

Violence is a big topic. Not only because its incidence and experience in the world demands our attention and judgment, but also because it is such a constant in human history and in artistic representation. Violence shapes our oldest stories and our newest ones, and deciding precisely how an anthology like this one should address the topic—even when limited to the only-slightly-narrower focus of violence in literature—poses something of a challenge. (Salem Press’ Critical Insights series includes other thematic volumes, and I wondered which editors might have had a similarly interesting problem. Maybe Margaret Sönsner Breen did when she was tasked with rounding up “good and evil,” or John V. Knapp when he covered “family.” I should also mention Alex Vernon’s excellent volume on war, which can be considered a kind of companion to this one.)

And so I probably don’t need to mention that this collection is necessarily selective and that there are certainly interesting subjects left out—the way violence works in comedy, for instance, or in regional and national traditions not covered here, or how graphic novels depict it in a combination of text and image. But I will note what this volume succeeds in doing, which is to draw together smart, sometimes provocative essays about works that vary widely in their historical and cultural contexts, in their style and structure, and the ways that violence makes (or resists) meaning within them. While each essay is intelligent and thought-provoking on its own terms, what has fascinated me most in compiling them is the connections that can be made across radically different works.

Thomas Palaima, for instance, begins his essay about the violent stories of the ancient Greeks and the cultural contexts that made those stories appealing—for them, and for us, almost 2,500 years later—with Euripides’ *Medea*, a play about a woman who kills her own children. As he notes, it is an act that the scholar Denys L. Page once called “outside our experience,” beyond the possible.

But we know, sadly and excruciatingly, that it's not. The real-life stories of Andrea Yates and Susan Smith reveal as much, as does that of Margaret Garner, whose life provided inspiration for Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. That novel is the focus of Aretha Phiri's essay, which explores the protagonist's act of infanticide in the context of African-American history and the lived experience of slavery. *Medea* was first performed on the brink of the Peloponnesian War; *Beloved* takes place both before and after the Civil War. Different worlds in many ways, with different motivations and historical circumstances at stake, and yet each work of art gives us a similarly unspeakable act to contemplate. Unspeakable—except Euripides and Morrison both speak it, insisting that we consider what we as humans are capable of, what is indeed within our experience, and the reasons that this might be so.

In Genesis, Abraham also believes he must kill his own child, an episode that David Mikics discusses in his essay on violence in the Hebrew Bible. Abraham doesn't question God's demand and moves to fulfill it, only to be stopped at the last moment. (Isaac is thus saved from his father's act of pious violence, though what he might have thought and felt about the experience afterwards is left to our imagination.) The threat of a single act of violence here becomes violence repeatedly and seemingly arbitrarily enacted in the Book of Job, a theological conundrum if ever there was one. Again, children die: Job's are killed, taken from him along with his wealth and his good health. The losses keep coming, and unlike Abraham, Job questions God—though the answer he receives is not the one he expected. Job is not a lengthy tale, and its author doesn't describe the deaths or Job's boils in anything like gory detail. But the piling of violence on violence is what we remember and what provokes both Job and the reader to ask, as we inevitably do in such circumstances, why this is happening. It's not so different, surprisingly, from the writings of the Marquis de Sade, which are also characterized by violent act after violent act visited upon seemingly undeserving victims. But as Lindsay Hallam argues in her essay, Sade's writing thus avoids the cloaking or veiling common to institutionalized violence and reveals that violence is "an integral part of the 'civilized' human, no matter

how much we try to silence these aspects.” It’s not a comforting thought, but then neither is God’s response from the whirlwind.

Shakespeare seems to think that violence is similarly unavoidable for some, according to Philip White, who explains how the Bard’s view of the physical self, and thus a person’s disposition and resulting values, influences his portrait of violence in *Romeo and Juliet*—murderous acts that are not, upon careful reading, purely a product of the feud between families. James R. Giles addresses two contemporary American novels that also suggest something about what it means to have a “disposition” for violence, though the characters in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* are inclined to take things a bit further than the Montagues and the Capulets—and are motivated to do so at least in part by the corrupt capitalist systems in which they function. Issues of scale, of degree, of motivation do lead to considerations of economic and political context, as Núria Sabaté Llobera and Aaron Bady show in their discussions of colonial and post-colonial portraits of violence in Latin America and Africa, respectively, and the legacy of violent cross-cultural contact in representations from both sides of the conflict. Sabaté Llobera’s essay engages the blurred boundaries between history and fiction that can happen as a result in narratives that attempt to make meaning out of violence perpetrated or violence suffered. Bady focuses on Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, which is often read in dialogue with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As Bady argues, however, the novel is more properly understood through the lens of Simone Weil and her reading of the *Iliad*. Colonization is indeed a destructive force, but force itself—the true hero and subject of the *Iliad*, according to Weil, and of *Things Fall Apart*, according to Bady—can erupt in human relationships for other, deeper reasons, even within a colonial context.

Like Sabaté Llobera, Ty Hawkins also focuses on literature as a sense-making exercise, particularly in response to modern war, and finds different paradigms of doing so in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. The essays in this volume cover

violence in a variety of social contexts, and even though the subject of war is, as I mentioned, well covered in another volume in this series, America's modern and contemporary wars—namely, the twenty-first-century wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—have elicited so much creative production that attention to that work is warranted. Mark Bresnan writes about Ben Fountain's 2012 novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, which follows a squad of soldiers enduring the bromides, glad-handing, and overstimulation that comes with being honored for their service during a Dallas Cowboys football game. It's not combat, but it's not easy either, as they are bombarded with all the noise of American sports, fandom, patriotism, and spectacle. Fountain builds a story out of fictional characters, but Lydia Neuman shows in her essay how contemporary journalists like David Finkel, Sebastian Junger, and Dexter Filkins write about real people undergoing violent experience, balancing the need to document reality with the need to shape the story most effectively. These writers embed themselves within the lives of soldiers in combat or on the home front, a heightened presence that fades in their finished work, which seeks, as much as possible, to reflect those soldiers' experiences—a challenging and potentially problematic practice, to say the least.

All of these essays reveal the often unexpected ways that violence can turn up in human lives, but in this volume's final essay, Allen Josephs reminds us that violence and its traumatic aftermath may not, in fact, appear in the places we assume them to be. Sometimes a story about fishing is just a story about fishing (well, and writing), as Josephs argues about Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," with a careful and thoughtful intervention into the details of that story and its publication, the critical conversation surrounding it, and Hemingway's own comments about its creation and content. An appropriate final word on the subject of violence, I think, emphasizing that as much blood, force, and injury there is to be experienced and written about in the world, there are also moments of stillness and peace. If it's true that one shouldn't turn a blind eye to violence, past or present—as many of the essays in this volume insist—then neither should one ignore the sight of a trout

breaking through the surface of the water and, just for an instant, catching the sun.

Kill Lists: Sade, Cinema, and the Language of the Torturer

Lindsay Hallam

The Marquis de Sade was primarily an author of novels, and it is within these works he espoused his individual philosophy. What preoccupies this philosophy most of all is, of course, the human experience, but for Sade this experience was a wholly physical one. The human condition is an embodied condition, and therefore, the exploration of the possibilities and the limitations of the bodily form was his main project. Specifically, it was the extremes of bodily expression—sex and violence—that become the main driving force of his narratives and the subject of his characters’ endless philosophical debates.

In cinema, too, there is a focus on the body and its participation in sexual and violent acts. Examples of extreme cinema, such as the recent “torture porn” trend and films from *The New French Extremity*, continue Sade’s exploration of all possible perversions and atrocities. Recently, there has been an increase in representations of torture, of showing the body undergoing torture, as well as considering the motivations of those who commit torture and the place of the spectator in relation to what they are seeing on screen. Bringing the works of Sade into the discussion of these contemporary films helps illuminate further the relationship between images of violence and those who consume them. The use of Sade is apt, as he also used fiction in order to create a language of violence, revealing how violence is a fundamental aspect of humanity—even within civilized society, which often seeks to deny or explain away violence.

In the next section, Sade’s main philosophical ideas are explained, as well as how he utilized language and narrative structure to articulate violence in a new and different form. Subsequently, the essay examines Georges Bataille’s claim that Sade’s language of violence was actually “the language of the victim,” as it expressed violence in a way that did not rely on state-sanctioned excuses and

explanations. Finally, the essay explores how Sade's expression of violence in literary form can be applied to the analysis of violence and audience reception in cinema.

Sade's Violent Philosophy

The combination of sex and violence in Sade's works is what led Richard von Krafft-Ebing to coin the term "sadism" to describe a pathological condition in his book *Psychopathia Sexualis*. A sadist is someone who experiences sexual pleasure from inflicting pain and humiliation on another person, and certainly, Sade's libertine characters do gain sexual pleasure from such behavior (while a "masochist"—named after the author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch—is someone who feels pleasure when receiving pain or being humiliated). As well as violence, though, the Sadean libertine also experiences sexual pleasure from other activities and objects, some of which may be viewed as non-sexual, such as filth and bodily waste. The telling of stories as primers to sexual activity and the discussion and analysis of these acts are also important aspects of the sexual scene. As Sade states: "There's more to it than just experiencing sensations, they must also be analyzed. Sometimes it is as pleasant to discuss as to undergo them" (*Juliette* 60).

What is being emphasised here is the place of order within transgression. Although Sade's libertines commit all manner of criminal and lustful acts, they do this within an organized system. They do not give into any desire or urge that comes to them spontaneously; they feel that urge and then subject it to much thought and planning. In *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, the young Eugenie is schooled by older libertines, Dolmance and Madame de Saint-Ange, in the ways of sex, which also involves participating in acts of violence, climaxing with her committing atrocities against her own mother. Yet, these events occur as lessons, as ordered and organized scenarios: "let us put a little order in these revels; measure is required even in the depths of infamy and delirium" (*Justine* 240). Similarly, in *Juliette* the eponymous heroine is reprimanded by her mentor, Clairwil, for getting too carried away in the heat of her passions. In response, Juliette devises an elaborate process that she carefully

and methodically goes through before each of her crimes, which incorporates periods of abstinence and contemplation. Juliette later admits that this process produces greater pleasure: “execute it and you will find that this is the species of viciousness that suits you best and which you will carry out with the greatest delight” (*Juliette* 641) What is highlighted in this statement is that “viciousness” leads to “delight”—violence results in sexual pleasure.

For Sade, violence comes from nature and is bound up with nature’s constant cycles of fornication and reproduction. Hence, the sexual and violent instincts are not separate; they are fundamentally connected. Sade feels that we should follow these “natural” instincts: “Absurd to say the mania offends nature; can it be so, when ‘tis she who puts it in our head? Can she dictate what degrades her?” (*Justine* 230). However, despite the fact that Sade positions his libertines as followers of nature’s urges, there is also the need to overcome nature’s control, which is why systems of order are put into place when the libertines commit their crimes. By doing this, the libertine is asserting his or her superiority over nature, over society and its restrictive laws, and most obviously over the powerless victim. These crimes are expressions of the libertines’ “sovereignty,” a term used by both Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille to describe the state that the Sadean libertine strived to attain. Sade’s libertines gathered together in small groups of likeminded individuals (both male and female), placing themselves above all others. Therefore, in order to assert this sovereignty, there must be within the sexual scene “victims, not partners,” who are “denied any rights at all” (Bataille 167). Activities are meticulously organized and operate with a strict hierarchy in place. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy are abused and violated, with no remorse felt by their captors.

The libertine feels no remorse because in his or her view, they are merely following nature. Juliette joins a group called The Sodality of the Friends of Crime, who meet in order to commit crimes for purpose of sexual pleasure. This group “considers itself above the law because the law is of mortal and artificial contrivance, whereas the Sodality, natural in its origin and obediences, heeds and respects Nature only” (*Juliette* 418). Just as a natural force

has no “feelings” about any devastation or disaster that it causes, so too does the Sadean libertine. In fact, there is a lack of feeling altogether, with the libertine becoming quite apathetic and numb to the violence committed. It is this apathy that leads to the more extreme and violent measures that the libertine is driven to in the midst of their pleasures. They are titillated primarily by the thought of what they are doing, about how their actions are transgressing social and moral laws:

[B]elieve me when I tell you that the delights born of apathy are worth much more than those you get out of your sensibility; the latter can only touch the heart in one sense, the other titillates and overwhelms all of one’s being. In a word, is it possible to compare permissible pleasures with pleasures which, to far more piquant delights, join those inestimable joys that come of bursting socially imposed restraints and of the violation of every law? (*Justine* 342)

As this quote illustrates, the acts themselves are almost irrelevant, as is the other person involved; it is more about what they represent in relation to societal laws and taboos. The notion of “evil” is important, as it is tied to Christian ideals, to which Sade was vehemently opposed. To show his complete disdain, Sade often incorporated Christian symbols into his sexual scenes in order to blaspheme them. Even though Sade’s libertines were atheist, they found pleasure in blasphemy because of what it represented, as an act that was taboo and went against the foundations of Western Christian society: “It is not the object of libertine intentions which fires us, but the idea of evil, and that consequently it is thanks only to evil and only in the name of evil one stiffens, not thanks to the object” (*120 Days* 364). Again, we see that it is the idea, the thought, behind the action that is most important and leads to pleasurable sensations. The victim in the scenario is perceived as nothing but an “object,” a thing to be exploited and then discarded, hence the prevalence of violence within the sexual scene and the most controversial aspect of Sade’s novels and philosophy.

Works of Literature Exploring Violence_____

Drama

Oresteia by Aeschylus, 458 BCE

Oedipus Rex, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* by Sophocles, 441–406 BCE

The Trojan Women by Euripides, 415 BCE

Titus Andronicus by William Shakespeare, c. 1588–1593

Macbeth by William Shakespeare, c. 1606

Woyzeck by Georg Büchner, 1836–37, posthumously published (with heavy editing by Karl Emil Franzos) 1879

The Conduct of Life by María Irene Fornés, 1985

Death and the Maiden by Ariel Dorfman, 1991

The Lieutenant of Innishmore by Martin McDonagh, 2001

Poetry

Beowulf, 8th–11th century

The Song of Roland, 11th century

The Divine Comedy, Dante Alighieri, 1308–1321, published 1555

John Brown's Body by Stephen Vincent Benét, 1928

Dien Cai Dau by Yusef Komunyakaa, 1988

The War Works Hard by Dunya Mikhail, translated by Elizabeth Winslow, 2005

Here, Bullet by Brian Turner, 2005

The Oxford Book of War Poetry edited by John Stallworthy, 2008

Effacement by Elizabeth Arnold, 2010

Fiction

Satyricon by Petronius, 1st century

Candide by Voltaire, 1759

The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1880

The Island of Doctor Moreau by H. G. Wells, 1896

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