The Stories We Tell:
Rebecca West and the limits of complexity

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I write books to find out about things
-- Rebecca West for 'The Paris Review'

Fifteen years had passed since the military conflict in former Yugoslavia when I headed towards the Plitviče Lakes through the bumpy off-roads of Bosnia and Herzegovina, passing miles of empty fields, deserted buildings scarred by bullets, and signs warning me against active mines. If the role of narrative is to envision the entanglements of history, to see past and present intertwined, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1942) by Rebecca West (British journalist, critic, novelist) perfectly fulfilled it by taking me back along those roads. West found in Yugoslavia a microcosm of the many complexities that inspired her work as a journalist and critic. In this essay, I explore interpositions between West's writing and questions about the limits of complexity in political thinking. It seems important, especially in the current reality of pervasive political populism and nationalism, to ask to what extent the search for the singular truth may be a side effect of our world becoming complex beyond our comprehension. As readers and as critics, how do we navigate between, and beyond, the polarities indispensable to politics, class and gender?

Let us take West's 1915 essay 'It Is Our Duty to Practice Harsh Criticism' for our point of departure. In this early article, West offers a unflattering appraisal of English criticism and its adherence to the conventions of pleasantness, calling instead for a 'new and abusive school of criticism'. Through emphasizing the fundamental fallacy of criticism, she hopes to instill in readers an urge to look beyond the constraints of well-mannered speech and stultifying gentility. 'There is now no criticism in England', West claims with confidence, 'there is merely a chorus of weak cheers, a piping note of appreciation that is not stilled unless a book is suppressed by the police, a mild kindness that neither heats enthusiasm nor

reverses to anger.' [1] But if the aim of the critic were to transgress pleasantness, might 'harsh criticism' itself be in danger of a certain reductionism and repetitive negativity, that Rita Felski coined 'the mentality of critique'? [2] West's sharp tongue, whetted on the brutal edges of her prose, became well known in literary circles. It would certainly be unfair to limit all of her reflection on criticism to this matter of harshness; nevertheless, the phrase 'the abusive school of criticism' stands out. Why would this figurative 'abuse' promote critical insight? Do we, as critics, seek validation through the fierceness of our own arguments?

Although the tone of West's manifesto might now strike us as oddly callous, post-Edwardian gendered reality made it necessary for the words of harshness to be spoken by a female critic. In *A Strange Necessity* (1928), West suggested that the business of the critic is 'to synthesise a million glances at his subject that will tell the onlooker at one glance the truth about him.'[3] This concept of writing as holding a mirror up to the viewer to see their own reflection is telling and poignant, shifting moral responsibility onto the reader to recognise their own agency in coming to judgment. The idea brings to mind the scene from Virginia Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts* (1941), where the audience of local performance is left perplexed having seen their reflection in mirrors held by actors [4]. By analogy, the view might well be the same but it is the perspective that makes world of the difference.

Meta-critical reflection about the limits of complexity, political perspectives and subjectivity pervades West's entire body of work, and in particular her magnum opus *Black Lamb*. In this multi-generic book, she invites the reader to journey through centuries of Yugoslavian history and culture. The book's ambition and scope, in speaking frankly to the entirety of human experience, resembles that of an epic. If so, this is a 'feminist epic' that, following the words of Bernard Schweitzer, eschews 'the authoritative historical narrative of the imperial winners.' [5] In traveling across the Balkans between 1936 and 1938, West fell in love with Yugoslavia but she sensed, correctly, that it might soon come under the domination of fascism. Despite slight fictionalizations, in *Black Lamb* she hoped to 'show the past side by side with the present it created.' [6] In this story, private interweaves with political, church with state, love with hate, obedience with rebellion – creating, according to

Geoff Dyer, an 'immensely complicated picture not simply of her own soul but that of Europe on the brink of the second world war.' [7] Indeed, in West's view, the difference between 1389 (The Battle of Kosovo) and 1939 England 'lay in time and place and not in the events experienced.' If this method of parallel storytelling proves effective, it is not only in keeping the readers' attention but also in reflecting the simultaneity of history and politics as such. This, too, is mirrored in the organisation and hybrid style of West's lucid yet meandering prose; its intrepid wit, careful metaphors, polemical conversations with Constantine, and shifting registers – all of which combine to create, what she once poignantly called, 'the visibility of life'.

With a skill for reportage equal to Martha Gellhorn or Ryszard Kapuściński, West's narrative begins with the cinematic scene on a train. The writer and her husband journey to Yugoslavia – the land where, she narrates, 'everything was comprehensible, where the mode of life was so honest that it put an end to complexity' (1). The book's dedication positions *Black Lamb* as a quest for a long-lost golden age, a hidden meaning, and a fatherland. The author addresses the book to friends in Yugoslavia who 'are now all dead or enslaved', wishing them 'the Fatherland of their desire' that would 'make them again citizens of a Paradise'. For a reader familiar with the author's daring style, such an opening might seem surprising; for an anti-fascist book published in wartime Europe, the dedication is chiefly political. The imagery of a paradise in which death is present brings to mind a striking motif, *et in Arcadia ego*. West reminds the reader that the country she fell in love no longer exists. So if the memory of 'what once was' may survive through narrative, we might ask: what matters more than storytelling?

The narrative flow of *Black Lamb* is irresistible. Throughout West's prose, historical figures evolve from mere facts, names we associate with certain dates, into flesh-and-blood humans, animated by desire. Of course, this constant conflict between private and political put the author's writing under the scrutiny of critics, some of whom have taken issue with historical inaccuracies and the openly subjective tone of her work. Opposing Eliotic pretension to the artist's 'continual extinction of personality' [8], West claimed that 'literary criticism must be largely a matter of psychological research.' To illustrate her method we may look on the excerpt from the prologue when she describes Franz Joseph tormented

between his love for Elizabeth (known as Sissi) and loyalty to the mother:

> Her [Elizabeth's] husband, like many other human beings, was divided between the love of life and the love of death. His love of life made him love Elizabeth. His love of death made him love his abominable mother, and give her an authority over Elizabeth which she horribly misused. (5)

This psychological insight into the realm of the family and the character's dilemma turns the reader into an empathetic listener who, in the story of Franz Joseph, may recognize their own ambivalent or conflicted emotions toward parental authority. By introducing state-governed issues focalised through dramatis personae, West encourages the reader to participate in the narrative while offering a fresh perspective on the backstage of European politics.

Narrating historical events with contemporaneous urgency is an organising principle of West's storytelling. Take the chapters of Franz Ferdinand assassination as an example. What if the political orientation towards South Slav had been different? What if Franz Ferdinand had never paid a state visit to Sarajevo? Would Bosnians be 'restored to life by this act of death' (350)? Even though we know Gavrilo Princip will inevitably kill the archduke, the tension of this chapter still equals that of the finest crime novel or suspenseful thriller. At one point, West breaks the fourth wall of her narrative and comments on the limits of her own understanding:

> Leaning from the balcony, I said 'I shall never be able to understand how it happened.' It is not that there are too few facts available, but that they are too many. (350)

The penultimate line speaks of West's lifelong struggles in dealing with complexity while the second sentence introduces one of the key problems of contemporaneity. As Olga Tokarczuk puts it, 'we live in a world of too many contradictory, mutually exclusive facts' [9], surrounded by polyphonic first-person narratives, individualized to extent that human experience loses connection with one another. In West's prose, we see the exact opposite: an attempt to, through the residue of subjectivity, re-tell the story that would be universal, etched in history as inconvertible fact. She shifts perspectives between the assassination that

originated in a nexus of state policies, hostilities and tensions with insight into the inner life of both assassin and assassinated. But in a broader perspective, West asks whether it is possible to understand any aspect of modern history without imaginatively translating it into the subjective language of emotion?

Following the logic of this question, we too may become curious about the emotions behind West's writing. The familial motif that reverberates throughout her prose, is tied up with the author's psychobiography. Brought up in a patriarchal family, West struggled to reconcile her conflicted feelings towards her father. Her fiction – most notably *Harriet Hume* (1929) and *The Judge* (1980) – gives vent to some of her own projections and insecurities about 'sex antagonism' and gendered double standards. Even the digressive, meandering structure of her prose – decades before feminist criticism would coined term *continuum* – defies the linear narrative associated with the dominant culture produced by and for men. Alongside Woolf or Katherine Mansfield, West's oeuvre takes its rightful place in the modernist tradition of female writers' experiments with prose that is, as Laura Marcus aptly contextualizes, 'ultimately bound up with their imaginings of new possibilities for women's lives and identities'. [10] But some longstanding cultural expectation like childbirth and motherly love are still present. In one example of West's criticism of foreign customs, she describes the rite of St. George's Eve, when a lamb or cock is sacrificed in a bloody ritual believed to bring women fertility. West speaks of 'the slaughter of a lamb' (826) drawing a fascinating comparison between the reality of Macedonian rite and Western philosophy founded on the idea of purification through the suffering of an innocent. In doing so, the author tests the possibility of reasoning with the idea of Crucifixion; its paradoxical mergence of atonement and salvation. How can we deal with the idea that the killing of the lamb would bring another life into being? And how can one reason with any belief in the first place?

In reading West's journalism and *Black Lamb* I have come to think of them as one of those examples in which the story of the teller is equally as fascinating as the tale itself. To appreciate her writing is to appreciate, as Christopher Hitchens noted, the toughness of her mind [11] and to value the art inclusive of its opposites. The creative journey through Yugoslavia, ordering the flow of her thoughts and sensations through writing, offers

a instance of the inseparability of history and subjectivity. Nevertheless, the reflection on binaries of gender, history and politics provoked by West's writing may only be productive if we allow ourselves to accept how uncertain the truth can be, without demanding resolution. Thus the reader' attempt to escape 'fine distinctions' means depriving ourselves of the certitude we are often seeking. To my mind, this requires not only critical insight but perhaps even bravery, to look plainly on how opposites do contain each other 'in our souls which [are] hung truly between life and death' (1125).

Works Cited

[1] https://newrepublic.com/article/71896/duty-harsh-criticism [access 28/04/2020]

[2] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press 2015).

[3] Rebecca West, *Strange Necessity. Essays by Rebecca West* (New York: Garden City 1928), 281.

[4] Cf. Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Penguin 2000).

[5] Bernard Schweitzer, Rebecca West: Heroism, Rebellion, and the Female Epic (Westport: Greenwod Press 2002), 88. See also Timothy Wientzen, An Epic of Atmosphere: Rebecca West, Black Lamb, and Reflex' [in] 'Journal of Modern Literature 38, no. 4 (2015).

[6] Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon. A Journey Through Yugoslavia*. Introduction by Christopher Hitchens (London: Penguin 2007) Thereafter refereed with page number in brackets.

[7] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/aug/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview2
[access 3/05/2020]

[8] T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber 1969), 17.

[9] https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/104871-lecture-english/
[access 21/05/2020] Significantly, Tokarczuk adds: 'how we think about the world and—perhaps even more importantly—how we narrate it have a massive significance, therefore. A thing that happens and is not told ceases to exist and perishes. This is a fact well known to not only historians, but also (and perhaps above all) to every stripe of politician and tyrant. He who has and weaves the story is in charge.' Transl. by Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

[10] Laura Marcus, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Rebecca West [in] *The Cambridge History of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 717. See also Carl Rollyson, *The Literary Legacy of Rebecca West* (Open Road Distribution 2016).

[11] Christopher Hitchens, Introduction [in] Rebecca West, *Black Lamb*, op. cit., xxviii.