THE AMERICAN BESERK. YOUNG TERRORISTS AS ARCHETYPES IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE

GABRIELA GLĂVAN
West University in Timișoara

Abstract: *From Philip Roth's character Merry Levov in American Pastoral to real-life figures such as the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre, the young domestic terrorist has become the archetype of a dramatic and unpredictable social and political climate. This paper intends to explore the real and fictional avatars of this contemporary anti-hero, its dynamics and specific place in contemporary imagination.*

Keywords: *terrorism and literature, Columbine shooting, gun culture, school shootings, adolescent terrorists*

1. Introduction

Although no longer a new phenomenon in recent history, the criminal actions of domestic young terrorists continue to puzzle and intrigue authorities, the general public, political theorists and specialists across a vast scientific spectrum, from forensic investigation to medicine and psychiatry. They are present in many contemporary cultures across the globe, but their actions have a special relevance in recent American culture. The present paper focuses on the dramatic school shooting that took place on April 20, 1999 at Columbine Highschool, in Littleton, Colorado, when two students killed 12 pupils, a teacher and wounded other 23. It was not the first school shooting (the case involving Charles Whitman at the University of Texas in 1966 was), and certainly, it was not the last, nor the deadliest. However, this particular one holds special relevance. I intend to argue that, since this event coincided with the advent of the internet and the widespread use of online communication tools, it gained landmark status in a complex debate that, almost 20 years later, is still ongoing. The cardinal role of this event in the American history of the last two decades connected the tragic figures of the two adolescents who committed the massacre to an archetype that has emerged lately in contemporary culture as the radical opposite of the American dream – the domestic terrorist, an agent of chaos that orchestrates brutal attacks against his fellow citizens. As Ralph W. Larkin argues, "the Columbine shootings have attained a mythical existence and have influenced subsequent rampages (Larkin 2009:1309).

There is a solid body of fictional literature that supports the relevance and centrality of this archetype in today's public consciousness – with important authors such as Joseph Conrad, Don DeLillo or Philip Roth having written fictional accounts of the phenomenon. In his novel, *Mao II*, a fictional voice utters an uncomfortable truth:

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. ... Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of a culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. (De Lillo 1991:41)

Literature and domestic terrorism share the common ground of discourse, as both function as rhetorical products (Zulaika and Douglass 1996: 23) and they have been connected for the purpose of theory and analysis with remarkable results (Houen 2002; Herman 2018). In a rather restrictive manner, I will focus on two distinct narratives – the real events of the Columbine Highschool

shooting from 1999 and the diverse, complex narrative created by the media around it (also reflected in numerous books written by investigators, specialists, relatives of the victims, including the mother of one of the shooters) and the story of Merry Levov, from Philip Roth's novel *American Pastoral*. The novel is a elegy for the lost American dream (Safer 2006:80), and, as it has been often noted, the story can be seen "as the tragic losses of Seymour "Swede" Levov during the years following World War II." (ibid.: 81), "a family epic about social breakdown and freakout" (Gitlin 2003: 63). My focus is to outline the emblematic status the Columbine shooting has gained in the past two decades since it occurred and the manner in which its protagonists have become archetypal representations of troubled youth resorting to extreme violence and homicide. For this purpose, Roth's character could be used as a revealing fictional mirror – a child born into an affluent, middle-class American family, growing up in a quiet neighborhood, receiving a good education, parental love and attention, irrationally accumulates a massive amount of hatred, politically targeted against their immediate community. Yet she is "the anarchic center of the novel" (Parrish, 2000:91). Merry becomes a member of the infamous Weathermen Underground radical left-wing organization; in Roth's unforgiving and memorable definition, she is the one who crushes her father's peaceful, assimilationist view of the American Dream. The prosperous businessman married to Miss New Jersey 1949, Dawn Dwyer, an exemplary case of fitting in and pursuing the American Dream, finds himself faced with an insurmountable tragedy – his daughter blows up the local post office, becomes a fugitive and continues to take part in other bombings, killing four people. Merry's bomb "detonated his life": it "might as well have gone off in their living room (Roth 1997: 69)

She is "the daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral— into the indigenous American Berserk" (Roth 1997:86). Also, she is "the major disruption of the hero's American Dream" (Safer 2006:87).

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had less elaborate agendas, at least as far as their political stance was concerned. Their issues belonged to the spectrum of trauma and depression induced by group relations, bullying and marginalization. However, they reflect Merry's incomprehensible anger and frustration, echoing the painful question that has been repeated obsessively after each bombing, massacre, shooting, terrorist attack – what drives well educated teenagers from normal, next-door families to carry out vicious, deadly attacks against their peers and neighbors?

First, it is important to note that Columbine has been considered a school shooting, with many variations of the term circulation in the media long after the actual event – massacre, attack, rampage killing, rampage shooting. Indeed, as a solid body of scholarship on school shootings has pointed out, "monocausal explanations are inadequate, and [...] school shootings must be understood as the outcome of numerous interacting risk factors" (Böckler et. al.2013:2). The same authors believe that

"the existing body of empirical and analytical research would suggest that it is high time to turn attention to the violence-affirming setting in its entirety. This includes:

1. Structures and factors influencing the socialization of children and adolescents (socio-structural, cultural/media, familial)
2. Institutional circumstances of school life and study ([country-]specific school climate and culture).
3. Individual biographical and ensuing psychodynamic background, factors, and influences." (ibid.).

2. The Chronicle of a Disaster Foretold

April 19 and 20 are fateful days in recent American history. On April 19, 1993, one of the greatest tragedies involving civilians and the FBI erupted. After a fifty-one-day standoff with the Branch Davidians cult in Waco, Texas, the FBI entered the Mount Carmel compound, where the leader, David Koresh, and his followers locked themselves in and refused to surrender to police.

Authorities used military-grade tear gas, and, in a catastrophic turn of events, the building was engulfed in flames, the fire killing almost all of the 80 inhabitants. The event was heavily debated in the media, with sightseers going at the scene to witness the conflict unfold and TV stations constantly broadcasting news regarding the incident. Two years later, on April 19, 1995, Gulf war veteran and anti-government militant Timothy McVeigh detonated a truck containing explosives, parked outside the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and injuring hundreds more, as a vindictive act against the government's disastrous involvement in the Waco siege.

These events left an indelible mark on public consciousness, and it is safe to assume that, although very young at the moment, Klebold and Harris were aware of both the Waco siege and fire and the Oklahoma City bombing (Cullen 2009:50). Their ideology was personal and subjective, as compared to the radical survivalist discourse and political stance of Koresh or McVeigh. However small when compared to the agendas of other domestic terrorists, the reasons behind the Columbine attacks are no less worthy of investigation. From a certain perspective, they deserve a surplus of attention: many adolescents have emotional issues, bullying has long been a widespread phenomenon in American schools, and, as other similar tragedies after Columbine seem to prove, stricter gun control is a cardinal issue in contemporary U.S. politics, in dire need of revision. Columbine has become central in public consciousness also due to its relevance to the everyday issues of American families, as the two young perpetrators had rather normal behaviors, with Klebold even attending the prom a few days before the attack.

The plan of the Columbine shooters was simple and devious – the attack would mainly involve bombing, and, in order to increase body count, they intended to shoot as many bombing survivors as they could. Their plan mostly failed, as the propane bombs they had set up didn't go off, only the pipe bombs Harris had made exploded. The bomb squad that responded to the high school confirmed that, prior to the shootings, a diversionary bomb detonated 2,5 miles away, on South Wadsworth Boulevard. 2 other propane bombs were set in the cafeteria and various other explosives were found in the vehicles of the attackers. When they realized the bombing had failed, they started to shoot, killing 12 students and a teacher in less than 30 minutes, then turning the guns on themselves.

In Roth's novel, understanding the reasons behind his daughter's vicious plot is her father's major obsession. While Merry is a fugitive, the Swede tries to evaluate the past, hoping he could find an explanation for her incredible deviation. Politically charged televised violence could be an answer. Merry grew up in the turbulent decade preceding the Vietnam war, and the country's multiple crises superimpose her own:

Five years pass, five years searching for an explanation, going back over everything, over the circumstances that shaped her, the people and the events that influenced her, and none of it adequate to begin to explain the bombing until he remembers the Buddhist monks, the self-immolation of the Buddhist monks. ... Of course she was just ten then, maybe eleven years old, and in the years between then and now a million things had happened to her, to them, to the world. Though she had been terrified for weeks afterward, crying about what had appeared on television that night, talking about it, awakened from her sleep by dreaming about it, it hardly stopped her in her tracks. And yet when he remembers her sitting there and seeing that monk going up in flames—as unprepared as the rest of the country for what she was seeing, a kid half watching the news with her mother and father one night after dinner—he is sure he has unearthed the reason for what happened. (Roth 1997: 152)

Philip Roth's fictional speculation bears a lot of significance in the discussion concerning Columbine. Industrial rock and violent video games have been invoked in relation to the atrocities carried out by Klebold and Harris, and, even if they could be accepted as arguments in a debate regarding the killers' motives, they must necessarily be integrated in a larger framework, that of violence in the media and in popular culture. Indeed, "School shooting incidents need to be understood from a constellation of contributing causes, none of which is sufficient in itself to

explain a shooting.” (Muschert 2007:68) No single cause could trigger the actual event, one in which the aggressor acts upon his/her rage. Philip Roth reiterates his credo across his novel: evil is born and raised in good families and quiet neighborhoods, yet its roots are complex and deeply rooted in the fabric of society and in the zeitgeist.

3. Good Wombs Have Borne Bad Sons

In the weeks before the tragic events, starting on March 15, 1999, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris stated their intentions on video, in the basement of the Harris family, while Eric’s unassuming parents carried on with their lives. Although in the years following April 20 1999, these so-called “basement tapes”, reminding of Bob Dylan’s 1975 album, filmed with a Sony 8mm camcorder, gained an unwanted status as cult objects, as all parties interested in the events wanted to watch them – journalists, researchers and the so-called “fans” of the perpetrators that have created blogs, sites and forums dedicated to their idols. The contents of the tapes, described by police officers who have seen it, reveal a startling situation – two obviously depressed young men with serious emotional issues detail their plans to blow up the school with artisanal bombs, and in addition to that, to kill as many students and teachers as possible. Filmed mostly at the Harris residence, these short, disturbing homemade videos give a clear insight into the last days of the young men, highlighting their craving for violence and the frightful lucidity and awareness of what they were planning. At one point, while expressing their regret that their parents would have to endure the consequences of their murderous (and suicidal) acts, Harris cynically quotes from Shakespeare: “Good wombs hath borne bad sons”. After years of speculation, the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office confirmed in 2011 that the tapes were no longer in their possession. The public Information director of the Office confirmed that the Sheriff had approved the destruction of the tapes along with other types of evidence from the massacre – weapons and shell casings, among others.

In an almost exhaustive account of the attack and its complex context, Dave Cullen (2009) analyzes a vast amount of data concerning the two high-school seniors, their families, relationships with parents, teachers, peer and friends, in an effort to uncover the reasons behind their terrible deeds. In the tradition of Truman Capote and, on a more popular note, of true crime fiction, Cullen creates a narrative based on facts, documents and witness accounts. In reverse, this type of literature paradoxically contributes to the myth Harris was hoping to leave behind as his legacy. The story of two young men at war with everybody has an undeniable romantic quality that still seduces audiences. Much like the villain protagonists of Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*, whom they openly admired, Klebold and Harris wanted their tale to be told and the two of them to remain in popular imagination as figures of evil and vengeance. The boys’ journals, a complementary type of narrative of great forensic relevance and an invaluable source of information, revealing their well-hidden emotional lives, point towards a dreadful reality – Dylan Klebold, a highly gifted student, had long been battling suicidal thoughts, without acting upon them. His depression was visible between the lines, although no one, at school or at home, had paid sufficient attention to it. Eric Harris, on the contrary, was self-obsessed, with a strong desire to become famous after the fateful day they used to call, in anticipation, Judgment Day. In the years following the tragic moment of April 20, 1999, analysts have made efforts to pinpoint the defining traces that has turned Columbine into a “cultural watershed” (Larkin 2009: 1311-1312). Besides the obvious facts that the case was almost as covered as the infamous O.J. Simpson car chase, the most covered news event of the 1990s, and, at the moment, it was the deadliest school shooting in American history, the most impactful component was the perpetrators’ media presence – media they created themselves. Ralph W. Larkin details:

Harris posted his writings on the Internet, developed “wads” (shooting environments) on the Internet for Doom video game players, and constructed the Trench Coat Mafia Web site. There he posted rants, essays,

descriptions of vandalism that were perpetrated by him and several friends, hate lists, death threats, and other miscellaneous documents. He and Dylan recorded their lives on video. They taped themselves testing their weapons in the Colorado mountains and made a film in which they starred as professional hit men who were hired by a bullied student to kill his "jock" persecutors. They recorded the so-called basement tapes, in which they revealed the reasons for the shooting, said goodbye to their parents, and vented their theories of revolution. Fourth, the shootings changed behaviors of school officials, police departments, students, and would-be rampage shooters. (Larkin 2009: 1311-1312)

The familial environment was often questioned, and Sue Klebold's confessional memoir could be summed up by her painful admission that parental vigilance can be dramatically limited: "I hadn't known what Dylan was thinking and planning" (Klebold 2016:248). More than the familial environment, individual experiences have a stronger impact on the emotional lives of adolescents. "I'm lonesome" (Roth 1997:226), Merry used to say to her father when she was a little girl. Later she developed an exasperating stutter that she could overcome only when she doubled her speech with extreme violence. "She never stuttered when she was with the dynamite" (Roth 1997:259) because the bombs "express the rage that the stutter concealed." (Parrish 2000:92). Social exclusion has been listed as an important factor of frustration in adolescence (Heitmeyer et al. in Böckler, 2013: 46) and diary entries and confessions of the two Columbine shooters seem to confirm this. For example, Dylan Klebold felt estranged from his peers, lonely and isolated, all these elements greatly contributing to his aggravated depression: "This is a weird time...weird life, weird existence...I think a lot. Think...Think...that's all my life is, just shitloads of thinking...all the time...my mind never stops...i am in eternal suffering...hoping that people can accept me...that I can accept them" (Klebold in Böckler, 2013:46). Eric Harris needed social recognition and carefully planned to avenge the lack of it: "It'll be very hard to hold out until April. If people would give me more compliments all of this might still be avoidable...but probably not. Whatever I do people make fun of me, and sometimes directly to my face. I'll get revenge soon enough" (Harris in Böckler, 2013: 43). In his concise analysis of "rampage shootings as political acts" (Larkin 2009:1309), Ralph W. Larkin argues that "Harris and Klebold committed their rampage shooting as an overtly political act in the name of oppressed students victimized by their peers." (ibid.) This perspective must also include other issues coming from popular culture, the media and society as a whole: "school shootings should be perceived as acts of societal violence that embody a number of interrelated social issues: a crisis of Western masculinity, an out-of-control gun culture, and globalized commercial media that project normative images of violent masculinity and make celebrities out of murderers (Muschert and Sumiala 2012:VI; see also Kellner 2008:14).

4. Conclusion

Although solid scholarship has been dedicated both to the phenomenon of school shootings and the Columbine massacre in particular, specialists make continuous efforts to focus on the most important aspect of their investigations – prevention. A vast network of narratives has emerged in relation to the events of April 20 1999 and it gained the shaping ability of popular myths. This complex narrative, reuniting media coverage, memoirs, confessions and public documents of forensic relevance foreshadows the tragic fate of two adolescents turned cold blooded killers. They echo archetypal literary characters that mirror their angst, fears, emotional breakdown, all deeply rooted in the environments that shaped them – family, school, their historical present and its social and political unrest. In this sense, Philip Roth's Merry Levov could be considered an emblematic literary prototype of the young domestic terrorist, a universally recognizable figure of the innocent turned assassin that our culture and ethics systematically fails to integrate and comprehend.

References:

- Böckler, B. Seeger, T. Sitzler, P. and Heitmeyer, W. 2013. *School Shootings: International Research, Case Studies, and Concepts for Prevention*. New York: Springer.
- Cullen, Dave. 2009. *Columbine*. New York: Old Street Publishing.
- De Lillo, Don. 1991. *Mao II*. Penguin Books.
- Gitlin, Todd. 2003. "Weather Girl" in Bloom, Harold *Modern Critical Views. Philip Roth*, Chelsea House.
- Harris, Eric. 1998. Personal testimony, JC -001-026015
- Herman, Peter C. 2018. *Terrorism and Literature*. Cambridge University Press.
- Houen, Alex. 2002. *Terrorism and Modern Literature: from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kellner, Douglas. 2008. *Guys and Guns Amok: Domestic Terrorism and Schools Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombings to the Virginia Tech Massacre*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Klebold, Dylan. 1997. Personal testimony, JC -001-026389
- Klebold, S. 2016. *A Mother's Reckoning. Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Larkin, Ralph W. 2009. "The Columbine Legacy. Rampage Shootings as Political Acts". *American Behavioral Scientist*. 52.9. (May 2009):1309-1326.
- Muschert, Glenn W. 2007. "Research in School Shootings". *Sociology Compass* 1.1:60-80.
- Muschert, Glenn W., Sumiala Johanna (eds.). 2012. *School Shootings: Mediatized Violence in a Global Age*. Emerald Group.
- Parrish, Timothy L. 2000. "The End of Identity: Philip Roth's American Pastoral". *Shofar*. 19.1:84-99.
- Roth, Philip. 1998. *American Pastoral*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Safer, Elaine B. 2006. *Mocking the Age. The Later Novels of Philip Roth*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Zulaika, Joseba, Douglass, William A. 1996. *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables and Faces of Terrorism*. New York: Routledge.

Note on the author

Gabriela GLĂVAN teaches Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, West University of Timișoara. She has published a book on the radical modernist authors of the Romanian interwar period, a book on Franz Kafka's best known short stories and numerous papers in relevant journals focusing on the imagination of childhood and premature death, on children's literature and post-communist nostalgia.