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Violent Criticism

Abstract:

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary's first definition of 'violent' as a transitive verb is 'strain the meaning of (a text)'. This word is not in currency and 'violate' performs the transitive function, although it does not have a definition that specifically refers to actions against texts. Despite this lack of a current word that clearly ties together violence and interpretation, the notion that readers and critics can be violent against texts is significant for the ethics of reading and criticism. This paper argues that certain practices of reading and criticism should be rejected as unethical because they are violent.

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The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary's (NSOED's) first definition of 'violent' as a transitive verb is 'strain the meaning of (a text)'. This word is not in currency and 'violate' performs the transitive function, although it does not have a definition that specifically refers to actions against texts. Despite this lack of a current word that clearly ties together violence and interpretation, the notion that readers and critics can be violent against texts is significant for the ethics of reading and criticism. Contemporary critical practice accepts multiple interpretations of texts, but what makes an interpretation violent and therefore morally unacceptable? The prefix 'mis' recurs in answers to this question, occurring in the NSOED's fourth definition of violence: 'The action or an act of constraining or forcing unnatural change upon something; *spec.* (a) misinterpretation or misapplication of a word [or text] etc'. Some, like Harold Bloom in *A Map of Misreading*, argue that misreading is the basis of all valuable developments in creative and critical writing. To qualify this view, certain practices of misreading ought to be rejected as unethical because they are violent. 'Mis' is the action that injures the text, changing reading into *misreading*, and representation into *misrepresentation*. Definitions of 'mis' describe it as 'wrong' and 'bad', firmly situating it within the ethical sphere, which means it does not lie beyond ethics. Some forms of violence might be understood as transcending ethics;ⁱ however, the possibly transcendent nature of 'divine violence' is not considered here. Instead, violence is always linked to the prefix 'mis', which is taken to be the action that corrupts the process it modifies. It is maintained that violence is unethical and that misreading and misrepresentation are violent.

Fostering diversity of reader response and critical response has been a goal for a long time in literary studies and creative writing programs.ⁱⁱ This is good because it works against prejudicial orthodoxies that censor freedom of expression and impression. It allows valuable new interpretations that once might have been rejected as wrong because they strained the meaning of the text by the standards of restrictive dogmas. However, this does not mean that criticism should not be constrained. Fostering diversity of reader response was never intended to encourage defamation. The ethical good of supporting greater freedom of reader response must be complemented by the ethical good of supporting less violence in reader response.

The definitions of violence given above are expanded in *Burton's Legal Thesaurus*, in which 'strain the meaning' falls under the key word 'distort'. The synonyms of 'distort' identify actions involved in violent criticism. Here is an abridged list:

camouflage, caricature, conceal, disproportion, dissemble, exaggerate, falsify, miscite, miscontrue, middescribe, misdirect, misestimate, misinform, misinterpret, mislead, misquote, misread, misreckon, misreport, misrepresent, misshape, misteach, parody, play upon words, warp.

Fiction and creative non-fiction writers do many of these things to make their writing more engaging for readers. They conceal, exaggerate, mislead, parody, and play upon words, but they are not regarded to be violent for doing so. When reviewers and critics perform the same actions they risk fulfilling the definitions of violence by distorting the meaning of the text. The same rhetorical strategies that make a good creative writer can make a bad critical writer. This is the case because critical texts

such as reviews, essays and reader's reports, that is, texts about other texts, are circumscribed by specific ethical responsibilities to the texts they analyse and the processes of meaning-making prescribed for them differ from those prescribed for creative texts. The conventions of genre, including literary fiction, partly determine creative texts; it is acceptable for them to mislead and exaggerate because it may be prescribed by suspense and parody. Critical texts do not mislead and exaggerate in the same ways because the ethics of criticism restrict these actions. Critical texts relate to what they represent differently to the way in which creative texts relate to what they represent. This is because critical texts make truth claims about other texts. Although contemporary theory understands the final meaning of texts to be indeterminable, it is still expected that criticism correspond with the texts it analyses. If this were not the case then we would not read critical texts for a sense of what they review, but only as self-referring objects.

All reading and critique shapes texts, but not all shaping is violent. 'Distortion' and 'figuration' are useful terms for thinking about the difference between violent and non-violent criticism. To rely again on the NSOED, the second definition of 'distortion' is '[t]he action of perverting words, facts, etc., from their natural interpretation or intent; misconstruction, misrepresentation'. The concepts 'natural' and 'intent' are problematic, the first because of its long association with oppressive norms, and the second because of the gulf between it and outcomes; however, the prefix 'mis' recurs in this definition, this time signaling the corruption of representation. In contrast, 'figuration' simply means '[t]he action or process of giving shape to; assignment to a certain form'. It shapes without misshaping. It can take a literal or figural approach without becoming distortive. This distinction between distortion and figuration rejects the notion that all representation is necessarily violent, simply because it shapes, which is an extreme position that is itself characteristic of violence in its straining of all meaning towards one end. Maintaining the distinction between distortion (or violent reading) and figuration increases our capacity to distinguish between different critical practices.

Some will rightly argue that one person's violent distortion can be another's insightful figuration. They might also argue that context is the most important determinant of what is regarded to be violent, that one decade's crime is another's virtue. Both of these claims are connected to the claim that any criticism is simply the critic's opinion, to which she or he is entitled. These appeals to relativism are *exceptionally* unconvincing in the case of violent criticism, which must not be understood to be a matter of opinion, context, or taste. This is not to take an anti-relativist position. Rather, it is to take a position against the anti-relativism of violence. Violent criticism constrains the relative and relational processes that occur between the reader and the text. It does this by forcing the text to mean only one thing, or things it might not only mean. It is usually anti-contextual, ahistorical and structuralist (in a bad way) because it usually meets diverse texts with the same damaging operations. Therefore, violent criticism is predictable. Most often it oversimplifies the meaning, value and relevance of the text, and oversimplification is not simplification; the prefix 'over', like the prefix 'mis', corrupts the process it modifies. This means violent criticism is misleadingly reductionist, distilling the text into misrepresentative elements. Familiar

examples of this type of misreading are the straw subject and cherry picking fallacies. They are common because they are easy to do; if one is unwilling to do the work required to better understand something or someone then one might just pretend it is something or someone else.

The Bad Review

No literary form is inherently violent, yet all have conventions and constraints that abet particular forms of violence or distortion. The short review is a popular form of criticism and is shaped as much by its own generic conventions as it is by any ethical responsibility to the text it reviews. It can be a brilliant diamantine condensation of insightful reading. It can also injure texts in distinctive ways, by its vividness, briefness, and restrictive focus. Usually, it first classifies the text according to genre (autobiography, historical fiction, thriller, et cetera) then gives a brief overview of the plot and protagonists before moving on to evaluate the text. Once evaluation commences the vocabulary comprises descriptive terms such as ‘dull’, ‘sentimental’, ‘great’, ‘middle-class’. Frequently these are augmented by vivid terms such as ‘fascinating’, ‘absorbing’, ‘sensual’, ‘moving’. Indeed, the word ‘vivid’ itself is a very common one in reviews. Vividness startles the reader, seducing attention into its vibrancy. It can camouflage the conceptual deficiencies of the review, and camouflage is a synonym of distort, which is a synonym of violence. Vividness is characteristic of writers’ festivals’ brochures and back cover blurbs, of commercialism that contains scant evidence to substantiate fantastic adjectival claims. It is also characteristic of violent criticism because it forces and obscures the text behind a distortive brightness. Vividness is anti-contextual because it is an effect that is applied to diverse texts for the same result. It is a self-referring quality that is more involved with its own pseudo-liveliness than it is with any ethical and critical responsibility to the text it ostensibly reviews.

After evaluation, the review delivers the verdict. Here, again, literary theory that permits multiple interpretations is at odds with a practice of criticism that aims to fix the final meaning and value of the text, often without sufficient evidence, driven by its generic form. The verdict may invite agreement and disagreement, but it fails to register within itself other ways the text may be valued and forces and strains the meaning of the text towards one end. In this way, it fits the definition of violence. The verdict’s emphasis is on terminating the process of evaluation. Yet, evaluation is a relative process, wherein differently valuing one element of the text will affect the way in which other elements are valued. The verdict, like violence, suppresses relationality and relativity. Interestingly, it constrains the reading audience too, by homogenising it through not recognising different ways the text might be valuable to different readers.

Another way the short review can *violent* the text (to use the sixteenth century’s transitive form) is by omitting crucial information about it. Consider the following sentence from a short review of Christos Tsiolkas’s *The Slap in Overland*: ‘One of the novel’s great strengths lies in its representations of the experiences of motherhood and female sexuality’ (Ashton 2009). As I argue in *On Line Opinion, The Slap*

‘obsessively repeat[s] scenarios wherein women and men consent to violent sexual practices that are characteristic of a suspect gender order in which men physically and aggressively dominate women’ (Gibbons 2011). Sandi directs her husband to make her gag on his penis (112) and Hector ‘could not control his passion. His thrustings were almost violent and over time [Aisha] had allowed herself to slip into fantasies of assault to accommodate his zeal’ (372). Julie Szego writes that readers of *The Slap* are ‘told how Rosie . . . had been a “slut” during her troubled teens—one night even “allowing herself” to be “f--ked” by seven guys. Three or four presumably wouldn’t have cut it for Tsiolkas’s purposes’ (2011). Such problematic representations of men’s and women’s sexuality are throughout *The Slap*, but all the review tells us is that ‘[o]ne of the novel’s great strengths lies in its representations of the experiences of motherhood and female sexuality’. Maybe it is possible to make this argument about the novel, but as it stands the review strains the meaning of the text and by doing so fulfils the definition of violent criticism.

The Slap was short-listed for the 2009 Miles Franklin Award. Tim Winton’s *Breath* won it. Asphyxiation is *Breath*’s focal sexual experience. A quick scan of major newspapers allows us to examine reviews of *Breath* to gauge the state of commercial criticism. Jason Steger for *The Sydney Morning Herald* wrote that *Breath* ‘begins simply enough, with staying under the river water for as long as possible, but moves on to the more intense physical and emotional risks posed by huge surf and confronting sexual experiences’ (2008). Here, asphyxiation is euphemistically referred to as ‘confronting sexual experience’ and is conceptually linked with surfing. Carmen Lawrence for *The Australian* dedicates most of her review to discussing Winton as a ‘writer of place’, and when she mentions sexuality she writes ‘Pikelet sympathises with her [Eva, the woman who directs Pikelet to asphyxiate her] desire to experience the same fear, “the rising gorge of panic” and “the delicious ricochet of sparks” that he has known while surfing, while holding his breath, but ultimately it blights his life; it’s how, years later, he is able to read the bruises on the young man’s neck’ (2008). Again, asphyxiation is glossed over. After an initial qualification, James Bradley for *The Age* moves on to also focus on Winton as a writer of place, and surfing too, and when he gets to writing about the sexuality in the novel he states ‘Pikelet and Eva slip almost heedlessly into a sexual relationship, something Pikelet believes is love and Eva sees as something quite different’ (2008).

All these reviews omit a crucial thematic experience of the novel (sexual asphyxiation) at the very moment they raise the theme (sexuality). This decontextualizes them from the very text they are reviewing, which is odd. I suspect these omissions might not be the result of concerns about narrative spoilers, but of an instinct to downplay the central role of sexual asphyxiation in a novel by a renowned writer of place. The violence of the criticism arises from its lack of accuracy. These examples show how the polite and well-mannered review that forces and strains the meaning of the text can be understood to be an act of interpretative violence. It is easy to make an argument that is at odds with these positive reviews, one that properly accounts for the way in which *Breath* problematically locates the source of the morbid sublime of fatal sexual asphyxiation in a young woman who is portrayed to be a manipulative abuser of an innocent teenage boy.

To summarise: violent criticism strains and forces the meaning of texts. It decontextualises itself from the text it reviews by omitting crucial information and by obscuring the text behind a distortive vivid vocabulary. It is anti-relational because it restrains subjects within stereotypes, delivers verdicts that function to inhibit further evaluation often without sufficient evidence and, by doing this, fails to register different ways in which the text might be valuable to different readers. It is not an aberration, but rather an inherent systemic risk of critical practice. For this reason, it is somewhat impersonal, involving the mechanical subsumption of one text under the generic conventions of another kind of text. Therefore, the responsibility for it lies less with individual critics than it does with the general literary culture. Fortunately, there always remains the opportunity to promote a literary culture that forgoes violent criticism, and one rudimentary framework reviewers and critics can look to for rough guidelines on ways in which to do this is the Australian Journalists' Association's Code of Ethics.

Endnotes

ⁱ Slavoj Žižek (*Violence*) and Giorgio Agamben (*Remnants of Auschwitz*) are prominent figures that discuss the negative sublime of violence and trauma. For important criticisms and critique of their work see Dominick LaCapra's *History in Transit* and *History and its Limits*. There is a case to be made that Agamben and Žižek fetishize the 'movement towards the paradox, aporia, or impasse [or divine violence] that "sublimely" brings language to a halt and renders impossible (or situates as helplessly naive) any form of recovery or viable agency' (LaCapra 1994: 192). This paper aligns itself with LaCapra's approach, which rejects the glorification of violence as sublime impasse and the idea that views any hope for improvement in critical agency and practice to be naive. Most critical violence operates at a more banal and everyday level than that with which these theoreticians are concerned, and there are relatively easy and practical ways of improving critical practice, ethics and agency in literary cultures.

ⁱⁱ General introductions to basic concepts of reader-response theory were being written as long ago as 1987 (McCormick, Waller, Flower). This paper is concerned with what might be termed 'reader responsibility'.

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