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# Feminism and the Abomination of Violence

Jacqueline Rose

## Abstract

One of the foremost tasks of feminism is the exposure of, and struggle against, violence toward women. In the twenty-first century this violence shows no sign of decreasing. In this essay the author argues that because the discourse on violence has tended to be appropriated by radical feminist thinking—violence is not only, but also *exclusively*, what men do to women—the question of violence, as part of psychic reality, has become something that feminism repudiates. Continuing her ongoing engagement with psychoanalysis and feminism, she explores two women thinkers who placed violence at the core of their life's work—Hannah Arendt and Melanie Klein—both of whom track the complex relation between violence in the world and in the mind. How might their understanding of violence be theorized for modern feminism?

When I was working on Sylvia Plath more than twenty years ago, I discovered that, almost simultaneously, the distinguished critic and biographer Diane Middlebrook was working on Anne Sexton. Upon completion of our books—we shared at least one train ride on our way to readings across England—we were both in a state of not only exhilaration but also shock. Both poets had required us—a requirement each of us experienced as an exclusive, personal, invitation—to immerse ourselves in what it meant to suffer as a woman in the 1950s and early 1960s. But they did so with such vigor and riotousness as to deprive us of, or at least exceed, the most obvious narrative of subordination that you might expect such suffering to evoke. Sexton and Plath were angry—they had a lot to be angry about. But in both cases, the anger did not block, as it so easily can, the complex internal reckoning that as women they conducted with themselves.<sup>1</sup>

If this central reality united our projects and fueled our respect and love for the two poets, it also overrode what was the most striking discrepancy between our experiences in writing our books. At every turn, I (like so many Plath scholars) had been obstructed by the Plath estate, Olwyn and then Ted Hughes, who hated my book, and insisted it was a biography, which it wasn't.<sup>2</sup> They felt I had transgressed the boundary between literary criticism and life story, a life story whose true version they knew themselves, without reserve, to be in sole possession of. Diane's problem was the opposite. If anything the Sexton estate had been too cooperative, flooding her with what today we call "too much information," whether in the form of the release by Sexton's analyst of the tapes she made after her sessions at his instruction to prevent her obliterating them from her mind or in the revelations by Sexton's daughter, pressed on Diane, of being intimately invaded by her mother.

If that moment has stayed with me, it is because of the ethical dilemma we both faced. Neither Sexton nor Plath lived to see the birth of second-wave feminism. It is tempting, and not wholly inappropriate, to think that if they had enjoyed the advantage of feminist insight and solidarity they might both have been alive today. Certainly, their anguish as women was rooted in the perils of domesticity and child-rearing, which would become the target of that wave of feminism's opening and loudest complaint and for which they were among the first to craft the poetic language, to give it voice. But that was not all. Sexton was an emotional hurricane. At the center of that hurricane there is a tale of domestic abuse—by her father, possibly by her beloved aunt, later of her own daughter. As this story migrates across genders and generations, there is no neat version to be told. It swallows up too many people, regurgitates through Sexton's life and writing (such regurgitation is of course recognized today as the hallmark of abuse). Plath, for her part, felt herself trapped by a desire that drowned her in its intensity and left her stranded on the

far shore of a domestic ideal that was a travesty of her own fierce and expansive imaginative reach.

What we shared was our respect for the psychic risks that being a poet allowed both these women to take, together with the conviction that the energy with which they did so is more important than the fact of their deaths. “What I most want to know about women in the past” is not, therefore, as Catherine MacKinnon puts it in an article first published in 1992, “how did she die?” but rather, “how did she live?” (2006a, 28). And I also want that question to be able to gather on its journey whatever it may find, however messy and unexpected, on its path. Central to what follows is the proposition that feminism has nothing to gain by seeing women solely or predominantly as the victims of their histories.

If I quote MacKinnon it is not just because she represents a viewpoint from which I dissent nor because I know there are many feminist scholars who draw productively from her work. It is also because, as she has most loudly and consistently alerted us, the times we live in oblige any feminist to reckon with the increasing, or certainly increasingly visible, violence against women that we seem to be witnessing today. In March 2014, Gayatri Spivak gave the Juliet Mitchell Lecture in Cambridge on rape as both a—if not *the*—crime of identity and as the “indestructible unconditionality” of the human: “We are,” she stated, “male and female—raped into humanity.” “This is,” she stated, “the human condition.”<sup>3</sup> This did not, of course, stop her from naming rape as the crime against women which it mostly is. Feminism today cannot *not* talk about such crimes, whether rape as a war crime, fgm, or domestic abuse. To pluck just one out of a barrage of recent statistics and reports, a survey of forty-two thousand women across twenty-eight EU member states released in March 2014 found violence against women to be an extensive human rights abuse throughout Europe, with one in three women reporting some form

of physical or sexual abuse since the age of fifteen and the UK reporting the joint fifth highest incidence of physical and sexual violence.<sup>4</sup> Most of that violence is carried out by a current or former partner with nearly one in four women in relationships reporting partner abuse.

Disturbingly, the incidence of abuse does not seem to decline with a rise in equality. Violence against women in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, each praised for their gender equality, outstrips the UK rate. Central to the problem is that domestic abuse is one of the least-reported crimes.<sup>5</sup> The statistics are therefore, as always, misleading, in the case of such abuse perhaps even more so than usual. In discussion of these reports, we hear little of the obstacles that litter the path between sexual violation, indeed between all sexuality, and language (where it is not just a matter of finding the courage to speak)—compounded of course by the institutionalized refusal of those in positions of authority to listen.

Domestic abuse is not the worst, but I do not want to list all the forms of global violence against women as it is one feminist tactic to do. Feminism is not served by turning violence into a litany, as if the only way to make us think about such violence is by verbally driving it home, rubbing it in our face, as one might say. When we look at the picture of a woman who died on 9/11, the first and only feminist question should not, to my mind, be—MacKinnon again—“who hurt her before?” (2006a, 28); nor, when we look at the bones of a woman from an ancient civilization, do I want us to see her, and them, as, inevitably, broken. Such a strategy does not help us to think. It is a central argument of this essay that violence against women is a crime of the deepest thoughtlessness. It is a sign that the mind has brutally blocked itself. The best way, I argue, for feminism to counter violence against women is to speak of, to stay and reckon with, the extraordinary, often painful, and mostly overlooked, range of what the human mind is capable of. The title of this essay is “Feminism and the Abomination of Violence.” Violence for

me is part of the psyche. A crime to be detested and cast off but also something that one feminism, in the very force of that gesture—however necessary, however right at one level—then itself repudiates, renders unthinkable, shuns beyond the remit of the human (precisely abominates). At that moment, feminism finds itself replicating that part of the mind that cannot tolerate its own complexity. It thereby becomes complicit with the psychic processes that lead to the enactment of violence itself. For me it then becomes crushing—or to put it more crassly, cuts off its nose to spite its face.

I take my idea of thoughtlessness from Hannah Arendt, to whom—along with Melanie Klein—I appeal here as offering a new way of thinking about violence against women in our time. Following and anticipating Sexton and Plath, both Arendt and Klein suggest that there is something about the process of human thought that is often insufferable, not least because thinking acts as a break on the fantasy that the world is there to be mastered and thereby prevents that dangerous fantasy from doing untold damage by running amuck or away with itself. For Arendt, violence is a form of radical self-deceit—or “the impotence of bigness,” to use her phrase—that punishes the world, punishes women we can say, for the limitations of human power (the gender implications of her phrase “impotence of bigness” are surely glaring even if she does not fully draw them out herself) (1972, 34). “What I propose, therefore, is very simple,” she writes at the beginning of *The Human Condition*, “it is nothing more than to think about what we are doing” (1958, 5). As often with Arendt, such simplicity is deceptive. Thinking as process has to be fought for. It is threatened from all sides, by modern pseudoknowledge which leaves us at the mercy of every gadget that is technically possible “however murderous it is,” and by the muteness of sheer violence: “Only sheer violence,” she writes, “is mute” (6). For Arendt, therefore, the mind is under siege, and thinking is the only restraint against murderous know-how

and the cruel silence of sheer violence which mutes both itself and its victims.

Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* in the 1950s (it was published in 1958)—the moment, of course, of Sexton and Plath—when the power of death-dealing technology had reached new heights: from industrial genocide to the atom bomb. “The technical development of the implements of violence,” she writes in her later 1970 study *On Violence*, “has now reached a point where no political goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict” (1970a, 3). The “suicidal” development of modern weapons involves “a massive intrusion of criminal violence into politics” (14). Behind this analysis is her indictment of the myth of “progress” which the United States, where she arrived as a refugee from Nazism in the 1930s, believed itself to embody beyond any other nation (today’s version would be Hillary Clinton describing the United States as the “indispensable nation,” which of course sanctions any worldwide intervention the United States wishes to make). For Arendt, “progress” is a ruthless illusion, a self-fulfilling prophecy, which leaves itself no escape clause other than the increasingly violent enactment of itself. Or to put it another way, so-called progress leads directly to the burnt bodies of Vietnam.

Arendt is not, to put it mildly, most famous for her contribution to feminism, any more indeed than Melanie Klein, on which more later, although the case for Arendt’s contribution to feminism has been made strongly by scholars such as Seyla Benhabib and Mary Dietz, whose readings are the starting points for mine.<sup>6</sup> But there is an important gender dimension to her work (and, as I argue, to Klein’s). It is there in that “impotent bigness”—a phrase to which I will return. But, almost despite herself, Arendt can be seen as the forerunner of one feminist analysis that traces women’s subordination, and the violence that is so often its consequence, first and foremost to the division of labor in—or rather consignment of women *to*—the home. Arendt’s

political ideal is the Greek city space of the polis. Indeed, so invested is she in the Athenian model of democracy that she has often been accused of overlooking (or worse, reinforcing) the status of women and slaves on whose bodies and backs it built itself. But Arendt makes it clear that if the home and family life are prepolitical, it is because, she writes, they are the place “where the household head ruled with uncontested despotic powers” (1958, 27). It is because the *paterfamilias* rules with such absolute power in the household that it remains outside the domain of politics: “Even the power of the tyrant was less great, less ‘perfect’ than the power with which the *paterfamilias*, the *dominus*, ruled over the household of slaves and family” (27).

The consequence is violence in the home. Freedom belonged exclusively in the political realm, whereas the household was the place of necessity—read the base environment of creaturely life (or “housework,” as we call it today)—that must be mastered for man to be free. Out of this forced discrimination, violence surely follows. Because, in Greek thought, “all human beings are subject to necessity,” Arendt explains, “they are entitled to violence towards others” (1958, 31). Violence then becomes the “pre-political act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of the world” (31). That is why to be a slave means, not just loss of freedom, but being subject to man-made violence. And this is also why there is no real sexual division of labor—nothing one could even grace with the epithet of “separate spheres”—since such a notion relies on an at least formal assumption of equality between man and women, whereas no such assumption existed. Women and slaves—Arendt is surely hardly condoning the equation—stand in, and for, the place where the necessity of the world is subject to brute mastery. While the ancient household head might of course exert a milder or harsher rule, he knows “neither law nor justice” (34). Or to put it another way, it is because women and slaves are called on to redeem the frailty of human, bodily, life—what Judith Butler would call



“precarious life”—that they are the objects, in fact they *must be* the objects, of violence.

The key word is “mastery.” It is for Arendt, in the world and in the heart, a delusion. Thus when she goes on to make her famous distinction between violence and power that is at the center of *On Violence*, what matters is that a government will have recourse to violence in direct proportion to a decline in its authority and power, a decline that violence is desperate to redress (violence is always desperate). “Rule by sheer violence,” she writes, “comes about when power is being lost” (1970a, 53). State violence, we could say, is the last resort of the criminal (as we have seen so cruelly in the crackdown on the streets of Egypt, post-Tahrir Square, and throughout the world). When a state “starts to devour its own children,” Arendt observes, “power has disappeared completely” (think Syria) (55). “We know or should know,” she insists, “that every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence—if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands . . . have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it” (87). And she observes: “Impotence breeds violence and psychologically this is quite true” (54).

Arendt’s distinction between violence and power is important in relation to a feminism that wishes to align violence with male power of which it then becomes the inevitable expression (which makes female power, as MacKinnon once famously put it, “a contradiction in terms” [1988, 53]). Instead, Arendt allows us to see such an equation as the lie that violence *perpetuates about itself*, since it will do anything—destroy women and the world—rather than admit that its power is uncertain. Women then become the scapegoats for man’s unconscious knowledge of his own human, which means shared—that is, *shared with women*—frailty (“The Frailty of Human Affairs” is the title of one section of *The Human Condition*). Such frailty takes us to the darkest corridors of life and of the mind, to “the realm of birth and death” that must be excluded from the

public realm because “it harbors the things hidden from human eyes and impenetrable to human knowledge. Impenetrable because man does not know where he comes from when he is born and where he goes where he dies” (1958, 62–63). Or to put it another way, violence is man’s response to the fraudulence of his power and the limits of his knowledge. “Impotent bigness” indeed, as we might say.

In her constant return to what cannot be mastered or fully known by the mind, Arendt, as I read her, is—perilously or brilliantly depending on your viewpoint—skirting the domain of psychoanalysis for which her stated antipathy is well known. But it is very hard not to read her account of things impenetrable to the human mind as having much in common with the Freudian concept of the unconscious that signals—over and above the sexual debris of its contents—the limits of man’s cognizance of the world and of himself. In Arendt’s account such limits strike the body politic as much as they do the human heart. This is her vocabulary for both these realms: “boundlessness,” “unpredictability,” and “the darkness of the human heart” (1958, 244, 191). We live, she states, in an “ocean of uncertainty,” against which there is no redress (1958, 244). It is the human condition. Men are fundamentally unreliable since they “can never guarantee who they will be tomorrow” (244). And how, she asks, can you see or foretell the consequences of an act “within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act” (244)? To be part of the body politic means relinquishing your control over the future—yours and that of the other who is your equal, *because* they are your equal. Man’s “inability to rely upon himself or have complete faith in himself,” which, she insists, “is the same thing,” is “the price human beings pay for freedom” (244). While “the impossibility of remaining unique master of what they do”—read subordinating another to your power—“is the price they pay for plurality and reality” (244). If Arendt describes such open, equal, participation in the unpredictable reality of

the world as a “joy” (her word), she has also laid out with stunning clarity the unwelcome nature of her own insight and, hence, the lengths men will go to deny that insight and subordinate the world, in which I include women, to his purpose.

In *The Life of the Mind*, which was Arendt’s last work, she takes this further. Now thinking appears even more clearly as the other side of false mastery and knowledge. This is why, for example, Arendt insists that the correct translation of Kant’s *Verstand* is not “understanding” but “intellect” or “cognition,” because it represents the “desire to know,” as distinct from *Vernunft*, which arises from the “urgent need to think” (1978, 1:57). “To expect truth to come from thinking,” she writes, “signifies that we mistake the need to think with the urge to know,” a need “that can never be assuaged” (1:61, 1:55). Both are anguished but one in the service of hammering the world into place, the other by its own interminable process, which has no end on which it can brand its name. Only intellect or cognition believes it can answer the unanswerable questions—that it can seize the world in its mental coil. Philosophers of this persuasion, she tells us, are “like children trying to catch smoke by closing their hands” (1:122).

Against this false and futile knowing, Arendt places, even more strikingly in this last meditation, a thinking ego that moves among “invisible” essences, that is strictly speaking “nowhere,” “homeless in an emphatic sense,” which led, she suggests, to the early rise of “cosmopolitanism” amongst philosophers (1978, 1:199). Way ahead of her time, Arendt calls up her answer to the violence of the times in the terms—homeless, nowhere, cosmopolitan—that will be so central to the literary and cultural theory that will follow, although rarely acknowledge, her. And in doing so, she shows these terms seized from the history of the refugee and the exile—homeless, nowhere—the stateless, as we might say, whose predicament had been her own and which she did so much to articulate and dignify. True thought, then, is a form of

memory that exerts no dominion, ousts no one from their own space, because it remembers that it is or once was radically homeless. We could not be further from the despotic ruler of the Athenian household who dispenses violence to his women and slaves because it is in the remit of his own power, or rather because it is the only way he can struggle to exert control over the debasing, corporal, necessities of life. Nor from the modern-day state that turns to violence in order to shore up a power that has lost all legitimacy. Arendt's life of the mind does not, then, point to some realm of abstract contemplation—her plea for thought is the child of its time.

Perhaps then we should not be surprised, although I admit that I was, to find Arendt slowly inching her way to the world of the dream—the “royal road to the unconscious,” as Freud called it (till the end of his life, he saw *The Interpretation of Dreams* as his most important book). Whatever the achievements of the thinking ego, it will, Arendt writes, never be able to “convince itself that anything actually exists and that life, human life, is more than a dream” (1978, 1:198). To illustrate this suspicion—among the most characteristic of Asian philosophy—she then selects the Taoist story of Chuang Tzu who dreamt he was a butterfly only to wake not to the unerring sureness of who he really was but to the realization that perhaps he was a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tzu (the same example used by Jacques Lacan to evoke the vanishing of the human subject in relation to the unconscious [Arendt 1978, 1:198; Lacan 2004, 76]). But Arendt (being Arendt) does not of course leave it there. The dream returns—in the conclusion to *The Life of the Mind*—as the great equalizer in the shape of the king who dreams he is an artisan (since his quotient of life in that moment is no different from the poor artisan who dreams he is king) (Arendt 1978, 2:150). Moreover, she writes, since “one frequently dreams that he is dreaming” (she is citing Pascal's critique of Descartes), “nothing can guarantee that what we call our life is not wholly a dream from which we shall awaken in death”

(2:150). The personal resonance of such moments in this, her last, uncompleted, book, is surely striking. Arendt is exploring and relinquishing her own powers.

Something is creeping back into Arendt's writing. Remember the Greek citizen who mingled freely in the polis on condition of ruling with a rod of iron in his home. Remember too that, if women had to be subdued, it was because women were required to subdue in turn, and on his behalf, the messy, bodily frailties of life, the realm of birth and death that "harbors the things hidden from human eyes and impenetrable to human knowledge." What seems, therefore, to be happening here is that this banished domain of the Greco-Roman dispensation is, in this final work, taking vengeance on the murderous technocratic know-how of the modern world, as slowly but surely it beats a path back into modernity as its only hope. I think we are talking about the return of the repressed. The options are stark. Violence or the dark, shadowy, innermost recesses of the hearth and heart where all knowing comes to grief. Violence or the world of the dream.

Cue Melanie Klein. But before leaving Arendt for Klein, there is a crucial link to be made to Rosa Luxemburg, for whom Arendt's enthusiasm knew no limits. There is the deepest and fully acknowledged debt. In all the works by Arendt I have been discussing so far, spontaneity—Luxemburg's central concept and another humble reminder of the unpredictable reality of the world—is a repeated refrain.<sup>7</sup> But there is one moment when Arendt evokes Luxemburg that is of particular value for what I am trying to evoke here. She is talking about love. In its highest manifestation, Arendt writes, the willing ego pronounces, "*Amo: Volo ut sis*," meaning "I love you; I want you to be." Not, she goes on, "I want to have you," or "I want to rule you" (1978, 2:136). Love without tyranny. Compare this free-wheeling, uncontrolling version of love with Rosa Luxemburg. "Blessed are those without passion," she wrote to her last lover, Hans

Diefenbach—a relationship conducted by correspondence from prison—“if that means they would never claw like a panther at the happiness and freedom of others.” Then she qualifies: “That has nothing to do with passion. . . . I possess enough of it to set a prairie on fire, and still hold sacred the freedom and the simple wishes of other people” (qtd. in Ettinger 1986, 213). True passion stakes no claim. Like democracy, it does not own, control, or master the other. It lets the other be. With Luxemburg, you barely have to scratch the surface. We are talking about sexual politics.

In the middle of World War II, the pioneering psychoanalyst Melanie Klein finds herself with an unexpected opportunity—to analyze a ten-year-old boy over what they both know in advance will be the restricted time frame of four months. She takes notes after every session—several verbatim—and then collects them into one of the first full-length accounts of what her editor Elliott Jacques describes in his foreword to the published volume as a “total analysis” (5). The fact that this is only made possible by the conditions of the war—evacuation from London—a war which will color the analysis at every turn, is seen not as an obstacle but as the core of the process. Richard’s distress is multilayered and overdetermined. This in itself demonstrates the futility of trying to locate childhood anxiety either inside the mind or outside in the world (as if one precluded the other). He is an avid follower of the war—reads three newspapers a day, listens to all the news on the wireless, and threatens suicide at the fall of Crete if Britain should be defeated. But his fear of Hitler is overlaid—driven, perhaps, we do not have to decide—certainly matched, by his fear of his father. The two are inseparable. And what he fears most from his father is what he is doing, or capable of doing, to his mother.

“Just now he had spoken of the terrible things the Austrian Hitler did to the Austrians. By

this he meant that Hitler was in a way ill-treating his own people, including Mrs K., just as the bad Daddy would ill-treat Mummy” (Klein, 22). Or again: “Mrs K. interpreted R’s desire for peace and order in the family, his giving way to Daddy’s and Paul’s authority, as a means of restraining his jealousy and hatred. This meant there would be no Hitler-Daddy, and Mummy would not be turned into the ‘pig-sty’ Mummy, for she would not be injured and bombed by the bad father” (194). Hitler-Daddy. Klein’s interpretations are famously blunt, some would say coercive. But this very bluntness, I would like to suggest, has served to obscure something that is also staring us in the face. “Ill-treat,” “injure,” “bomb”; Mummy as a “pig-sty” for the garbage of the world and of the heart. Like Arendt, Klein is not best renowned as a feminist thinker. Nonetheless, when she looks into Richard’s fantasy world, what she sees there—what she urges him to see—is a scene of domestic violence. At one point Richard asks obsessively and solicitously about the number of Klein’s other, especially child, patients. Interpreting this as the rivalry and fear of displacement it clearly is, she then also suggests that perhaps he wishes Mrs. Klein to have child patients in the same way as he wanted Mummy to have babies: because, I quote, “*they were less dangerous than men*” (347, emphasis added).

It is central to one radical feminist argument that the world of war and peace are no different. For MacKinnon, the 1990s assault on Bosnian women and their resistance to it challenges “the lines between genocide and war and, ultimately, between war and peace” (2006b, 2). The significance of September 11, which she describes as an “exemplary day of male violence,” is that the number of people killed in the twin towers on that day was almost identical to the number of women murdered by men, mostly their male partners, in the United States over the average year (2006c, 260–61). MacKinnon is rightly challenging the indifference of national and international law toward violence against women compared with the military response to the

attacks of 9/11. Although when she asks, “Do these women not count as casualties in some war? Will the Marines not land for them?” (2006c, 272), I take my leave. To my mind the last thing feminists should be calling for is the U.S. Marines landing anywhere in the world any more than they do, mostly disastrously, already (although the advent of the drone today means that soldiers do not exactly land in the same way).

But what is never discussed in this argument, which assumes a perfect fit or continuity between manhood and a violence of which it becomes the supreme and deadly fulfillment, is the terrain in which men, and before them boys, do psychic battle. Crucially, in Klein’s account, that terrain is not free of violence. It is drenched in it. She is the arch theorist of psychic violence, more specifically of matricide, as Julia Kristeva points out in her study of Klein.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Richard, the line between war and peace is indeed thin to the point of breaking. To differentiate them is his most urgent task. It is the work to be done. Richard’s challenge, we might say, is to resist the pull of the most deadly masculine identifications the world has on offer. Were that not an available option for him, indeed for men more generally, then feminism would surely be on a hiding to nothing, it would be on a losing battle—forever. If the child is father to the man, then, Melanie Klein’s life’s work suggests, what that means is always, urgently and painfully, up for grabs. There is always still everything to play for.

If there is a profound link here for me to the ideas of Hannah Arendt, it comes through the category of thought. Richard is a boy who “knows his blows” (a slip of the tongue as fateful as it is wondrous) (Klein, 34). Goebbels and Ribbentrop become especially intense objects of hatred when they dare to say that Britain was the aggressor in the war. In this flagrant act of projection, they are way behind Richard himself, since the whole of his analysis is an inner negotiation with the violence that he feels himself capable of. He knows his blows. Remember



that lying was the target of some of Arendt's fiercest political critiques ("Lying in Politics," which gave rise to her idea of impotent bigness, was the title of her 1972 critique of the Vietnam War). Lying is, as we know, the collateral damage of warfare whose first casualty is truth. Klein is providing the psychic backdrop to Arendt's protest against the corruption and deceptions of political life, which are if anything more flagrant today. In Richard's narrative, lying is a form of self-harm, an act of blinding that then becomes the trigger for increasing violence against the other. When Klein suggests that Richard's moral outrage at Ribbentrop's lies might be due to the fact that he too is capable of aggression, I read her as saying that the one who deceives himself on such matters becomes his own—although by no means only his own—worst enemy. Lying drives aggression in deeper, leaving it no outlet finally other than the destruction of everything that litters its path (Hitler-Daddy assaulting pig-sty Mummy). When Klein offers this interpretation, Richard remains silent, "obviously thinking over the interpretation and then smiled." When she asks him why he had smiled, "he answered that it was because he liked thinking" (25). This does not mean that he mentally submits to her or lacks his own psychic freedom: "How," he insists at one moment, "can you really know what I think?" (111).

For psychoanalysis, thinking is not of course exactly thinking as it is most commonly understood. Returning to Arendt's insistence on the Kantian difference between the "urge to know" and the "need to think," we could say that psychoanalysis pitches its tent firmly on the side of the latter. Unconscious thinking does not know its own ends. Epistemophilia, as the strongest impulse of the infant, was a term introduced by Klein into the psychoanalytic lexicon. We yearn to know (*Sehnsucht*, or "yearning," was Rosa Luxemburg's favorite word). Driven by sexual curiosity, the infant is pitched into a dark, shadowy world where she or he will struggle to find a place and that she or he cannot fully control, an "ocean of uncertainty," as Arendt might

say. Such control would be as murderous as it is phony. It is the violent solution of the bad father who lashes out at the mother as a way of getting rid of what he cannot bear to countenance in himself.

In this sense, Melanie Klein can be seen as the silent psychoanalytic partner of Hannah Arendt. Klein, we might say, is giving flesh and blood to the “passions of the hearth” outlawed from the polis by the Greek city-state. And for Klein, as for Arendt, what is at issue is once again what we might call “impotent bigness.” “Richard’s love was genuine,” she comments, “when his predominant attitude was to protect me against the bad father, or when he himself felt persecuted by the internal father and expected protection from me”—that is, when Richard refuses the invitation to identify with the violent father in his head (426). “He became artificial and insincere,” she continues, “*when he felt he possessed the powerful penis with which he could ally himself in a hostile and dangerous way against me*” (426). Only a boy who relinquishes the fantasy of the powerful penis will stop himself from attacking the mother. Ceding his omnipotence at the very moment he is most compelled by it is the only path to a viable masculinity—calling the bluff on impotent bigness, as we might say. Certainly it is the only way that this young boy, on the verge of puberty, can behave toward his woman analyst like a gentleman. Or to put it another way, violence against women is the boy’s deepest wish and worst fantasy. But if he knows this, can give it thought, then it becomes a fantasy he is less likely to act on.

If Klein is key to this discussion, it is because she is sentient of just how high the stakes are, how treacherous the ground on which she moves. She is dealing with psychotic anxiety in which she believes all human subjects have their share. The greatest anxiety that afflicts the infant is that she or he has destroyed the object; a fear that she distinguishes crucially from the

anxiety that she or he might do so (which at least leaves open the possibility that you and the world might survive). On such finely graded psychic distinctions the health of her patients relies. Hitler-Daddy goes on killing because he has nothing left to lose. For Klein, to skirt this perilous domain in the analytic encounter is, therefore, a sop to a world in denial (the lies of Ribbentrop). The implications for her practice—what made her and still I think makes her so controversial—resides in this. It was also at the heart of her famous dispute with Anna Freud.<sup>9</sup> In an extended footnote to the twenty-first session with Richard, she explains why she goes so far and why she believes it makes her patients better:

It is in fact striking that very painful interpretations—and I am particularly thinking of the interpretations referring to death and to dead internalised objects, which is a psychotic anxiety—could have the effect of reviving hope and making the patient feel more alive. My explanation for this would be that bringing a very deep anxiety nearer to consciousness, in itself produces relief. But I also believe that the very fact that the analysis gets into contact with deep-lying unconscious anxieties gives the patient a feeling of being understood and therefore revives hope. I have often met in adult patients the strong desire to have been analysed as a child. This was not only because of the obvious advantages of child analysis, but in retrospect the deep longing for having one's unconscious understood had come to the fore. Very understanding and sympathetic parents—and that can also apply to other people—are in contact with the child's unconscious, but there is still a difference between this and the understanding of the unconscious implied in psycho-analysis. (Klein, 100n)

In such moments, Klein is making a plea—one I would wish to endorse—for a more psychoanalytically attuned world.

So, in what, then, might the renewal of hope consist (which must be the only question)? At the end of a treatment whose long-term effects Klein is not in a position to predict, Richard begins to feel compassion for his enemies. We are on the last page: “He no longer felt impelled to turn away from destroyed objects but could experience compassion for them. . . . Richard, who so strongly hated the enemies threatening Britain's existence became capable of feeling compassion for a destroyed enemy” (Klein, 466). This too is a political as much as a psychic point. Before we dismiss it as unrealistic or sentimental (or both), we might remember that had

the Allies felt sympathy for, and been less punitive towards, a defeated Germany after the First World War, we might not have witnessed the Second.

In her important essay on brotherhood and the law of war, Juliet Mitchell suggests there is an irreconcilable contradiction in how women are viewed in war.<sup>10</sup> They are both the defeated and protected—in double jeopardy, as we might say. Rape as a war crime would then belong at the opposite psychic pole to what Richard arrives at here. No compassion. Probably no recognition of what you have done. Certainly no place for your own dead objects inside your head. Instead, the enemy you have defeated has to be destroyed and degraded over and over again. On this, for me, Klein's bombed, damaged, pig-sty Mummy and Arendt's thoughtlessness belong together. Klein was no social commentator, but she has described a world that repeatedly condemns itself to violence and where women pay the price for men's self-blinding repudiation of the life of the mind.

To return, finally, to literary writing, which is where this essay began. Not to Plath and Sexton but to two modern-day women writers who I think bring what women can do with words, disturbingly, into its next phase, into our time where violence against women seems to have been raised to a new pitch. First Temsula Ao, then the Irish writer Eimear McBride, who shot to fame in 2014 with her UK Orange prize-winning novel, *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* (after her novel had languished unpublished for nine years).

Ao is Nagalese. She comes from that part of India that received the brunt of the newly independent's nation drive to crush anything that might tar the image of national unity in which it so needed to believe and project to the outside world. In fact, the Naga rebellion predated independence, as the Naga National Council was formed in 1946. The violence in Nagaland is

not widely known. It is perhaps because Gandhi had stated that, after struggling for freedom, of course India would respect the desire for independence of any of its peoples, that the state then struck with such viciousness against the secessionist Nagalese.<sup>11</sup>

Ao entitles her collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. She means it. She does not spare her reader. Neither of my two writers spare their readers—indeed not sparing the reader is the point, so this final turn to literature is not intended as a soft landing. As Ao states in her preface—“Lest we forget”—her aim is to probe how the atrocities of that era have “restructured or even ‘revolutionised’ the Naga psyche” (x).<sup>12</sup> Government forces would enter the villages with the intention to degrade, humiliate, and maim. In one story—“The Last Song”—a young girl, Apenyo, who starts singing almost from birth and becomes the lead soprano of her school, renowned across the land, carries on singing as a government soldier yanks her off to the local church where he and his fellow soldiers rape both her and her distraught mother and then kill them (Apenyo’s song then echoes through the village for years as “one more Naga village weeps for her ravaged and ruined children” [33]).

The story I briefly focus on here is “An Old Man Remembers.” It is for me one of the most courageous stories of the collection: first, for so boldly entering the life of a man’s mind, and second, for what it finds there. Sashi is a man who has been part of the Nagalese resistance, although what he remembers is not a heroic struggle but a moment of violence which has haunted him ever since. The story is therefore a countermyth. It is also a talking cure. His aging body is racked with pain at least partly, the story suggests, because he cannot bring himself to tell the grandson who so lovingly tends him the truth about the war. “‘Grandfather, is it true,’ the little boy asks him, ‘that you and grandfather Imli killed many people when you were in the jungle?’” (92). He is completely thrown, has never spoken about his jungle days: “It was as

though that phase of his life was consigned to a dark place in his heart and would be buried with him when his time came. But now the question of a disturbed child stirred old spectres and left him speechless for a long time” (92). He has been hurled a question “from the other side of history” (93). When Sashi starts speaking, it is “like the massive gush of a waterfall which now threatened to drown both storyteller and listener” (97).

What matters is not so much the main incident he remembers and that brutally conveys “how youngsters like Imli and him were transformed into what they became in the jungle” (96). More crucial is the fact that the morning after, the young Sashi and Imli decide anxiously and hesitantly to go back to see what they had done in the night (they, and the reader, have to look at the one they have destroyed). Facing your own violence therefore provides the core of the story as well as its narrative frame. As the grandfather tells this story, he starts to weep. The young boy is baffled—“after all, they were enemy soldiers, weren’t they?” (108). Why would you weep for your enemy? “Once in a lifetime,” the grandfather says to the boy, “one ought to face the truth” (108). To portray the Nagalese resistance as the agents rather than the victims of violence goes against the grain of how this community, with more than slight justification, views itself—although for Temsula Ao, the future of her world depends on its doing so. “And the earth continued to be” are the last words of the story (113).

Finally, Eimear McBride. Commentaries have rightly focused on the form of the writing, above all on the shortness of the sentences, and the absence of the comma—although that is not quite accurate. There are commas, but they are used very sparingly and to dramatic effect. But the overall effect is of a voice starting and stopping, choking almost on its own breath, as in these now famous opening lines:

For you. You’ll soon. You’ll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she’ll wear your say.  
Mammy, me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I’d say. I’d say that’s what you did. Then lay you down.

They cut your round. Wait and hour and day. (3)

The fact that we are, as we soon discover, inside the womb simply adds to the suffocating effect. This is a voice—the only and unnamed voice in McBride’s novel—repeatedly halted in its tracks (a kind of breathlessness that places writing on the border between life and death). The break-up of language and the more-or-less dismemberment of the woman’s body are inseparable (the language manages to be as unrestrained and freewheeling as it is broken and clipped). It a story of sexual abuse—by the uncle, and then, as we are later told, of the mother by her own father: “Lie across each other’s beds we tell each other sorts of things. It makes us such close friends. No bits pieces left unsaid. And truth now tell the truth we say. Her father felt her up. It makes her red and cry. Daddy still loves her the best but he wouldn’t want anyone else to try. That is love” (95). Abuse passes down the generations. Think back through the grandfathers, as, perverting Woolf, one might say.

At the opposite pole from trauma as unspeakable, which is one fashionable account of trauma, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* is traumatized speech with no exit. “Out my mouth like a mad thing raving clawing out my eyes” (162). As a reader you are given no cover. You have nowhere else to go other than the narrator’s head. Her brother is dying—she has known this since before she was born (inside the womb, where the novel begins). As a child, she is slapped, rammed, bruised, and bloodied by her mother, who she also describes as her “close friend” (95). Her uncle rapes her as a thirteen year old girl. She responds with a form of crazed promiscuity that allows men, including the uncle, repeatedly to tear her to shreds. This is modernism as slut walk, language as a type of syncopated abuse—the constant line breakage as the literary form for injury or self-harm (as Anne Enright put it in her review of the book, “You can almost hear the blows in the rhythm of the words” [2013]). To take just one example—it is also a rare sentence

with commas: “I met a man. I met a man. I let him throw me round the bed. And smoked, me, spliffs and choked my neck until I said I was dead” (96). The fact that this can also be read as a nursery rhyme simply intensifies the violence.

To take one moment from very near the end of the novel, her beloved brother has just died. She walks out on the pious mourning party of the gathered relatives and heads for the woods where she knows—she seeks it out—she will meet with a violent sexual encounter, one of a trail that have run through the novel but which, in terms of what it does to her, and to the language of the text, makes everything that has preceded it seem—almost—harmless. This passage, which is not the worst of it, comes after the encounter itself when, you could almost say, she is collecting herself:

I lie thisright place for me with my fingers ripped onthebody Mine is Lie in the ground faceWhere I right for meyes. Think about your face. Something. Shush now. Right now. FulllofslimeThere better now. And I am. Done with this done. Fill the air up. Smear the blood up is there any no no t reeeelly. My work is. I’ve done my I should do. I’ve done the this time really well. And best of. It was the best of. How. Ready now. I’m screaming in the blackness. Scream up until I’m done my body. Full of nothing. Full of dirt the. I am. My I can. There there breath that. Where is your face off somewhere. Where am I lay down this tool. I fall I felled. I banged my face head I think. Time for somewhere. Isgoing home. (194)<sup>13</sup>

None of the first reviews and critics of this novel dwelled on the sexual violence at its core.<sup>14</sup> The moment will lead—more or less—to her drowning, which is how the novel ends. But note two things about this passage. First, the “you”—as almost constantly throughout the text—is her brother (from before her own birth till after his own death): “Think about your face.” The destruction of herself is therefore her loving return to him and a form of care: “There there.” This, incidentally, is why to describe this text as all interior monologue is not quite right. She is nearly always somehow speaking to him. Second, the narrator goes out looking for the violent encounter and knows where to find it. As well as everything else it monstrously is, it is also her achievement: “My work is. I’ve done my I should do. I’ve done this time really well. And best of



it. It was the best of.” Crucially, therefore, she is her own agent. Violence is sought. As well as being viciously what men do to her, it is a component of her grief. None of this mitigates anything; the protest against violence is not lessened but intensified. For me, the genius of McBride’s novel is that she can get all of this onto the same page or line or word, into the strangulated syntax of her prose.

*A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* takes us back to where this essay started: to violence against women as the hallmark of the modern world. If McBride plunges us into the worst—and I have not conveyed the half of it—she also, like Sexton, like Plath, gives us a voice that brilliantly orchestrates its own sorrow and rage. The fight-back is in the words, in what a mind (the life of the mind, no less) can do with its own history. Along with the necessary fight for public and legal recognition of violence against women today, this continues to be, as I see it, one of women’s best weapons against cruelty and injustice. As feminists, we do not have—should not be asked—to choose between the two, at least not in the world I want to live in.

**Jacqueline Rose**, critic, novelist, and theorist, is professor of humanities at the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, University of London. She writes widely about feminism, politics, psychoanalysis, and violence, and is internationally known for her work on literature, including authors such as Sylvia Plath and Marcel Proust, and urgent political issues such as the ideology of Zionism and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Among her many books are *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1986), *States of Fantasy* (1996), and *Women in Dark Times* (2014).

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## Notes

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- 1 See Middlebrook.
- 2 For an account of these disputes, see Rose 2003.
- 3 Subsequently printed as Spivak 2015.
- 4 See European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights; Campbell.
- 5 See Martison.
- 6 See Benhabib; Dietz.
- 7 See Arendt 1970b; Rose 2014.
- 8 See Kristeva; Jacobs.
- 9 See Rose 1993.

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10 See Mitchell.

11 See Luithui and Haskar.

12 My thanks to Akshi Singh for bringing Ao to my attention.

13 In the lecture this passage was not read by me but projected on a screen for the audience to read inside their heads.

14 For a fuller discussion of critical responses to the novel, including an account of the lecture in which I first discussed McBride—"Modernism: The Unfinished Legacy," delivered at the British Association for Modernist Studies (BAMS) on June 26, 2014—see Collard.