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Europe's Legacy of Ruptures—As Reflected in Late 20th-Century Literary Discourse

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Shortly after the collapse of the USSR, in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Francis Fukuyama encircled a spiritual condition pointing "toward establishing capitalist liberal democracies as the end state of the historical process", while leaving the possibility open for a fall back "into the chaos and bloodshed of history". In *Historien er ikke slut* (History has not ended, 2000), Thomas Thurah, a Dane, converses with 36 European writers, most of whom implicitly dispute Fukuyama's notion of an uplifting end of history. Rather, the common denominator for many of these interlocutors is their emphasis on "the contradiction-filled state of mind being an important part of the historical, social and creative processes that form both us and our world" (p. 454). Thurah concludes that "the contradictory, the paradoxical, the incommensurable or the unstable truths … are characteristics of this reality, which every work of art seeks to give expression". I investigate 2/3 of these interviews and lay bare their notions of Europe around 2000 and how the interviewees envision their continent's legacy as informed by a variety of ruptures, some of which they predict will prevail. Simultaneously, I reflect on the conditions of possibility that underlie the authorial discourses and determine their outcomes.

Keywords: contradiction, ambiguity, complementarity

Paper

While cultural ruptures are not distinctly European, their depth and multidimensional character, as they appear not least in the continent's late 20th-century literature, are too striking not to be considered key to Europe's current cultural identity. Or, as Thomas Thurah put it twenty-five years ago in *Historien er ikke slut* (History has not ended), his collection of interviews with 36 authors from multiple European countries: "the contradiction-filled state of mind" for Europe and Europeans alike is "an important part of the historical, social and creative processes that form both us and our world", and "the contradictory, the paradoxical, the incommensurable or the unstable truths … are characteristics of this [European] reality, which every work of art seeks to give expression" (2000, p. 454).

My goal is to skim through roughly two thirds of Thurah's interviews to hopefully detect a meaningful pattern underlying this apparent disorderliness and the impact its 'message' may hold for the foreseeable future of Europe and potentially other parts of the world. I start with writers of Western European descent or affiliation, representing the bulk of European nations and the majority of the continent's populations, and I end

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with writers from its Eastern regions, including the Baltic and Balkan states[1].

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As for the scenario's historical background, Danish author Tage Skou-Hansen notes: "Europe's history is an eternal conflict between faith and reason. We are obsessed by doubt. We have questioned all authorities … we have doubted about everything. This is the foundation of Europe's history: the critical reason, willing to revise itself. Truths in Europe are provisional. And our condition is a fundamental uncertainty. Which we mustn't regret" (Thurah, 2000, p. 54). And further: "We may be at the mercy of angst while indoors, but when we dare go outdoors, we may experience the wonderful liberation that there is another world" (p. 55). For Salman Rushdie, Europe's duplicity takes shape as "ever so many shadow figures, dead twins, double worlds, fissures and crevices … because I have always been preoccupied by alternative possibilities, which remain to exist, like, for instance, the person I didn't become … all, of course, magnified by having always lived such a split life" (p. 90).

For Norwegian author Jan Kjærstad, divisiveness hits the narrative perspective itself and puts it in flux, almost like complementarity in Niels Bohr's atomic theory. Truth is ambiguous, at least "there are always two truths, never only one, perhaps rather ten" (p. 96), which, narratively speaking, means that Kjærstad's "story telling is one great thing consisting of many minor narratives linked together by way of associations" (p. 98), which again reflects his personal sense of divisive enrichment: "I have always been a split personality, in a compounded, complementary sense … always felt a strong desire to enter a monastery as a monk, but also always felt a strong need to live in a relationship. I believe both-and is possible. In the ideal marriage you can be a monk with a great privation and yet live with passion and close relation to another human being … which everybody thinks is impossible" but which is possible within a "sort of complementary understanding of humanity" (p. 99).

What in this case seems like a personal rupture and healing in one fell swoop takes on a socio-political dimension for German author Siegfried Lenz. He acknowledges our desire to live in a cozy domestic microcosm but warns against such "*splendid isolation*" (p. 147) and points to Germany's history as an illustration of that tendency turning into an art of repression, which ultimately results in a history of war that seems to endlessly repeat itself. A different conglomerate of politics and literary psychology emerges in Norwegian author Kjartan Fløgstad's fiction. Because the press in capitalist societies is driven by profit motives, "popular and trivial narrative forms prevail" in the culture, but in doing so "inadvertently reveal important sides of society's modernity" (p. 157). As the Berlin Wall falls, so does "the industrially organized society", which in the East led to collapse, but in the West to a social welfare state aimed at "avoiding a revolution like the Communist one" (p. 158). Fløgstad views this socioeconomic schism in terms of Bakhtin's theory of the carnival, an age-old attachment to the culture of manual laborers, which may no longer be in fashion, but in Fløgstad's view has proven compatible with the magic realism that for long was his escape route from domineering high modernist trends in 20th-century literature.

Mitigated or not, ruptures were the driving force in British author Martin Amis' work as well—and for both good and ill. For this pessimist, and devil's advocate, death is nothing but clarity and an artistic aid in

[1] There are different definitions of Europe's regions. Given the overall age of the authors I discuss and the fact that most of them were practicing much of their craft during the Cold War, my definition here complies with the Cold War scenario, when Eastern Europe was the area West of the Soviet Union that was under direct Soviet influence, while Western Europe made up the rest of the continent.

seeing a different world than the one we are linked to: a source of inspiration for the artist, who also praises the subconscious for allowing the unthinkable to come true, much like the narcotic effect of angst. Because we are one with the cosmos, and the infinite universe is chaotic, Amis relishes the maturity it potentially has in store for our otherwise fixated humanity. It's a boundless ambition shared by Icelandic author Einar Már Gudmundsson, who always seeks to embrace "reality in its full-scale contradiction" (p. 180), not simply in the rational way professional historians make sense of it, because the history of life can defy rationality and only become accountable within an epic, humanistic narrative.

As for Danish poet Per Højholt, who has labeled his poetics "The Grimace of Nothingness", his work is "not for maintainers" but for those in search of differences. He therefore takes to irony and blasphemy as ways to "repel yet take in [the sacred] in one gesture" (p. 233); for unless granted such access to the culture, sacredness will figure out how to sneak in. More broadly, "immortality is incorporated in humans' bent for leaving their marks" (p. 235). Ruptures will not go unnoticed. For German author Hans Magnus Enzensberger, the ruptures of the Second World War undercut his humanism as a "valid guarantor for the future and orderly circumstances" (p. 238). In its place, the poet is tempted to follow "his innermost inclinations: abandonment, pessimism, what's it all good for?" (p. 239). Humans are at once disposed to "the worst dirty tricks and the greatest wonders", and they "only learn the hard way", anthropologically equipped for success but not with the mental capacity to address its downsides or shadow effects (cf. p. 243).

Swedish author Kerstin Ekman views civilization's darkness and barbary from a Northern European perspective, which is really not all that different. Sweden, in particular, being neutral during the Second World War, felt tempted in the 1960s and 1970s to let trust in the future "put [this] past behind" and allow "the enthusiasm for modernity" to quell the darker side of history (with historians complicit in the denial), leading this author to sense a cynical disengagement in her country's democracy at the time of the interview. As she watches the decline in democratic interaction around her, she only feels comfort in avoiding both optimism and pessimism in favor of attitudes like Alva Myrdal's, who worked for tolerance and humanism but often from the perspective of a pessimism that prevented "skepsis from turning into cynicism"; Ekman's formula was to see darkness in the eye and to convert "pessimism to defiance" (p. 263). Ekman's Danish colleague Klaus Rifbjerg realized that even ruptures advanced by literary avantgardism, to which he had contributed significantly, soon became old hat, and that only art revoking reality—for evil and good but never bland—would produce the ruptures European culture needed. A sensory and moral impartiality, devoted to things, informed an existence richer in nuances than that of bourgeois rebels. Rifbjerg's productivity harks back to his "completely anarchistic" (p. 287) take on artistic legitimacy—and his belief that only this attitude might secure a genuinely rich history.

Though far from a literary anarchist, German author Günter Grass displays his own eruptive strategy by constantly varying his visual angle, while his take on historical denials, such as Japan's of Hiroshima and Italy's of its fascist past, is even more pessimistic than that of Rifbjerg. To Grass, repression of historical truth is omniscient, democracy is always in danger, and German reunification after the Cold War was ill-handled: "we humans are recidivists, we repeat our mistakes both three and four times" (p. 309). He personally refrains from viewing history from "the perspective of the powerful" and favors instead "the viewpoint of the humans that history has overridden", which makes him, in his own words, "a light-hearted pessimist" (p. 310), especially remote from "the American notion of *happiness of life*, the Capitalist, materialist Utopia" (p. 311).

Modern art cannot rely on today's legacy of Montaigne's rationality—an impoverished reduction of human irrationality—that can only be done justice by telling the untold.

In other words, like those of Swedish author Per Olov Enquist, this may well be drawing a line between right and wrong that "is a riddle" (p. 317). Clearly, "the opposites" it separates "remain opposites, unresolved, but real paradoxes" … "Now faith is the enemy of reason, now it is synonymous with life. Now reason is the condition of all possibilities, now it is idleness. In between the two there is only one and the same" (p. 317). In Thurah's words, "to unify faith and thought, to cancel the discord and bring the opposites together in one point" is what Enquist's work is all about (p. 318). A harmonizing view, if you will, and practiced by Enquist, because, as he puts it, "I'm convinced that all humans are vital liars" (p. 330). Which is to say that even when Europe's legacy triggers a harmonizing effort, such as Enquist's, its driving force is disruption.

In his principal work, author and Russian migrant to the U.S. Vasilij Aksjonov realistically describes Europe from East to West as one sick society whose pretentious ideological ambitions are deadly Utopian enterprises, whether Nazism or Communism, or the Russian Revolution, which a Russian philosopher has named "the little Apocalypse" or "human culture [being] an apocalyptic culture aimed at destruction" (p. 336). Rupture and disruption, perhaps not exclusively in (parts of) Europe, seem to occur everywhere: "revolutions have always been succeeded by dictatorships; there are [few] examples of a revolution bringing good ideas to fruition" (p. 336). Democracy, meanwhile, seems a rarity and often victim of revolutionary destruction, and that KGB created perestroika and the American revolution a noble colonial war, are but exceptions confirming this rule. As for Russia, the West is its "sole hope for a future" (p. 343).

One writer who resembles Aksjonov but addresses humanity at large, rather than Europe in particular, is the Dane Peer Hultberg, always curious about the world away from his national home and a migratory author who repeatedly notes how full of meaning the accidental can be, whereas norms and forms are rather clearances—views that conform with cognitive ruptures in Europe's cultural output. While freedom, to Hultberg, of course means freedom from something, if that's all it means, "then it is nothing" (p. 336). In fact, "Unfreedom in itself is not an evil thing" (p. 357). To stress the kind of rupture this view brings to today's conventional wisdom, Hultberg himself makes the point that "Where you use the word liberation, I prefer to use the word *catharsis*" (p. 358). This is how anchored in the norms of antiquity modern European ruptures can seem.

Like his Nordic colleagues Højholt and Hultberg, Norwegian author Dag Solstad reflects on nothingness as a state of freedom, or, as Thurah puts it, "the possibility of becoming an Other by erasing oneself, becoming everybody by being nobody" (p. 374). It's a worldview typical of the later 20th century's radical modernism in Scandinavia, which also entails inspiration from everyday language and contrasts between collective and individual novelistic art. On the downside, this productive epoch often turned a dead-end trajectory for progressive creativity, which Solstad acknowledges. Europe's dominant culture around 2000 is commercial, but there is "a Central European culture with which I identify; it will survive, but it will survive as a marginalized phenomenon … I find myself on the losing team. I belong to a culture that has lost" (p. 379). Commercialism has "to a large extent become the yardstick for the entire literary culture", and though Solstad is not part of it, he admits that "the manipulating aspect of commercial culture or literature is exciting in and of itself" (p. 380), and people gladly submit to its soap operas; such audiences are the citizens, while readers of Marcel Proust are the outliers. And while the end of the Cold War rebellion in Eastern Europe was greeted with Western

enthusiasm, the effect was soon to be just more tasteless Capitalism. For a radical leftwinger like Solstad, there is little left to rely upon but "a few illusions", in fact, his novels are dedicated to "removing the compromises necessary for surviving in life, the illusions, in order to detect how life really is" (p. 382). Cultural ruptures seem to have gone underground, or into fictional hiding, to at best allow a disruptive insight into Europe's life-flattening commercialism to come true.

This seems in line with Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr's notion that only an unreal—or Utopian—world can inform the real one, like the naked desert becoming humanity's fallout room or the room for realizing its potentials. In like manner a historical narrative can be healing by laying bare as many alternatives as possible; ruins can speak volumes, suicide be liberating, and happiness the complement of horror; in fact, "an idea of happiness … without thoughts about those who went under or … about the dark side of the world, is a fiction, an illusion, … kitsch …" (p. 412). Unless enlightenment becomes an individual experience, its effect will likely be counterproductive, as when Austrians for long hung on to a deceptive image of their role in the Second World War because the democratic alternative was initially imposed upon them from outside at the war's end. To transcend such a nationalistic input, enrolling individual nations into the European Union may be insufficient and only give nationalism a wider range. For Ransmayr, "the Utopia must be to transcend even the borders of Europe. Once in the future it must become meaningless to speak about Europe, it too is too small" (p. 415). A real Utopia is where the human is elevated above nation and place, which perhaps only art makes possible by transforming the outer world "into language", that is, into a world of words (p. 417), enabling creative ruptures to supersede the destructive ones of the so-called real world.

Someone Thurah mentions for having stressed the latter point—that "words are not images of the world, words are words" (p. 419)—is French author Philippe Sollers, a modernist with multiple personalities. At unease with social conventions and liberating himself from the straitjacket of Christian European history writing in favor of Orientalism, Sollers nonetheless claims that "my basic political views are pro-European", and that "the past is here and now" (p. 424). In tune with Ransmayr's outlook is even Sollers' take on artistic truth, that "it is never the truth of society" (p. 426), but what unveils the shadowy side of history—an ability that was key to "the 20th century's victory over the 19th century" (p. 427).

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Breaking with his European world order to grasp both its identity and his own is the key rupture in Sollers' work, as it was in the case of other West European artists in my outline of Thurah's interviews; self-comprehension for many issued from viewing the world through a window not of this world, as when Hans Magnus Enzensberger found humans disposed to do both good and bad but prepared only for success and not for addressing downsides or shadow effects. In his experience, nothing but the magic voice of poetry is able to unify these opposites and to defy "the artificial division between emotion and intellect. As if there was a conflict here!" (p. 244).

A somewhat similar Eastern European response emerges from Hungarian author Péter Esterházy's prose. Like a 'pomo' (postmodernist), this ironist enjoys "new incompatible connections … keeping all syntheses at bay, playfully, but insistently"—including the ones that govern many narratives about "Central Europe as a coherent domain" (p. 248); by his account, it has been a 'land' without a center, held together by brutal dictators but now yearning for its future to breed "a new spiritual culture" (p. 250) that can shed light on its pitiful and ridiculous past, when the area's cultural identity was compromised and only survived thanks to irony. To recover from such intellectual impotence, Esterházy was comforted by death and writing, both opposed to

lying and connected by shared conditions, that is, "to tie the body and thus existence to a narrow space, which is also the space of the text. The text cannot step out of this space, just like the body cannot liberate itself from its connection to death. This is a narrowness, a limitation, but also a great intensity" (p. 253). Such *tabula rasa* is the only future for the central part of Eastern Europe.

Esterházy's fellow countryman Imre Kertész takes a similar, but more directly realistic approach to his nation's Second World War history and its aftermath. His Holocaust and concentration camp experiences reign supreme, and one of his novels dealing with the theme of terror explores how "even the unthinkable can seem natural" (p. 361). To be faithful to one's destiny "is a relative freedom", while denying other possibilities is like "having no freedom" (p. 362). Even "a survivor of totalitarianism … will be stigmatized" (p. 364). "Totalitarianism infantilizes a human being" and "severs him from both his society and language", so he, like a machine, ends up using the latter "to rationalize the absurdity he encounters" (p. 365). It's an infantilization no humanistic approach can prevent without turning sentimental, a paradoxical borderline Kertész may well have crossed to the advantage of the truth and his absurd survival in the camp—indeed thanks to Auschwitz. So, his destiny has placed him in nothingness, unless he decides to live on by taking some of himself back again instead of continuing to give in to totalitarian forces.

Further north in Eastern Europe, in his major novel *Judge of Mercy* Czech author Ivan Klíma explores the lead character's belated insight that grappling with political repression has been pointless since the man remains part of the repressive system. In another novel, *Waiting for Darkness, Waiting for Light*, Klíma shows his protagonist Pavel learning how not being granted the right to win gives one protection against defeat, which amounts to a self-destructive and schizophrenic double-life. Still, it at least involves a destructive incentive to "heighten morale", whereas post-totalitarian "money and consumption are not advancing a moral instinct" (p. 32). The fact that "totalitarian ideologies", under which Klíma has lived most of his life, have now become "discredited", is thus no guarantee that "the future won't see its own ideologies" (p. 34).

Even further north in Eastern Europe, Polish author Andrzej Szczypiorski makes his own and more ironical inroads into the psychology of political dictatorship, including his country's liberation from Germany after the Second World War and later from the communist regime—without losing sight of the possibility "once again to lose what has been won". Peace can be stunningly self-destructive, especially when it "is no longer measured by the horrors of war, but by the everyday triviality and thus appears poor and without value" (p. 58). By contrast, the Holocaust was "a richness in European civilization. It may sound odd, but in a spiritual sense it is a richness to have such a tragic experience". The author elaborates on this insight in the human condition: "A human is devil and angel at the same time, subterranean and heavenly at the same time. He or she can be self-sacrificing, heroic, almost sacred, and can do the most horrible things, for instance Auschwitz" (p. 60). This is an insight that changes over time and offsets a deep moral ambiguity. "My narrative is not about the past, it's about my memory thereof, and that's something different. I remember today what happened back then, but perhaps it was altogether different, I will never know. I'm changing. Like you, I am another person today than I was yesterday" (p. 62); "we can all be victims and tormentors, it depends on the situation" (p. 63). Szczypiorski admits to a "moral relativism" (p. 64), which also troubles him. Hatred of evil is understandable, but "hatred disavows the world and ultimately the hater himself" (p. 65); at the same time, if humanizing evil puts it on equal footing with the artistic observer, how then to separate moral qualities. The author admits the dilemma. Separating good from evil is one thing, but why a certain person did what he or she did is an open-ended question. Was he or she a mistaken idealist who believed in the system or its ideology? A cynic

willing to do anything to survive? Or an opportunist, who knowingly did wrong, out of fear to do otherwise? Bottom line for Szczypiorski: "The miracle of life is that it's stronger than death and stronger than its most horrible experiences" (p. 66). Altogether a moral dilemma no less complex, only more heartbreaking than most Western European authors have testified to.

In Baltic Estonia, far north in Eastern Europe, the author Jaan Kross produced, somewhat similarly, "example upon example of the constitutional reflex of repression", as when "turning one's deaf ear" in that direction only reveals "the incurable stupidity that follows from denying oneself the truth" (p. 104). In his novel *The Czar's Madman* Kross's analysis of this "conspiratory character of power" (p. 104) is matched by his title character's duplicity, or with the "demonic aspect of his love for the truth" as he brings unhappiness to the one he loved, and crushes himself in an effort to "crush the blindness and evil and injustice in the Czar's Russia" (p. 105). Hatred is alien to Kross, who instead seeks to distance himself—"Humor is more useful" (p. 106)—from the bad guys ever more "punished by their own conscience" (p. 107). Meanwhile, though the USSR's constitutional text and other classics were compelling documents, actually living under their umbrella revealed that an "underlying element was lying" (p. 108). As an American psychologist has suggested, humans, like Kross himself, exist in a bubble—"this is where the individual's freedom resides. I trust the bubble of my private life. What happens out there, what the propaganda claims and wants to sell—it doesn't disturb me" (p. 110). Rupture is kept under lid.

Moving now from the Baltics in the North to Serbia in the Balkan South makes a final variant of how East Europeans' shadow life comes to the fore. Serbian-Jewish author Aleksandar Tišma "writes about human evil and about living with it as a shadow from which one cannot separate" (p. 429). Tišma is a sober observer, who "doesn't want to move, he wants to examine" (p. 429), which offsets a "both sad and diabolic fatalism" on *The Use of the Human*, his 1996 novel. Here and elsewhere his fiction displays humans realizing their actions were to no good, since "reality has moved in a totally different direction, so we have to follow and defend it, although it has already become alien to us, and we can't be blamed for the outcome" (p. 430). We are all "blameless hangmen, blameless victims … a shared destiny that explains why it's in a victim's house the former finds 'a corner of Paradise'" (p. 431). Tišma conveys no understanding of a crime's rationale—whether it seems "reasonable or acceptable"—only of "the evil of the powerless, the infringement as a compulsory act" (p. 431). He also avoids any clear separation of victim and tormentor, since it's mostly historical circumstances that draw the line between them. And as to the critical status of Serbia in 2000, when he was interviewed, Tišma doesn't know what to say. He knows that the West blames his state for the situation in Kosovo and the war against Croatia and Bosnia. "I know it, we know it, everybody knows it. OK, this is how the West thinks, we can't do anything about it. We'll have to see" (p. 440). Once again, an artist admits the truth is up for grabs.

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Harking back to my introductory remarks and Thomas Thurah's words about "the contradictory, the paradoxical, the incommensurable or the unstable truths"—about Europe around 2000—let me conclude this review of roughly two thirds of his book's interviews by adding that most of them conform with his claim. In fact, what he also states in his conclusion seems a common denominator: "Literature's unmasking … is not the revelation of a final truth or unchangeable circumstances, but rather the revelation of the circumstances under which truths come into being and later collapse" (p. 458). Verbal art does not make sense of nothingness but concretizes it (pp. 459, 461). What I would add is part of another summation, of Martin Jay's article "From Modernism to Post-Modernism" in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern Europe* (1996).

Like Thurah's interviews, it deals with the period when modernism yielded to postmodernism, and Jay's point is that while the latter presented a "radical disruption of the triumphalist mid-century narrative of modernism", in 1996 it was still "too early to write a final balance sheet on post-modernism itself; indeed such an outcome may well be permanently thwarted, if the post-modernist insistence on multiple narratives, heterogeneous subject positions, and the impossibility of totalizing perspectives survives its own heyday. … What can be called the uncompleted project of post-modernity has, it seems, still to run its course" (Jay, 1996, p. 278).

Now, a quarter of a century later, at least some of that course has been run; and while it may seem that the postmodern matrix as a gauge of European ruptures still holds, there are also signs that some of the challenges to conformity that artists of this ilk have been advocating and practicing are now falling prey to conformity themselves. Many still function, as clues to the cultural polarizations and ambiguities in today's Europe[2], but as the concept of rupture is unlikely to be predictable across timelines, there are indeed features of today's European culture that are less in sync with the forecasts Thurah's interviewees predicted. The times, they are indeed 'a-changing'.

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[2] Take, for example, Ransmayr's prediction of a European Utopia without borders, and imagine its realization in the Trump era!