

Violence as a Trope in Modernist Fiction

Review of *Violence in Early Modernist Fiction: The Secret Agent, Tarr and Women in Love* by Izabela Curyłło-Klag (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2011)

It is perhaps the bifurcated or, as Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane term it, "Janus-faced"¹ quality of Modernism, together with the intensity with which established patterns of thought and forms of artistic expression were questioned, that makes this moment of cultural history exceptionally inspiring to scholars. As we are slowly approaching the centenary of 1922, the *Annus Mirabilis* of Anglo-American Modernism, the number and variety of recent publications bear witness not only to its cataclysmic seismography, but also its unceasingly attractive potential. Explored so extensively from diverse points of view, a fresh perspective may seem impossible. Yet, Izabela Curyłło-Klag of the Institute of English Philology of the Jagiellonian University has found her own niche - the representation of violence in early modernist British fiction.

In her study, Curyłło-Klag approaches this issue through the prism of the anthropological propositions of René Girard and Barbara Whitmer. She relies mainly on Girard's concept of "sacrificial crisis", a moment when established social models and hierarchies have proven insufficient and are replaced with the desire for a violent, destructive "spasmodic occurrence"² and ensuing catharsis. This seems a valid approach to the pre-war art and society: with the trust in liberalism, positivist epistemology and traditional patterns of thought eroded, established concepts were contested, reappraised and rejected. Hence, among the hallmarks of early twentieth-century modernity there remains a compound of chaos, confusion and crisis which ignited a quest for restorative energy, order and equilibrium.

Writers too were whirled into such processes. Synaesthesia, the syncretism of previously opposed categories and forms, the condemnation or celebration of interwar modernity, as well as pronounced conservatism and revolutionism, are but some of the literary characteristics of the period. In addition, there is a pronounced tendency to yearn for some regenerative power as a means of "controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy,"³ as T.S. Eliot put it in his famous review of *Ulysses*. On the one hand, there is the fascination with myth and ancient cultures as epitomes of order. On the other, there are catastrophic visions of apocalyptic destruction, calls for action, aggression and discourses of violence. Curyłło-Klag seizes upon this latter ingredient in the modernist writing to bring under scrutiny what she calls "the trope of violence"⁴ and its representation in three novels: Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), Wyndham Lewis' *Tarr* (1918) and D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920).

The choice of the novels and their successive chronological treatment support the major thesis of the study. The texts are approached as representative indexes of "the

- 1 Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism," in *Modernism*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (1976, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), 44–49.
- 2 Izabela Curyłło-Klag, *Violence in Early Modernist Fiction: The Secret Agent, Tarr and Women in Love* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2011), 9.
- 3 T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," *Dial* 75 (1923): 483, University of Virginia, accessed 27 December 2011, <http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/eliotulysses.htm>.
- 4 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 18.

growing intensity,"⁵ pessimism and escalating crisis in years spiralling towards the war. In the initial part of her study, Curyłło-Klag provides an informed outline of her theoretical approach as well as existing critical approaches to the role and forms of aggression and violence in modernist art. On such bases, in Chapter Two she proceeds to discuss *The Secret Agent*, the oldest of the three chosen texts. The reader is safely guided through an analysis of the key characters Professor and Winnie, their "inflammable ideas", "abrupt energetic discharges"⁶ and relation to anarchism and violence. In contrast to the other two novels, the turn-of-the-century world of *The Secret Agent* is defined as still functional and with no obvious signs of social disintegration. Curyłło-Klag notices Conrad's underlying critique of the suspension of the rational control by freeing of the suppressed instincts and shows how individual characters act aggressively because they are convinced that the perpetration of violence can have positive cathartic consequences transforming their *status quo* for the better.

Chapter Three explores Wyndham Lewis' *Tarr*. This is a very creditable step because of the general tendency to underestimate the novel and place it in the shadow of texts viewed more enthusiastically as icons of Modernism. Curyłło-Klag approaches the text as a probe into the origins of violence in frustration and deprivation.⁷ She focuses on the position of the main character Kreisler in the expatriate bohemian community in pre-war Paris and explores how his despair grows "towards unhinged violence" in proportion to the decrease of rational restrictiveness and self-control.⁸ For the first-time reader of the study, the discussion proper of Kreisler's violent surges is likely to seem somewhat belated because preceded by a long and detailed analysis of several processes leading him to such a violent climax. However, the character and quality of the analysis in the second part of the chapter justifies the preparatory observations because they prove essential for the intention of the author to focus on violence as a centrifugal force. Curyłło-Klag's argumentation convincingly illustrates that Lewis' concept of violence evolves from that of Conrad in that violence is no longer approached as a hidden threat "caged in potentially explosive individuals,"⁹ but as an infectious 'contagion' gradually subjugating an individual and radiating from them towards other members of the bohemian coterie. Her discussion of Kreisler's development also reconfirms the generally accepted societal nature of Lewis' characters, whose identity issues from their interaction and engagement with others. Curyłło-Klag, however, also finds a parallel between the two novelists in their attitude towards chaos and releases of primeval (violent) instincts in consequence of the defeat of rational restrictiveness. For Curyłło-Klag, Lewis in *Tarr* maintains that "human beings who follow their natural impulses become indifferent like robots and therefore unswerving in their destructiveness and cruelty."¹⁰ With such a conclusion, it is a pity that the author does not place her postulates in the context of Lewis' and other modernists' conservative, anti-romantic and anti-heroic stances.

The last chapter is dedicated to an analysis of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. The novel is registered as another phase in the representation of violence and aggression in early modernist fiction. Aggressiveness is no longer shown as an individual behavioural pattern or as a contagion but as a widespread social malady and an unquestioned norm. Curyłło-Klag notices that Lawrence presents violence and the will to power as natural

5 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 10.

6 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 31-32.

7 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 61.

8 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 67-68.

9 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 113.

10 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 85.

givens, as consequences of the human weaning from oneness with nature and as “necessary for self-preservation in a hostile environment,”¹¹ a condition she describes as a result of Lawrence’s absorption of Freudian, Nietzschean and Darwinist beliefs. As in the case of Conrad and Lewis, this motif is viewed as the novelist’s critique of the social exhaustion which has led to the “predatory relations existing in the modern world.”¹² The chapter maintains the high standard of the previous sections despite the fact that this particular issue too should perhaps be discussed more closely, especially as Lawrence also celebrated natural, animalistic and suppressed forces, which the author herself admits.

The study as a whole has concrete merits. The author tackles the novels from a point of view which yields fresh results. These texts have the potential to contribute to our understanding of the early modernist novel in terms of its representation of the individual and communal violent acts emerging from the dissatisfaction with the *status quo* of the actual environment, hence acts that can be equated with escapism through action *in situ* rather than imaginative or physical escapism to other places or times. In her study, the author makes propositions pertaining to the underlying, transversal features of the three works, e.g. the presence of (self-) destructive elements, as well as their specific portrayals of violence and aggression - “the darkest of human impulses.”¹³ Curyłło-Klag considers the novels as evidencing a progression towards ever more obvious signs of crisis, tensions and violence - viewed as “a marginal phenomenon, limited to the underworld” in Conrad, as a contagious disease in Lewis, and as “an inescapable aspect of everyday life”¹⁴ in Lawrence. Yet, this is not only an informative and original study in terms of the extensive bibliography and profound understanding of the issue. It is also inspiring for its postulation of a question that future research may fruitfully address: to what extent is the registered progression towards a more common presence of crisis and violence illustrative of a general development of the English novel as it approached the Great War. This, however, would be a vast project, the undertaking of which rests beyond the scope of this slim but accomplished volume served to the reader in an original and gripping cover by Marcin Klag.

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11 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 92.

12 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 94

13 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 112.

14 Curyłło-Klag, *Violence*, 91-92.