OUT OF CONTROL: DESIRE AS A NARRATIVE OF VIOLENCE IN KRISTEN ROUPENIAN'S *YOU KNOW YOU WANT THIS*

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Abstract
This paper aims to explore the intersections of desire and violence as they operate across the narratives of Kristen Roupenian's 2019 short story collection, You Know You Want This. The narrative field is a space for the exploration of repressed feelings, forbidden desires, extents of stress unsustainable in daily life, and the private conflicts of individuals constrained by social respectability. As such, Roupenian's tales set out to follow not only characters with desires that would be considered exploitative and objectionable, but also speculates upon the spectacle of indulging in these desires and the ramifications of the violence involved in their fulfillment. To trace these dynamics of suppression and objectification in their route to cathartic conclusions, this paper shall draw upon theories and concepts from psychoanalytic practice, cultural theory and sociology, employing their lenses to measure and chart the play of tensions that Roupenian constructs in order to supply her narratives with an affective momentum.
***Keywords**: kristen roupenian, desire, violence, repression, narrative.*

Introduction: Touch and Taste

In a meditation upon the semiotics of love, the eminent literary theorist Roland Barthes writes, "Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire." (73). This tactile rendering of desire as a series of embodied signs that furnish a fantasy's sensual force is borne out in a narrative form across Kristen Roupenian's 2019 collection of short stories, *You Know You Want This*. An American writer whose work employs elements of horror and thrillers in order to investigate themes of desire, guilt, alienation and the power dynamics of individuals in romantic relationships (Brockes, *The Guardian*), Roupenian's stories delve into the currents that flow below the skin of language, a subconscious dimension of the body and its roles that lays bare the desires and drives concealed and corralled by the dynamics of respectability. This negative space is explored through fictional forays into the depths of subjectivity, as characters mull over their repressed fantasies, and necessarily leads the narrative to explore the dynamics of objectification, as the desiring subject yearns to incorporate into the trajectory of their needs a climactic destination, a linguistic skin to touch and (con) figuratively overwrite. Contact thus opens possibilities of control and closes off the potential for alterity, becoming a form of textual violence insofar as the polyvocality of characters is folded into the silence of the monologic perspective, of the protagonist who subsumes all positions toward their catharsis. It is this point and process of transformation, wherein desire becomes and begets a narrative of violence, that this article endeavours to trace across Roupenian's collection, focusing in particular upon the stories "Bad Boy" and "Biter", the libidinal fabulation of which shall be explored through the lenses of psychoanalytic and sociological literary criticism.

Investigations of the link between desire and violence in academic literature, especially from

literary and cultural standpoints, focus upon how these seemingly oppositional dynamics stem from similar psychic and social sources, namely an inability to accommodate two distinct narratives and subjectivities at once. The philosopher René Girard employs the Greek concept of *mimesis* to explain how violence is at once inherited and yet contests for its entitlements, arguing: "Violence is not originary; it is a by-product of mimetic rivalry. Violence is mimetic rivalry itself becoming violent as the antagonists who desire the same object keep thwarting each other and desiring the object all the more. Violence is supremely mimetic." (13). Driven by an image of fulfillment that is often incommensurate with the scarcities and contradictions of reality, the violent desirer must employ force to resolve paradoxes, breaking antagonists into supporting characters or even simply objects that furnish their journey toward *mimesis*' famous cousin, *catharsis*. Such a forceful journey towards climax necessarily evokes images of brutal penetration, of an imagined void that one both carves out of another being and fills with images of oneself, an assisted masturbation to link *id* and *ego* in consumption-consummation- as the literary critic Leo Bersani notes, "There is perhaps an even more fundamental violence intrinsic to all desire by virtue of the lack without which desire is inconceivable. I want to consider a melodramatic, perhaps mad, sexual version of the devastations of reality to which the emptiness of desire invites the desiring imagination." (12). The affective power of the reaction generated by blending ardent yearning with total domination is at the core of Roupenian's transgressive appeal, reflecting the perspectives of Deleuze and Guattari on the violent productivity of desire- "Itrepresents nothing, but it produces. It means nothing, but it works. Desiremakes its entry with the general collapse of the question "What does itmean?"" (119). With these three guiding concepts in mind, namely *mimesis*, lack and drives-beyond-meaning, we shall proceed to chart the narrative trajectory of Roupenian's volatile compositions.

Bad Boy: Unfamiliar Adoptions

The first piece in the collection, "Bad Boy", centers on a couple that is housing a friend after his breakup with a toxic partner, a charitable arrangement that grows fraught with desire and manipulation after the couple invites him to watch and eventually participate in their sexual activities- "We made up rules about what he could and couldn't do, what he could and couldn't touch. [...] We were tyrants; we got most of our pleasure from making the rules and changing them and seeing him respond." (Roupenian 14). Narrated exclusively in the first-person plural, "we", the couple is presented not as a social construct negotiated between two distinct partners, but rather a psychic collective, a living force woven from a multiplicity of minds, the weight and volume of which steadily overwhelms the individuality of the friend and thus incorporates him into a hierarchical cluster of orders and services where he has a precise place to belong, a function to perform that is changeable in its exact details, but constant in the flow of demands. Driven by a sense of abandonment and neglect by his ex-girlfriend- "Withholding sex had been one of the manipulative strategies of the terrible girlfriend" (12), the friend finds in the couple a set of sexual partners that not only desire him, but also dictate the terms of the desiring beyond negotiation, leaving no room for his opinions, and accordingly no room for his performance in this dynamic to be judged as a consensual contribution that could then be subject to success or failure. In a society where relationships are predicated upon dense cycles and rituals of meeting, judgment, negotiation, adaptation and maintenance, he enjoys the primal pleasure of operating as an object, a toy with which others satisfy themselves, a void of personality beyond innocence

or guilt. In short, as the title of the story suggests, he is transformed into a child, a "boy" rather than an adult man, suspended in a parodic and fetishistic *mimesis* of a nuclear family dynamic wherein the dependent child's autonomy is dominated by his parents in every regard, upto and including his sexual behaviour, a reversal of the incest prohibition that makes the prohibition itself the source of incest- "We made him a schedule, sliced it up into finer and finer increments, until he was sleeping,eating, pissing, only when we told him to. It seems cruel, laid out like that, and maybe it was,but he gave in without complaint, and for a while, he flourished under our care." (15)

Roupenian clearly separates this erotic order from more established forms of alternative sexual lifestyles, whose participants organize them "respectably, with housemeetings and safe words and polyamorous meet-ups" (15), defying linear metaphors to suspend the narrative in a flux of conflicting forces that challenge and discomfit conventional sensibilities. In keeping with cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek's observation that "desire's *raison d'être*[...] is not to realize its goal, to find fullsatisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire." (39), the couple realizes, "We loved it, his eagerness to please, and then, slowly, it started to get under our skin.Sexually, it was frustrating, his unerring instinct toward obedience; once we settled into thisnew pattern there was none of the friction or uncertainty of that first dizzying night." (15). To subordinate the friend completely would represent the culmination of their adventure, the emptiness of total victory, for if the child is perfectly compliant, then the function of the parents and accordingly the thrill of the incestuous-dominant fantasy is eroded. The erotic charge of their arrangement relies upon the friction produced by symbolically castrating an adult man into a "boy", and the stronger the man, the greater his disobedience, the further the appeal of his subordination- as such, the friend must not only be a "boy", but a "bad boy"- bad because he tends to rebellion, and a boy because he can be brought back in line. The fantasy therefore progresses dialectically in alternations of transgression and suppression, of mutiny and fealty, arriving at its narrative pinnacle when the friend is revealed to have been cheating on the couple with his ex-girlfriend, the ultimate taboo as he threatens to return to the identity they have so systematically stripped him of.

Until this point, the narrative has only featured two characters, the couple functionally acting as one, which represent the desiring subject who deploys violence, and the friend serving as the second, representing the object on which violent desire is predicated. The ex-girlfriend is the first third party that may truly destabilize their connection, an outsider much in the same way that the friend was before fully joining the couple, but the reader has already seen how the couple deals with outsiders, and the lurid spectacle of the friend discovered in bed with a lover is both the narrative and the couple's *pièce de résistance*, a chance to relive their originary thrill and surpass it besides. The latent violence of the hierarchy turns horrifically actual as the couple command the friend to complete the sexual act with his nonconsenting, terrified ex-girlfriend, an order he cannot turn down, operating at once as a mimetic extension of their control, visited now upon the objectified girlfriend, and yet also then an object that is one with the girlfriend, a breathing exhibition for the pleasure of the gazing couple, whose authority is now so immense as to transcend the need for touch: "By the time we told him to stop, her eyes were bluemarbles, and her dried lips had pulled high up over her teeth. [...] We kissed him, and we wrappedhis arms around her and we pressed his face to her face. Bad boy, we said softly as we left

him.Look at what you've done." (17). In his seminal work upon the attitudes of the consumption-driven leisure class, Thorstein Veblen states that "The servant or wife should not only perform certain offices and show a servile disposition, but it is quite as imperative that they should show an acquired facility in the tactics of subservience—a trained conformity to the canons of effectual and conspicuous subservience." (44), an observation borne out by the boy's final act of service, for he has been objectified beyond even the passive acceptance of violence enacted upon him by the couple and now become an object *through* which violence is performed upon others, an active agent who moulds not only himself, but the lives of others to the demands of his masters' desires. As such, "Bad Boy" is a narrative that represents the trajectory by which mimetic desire moves from a dynamics of *lack* toward the production of violence, a process of creation that Roupenian harnesses to generate the *catharsis* of her narratives.

Biter: Economies of Eating

We turn next to "Biter", which follows Ellie, an office worker who has harboured since infancy a fixation upon biting people, tormented by vivid fantasies of hunting, overcoming and consuming an ideally unprepared target- "For while the world had succeeded in shaming Ellie out of biting, it couldn't make herforget the joy [...]" (Roupenian 131). A symbol *par excellence* for themes of violent desire, the fantasy of biting supplies its own cathartic narrative, tracing a trajectory from identification to stalking, from the thrill of the chase to the rapture of capture, that magic moment where the subjectivity of a desired other is transmuted into objectification, their life becoming quite literally a resource for the fulfilment of the hunter. As with the story studied prior, Roupenian is conscientious in delineating this desire from any that might easily lend itself to a sexual reading and thus be safely abstracted or categorized into a compendium of paraphilias, specifying of the subject of Ellie's desires- "Corey Allen was beautiful and fey.Ellie didn't want to have sex with Corey Allen. Ellie wanted to bite him, hard." (132). While a parallel may still be drawn via imageries of penetration and the dynamics of animal attraction, the explicit textual demarcation of Ellie's desires as non-sexual, wherein sex is associated with pleasure, reciprocity, connection and an involvement of both partners, necessarily leads to the conclusion that Ellie's desires involve none of these things- what she wants is too violent and too socially transgressive to be termed 'sex', but it is a want all the same, and all the more vivid for its incomprehensible and meaning-destroying nature. While "Bad Boy" centered upon the idea of yielding to desire and how far this ego-death might reach, a suspension of disbelief for an exploration into fantasy, "Biter" is composed in a more realistic mode, as the consequences of giving in to her violent temptations hang like a sword over Ellie's imagination: "Her entire existence, she sometimes felt, was premised on the idea that pursuingpleasure was less important than avoiding pain." (132).

Repression is the driving mechanism of this story, and accordingly renders the tension between fantasy and frustration all the more potent, given that a single indulgence could cancel out all constraints and permanently position Ellie in the realm of the abject *other*, and is yet so simple, so natural, and so easy to engage in that it would bring the narrative to a close at once. Attempts to redirect or formalize her restraint- "whenever she found herself in a situationwhere she could have bitten him, and didn't, she awarded herself a point. [...] When she reached tenpoints, she took herself out for ice cream, and while she ate, she allowed herself to fantasizeabout biting Corey Allen to her heart's content." (134) only serve to heighten the temptation, and are as

incapable of pushing back her desire as they are of reversing the progress of the tale on a narratological level, wherein every negation nonetheless contributes to the total dramatic mass of the production as it awaits conversion into kinetic energy, echoing the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel's observation that "If the disappearance of the original aim fromconsciousness is called repression, every sublimation is a repression (a"successful" one: through the new type of discharge, the old one hasbecome superfluous)." (137). Unable to break the fixation entirely, Ellie must attempt to achieve 'within' the setting of the story what the author disavows on the metanarrative layers 'outside' it, namely the framing of her desires within a permissible social framework wherein the biting may be forgiven, concealed, justified or otherwise diverted from the realm of the deviant into a more extenuating context- "if a woman bit a man in an office environment,there would be a strong assumption that the man had done something to deserve it [...] as a young white woman without a criminal record,Ellie probably had at least one get-out-of-jail-free card." (133).

The suppressive counterbalance that prevents the euphoric uncoiling of Ellie's desire is weighted by shame and fear, the notion that Ellie's needs render her unmistakeably different- an assumption that Roupenian innovatively overturns when Corey Allen, object of her desires, attempts to sexually harass Ellie at a party. In this, he reveals himself to be similar to her in a sense, insofar as he too harbours desires that he is willing to violently achieve via an incursion of the object's agency, and as such becomes fair play for his very foulness, two negatives into a positive. Awakening to the fact that society is dense with violent desirers, Ellie reformulates the central question along the lines of practicality rather than morality- not *should I do this* but rather *how can I get away with this*?- an inquiry that Allen provides a neat resolution to, since her biting of him is justified by the staff as an act of self-defence and poetic retribution- "Corey left, and Elliedidn't even get a letter in her file; in fact, she ended up with many more friends in the officethan she'd had before." (136). Reflecting the transgressive writer Angela Carter's view that "Flesh has specific orifices to contain the prick thatpenetrates it but meat's relation to the knife is more randomand a thrust anywhere will do." (139), the eating of flesh functions not as an originary act of violence, but rather just one among the innumerable cruelties inflicted across society- a violence that is more neutral and perhaps even liberatory in comparison to the customary atrocities that women are subjected to by men. Ellie's biting does not impede upon sacrosanct bodies, but reconfigures them along new patterns, a violence of productivity driven by the power of imaginative desire- "there was one in every office: theman everyone whispered about. All she had to do was listen, and wait, and give him anOpportunity, and, soon enough, he would find her." (136)

Conclusion: Beauty and Terror

In a novel about the agonies and ardours of making art, Virginia Woolf writes, ""Beauty was not everything. Beauty had this penalty — it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life — froze it." (273). It is precisely the pursuit of such devastating scintillations that drives the short fiction of Kristen Roupenian, delving into those regions of the psyche wound most tightly and exploring what happens when their profound pressures are released upon the malleable bodies of their conquests, a moment of transformative completion that splashes the results of the subject-object collision across the page in ink, that most fertile of bloodstains. In analysing her work, a reader is led to appreciate the value of beauties that can freeze us in place, compelling us to consider the mechanics of desire and the price that must be

taken and paid, both by authors of fiction and the subjects of society, in the course of their fulfillment.

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