Ethical challenges when reading aesthetic rape scenes[i]

Emy Koopman

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Oscar Wilde states: 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.'[ii] This 'aestheticist' or 'formalist' claim that a work of fiction is autonomous and cannot be inherently (im)moral (*l'art pour l'art*), has become almost dogmatic within literary scholarship, especially since Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" (1967).[iii] However, since the 1980s various literary scholars (most notably Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum) have called for 'ethical criticism'.[iv] The extent to which literature is autonomous is an important and complex debate, but Wilde's oneliner in itself does not exclude ethical criticism. As for example Wayne Booth has argued in *The Company We Keep*, a literary work can very well trigger ethical reflection while portraying immoral events and even stereotypes.[v] 'Ethics' thus needs to be distinguished from 'morality': the latter refers to prescriptive notions on what is right and what is wrong within a given society (norms and values), while the first refers to critical enquiry into moral claims like what is 'just'.[vi] In that sense, especially works containing 'immoral' notions or events can trigger ethical reflection in readers, but whether they actually do so depends on – indeed – how well they are written, and how well the reader is willing to read. What is at stake is thus both an ethics of representing and an ethics of reading. While ethical reflection in the end needs to be realized by the reader, the literary text itself needs to invite and sustain certain reader responses, a potential that should mainly be seen in the 'how' of the representation, instead of in the 'what.' As Adorno argued in 'Commitment,' the ethical potential of 'committed' literature lies in the form, in the way the work unsettles the reader, not in the events depicted.[vii]

When a literary work is confronting us with cruelty – when someone is shown to suffer and/or someone is shown to inflict suffering – ethical reflection becomes particularly

relevant. In this short paper, I would like to focus on the ethics of representing and reading rape, and more in particular the issue of dealing with aesthetic rape scenes. When I am speaking of 'aesthetic' rape depictions I mean those depictions that clearly foreground stylistic features like metaphors, contrasts and repetitions.

Aestheticizing suffering has been deemed problematic by various scholars, especially within the fields of Holocaust and Trauma Studies. Theodor Adorno's remark in 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric has become famous.[viii] In his later essay 'Commitment,' Adorno nuanced this claim, still believing in its veracity, but also stressing that real suffering should not be forgotten and that art seems to be one of the scarce places which can lend a voice to suffering: "suffering […] demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it".[ix] The main problem Adorno signalled is that the aesthetic aspects of art do 'injustice' to actual victims, because the aestheticism relieves the original horror and, moreover, can provide the reader with a certain amount of pleasure.[x] Adorno's great fear appeared to be that when suffering is represented in an artful way it can become 'entertainment' for those who have not suffered. Later positions in Trauma Studies, by amongst others poststructuralist scholars Cathy Caruth and Julia Kristeva, aim for a representation of suffering and trauma through unconventional stylistic devices which stress the fragmentary and disruptive nature of traumatic experiences.[xi]

In the case of rape depictions, the problem of pleasure is particularly poignant. The sexual element implies that authors (and subsequently readers) have to relate to issues of gender, power, sadism, voyeurism and arousal. Novelists depicting rape face the challenge of choosing how much access to the rape scene they grant the reader and how that access is envisioned. From the reader's point of view, one of the main issues at stake in reading rape scenes is being distanced versus being drawn in, between feeling repulsed by it all, feeling empathy for the victim, and feeling sexual desire (which could be seen as empathy with the

perpetrator). In her work on torture and rape in contemporary literature, Tanner, in a similar move to Adorno, has stressed that texts portraying 'intimate violence' should not obscure the painful reality of actual violence, "the suffering body".[xii] But Tanner takes this a step further, emphasizing a form of empathy in insisting that what representations of violence 'should' do is "subvert the disembodying tendencies of the reading process in order to offer the reader the fullest experience of reading violence. They must, in effect, remind the reader of his or her own violability".[xiii] Tanner thus pleads for a type of representation which tries to its best ability to confront readers with the reality of pain. The problem with this position is that it is impossible to decide when 'the reality' of pain has been 'truthfully' conveyed. What is possible, however, is to determine whether a victim's voice has been represented, in what way, and especially to try and discern possible (ethical) reactions to that representation.

I will present two short fragments of aesthetic rape representations, to bring out two distinct ways in which the aestheticization of suffering can function: in the first fragment we are drawn into the perspective of the victim, in the second the perspective of the perpetrator is central. Both rape scenes are confrontational, but each invites different reader responses. As we will see, it is not just focalization which makes the difference for the ethical potential of the text.

An example of an aesthetic rape scene in which the author tries to convey the victim's experience can be found in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982).[xiv] In this novel, Lorraine (a lesbian Afro-American woman) is raped by a group of men from her neighbourhood. The men are portrayed as having no purpose in life, no actual power except for the pain and humiliation they can subject this woman to. In this scene, Naylor employs poetic devices to increase the viscerality, which Tanner has lauded for effectively bringing the reader up close to the experience of the victim, thereby obstructing a voyeuristic response, since one does not look at the victim, but through the victim's eyes.[xv] The gang rape is

portrayed in such an extremely explicit manner, containing detailed descriptions of the violent sexual act(s) and particularly of the bodies of the victim and perpetrators, that only a very sadistic reader would be able to find any voyeuristic pleasure. An example of a sentence which brings out the violence and viscerality: "He slammed his kneecap into her spine and her body arched up, causing his nails to cut into the side of her mouth to stifle her cry".[xvi] As can already be discerned from the choice of words in the aforementioned sentence ("arched up," "stifle"), Naylor makes use of a rather poetic discourse to transmit the pain of the victim.

Naylor consistently mentions every body part involved in the violence, to the extent that explicitness becomes stylistics. To give a few examples of how she combines the explicitly violent and the aesthetic:

- The impact of his **fist forced air** into her **constricted throat**, and she worked her sore **mouth**, trying to form the one word that had been **clawing inside of her** – '**Please**.'
- Then she opened her **eyes** and they **screamed and screamed** into the **face** above hers – the **face** that was **pushing his tearing pain** inside of her **body**.
- She couldn't tell when they had changed places and **the second weight, then the third and the fourth**, dropped on her – it was all **one continuous hacksawing of torment** that kept her **eyes screaming** the only word she was fated to utter again and again for the rest of her life. **Please**.[xvii] [*my emphasis*]

The violence of the rape is inescapable, but at the same time Naylor uses repetitions (e.g. "screamed and screamed," or the word 'Please'), prefers poetic words to more common ones (e.g. "continuous hacksawing of torment"), and makes extensive use of metaphoric language, particularly in the form of synecdoches and metonyms. The use of synecdoche and metonymy puts the body parts mentioned in another perspective: it is not "the man" who is pushing his penis, but "the face" (*pars pro toto*) which is pushing "his tearing pain" (substitution of effect for cause). The displacements in agency simultaneously invoke the agent that is not directly shown: 'the face' has to be attributed to the man, and the 'tearing pain' to his penis. This

means that readers have to make an extra step in their imagination, seeing the man while only 'the face' is mentioned. A particularly emotive displacement (and contrast) is that while the victim is incapable of screaming with her vocal chords, her eyes do scream, making her 'Please' visual instead of auditive. Through metaphoric language Naylor is thus showing more instead of less. This effect is strengthened through the fact that, even though an omniscient narrator is narrating, the victim possesses the focalization during most of the fragment.

Naylor uses 'aestheticization' in a way that problematizes the term 'aestheticization': what she shows us is not 'beautiful' but excruciating. However, she uses narrative aesthetics to bring that message home. Her depiction of a rape scene is upsetting, inviting the reader to feel the victim's pain, to bear it while the victim cannot bear it anymore. Through her narrative choices, Naylor is both asking us to empathize with the victim and to be unsettled by the cruelty.

Indeed, both empathy (in the sense of being drawn into the narrative world and the protagonist's experience) and unsettlement (in the sense of being confused and upset by what is being shown and how it is being shown) are crucial ethical responses when reading about someone suffering. Dominick LaCapra has used the exact term 'empathic unsettlement' in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) to indicate both the way authors can deal with writing about trauma and the way readers can respond to it.[xviii] LaCapra stresses the value of disruptive narrative techniques in demonstrating the impact and the unknowable aspects of traumatic experiences, as well as the importance of staying true to facts (especially in historic writing) and not foreclosing empathy (in writing trauma in general). LaCapra's plea for 'empathic unsettlement' is a plea for a type of writing that establishes a balance between disrupting the public's conventional frameworks of knowledge on suffering and engaging the public with the persons involved in the depicted suffering. Empathy, to LaCapra, is "a

counterforce to numbing," and "may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others".[xix] 'Attending to' the experience of victim and/or perpetrator (without falling in the trap of "unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage") and thus being open to empathic unsettlement, is a responsibility for both authors and readers.[xx]

'Empathic unsettlement' implies that a certain amount of empathy is necessary to relate to the depicted events and characters, while being unsettled by the representation helps to recognize the difference between one's own situation and the depicted events and characters, to acknowledge the fact that in looking at another's pain we can never completely share it. In the case of Naylor's depiction of rape, the repetition of the word 'please' for example establishes simultaneously empathy and unsettlement: we are invited to feel for the victim and at the same time the 'please' (in the sense of 'please, make this stop') applies to us, the scene is so extremely visceral and violent that it is hard to keep reading.

Explicit aestheticized depictions of rape can become arguably more problematic when they take the point of view of the perpetrator. An example of a novel in which this is the case is Gerard Reve's *Een Circusjongen* (1975), in which an entire chapter is dedicated to the description of a rape which the protagonist-narrator sees as his one unforgivable sin.[xxi] For several reasons it is hard to take the rape scene seriously: earlier in the story the narrator has recounted cruel sexual fantasies with the aim to arouse his partner and Reve uses an exalted and hyperbolic discourse to describe the rape and to contextualize it within catholic notions of sin and forgiveness, a discourse which shows a decadent fascination for the horrific beauty of transgression. The androgynous girl who is raped is presented as the most angelic pure being that ever existed – a true Justine – and later in the novel she literally becomes a saint. The description of the rape is extremely detailed and aestheticized, and also very sadistic, inviting the reader as voyeur on the scene. One example will suffice to illustrate this:

> Now I unbuttoned her shirt up to her waist, and grabbed both of her small breasts, squeezed each of them into elongation and pulled her upper body towards me with brutal force, while I firmly clasped both of the cool, solid, but as far as the skin was concerned peachy-soft fruits. The clear realization that I was heavily hurting this defenseless, innocent, playful creature that was practically a child, made me feel dizzy for several moments, as if intoxicated.[xxii]

Reve is describing the rape as an erotic scene in which the resistance of the victim only increases the arousal. While the narrator keeps emphasizing how awfully sinful his behaviour was, the indulgence in the rape scene – which, as said, takes up an entire chapter – is pornographic, while the edge is taken off from the pornographic descriptions through the ironically hyperbolic poetic discourse.

With Reve then, the problem is not so much that he provides us with the perspective of the perpetrator. What is problematic is a summation of aspects: 1. the perpetrator is a sympathetic protagonist throughout the rest of the novel, 2. the scene is described in a way that is blatantly erotic, inviting voyeuristic impulses of the reader, 3. the scene employs an ironic discourse, inviting laughter. Even though the victim's voice is practically inaudible, the text still allows for an ethical approach. The complete focalization by the perpetrator guarantees that hardly any empathy with the victim is invited, instead, what is invited is voyeuristic pleasure. However, since at the same time the unconventional discourse is a distancing device, the reader can be triggered to consciously and critically reflect on that mechanism and take a critical distance towards the evoked voyeuristic pleasure. The reader would then be able to realize through this highly fictionalized scene how voyeuristic pleasure depends on fantasy and how violent fantasies belong precisely to the realm of the fictional and not to the realm of the real. The ironic discourse thus can function as being unsettling, if one reconstructs what is actually happening in this scene and contrasts it with the way it is told.

When reading representations of sexual domination, attending to one's emotional responses is an ethical responsibility, whether this is an emotional response of being empathically unsettled or of being unsettled by one's sadistic impulses. Recognizing undesirable affective responses can be effective in an ethical response, as long as readers acknowledge their reactions and use these to ask themselves critical questions with regard to their responsibility to others. As Kelly Oliver has argued, owning up to one's desires and phobias is a necessary precondition to being a self-reflective, ethically responsible person, especially because domination often springs from fears and desires which those in power would rather not admit to.[xxiii] Reve plays with our desires, while at the same time ridiculing our voyeuristic impulses. Naylor takes a more serious approach, confronting us with the pain of a victim as much as a fictitious representation can accomplish. In both cases, there remains a necessary distance between the text and ourselves which allows us to reflect, to take a step back and ask ourselves what the text is doing to us and how we can respond to that. In that sense, Adorno's warning that representing suffering in an artful way constitutes an ethical problem needs to be revised: instead of a problem we are dealing with a possibility and responsibility for both author and reader. Authors have the opportunity and responsibility to write texts that allow for ethical reflection. In the case of the representation of sexual violence, an indulgence in the stylistics of the representation, or a voyeuristic or sadistic revelling in the represented events could be seen as an unethical response. However, if a text is well written and the reader has a sufficient ability to critically reflect, these at first sight unethical responses can function as a fruitful starting point for an ethical reading.

Bibliography

Adorno, T. W., 'Commitment'. In: *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (eds), Urizen Books, New York, 1982, pp. 300-318.

Adorno, T. W., 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft'. In: *Gesammelte Schriften Band 10-1*: *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I*, R. Tiedemann (ed), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, pp. 11-30.

Barthes, R., 'The Death of the Author'. R. Howard (transl.), *Aspen*, 5/6, 1967, 9 September 2008, viewed 25 September 2010, www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html #barthes.

Booth, W. C., *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988.

Caruth, C., *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 1996.

Hakemulder, F., *The Moral Laboratory: Literature and Ethical Awareness*. Dissertation, Utrecht University, 1998.

Korthals Altes, L., ' "The Dissolution of the Sphere of the Common": Literature, Ethics and J.M. Coetzee.' In: *Religion and The Ar*ts, H. Zock (ed), Peeters, Leuven, 2008, pp. 1-21.

Kristeva, J., *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. L. S. Roudiez (transl.), Columbia University Press, New York, 1989.

LaCapra, D., *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 2001.

Naylor, G., *The Women of Brewster Place*. Viking Press, New York, 1982.

Nussbaum, M. C., *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1995.

Oliver, K., *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004.

Reve, G., *Een Circusjongen*. Elsevier, Amsterdam/Brussel, 1975.

Tanner, L. E., *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth Century Fiction*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994.

Wilde, O., *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Penguin Popular Classics, London, 1994.

[i] This paper is based on research done for my master thesis in Literary Studies at Utrecht University. I have published a different paper based on the same research, with a similar theoretical framework, in the *Journal of Literary Theory* 4:2 (2010), 235-251.
[ii] O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Penguin Popular Classics, London, 1994, p. 5.
[iii] R. Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', transl. R Howard, *Aspen,* 5/6, 1967, 9 September 2008, viewed 25 September 2010, www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes.
[iv] W. C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988. M. C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995.
[v] Booth, *The Company We Keep*, p. 179.
[vi] See F. Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory: Literature and Ethical Awareness*. Utrecht University, Dissertation, 1998, p. 13. See also L. Korthals Altes, ' "The Dissolution of the Sphere of the Common": Literature, Ethics and J.M. Coetzee', in *Religion and The Ar*ts, H. Zock (ed), Peeters, Leuven, 2008, p. 3.
[vii] T. W. Adorno, 'Commitment', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, A. Arato & E. Gebhardt (eds), Urizen Books, New York, 1982, pp. 300-318.
[viii] T. W. Adorno, 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft', in *Gesammelte Schriften Band 10-1*: *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I*, R. Tiedemann (ed), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 30.
[ix] Adorno, 'Commitment', p. 312.
[x] ibid., p. 313.
[xi] C. Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins U.P., Baltimore, Maryland, 1996; J. Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, transl. L. S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989.
[xii] L. E. Tanner, *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth Century Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, p. 10.
[xiii] ibid., p. 12-13.
[xiv] G. Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place*, Viking Press, New York, 1982.
[xv] Tanner, op.cit., p. 29.
[xvi] Naylor, op.cit., p. 170.
[xvii] All citations: Naylor, op.cit., p. 170.
[xviii] D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2001.
[xix] LaCapra, op.cit., p. 40.
[xx] ibid.
[xxi] G. Reve, *Een Circusjongen*, Elsevier, Amsterdam/Brussel, 1975.
[xxii] Originally, Reve, op.cit., p. 107: "Ik knoopte nu haar bloesje open tot haar middel, en greep daarna haar beide borstjes vast, kneep elk ervan tot langwerpigheid ineen en trok, terwijl ik de beide koele, harde, maar wat de huid betrof perzikachtige aanvoelende vruchten stevig omklemd hield, met forse kracht haar bovenlichaam voorover naar mij toe. De duidelijke gewaarwording, dat ik dit weerloze, schuldeloos speelse wezen dat nog bijna een kind was, hierbij hevig pijn deed, deed mij, als in dronkenschap, enkele ogenblikken duizelen." Since there is no official translation of *Een Circusjongen* I translated the passage myself.
[xxiii] K. Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004, p. 199-200.