

BOOK REVIEW

THE VIOLENCE OF READING: LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY AT THE THRESHOLD OF PAIN

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Dominik Zechner. *The Violence of Reading: Literature and Philosophy at the Threshold of Pain*. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, ix+212 pp. ISBN: 9783031531910

Abstract: This Book Review examines Dominik Zechner's *The Violence of Reading*, a philosophically rigorous exploration of how reading itself becomes a site of violence, pain and linguistic rupture. Drawing on thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Werner Hamacher, Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot and Gilles Deleuze, Zechner destabilizes naïve assumptions of linguistic referentiality and exposes the wound inherent in literary representation. Through close readings of philosophical, literary and rhetorical case studies, the author argues that pain is not merely represented in language but conditions the very possibility of meaning. The book offers an original contribution to literary philosophy, phenomenology and critical theory by rethinking reading as an ethically and affectively charged encounter.

Keywords: *Critical Theory, Linguistic Phenomenology, Masochistic Rhetoric, Pain and Representation, Philosophy of Literature, Referentiality, Violence of Reading.*

Language can function as a medium of educative violence. When meaning is articulated through language, representation itself may become destructive, generating pain in and through the act

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of writing. In this sense, language may be experienced as a language of pain, insofar as it binds textuality and violence together and leaves a lasting, often haunting, imprint on readers. Reading and rereading literary texts can reopen wounds repeatedly—wounds that resist closure or cure. Yet linguistic theory frequently takes the referential function of language for granted, grounding it in subjective experience rather than recognizing it as a phenomenon that structures reality itself. If linguistic representation produces affective pain, the communicative adequacy of language must be questioned. How, then, can one responsibly negotiate the limits of language and its capacity for harm?

Dominik Zechner's *The Violence of Reading: Literature and Philosophy at the Threshold of Pain* consists of six chapters and develops a sustained philosophical inquiry into this question. The study originates in Walter Benjamin's notion of "educative violence," further shaped by Werner Hamacher's reflections in *The Pains of Language*, and crystallized through the author's engagement with the conference on *Other Pains*, which ultimately gave rise to the present volume (vii). Each chapter stands independently while contributing to a unified exploration of reading as a painful yet productive experience. The book examines diverse genres and intellectual traditions through linguistic phenomenology, focusing on linguistic failure as an extreme articulation of pain that exposes the rift between linguistic systems and phenomenal reality. As Zechner clarifies, the central motivation of the book is to destabilize the assumption of transparent reference and to insist not on an ontological but on a philological difference between language and experience (3–4). In this framework, language and pain are not merely associated but fundamentally intertwined. Reading becomes the decisive site where linguistic and phenomenal experience undergo a process of mutual unbinding (5). Zechner argues that misrepresentation arises when language exploits referentiality, distorting the act of reading and transforming interpretation into an irreversible form of wounding (9). Such linguistic violence ensnares readers in destructive interpretive practices, leading not to understanding

but to an inescapable entanglement in misrecognition.

The opening chapters analyse three contemporary case studies: a therapeutic discourse premised on knowing oneself through others, interpretive encounters with *Moby-Dick* that turn self-understanding into self-inflicted injury, and Byung-Chul Han’s poetic figurations that foreground the violence of linguistic abstraction. Across these examples, Zechner demonstrates how readers are compelled to imagine that texts—or others—know them better than they know themselves. This process generates irreparable wounds, as poetic and narrative forms push readers toward destructive identifications that collapse the distinction between representation and lived reality. Reading thus emerges as an allegorical and, at times, masochistic practice within philosophical and literary discourse. The book culminates this analysis with reflections on suicide in contemporary lyrics, reinforcing its broader claim that literary language cannot be reduced to a reliable conduit of subjective truth (29).

Unlike ordinary affective responses to tragic literature, the violence of reading does not end with empathy or emotional resonance. Rather, it confines both reader and author within the prison of relatability and representation, erasing the boundaries between linguistic expression and the empirical act of consuming a text (35). In this process, reading annihilates the conditions necessary for interpretive distance, leaving behind a scene of destruction that implicates all participants. To confront this dilemma, Zechner turns to Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot, arguing that the violence of reading is not accidental but structural. Although theories of reading often resist acknowledging violence, once it is recognized as intrinsic to interpretation, it dominates the entire conceptual field. Attempts to domesticate or contain this violence inevitably fail, as it reasserts itself as the very condition of genuine textual encounter (44). Reading thus unfolds through misrepresentation, displacement and isolation, revealing violence as its constitutive premise.

The subsequent chapters extend this analysis by introducing masochism as a rhetorical configuration within linguistic practice. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s *Présentation de*

Sacher-Masoch (1967), Zechner conceptualizes masochism as a structure organized around promise, persuasion and anticipation (69–72). Through examples such as curriculum design and letter-writing exercises, he shows how masochistic rhetoric distributes violence linguistically. Language here is neither a neutral medium nor a mere vehicle of representation; rather, it is the primary site where power, submission and pain are enacted through rhetorical forms. This argument reaches a critical turn in Zechner's reading of Robert Musil's *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906). Zechner contends that institutional violence derives its authority from an abstract and primordial violence embedded in the very process of formation (129). Engaging thinkers such as Elaine Scarry, Judith Butler, Franz Kafka, Paul de Man and Georg Trakl, he advances the claim that pain does not merely challenge representation but fundamentally conditions its possibility (130). The wound of language—produced by the inevitable gap between words and their referents—becomes the interface between textual corporeality and historical experience. Meaning, therefore, unfolds as an architectural operation situated within historical temporality rather than as a stable, synchronous structure (149–150). The final chapter offers a tentative resolution by reimagining reading not as total annihilation but as survivable rupture. Though wounded, the reader remains capable of movement, encounter and renewal: “I am somehow still alive” (161). Reading, understood architecturally, becomes an act of reconstruction rather than pure devastation.

The Violence of Reading is a philosophically rich and intellectually demanding work that challenges readers to reconsider the ethical and affective dimensions of interpretation. While the book could have further engaged contemporary cultural forms—such as cinema, theatre and ecological narratives—where violent representation shapes collective consciousness, its conceptual depth and originality remain undeniable. Zechner's study is highly recommended to scholars of philosophy, literary theory, rhetoric and critical studies, as well as to readers interested in the unsettling yet transformative power of language and texts.