

(Beyond) Posthuman Violence

Epic Rewritings of Ethics
in the Contemporary Novel

by

Claudio Murgia

Series in Literary Studies



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For my Father

who believed in me more than I do

and without whom

I would not have found a reason to finish this work

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Introduction

Claudio Murgia has given us, here, a remarkably original and inventive study of one of our major contemporary cultural and political predicaments: the status of violence as a condition of consciousness. As we know, violence is very much a determining instance of political and cultural change; but this is obviously deeply unsettling, raising as it does major questions around the relation of political change to ethics, and even to the very survival of the social and ecological fabric of our networked lives. Murgia's method – literally, his way or route through the conundrums associated with this, or what in ancient Latin or Greek was called *methodos* or pursuit of knowledge – lies in an analysis of literature and specifically of some contemporary narrative modes. There has been a significant turn, he notes, in what we have come to call 'the postmodern'; and this narrative turn allows us to negotiate the tensions between cognitive psychology and linguistic experiment. At issue is the very status of 'reason' when set against the pressures and demands of physical existence.

The problem might be most immediately recognisable to readers as a re-visiting of an older Enlightenment problem, but it is a vital reconfiguration of that problem staged for the contemporary moment. It is one that earlier and perhaps much more conservative generations - more traditional readers and critics - might have thought of as a 'Jane Austen problem': how do we regulate the competing demands of sense and sensibility, or of pride and prejudice? That is to say, how do we calibrate the demands of thought against the demands of the body, of the ostensibly free-ranging and uncircumscribed consciousness with the constraints of the material reality that such a consciousness faces; how can we find a mode of behaviour that respects the pressures of physical existence while at the same time suggesting that we are not completely contained by or constrained through our merely physical and material lives.

In the immediate aftermath of the contestation between Romantic and Enlightenment social constructions, some later thinkers saw the route through the predicaments in Marx, whose philosophy asks us to find a way of acknowledging the materiality of real lives while at the same time accepting our responsibilities and refusing the limitations on our activity that seem to be given to us by the indomitable facts of nature.

One way of thinking about the political activity associated with Marxism would be to indicate that Marx saw the human body, especially in its form as a labouring body, as a medium through which the realms of a seemingly determining natural world could be modified by that body in what we call the 'production' of a life. Human living is a product that depends upon our modifications of – and even control over – nature. Labour is the mechanism or production process that makes nature habitable, as it were, by overcoming its constraining force. This has, in more recent times, come under pressure by those who would want to say that we must find a new way of accommodating ourselves to the ecological determinants of survival in the world. A kind of eco-Marxism might be the result of that, and with such a suspicion we also begin to think that our 'overcoming' of the constraints 'imposed' on us by nature might itself be an activity that is informed by a violence against nature. We have thus never quite overcome the problems given to us by our attempts to live both in sustainable harmony with the world and in sustainable political harmony with each other.

Throughout all of this, we find what is at the core of Murgia's thinking: narratives that we deploy to help us not only to make sense of the world but actually to determine our own future possibilities. Those narratives, it turns out, are the overt manifestations of a series of predicaments that are fundamentally ethical in nature. They have to do with *ethos*, with the mood or disposition of individuals towards the world, and often towards other humans and to ourselves.

What, then, might it mean to be human? For a whole history of modern philosophy, that identity is given by the processes of reason. To think is seemingly fundamental to existence, and thinking is itself preconditioned by the brute facts of biological existence. 'I think' therefore there must exist something that is doing the thinking, as Descartes told us. But this is the important point here: he *told* us: that is to say, he wrote these words. Murgia discovers that it is through the very activities associated with writing – language and its own possibilities of forming a rational basis for communication – that we can even get to this fundamental condition of modernity. Further, the writing itself is preconditioned by narratives that shape the very psychology of our being. Thus it is that he is able to weld together cognitive psychology with literary theory. The result is an outstanding study.

This brief indication of the substratum of Murgia's thinking does not do full justice to the range, scope and ambit of this book. It has become fashionable in recent times to suggest that we are entering a new critical norm, in which 'world literary study' will supplant – or has already

supplanted – comparative literature as a field. Be that as it may, it is still the case that we need scholars who can work across different national literatures in the original languages in which those literatures are made. Murgia follows a line of great thinkers who took it for granted, historically, that an engagement with a literature requires a fundamental engagement with the language in and through which that literature makes its senses and thus makes itself ‘available’ to an audience of speakers and readers. Thus, here, we have studies of work in English, French and Italian. That is unusual in our time, and it is all the more important that we acknowledge the individuality of this kind of work. For Murgia, an understanding of and a primary engagement with work in its original language is of paramount importance. The reasons are simple: narratives themselves are shaped by linguistic norms, and those norms are often very specific to modes of consciousness that are determined by the communities of speakers in which the narratives will make sense.

This is a position that eschews the simple idea of what has become known as ‘distant reading’ in our time. That distant reading suggests that it is possible to make generalised theoretical pronouncements by getting a grip on some basic lowest common denominators of narratives. Thus, translated texts will allow us to make an engagement with a generalised ‘world’ of literary thinking. For Murgia, this avoidance of specifics is not enough. He is still a close reader; but a reader whose closeness to and intimacy with the texts that he studies allows for his readers, in turn, to be introduced to the intricacies of narratives in all their idiosyncratic specificity. It is only after such intimacy that we can get to the generalised theoretical grasp of the status of violence for our times.

This, in a world where political violence is increasingly a genuine and material threat, and in a world where the key armoury that we might have as a defence against such dangers is narrative, makes this a key work for our time.

Thomas Docherty

University of Warwick

Foreword

Aesthetics and Ontology: The Problem of Transcendence and Immanence or, The Power of Narratives and the Voice

Undertaking the study of violence in contemporary fiction necessarily involves a study of the nature and structure of fiction itself and, more precisely, of the narrative techniques, which constitute it. For this reason then, this study of violence in fiction runs parallel to the study of narratives. The importance of such a study today has been made evident by much research in cognitive science, and specifically that branch of research which shows how the brain relates to the material conditions of reality through metaphors and stories. In other words, the individual creates images in her head with which she processes the real. “The real” is thus not some pre-given state of affairs, but a process, dependent upon a relation between the subject of perception and whatever it takes as its objects: both subject and object are constructed in that relation – and that relation is what we call “the real” or “reality”. Consequently, the analysis of narratives offers a key to the way we perceive the world; and, within that, a study of narrative technique will help explain perceptions of violence.

The Brain as Metaphor Machine

This approach then requires at least and ideally a short introduction to the problematic relationship between reality and the brain. However, since this is a work of literary criticism I will outline the question mainly from a literary point of view, rather than resort fully to clinical matters. With this purpose in mind I will overview David Porush’s analysis of Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992) in his essay “Hacking the Brainstem: Postmodern Metaphysics

and Stephenson's *Snow Crash*.”¹ This overview will then yield a specific and paradigmatic framework for the work of the rest of this book.

Sharing the ideas of cognitive science, Porush argues that the human mind is genetically made to conceive the world through metaphor. Far from being a mere rhetorical tool, metaphor is the process through which the brain gives a meaning to the data taken from the reality outside our heads. The brain is genetically programmed to extrapolate physical data from an “irrational, inchoate reality,” and translate them into thoughts and sensations. Porush concludes then: “At the risk of belaboring the obvious, the brain (not the mind, but the physical organ the brain) is a metaphor machine, operating continuously to carry meaning between realms that are in the larger sense thoroughly incommensurable.”²

Taking the lead from this claim, we can state that metaphor is a mechanism of translation between the physical and the mental, between the data received through the senses and an image, a story in the brain. Cyberspace - because this is what Porush is dealing with in his essay - is an externalization of this metaphor machine in a shared virtuality.

With this premise, Porush arrives at his definition of transcendence in the history of humanity, and not only as a moment connected to cyberspace, as the equivalence between metaphor and cognition: “when we confuse the metaphorical as the cognitive--or rather, *the moment when we recognize that the cognitive is the metaphorical*. This is my definition of transcendence.”³

This definition establishes that knowledge is possible only through metaphor, which is a rhetorical and artistic trope.⁴ This implies that in the

¹ David Porush, “Hacking the Brainstem: Postmodern Metaphysics and Stephenson's *Snow Crash*”, *Configurations* 2.3 (1994), pp. 537-571.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 549-550.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 551. Emphasis in the original.

⁴ Metaphor is after all present in Aristotle both in his *Rhetorics* and in his *Poetics*. In the latter work, Aristotle defines metaphor thus: “Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy.” (Aristotle. *Aristotle on the art of poetry* (Kindle Locations 528-530). Public Domain Books. Kindle Edition.) For Aristotle, then, metaphor is a substitution or misplacement of names and a transference. The passage from transference to trans-cendence is quite easy to infer, especially considering the substitution of the name of reality for the name of fiction. It is furthermore

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My mother, who taught me about humility and sacrifice

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