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An Eye for an Eye: Brian Evenson's Merciless Art of Exposure

Jean-Yves Pellegrin

In the afterword to *Altmann's Tongue* (1994), Brian Evenson's first collection of short stories, the author sets out the main project behind his book:

> I became particularly interested in breaking through the clichés that are most frequently applied to violence, masks that make it palatable to movie or television viewers. I wanted instead to depict murder, violence, and absence of human response in a way that allowed the readers, if they were willing to keep their eyes open, to perceive violence not as symbolic, not as meaningful, but as a basic irrecoverable act. (271)

At first sight, the task is a seemingly impossible one. How could literary representation expose violence by stripping it of its aesthetic masks when the artistic medium itself can only process and transform its object? Likewise, how could a text expose its reader to violence when language and its built-in symbolic function can only put the reader at a distance from the depicted object? All representation has a safety to it that goes against the idea of exposure.

Yet Evenson's prose has a way of showing violence in a light that eventually leaves the reader unsheltered from what is exposed on the page, and makes it increasingly difficult for him to keep his eyes open all along. It is certainly no coincidence if a great number of the violent acts performed in *Altmann's Tongue* are cruelty inflicted upon the eye: eyes will be sucked out and spat out, burnt and bashed in, eyelids pried open or sewn shut. The taboo that protects the eyes is overruled, suggesting that here, no eyes, including the reader's, shall be spared.

"A certain narrative blankness": representation as *camera lucida*

Exposing violence, and exposing the reader to violence *through* writing, involves a mode of writing endowed with some kind of transparency; a "colourless writing" perhaps not unlike that Roland Barthes described in *Writing Degree Zero*. To allow its objects to radiate and expose the reader's eye to their brightness, writing must indeed make the resisting medium of language as diaphanous as the invisible presence that allows visibility. If writing could confer such luminous invisibility on prose, if it could discolour it to the point of turning it into an

inert and neutral form, it would be the perfect instrument of exposure, for as Barthes points out, colourless writing "implies no refuge, no secret" (*Writing* 77).

In many respects Evenson's writing strives for transparency – for the pure whiteness of light. It is certainly no coincidence if the first story in *Altmann's Tongue*, "The Father, Unblinking," repeatedly points to the broad daylight bathing its minimalist setting. The "bright day, without clouds" (3), the "shafts of light from the [barn's] roof traps" (3), and the "sunlit half-mile downslope" (5) may all be construed as visual markers of representation's attempt to expose its objects in the clearest of lights. This move towards whiteness or blankness is nowhere more perceptible than in the impersonal mood of most of the stories. Typically, a toneless narrative voice – if it may still be called 'narrative' given the massively descriptive regime of most pieces – a voice utterly bereft of commentary, let alone of judgement, expounds grim facts with detached brutality. Thus:

> He placed his open palms on both sides of her head, covering her ears. He pushed in and held her head still while he moved his face down against hers. He opened her eyelid with his tongue and sucked until the eye popped loose. (169-170)

Even though many descriptions are visually disturbing, the writing itself is not violent but rather measured and controlled. A blend of precision and austere prose, it throws neutral light – what Evenson calls "a certain narrative blankness" (276) – on what it depicts, making textual representation a blank structure of transitivity to the depicted events. Indeed, this detached mode of writing does not introduce distance between the reader and the objects of representation. On the contrary, it keeps the reader's eyes on them, sticking closely to the surfaces of things while the syntax follows their movements, using chronological order as its sole organizing principle. In "The Father, Unblinking," for example, the description of the burial of a corpse in a barn testifies to the ancillary relationship of Evenson's writing to the objects it describes:

> Banging the shovel clean on the side of the hole, he hung it in its proper place. He sprinkled the bottom of the hole with hay, dropping in handfuls. He dug through the hay, pulled out the body, jaundiced now with grain dust. He kneeled, lowered it in, dragged with the shovel blade the dirt back in over it, stamped the grave down, kicked the rest of the dirt around the barn until it was no longer visible.
> He put the shovel away. He left the barn. (7-8)

Deliberately, in segments proportionate to that of the action therein exposed, the sentences go their imperturbable and scrupulous course, bent on modelling their structures on that of the ground what they cover, tracing its surface like some transparent fluid spreading over it and clinging to it. That the sentences should stick to the fabric of the world they describe also suggests that if words appear on the page, it is only to disappear *behind* the images they conjure up. Language, here, is the light *in* which, and the transparent medium *through* which, figures become visible; it is also the neutral support structure of the figures, an *analogon* to the blank page that allows the objects of representation to stand forth.

Evenson's mode of writing may thus be compared to some kind of *camera lucida* as it means to transmit to prose 1) the immediate transitivity of light, 2) the transparency of the camera lens, and 3) the blankness of photographic paper. Intent as it is on clearing out whatever might stand in the way of pure whiteness and prevent full exposure of its objects to light, the prose makes a bid for the "evidential power" (*Camera* 91) of photography. Over and against the vague, slant, or ambiguous perceptions usually favoured by textual representation, Evenson's descriptions do not allow the reader's eyes to seek refuge from the certainty of what they are seeing in the blurred, the indefinite, or the allusive. Defining the narratives' point of view as "an unblinking eye that operate[s] from a point of personal stability" (271), Evenson denies his writing any camera-shake effect; it guarantees the accuracy of vision and the high definition of the images it summons. The effect is enhanced by the way the descriptions isolate their objects from all contexts, forcing the reader to focus his attention on the matter at hand and see it in close-up, as it were. The opening sentence of the story titled "Eye" is a prime example of the extremely short range at which the reader is sometimes compelled to take in the situations he is being exposed to: "He came close enough to her to see the webbed stresses on the surface of her eye spreading out from the minute white pocks of crushed glass" (167). Catching the reader's eye, compelling it to focus on the objects the descriptions exhibit, the text turns the reader himself into a sort of camera eye, thus confirming the photographic quality of the writing. As the title of one of the stories suggests, the words, here, are "bodies of light" which, photon-like, traverse the crystalline lens of the reader's eye to burn persistent images into the exposed retina. Of the persistence of vision this exposure induces, more later. For the time being, suffice it to sample once more the snapshot quality, the unencumbered transitivity, the taken-for-granted referentiality of Evenson's prose images: "He looked up, found her to have emptied the glass. She set it upon the table. The milk-sheen faded from the sides, descended to ring the inner base" (138).

The opacification of transparency: from exposure to overexposure[1]

Considering the affinity of Evenson's writing with photography, it is hardly surprising that the author should have chosen to combine the two media in one of his more recent works, "January," a piece written in collaboration with Los Angeles writer and visual artist Stacy Dacheux, which appeared in *Conjunctions* in 2003. The story recounts a photography session from the photographer-narrator's point of view. The piece alternates a set of twelve close-up portraits of an unidentified sitter with short paragraphs whose basic function is to comment upon the pictures. From the outset, the use of commentary (if taken at face value) suggests a departure from Evenson's neutral mode of writing. Commenting upon his work, the photographer introduces a self-reflexive element into the narrative voice and disrupts its transitivity, implying besides that, despite the transparency of the medium, the snapshots may require clarification.

The first photograph in the series confirms that, for all their evidential power, photography, and the photographic mode of writing are not immune to their own kind of opacity. What the photograph shows on its surface is manifest, all soft focus and other aesthetic veils notwithstanding. It certifies that the model's face was actually there, under the camera's eye, at a given moment. Yet, even if this presence is exposed to view, it remains impenetrable. As Maurice Blanchot points out in *The Book to Come*, "the essence of the image is to be altogether outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and mysterious than the thought of the innermost being" (*Camera*, 106). The observer may well exhaust himself scrutinizing the flat surface of the picture, he can never see through the closed-eyed mask of the sphinx-like model, no matter from what angle he looks at it. The second photograph in the series, adding brighter lighting and frontality to the previous picture, simultaneously highlights the photograph's evidence and further emphasizes its inaccessibility: while exposing itself to the viewer's gaze, the face stands immobile, like an obstacle blocking the gaze – the model's closed eyes mirroring the onlooker's paradoxical blindness, the absent mouth hinting at the snapshot's essential muteness.

Interestingly, as they assert their basic impenetrability over their transparency, the snapshots also display signs of increasing overexposure. Due to the light falling directly on the brow, the upper part of the sitter's face is a blaze of whiteness. In this area where there is literally nothing to see, the picture returns the photographic paper to its original blankness. It surrenders its figural power to the opacity of its medium. Significantly too, the text framing

[1] I am indebted for this analysis to Louis Marin's "Ruptures, Interruptions, Syncopes in Representation and Painting" in *On Representation*, pp. 373-387.

the photographs invites the observer to associate this opacification with violence. The photographer rather laconically informs the reader that the sitter has been compelled to attend the photography session against her will. In the absence of explicit signs of violence in the first two pictures, the opaque blankness becomes the objective correlative, so to speak, of the psychological and physical outrage inflicted on the sitter (an association later confirmed by the extensive use of overexposure in the snapshots showing the contorted face of the sitter as she struggles under the effect of a drug injection administered by the photographer).

The violence signified by overexposure, however, is not simply the violence inflicted on the sitter but also, as the fourth snapshot in the series indicates, violence aimed at the viewer: the clenched fist in the foreground seems ready to throw a punch at the observer – an attack soon confirmed by the photographer's comment: "A moment after the photograph was taken, her fist snapped toward me." But what is meaningful, here, is not so much the suggestion of the blow dealt to the observer as the fact that in the only snapshot showing a glimpse of the sitter's pupil, her gaze should look away. The violence inflicted on the observer coincides with a wilful interruption of communication. Ignoring the viewer's gaze, the averted eye places the observer irretrievably out of the impenetrable picture, forbidding him to go beyond the plane of representation, arresting the gaze in just the same way as the blank surface of the overexposed area. Part of the violence done to the observer then stems from the fact that whatever is exposed to view in the bright light of evidence is also, as Daniel Arasse puts it, "veiled in its own light[2]" (Arasse 207), inflicting irremediable blindness on the viewer. The fifth snapshot in the series, a portrait of the photographer's victim as an overexposed blind figure, her eyes rolled upwards to reveal the opaque whites, ironically reminds the viewer of his own paradoxical fate, his eyes seeing yet unseeing.

Considering this reversal of transparency into opacity in "January," it appears that Evenson's colourless mode of writing in *Altmann's Tongue* aims at creating conditions suitable for overexposure. The pure white light the prose sheds on all its objects conceals just as much as it reveals, leaving the reader "dazed and groping," as Alfonso Lingis suggests in the foreword to the collection (Lingis xii). The toneless narrative voice shares the essence of photography as defined by Blanchot; being altogether outside, without intimacy, it grants the reader no more insight into its non-existent interiority than the platitudinous photograph. In this respect, Evenson's toneless narrative voice is very close to "that neutral, indefinite speech, which is the being of speech," that "it" described by Laurent Jenny (commenting on

[2] « voilée dans sa propre lumière »

Blanchot) in *La Fin de l'intériorité* as "that vacant speech with which nothing can be done[3]" (Jenny 158). Thus, this passage where a father finds his daughter dead, facedown in the mud:

> He squatted over her and turned her up, and she came free with a sucking, the air coming out of her in a sigh, blowing bubbles of mud on her lips. He smeared away the mud from around her mouth. He worked at bending the body straight until the mud on her face dried ashy, then cracked. (3)

Through synesthetic perceptual notations, the depiction compels visualization but gives no hint of the character's feelings – or rather, it rules out the existence of feelings. The transparency of writing foregrounds surfaces and movements at the expense of all depth; it converts the scene into temporal and spatial processes, sequences of material causes and effects, which, it is to be noted, may be indifferently initiated by the living body or the dead corpse, as the description allows no intention, implicit or otherwise, to preside over their unfolding. Such narrative/descriptive passages leave the reader dazed indeed and groping for a way through the sleek and all too bright surface of representation, frustrating each renewed attempt at interaction.

To drive the helpless reader further into the bewildered contemplation of the opacifying light Evenson's stories shed on their objects, the narrative voice aspires to absolute neutrality. This neutral voice is not to be mistaken for an indifferent voice showing no psychological or human response to the situations it describes; it is rather to be understood as a non-human voice making no difference between the things it describes, therefore shedding the same quantity of light on them, and depriving the reader of all contrast sensitivity. In the opening paragraph of "The Father, Unblinking," every object gives out the same brightness in the unclouded daylight:

> He had that day found his daughter dead from what must have been the fever, her swollen eyes stretching her lids open. The day had been a bright day without clouds. He had found his daughter facedown in the sun-thick mosquito-spattered mud, by the back corner, where the dark paint had started taking air underneath and was flaking off the house now and falling apart at a touch like burnt turkey skin. (3)

More than the father, perhaps, it is the narrative voice, if I may, that is "unblinking." Holding up each object in the same light, it endows them all with the same level of luminance. If it

[3] « Cette parole neutre, indistincte, […] la parole désœuvrée dont il ne peut rien être fait. Cette neutralité, ce "cela" ne renvoient plus à aucune intériorité… »

lingers on "the sun-thick mosquito-spattered mud" or "the dark paint [that] had started taking air underneath" and was now "flaking off […] and falling apart at a touch like burnt turkey skin," it is because these darker, dull objects require longer exposure time to achieve the same level of luminance on the retina as the glaring "swollen eyes" staring the reader in the face at the beginning of the passage. Collapsing perspective, and flattening contrast, the narrative voice produces visual overexposure. It exposes the reader to a world utterly devoid of interstitial shades that may allow him to break through the solid surface of light. As the past perfect on which the story opens indicates, what is being exposed here is also, simultaneously, hidden from the reader's view, since the discovery of the corpse is situated from the outset in an inaccessible past before the story, a time outside the narrative frame.

Three insistent and complementary motifs in *Altmann's Tongue* make it clear that overexposure is the overall visual regime of the narratives: 1) the wide-open yet unseeing eye, 2) cloudy whiteness, and 3) blank spaces. Significantly, the first gaze the reader is confronted to in the book is that of the dead daughter, her eyelids stretched open. In "Bodies of Light," another father bends over his dead baby, and "coaxe[s] the pupil of the open eye down from under the rim" (137) with his thumb. In the story called "Eye," a man moves his hand to a woman's closed eyelids and pries them open to reveal a glass eye (167). In "January," the sitter's staring eyes repeatedly appear as pearly white globes without pupils [pictures 5, 6, and 7]. The eye, here, is no longer the Emersonian "Transparent Eyeball" nor the proverbial "window of the soul"; even though it opens wide to give out light and let light in, it remains a veil all the same. The light in the dead and open eye reveals its obscuring power; no longer the invisible condition of possibility of the visible, but the manifest presence of a blank.

This idea is complemented by the motif of the cloudy white. In many stories, whiteness, the transparent colour of light, shows a tendency to thicken, as for instance in "Bodies of Light," a piece whose title alone suggests a densification of whiteness. In a succession of short episodes which see the reader through the darkness of night to clear daylight, a lie is gradually exposed: that of a man hiding the death of their newborn babe from his wife. If the plot and the growing light it throws on the man's dark secret seem to assert the transparency of daylight over and against the obscurity of night, it is, oddly enough, the obsessive and all-pervading image of milk which concentrates all the whiteness of light in the narrative. A thick liquid, milk reverses light's transparent whiteness into opaque whiteness. The idea is almost explicitly stated in a brief notation showing white milk and black coffee side by side: "He entered the kitchen, poured coffee, poured milk" (137). The parallel – perhaps a visual pun on Jacques Audiberti's famous line describing "the secret darkness of

milk[4]" – emphasizes the potentially obscuring power of whiteness and therefore of light itself. Confirming this reversal, it is, unsurprisingly, in broad daylight that the man finally hides from his wife in the last sentence of the text, when his secret is about to be discovered: "He eased open the door, stepped into the light" (139).

Opening out onto the concealing light, the door also opens out onto its closest visual equivalent in the book, the blank space of the page where words fall silent and reading stops. And it takes the reader some time to realize that this terminal blankness has been subliminally present throughout the text – and throughout the book for that matter – in the unobtrusive intervals dividing the narrative continuum into episodes. Those blank spaces, which the reader had first mistaken for some kind of fade-out-and-fade-in transitions playing on the diaphanousness of the medium, now flare into solid white opacities interrupting the text, blocking the view, and literally blinding him. The blinding effect of the blank spaces is particularly well illustrated in "Eye" in the passage quoted earlier, where the man sucks out his victim's glass eye. After a blank space, the narrative voice resumes: "He rolled the eye around on his tongue. He spat the eye out onto the bed. It bounced slightly, rolled a little. Pupil half-down, the eye came to a stop" (169). What is it I see in the clear light of the description? The plucked-out glass eye, of course. The deictic *the* – the instrument of exposure – insists that "*the* eye" can only be the self-same eye as the one I have been compelled to scrutinize all along. Or is it? After yet another blank space, the story proceeds to its conclusion:

> He put his jacket on, removed from his pocket a crumpled plastic ziplock bag. He shook the bag out, smoothed it flat on his palm. (…) He put the eye in the plastic bag. He stuffed it into his jacket pocket. He waved, shrugged, went to the door.
>
> "Ah, what the hell," he said. He went back to the bed. He rummaged through the sheets until he had in his possession the other eye, the false one, as well. (169-170)

Dissimulated in/by the blank space, a substitution has taken place, one the reader – blind in both eyes like the victim – cannot become aware of until the end of the story.

Stasis and exposure time

All things considered, the various modes in which light is opacified in Evenson's stories define overexposure as a breach of the tacit contract of visibility and legibility supposedly

[4] « [L]a secrète noirceur du lait » in « Du côté de Lariboisière », *Race des Hommes*, Paris : NRF, 1937.

inherent in the act of exposure. It reveals that this very act may, in fact, doggedly resist the conversion of whatever it exposes into commodified tokens submitted to the negotiation of their meaning and destined to enter the flow of social, symbolic, or codified exchanges. Whatever is *ex*-posed, somehow, stands *out* and is removed from circulation. This is perhaps the most violent blow Evenson's writing deals to the reader (or to reading), for it is eventually an attack on the system of language itself.

Evenson's colourless mode of writing, as I suggested earlier, reduces all act into fact, which is already a way of doing violence to language, as it challenges its built-in drive towards semantic exchange and circulation. For language is not fact-oriented or object-oriented; language is primarily about usage. It is intent on setting up *between* its objects (its linguistic signs and what they refer to) syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations that allow semantic circulation. The objects exposed by Evenson's prose hinder this process if only because they frustrate the reader's attempt to put them into context, to insert them into relational discourse, to invest them with narrative power, in short, to confer on them some intention or meaning. Moreover, the linguistic and syntactic accuracy of the almost clinical prose further thwarts the reader's efforts to introduce some leeway into language. As Lingis points out, "the extreme precision of trenchant language isolates, cuts away the bed and comfort of allusions and ambiguities" (Lingis xviii). In just the same way as the exposed thing stands frozen under the objectifying gaze, the words and sentences are set rigidly in their exactness.

A similar stasis is also achieved through exposing certain intransitive words which, like solitary monoliths, impose their vertical project on the text. Such erect words cause the syntagmatic flow to break down and render the paradigmatic axis non-functional. In "Eye," the word singled out and exposed in the title is one of these words: the reader is soon invited to question its transparent transitivity as it appears in an enigmatic dialogue at the beginning of the text:

> "Don't look at me like that," she said, from where she was beneath him on the bed.
> "Like what?" he said.
> "My eyes," she said.
> "Eye," he said. (167)

By correcting "My eyes" to the lonely and singular "eye", Evenson returns the word to its original state, a state which, as Barthes points out, is possible only in the dictionary or in

poetry, a state in which "the noun can live without its article" (*Writing* 48). Its conventional connections abolished, the word becomes encyclopaedic. Loaded with all its potential and accreted meanings, ready to cause paradigmatic overload, it threatens to arrest interpretation. And it finally does so when it reappears in an unlikely place a few paragraphs further down:

> He forced his fingers in her mouth, hooking on to her bottom teeth, pulling down until the mouth was wide and her bottom jaw pushed down against her collar bone. He held it there as he looked, and looked.
> "This is one hell of an eye here," he said, and let her jaw free. (168)

The monstrous displacement of the exposed "eye" forces the reader to encounter the word frontally, in its radical decontextualization and deprived of the guide of its selective paradigmatic connections. Paraphrasing Barthes's remark on the word in poetry, I would suggest that the word *eye* in Evenson's story, while increasingly opaque, "shines with infinite freedom," that it "radiates towards innumerable uncertain and possible connections" (*Writing* 47), that it is, therefore, a linguistic equivalent of overexposure, a blank word meant to dazzle the reader, to compel him "to look and look," caught in some time warp, petrified in exposure time, overexposed to the intense radiance of Brian Evenson's prose.

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