

Europe and its 'Ends'. Haunting (by) the Past in Christos Tsiolkas' Dead Europe

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Abstract: This paper aims at attempting an analysis, by force partial, of *white* Europe as such a metaphor in the light of recent critical work on whiteness within a European context. Quite obviously, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 strongly impacted upon the numerous and often conflicting discourses related to the construction and reconstruction of global and European identities which followed that momentous event; I refer here to the lacunar mythical roots Luisa Passerini finds in the idea of Europe itself (2002), to the shadows of the Shoah, but also to studies of European post-socialism in its unpredictable and still underrated connections with post-colonialism and the aftermath (and vampiric debris) of the Cold War.

Keywords: Eastern Europe; Australia; European identity; whiteness studies; Shoah; Christos Tsiolkas

Introduction

In her *Exit into History. A Journey through the New Eastern Europe*, Eva Hoffman pronounces her ‘desire to declare the whole, tedious case closed; to declare it null, void, canceled, revoked’ (Hoffman, 1993: 175). The case she refers to is the weight and legacy of twentieth-century traumas which are an undisposable predicament shared by many diasporic writers of European descent – in Hoffman’s case linked to the Shoah and its aftermath. These writers often travel back to their *ancestral* land to find traces and recover memories of their past, but end up with zombie-like presents which prove quite difficult to engage with. In this sense, Europe itself is a ghost which, in many contemporary narratives of reverse journeys and colonization, proves unattainable, a projected mirror image devoid of meaning and hope.

In my view, writers such as Eva Hoffman, Anne Michaels, Lily Brett, and Christos Tsiolkas engage Europe in a corporeal fight with ghosts that emerge to haunt both European and non-European fiction and culture. The main focus of this essay lies on *Dead Europe* by the Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas (2005), a text in which the Gothic mode is adopted to give vent and body to an unredeemable paranoia, inhabited by spectral voids that fill it with the call of European history, and with the predicament lying at the very sources of what Nicolaidis and Howse term “Eutopia” (768).

Endings and Lacunae

It was February 1989. An eventful year, indeed. In a remarkable and ground-breaking conference held at the astounding John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy, at the University of Chicago, Francis Fukuyama struck the high-pitched bell sounding the long-awaited, in his view, eventual victory of the ‘West’. It is still worth quoting him:

The triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident... in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism. ... But this phenomenon extends beyond high politics and it can be seen also in the ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture in such diverse contexts as the peasants’ markets and color television sets now omnipresent throughout China, the cooperative restaurants and clothing stores opened in the past year in Moscow, the Beethoven piped into Japanese department stores, and the rock music enjoyed alike in Prague, Rangoon, and Tehran. What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but *the end of history as such*: that is, *the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government* (1989, my emphasis).

Fukuyama’s contention caused a heated debate over the question and questioning of historiographical ends, in a century which had already seen so much of its past heritage and population ravaged by global wars and technologically advanced mass destruction campaigns. In what *a posteriori* seems an over-enthusiastic move, the American historian boldly uttered his belief in liberal democracy, and offered disquieting examples of its success by referring to the quoted ‘ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture’. At the turn of the new millennium, ‘ineluctability’ was going to be connected to a very different event – 9/11 –, and ‘history’ came to be read rather through the prophetic, somber positions taken by Samuel B. Huntington in his work on the clash of civilizations (1996). But that is another hi-story. I shall use Fukuyama’s suggestions as a co-textual grid to hint at formulaic ideas of the West, and at their relevance in contemporary Anglophone literature dealing with Europe. More specifically, I intend to look at ideas of Europe that tend to mystify its roots and its past, more specifically the legacy of the Shoah, but also the uneasy restlessness of ethnic borders disturbing its present.

In a work dedicated to the history and ideologies of Europe, Luisa Passerini expatiates upon the symbolic lack she sees lying at its root. She argues this might be taken as one of the reasons motivating the lukewarm reception and perception of the European Union

experienced by many of its citizens. That ‘deficit’ (Passerini 124), I contend, is an abysmal gap which also inhabits fiction and auto-fiction by many writers sharing variously-tinged European origins and becomes overtly, and paradoxically, visible in the shape of ghosts haunting their texts. In many senses, I contend, the Holocaust is among the most *ponderous* ghosts of and in Europe, one that must be tackled historiographically and culturally to prevent its foundering into a soothing, dangerous amnesia.

As a matter of fact, the questions related to the remnants of Auschwitz (to quote a beautiful essay by Giorgio Agamben, 1999), and to the memories which *must* be passed on to future generations are highly visible on the cultural and political agenda of our post-post age. Among others, Elie Wiesel has been claiming that survivors, and survivors only, have the right plus the morally implacable duty to talk about the unutterable. But time is sweeping them away and, soon, they will all be gone. The second and third post-Holocaust generations are left with a “*mémoire trouée*”, a memory riddled with holes and gaps, to use the powerful expression used by the French novelist Henry Raczymow (Raczymow quoted in Hirsch, 1996, 663). In this context, Ellen Fine asks radical questions which must be answered, no matter how tentatively: “How can one ‘remember’ an event not experienced? How is trauma transmitted...? How does the Holocaust shape the identity of those living in its aftermath... and how is the burden of memory then assumed?” (Fine 185). At a time which is always experienced and imagined as posthumous, Holocaust fiction and studies also bear an ethically complex burden, and those who dare enter this delicate arena do it at their own risk. To quote one famous example, Zygmunt Bauman has criticised second- and third-generation memories – in the form of memoirs, poems, installations, films, fictions, etc. They are all – to him – produced by victims “by proxy”. And yet, even he must agree that “that memory pollutes the world of the living... *We are all to some degree possessed by that memory...* (Bauman 33, my emphasis)”. Or post-memory, as Marianne Hirsch has suggested on various occasions and as I shall also try and refer to later in the essay.

Possession. Haunting. These insidious metaphors invade the prose and poetical work of Eva Hoffman, Lily Brett, Anne Michaels, and, more to my purpose, Christos Tsiolkas. These writers are all variously related to Europe, though not all directly personally touched by the Shoah, and are all intent on recovering and rediscovering the traces of their own past which is enmeshed with the history of the old continent. In my view, many of these texts share a common attempt at reaching a non-existing, never-existed location, an imaginary, literally ‘ou-topian’ Europe frozen in time and space, the site for the wished-for recovery of a desired all-rounded sense of identity and belonging. The fiction, autobiographies and travel writings – I refer to only prose works in this context, although I am aware that much relevant, powerful poetry has been and is being written on the complex relation between the ‘Old’ Continent and the ‘New’ ones – of these authors are filtered through by a harsh disappointment in finding, instead, in the place of a desired pre-lapsarian, pre-fascist past, a chaotic conglomerate headed on towards the basest and crudest forms of globalization. In a literal embodiment of Fukuyama’s claims, *that* Europe is all but mythical. Instead, it proves as materialistic, consumeristic, voyeuristic, and trashy as many other parts of the globe. Furthermore, in the words of Nicholas Manganas:

Europe has thus taken on board the ‘evil’ of the twentieth century and narrativised it through various modes of commemoration and *fin de siècle* memoirs. Thus evil is somehow intrinsically linked to the European space, since some of the worst excesses of the twentieth century occurred on European soil, the geographic location of the First World War, most of the Second World War, the Holocaust, fascist dictatorial regimes, the oppressive Soviet Union and its satellite states, civil wars, ethnic tensions and economic devastations. (10)

From this perspective, therefore, Europe itself – its history, its space, its institutions, its peoples, maybe – *is* evil, due to its status as the site of collective and personal traumas whose victims still await and struggle to recover and re-locate. The convergence of Holocaust studies and the late-twentieth-century blooming of trauma studies is thus extremely fruitful in reading the resilience of European and global otherwise veiled past(s) and, also, in understanding some of the reasons behind the many attempts at spreading forms of amnesia, if not straightforward negationism. In applying to trauma culture and fiction the theoretical grid suggested by Arjun Appadurai (1996), Maria Tumarkin contends that

traumascapes become much more than physical settings of tragedies: they emerge as spaces, where events are experienced and re-experienced across time. Full of visual and sensory triggers, capable of eliciting a whole palette of emotions, traumascapes catalyse and shape remembering and reliving of traumatic events. It is through these places that the past, whether *buried or laid bare* for all to see, continues to inhabit and refashion the present.

(Tumarkin 12, my emphasis)

Seen as humanized space, thus, Europe undoubtedly possesses – and is possessed – by Passerini’s symbolical, but also remarkably physical – ‘deficit’ (Passerini, 2002: 124). Eastern Europe is the area from which many writers of Jewish origin were forced to relocate, in the cases I am interested in towards North America and Australia. Due to its having been the site of mass wars and other variously barbaric post-war crimes, that area comes to the fore as a doleful example of traumandscape whose borders need to be redrawn and whose ideological and political relevance needs to be faced. In this context, I find it very useful to refer to Benedict Anderson’s much quoted metaphorical statement on the ‘modern darkness’ of the Enlightenment (19). If applied to space, to Europe as traumatized and traumatizing ‘striated space’, that metaphor reveals its own aporia, its status as the symptom of a remarkable ‘slippage and relation between the lived, heterogeneous embodiments of contemporary Europe and abstract notions’ (Eleftheriotis, Pratt and Vanni 2).

As Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery suggest in their work on an advocated convergence between studies on post-colonialism and on post-socialism (2009), it is essential to address and, again, face the (white, ghostly) racist nuances powerfully at work in the re-construction of national identities in ‘Eastern’ Europe. In their words:

... *white supremacy*’s function in the constitution of Eastern European national identities is more deeply rooted than either these nations’ official

self-representation or the Western media portrayal of recent ethnic confrontations would suggest. (Chari, Verdery 80, my emphasis)

In my reading of Christos Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe*, the ghosts of whiteness veil as well as reveal Anderson's 'modern darkness' and configure Marianne Hirsch's 'post-memory' in an implacably tainted palette. Tsiolkas points out the friction of and within Europe and looks at it both from an Australian and an *insid-ious* perspective almost from the beginning of his novel, which follows the highly controversial *Loaded* (1995) and *The Devil's Playground* (2002). In his previous works, Tsiolkas deals, among other topics, with migrant life, with homosexuality and homophobia in communities which prove all but united and friendly. In *Dead Europe*, which again interrogates the concepts of community and belonging, Tsiolkas introduces a double plot to follow Isaac, a gay Australian photographer with Greek-born parents, on a disenchanted tour through stale Europe and Greece. Both are felt, by the innocent, childish voice of Isaac's nephew, as equally, utterly distant: '--- A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away... does that mean Europe?' (Tsiolkas 11).

The trope of the reverse journey slants towards a very dark version of parody, and the slight difference parodic discourse requires (see Hutcheon, 2000) is *embodied* by the many ghosts who inhabit the text and the microtextual photographs which are implied – but not presented – in the narration. In Nicholas Manganas's words, the fiction is further complicated by the haunting presence of Australia itself, of some of its founding and deeply rooted cultural images:

Isaac in *Dead Europe* leaves Australia, a land of people still searching for a common identity, only to land in Europe to discover a continent actually living Kagan's post-historical paradise, but unable to answer the age old questions: Who am I?, and, Where do I come from? ... what is the place of Australia in a world where Europe is dead? What happens to antipodeans when their other pole is no more...? The other pole that is no more, is the 'authentic', disconnected Europe that remains in the imagination of Europe's former colonies and exiles. (Manganas 13)

The Greece – and the Europe, *and* the Australia – Isaac re-visits eventually proves an inauthentic, never-authentic, no-return *topos*, a land of no hope, imbued with frantic consumerism. It is post-modern and reckless in its hectic will to get over, rather than more radically cancel, its past, its history of poverty and migration, its traditions and religions. When (and if) they are discovered in this novel, roots seem to do nothing but stifle, as proved by Isaac's visit to Thessaloniki's Jewish History Museum, where he encounters the first *actual* ghosts of the novel:

There are no Jews now. But there were. *There were phantoms*, and I had found them in the museum ... a cavernous warehouse...we walked slowly and reverentially past walls and walls of photographs... The history of the Holocaust. ... I wanted to acknowledge the Hebrew past of this city, to make recompense – I knew it was pitiful, hopeless, that nothing I could say or do could make amends for the terrible history hanging on the walls... (Tsiolkas 88-89, my emphasis)

The willed need to acknowledge and to atone, in *Dead Europe*, is eventually impeded, stuck in the cultural aporia which renders Europe a site of ‘Ghosts. Blood and land and ghosts.’ (Tsiolkas 90) Invited to take part in a photographic exhibition celebrating the Greek diaspora, Isaac is a means for a harsh questioning of taken-for-granted myths of identity and rooting; as narrating voice, he never stops remarking the fallacy lying at the ruinous core of nationalistic as well as liberal humanistic discourse:

Isn’t the theme of homesickness, of exile and return, irrelevant to modern Greece? ... the Greece I knew in Australia was indeed largely irrelevant to these modern Europeans. (Tsiolkas 35)

In Gerry Turcotte’s view the ‘spectral turn’ Roger Luckhurst sees in many of what he defines as the disempowered authors of the late-Victorian British imperial margins (this scholar refers to Anglo-Irish writers, such as Stoker, among others; see Luckhurst, 2002) can and must be used to read what he terms a post-colonial ‘geography of the spectral’:

The *domination of the spectre* in contemporary post-colonial literatures has emerged in the context of a tradition in Australia that denied the existence, even the possibility, of hauntings. Frederick Sinnett (1856), among others, claimed that Australia was too devoid of history to tempt even “the wandering footsteps of the most arrant *parvenu* of a ghost” (Turcotte 23, my emphasis).

It is nevertheless true, pace Turcotte, that Australian colonial fiction and poetry have been ‘invaded’ by ghosts since their beginnings, as proved by the cases of John Lang’s ‘The Ghost upon the Rail’ (1859), and Henry Kendall’s ‘The Last of his Tribe’ (1869). Yet, in the context I am trying to deal with here, I intend to adopt the concept of ‘reverse colonization’ Christopher Craft reads as leading motif in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (see Craft, 1984). Seen from this perspective, Europe is re-appropriated, not only by diasporic eyes, but also by its own unclaimed – or only partially ‘seen’ – historical ghosts:

I picked up a photograph. It was of my mother’s village.... In one of the fields... a figure crouched and stared furiously at the camera. The boy’s face was haggard and lean... his eyes shone brightly. ... tall thin figures congregated. Of them, I could make out nothing at all: they could have been wisps of smoke. (Tsiolkas 132)

In *Too Many Men*, another fictional version of muscular encounter with Europe written by expat writer Lily Brett, the protagonist journeys back to Poland where she is faced with paranoid hallucinations, a literal, parodic and unpredictable embodiment of the “ghost of the Holocaust”. She talks to Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz. Höss is in “‘Zweites Himmel’s Lager’, a purgatorial camp where he relives his life and death and has lessons in humanity to make him suitable for heaven.... They talk in English, which Höss has learnt after his death.” (Brett) In *Dead Europe*, less ironically, the ghost Isaac encounters is that of a Jewish boy, who turns out to be his own grandfather, and whose haunting presence accuses his Christian Greek grandmother of

the most radical betrayal. Eventually, readers discover, or are psychotically led to believe by an increasingly untrustworthy narrator, the dangerous boy seems to appropriate Isaac's body and to paradoxically drink his blood, which is very literally his own. As Padmore states quite clearly:

The ghost [that]... seems to inhabit Isaac's body [can be seen as] a literal example of Derrida's "Ghosts: ... the other in the same . . . the completely other, dead, living in me" (41-42). (Padmore 59)

In this novel, devilish possession refashions more familiar discourses on the Shoah, and verges on politically incorrect representation and confusion of the roles of victims and perpetrators. It is photography which becomes the instrument for the obsessive testing of a memory always both present and absent, so frequent in second and third generation re-workings of Holocaust, and diasporic, foundational and familial myths. Referring back to the remarks on photography Roland Barthes suggested many years ago, Marianne Hirsch deals with the concept of trace in the following terms:

Art historians and semioticians have discussed the photograph as a *trace*. The notion of trace, or index, describes a material, physical, and thus extremely potent connection between image and referent. In its relation to loss and death, photography does not mediate the process of individual and collective memory but brings the past back in the form of a ghostly *revenant*, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability. (Hirsch *SI*, 13, 21)

Post-memory, be it fictitious or not, stands unsteadily upon its need for fashioning and refashioning itself. It is paradoxically doomed, on the one hand, to filling abysmal gaps and depths but also, in so doing and for so doing, to "inventing fantasies and myths... and fabricating its own version of mnemonic legacy" (Fine, 191) Following this line of contention, therefore, Luckhurst's spectral turn in Tsiolkas' work is at least doubled, due to the diasporic *and* post-holocaust haunting traces insinuating this text. And yet, while in Luckhurst's view memory is only tremblingly related to the "real" (see 2002), in this novel post-memory revisits the very concept of modernity (or post-modernity) whose landscape, *pace* Fukuyama, is nothing but garbage, or rubble, as Benjamin's angel of history taught us to see long ago, causing its overexcited narrator nothing but olfactory disgust.

Berlin... stinks, a putrid sewer of filth and waste. The smells are chemical, of the city. There is nothing organic in any of it. ... I rid Berlin of its people and capture instead the evidence of their passage. *I am fascinated by the banal modernity of the city. It is as if history refuses to be trapped in this sterile landscape, as if history never happened.* The flashlight falls on the last negligible vestige of the old Wall... (Tsiolkas 261, my emphasis)

In another remarkable passage, Isaac seems to have Fukuyama's claims quite clearly in mind when he comments upon (and dismantles) one of the most celebrated *new beginnings* of European history:

If the fall of the Berlin Wall had seemed to inaugurate a moment of universal happiness, it was not so in my father's house. They've got what they've always wanted, those dirty Poles: fascism. Same with all of them – fucking dirty European scum.... He took their jubilation about capitalism as a personal betrayal, and every slab torn from the wall... an attack on his very... property. (Tsiolkas 265, my emphasis)

In the novel, the geographical locus, out of which contemporary, but also a-historical, vampires leave to insinuate the West, remains set in Eastern Europe, as in much late-Victorian gothic fiction. Yet the whole continent shares the same dominant physical degeneration, invaded as it is by infected and infective blood, marking Europeans out as 'obscene', outmoded and unhealthy bodies and cultures which, in a paradoxical scurrilous and vindictive move, Isaac wishes to do away with:

The enervated men sitting at the table are spent. They are *at the end of time, awaiting their extinction*. I am gloriously alive... They are obscene, a final limp turd squeezed *out of history*. A fire, just and swift and magnificent, should rage through all of Europe. (Tsiolkas 368)

In a time of posts, nothing remains but an almost spent extremity, a *litteral* white waste whose remnants, as Christos Tsiolkas seems to be suggesting, merely stink.

When tackling the topic of the unrepressed racism of many post-socialist European areas, Aniko Imre suggests that whiteness (in the 'mythical' sense Robert Young has proposed (Young, 1991)) still feeds a large part of the political and cultural agenda of those countries, that in Eva Hoffman's argument only started turning back in history with the decline and fall of the Soviet Union. The memory of the Shoah is all but 'illuminated' by this other haunting presence, which intrudes upon and at the same time is already radically inherent to Europe as a whole project and its liberal democratic ideals. The rest of the world fares no better, as *Dead Europe* proves when it points to the Australian post-war reception/rejection of Displaced Persons. The return – or rather, the continuous presence – of the racist repressed must be faced, in Imre's as well as in Tsiolkas' view; yet the novel concludes in an alienated, counter-historical key, reverting back to the ancient lore of vampires and human sacrifice.

Rebecca, Isaac's mother, and his boyfriend Colin join Isaac in England, the final destination of Isaac's European meanderings, when he is taken to hospital in a state of speechless frenzy. The true migrant in this novel is Rebecca. Her past estranges her, her family crime towards the young Jew her grand-parents should have protected and saved during the war visits upon her and her posterity as well as upon European pretences to modernity and multicultural tolerance. She embodies the ghosts of exile, but those ghosts coincide with the ghosts of European Jews, in her/their being "... cursed. Never to settle, to have roots, to belong" (Tsiolkas 403). As already stated, from this perspective roots are mischievous, mystifying, annihilating:

This was not Australia.... she recognized the churlishness and the abrupt rudeness of the people: she remembered this toughness. As if visited by a distant memory, she saw that this city was indeed European, by which she

meant ancient. Her husband had called Australians unsophisticated... It had everything to do with one's place in the world. She had been born in a remote corner of damaged, destroyed Europe but it had still felt like the centre of the world.... She could not help wondering what it would be like... to have migrated here... to have remained in Europe. She would probably not feel that hunger for something else, which, for her, was the meaning of being Australian. *O neos kosmos*. (Tsiolkas 399-400)

In a final chapter which is interestingly entitled ‘Atonement’, Rebecca/Reveka and Isaac move back to the “neos kosmos”, which not surprisingly hosts the very same traces and ghosts which crowd Europe. In offering her soul for the sake of her son’s health, the novel eventually concludes with a very debatable connection of Jew-Devil, with a post-memory which, while undoubtedly fictitious, yet takes us back to the questioning of identities, ethnicities and belongings I started with.

Conclusion

Keeping in mind Chari’s and Verdery’s contention about the “... fruitfulness of re-conceiving a singular world with differentiated histories” (Chari, Verdery 19), I would like to conclude by connecting the novel’s approach to Europe, its history, myths and lore with some lines written in 1944 by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. In the context in which they were writing, European citizens had been made seriously aware of the practical effects of ‘whitewashing’ mass war:

Europe has two histories: a well-known, written history and an underground history. The latter consists in the fate of the human instincts and passions which are displaced and distorted by civilization. The Fascist present in which the hidden side of things comes to light also shows the relationship between written history and the dark side which is overlooked in the official legend of the nationalist states, as well as in the critique of the latter. (Horkheimer, Adorno, 1944, cit. in Hewitt 17)

Of course, one might argue that what Horkheimer and Adorno were referring to, whatever lied and lies behind and beyond the term ‘Europe’ is actually much more complex and articulated than the binary histories they mention. And yet, I want to stick to parts of their argument, namely when they refer to official ‘legends’ and to an unofficial ‘dark side’ which, I argue, collapse one onto the other and help construe a modern mythopoietics of ghostliness.

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