Terror and the Sublime: Two Post-1989 British Novels about East-Central Europe

Ágnes Harasztos
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1 Terror has been traditionally linked to the experience of the sublime in aesthetic treatments ranging from ancient times to the twenty-first century. After Aristotle’s passing touch upon the theme, the Ancient Greek philosopher Longinus was the first to profusely dwell on the topic and establish the seminal idea of coupling the notions of terror and the sublime. In the eighteenth century, with the upsurge of interest in classical authors, Longinus’ work had a strong effect on Edmund Burke who, in his treatise about the sublime, stated that “terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime”. For him terror and sublime were inseparable, they mutually presumed each other. After Burke, Immanuel Kant contributed significantly to the aesthetic discourse on the sublime in his Critique of Judgement. Kant established two archetypes of the sublime: the mathematical sublime, which is based on the awe of the incomparably vast, and the dynamical sublime triggered by the power of nature overwhelming our weak selves with the possibility of hurting us. A most influential part of Kant’s ideas about the sublime is the assumption of a compensatory pleasure of self-admiration in the sublime. He states that after having faced something incomprehensibly great, the subject realizes the endless potential of the mind to encompass ideas and notions which is an occasion to reaffirm the faculty of reason and to reflect on man’s supersensible dignity. The notion of the sublime definitely occupies a significant position in Romantic art, partly in the form of the natural sublime, partly as a response to what contemporaries felt in connection with the terror induced by the French Revolution. In modern times, the source of terror which gives rise to the sublime is shifted to manmade objects, such as urban surroundings or society. The twentieth century witnessed a crucial cataclysm in the history of the notion after the traumatic and violent events of the Second World War. Theodor Adorno even argued that Auschwitz was an irreversible liquidation of metaphysical optimism which renders the Kantian idea of the sublime of
terror being a reason for human self-admiration impossible, because these events are no less than devastating for human dignity. This seems to hold true to the state socialist regime’s terror as well. In the present post-9/11 days, global terrorism is at the centre of the discourse about terror. Habermas and Derrida contributed to this issue in a memorable volume where they both argued for the idea that international terrorism is originally preceded by the terror of the modern state. Since the French Revolution, terror seems to be the prerogative of modern state.

2 After the collapse of the state socialist regimes in what was called the Eastern Block, the task of, and also the burden on, East-Central European societies was bestowed in the form of an urge to come to terms with their terror-haunted public and personal past. In addition, together with the gradually uniting Europe and the East-Central European immigrants flooding Western-European countries, this problem appears as a wider European and also general human debt. Hannah Arendt claims: “if we want to be at home on this Earth, even at the price of being at home in this century, we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with the essence of totalitarianism”. Immediately after 1989, British literature reacted to this urge, and the topic of East-Central Europe’s socialist past emerged in contemporary novels. By exploring a world of considerable human misery, these works of art highlight the inseparability of moral and aesthetic as claimed by Arnold Berleant. Two significant works of this nature are Paul Bailey’s *Kitty and Virgil* (1998) and Rose Tremain’s *The Road Home* (2007).

3 The first aim of this paper is to outline how Communist state terror is depicted in these novels with its regard to the experience of the sublime. Secondly, another intriguing issue of the two novels is how the post-1989 East-Central European protagonists deal with the terror that predominantly concerns their past. All theories agree on the sublime being triggered by terror only on condition of physical or temporal distance. A relative safety from the viewed object and its terror is required to obtain the emotion of sublimity. This distance is historically given in the initial position of the two novels, however, it is a crucial question for both main characters, whether they could in fact distance themselves from their past or remain entangled with it. Thirdly, responses to the present are inherent in interpretations of the past. Consequently, it is also appealing to examine what attitudes to the future stem from the various ways characters of these novels handle their own past experiences of terror.

A Hamletian dilemma: coming to terms with our fathers

4 Jürgen Habermas argues that our lives are linked to the life context in which Auschwitz was possible and his words referring to the historically determined nature of German identity holds equally true to nations east of the Iron curtain, who lived through socialist state terror. In the words of Habermas:

5 our form of life is connected to that of our parents and grandparents through a web of familial, political, local and intellectual traditions that is difficult to disentangle – that is, through a historical milieu that made us who we are. None of us can escape this milieu, because our identities both as individuals and as Germans are indissolubly interwoven with it.

6 Virgil Florescu the Romanian protagonist of *Kitty and Virgil*, and Lev the main character of *The Road Home* from an unspecified East-Central European post-socialist country, both happen to belong to the second generation of those who lived through socialist terror.
They share the identity definable in terms of the sons’ generation in a system of terror posed rather by an older, typically parental generation. Thus both protagonists are endowed with a certain Hamletian dimension where their personal traumas and the social-political evil are closely linked. Likewise, their relation to their roots and cultural origins are bound to the spectre of a father who lingers over their present prosperity or failure. Their struggle of coming to terms with their fathers’ mistakes and sins is closely associated with digesting those of the Communist regime. On the one hand, they experience their historical dimensions in terms of “time is out of joint”\(^7\), and it immediately entails the wish of setting it right. On the other hand, the formation of their selves and their Freudian struggle against their fathers is bound to the outcome of their perceptions of the terror experienced not only as a son but also as a totalitarian subject.

\(^7\) Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) emphasized the necessary distance from pain or danger in order to create the delight of sublime, whereas in the case of terror pressing so near as to pose a personal threat to the onlooker, it appears as “simply terrible”\(^8\) and mobilizes only passions of self-preservation. According to Burke, distance from the terrible object is necessary so as to experience personal freedom from the evils seen. In such a case, it can trigger the emotion of sympathy, a concern for the other by way of the self being substituted for the suffering other(s).\(^9\) Hence the necessary exile of the two East-Central European Hamlets as Lydia in *The Road Home* remarks about Hamlet’s situation being parallel to their own because he also “casts himself out, so that he can make things right in the place that he’s left behind”.\(^10\) Thus it seems that terror regarded with the respectful awe of the sublime feeling seen from a certain distance is a precondition to being able to find remedies to it. However, here arises the Hamletian dilemma whether you are also part of your father’s sins as you are heir to his flesh and blood. Consequently, the question is posed whether it is possible to be distanced from your own father, your roots, and your origin.

\(^8\) Both for Lev and Virgil, there is a troubled father-son relationship given and the danger is present that it would impede the necessary distance from the past terror so as to sublimate it or find it linked to the aesthetic experience of the sublime. For Lev however, the situation is somewhat milder. Although he remembers his already dead father with a typical filial impatience and the memory of his father’s resistance to any change becomes symbolic for him of the whole Communist system’s rigidity, his relationship to his father still seems to allow Lev to distance himself from both his father and the terror he lived through in the past. The descriptions of his memories of the totalitarian past, which in the first parts of the novel are so abounding, gradually disappear to the end of the book as a clear sign of a successful overcoming of this period of his life. It seems that for Lev, all the preconditions given to regard terror, as an onlooker, are reason to feel sublime.

\(^9\) In the case of Virgil it seems that the removal from pain and danger is much more complicated. His father is still alive, and has always proved a very aggressive and strong personality who, from early childhood, kept terrorizing his elder son. Constantin Florescu, Virgil’s father, educated his sons in a cult of strength: he reproaches Virgil for being ill at the age of nine, and likewise for a predilection for poetry, especially that of a melancholy poet whom he calls a “weakling”.\(^11\) In Burke’s tract, the quality of strength, especially destructive strength, is accompanied with the sublime, whereas weakness is a quality rather belonging to beauty. In his words: “power derives all its sublimity from the terror with which it is generally accompanied”.\(^12\) Consequently, it can be stated that Virgil’s father was highly inclined to regard terror as an object of awe and respect, as
emanation of strength, thus reason to feel sublime in connection to it. This entails that he views it from the appropriate distance. However, his son seems to opt for weakness and, as a poet, for beauty. It might imply that Virgil is unwilling to regard terror as sublime with a certain incapability to view it from a distance. Upon careful scrutiny of Burke’s sublime, it turns out that, for him, when we experience terror that does not closely concern our precious selves, we feel the delight of sublime which is close to, though not equivalent with, pleasure. On close consideration, this idea evokes a cruel selfishness on the part of the onlooker. However, Burke adds that, on the one hand, “delight we have in such things hinders us from shunning scenes of misery”, and on the other hand “the pain we feel prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer”. Thus, distance from terror and the consequent regarding of it as sublime is capable of producing either the attitude of an inhumane delighting in the scene of terror, or the feeling of sympathy. In Virgil’s father’s case we clearly talk about the first option, and in Lev’s case the second.

Virgil himself also regards terror as a source of sublime awe, which is “sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with horror”, but he lacks both the delight and seemingly the urge to help. The reason for this is that he is incapable of creating the distance from the terrorizing party of the scene. From the moment he learns how his father in his young days took part in the mass murder of Jewish civilians in the Second World War and is still proud of it, he feels that his own physical existence is loathsome. He ponders over how his father made love to his mother “with blood of children on his hands” and over himself being the product of that love-making. Constantin Florescu also emphasizes how their family’s blood descends from the Roman conquerors rather than from that of the subjugated Dacians of the highly ideologized Ancient Romanian history. Also a recurring element in the novel is Virgil’s prosthesis made of stainless steel which he calls the Communist tooth and often dwells on how it is stronger than nature, and when in a thousand years his grave will be opened, nothing of him will be visible except his eternal Communist tooth, a physical part of him into which terror is immortally engraved. Immortality, as all excesses, plays a crucial role in the sublime, and it adds a certain uncanniness to Virgil’s construction of the Communist terror as sublime. The appearance of the uncanny, immortal, even unnatural leads us to an examination of sublime elements in these novels’ perception of Communist state terror.

Sublime pictures of mediated terror

In both novels terror appears as sublime with the not insignificant difference of the two protagonists not being able to take a removal from it to the same extent. Lev regards his own terror-haunted past mediated by both temporal and spatial distance with the awesome horror apt for perceiving it as sublime. Sublime for Burke is highly evoked by the terror of the obscure, the unknown. An instance of this emerges in The Road Home when Lev and his friend on a night trip to a faraway lake encounter strangely fluorescent fish which to their horror they believe to be the outcome of the lake being contaminated by some nuclear waste. Since then, they live through the terror of the possibility of slowly dying of some unknown, invisible illness. The terror of the unknown but possible appears again in the memory of Lev’s having suggested his wife Marina having been pressurized by his Communist boss to pursue a relationship with him. The terror of the faceless and the elusive is also a significant concomitant of Virgil’s picture of Communism. He compares the speech writers of Ceausescu to ghosts, because unlike the typewriters of
other people in Romania, theirs are not registered by the secret police for purposes of identification: "they have his /Ceausescu's Á.H./ words at their command, and his words ensure their ghostly survival. [...] That is how they work for him, his regiment of ghosts".

12 The application of the image of ghosts in connection to Communist terror is evocative of the metaphysical dread in the face of the wholly unknown other, which, being an inherent concomitant to Gothic literature, draws on early Romantic literary traditions here. Terry Heller claims in his book about terror in Gothic fiction: “Gothic fiction expresses what industrial capitalism represses. It therefore responds to a need humans have to be whole, to possess themselves wholly, a need that always must resist the claim of a particular culture's values and world view to be all-inclusive”. This aspect of the element of ghosts is also relevant in the Socialist setting of the two novels, bearing in mind that the Communist state promoted, under the threat of terror, a highly secularized ideology saturated with materialism. Religion or any form of irrationalism was just as marginalized in this world as in the nineteenth century high-capitalism. This ideologically so secular Communist state repressed and marginalized irrational areas of human imagination. Therefore, Virgil’s simile where the source of sublime terror associated with the socialist state power is likened to the horror of ghosts carries the significance that this state in its terribleness is still fundamentally identical to what people for centuries long held devilishly horrible. The very excluded part of human self-image and world-view strikes back and defines the one, namely the solely rational state power, which aimed at excluding it.

13 The uncanny idea of probably slowly dying of a nameless disease without apprehending it or being ruled by a dictator at whose command there is a regiment of ghosts is noteworthy as it introduces not only the terror of the obscure, but also the horror at the unnatural. In both novels socialist terror is associated with images of the unnatural, the immortal and the forever motionless. Burke also emphasizes how infinity fills the mind with delightful horror. Peculiarly enough the picture which Lev keeps in his mind of his father is exactly one which evokes the idea of infinity and everlasting recurrence: “I’d be exactly where he was, immortal on a chair. I’d be enslaved to a lumber yard until I died, and to the same lunch every day and to the snow falling and drifting, year on year, falling and drifting in the same remote and backward places.” In addition to the image of a dull life, the tantalizing lack of change, improvement and opportunities of the socialist system is depicted in this picture. According to Burke, the sublime is a feeling evoked by terror in which all motions stop because of the pain it is associated with. There was already a mention of Virgil’s unnaturally everlasting ‘Communist tooth’. For him, immortality is a symbol of the unavoidability, the all-penetrating and all-enduring nature of totalitarian terror which he obviously connects to his Communist military officer father whom he also associates with immortality: “Let the man who spawned me never die. [...] Let him live to find life itself unendurable”. It seems that a frozen state of terror and its association with the uncanny, the unnatural and the immortal is a fundamental part of the sublime felt at the aesthetic judgement of mediated Communist state terror.

14 Since Longinus, all who studied the sublime emphasized its total antagonism towards the trivial, the everyday, the useful and also the ridiculous. What is common to us, what is subservient to us or what we find ludicrous, we definitely fail to respect and fear in motionless awe. What we find sublime in terror is its destructive power over us, the hazy threat it would pose to our life, lest we did not view it from a secure distance. It is clear
then that after we got used to the terrible, terror abates and together with the lack of necessary distance it is precisely why the figures in these novels that remained in the post-socialist countries (e.g. Virgil and Lev’s mother, and their friends) fail to regard terror as sublime: “custom reconciles us to everything”. Terror not perceived as sublime can also emerge as ridiculous, though clearly this humour is to some extent morbid, and in Kitty and Virgil this farcical approach to Communism often appears just that. The target of this humour is nearly exclusively Nicole Ceausescu. The way he enrobed his Labrador dog as a high ranking officer, how he faked pictures lest his shortness could be observed, how he missed even drugged bears on hunts by several meters, make the so-called ‘Conducator’ appear as a “ludicrous Clown”. This aspect of Virgil’s attitude to Romanian socialism suggests that he refuses to see it in a sublime light and strives to find solace in the comic relief. However, he never posits his father and the terrible deeds of Constantin Florescu in such farcical light, and refuses to pronounce the name even of Ceausescu which alludes to the fact that the petrified awe in front of Romanian state terror in general could not be eased by the desperate effort to depict its obviously absurd sides. Such an attempt might be considered as a last resort in the face of terror pressed indeed too near to sublimate, evade or see it from a safe distance.

Terror as either a debilitating or a facilitating experience

The responses of the two main characters to this reign of terror which a vast, overpowering entity the Communist totalitarian regime practised over them are of two different kinds. It was so far observed that Lev, as opposed to Virgil, is capable of detaching himself from experiences of terror, and the Romanian poet remains sadly entangled in it. This significant difference determines their actions at the final stage of their personal coming to terms with socialist terror and its meaning in their lives.

Lev, after having succeeded in finding a relatively well-paid job in England first as a kitchen porter and later gradually ascending to the position of chef, elaborates a plan and carries it out successfully. He collects money by which he opens his own restaurant in Baryn where the old ways of the grim socialist restaurants with unsmiling, hurrying waiters and low quality food are mended. By the aid of what he learnt in England, he provides livelihood for not only his family but also his friend, and also adds to his country’s efforts of stepping forward and leaving Communist times behind. For Lev, terror he lived through finally proved to be a facilitating experience which definitely moved him and encouraged him to find rectification, however small, to both social and personal matters. He seems to be the successful Hamlet who ‘set it right’ indeed. Such an attitude towards terror seems to be linked to his regarding it as sublime and the willingness to see it from a distance. Lev’s perception of terror resembles Kant’s description of the sublime experience where “the feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful”. So the idea of terror seems to multiply Lev’s vital forces in the Kantian sense. Viewing it from England made him conscious of the fact that now terror belongs to another society, another time and other persons from whom he could tear himself away and then step back so as to mend what he was capable of.

The Communist regime and its unchanging terror portrayed as a motionless system provokes Lev’s motion as a form of counteraction. His struggle though is small-scale and
clearly everyday. Labour, according to Burke, is also capable of producing controlled pain and thus sublime, however in this case, this statement hardly proves right. Lev, with his deliberate choice of everyday labour, is opposing the unnatural and grand-scale nature of sublime terror he aims to overcome. Longinus also emphasizes how the everyday excludes the presence of sublime. Although Lev’s reaction to his terror-haunted past experience seems to generate a positive sublime which, with its distance, triggered positive actions, his case seems to be far from that simple. At the end of the novel, a rumour about the proposed building of a dam and therefore flooding Auror, the home village of Lev, petrifies him and his family. It is momentous how it is first learnt by Lev who works in England, and although the news paralyzes everybody at home, he from the distance of England is capable of arranging their life after the dam: giving orders, sending money and making plans. This is indicative of how a distant view of terror is capable of facilitating action as opposed to terror nearby. The sublimity of the finally built Auror dam, the roaring sound of the turbines and the sight of the huge water and the terror of all Lev’s past, his home village flooded, destructed under it is clear by the silent horror they feel on visiting it. Lev’s attitude to it however is emblematic: he wants to shun the scene: “don’t think about Auror down there in the darkness. Don’t think about the past.” thus go nearly the last words of the novel. Lev does not in fact overcome terror and the sublime he felt at the sight of it, he merely steps forward; he detaches himself from the horrible, awesome delight at the terror he saw and attempts to leave it behind without pondering much on it.

Paul Bailey’s novel provides a considerably disparate picture of emerging from the totalitarian rule. Virgil, as a poet of a sensitive nature, is unable to embark upon a new life of mending the ways of the old, as did Lev. Virgil seems to be incapable of removing his self from his physical origin, and the fact that this posits him together with his begetter on the side of those who caused terror. Instead of watching terror as an observer with feelings of sublime awe at its horror, but delighting in not being part or subject to it, he is paralyzed by the sublimity of terror, by his regarding it unavoidable for his own person either as a cause or a victim of it. He sees terror as something that never ceases to be with us humans, because it is inherent in our society in the form of “plump old survivors” who were mass-murderers and are now kindly grandfathers or courteous gentlemen. Terror also penetrates our families in the form of a terroriser father and our very own bodies which are made of the same flesh and blood as those who committed these murders. The only escape from the terror of being part of a terroriser society, family and race is to be freed from the Romanian society and the Florescu family and finally of his own body. His only motion as a counteraction to the standstill of terror is suicide. He could not provide the necessary distance to view terror as sublime, he felt the existential necessity to choose between the two parties of the terrorizing act and he opted for being a victim rather than an aggressor. He only partly experienced sublime because he was terrified at the grand-scale and all-embracing nature of it, but he failed to step out of its circle of enchantment and his drive of self-preservation proved to be weaker than the desperate wish to evade something perceived inevitable. Recalling the images of immortality and infinity associated with socialist state terror, the gesture of “die, sleep, no more” proves indeed to be an “act of atonement” what Virgil intended it to be. Thus it may be considered as a heroic action in the face of a world saturated with terror, though from another, probably slightly utilitarian, point of view we might conclude that Virgil was debilitated by the experience of terror which he partly perceived
as sublime, but failed to find delight in it or be facilitated by the emotion of sympathy to address further steps of redress.

19 The two novels abound in mythic adumbrations of the facilitating or debilitating effects of state terror the protagonists have to cope with. Virgil often refers to a childhood fairy-tale he used to be told by his mother about a speaking lamb who advises his master to die rather than fight on occasion of highwaymen arriving. This peaceful lamb is a recurrent element up to the point of becoming a symbol of Virgil’s demeanour. It is worth noting here that Kant defined the dynamical sublime being triggered by power which overbears the resistance of an entity as in itself also source of some power. Overwhelming something that fails to resist is not sublime according to him. This also underlines the fact that Virgil’s reaction to socialist past fails to build into it a perception of terror as sublime. He answers to the ‘simply terrible’ in becoming a lamb to be slaughtered, a sight far from being sublime. In another Romanian folk tale a Russian soldier attempts to outwit Death to avoid his end and finally immortality proves to be a punishment for him.

36 In addition, Virgil keeps musing over the story of Bach junior who finally, having been unable to escape from the shadow of his celebrated father’s fame, fails as a unique composer and becomes a drunkard. An emblematic event foreshadowing the successful recovery from the past terrors in *The Road Home* occurs in Lev’s memory of his errand on his mother’s birthday to find poinsettia plants on the market of shortages where only plants producing food could have been purchased. After a failure on the town market, he came across some flowers by chance and finally managed to create beauty in a world of terror where most people only cared for self-preservation (food). Burke claims that the remedy of melancholia and despair is labour, which indeed proved to be Lev’s way of overcoming terror; and this is also foreshadowed by the episode when after having fallen into inactive desperation at his wife’s death, his friend Rudi takes him on a trip where they climb up an especially sharp steep and after the exacting exercise, in the course of which he definitely did not have the opportunity to cherish his depression, they arrive exhaustedly at a cave where they found the body of a dead Communist colonel as a symbol for the old regime and its termination.

20 Considering the two disparate social and personal outcomes of the search of East-Central Europe for a new identity in arranging its attitude to its terror-laden past – especially in dealing with British literary artefact – the effect and role the West plays in this process is of high account. In both novels the West and especially England function as the promised land of freedom, democracy and possibilities. It is originally regarded by both protagonists as the location where the wounds of socialist terror will heal. Lev’s expectations being of economic kind, he decides to make the English share their “infernal luck” with him: he basically arrives at the Capitalist land of opportunities. His final answer is also of material and practical kind: what he learnt from England aids him in his formation of a new world typically suppressing and rather forgetting the old one. Thus, Lev’s construction of England supports the Cold War Western self formational image of serving as a counterforce to terror. Although the Romanian poet also seeks refuge in the West, Virgil’s position is radically different from the onset. The fact that Nicole Ceausescu, the dictator of the totalitarian state, was bestowed the Order of the Garter by Queen Elizabeth, when mentioned immediately rouses doubt in the firm belief that England is in the moral position to provide a shelter for the fleeing Romanian poet from his ghosts. In a volume of dialogues about terrorism, Derrida calls attention to the fact that “throughout the Cold War Western liberal democracies were arming and training
their future enemies in a quasi-suicidal manner suggesting that terror was and is an autoimmune disorder which is also deeply rooted in Western culture. The reason for such inherence lies in the structural instability of the conceptual distinction between authorized and unauthorized force. The latter being in all times the revolutionary cradle of the laws and regulations a state forms its boundaries and legitimacy upon: a condition of lawlessness and violence serving the future vista of a world of law and order. Gene Ray also affirms in his essay that capitalist modernity holds terrible and sublime power with its monopoly on violence. In light of this, it is explicable why Virgil was unable to be distanced from his past experiences of Romanian terror not only for reasons of the deep philosophical kind, but also of actual historical nature. As terror and violence is not plainly philosophically inherent in all human beings, but actually in the participatory democracies of Western- as well as the totalitarian states of Eastern-Europe. This also explains why Virgil commits suicide in fact after the 1989 Romanian Revolution and how his deed is not only the result of past but also the inescapability of possible present crimes and terrible events.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that the traditional aesthetic principle that terror is fundamentally accompanied by the feeling of sublime on conditions of appropriate distance from the terrible object is definitely asserted by these two contemporary British novels dealing with post-1989 East-Central European concerns. However, neither of the two consequences of the novels provides an impeccable realization of the Burkan idea that terror in ‘all cases’ triggers sublime. In Rose Tremain’s The Road Home, the protagonist, Lev, is capable of distancing himself from terror both in space and time so as to regard it as sublime. His attitude to the feeling of sublime causes his motion to remedy his world saturated with and petrified by the past experience of terror, but it seems obvious that he does not intend to ponder too much over or be involved excessively in the delights of sublime at the examination of terror. He does not aim at dwelling long upon the sublime which in Lyotard’s interpretation means that he prohibits his reason to engage in the aesthetic adventure of sublime after once having lived it through. Lyotard defines sublime similarly to Kant as an adventure of the imagination in defying its finitude and immersing in the infinite. It seems that for Lev the infiniteness and everlasting motionlessness of Communist terror is distinctly an experience to be avoided. Therefore, through hard work and with small-scale goals, such as running a restaurant, he clearly opts for finitude.

The main character of Paul Bailey’s Kitty and Virgil demonstrates a very moving answer to the basically so typically human characteristic to receive the sight of terror with the delight of the sublime. He is the one for whom terror presses too near and is therefore unable to distance himself from it both personally and also as a historically determined man. His experience of sublime is only temporal and partial: in the very first moment he is taken aback by the inhumanity to ignore and even delight in the suffering seen from the safety of distance. His personal and general human involvement in the terrible events is so deep that his ‘act of atonement’ against the seen horrors is to take sides with the victims. In his suicide he exhibits a testimony that terror is everything but sublime for him; moreover, he suggests that it might be considered even immoral to view it as such.
Virgil’s suicidal act which might be regarded as a slightly passive response to socialist state terror and also to some extent Lev’s slightly blinkered hiding in everyday tasks, reveals not only a partial failure to cope with the terror of the past, but also a disillusionment with the present’s capability to prove radically different from the past. Finally, Adorno’s claim about the modern sublime aroused by the terror of the twentieth century traumas being deprived of its Kantian reaffirmation of human dignity holds true to the depiction of post-Wall East-Central Europe in the two analysed novels. With regard to the consequences of this to the traditional philosophical association of terror and the sublime, two distinct conclusions could be deduced from the two novels: Communist state terror is regarded as either total and inescapable for the onlooker – therefore far from sublime – or the sublime it triggers fails to serve as reason for much delight and rather facilitates a struggle for a life freed from such moving feelings as the sublime Romantic artists were so keen to find.

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NOTES

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RÉSUMÉS

Depuis les temps anciens jusqu’à l’ère postmoderne, l’expérience de la terreur médiate a toujours été traitée par les essais esthétiques comme une source de sublime. Cependant, cette association traditionnelle entre terreur et sublime s’est trouvée bouleversée par les tragédies violentes du XXe siècle, et on peut se demander si la terreur d’un état totalitaire peut déclencher le sublime. Le but de cet article est de décrire comment ce couple traditionnel de la terreur et du sublime a été transformé dans la littérature contemporaine en évaluant la terreur de l’état socialiste à partir de deux romans anglais contemporains sur l’Europe centrale et orientale: *Kitty and Virgil* de Paul Bailey et *The Road Home* de Rose Tremain.

Since ancient times well into our postmodern era, aesthetic treatments have regarded the experience of mediated terror a source of the sublime. However, this traditional association of the two notions suffered a severe cataclasm during the violent tragedies of the twentieth century, and it became questionable whether such terror as that of a totalitarian state could trigger sublime at all. The aim of this essay is to outline how the traditional coupling of terror and the sublime is transformed in contemporary literary evaluations of socialist state terror based on two contemporary British novels about East-Central Europe: Paul Bailey: *Kitty and Virgil*, and Rose Tremain: *The Road Home*.
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