Where Literature Encounters Philosophy of Violence

Examining the representation of violence in Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* and David Greig's *Europe*

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Although violence has always accompanied societies, the first half of the twentieth century was a particularly cruel and horrendous episode of our History. The Nazi Holocaust and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused wounds from which humanity may never recover. Philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault and most recently Slavoj Žižek devoted much of their work to violence and its relationship with power. This essay will discuss how their approaches to violence can be applied to Contemporary Literature by examining the representation of violence in two British literary pieces from the late twentieth century: *V for Vendetta*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd, and *Europe*, by David Greig. On a final note, it will briefly analyze the political implications of both pieces and how they are constrained by the political environment of their time.

Alan Moore (Northampton, 1953) and David Lloyd (Enfield, 1950) published *V for Vendetta* as a volume of ten comics in 1988. Set in a dystopian Great Britain under the rule of a fascist government, the bestseller features violence not only as a convention of its genre but also as an important source of dilemma. Violence is performed by both sides of the story. On the one hand, V uses it against the government on multiple occasions, as a medium for his vendetta. He assassinates numerous men, destroys the sculpture of justice and frightens the population. On the other hand, the ruling government commits continuous state violence against its own people. To that end, the subplot introduced by Valerie's letter into the graphic novel brings the reader to know first-hand the fear a member of the LGBT community would feel inside a fascist state. Violence therefore confronts V and the government, creating a continuous battle between them, in the same fashion as superhero comics, making it an indispensable element of the story.

In order to analyze the outstanding importance of philosophy of violence in *V for Vendetta*, one must bear in mind that violence does not only appear inside of Moore's dystopian universe, but plays also an important part on its origin:

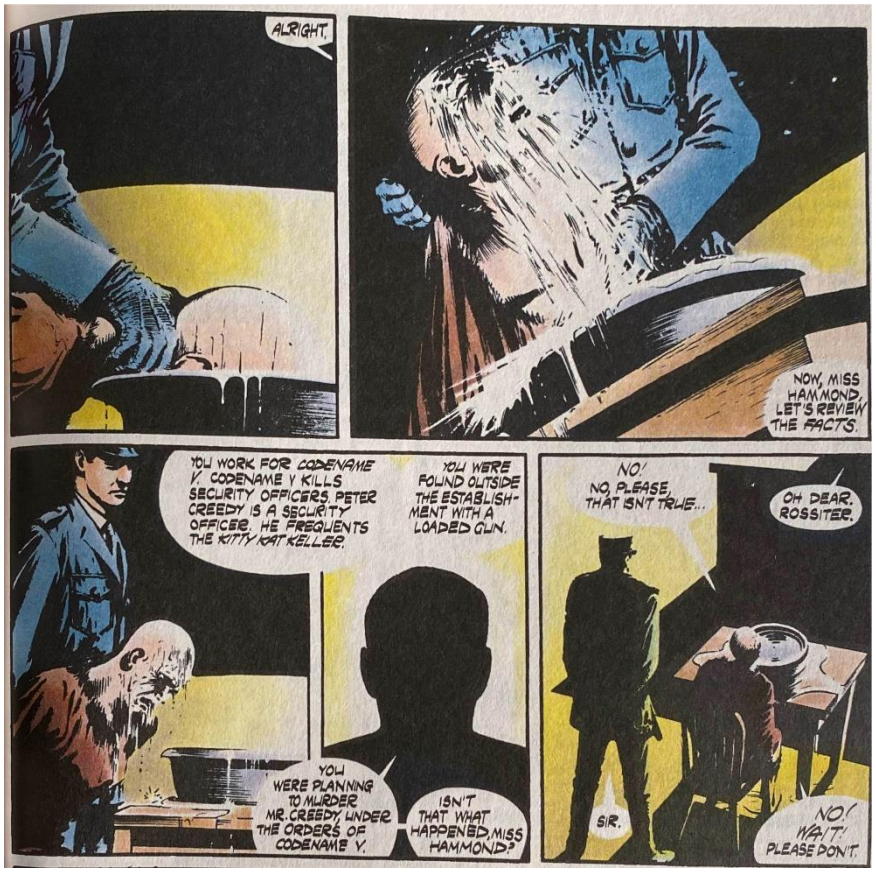
(Moore and Lloyd 27)

In these five panels, Lloyd illustrates Evey and V's conversation and Evey's tender childhood. No violence is portrayed visually. However, the reader learns about a war, destruction and bombing, making this representation of violence explicit and implicit at the same time. Moreover, the fact that the origin of the chaos is precisely an atomic bomb references one of the topics that most attracted philosophers during the twentieth century. In the words of Arendt:

> The technical development of the implements of violence has now reached the point where no political goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict (7).

That is to say that, by introducing the most violent form of technology into the origin of its dystopian government and society, *V for Vendetta* is aligning itself with the philosophers and political theorists that believed an ethical end had to be given to the development of technology. Destructive weapons such as atomic bombs where conceived by both Arendt and Moore as completely unethical, and a source of injustice and disequilibrium. Furthermore, Moore's chose of political agents is not arbitrary. Americans are the ones to bomb, while "Africa's not there anymore" (Moore and Lloyd 27). The blame is on the United States of America, immersed in a war with Russia, while Africa suffers the consequences of their violence.

On a different note, *V for Vendetta*'s main characters also take part in another dilemma concerning philosophy of violence. In order to make Evey endorse his vendetta and test her loyalty, V tortures her, impersonating government's men:



(Moore and Lloyd 157)

Unlike in the last extract, these panels do reflect visual explicit violence. Evey is mercilessly tortured both physically and psychologically. By shaving her head, she is deprived of her dignity and individuality. The reader will later be astonished to know that V is the person under all that violence. And here is where the dilemma arrives. Does not the anarchist V perpetuate the same violence that the government enforces on its population? Is this perpetuation ethical in any way? It is possible to try to find an answer to these questions in view of the paradigm stablished by Michel Foucault to understand power. Maze summarized the philosopher's ideas by saying that "for Foucault, power thereby functions as a conceptual substitute for the con-glomeration of force relations strategically employed to (attempt to) control a situation" (123). To that end, power is an attempt to control another being, and violence, or forced relations, are the medium to achieve this. By trying to control Evey, V stablishes a power dynamic over her, something that is profoundly violent. Provided that, V is being incoherent as an anarchist. And the final question is left open, both by Foucault and Moore: is it justifiable?

A key thing to remember is that *V for Vendetta* is not a political theory manual, but a profoundly ideological work. As Moffet points out, the dystopia conceived by Moore was a possibility for both the author and the reader (47). Alongside with the atomic war that would make Great Britain reach that situation, which has been already stated as a well-discussed topic in the second half of the twentieth century, unemployment, scarcity and surveillance are part of the elements that define Moore's universe in *V for Vendetta.* Moffett explores how all of these elements are references to anti-Thatcherism, for example:

> Despite surviving the war, the people of Britain still suffer enormously, and Norsefire – the ruling party of V for Vendetta – comes to power as the nation responds to horrific circumstances with desperation, much as Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party were perceived by many liberals as

> having obtained their power due to a desperate populace in the face of the so called 'winter of discontent' in 1978–1979 (47).

To that end, Moore and Lloyd saw the government of Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party as a threat that could derive in fascism, and anarchism is nothing but the opposite pole of fascism. By going from one extreme to another, "one of the characteristics of *V for Vendetta*'s dystopia is that it is a landscape within which brutal violence becomes justifiable" (Moffett 49). Moore positions himself as an anarchist, creating a literary piece that serves as an anarchist manifesto through a dystopia, worried by the fascist leaning of Thatcherism. Philosophy of violence is therefore comprehended inside *V for Vendetta* as a way to justify anarchism.

Although it first premiered in Edinburgh only six years after *V for Vendetta* had been published, *Europe* by David Greig (Edinburgh, 1969) makes for a completely different representation of violence as a literary piece. If Moore and Lloyd chose an alternative possible Britain as a setting for their graphic novel, Greig set his play in an undefined, but absolutely plausible and contemporary, town in Europe. But that is not the only difference. In *Europe* there are not two sides in conflict or war, only perpetrators and victims. Singularly, violence appears throughout the play as something gradual. At the beginning, the European town seems like a boring static place, radically different to the "brutal landscape" (Moffett 49) present in *V for Vendetta.* However, the action itself muddies the waters. When Sava and Katia arrive as refugees, at a time when unemployment brought sadness and desperation to the town, some of the locals see it as a threat to their status. Xenophobia makes them violent. Each scene has more and more explicit violence going from verbal attacks to physical assaults, rape and an explosion. The play ends precisely with the destruction of the train station, the heart of the town, and two murders: the climax of a whole play of accumulated violence.

In this context, it is clear that *Europe* does not raise the same questions regarding philosophy of violence as *V for Vendetta*. There is no point in figuring out whether it was ethical for Horse and Berlin to beat Morocco or blow away the train station. However, there are different questions that may come to mind. For instance: where is the government while all the action happened? Only a reference of government intervening can be found:

> **Berlin** The next day, after the fire, the government minister came to see the ashes. He said they would stamp us out. He said… these monsters aren't part of our nation. They don't belong in our midst. He said we have to drive them out. There's no place for them here. No place for them anywhere (…) He said he'd tighten up on immigration controls. After all… feelings were running high over the continent (Greig 83).

Therefore, the government would only appear when it is too late. Fret and Sava died in the fire, this being the only act of violence authorities are aware of. Berlin pronounces these words in between anger and triumph. The syntactic repetition, using structures that begin with "he said" or "no place", create a feeling of the character not being absolutely aware of the seriousness of the situation. The government is inefficient on its duty of protecting the population and at the end, blames it all on immigration.

Similarly, the government never gets to know about the violence occurred because there is a systematic distrust on them. Katia says it clearly: "I don't like to deal with the police. I feel uncomfortable with uniforms of any kind, the police especially" (Greig 73). Is not the fact that someone might be afraid of the police force violent on itself? Žižek's philosophy of violence would answer this question, as it introduces the existence of different types of violence aside from direct physical violence and ideological violence, such as racism and discrimination (10), focusing on "the complex interaction of the three modes of violence: subjective, objective and symbolic" (11). To that end, *Europe* portrays

a society where there is subjective violence in between the individuals, but also objective, since a lot of them are forced economic or political migrants, and symbolic, since the refugees are targeted by the discourse of the authorities that they fear.

The political implications of portraying violence, as something done by non-intervening states, are enormous. Although the town is undefined, it can easily be assumed that it is placed near the Balkan area, Sava and Katia being refugees from the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001). As Rodrigues genially points out, *Europe* makes for a representation of contemporary European Union, where hostility towards migrants coexists with an idealist narrative around the continent, mainly brought up by Adele (113). As a concept, Europe is problematic, and that can be wonderfully spotted in David Greig's work. Europe is at the same time Paris and a little village where trains have ceased to stop. And to top that, Europe has a migration problem that is treated with indifference and coldness. However, once again, the play differs with *V for Vendetta*, as *Europe* has no political agenda. Greig does not enforce a political ideology such as anarchism, he gives no solutions. Although the author denounces a situation that nowadays speaks to the present, he does not come up with an alternative to the political tension or a revolutionary call to action.

In conclusion, Alan Moore and David Greig wrote two really different portraits of violence, but they both deeply align with the philosophy of violence that had been produced during the twentieth century. Arendt's political theory around violence and technology, Foucault's idea of violence being intrinsic to power and Žižek's perspective of multiple forms of violence are comprehended inside these literary pieces. *V for Vendetta* and *Europe* raise the question of violence, with its different facets and their own political aims, either as an anarchist utopia or as the denounce of the European problematics and the inaction of its governments. Dystopic or not, it has been made clear that violence is a reality and a concern in the Contemporary World.

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