

Martina Ciceri

University of Rome "La Sapienza"

Book Review: Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour. Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

**Abstract:** This book review analyses *At the Violet Hour. Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* by Sarah Cole. Cole's volume deals with the troubling relationship between art, with its focus on formal beauty, and violence in English-language literary modernism. Cole's argument concentrates on three related issues: how literary modernism engages the controversial issue of violence, whether there exist major imaginative structures about violence in modernist works, and how these repeated patterns relate to the theoretical paradigm of enchanted/disenchanted violence. Cole argues that works of the modernist period had the tendency to elaborate aesthetic forms to restrain and display both intensive and extensive modes of violation, and she concludes that Eliot, Yeats, Conrad, and Woolf were able to formulate an idiosyncratic performative language of violence. In addition, Cole claims that this distinctive stylistics of violence gravitates around certain abstract patterns, preeminent among which are the rhetorical strategies of allegory, analogy, and substitution. Moreover, I note that Cole's argument about a sort of miscegenation between the destructive nature of violence and its narrative creative potential resonates with an increasing focus on pre-modern, modern, post-colonial, and contemporary theories and traditions, thus progressively moving the reflections about the form and force of violence towards new literary, artistic, and cultural developments.

**Keywords:** Sarah Cole, literary modernism, stylistics of violence

In *At the Violet Hour. Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*, Sarah Cole provides a unique interpretation of English-language literary modernism in relation to one of the major historical and cultural phenomena that affected its very aesthetic: violence. Cole's reading is based on the assumption that modernism engages the notion of violence at both thematic and formal levels, though the originality of her analysis mostly depends on the emphasis she places on the latter. In fact, the focus of Cole's investigation is on the representational strategies T.S. Eliot, J. Conrad, W.B. Yeats, and V. Woolf employed in their works to make sense of the

multifaceted and complex nature of violence. To analyse the formal achievements of these authors means to shed light on a proper “language” of violence and to reveal how it shapes and redefines the aesthetics of modernism.

Almost tautologically, the motif of violence is a basic ingredient of cultural history, a practice that dates back to Greek culture, as Cole outlines in her volume. In her opinion, each century attempts to aestheticize and represent the threats of violence in relation to its historical, cultural, social, and political context. As far as the 20th century is concerned, phenomena such as world wars, anarchism, and revolts set the terms for historical modernity and for its idiosyncratic aesthetic representations. In support of her claim, Sarah Cole resorts to anthropological, cultural, and philosophic studies, as well as to works of more recent literary criticism<sup>1</sup> concluding that “works of the modernist period [are] profoundly shaped by the call of violence: to answer its challenges, to seek out new representational strategies, to find a conceptual register cued to its brutalities” (5). In other words, violent events are the crux and pivot of the aesthetic imagination in the modernist period, a motif that impinged on and broke into the artists’ *Weltanschauungen*. By exposing the layered and dynamic representations of violence provided by modernist artists, and by attempting to delineate common patterns and paradigms, the scholar sets the discourse of violence at the core of her stylistic investigation.

Before providing textual evidence, Sarah Cole defines the theoretical pattern of enchantment/disenchantment as a frame that enables her to classify literary works, redirecting them towards one category or the other, to detect similarities in the corpus analysed, and to delineate the diachronic evolution of certain patterns. In so doing, she sketches the mutating and unstable relationship between literature and violence as it occurs in W.B. Yeats’s poems, in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, and in Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*, *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Years*, *Three Guineas*, and *Between the Acts*. Not only is this methodological approach clearly displayed in the introductory chapter of the book, but it also proves to be entirely appropriate given the scope of the volume. In fact, in describing her methodology in the first chapter of the book, Sarah Cole provides

---

<sup>1</sup> Among this great variety of anthropological studies, it is worth remembering James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), Jesse Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), René Girard’s *The Violence and the Sacred* (1972), and George Bataille’s *The Tears of Eros* (1989). Conversely, Max Weber’s works, Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1937), and Simone Weil’s *The Iliad or the Poem of Force* (translated by James P. Hokola, New York: Peter Lang, 2003) provide a unique contribution to the theorization on violence, rituals, and modernity. As far as the representation of violence in literature is concerned, George Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* (1908), Frederic Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), Gillian Beer’s *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (1996), and Christine Froula’s *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Guard: War, Civilization, Modernity* (2005) are of primary importance in Cole’s analysis.

macro-categories that guide the reader towards the progressive classification of the performative language of violence, which also includes episodes of miscegenation.

The dichotomic model is at the very basis of the structure of the whole book, as it sets the central principles around which the literary engagements with violence have tended to cluster. Though Cole is well aware of the fact that recent scholarship has often dealt with violence,<sup>2</sup> she gives a fresh and original flavour to her analysis by formulating a personal and stimulating definition of “disenchantment.” “What “disenchantment” will mean, in my configuration,” she observes, “is not a passive recognition of spiritual flatness, but the active stripping away of idealizing principles, an insistence that the violated body is not a magic site for the production of culture” (42). Conversely, the term “enchantment” is defined in a more traditional way, namely as a tendency to confer to violence any kind of generative power.<sup>3</sup> This divided approach is a useful tool to both tackle and translate.

Allegory provides a second significant rhetorical device to display the meaning and value of violence. Yeats’s poems of the “sudden blow” (7), *Leda and the Swan* among them, as well as Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, are pivotal in this sense. In fact, as Cole observes, both Yeats and Eliot detect ontological connections between violence and any generative literary act, thus mixing the two systems of imagining violence. Their distinctive use of images of regeneration, metamorphosis, and rebirth hints at the troubling connections between artistic (formal) beauty and violence, and it offers “a way to understand literature as a self-conscious artefact produced out of and within a history of violence, recognizing its origins in a frightful set of half-forgotten tales.” (81). In other words, Eliot and Yeats provide a “poetic of enchantment that at the same time disenchants its own origins” (81). Nonetheless, “keening,”<sup>4</sup> generative violence, reprisal, and architectural allegory offer a kind of idiosyncratic repertoire that influences the structure, the rhythms, the language, and the themes of Yeats’s poetry, exposing the diachronic changes that occur in the interpretation of literary violence across culture. Most effectively, the “reprisal”

<sup>2</sup> See: N. Armstrong and L. Tennenhouse (eds.). 1989. *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*. New York: Routledge; G. Teskey. 1996. *Allegory and Violence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; J. Howlett and R. Mengham (eds.). 1994. *The Violent Muse: Violence and Artistic Imagination in Europe, 1910–1939*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; S. Žižek. 2008. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. London: Profile; D. LaCapra. 2009. *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; R. Buch. 2010. *The Pathos of the Real: On the Aesthetics of Violence in the Twentieth Century*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press; R. Nixon. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>3</sup> The ideal of generative violence is based on the assumption that “death must become fruitful” (143), to use Cole’s expression, a principle strongly supported by Pádraig Pearse and by other members of the Irish nationalist movement.

<sup>4</sup> “Keening” is the language of ritual mourning in Ireland. Though it cannot be defined as a form of representation of violence, it nevertheless functions as a performative language for shared national sufferings. J.M. Synge, W.B. Yeats, and Sean O’Casey are among the major exponents of national ritual mourning in the early 20th century.

mode conveys the idea of the back-and-forth movement of violence, an aspect that reverberates through Woolf's prose as well, especially in *Three Guineas* and in *Between the Acts*. This dimension of the cyclic nature of violence is expressed, on the one hand, by the varied forms of repetition that mimic in form what they describe, and on the other by the metaphor of the wave. Such a literary device bears witness to the recurrent use of visual patterns in modernist literature in order to depict episodes of violence. Moreover, Sarah Cole observes that Woolf, Eliot and Yeats engage the theme of violence by using recurrent images with different shades of meaning: for example, the wind, the whirlpool, and the shallow convey the idea of force, strength and destruction; the rose and the tree suggest a promise for the future, however indefinite it may be; the shell and the destroyed building are relics of modern violence.

Along with allegory, analogy is another literary strategy that Cole takes into consideration: in fact, both Yeats and Woolf tend to describe episodes of violence against animals in order not to directly deal with human bodily violation. Moreover, specific attention is devoted to the world of objects, as they often are, in modernist fiction, emblems of both violence and the body in pain. The airplane and the blood are highly significant in Woolf's works, though Cole devotes more attention to the analysis of the latter as it recurs in *Between the Acts*. As Cole observes, Giles's shoes are defined as "white canvases"<sup>5</sup> in the text, an expression that directly evokes the idea of a pictorial canvas. Thus, the blood that stains them in the moment of killing becomes a blood painting in effect, a textual and idiosyncratic manifestation of the close tie between violence and art that shapes the theoretical structure of Cole's analysis. "The blood on the shoes, then," she concludes, "becomes emblematic: it stands for Woolf's observation about how violence and art mutually inseminate both in her own work as well as in that of many other artists (including Eliot)" (285). The shovel used to scrape up Stevie's scattered body fragments in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is another emblematic example that indirectly evokes motifs of bombing, explosion, destruction, bodily fragmentation, and death. In relation to Conrad's text, Cole interestingly suggests that the interplay between intensive (domestic) and extensive (political) modes of violation is the most effective formal solution the author deploys to represent the pervasiveness, senselessness, and circulation of violence in the modern era, along with its sensationalistic, and melodramatic nature.

Cole's book offers a wealth of theoretical tools, which open up a large textual territory. Thanks to the clarity and the originality of her stylistic choices, Cole investigates the various formal solutions adopted by the early twentieth-century writers to articulate the double nature of violence in a peculiarly balanced fashion. Although she gives wider emphasis and pays greater attention to the analysis of

---

<sup>5</sup> See: V. Woolf. 1969. *Between the Acts*. San Diego: Harcourt, 99. Quoted in: S. Cole. 2012. *At the Violet Hour*, 197.

Virginia Woolf's works — Woolf being defined as “a great theorist of literary violence” (200) — she nonetheless considers many other modernist voices and opens new intriguing vistas into Eliot's poems, Yeats's poetry and drama, and Conrad's fiction.

The thorough treatment of the subject is also rooted in the relevance of textual references and in her familiarity with the cultures approached. Textual evidence, however, is not limited to primary sources of English and Irish literary modernism. In fact, Cole also looks back to nineteenth-century English and Russian fictions, to Italian futurism, and to postcolonial novels, thus unravelling the pervasive nature of violence as well as its entanglement with the world of fiction. In her approach, Cole is guided by some philosophical mentors, preeminent among whom is Simone Weil, who elaborated on the concept of “Gewalt,”<sup>6</sup> a German word traditionally translated into English as both “force” and “violence.” As Cole clarifies,

Force, as I am imagining it, is almost a condition of existence, a way of considering the swell of power that surrounds and can demolish the individual, even as, in some cases, it provides a sense of that individual's purpose ... to resist or rebel by the bare fact of remaining human. It is, finally, a central insight of this period [the 20th century] that, for all the contortions the literary text might take to adapt itself to the violent condition of the world, raw force will always have the power to squelch and to silence. (24)

Anthropological and cultural studies by J. Frazer, M. Arnold, and E. Said, as well as works of literary criticism by J. Allison, G. Beer, and F. Jameson, also play a pivotal role in the elaboration of Cole's patterns of violence. Interestingly, recent works on photography are also included in the theoretical landscape, and references to Susan Sontag's works pervade the section devoted to Woolf's fiction. Thus, photography proves a very useful addition to more traditional instruments.

In *At the Violet Hour*, Sarah Cole sheds a new light not only on modernist literature, but also on contemporary culture: in fact, she skilfully illuminates the many anxieties related to the multiple facets of violence that are still relevant today. Her analysis of terrorists framed through their historical and literary roots is, of course, an especially burning issue. In so doing, her analysis focuses on a more disenchanted vision of violence, an interpretation that pervades both modernist and contemporary literature, as well as journalism, television and cinema. Bridging classic and pre-modern theories and traditions to postcolonial and contemporary ones, moving through the complexity of literary modernism, Sarah Cole makes a

---

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil defines the notion of “force” as a form of super-violence that lays at the core of human history, an unstable, fluctuating, and devastating phenomenon that touches the wilders of power as well as its victims. In the philosopher's view, the concept of force and the violence of war are intimately intertwined, an interpretation that Weil formulates in her work on the *Iliad*. In so doing, she establishes the tangle force-war at the point of origin of the western literary canon. It is Weil's analytic method, which focuses on literature in order to explain aspects of human history and culture, that stirs Cole's imagination and that sets the theoretical basis for her analysis of the language of violence in modernist works.

unique and genuine contribution to the subject of the representation of violence in literature.

The scope of the analysis and the variety of approaches make the book attractive to those people who are not experts in modernist studies, but scholars of the period will also be satisfied by the up to date critical approach. For all these reasons, this book could serve as an excellent supplementary reading in almost any course on English-language modernism at university level. Similarly, the volume is sufficiently thought provoking and provides a stimulating read, which covers numerous areas of literary and cultural studies. Also to be noted is the keen attention paid to performativity and, therefore, to the language of violence in modern, postcolonial, and contemporary fiction.