

Holocaust as Postmodern Trauma:

Representing the Real in D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*

1982 witnessed the site of a short-lived, but nevertheless intense battle over D. M. Thomas's first commercial success, *The White Hotel*. After initial positive reviews and high sales in the United States, D. A. Kendrick's "Letter to the Editor" in the March 26, 1982 edition of the *Times Literary Supplement* accused the author of plagiarism. Kendrick argued that the fifth chapter of Thomas's novel was "in fact a superficially reworked version of the historical accounts in [Anatoli Kuznetsov's] *Babi Yar*." Kuznetsov's 1970 documentary novel, a fictionalized account of the 1941 destruction of the Kiev ghetto and the murder of approximately 34,000 Jews at the ravine of Babi Yar, recounts in particular the experiences of Dina Pronicheva, one of only two known survivors. Kendrick's letter, in which he labels *The White Hotel* a "literary deception," spawned a controversy carried out within the pages of *TLS* over right of authorship, breach of copyrights, and the limit of artistic creativity in postmodern literature.¹ Looking back at the debate, however, the accusations and the vehemence of the argument seem exaggerated and overwrought. Compared to the ludic pla(y)giarism of other postmodern writers, Thomas's use of actual persona and his fictionalization of history is moderate and certainly should not be perceived as offensive.² Not only does he acknowledge his indebtedness to Kuznetsov in the copyright section, he also treats the "stolen" material with the utmost respect for authenticity—to the point of quoting the original verbatim. Nevertheless, many readers were greatly upset, and even his defenders acknowledged the danger of his approach.

Although the debate has long abated, the issues have not. Articles discussing *The White Hotel* show how most critics are still puzzled by the dispute and often feel the need to take a

stand with or against Thomas on the issue of plagiarism. What is most peculiar about these discussions is the emotional intensity with which they are carried out as well as the fact that the reality of Thomas's literary and intellectual debt stands in no relation to the oftentimes hostile reactions it has received.³ For example, Lady Fall Brown, one of Thomas's most steadfast accusers, claims: "Had D. M. Thomas never read *Babi Yar*, he could have never written *The White Hotel*" (78), thus not only faulting Thomas for moral deficiency but also for artistic failure. Accordingly, she traces a variety of concepts in Thomas's text back to Kuznetsov's novel, including several that are completely unrelated to *Babi Yar*. Similarly, Martin Amis regards the *Babi Yar* chapter not only as ethically but also as aesthetically superior when he describes it as "the best bit—and Thomas didn't write it" (124). Yet when looking at the principal contributions to the debate, it becomes apparent that the purely formal complaints are ultimately subsumed by the critics' moral outrage. The criticism of Thomas's use of Holocaust material moves into an ethical register as readers argue that "no writer has the moral right to take the experience of a real human being and attach it ... to a made-up character" (Tennant) or conclude that "the 'borrowings' are symptomatic of a wider irresponsibility" (Frost), and wonder whether "the author of a fiction [should] choose as his proper subject events which are not only outside his own experience but also, evidently, beyond his own resources of imaginative re-creation?" (Kendrick).

The ethical imperative evoked again and again in the critical responses suggests that it is, in fact, the notion that Thomas plagiarizes a Holocaust survivor, rather than one of Freud's neurotic, bourgeois patients, which is most reprehensible. Considered to be beyond representability, the Holocaust occupies a consecrated state of sublimity; as a result, any writing on the Holocaust is subjected to intense scrutiny, especially when written by non-survivors or

when venturing outside of purely factual accounts.⁴ Consequently, the accusations against Thomas revolve around Kuznetsov's novel only, a text that is, in fact, acknowledged and thanked in the copyright section, whereas Thomas's free use of Freudian concepts and styles and his substantial debt to the case studies is barely mentioned, even though it constitutes a similar type of intellectual appropriation. Ironically, the criticism offered is one that could, in fact, be leveled against any number of postmodern writers as well as against authors of documentary fiction—like Kuznetsov and other writers of Holocaust novels. In fact, as several defenders of Thomas's novel have pointed out, Kuznetsov's text itself is already mediated, since he transcribes Dina's eyewitness account. As a result, critics' discomfort with *The White Hotel* is not simply explained on the essentialist grounds that the author is a male, Gentile non-survivor or that his novel fictionalizes the Holocaust. While such criticism could arise from more purist quarters of Holocaust Studies, Thomas's book has actually received surprisingly little attention from Holocaust scholars.⁵ Instead, most scholarly criticism firmly situates Thomas as a postmodern historiographer and, as such, the narrator's varying subject positions and the playful and plagiarist attitude towards historical facts are most often thought to be simply part of its postmodern characteristics. After all, only within the discourse of the postmodern can we understand that Thomas's use of Dina Pronicheva's testimony cannot be charged with the ethical reproach of plagiarism but instead must be understood as a vital aspect of postmodern historiographic metafiction.

The postmodern theoretical framework of most critical responses to *The White Hotel* makes the ultimately negative ethical response all the more puzzling. In order to understand the generally felt uneasiness when confronting the novel, we have to look not only at Thomas's depiction of the Holocaust but also at the other central topic of the novel, psychoanalysis. Not

only is Thomas facing the dual demands placed upon any writer of Holocaust fiction in terms of authenticity to the Holocaust and creative originality, he is also connecting the two disciplinary approaches of psychoanalysis and history that often appear to be contradictory and incompatible.⁶ In so doing, Thomas's novel bridges the old antagonism between historical and psychoanalytic criticism by invoking both disciplines and therefore demanding both disciplinary approaches. Consequently, Thomas's novel must be categorized as postmodern not so much for his mixing of styles, voices, and genres as for its understanding of the relationship between the two seemingly contradictory discourses of history and psychoanalysis. It is the violent juxtaposition of these two topics that makes this text so unsettling and causes the readers' often quite mixed reactions. Only at the intersection of the emotionally charged discourse of psychoanalysis, the historical reality of the Holocaust and the ludic structural devices of postmodern fiction can we fully explicate the debates surrounding Thomas's *The White Hotel*.

By thematically and stylistically connecting the heroine's personal trauma as it is revealed through the Freudian case studies with the collective and historical trauma of the Holocaust, the novel questions the truth-value of both disciplines as well as any interpretive attempts that privilege one in favor of the other. Lisa becomes an exemplary subject; both within the psychic and the historic realm, her function is to stand in for others. In the Freudian case study, Lisa serves as a model hysteric for psychoanalytic theory; in the Babi Yar chapter, she turns into a representative Holocaust victim. Through her dual exemplary role, Lisa points towards the difficulty of separating the psychoanalytic and historical as well as the particular and universal. In other words, Thomas connects his protagonist's personal turmoil with global events as he relates her psychic anguish to the genocide of European Jewry. It is this juxtaposition of the psychoanalytical and the historical, that must be held responsible for the

intense discomfort in many of Thomas's readers which manifests itself in their obsessive focus on the supposed plagiarism of Dina Pronicheva's testimony.

To fully understand the readers' discomfort with Thomas's novel, however, we have to move beyond the initial ethical offense of appropriating a Holocaust survivor or even the juxtaposition of the personal and the historical. By using a Dina Pronicheva's account, Thomas has entered the field of Holocaust Studies, a discourse upon which he implicitly comments when he presents history and psychoanalysis as different disciplinary modes of trying to understand and theorize the experience of the Holocaust. As Thomas presents side by side these two very different approaches to the Holocaust, he implicitly comments on the conventions of survivor testimonies, one of the most prolific fields in the literature of the Holocaust. He does not contradict the conventions as much as foreground the dichotomy present in many—if not most—of these eyewitness accounts: only when we read *The White Hotel* against the background of other Holocaust testimonies can we see how Thomas exposes a certain repressed tension in the relationship between particular and universal experiences that most eyewitness testimonies try to ignore. Exposing this underlying tension of the survivor to report one's own experiences truthfully while at the same time representing the victims as a whole in order to speak for those who cannot, Thomas reveals an ambiguity between the particular and the universal often repressed in Holocaust Studies. Consequently, the emotional reactions to the meeting of psychoanalysis and history, of personal and collective trauma in *The White Hotel* indicates the currency of these issues within this quickly developing discipline.⁷ As such, reactions to *The White Hotel* must be seen *not* as a result of its plagiaristic use of previous material nor for its attempt to discuss the Holocaust in postmodern terms, but for short-circuiting—and thus laying bare—the complex relationship between the different discourses of history and psychoanalysis

that attempt to understand and explain the supposedly incomprehensible and unrepresentable event of the Holocaust.

At first sight, it appears that we must understand most objections to Thomas's novel within the context of its postmodern historiographic structure and the utterly ambiguous ending. While the concerns most readers voice are more complicated and complex, it is useful to discuss the objections named most frequently, namely Thomas's appropriation of a Holocaust survivor to create his literary heroine. After all, what frustrates many readers about Thomas's fictional depiction of the events at Babi Yar is the novel's postmodern approach to the Holocaust, the event whose brutal reality threatens to overwhelm and erase any attempt of fictionalization. As fiction meets fact, both are questioned and destabilized, but this ludic decentering is much more threatening to the historical account and the social and political beliefs it sustains. Accordingly, at the center of this debate on postmodern Holocaust narratives is the problem of suitable representations and the question as to whether *any* fictionalization does not fall danger to a negation of the facts, i.e., whether only the facts pure and simple can adequately tell the "real" story. After all, since part of the Nazi agenda was the complete erasure of the genocide it carried out, scholars are often lacking vital data, facts, and information, a particularly sensitive issue when considering the onslaught of revisionist historians who repeatedly attempt to scientifically "prove" that the Holocaust did not occur. Yet by guarding the Holocaust against the falsities of fictionalization, a faulty dichotomy between facts and fiction is established where the power of the imagination is collapsed into falsehood and lies. Postmodernism, on the other hand, suggests that fiction can often achieve a larger truth above and beyond the facts themselves—even as it may fail to recount all the particular details. This is especially pertinent when we consider that Holocaust narratives confront a system whose implicit goal was an Orwellian rewriting of

history in which most of the surviving documents were produced by the perpetrators. As a result, artists often resort to fictionalization to imagine and resurrect the voice of the victims, though their artistic license is constantly in danger of being perversely abused at the hands of Holocaust deniers.⁸

When fictionalizing witnesses of the Holocaust, however, we face the problem of immediacy of personal experiences, a central issue in postmodern theory but particularly relevant for Holocaust Studies. After all, as we move further away from the actual historical events, any attempt to access the truths of the past is mediated by knowledge and understanding already cast in language. It is this awareness of postmodern theory that any experience can only be fully accessed in language that must be brought to bear on Thomas's novel. In this case, the actual events at Babi Yar are recounted several steps removed as the novel emphasizes the literary process of our imagination and our need for literary models to comprehend the world. Even though Thomas's detractors criticize him for not treating the Holocaust reverently enough, his very use of Pronicheva's story suggests that the exact opposite is true. In fact, *The White Hotel* follows the self-imposed *Bilderverbot* so often found in Holocaust narratives that eschew representations of the Holocaust unless they rely on the authenticity of the eyewitness. Considering his strange reliance on the actual eyewitness account of Dina Pronicheva, the criticism of Thomas's use of a survivor account is startling. He even admits in one of his letters that "the only appropriate voice becomes . . . the voice of one who was there" (Apr 2, 1982). Thus, it is equally plausible to regard Thomas's use of eyewitness accounts as the most reverential way to approach the Holocaust.

While his resorting to an actual survivor lends the novel a certain authority, it also purports a more naïve understanding of reality and fiction not found in the rest of the text.

Whereas Thomas was willing and able to imagine a fictionally altered Freud, reality has become too strong in the case of his presentation of Babi Yar; he thus explains his failure to imagine Dina's words like he had imaged Freud's because "imagination . . . is exhausted in the effort to take in the unimaginable which happened" (Apr 2, 1982). Accordingly, Thomas subscribes to a model of authenticity in which not only the testimony of the Holocaust survivor herself is given a certain undeniable truth status but any account that can be traced back to her is granted a similar privilege. The direct genealogy from Thomas through Kuznetsov to Dina Pronicheva moves "The Sleeping Carriage" within the realm of the horrific sublime of Babi Yar which—though inadequately mediated through words—seems to allow us a glimpse of the reality of the Holocaust. Consequently, the postmodern fictional treatment of the Holocaust in *The White Hotel* is ultimately neither completely postmodern nor completely fictional as Thomas obeys the imperative of silence in which the Holocaust is surrounded by what Claude Lanzman calls, "a circle of fire." While Thomas's decision to use Pronicheva's account testifies more to an ethics of authenticity than to a postmodern pla(y)giarism, the particular manner in which Thomas presents Dina's experiences raises various problems for traditional Holocaust narratives.

D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* confronts the reader with an unconventional setup and structure but thematically splits into three parts: the initial sections focus on Lisa's psyche and the Freudian case study (complete with the patient's original texts and her corrective letters); followed by a briefer, historical account of Lisa's subsequent life through the turmoils of Stalinist Russia up to her brutal murder by the German soldiers; finally, a postmodern dream sequence that moves Lisa beyond death to an imaginary—though not idyllic—camp of healing and recuperation. Whereas the first part already problematizes the question of universal representation and representability, the second part shifts the mode of representation, completely

undermining any attempt at universality, only to be overthrown yet again with the final section. Lisa thereby gains a depth of character that any single mode of explanation could not have provided. As the character evades any simplistic unified mode of interpretation—be it psychoanalytic or historical—so does the novel as a whole. In particular with the final chapter, any privileging of the psychoanalytic or historical as the “final word” must be thrown into doubt as the dream-like sequences simultaneously affirm and question both.

The novel commences with an epistolary prologue containing a variety of letters, most of them from or to Sigmund Freud. Beyond the—historically accurate—visit to the United States, the letters discuss a specific case and its patient’s writings. These obviously fictional letters describing actual historical characters and circumstances set the stage not only for the central role of psychoanalysis and its emphasis of eros and thanatos, but they also introduce the constant merging of historical and fictional text. Moreover, they appear to create a fictional frame to verify the accuracy of the initial three chapters containing the patient’s erotic poem and prose narrative as well as Freud’s case study, “Frau Anna G.” Yet this apparent narrative frame breaks when the fourth and fifth chapters reveal the patient’s actual name as Lisa Erdman, supplement and clarify much of Freud’s assumptions, and expose a variety of errors in his interpretations. It is here in the next to last chapter that the second motif finally emerges with Lisa’s brutal murder at Babi Yar, one of the Nazis’ infamous sites of Jewish mass execution. The sudden advent of the Holocaust in *The White Hotel* catches the unsuspecting reader by surprise—some even feel “angered” and “tricked” for being “thrust in the most horrifying way into the midst of Babi Yar” (George 57). In effect, this brief fifth chapter, which depicts Lisa’s death, overshadows the entire book and any interpretation of it.

Even critics who do not accuse the novel of plagiarism often privilege the relatively brief passage of Lisa's killing at Babi Yar as they use it to undermine and correct the psychoanalytic sections, thus implicitly privileging the outer, historical struggles over the inner ones. Any reading that relies exclusively on this realist chapter and retroactively reinterprets the earlier psychoanalytic ones through a historical lens, however, has to ignore not only the multitude of vantage points offered throughout the novel but, more specifically, the final chapter. This last chapter offers yet another point of view as it undermines both the psychoanalytic and the historical approach through its fantastic mode. As Ellen Siegelman summarizes, possible interpretations of the epilogue include "yet another prophetic fantasy of Lisa," "Lisa's experience of dying," or "a believer's account of an afterlife" (75). Merging the truths of reality and the fantastic, of a life and dream world, the novel concludes on an utterly ambiguous note that questions all that has come before and, most certainly, refuses any unified and coherent interpretation.⁹

While both psychoanalysis and the Holocaust are clearly important themes in *The White Hotel*, critics disagree on their respective relevance in regards to the overall interpretation of the text. Psychoanalysis obviously occupies the larger portion of the text; in fact, it is the central motif throughout the first four sections. Though retroactively we can see its anticipation in Lisa's symptoms and dreams, it is not until chapter five that the Holocaust consciously enters the text. Yet at that point it completely overshadows the story and any of its previous themes. As a result of this dual split, many readers have chosen to take sides, selecting one of the two frameworks as sufficient and subsuming the other theme within it. While a more historical reading such as Robertson's claims that the Babi Yar chapter "portrays a reality which drives out the [psychoanalytic] theory" (460), a psychoanalytic critic like Cowart argues that

“psychoanalysis is an ideal structural device for a fiction concerning appearance and reality” (216). Providing a reading in which the horrors of reality demonstrate the limitations and, ultimately, the uselessness of Freudian analysis or in which psychoanalysis ultimately is a theory that can account for all of the historical occurrences, these interpretations tend to pit the two parts against one another. However, not only does such a reading run contrary to the postmodern impetus of the novel, it belies the text’s very form and contents. Therefore, the central question when trying to read *The White Hotel* from a psychoanalytic and historical perspective is how to stay faithful to the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis and the historical realities of the Holocaust without privileging either one, thus maintaining a balance similar to the one the text itself performs. It is only when we consider the various incommensurable interpretations simultaneously that we can reach the meaning of the novel, a truth more complex than any singular vision could offer. While we must take into account the limitations and failures of the Freudian approach, the text does not support a reading in which the historical section supplants or eradicates the psychoanalytical insights; rather, the two parts must be seen as interdependent and supplementary so that we can understand the text fully only when bringing into dialogue the two seemingly disparate story lines.

Strangely enough, both the psychoanalytic and the historical readings agree insofar as they use the realities of the Holocaust to question, undermine, and supplement the theories of the psyche.¹⁰ Yet, whereas one approach regards the Holocaust as psychoanalysis’ death knell, the other views these historical events as simply another challenge that psychoanalysis has taken on to become a more comprehensive and better theory. Historically, psychoanalysis has often been accused of not offering a comprehensive framework to fully understand and theorize the Holocaust’s effects on the survivors, since the universal trauma of the victim’s experience in the,

as David Rousset has called it, “concentrationary universe” is seen to outweigh any previous particular experiences.¹¹ In an attempt to explain the overwhelming force of the Nazi machinery and the utter arbitrariness of survival, many accounts and interpretations of the concentration camps thus fail to emphasize the relative importance of previous experiences, of personal qualities that might have helped their survival as it allowed them to confront their traumatic environment.¹²

In other words, the survivor’s trauma is always seen as a political event and not based on familial circumstances. Of course, such a reading is justified to a certain extent, since the Holocaust has often been regarded as the greatest of equalizers: the utter arbitrariness and gratuity of its violence disavows the advantages of personal achievements and moral strengths while its all-encompassing murderous intent equalized all its victims, regardless of any particularizing or individuating attributes. Nevertheless, it trivializes the category of the individual as it subsumes any and all personal idiosyncrasies to the universal trauma of the Holocaust and assumes that the Holocaust reduced everyone to the same state in the same way. Not only does the Holocaust negate the individualizing characteristics of the victims as they are thrown into its nightmarish world, the type and extent of their suffering retroactively seems to erase all that they were before while it equalizes their experiences to the one central trauma of the Holocaust. While it may be true that the victims lost their individuality in the camps and at the moment of death at the hands of the Nazi machinery, it is certainly more problematic to look at survivors as if the trauma of the camps had erased any individual experiences before or after.¹³

It is this tendency to erase the identity of the individuals in favor of a universalizing victim-status that we find challenged in *The White Hotel*. By simultaneously approaching the Holocaust from a historical and a psychoanalytic perspective, Thomas not only forces a

confrontation between those two approaches, but also shows how they necessarily must be part of one another. After all, history is shaped and carried out by individuals with particular likes, dislikes, and idiosyncrasies. Accordingly, no individual can be regarded as separate from the historical circumstances that have shaped his or her attitude, fear, and desires; neither can we regard historical events as divorced from individuals or see these individuals as nothing but a set of historically contingent circumstances. In order to make his case clearly, Thomas chooses extremes for both sides: Lisa's analysis is with none other than Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, while her eventual demise is part of one of the largest and most haunting historical events of this century.

Thus, when Thomas creates a heroine who is both a patient of Freud *and* a victim of the Holocaust, he pits exemplary events of both psychoanalysis and history against one another, each of which appear to deny the other's importance and impact. What *The White Hotel* succeeds in doing, then, is to complicate these clear boundaries, thereby showing the reader that both the more ahistorical reading of Freudian psychoanalysis as well as the anti-psychological, anti-individualistic approach to the Holocaust are problematic if not simply wrong. Lisa simultaneously comes to represent the model Freudian patient in her case study while the information the following chapters reveal about her actual life move her outside of the psychoanalytic framework. Similarly, she becomes both the representative Holocaust victim—standing in for the tens of thousands that died at Babi Yar—while she already cannot be typical any more to the reader since we have already heard her story, been asked to identify with her. This constant move between the particular and the universal becomes the theme throughout Thomas's novel and corresponds to Thomas's merging of history and psychoanalysis. After all, one of the central differences of their fundamentally distinct philosophical backgrounds is the

dissimilar emphasis they place on the universal and particular. While psychoanalysis focuses on the individual psyche, history is characterized by its attempt to describe and understand the actions of large groups, factions, and nations. As psychoanalytic analysis foregrounds the particulars that make each patient different, it must look at each patient's symptoms and solution on its own terms. Historical analysis, on the other hand, is less concerned with the motivations—or even actions—of individuals as it addresses larger schemes of social changes, political upheavals, and wars.

Throughout the novel, Thomas connects the two story lines in several ways. Not only do both parts chronicle the life of protagonist Lisa Erdman and early twentieth century history, any number of motifs, themes, and symbols appear throughout the case study only to recur in the historical sections. First of all, there is the apparent connection of Freud's Jewishness, and while the novel does not address Freud's life during the Holocaust, the psychoanalyst's flight from the Nazis and the loss of his four sisters in the camps looms in the background of the text. A subtler but more important connection lies in Lisa's symptoms which, in fact, are intimately related to a history that has yet to come. Freud misreads these symptoms as hysterical, but the reader ultimately learns that they are prophetic: Lisa experiences pains in the very same places that will later be injured prior to her death, her pelvis that is cracked by the boot of one of the SS men and the internal injuries she suffers when one of the soldiers rapes her with his bayonet. Moreover, one of the images she repeatedly imagines in her dreams and that open the "The Gastein Journal" is her flight through the woods. Not until after Lisa's death can we understand that she not only foresees her own murder but also the experiences of the only two survivors of Babi Yar. Thus, the reader learns that Dina's survival had been anticipated by Lisa, "for she had clairvoyant

gifts” (250). In fact, we learn little about Dina’s actual escape in the Babi Yar chapter, but we have already experienced her flight from the ravine in detail through Lisa’s imagination.

On a structural level the historical and psychoanalytic aspects are connected in the figure of Lisa and the model role she plays in both story lines, as an exemplary patient of Freud’s case study and as a representative victim at Babi Yar. Melding the surrealist portrayal of the protagonist’s dreams and fantasies with the realist discussion of political, historical, and social issues of the twentieth century, *The White Hotel* links the personal psychic scars of its protagonist to the general traumatic impact of the Holocaust. In casting Lisa in both roles, Thomas foregrounds the connections between the protagonist’s personal trauma to be revealed and reconstructed by Freud and the collective trauma of mass murder as experienced by the victims at Babi Yar. It is this exploration of the relationship between personal and collective trauma that marks Thomas’s novel as an important example of recent trends in trauma studies. Lisa’s trauma, after all, is not only the psychic reaction to the tragic loss of her mother but, more importantly, her anticipation of the collective tragedy to come. By removing the actual traumatic event from Lisa’s past to posit it in the future, Thomas offers a new understanding of trauma, one in which the traumatic reactions can occur without the actual personal experience.

Not coincidentally, it is the premonition of the Holocaust that brings about Lisa’s traumatic sufferings. It is within the context of Holocaust Studies that we can detect this new, extended understanding of trauma as collective, a trauma which consequently can affect people not immediately involved. As opposed to the traditional definition of trauma as the victim’s reaction to a psychic scar, as a reaction formation to repress a painful psychic event, this collective trauma moves beyond the personal experience to encompass larger historical events such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima, or the Vietnam War. Even though the experience and

suffering of the *individual* victim may be similar to victims of other traumatic incidents, the historical impact of the collective traumatic event separates the two and creates a traumatic collective that incorporates people not immediately affected. Especially in Holocaust Studies, trauma theory has become a privileged mode of discourse as it allows for the explanation of events not easily theorized within a traditional psychoanalytical framework. In fact, looking over the recent non-clinical literature on trauma, we could safely say that the Holocaust has become the exemplar for trauma theory.¹⁴

Within the Freudian section, Lisa clearly performs an exemplary function as Freud tries to generalize her experiences. After all, most of his findings were derived from particular case studies. Thus, while the Freudian case study by definition emphasizes the particularity of the patient, it does so with the understanding that the individual may generate general truths about human nature. It allows the analyst to formulate and develop his theories by addressing a universal problem within the particularities of his patient's specific life. Lisa's case study, "Frau Anna G," however, also shows the apparent limitations of this approach as Freud refuses to foreground Lisa's individuality in his endeavor to find an all-encompassing theory. In fact, the text questions Freud's diagnosis of his patient as a repressed homosexual via Lisa's letters which provide additional information about her life. A reader versed in Freudian psychoanalysis may further recognize the fictional Freud's discovery of Lisa's homosexual tendencies as reminiscent of the historical Freud's also faulty diagnosis in the case study, *Dora*.

Though Lisa's case study has mostly been read as modeled on Freud's early *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud's diagnosis as well as its style (including the corrective footnotes) suggest that the chapter must also be read as a commentary on Freud's *Dora* case. As many readers of the actual case study of *Dora* have pointed out, Freud's countertransference prohibited him from

fully understanding his patient's problems, from fully analyzing her symptoms.¹⁵ By allowing Lisa to speak on her own behalf, Thomas, in fact, creates the counterdiscourse Dora was never permitted and thereby questions Freud's abilities at the same time as he shows the limitations under which Freud was constructing his case study. This intertextuality with *Dora*, the case study which has become a symbol of psychoanalysis' (and the real Freud's) limitations, suggests Freud's desire to impose his general theories on individual subjects regardless of their particular histories and symptoms. As a result, the position of exemplarity that Lisa occupies employs the details of her specific individuality only insofar as it provides her with the ability to embody a universal principle.

Accordingly, many critics privilege the historical sections and regard them not only as supplementing but rather as supplanting the psychoanalytic ones. *The White Hotel* itself suggests psychoanalysis' inability to succeed in its task when it twice quotes Heraclid's "The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored" (196-7, 250). Freud cites the ancient philosopher in a letter to Lisa—though he immediately questions its accuracy and judges it as "not altogether true" (196). Later, this quote precedes the description of the massacre at Babi Yar. While this repetition emphasizes the connection between the two parts, it is followed by another passage seriously undermining psychoanalysis' authority:

Most of the dead were poor and illiterate. But every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions and had amazing experiences, even the babes in arms (perhaps especially the babes in arms). Though most of them had never lived outside the Podul slum, their lives and histories were as rich and complex as Lisa Erdman-Berenstein's. If a Sigmund Freud had been listening and taking

notes from the time of Adam, he would still not fully have explored even a single group, even a single person. (250)

Many critics use this passage to contend that psychoanalysis is completely discredited in the face of reality and history—some even go as far as to claim that it indicates Freud’s “failure to put himself in dialogue with real history” and thus “evasive of historical responsibility” (Robertson 463). This complete privileging of realism and historical reality is questioned, however, by the final chapter which, consequently, has been criticized by many readers as an evasion on Thomas’s part to confront the harsh reality of twentieth century history. As our analysis of the juxtaposition of psychoanalysis and history has shown, however, this final chapter simply underscores a point made repeatedly throughout the novel, namely that both modes of explication must be taken into account, that none of them should be privileged. By refusing to conclude the novel with the historical account, Thomas questions the temporal teleology employed when regarding the later chapter as “truer” and more valid. Likewise, the move into an utterly non-realist scenario (whether it depicts Lisa’s dying dream, her ultimate prophesy, or an actual afterlife), problematizes the clear valorization of the reality of the Babi Yar chapter. As he thus maintains a balance between the psychoanalytic and the historical approach, Thomas emphasizes the importance of both a particular and a universal reading of the Holocaust.

In fact, *The White Hotel* foregrounds the importance of looking at the victims as individuals and realizing their particular identity. While the very methods of historiography resist such an approach and the Babi Yar chapter seems to follow the impersonal, objective style preferred by most historians, the reader remains quite aware of the victims’ individual personalities. Not only do we know Lisa intimately and therefore cannot remain detached and uninvolved in the scenes at Babi Yar, the particular passage quoted above does more than simply

question Freudian analysis. By reminding us that every single one of the victims had an inner psyche as rich and complex as Lisa's, the text refuses to allow us to single her out for identification. While most texts make us care about and identify with the protagonist at the expense of all the other victims, *The White Hotel* resists such an approach both stylistically and thematically. In contrast to the early sections that concentrate on Lisa's inner life, in the Babi Yar section, Lisa appears at first to be less individualized as she loses her proper name and becomes "the old woman." Moreover, when reminding us that "every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions and had amazing experiences," the text makes it clear that Lisa is not to be singled out for sympathy or identification; rather, she simply has become a representative for the suffering.

Both narrative strains address issues of representability and exemplarity as they confront the question of whether a particular person can stand for an entire group, whether she can adequately represent a collective idea. The Freudian psychoanalytic truths and insights are universal only insofar as they can be represented through a particular individual—at the same time as this exemplary representative belies Freud's theories as the historical part shows. In the Holocaust section, Lisa can function as an exemplary representative only insofar as she has already become an individual through the psychoanalytic sections. Thus, the two sections are complexly interdependent and cannot be read apart from one another. Although the text initially seems to follow Freud's enlightened rationalism in privileging an all-encompassing universal mode, the concluding chapters supplement such universals by suggesting a logic of exemplary particularity in which the representative only functions as such via her specific and distinct identity.

When comparing the scene at Babi Yar to the earlier passage in which Freud regards Lisa as a prime example of his theories developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, we can see a shift in Lisa's representative status from universalized particular to particularized universal. In his case study, Freud comments that he "began to see Frau Anna G., not as a woman separated from the rest of us by her illness, but as someone in whom a hysteria exaggerated and highlighted a *universal* struggle between the life instinct and the death instinct" (128-9). In the scene after Lisa's brutal murder, the narrator informs us that "Dina survived to be the only witness, the sole authority for what Lisa saw and felt. Yet it had happened thirty thousand times; always in the same way and always differently" (251). The moments when Lisa explicitly is defined as a representative bear out this distinction between a universalized particular in the case study and a particularized universal in the Babi Yar section. Whereas Freud still sees her as an example of a universal rule, the phrase "always in the same way and always differently" suggests a more complex understanding of Lisa's exemplary function. It emphasizes both universal characteristics (always same) as well as her particularity (always different). Rather than resorting to a least common denominator (which is often negligible when confronted with the differences), *The White Hotel* suggests that paradoxically it is only when we fully understand a person in all her complexity that we can reduce/raise her to the status of the example. Only as a complex human being with her conscious and unconscious ideas, dreams, and desires can Lisa become exemplary and stand in for the thousands slaughtered at Babi Yar, for the millions murdered by the Nazis.

As the novel explores the intricate differences between a universal particular in the first section and a particular universal in the second, its content raises similar issues. Lisa's relationship to her symbolic environment changes over the course of the novel in ways

comparable to her status of representability. In the first part of the novel, Lisa, the model hysteric, excludes herself from the world to bring it into being: renouncing sexual relations, marriage, and children, her sacrifice constitutes an imaginary limit, allowing her to exert control over her symbolic surroundings. In the face of anti-Semitism, she rejects her father's Jewishness which she conceives as *unvermögend* by refusing to have children of her own, thus foreclosing any possibility to confront (or be confronted with) her own Jewishness. Already by the fourth chapter, things change: in a letter to Freud, Lisa admits to her own anti-Semitic shame. By accepting Victor Berenstein's marriage proposal, she embraces not only her Jewish heritage but also motherhood (albeit substitute). This connection is made explicitly clear in Lisa's decision to accompany Kolya; she affirms her own Jewishness over an external identity symbolized by her Ukrainian identity card. Though again sacrificing herself, Lisa now partakes in her world rather than rejecting it. Her death is the result of an acceptance of her Jewishness rather than her exclusion from an anti-Semitic symbolic whose universalizing tendencies eradicate difference. The logic here is one of universal particularity, both in Lisa's acceptance of her Jewishness and her refusal to accommodate her environment as well as in her representation as Holocaust victim.

In other words, only through our insight into her psyche, only once Lisa has confronted her innermost anxieties and faced herself, can she become a representative Holocaust victim. Consequently, rather than contradicting or impeding her universal aspects within the Holocaust narrative, the psychoanalytic aspects of the novel are the very reason Lisa can become generally representative. This is important both for the larger interpretation of the novel and for the often seemingly opposing discourses of history and psychoanalysis. Instead of limiting the general historical focus, psychoanalysis allows us to understand the Holocaust victim in all her particularity. When we finally stand with Lisa at the ravine of Babi Yar, we know her deepest

and darkest fears, hopes, and dreams. It is this identification that makes Thomas's Holocaust chapter both so painful and powerful, an identification that owes more to the psychoanalytic and postmodern aspects of the text than to the purely historical facts. *The White Hotel* thus performs exemplarily what literature in general strives to achieve—by allowing the reader insight into the characters' minds, by creating distinct individuals, literature offers possibly the only way to connect with historical events and characters affectively. The fact that Thomas does not focus on an actual victim but instead creates a fictional character allows him to synthesize a variety of aspects into the composite of Lisa. In so doing, *The White Hotel* presents the Holocaust in a way that exposes its horrors without alienating the readers by allowing them to posit Lisa as Other.

Within the novel itself, Thomas comments on this need of a collective rather than an individual testimony when he suggests that Lisa's story continues through Dina's survival, because "naturally a part of her went on living with these survivors" (250). He thus emphasizes the superiority of a larger communal truth over the individual details of particular events, a position that begins to be more popular in Holocaust Studies as scholars are faced with an event from which we now are distanced more than half a century. Moreover, since the majority of the witnesses have been silenced, the survivors must testify not only to their own experiences but also to those of the dead who are not able to speak for themselves.¹⁶ As mentioned before, however, this imperative to speak for the dead is highly problematic, since it requires the narrator to "imagine" events, occurrences, and feelings of which he or she has no direct knowledge. It is this dichotomy that finally stands at the center of the plagiarism debate; it is this double bind that must be held accountable for many of the negative reactions to Thomas's use of Dina Pronicheva's testimony.

All survivor accounts make general statements about the experiences of the camps at the same time as they retain their individual knowledge to authenticate their narrative. Thomas, however, not only uses this method but also foregrounds it by juxtaposing Dina's public and personal story by offering side by side the psychological and historical account. In so doing, Thomas's fictional eyewitness testimony strongly resembles the actual survivor accounts in his attempt to maintain the balance between the particular and the universal. As a result, his depiction of the victims may be too close for comfort, foregrounding a fact that most testimonies share but few acknowledge. In fact, many Holocaust testimonies employ the collective voice at the same time as they foreground their individual experience, because they are torn between two opposing imperatives: they feel the need to speak for the dead while simultaneously knowing that that cannot be done. As a result, many focus on factual details, not only to certify that they were actually there, that the events actually happened, but also in an effort to overcome their awareness that by their very survival they can never fully testify.

One of the constantly repeated principles that pervades the writing of almost all Holocaust survivors is the all-encompassing impulse to tell their story—not only for their own sake but, even more so, for those who did not survive. This almost obsessive need to report the details of the concentrationary universe perseveres even as the survivors acknowledge and consciously contemplate their inability to understand it or to effectively relate it to their audiences. By speaking for the dead and telling their stories, the survivors take on aspects of a collective memory, transmitting a story larger than their own. As they tell the readers of their encounters with other prisoners, they give the nameless, faceless crowd of six million names, faces, and identities. Primo Levi, for example, repeats an often-stated sentiment when he describes how he felt the need to survive in order to bear witness. Nevertheless, he immediately

amends this statement by saying, “we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 83), thus not only emphasizing the impulse to testify on behalf of all of those who did not survive but also acknowledging the fact that by his very survival his account is not representative.

While survivor narratives tend to foreground their emphasis on particular details, their testimony must be valued for the collective information they reveal above and beyond the experiences of the individual author. Thus, when Charlotte Delbo prefaces her autobiographic text *Auschwitz and After* with the epigraph, “Aujourd’hui, je ne suis pas sûre que ce que j’ai écrit soit vrai. Je suis sûre que c’est véridique,” she wants to distinguish between a general truth (*vrai*) and the truthfulness and factuality of her accounts (*véridique*). In so doing, she differentiates between a reality of the camps that even to her seems unfathomable now and her knowledge and assurance that all the facts and details she recalls are correct. On another level, however, we can turn her statement around and make it even more accurate: in her trilogy Delbo relates the stories of numerous victims, especially in the third book where various chapters are written in the voices of other former prisoners as they recount their inability to overcome the trauma that was Auschwitz. The text leaves it uncertain as to whether Delbo simply transcribes these statements or whether she shapes them in various ways. In either case, her survivor testimony has become that of many; her attempt to write and speak for the dead has transformed her descriptions from a simple factual account to a moving work of art in which collective voices speak their fear, pain, and anger. As a result, Delbo may claim an emphasis on the particular details—her text, however, performs the opposite as it creates a collective memory of both the living and the dead.

It is this tension between the particular and the universal, between an emphasis on facts and details and a need for an overarching truth that Thomas's novel exposes when he creates an imaginary victim who follows the rules of the survivor testimony but also foregrounds the facets of her life outside of the concentrationary universe that are so easily forgotten. By allowing the reader access to Lisa's personal and inner life, he reminds us that we are not faced with a generic victim but are, in fact, dealing with a genuine person. By creating a fictional character yet using Dina Prinocheva's testimony, he foregrounds the fact that all Holocaust testimony must, in part, serve the function of a collective testimony. With the help of his heroine Lisa Erdman, Thomas illuminates the difficult relationship between the individual and the collective, psychoanalysis and history, and the particular and universal as he undermines the clear distinctions between them by having her transgress every supposed boundary. Lisa is both exemplary Freudian patient *and* representative Holocaust victim; yet by being both and more—as the final section suggests—she complicates the demarcating boundaries that disciplines like to establish as well as the clear frameworks that critics tend to employ. It is this dilution of clearly established and safe fields of thinking and writing that must be considered the most radical aspect of *The White Hotel*. As many Holocaust scholars have pointed out, an event such as the Holocaust has defeated any traditional disciplinary attempts to contain it and thus requires a new methodology. Creating a hybrid discourse that acknowledges the particular and the universal within both the personal and the political arena, Thomas outlines an approach to Holocaust Studies that dilutes disciplinary boundaries as it advances a new understanding of historical writing that is neither subjectively personal nor objectively historical but an amalgam of both. In so doing, this fictional text not only challenges the traditional disciplinary inquiries employed within Holocaust Studies but also

provides us with an alternative outlined in the postmodern, multi-layered, multidisciplinary method of *The White Hotel*.

Notes

¹ For an overview of the plagiarism controversy, see Lynn Felder; for the particular contributions, see letters by James Fenton, David Frost, Jeffrey Grigson, Sylvia Kantaris, D. A. Kendrick, Emma Tennant, and D. M. Thomas in *Times Literary Supplement*. Though Thomas's case is mentioned only in passim in *TLS*'s April 9, 1982 roundtable "Plagiarism—A Symposium" featuring Harold Bloom and Ian McEwan among others, the connection to the Thomas debate, which was taking place concurrently, is apparent.

² Other controversies involving postmodern literary use of actual historical figures and events include Robert Coover's insulting portrayal of Richard Nixon in *The Public Burning* or Salman Rushdie's fictional use of the Ghandis in *Midnight's Children*. Yet all these debates only prefigured the more serious and consequential scandal over Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, a text whose reception enacted the postmodern claims to destroy the boundaries between fiction and reality. For a discussion of this utterly postmodern spectacle of the *fatwa*, see Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland's *The Rushdie Affair*.

³ For diverse readings of the authenticity, authority, and impact of the Babi Yar chapter, see David Cowart, Richard Cross, John Foster, Linda Hutcheon, Robert Lougy, John MacInnes, Robert Newman, Rowland Wymer and James Young, *Writing*.

⁴ Beyond Theodor W. Adorno's often-quoted "no poetry after Auschwitz," representative instances of such a critical attitude are George Steiner and Elie Wiesel. While the former suggests that "silence is the only, though in this way suicidal, option" (156) to the horrors of the Holocaust, the latter simply denies the possibility of fictionalizing the Holocaust as he claims that "[a] novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka" ("Holocaust as Literary Imagination" 7). A more extreme stance can be seen in Yechiel Szeintuch, who argues

that not even survivors can write *after* the fact, thus restricting Holocaust literature to actual historical documents alone. For Szeintuch's position and the problems such a stance ensues, see Young, *Writing* 15-39.

⁵ Exceptions to this are Young's in-depth discussion, Zsuzsanna Ozsvath and Martha Satz's brief analysis, Alvin Rosenfeld's critical review, and Lawrence Langer, *Admitting* in passim.

⁶ New Historicism relegates Freud to an intellectual past and regards his theories as obsolete; see, for example, Michel Foucault in his discussion of psychoanalysis in *The Order of Things*, especially 373-89. Psychoanalytic critics dismiss historical approaches as too simplistic because they overlook the ultimate power and influence of the unconscious; see, for example, Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire*, tellingly subtitled *Lacan against the Historicists*, in which she presents a historically sensitive account of psychoanalytic criticism, thereby refuting the common complaint of psychoanalysis as ahistorical.

⁷ The fact that *The White Hotel* is still largely ignored within Holocaust Studies only supports my point insofar as it disrupts the clearly laid out boundaries that circumscribe and define the field.

⁸ A successful example of such a resurrection of the victims' voices is Ida Fink whose fictions are meant to supplement the insufficiency or bias of the actual eyewitnesses—who may, after all, be only found among the perpetrators or bystanders. See Sara Horowitz's discussion of Fink.

⁹ Readings of the final chapter vary but even positive readings of the novel tend to criticize Thomas's shift into fantasy. Many readers criticize the retroactive relativization of the historical chapter, such as Mary Robertson, who asks, "in view of the final chapter we must now ask whether Thomas means us to have read the realistic chapter as 'just one more possible discourse,' no more compelling than the others" (463). Similarly, Lars Sauerberg criticizes the "very nature of the shift" from "the mass grave at Babi Yar to the 'promised land'" (8), a

criticism elaborated by Laura Tanner who reproaches, “Having uncovered the violence lurking beneath Freud’s forms, Thomas, in this final section, retreats from the horror that he has unveiled” (148).

¹⁰ The two most famous attempts to understand the Holocaust within a psychological framework have long since been discredited. Both Bruno Bettelheim, a prisoner at Dachau, and Viktor Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz, failed to successfully explain the psychology of the camp inmate. Moreover, their judgmental approaches that tried to link survival to certain behaviors and mental stability offended large parts of the Holocaust community. For a very critical discussion of both writers, see Langer, *Versions of Survival* 1-65. See also, Young, “Versions of the Holocaust.”

¹¹ Even though most survivor accounts describe their lives before the Holocaust, it only serves to contrast the realities of the concentrationary universe. An almost constant feature throughout most Holocaust testimonies is the victims’ inability to comprehend the outside world as real, and many describe how their memories ultimately cannot provide a mental and emotional escape from the camps. A scene repeated in many accounts is the first day in the camps with its immediate need to “forget” the family members and friends who were murdered; only a complete foreclosure of emotions seems to assure the mental capacity to confront the camps, thus offering a chance of survival. Elie Wiesel, for example, describes his state of mind upon arriving at Auschwitz: “Those absent no longer touched the surface of our memories. We still spoke of them . . . but we had little concern for their fate” (*Night* 45).

¹² Among the survivor testimonies there is disagreement over whether there were any abilities or personality traits that could foster or even guarantee survival. Certainly, the absolute arbitrariness of the decision over life and death ensured that neither a certain knowledge, craft or

profession nor faith, political solidarity or strength of character was sufficient. In fact, most survivors emphasize the loss of individuality and identity as well as the fact that their survival was based more on chance and odd luck than anything else. For opposing readings of the prisoners' states of mind in the camps, see Terrence Des Pres's *The Survivor* and Lawrence Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies*.

¹³ In her highly self-conscious and self-reflexive autobiography *weiter leben*, Ruth Klüger, for example, criticizes this attitude that regards Auschwitz as a sort of birth place for all who survived it: "Und doch wird dieser Ort jedem, der ihn überlebt hat, als eine Art Ursprungsort angerechnet. . . . Aber so einfach ist das nicht, denn was immer ihr denken mögt, ich komm nicht von Auschwitz her, ich stamm aus Wien" (139).

¹⁴ Among the most recent books on trauma, LaCapra deals exclusively with the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub as well as Kali Tal discuss the Holocaust extensively, and even for Cathy Caruth's more theoretical discussion the Holocaust is always in the background.

¹⁵ For a variety of critical feminist readings on Freud's "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," see Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane.

¹⁶ This standard postmodern approach to historiographic novels is, of course, not restricted to Holocaust narratives. Examples from other areas include Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Rudi Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Each of these texts rewrites actual historical events and persona so as to give voice to those whom traditional history has disempowered and silenced.

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