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Florian Andrei Vlad. *Lights and Shadows in the Post-9/11 Age: Literature, Trauma, Geopolitics*. Bucharest: Editura Universitară, 2021. Pp 166. ISBN: 978-606-28-1385-7.

Two decades ago, the world watched in horror the most lethal terrorist attack unfold on American soil. The collapse of the World Trade Center cast a shadow that the American nation has yet to recover from, especially considering the recent resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism. Florian Andrei Vlad's *Lights and Shadows in the Post-9/11 Age: Literature, Trauma, Geopolitics* is both an academic "tribute in light" designed to mark the commemoration of one of the milestones in global history and a complex exploration of this ongoing "war in the shadows" intended to further understanding of the events before, during and after 9/11. While expertly navigating the intricate discourse on terrorism that oftentimes erases the lines between fact and fiction, the author creates a chiaroscuro which addresses the different shades of post-9/11 literature, trauma and geopolitics, while delivering a considerable corpus of literary and extra-literary landmarks that is not only enthralling but also illuminating. The author adds to the growing body of critical works devoted to this literary phenomenon by analyzing the ways in which the cultural and political consequences of trauma seep into the literary texts. The novelty of the monograph consists in its analysis of the disputes and contradictions that permeate the research of post-9/11 literature in order to illustrate how the meaning of 9/11 itself has been reinscribed or tailored to fit into preexisting frameworks. In this respect, the book examines not only the danger that fiction has of falling into solipsism and American exceptionalism but also the possibilities opened by approaching this traumatic historical event from a global, geopolitical perspective.

Vlad offers a meticulous investigation of the nuanced textual, political and cultural landscape, highlighting the ideological spin prompted by the unprecedented nature of the terrorist attack in the

physical, social and psychological spaces of the third millennium. Chiming in with the zeitgeist of the age, the necessary question raised by the author is whether, twenty years later, more sense could be made of what was hitherto considered unrepresentable and incomprehensible in the immediate aftermath of September 11. The strength of the book lies precisely in the panoramic approach to the subject that reconciles the trauma discourse and the political discourse so as to accommodate a spectrum of conflicting viewpoints that oscillate between using 9/11 to throw light on the phenomenon of trauma and using traumatic paradigms to understand the events that unfolded on September 11. Visions and re-revisions of the prior scholarly work and of fictional representations lead to insightful differentiations and openness to myriad shades of interpretation.

The book is structured in nine chapters, each dealing with the multifaceted dimensions of the phenomenon. Although a daunting project to undertake in light of its sheer scale, the rich theoretical framework is elegantly superimposed to bring forth new configurations. As such, a selective body of works combining history, politics, geopolitics, as well as approaches to cultural trauma, provide a necessary background of interpretation. Ideas coalesce, other times clash, but all of them are useful in depicting the yet unfinished picture of terror in the global narrative and subsequently showing various views and positions on the way 9/11 has been dealt with in fiction. Three important 9/11 texts are analyzed, by three American authors from three distinct generations and backgrounds. The novels considered are John Updike's *Terrorist*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. All of them are pursued by the author to illustrate the challenges, dangers and dilemmas circumscribing one very important day in America's history. With the hindsight of time detachment that two elapsed decades occasion, the allegorical representations of American realities not only convey an overlapping of crises, trauma, conflict but also shine with the promise for a better future.

The first chapter includes a compelling discussion on the end of history which shaped the *Weltanschauung* of the period, structured around the words of Yoshihiro Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington and Sarwar A. Kashmeri, among other distinctive voices, in order to trace the "lights and shadows" of the age and provide an objective reconsideration of America's geopolitical role in various parts of the world and the overall cultural effect of American diplomacy. Readers are invited to ponder on

whether September 11 may be regarded as a terminus or as a moment of revelation and reconsideration.

Framing terrorism in factual terms, the second chapter proceeds to explore the drama and implied heroism of the innocent victims of the terrorist attacks. By addressing the hard facts of 9/11, the author unveils the mechanisms through which the harsh realities are reconfigured to articulate emergent symbolic constructions. The terrain of symbolism that terrorism assumes is the catalyst for an analysis of patriotism and the importance of myth in the making and consolidation of a nation, laying emphasis on inconspicuous ideological determinants.

The chapter “Words and a Geopolitical Landmark: G.W. Bush’s War on Terror Speech” signals a skillful shift of focus with the intention of bringing to the fore an element at stake in the aftermath of the terrorist attack, namely language. The speech delivered by George W. Bush immediately after that historic day is advanced as a significant geopolitical landmark and part of a comprehensive background against which some of the major literary texts usually associated with the post-9/11 literature of terror appear. In the inspired analysis of the language of war, Vlad draws attention to the tough realist discourse of the War on Terror that came to define both domestic and foreign policy. The geopolitical issues discussed, ranging from the USA Patriot Act and Operation Iraqi Freedom to the rift between NATO allies and the anti-terror geopolitical map, display the various facets and versions of the global context. Thus, the reader is challenged to go beyond a dualistic division of the world into the democratic world and its dark counterpart.

In the following chapter, “Responses to the Shadows of 9/11 and Its Accompanying War on Terror,” a vast array of historical, geopolitical, media and critical sources, even conspiracy theories, that ponder the consequences of the Age of Terror are presented in an insightful manner. Thus, the author successfully raises questions regarding normal democratic life that are still deeply ingrained in the individual and collective consciousness, such as the clear division that tends to be made in public discourse between good and evil, victims and perpetrators. In this geopolitical picture, the power of discourse to name the enemy and articulate memorable narratives undergirds an intricate web of reverberations, accentuated by moments of deep crisis and instantiated in a certain paranoid frame of the collective imaginary.

The critical voice moves gracefully to an outline of trauma as a means of grappling with the unrepresentable. In the next two chapters, trauma theory is discussed at length by drawing on key theorists and capturing in a concise manner a chronological paradigm for understanding the lingering absence of meaning in the collective psyche. As every shade of emotion intrinsic to crisis is carefully examined, the reader is taken on a journey that begins with psychoanalytical theories, more specifically from Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as well as *Moses and Monotheism*, to therapists dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder in the wake of the Great War and the Second World War. Other significant voices in the field of trauma studies, ranging from Judith Herman, Kali Tal, Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra or Michael Rothberg provide a rich investigation of the ways trauma affects memory and identity, much needed in understanding the critical paradigm of 9/11 literature.

The chapter dedicated to John Updike's *Terrorist* focuses on the first of the three literary "translations" of the horrendous traumatic event into something significant not only for the fates of a number of protagonists that inhabit the novels, but for America as a whole. Vlad dissects the novel in an analytical investigation aimed at unravelling the facets of an un-stereotypical response to the meaninglessness of 9/11. Updike's fictional formula is closely inspected and woven into the interstices of the theoretical framework. The insights into the shadows that haunt the mind of the protagonist coupled with the external perspectives cast light on dimensions elicited and augmented by 9/11. Whether discussing the re-mapping of the American city or the reconfiguration of a new type of character that brings together mainstream and hostile aspects of American identity, Vlad provides a comprehensive scholarly perspective doubled by an engaging style.

Turning to a more exuberant way of coping with trauma, the chapter titled "Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close: From Melancholia to Mourning*" illustrates the key resources that Foer harnesses to frame the trauma of a child whose father is one of the collateral victims of the 9/11 terrorist attack into a narrative that resonates with the audience, tracing manifestations of mourning and melancholia inherent to any instance of crisis, and that is simultaneously imbued with substantial doses of humor. The reader is engaged in an exploration of possible ways of expressing unrepresentable human situations and forms of behavior. A plethora of examples is offered to illustrate the blending of

artistic playfulness and traumatic paralysis. Thus, the author reflects on how art offers a post-traumatic shelter and outlines the play of shadow and light that Foer traces in his text to incrementally move from melancholia to mourning as a positive process of grieving, while also engaging in unexpected, creative forms of overcoming loss.

The last chapter is dedicated to pursuing the intersection of the aesthetic, the psychological and the political in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. Vlad explores the manner in which life engages creatively with reality, the dehumanizing effect of the postmodern condition, the blending of fiction with other art forms that evince the cathartic role of literary texts. He also displays a preoccupation with the overt and subtle manifestations of trauma. He concludes that DeLillo responds to the state's exploitation of trauma as a political instrument by evacuating politics from the traumatized private lives of the citizens. The site of trauma disallows not only politics but also history as an authenticating narrative, in consonance with the modalities of mourning and post-traumatic recovery enacted in the novel.

Embracing the shadow and the light of the long and complex American narrative, Florian Andrei Vlad's *Lights and Shadows in the Post-9/11 Age: Literature, Trauma, Geopolitics* is a valuable critical source that provides an ideal balance between theoretical considerations, case studies and close readings of literary texts in order to create a comprehensive vision of post-9/11 America. In light of its representation of fiction as a post-traumatic refuge following the terrorist attacks, the book initiates a fruitful dialogue with our present times, making it a valuable resource for scholars, students and a wide public of readers interested in geopolitics, trauma and literary criticism.

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