Destabilized Security in Mérimée's Short Stories

Marianne Seidler-Golding

Violence in literature is not only found in the depiction of anger, blood, and death but also in less obvious areas of the text. And if it is true that there is a great deal of explicit violence in Mérimée's short stories, there is also, in a rather subtle way, an implicit type of violence derived not from the actions in the text but from the way in which the actions are depicted. The implicit and explicit violence in Mérimée's tales are complementary and necessary.

Theophil Spoerri remarks that "all his tales reek of blood and, at the decisive moment, reach their outcome in death." He goes on to say that "even when in later stories ... he diverted the conclusion to a happy ending ... a nightmarish atmosphere still remains ... primitive passion, the vendetta, the sadism of the werewolf, gypsy loves and gypsy hates, belied in fatality—these are the driving urges in the best tales" (8). Spoerri refers to the violence of the events represented that belongs to the action of the story and that will be referred to as diegetic to distinguish it from another type that is a result of narrative strategy, if not the strategy itself, and that Ross Chambers calls narrative violence. Indeed, no matter how atrocious some of the events told in Mérimée's work, it seems that it is not the violence of the actions and characters of his short stories alone that creates the atmosphere of his work, but also the violence embedded in the narrative itself.

Ross Chambers's article "Violence du récit: Boccace, Mérimée, Cortazar" discusses the violence born from having to sacrifice one of the two interpretations suggested in *The Venus of Ille*, when making one's final choice as reader. He mentions only one of the possible ways a text can assault his reader and does so using René Girard's analysis of violence and sacrifice. Though Chambers is right in comparing narrative violence to the violence discussed by Girard, he doesn't comment on the most relevant comparisons pertaining to the notion of positive and negative violence, the former being that which brings peace by putting an end to violence, and the latter that which propagates violence, generally through

acts of revenge. The notion of positive and negative violence will be analyzed in the last part of this paper.

There can be no textual violence, whether diegetic or narrative, if it is not perceived as such by the reader. Wolfgang Iser has dedicated most of his work to reader response, and he has developed a strong theory about what it is that makes the reader react. His analysis authorizes the concluding statements on the effects of narrative violence found in this article. Chambers's very broad definition of narrative violence will serve as a starting point for this study: he describes it as "the way in which a narration imposes itself" (159-60). The key word is "impose." Whether it is supposed to emphasize the notion of text as a compulsory application or as something made to prevail by force, as some dictionary definitions suggest, the same idea exists in both cases that the text is being forced upon the reader. It must be added that narrative violence is characterized by its ability to make the reader uncomfortable , to violate his/her expectations toward the text. In short, narrative violence is destabilized security.

The reader's sense of security can be destabilized in more than one way. When the language used to write a tale doesn't correspond to the situation being depicted, or when the reader's reaction to what is being told diverges drastically from that of the characters involved, the reader feels assaulted, unsatisfied, off balance. What better illustration of this phenomenon than *Mateo Falcone* ? It is the story of a young boy of ten, Fortunato, who soils his father's name by betraying a man in exchange for a gold watch. Mateo, the father, learning of his son's betrayal, picks up his gun and takes Fortunato to a ravine where the ground is soft and easy to dig:

> Mateo loaded his rifle and took aim.
> "May god forgive you! he said.
> The boy made a frantic effort to get up and clasp his father's knees, but he had no time.
> Mateo fired, and Fortunato fell stone dead.
> Without throwing a single glance at the body, Mateo went back to his house to fetch a spade with which to bury his son. He had only returned a little way along the path when he met Giuseppa (his wife), who had run out alarmed by the sound of firing.
> "What have you done?" she cried.
> "Justice!"

> "Where is he?"
> "In the ravine; I'm going to bury him. He died a Christian. I shall have mass sung for him. Let someone tell my son-in-law Tiodoro Bianchi to come and live with us." (24)

These are the story's concluding words.

It is difficult not to be appalled by the coldness with which Mateo executes his son and immediately thereafter arranges his replacement in the Falcone home by another male, one of his sons-in-law. It is also difficult not to be horrified by the gap between the atrocity of the events taking place and the manner in which they are told. That gap leads to another: one that separates the way Mateo seems to feel from the way the reader feels. The reader expects a somewhat different reaction from the father, which would translate into a more sensitive account of the facts by the narrator. The narrator, however, shows no more emotion than Mateo. James F. Hamilton has noticed that:

> The usual reaction of shock and horror clashes with the refusal of emotion by Mateo following the execution of his son, Fortunato, at the end of the story. This disparity creates a malaise on the part of the contemporary reader. (52)

But what is it that enables us to expect a certain tone or a certain language, a tone or language that differs from that found in the text? And what makes us react and think: this tone or this language is not appropriate for the situation? What is it that makes us feel assaulted by the text? Wolfgang Iser, one of the founders of Reader Response Criticism, has argued that:

> ... expectations arise from the fact that the reader has a repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes, together with familiar social and historical contexts. Technique and strategies are used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar. (288)

In our example, the father's lack of emotion goes against our social and emotional expectations and background.

Though not brought up by Chambers, this type of violence is also narrative. Narrative violence is provoked, in this text, by the imposition of an unsettling ending and of an uncanny behavior. The colder the father's reaction, the warmer and deeper the reader's

sympathy for the child. The reader is assaulted in his sensitivity by the text and fights back by taking sides with the boy. But to no avail. The text imposes itself on the reader and offers him no choice of accepting or rejecting the situation, and even less of a choice as to whether he might have misunderstood what actually took place. Indeed, both the situation and the language that express it are very clear and leave no room for doubt. Rereading the text only verifies that assertion rather than help find new elements that might somewhat soften the blow. Both the situation and the language are like shots fired at the reader, just as Mateo fires shots at anyone who gets in his way (one might recall that before shooting his son, he had killed a man who had hopes of marrying Giuseppa). The language used is sharp, concise and direct.

While *Mateo Falcone* assaults its reader with its blow-like and unsettling nature, quite the opposite is true of the *The Venus of Ille* whose theme, one could go so far as to say, is precisely indeterminacy—to use Roman Ingarden's expression—or undecidability. Indeterminacy in literature stems from the fact that literary texts "cannot be fully identified either with the real objects of the outside world or with the experiences of the reader" (Iser 9). From this definition of indeterminacy, it is obvious that all texts are subject to it. However, some texts play with the notion more than do others. Where *Mateo Falcone* leaves no room for interpretive doubt, *The Venus of Ille* does all in its power to maintain a feeling of uncertainty by offering not one, but several meanings to its story. One might think that having a choice as to how to create a story would purge any kind of violence from the text. But an analysis of *The Venus of Ille* will show that this is not necessarily the case.

Alphonse is to wed a rich and beautiful young woman. On his wedding day, the young man comes to the rescue of the villagers, who are involved in game of *pelota* against a team of mule drivers from out of town. In order to perform at his best, he takes off the ring destined for his fiancée and places it on the finger of a bronze Venus discovered on his father's property. After the game, he attempts to retrieve it from the Venus's finger but finds that he cannot. On the day following the vows of the young woman and Alphonse, the groom is found crushed to death in his bed; the ring is on the floor by his side.

At no point in the story is it explicitly stated that the Venus committed the murder of young Alphonse, and yet at the same

time, it is suggested every time an allusion is made to the Venus's human traits or behavior. The great quality of *The Venus of Ille* is its use of indecidability, the way it presents multifaceted events. For every situation, the text offers both a rational and a supernatural explanation, creating doubt in the reader's mind as to what he or she should actually believe.[1] This doubt is present throughout the text. We are first made aware of it when the narrator, an archeologist from Paris, and his host, Alphonse's father, cannot agree on the significance of the Latin inscription found on the Venus (CAVE AMANTEM). These words can mean one of two things: either "beware of him who loves thee, mistrust thy lovers" or "beware if she loves thee."

The plurality of meaning leads to a linguistic battle, the importance of which is not apparent until the end of the tale, with Alphonse's death that can be seen as occupying simultaneously two strategic loci in the mystery to be untangled: it can serve as the solution to the linguistic battle and mystery if one believes that the statue is the culprit, for in that case, it is clear which of the two interpretations is the valid one: "beware if she loves you." In the second case, Alphonse's death is the root of the mystery, rather than its solution, for if the statue is not held responsible for the crime, another culprit must be found (whether it be the Spaniard or someone else), and the linguistic indecision becomes an issue of no importance at all. The readers who favor the first interpretation, that which favors the statue's guilt, will also, in every event depicted, pick the supernatural explanation over the rational, as does the Parisian narrator.

The opening scene describes the discovery of the statue by Jean Coll, a workman employed by M. de Peyrehorade. This event is told by the guide who is driving the protagonist from the train station where he has met him to the home of Monsieur de Peyrehorade. The guide explains that Jean Coll found the Venus as he was digging in the ground. Jean Coll accidentally hit it with a pickax. As a result, the statue fell on the man and broke his leg. One can read what happened as an accident, or one may see it as the purposeful revenge of Venus. A few pages further, the rock that a young rascal had thrown at the Venus is flung back with full force in the boy's face. This can be explained as a simple ricochet, or can be recognized as the vengeful action of the statue. A feeling of uncertainty emerges for the third time as Alphonse tells the Pari-

sian that the ring on the statue's finger cannot be removed. Is it the Venus's doing, or is it simply the way the fingers of the statue are bent? It is written in the story that"... her right hand ... was bent, with the palm inward, the thumb and two fingers extended, whilst the others were slightly curved" (240). The narrator, whom the ring incident has left unsure and uneasy, recalls how drunk Alphonse was when he tried to take the ring back. He had also remarked on the size of Alphonse's hands, which would suggest their possible clumsiness. And so, in finding a perfectly rational explanation for Alphonse's inability to retrieve the ring, he reassures himself and forgets about the incident—temporarily, at any rate. But he is reminded of it the next morning, when the body of the groom is found lifeless in his bedroom, with the ring on the floor by his bedside.

Suspicion falls immediately on the Spaniard who was at the head of the losing team in the game of *pelota*, for he had good reason to resent Alphonse for his arrogance after his victory. The narrator "would have preferred M. Alphonse to be more modest" and he describes the Spaniard's reaction in these terms: "The Spanish giant felt the insult keenly; I saw him go pale under his tanned skin. He looked miserably at his racket and ground his teeth; then, in a choking voice he said: 'Me lo pagaras.'" ('You will pay me for it'). However, no sufficient proof can be found to arrest him, especially as he has an excellent alibi: "[T]he innkeeper with whom he lodged averred that he had spent the whole of that night in rubbing and doctoring one of his sick mules" (273). Nonetheless, the suspicion that had fallen on the Spaniard may have been dismissed too easily, for, as Anthony E. Pilkington remarks, the reasons for which he is released are not necessarily valid, or even satisfactory:

> The Spaniard who falls under suspicion is disculpated at least by the fact that his shoes are larger than the footprints. The narrator in reporting this fails to connect the difference in size with his own earlier observation that the heavy rain had so soaked the earth that it could not have possibly preserved a clear imprint of a footmark. The implication which arises when the reader connects the two facts, as the narrator fails to, would be that the effect of the heavy rain would make any footprints smaller by blurring their outline in the wet ground. (28)

In the same way, Pilkington plays the devil's advocate when he analyzes the statement of the young widow after her husband's death:

> It is reported that she saw her husband 'in the arms of a green-looking giant who was strangling him with all his might' and that she recognized in this figure the bronze Venus. Her description of what she saw immediately suggests to the reader ... the narrator's earlier description of the Spaniard defeated at pelota by Alphonse: a 'Spanish giant' striking in that 'his olive skin was almost as deep a tint as the bronze of the Venus'. (ibid.)

What matters is not to rule in one way or another but to recognize the possibility, everywhere present in *The Venus of Ille*, of a double reading. Each episode offers two options: that of the rational, and that of the supernatural.

It is Chambers's argument that choosing one of the interpretations results from an act of exclusion: one must reject one version when choosing the other. This act of exclusion is one of the reasons that such a strong word as violence is more appropriate in the context of narrative strategies than might appear at first glance. Ross Chambers's use of the expression "narrative violence" can be associated with the idea of sacrifice as defined by René Girard. Referring to a thematic sacrifice (that which chooses one theme or interpretation over another), Chambers writes that, following Girard's teaching, one can see the denouncing trace of an exclusionary violence which constitutes the text (160). He thus creates a parallelism between narrative violence and represented or diegetic violence. Chambers describes performing the act of exclusion as sacrificing the interpretation that has not been chosen.

Chambers's treatment of narrative violence forces us to go back to the idea of real violence analyzed in the works of Girard. Girard observes the existence of two types of violence: one that stems from a state of crisis and is "unjust, illegal, and illegitimate" (*Violence* 23), and the other that is a way of releasing or unburdening what caused it, a violence that Girard calls "holy, legal, and legitimate." He insists that "beneficial violence must be carefully distinguished from harmful violence" (37). Beneficial or positive violence is translated by sacrifice, a pacifying gesture whose object is to prevent the propagation of violence. Only through sacrifice can

the order disrupted by the first act of aggression—the one that makes the sacrifice necessary—be reestablished. Girard attempts, with this explanation, to prove the usefulness and positive qualities of sacrifice.

According to René Girard, negative violence, on the other hand, is that which spreads uncontrollably. The only way to put an end to it is to make a sacrifice. Coming back to our first example, that of *Mateo Falcone*, it must be said that, as horrible as Fortunato's death might appear, it creates a liberating discharge that enables the reestablisment of order. Order is first turned upside down when the child wants the adjutant's watch. That object embodies modernity and the city, which are both in conflict with the maquis and the ancient values (Gans 18). Fortunato's execution is a sacrifice in that its goal is to save the family name and the relationship between Mateo/traditional values and the bandit/traditional values, be it at the risk of breaking communications with the adjutant/city/modernity, all of which are embedded in the watch, symbol of progress and object of envy of a whole modern society. The reestablishment of order does not alleviate the feeling of horror that seizes the reader who experiences intensely the brutal force of the narration.

To speak of a "positive violence" therefore does not imply the existence of a good narrative violence. Is narrative violence's object ever to re-establish a stable situation in a state of crisis? Chambers seems to believe so, since he speaks of the possibility of an exclusionary act performed by the reader at the textual level. If it is indeed true that the reader is given the opportunity to choose between two interpretations, this choice requires an effort on his part; he struggles when confronted with this "narrative powerlessness." In *The Venus of Ille*, the difficulty in choosing or filling in the gaps is felt not only in the conclusion of the story, with the mysterious death of Alphonse, but as we have seen, throughout the text where dualities are continually operating.

There is one flaw, however, in Chambers's analysis: it presupposes the validity of each of the two interpretations, and never brings up a third option that consists of not making a choice between the two, for neither is actually found to be more valid than the other. The genius of *The Venus of Ille* is precisely the fact that it does not allow the reader to choose between the solutions suggested in the text, and for that reason, it enables the reader to

appreciate it more fully. As Roland Barthes states, "to interpret a text is not to give it a meaning (more or less well founded, more or less free), it is on the contrary to appreciate the plural from which it is created" (11, my translation). This does not imply that plurality is reassuring; quite the contrary. It frustrates the reader who does not necessarily accept the possibility of *not* having to choose between the interpretations suggested, of *not* being able to exclude one of the two.

The Venus of Ille does not give us the opportunity to exclude either of its interpretations, for neither can be proven unjustified. Violence might be triggered when one is confronted with a choice to make, but it is also present when that choice is not an option. Although we can be quite comfortable with a text that offers several levels or layers of meaning—the superficial and the deeper levels, for instance, or the comical and the sociological levels—a text that offers meanings that contradict or exclude each other has a drastically different effect on us; our expectations of finding a single conclusion to a text, and therefore a single meaning or several layers of non exclusionary meanings as just discussed, are likely to make us feel frustrated. Chambers, Barthes, and Iser would all agree that there is an uncomfortable feeling associated with the undecidability brought about by some texts. Does that imply that the reader would be more satisfied if the tension due to the narrative could be alleviated and replaced by a more comfortable feeling, one of certainty, one of security? The critics I have just mentioned would most likely agree that the reader would not benefit from such a release of the tension created by the text. Quite the contrary: Iser remarks that the reader's expectations "can be shattered, altered, surpassed or deceived, so the reader is confronted with something unexpected which necessitates readjustment" (Iser 287). But if this happens, the reader gains what H. James called "an enlargement of experience" (qtd. in Iser, 287). Iser sees the reader's frustration as a positive experience, not a detrimental one by any means. Indeed, what could we gain from having our expectations met on a systematic basis? B. Ritchie, whom Iser quotes, reminds us that: "[t]o say merely that 'our expectations are satisfied' is to be guilty of [a] serious ambiguity. ... such a statement seems to deny the obvious fact that much of our enjoyment is derived from surprises, from betrayals of our expectations" (ibid.).

The violence created by the shattering of our expectations—be it a result of language, tone, or plurality of meaning, of inconsistencies, gaps, or unreliability, to name but a few causes of narrative aggression (only two of which we had the space to bring out in this article)—turns out to be a positive violence, in that it forces the reader to react to the text he is reading, and in doing so, to take, along with the author, responsibility for the creation of the text. And so, although the possibility of eliminating tension through sacrifice is nothing but an ephemeral illusion shattered by the constant presence of indeterminacy, and although it is, in the end, only at the diegetic level that order can be restored through sacrifice, the violence found in the narration must not be thought of as negative. Thanks to the narrative violence, the reader is made to take part in the text, even if it only increases his sense of frustration. "It is only the 'safe' text, the 'nice' text which leaves us intact" (Brink 45).

As a conclusion, I would like to suggest that to pick up a work by Mérimée is to voluntarily engage oneself on an path both thorny and unbalancing, and that a (good) reading is perhaps essentially an adventure on which we set off without knowing (or wanting to know) what awaits us.

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Notes

[1] An excellent reading of *The Venus of Ille* by Tobin Siebers can be found in his article entitled "Fantastic Lies: *Lokis* and the Victim of Coincidence." *Kentucky Romance Quaterly* 28 (1981): 87-93.

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Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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