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“Can only the dead speak?”: Terror, trauma and the witness traveller

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“Try to imagine what a flame looks like from the inside.”

Simon Weston, Guardsman on RFA Sir Galahad during the Falklands War

Rushdie's rhetorical interjection in *Shame* (1983) - “Can only the dead speak?” - highlights a fundamental paradox to be found in the literature of terror: the impossibility, as well as the necessity, of bearing witness to historical truths that lie outside the direct experience of the speaker. It also opens up a space for reading history as a site that compels articulation from those who live outside it. This aggravated sense of displacement underscores the literature of terror, where terror is marked as a separate space of experience (Scarry, 1985: 35; Yaegar, 2002: 49) and where the position of the absolute or primary witness is a space of absence, loss and death. As Elie Wiesel has claimed in his reflection on witness testimonies from Auschwitz, “Those who have lived through the experience will never know; those who have will never tell; not really, not completely ... the past belongs to the dead” (cited in Agamben, 2008: 33).

The distinction between witnessing, as a primary act, and bearing witness, as an act that carries the burden of translation across a boundary, remains a significant one in critical analyses of trauma (for example, Agamben, 2008; Edkins, 2003: 177; Arruti, 2007). In his study of Auschwitz testimonies, Agamben formulates a specific reading for the process of boundary-crossing at the limit experience between life and death: here, this work proposes, witnessing is marked by a “threshold” in which “man passed into non-man” (2008: 47).ⁱ Agamben describes the threshold as “essentially unlocalizable”, a space where violence passes into law and law into violence (1998: 19; 32),ⁱⁱ and gives a privileged place to the experience of witnessing within the event – what could be called the movement into and being *in* terror. In contrast, Felman and Laub have focused on the process of bearing witness, indicating that the purpose of testimony is “*to come out of the other side* – of death, of life, of the limits of belonging, of history as total condemnation” (1992: 117; original emphasis). They describe it as a kind of translation – a word etymologically rooted in the Greek “to bear across” – that “incorporates a passage through death that takes the original off center” (Felman and Laub, 1992: 161) and that, crucially, can render witnesses into “witness-travelers”, a term developed in their reading of the work of Paul Celan, a “witness to catastrophe [who] is in turn a traveler, a witness-traveler whose poetry precisely is researching, through its testimony, the obscure direction and unknown destination of his

journey”. Celan, they note, is an evicted traveller, “one whose journey has originated in the constraint of deportation, in the throes of an *ejection* from his native country” (Felman and Laub, 1992: 25; original emphasis).ⁱⁱⁱ

These critical configurations of bearing witness as a boundary-crossing act invite us to re-evaluate literatures of terror such as Rushdie's, which have been marked by exile and eviction, by ejection from, or displacement within, the native land. If the process of bearing witness involves movement over a threshold into an “unlocalizable” terrain of ethical ambiguity in which the original experience is displaced and decentred, to bear witness to the terror and trauma of political violence invites a reevaluation of politically, socially and culturally inscribed boundaries where questions of belonging, authenticity and legitimacy are foregrounded. Terror literature by exilic writers marks a significant discursive site that allows for the exploration of the ethics, aesthetics and politics of testimonial address. It is a textual space marked by the moral ambiguity and ethical instability that is concomitant with the process of setting oneself up as a witness to events in the absence of an absolute witness; it raises concerns on the right to speak and represent oneself and chosen community, and the vexed question of an audience – who exactly is being addressed - a question that foregrounds the “obscure direction and unknown destination” (Felman and Laub, 1992: 25) of the witness traveller's journey. Here, the anxieties attendant upon the process of bearing witness can be revealed, the guilt attendant on surviving terror can be exposed, and the ethical uncertainty of whose side the witness is speaking for can be explored. Such literature allows for an aesthetic articulation of the ethical, a site where the presence of the secondary witness can be performatively staged. These issues mark the space where the political, the juridical, the discursive and ethical overlap, a space already occupied by the exilic writer.

My engagement with bearing witness draws upon Rushdie's rhetorical question in *Shame*, a question that foregrounds the politics of bearing witness from an exilic perspective, to explore Felman and Laub's reading of the witness traveller in relation to contemporary readings of terror literature by exilic writers. In doing so it follows the hermeneutic logic of boundary-crossing in travelling across a range of literary registers and texts in its consideration of the witness as insider and outsider, a mobile subject who moves across the boundaries of national and cultural affiliation, transgressing the borders of what Judith Butler has described as “the limits of the sayable” which, she argues, operate “to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (2006: xvii; xiv-v). It seeks to mediate some of the concerns that inform Rushdie's narrative interjection, concerns that focalise the issue of the authority and legitimacy of the exilic writer – doubly displaced in Rushdie's case as both a mohajir in Pakistan and an expatriate in England – to speak for and bear witness to

political violence, and the spectral presence of the primary witness who, despite being disappeared from the historical record, nevertheless haunts the text.

This analysis engages with the ethics and aesthetics of bearing witness in an effort to put forward a broad (and inevitably brief and staggered) thesis on literary witnessing in exilic texts. It examines textual fragments by authors as diverse as Joseph Conrad and Ariel Dorfman from a critical perspective situated at the intersection of multiple discourses of terror, trauma and exile. The thesis draws upon the differently angled readings of boundary crossing presented by Agamben and Felman and Laub to put forward a tentative and “nervous” reading (Yaeger, 2002: 42) of exilic texts as sites of double agency that mark a crisis of allegiance marked on the contested borders of national belonging.

Drawing together a disparate array of texts, mediating a wide and diverse range of histories, cultures and contexts, allows for a cross-cultural engagement with a subject that has global significance; it does, however, also carry the risk of eliding cultural and historical difference and the kind of social specificities that are necessary to fully understand and evaluate the singularities that make each act of literary witnessing a highly personalised experience, a private and individual act, which, for example in Rushdie's case, mediates an engagement with specific national pasts and his different personal connections to them. His representation of the human subject in terror is markedly different in *Shame* and *Shalimar the Clown* (2006/2005) in ways that appear to mirror his differently inflected exilic relationship to Pakistan and Kashmir. Yet, as will be seen, these different representations do much more than offer insights to Rushdie's personal positioning, and the aim of this paper is, in part, to expand the scope of Rushdie criticism to match the critical reach of his literary explorations. The historical materialist readings of terror and trauma that have largely driven the analysis of his work post-9/11 have worked, as Ana Cristina Mendes has shown, to position him as an apologist for US hegemony and foreign policy (2009: 99-100). The discursive register of such readings serves to endorse overdetermined cultural binaries of East and West and historical markers of pre- and post-9/11, eschewing Rushdie's wider political concern with the vulnerability of the human subject under threat of erasure, a concern that extends well beyond the social and historical world of his texts and one clearly shared by other exilic writers. As will be seen, the work of Jean Arasanayagam and Ariel Dorfman reveals how the personal can also be ethically embedded through the construction of an internal witness or addressee in ways that invite a wider cultural reading of trauma that opens up for exploration the process of reading itself as a witnessing act, allowing for an inquiry into the connections between the politics of representation and the politics of reception. This narrative construction of an internal addressee appears to be in imaginative alignment with the rhetorical drive that informs Rushdie's

interjection which appeals both to the implied reader and the split and doubled narrative persona constructed within the text: the “you” or addressee that is presented at this moment of narrative intervention.

Furthermore, Rushdie’s ardent appeal for the legitimisation of the exilic voice seems to invite a critical evaluation of subaltern agency itself. The pertinent question, Rushdie suggests, is not *Can the subaltern speak?* but *Can only the dead speak?*, not, in other words, the absence of subaltern agency but the denial of authorial legitimacy to those whose exilic status grants them an agency that is both compromised and suspect. Whereas Spivak’s rhetorical inflections might compel us into a productive engagement with the politics of metropolitan control over the representation of the subaltern in her argument for the singularity of strategic essentialism, Rushdie’s insistence on the political, cultural and ethical significance of the exilic writer seems to place a high premium on the value of their ruptured double agency and divided loyalty, which is offered as the alternative (and alter-native) discursive space in the absence of the voices of those who have been “disappeared” from the official record. In these terms, double agency marks the performative outcome of the ruptured witnessing of the exilic subject, a process that resists the very discourses of nationing that provide the ground for securitization and political violence. It is a process that seems to begin with a writer’s acknowledgement of the threshold of terror.

The Threshold of Terror

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1982/1902) provides a striking mapping of terror as a different country. This is a double-voiced text of displacement in which Conrad takes care to make the distinction between the absolute witnessing of Kurtz, who appears to have experienced terror, or horror,^{iv} at first hand, and the secondary witnessing of Marlow, the embedded narrator who bears witness to Kurtz’s experience:^v

I was within a hair’s-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that I would probably have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up – he had judged. “The horror!” [...] And it is not

my own extremity that I remember best – a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain [...]. No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. (101)

While Hillis Miller has reflected on the way this passage reflects a “proliferating relay of witnesses ... voice behind voice behind voice” (cited in Wolfreys, 2004: 183), within the paradigm suggested by Felman and Laub, it appears to convey the movements of a witness traveller who observes how the primary witness had “made that last stride ... stepped over the edge” while he himself had drawn back. Kurtz, it could be argued, is the primary witness who has been rendered spectral, having crossed the “threshold of the invisible” and whose speech is cryptically short, epigrammatically encoded in the single phrase “the horror”; Marlow is the secondary witness who is carried to the “edge” of terror and whose experience is mediated by an unnamed narrator who remains silent and invisible for much of the narrative. The difference between them, it could be argued, marks the “whole difference” between having something and nothing to say.

This splitting and doubling of witnessing, between Kurtz, Marlow and the narrator, thwarts the possibility of any direct reading of terror, presenting witnessing as an act of disjunctive displacement. While differentiating between the positions of the absolute witness – who of necessity is a spectral presence, a ghost, a dead man – and that of the secondary witness, Marlow, its emphasis on communicating the very incommunicability of terror also works paradoxically to give primacy to the experience of a generic victimhood, one shared by both Kurtz and Marlow, that troubles the novel’s racial politics as it effectively blurs the distinctions between victim and aggressor. This elision – one premised on what I will reflect on later as a kind of double agency – appears to blur Kurtz’s position as perpetrator of colonial violence into victim of terror, marking what Primo Levi has called “the gray zone” where the oppressor becomes the oppressed. It also marks the space where, in Agamben’s words, “all the metals of traditional ethics reach their point of fusion”, a zone of ethical ambiguity (Agamben, 2008: 21).

For, as Felman has shown, all witnesses to terror are tainted in some way, compromised by the very act of bearing witness to events that insist as much on silence as on a speaking out (1992: 196).^{vi} Jean Arasanayagam, a poet displaced by the Sri Lankan civil war who witnessed ethnic violence first hand,

has given powerful expression to this sense of guilt. “My fear”, she writes, “is that escape /From martyrdom makes our complexion and/ Our stature, coward” (Arasanayagam, 1991: 86). As a hybrid subject, of mixed-race Burgher origin and married to a member of the Tamil minority, her work unsettles the reductive discourses of a war that overdetermined identity along ethnic lines, repeatedly blurring the lines between victim and aggressor in ways that rendered it suspect to nationalist critics in her native land. Occupying a space where her very right to speak is called into question, a space where witnessing is compromised by the lack of an authenticated addressee, her poetry presents us with the ethical instabilities inherent in the act of reading terror literature by projecting the experience of victimhood and violence onto all readers, regardless of physical location and national affiliation. Poems such as “Bullets that Smash through Screens” and “The Death Carvers” rely upon the creation of a textually constructed poetic self and an implied addressee to produce a layered witnessing that calls readers to account. “We talk as if it is another country/ The harsh rock of flesh hacked with hatchets [... but] Someone has to wipe the blades clean/ Remove the smell of old blood” (Arasanayagam, 1991: 62). Here the guilt of survival, of “escape from martyrdom”, is strategically relocated and presented as a shared experience marked by the collective “we”, so that the act of bearing witness demands, compels justice.

The construction of an implied addressee appears to be a crucial element in exilic texts on terror for it reclaims precisely what is lost in crossing the boundary into the non-human. As Hartman and Laub have shown, dehumanization is marked by the loss of an addressee – a “you” that enables the “I” to speak (cited in Hirsch and Spitzer, 2010: 402). Within such terms, rehumanization requires a reclamation of an addressee in ways that parallel Rushdie's narrator in *Shame* and Mohsin Hamid's narrative address in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) where the narrator's opening address to an American stranger marks both double agency and a reclamation of personhood and citizenship for the culturally evicted subject of the novel.^{vii} Arasanayagam's poem “Personae” (2003: 27-8) makes a similar reclamation, but one expressly targeting the unseen reader, in a manoeuvre that marks witnessing as both a restorative and destabilising act:

Have you ever killed, tell me?
Or burnt or slashed?
Does the bullet speed away from you
Like a bird takes wing to nest
Within a body warm with blood?

[...]

Have you ever been silent tell me?
When words you must speak out
Choke you and clog your throat [...]

Have you ever turned away from those
Tell me, who once were friends
[...]
Or have you gazed and gazed
With eyes of lust upon the dead
The dying and the burning.

Here the visceral rendition of violence and use of direct address insists on a logic of accountability in the very space marked by its loss. To enter the dialogical discourse of her work is to be commanded to carry forward the responsibility of bearing witness beyond the boundaries of the text. Her poetry is mediated by a transitive and navigational self, a witness traveller akin to Stephen Clingman's "transnational self", for whom the navigation is both internal and external, not so much a crossing of boundaries but occupying the space – the threshold – of crossing, a process that, as Catalina Botez has pointed out, makes bearing witnessing a transcultural act (2010: 92).

Such transculturation has both aesthetic and political implications, unsettling the fixity of given identities in ways that unhinge the reductive binarisms found in the rhetoric of war. The layered, double-witnessing of *Heart of Darkness* is replaced here by what appears to be an inclusive double agency, in which cultural indeterminacy works not in the service of moral relativism but in the service of moral order, an order that not only transcends the narrow logic of national citizenship but is uncompromisingly focused as it "seeks to recognise", what Judith Butler has called, "the sanctity of life, of all lives" (2006: 104). Arasanayagam's work not only reveals the inherent violence of reading identities along nationally determined lines, but also the way in which the ethics of bearing witness is related to a transculturation only made possible by the performative construction of a witness within the text.

In what ways does such a performative manoeuvre impact on our reading of terror literature? Can this

double agency allow us to re-read the fraught space where witnessing and bearing witnessing converge? These concerns are addressed in Ariel Dorfman's *Widows*, a text that exists as a poem, a play and a novel, in which the multiple possibilities for bearing witness are tested to the full and whose different incarnations mark the author's genuine tussles with genre and voice. An engagement with the novel allows for an exploration of the relationship between the performative act of witnessing and the construction of a fictional, textual self in terms that give insight into the complex, contestatory textual dynamics through which double agency gets mediated.

Performative Witnessing and Double Agency

Ariel Dorfman's novel, *Widows* (1989), takes us into the exceptional space of violence marked by the enforced disappearance of civilians in an unmapped and unmappable terrain. The state of exception is clearly demarcated: men are being abducted from their homes, mutilated bodies are appearing in the river, and women and their children are left to bear witness to events. An old peasant woman, Sofia, whose father, husband and two sons have been disappeared, insists on claiming and burying bodies in defiance of the authorities in ways that invite parallels with Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Apparently set in Greece, though the land is never named as such, the novel is an embedded fiction that is at pains to foreground both its fictional status and its border-defying universality in its emphasis on subaltern experience and representation. Framed by a fictional Foreword, putatively written by the son of a pseudonymous Danish man who has disappeared during the Nazi occupation, the text is presented to us as an incomplete draft, a burnt remnant whose origins are radically unstable. Dorfman originally wrote this Foreword to avoid censorship in his native Chile, but chose to retain it to mark the text's exilic status, the conditions of its production under threat of censure. It is an important manoeuvre by a writer who has insisted on the significance of fictionalised testimony in the face of enforced silence and political repression.^{viii} Further, the fictional author, we are told, has never even been to Greece, suggesting that cultural authenticity and the national origin of the writing subject are not so much irrelevant but, rather, misplaced criteria in the writing of human rights, and that the transcultural practice of bearing witness requires a mapping of witnessing that is actively resistant to an emphasis on national origins and ties.

These concerns are central to the reading of double agency in the text, a term that has hitherto been used in two markedly different ways: first, within the context of biblical analysis, to describe the way a single event is simultaneously ascribed to two agents, connecting divine and human agency (Tracy,

2010), and secondly, within the context of cross-cultural studies, to describe what Tina Yih-Ting Chen has referred to as an “impersonation” that communicates divided and multiple allegiance rather than cultural betrayal (2005). The reading of double-agency as impersonation, is of course inflected by the discourse of intelligence and security studies where a double-agent is a counter-intelligence officer, one who engages in clandestine activity transgressing national boundaries in the service of a single nation, often withholding information: “a condoned channel of communication with the enemy” in the words of the CIA (Begoum, 2007). What these highly variant readings of double agency share is a concern over ethical ambiguity that is inherently connected to the positioning and construction of the human subject; for if agency is predicated on a notion of a unified subject (Chambers, 1994: 116-7),^{ix} then any doubling calls into question the linked issues of accountability and personhood.

My own reading of double agency, mediated through the act of witnessing and bearing witness, suggests that the divided and blurred subjectivities (found for example in the work of Arasanayagam) are not only marked by a process of transculturation but also by a resistance to the very discourses of nationing that mobilise processes of securitization and political terror. In Dorfman’s work, double agency is mediated through multiply fractured forms of witnessing that reflect Bhabha’s splitting and doubling of the subject under colonial power in ways that reveal what Felman has described as “the passage of the language through the violence and the passage of the violence through language” (1992: 30-1). Here the witness as addressee found in the performative manoeuvres of Arasanayagam’s poetry is displaced and internalised, marked as a rupture within the enunciative act.

This is strikingly evident in the way witnessing blurs into the performative register of bearing witness in the personalised testimonies of Fidelia and Alexis, the teenage twin grandchildren of Sofia. In Fidelia’s narrative, the use of fractured subjectivity in the pronominal slippage between first and third person, the elisions between personal nominations and social names, reflects a breakdown in trust between family members marking the impact of violence on the domestic space. Fidelia’s description of her mother Alexandra’s resistance to Sofia’s insistence on laying claim to bodies, takes us into the ruptured identities of a witness who is not only alienated from her family, but divided in herself, *both inside and outside her own experience*:

And she [Sofia] swept her gaze back and forth over us all. It pierced each one of us, including me, she looked at Fidelia with distrust, even knowing she could always count on her granddaughter [...] she was accusing even me of plotting behind her back. I had heard my aunts whispering what Mama had just announced out loud, but none of us answered. [...] We were

waiting for Alexandra to speak. Mama had opened the door, it was she who would have to find a way to shut it. (46-7)

Fidelia is both the subject and object of her own narrative here; her mother, presented as both Mama and Alexandra, registered as a sliding signifier in the daughter's uncertain identification with her family. Double agency, that is the split and doubled agency of the witness traveller moving across the threshold into the act of enunciation, witnessing and bearing witness simultaneously, is here etched with the uncertainty of allegiance to the primary domestic space that is the family home. In a text marked by the absence of national boundaries, this domestic space determines the boundaries of belonging and marks the primary site of social and cultural affiliation.

The process of desubjectification is interiorised further in the testimony of Alexis who, we come to realize, will not survive the terror. He is a primary, absolute witness in the text, one who has moved over the threshold into terror and occupies the grey, putatively unspeakable zone of borderless subjectification. His experience, marked through semantic rupture, presented into timelessness through elision between tenses, mediated via a second person narrative that calls the reader into the text, is a melding of interior monologue and telepathic communication with his intransigent grandmother whose resistance to the authorities effectively condemn him to death. It powerfully conveys both unspeakable terror and the creation of an internal witness whose body and being become the testimony itself:

that's how one survives, talking with someone inside, that's how, she'll say, grandma will say, that's how. did he have some such person?

you'll close your eyes so the gray beginning of light now scarcely profiling grandma's face, the cot back there, the bars behind you, you'll close your eyes but you're not going to weaken and you're not going to give up even a teardrop.

yes, grandma, of course.

[...] you can be sure, alexis, that if you have at least one person planted inside you, solid, growing, you'll make it back.

[...]

and you grandma, don't you have anyone inside you to help you come back?

you'll see on her face the beginning, yes, it's definitely the beginning of a smile. the light's coming in and it's enough to make out subtleties, shades, her face. ah, child, she was full, stuffed, totally swollen with people. and if not, how, how could she have gotten through these

years, but when one was old ... the important thing is, was, that the people we've carried inside us find another home, they mustn't die out, alexis, understand?
yes, grandma, he understood. (133-134)

Here Dorfman presents the passage of violence through language and language through violence by presenting us with the violation of language itself. The passage reflects what Bhabha has described as a performative time-lag or temporal gap which is produced by slippages in the signifier, internally open and endlessly iterable to “a future addressee who is strictly and permanently unheard of” (Philipps, 1999: 72). An internal witness, “someone inside you”, is revealed not only as a by-product of the grey zone but gains both internal and external manifestation in the dialogic play between the unspoken words of borderless subjectivities. The locus of production, ostensibly Alexis, is strategically deflected onto the reader who is compelled to internalise this witness as a by-product of the reading process. While in Bhabha's formulation the time-lag marks a temporal interruption of progressive modernity by marginalised, displaced and diasporic peoples belatedly repeating the authorised figure of the human (Philipps, 1992: 73), Dorfman's imaginative reclamation of witnessing relocates the time-lag as the historical condition of possibility for the elision between the sayable and the unsayable, marking the structural relationship between what Agamben has described as the “outside and the inside of language” (2008: 158). It also, significantly, marks the way the authority of the witness is based, in Agamben's words, on the “capacity to speak solely in his [or her] *incapacity* to speak” (my emphasis), a manoeuvre that could mark an intervention in the reading of subaltern agency and representation. The experience of trauma is marked by a crisis of language, a struggle for control over signification in a text that, as Sophia McClennen has pointed out, marks a rupture between the signifier and signified, the word and the body under threat of disappearance (2010: 133-4).

Can the subaltern speak?, Spivak has provocatively asked, and both Arasanayagam and Dorfman's response marks a defiant reclamation of personhood in an historical context that works to annihilate the very possibility of address, a reclamation of the subject at the vanishing point of disappearance that, significantly, calls the reader to account. Whereas Spivak's question generates a concern with the need for a locatable subject, the literature of terror analysed here alerts us to the need to locate an addressee. As Coetzee has observed in relation to writing in apartheid South Africa, a situation is created in which one is “living among people without reciprocity so there is only an ‘I’ [...] the ‘You’ is a debased ‘You’” (cited in Penner, 1989: 52). It is the deliberate and self-conscious attempt to impose a context of reciprocity from within the terms and experience of ejection that seems to energise Rushdie's political

reflections on terror. As will be seen, the power of Rushdie's rhetorical reflections lies in the way he foregrounds testimony as a lack, a silence that must be made to speak.

Can Only the Dead Speak?

In his engagement with Rushdie's fictional mediation of terror, Stephen Morton has drawn attention to the "worldliness in Rushdie's writing" revealing how terror can be read in relation to the texts' exploration of postcolonial modernity and the author's "resistance to political closure and national boundedness" (2008: 18; 149). Within these worldly readings, Sufiya's monstrous body in *Shame* can be seen to have parallels with Saleem's in *Midnight's Children* (1981) - both reflect the terrifying effects of the forces of history, marking how the emergence of the nation can result in the liquidation of the individual (Morton, 2008: 36); and *Shalimar the Clown* can be read in relation to its representation of terror as personal revenge narrative and diasporised political movement, which collectively offer "an ethical challenge to US foreign policy in South Asia" and "a political elegy for Kashmir" (Morton, 2008: 134; 147).

Yet such worldly readings, while doing much to ground the work in the historical materiality of national and transnational terror, do not readily accommodate the troubling, unsettled representation of history as haunting in Rushdie's texts. Nor do they easily lend themselves to an exploration of how the worldliness of terror and censorship impact upon the literary dynamics of texts that also serve as sites of bearing witness to trauma. As Morton mentions in his overview of critical approaches to Rushdie, allowance needs to be made for the "otherworldly" aspect of his writing, one which he suggests reflects what Eaglestone has called a kind of "'dream reasoning' or 'paralogical thinking' which does not follow the 'strict rules of logic' or aim to establish a consensus" (Morton, 2008: 149). A reading that seeks to explore spectrality as a marker of bearing witness in Rushdie's texts allows scope for an engagement with migration as an ontological condition and the effects of terror as trauma – both significant markers of otherworldliness in Rushdie's novels - in ways that mediate and accommodate an understanding of the writer as witness-bearer, a traveller who explores the boundary between the sayable and the unsayable.

Rushdie's violent interjection in *Shame* that lends this essay its title takes us to the heart of the ethics of writing on a subject that not only lies beyond the direct experience of the author, but also one deemed traumatic and therefore alinguistic and unnarratable or, in Warhol's terms, "supranarratable".^x Anticipating his readers' rejection of his fictional work on political repression in Pakistan on the basis

of his status as both an Indian expatriate in Britain and as a mohajir, he constructs an imaginary dialogue within the text that reclaims his right to write on a subject he has only a partial and incomplete knowledge of:

Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! ... I know: nobody ever arrested me. Nor are they ever likely to. Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign tongue wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies? I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?

Can only the dead speak? (28)

This rhetorical manoeuvre creates an internal addressee that works to authenticate the enunciative site of address of the geographically displaced author. It insists not only on the right of the outsider to trespass on culturally and politically sensitive subjects but also on the importance of their doing so. By speaking in the split and doubled register of a political exile with a “forked tongue”, Rushdie opens up a space for a re-evaluation of subaltern agency. The point at issue, he suggests, is not the absence of subaltern agency, or even the politics of its representation, but the denial of authorial legitimacy to those who have the space, opportunity and will to speak.

Thus in Rushdie’s work, the double agency of the exilic narrator is clearly marked as an ethically troubled site of enunciation whose interventions render him both “honourable and suspect” (Rushdie, 1992: 10) in ways that anticipate the worldly diatribe of Marxist critics such as Aijaz Ahmad who questions the ethical position of his “excess of belonging” (1994: 130). The split, forked tongue of the political exile marks their radical rupture from the interior experience of violence and also registers the split loyalties of one who has crossed cultural and political boundaries and literally and metaphorically *changed sides*. In *The Satanic Verses* (1988) Rushdie uses this idea to reflect on the ethical instability of the transnational subject: the forked tongue of the demonic exilic narrator is used to bear the weight of the doubleness of the migrant subject, which gains physical representation in the characters of Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta who between them represent continuity of connection with the homeland and the cultural hybridity of the transnational subject. This engagement marks a move away from the focus on trauma to be found in *Shame* where double agency is more clearly positioned as a reflection of the process of bearing witness to terror. Here Rushdie’s privileging of the double agency of

the outsider appears to follow the discursive logic of bearing witness itself: in explicitly acknowledging the death of the absolute witness, the position of the transgressive outsider becomes *the* site of significant witness.

In *Shame* the absolute witness, Sufiya Zinobia - the Beast, the embodiment of a nation's collective shame - epitomises not merely the transgression of ethical boundaries but their fusion in her occupation of a space beyond good and evil. She is both victim and aggressor; the manifestation of the subject under erasure, whose "very essence [is] in doubt" from the moment of her birth (90). If as Bettelheim has claimed, it is only the ability to feel guilty that makes us human, particularly if we are not, in fact, guilty (cited in Agamben, 2008: 93), then Sufiya is a projection of the subject taken to the limit condition of her humanity. Her metamorphosis into the bloodthirsty and vengeful Beast, the embodiment of a terrorizing agency that comes to control the land, marks an ethical shift from innocent victim to aggressor, a shift that parallels the double agency registered in the narrative voice. Crucially, it also matches what Agamben has proposed as a working definition of shame: "nothing less than the fundamental sentiment of being *a subject*, in the two apparently opposed senses of this phrase: to be subjected and to be sovereign" (Agamben, 2008: 107; original emphasis). Thus, as the embodiment of Shame, Sufiya's self marks the ultimate desubjectification of the subject in terror, for, as Levinas has shown, in shame, we are "consigned to something from which we cannot in any way distance ourselves" (cited in Agamben, 2008: 105).

Within this context, the voice of the exilic narrator, the outsider and trespasser who is at one remove from both his nation and his narrative, has specific resonance in calling us to account. For here we have foregrounded the role of the witness traveller whose voice is authenticated by the very unnarratability of its subject, shame or its displaced double, *sharam*, the word that lies beyond translation, embodied in Sufiya, the space marked by terror. The narrator's position as an outsider allows him to fulfil Felman and Laub's logic of discursive negotiation, guiding "an "audience into an inside" while keeping "in touch with the outside" (1992: 239), communicating the incommunicability of the terror marked by Sufiya in ways that render it simultaneously real and unreal, worldly and unworldly.

In Rushdie's more recent reading of terror in *Shalimar the Clown*, a novel that strategically maps a personal, revenge narrative on to the transnational, global network of terrorism, the material, worldly diasporisation of terror appears to mark a shift in the construction of double agency and the internal addressee, a shift that marks a different inflection on the construction of the human in the novel. Here it is the disjunction between a revenge narrative and the mapping of a terrorizing subject's story onto a material base that seems to create a space for silence to speak. The narrative presents the assassination

of Max Ophuls as a personal act of vengeance that gets geopolitically distorted and overdetermined as an act of political terror as Shalimar's stalking of his prey matches the movements of an international terrorist (Morton, 2008: 140). This disjunction between the personal reality of Shalimar's motives and the political mapping of it maintains the link between transnationalism and the precarious life of the subaltern subject showing how Shalimar's transnational status is a direct byproduct of his disempowerment. Narrative interjections in *Shalimar the Clown* serve not only to guide the audience into the unnarratability of trauma but also to register the boundaries of what is sayable. Rhetorical questions are strategically deployed to make the silence of history speak, as remnants of facts accumulate exponentially to foreground the presence of the human at the moment of its imminent disappearance, compelling the uncovering of further facts:

There was one bathroom per three hundred persons in many camps why was that and the medical dispensaries lacked basic first-aid materials why was that and thousands of the displaced died because of inadequate food and shelter why was that maybe five thousand deaths because of intense heat and humidity because of snakebites and gastroenteritis and dengue fever [...] why was that and the pandits of Kashmir were left to rot in their slum camps, to rot while the army and insurgency fought over the bloodied and broken valley, to dream of return, to die while dreaming of return, to die after the dream of return died so that they could not even die dreaming of it, why was that why was that why was that why was that why was that. (297)

There is no need to trouble with the open appeal registered by a question mark here, for the rhetoric is imperative rather than merely exhortative, narrative agency marked as historical agency and intervention in the transformative act of bearing witness. The exilic narrator (and it is worth noting that *Shalimar the Clown* is Rushdie's most elegiac novel of exile) demands that the historical record is made complete and that the remnants of facts are causally connected. It is an important manoeuvre that precedes a passage where the author's wresting of narrative control is shown to clear a space for a different way of cognitively appropriating a past marked by epistemological gaps:

Who lit that fire? Who burned that orchard? Who shot those brothers who laughed their whole lives long? Who killed the sarpanch? Who broke his hands? Who broke his arms? Who broke his ancient neck? [...] Who shot those girls? Who smashed that house? Who smashed *that* house? Who smashed *that* house? [...] Who burned the beehives? Who poisoned the paddies?

[...] Who raped that lazy-eyed woman? Who raped that grey-haired lazy-eyed woman as she screamed about snake-vengeance? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that dead woman? Who raped that dead woman again?’ (308; original emphasis)

Here double agency is marked by what Cathy Caruth has described as a kind of “double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (1996: 7; original emphasis). Rushdie moves away from the hyperfictionality of *Shame*, a hyperfictionality that marks a resistance to accessing the human being that is the subject of terror, focusing instead on the precarious vulnerability of the human body subject to violence - the broken man, the raped woman, the learned one who dies dreaming of return. The different inflections of the human subject in terror – the entropic collapse of personhood in *Shame* and the affirmation of the vulnerability of the human in *Shalimar the Clown* – suggest that Rushdie’s differently inflected exilic relationship to the different countries, Pakistan and Kashmir, may inform the construction of humanity in these spaces.

What is more, the insistent presencing of the human at the point of disappearance in *Shalimar* works in stark contrast to the empty registers of political bureaucracy, described in the novel as “the language of the unpronounceable acronyms which was the true lingua franca of the subcontinent's political class” (188). It is mediated by the sourceless language of rumour which, as Morton has highlighted, is a “system of writing with no identifiable source”, an anonymous and transitive mode of communication where information can be passed without leaving a trace (2008: 143). Rushdie's use of the anonymised narrative voice appears to do more than foreground “the historical experience of communal violence” and terror (Morton, 2008: 142); it takes us into the process of bearing witness to trauma, carrying the reader into a semantic register that marks the dead and disappeared as an absent site of witnessing whose very absence provides an enabling context for the presencing of the witness traveller. The rhetorical organisation of protest in these passages performatively stages the enforced creation of witnesses through the rage of negation. It is a powerful manoeuvre that aligns Rushdie with both Arasanayagam and Dorfman whose strategic investments in the dialogic as a process of transaction across multiple borders compel us to negotiate our own spatial and ethical bearings, our own position as witnesses to events, marking the dialogic as centreless, “a transaction”, in Peter Brooks words, “across what may be a referential void” (cited in Holton, 1994: 153). It also gives agency to silence, marks the unnarratable in the historical record, revealing, as Agamben has claimed, that the “value of

testimony lies essentially in what it lacks” (1999: 34).

Rushdie's inquiry “Can only the dead speak?” thus brings into visibility the site of the precarious boundary between the narrative presencing and authentication of the witness bearer and the silence of the disappeared primary witness, a site where historical fact gives way to history as a spectral haunting. Its rhetorical inflections open up a space for engaging with the varied literary articulations of this haunted space and for an evaluation of its negotiation by the witness traveller whose performative manoeuvres compel a response. It is a site that, as has been seen, others have explored before him, and between them these writers suggest that it is by presencing the voice of the outsider, the sliding signifier of exile, that literature comes to explore the full implications of silenced and unmarked censorship, the question of who can speak for whom, test the boundaries of belonging – boundaries that in times of war, when the discourses of nationalism and patriotism take hold, are all too often used to mark the space where the human begins and humanity ends. The double, troubled agency of the exilic witness - mobile, transgressive, and invariably rendered suspect within the reductive discourse of nationing - reveals how subalterneity is marked not only by the politics of representation but of reception too, not only by the absence of agency but by its very denial, and by the right to be heard, authenticated, to bear witness where others might not. It strategically mobilises witnessing in ways that resist political manoeuvres that might annihilate the possibility of address, the possibility of being heard and understood, by creating fictionalised textual witnesses and internal addressees that are activated by the reading process itself so that the conditions of intervention are left open and iterable, projected into an endless future.

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- i Agamben's reflections specifically pertain to the Muselmann, “the complete witness”, who inhabits the extreme threshold between life and death.
 - ii This spatialisation of terror as unlocalizable has provided fertile ground for political geographers such as Derek Gregory (2010) who has revealed how geographically locatable spaces such as Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib are effectively legal blackholes – “essentially unlocalizable”.
 - iii Here Felman makes a distinction between Mallarmé – an invited traveller, and Celan, an evicted traveller (1992: 25).
 - iv As Adriana Cavarero has pointed out, there is an etymologically based structural difference between terror and horror (2009: 4-9). Cavarero's work marks a significant intervention in the scripting and reading of witnessing through victimhood that makes a case for reading horror through the prism of ‘horrorism’, a form of violence that foregrounds the vulnerability of the human subject and induces immobility and a loss of agency. My own reading of Conrad's text has followed the structural and hermeneutic logic of Conrad's layered witnessing in its mobilization of horror as terror, revealing how movement across the threshold, evidence in the cited passage, is central to the construction of narrative perspective in the text.]
 - v This passage has been subject to much critical scrutiny with different readings on witnessing. From Lacoue-Labarthe's assertion that singular and interior experience is plural and shared, as Anne Luyat observes, (2012: xi), to J. Hillis Miller's observation that “the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* [i]s a way of indirectly speaking about, and bearing witness to, something that cannot be spoken of literally or directly but only in parable or allegory, and that can be borne witness

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- to only in a sequence of voices, each speaking for the one before” (2012: 26). Many critics have taken Hillis Miller's line of reasoning, arguing that it is a register of catachresis: see, for example, Julian Wolfreys who has read it in relation to a kind of “limit-language” marking the “inadequacy of any act of representation” (2004: 181-2).
- vi Felman observes that “guilt is not a *state* opposed to innocence, it is a *process* of coming to awareness” (1992: 196; original emphasis).
- vii “Excuse me, Sir, may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you.” Double agency is elegantly contained within a register that reflects “assistance” as both altruistic and suspect.
- viii For Dorfman's reflections on this, see Krog (1999: 360-1).
- ix Iain Chambers explores this notion (1994: 116-7).
- x The term “unnarratable” is used in the sense of “that which cannot be narrated”, in line with Gerald Prince's definition. Robyn Warhol has usefully qualified the unnarratable into four subcategories: “that which, *according to a given narrative* 1) 'needn't be told (the *subnarratable*),' 2) 'can't be told (the *supranarratable*),' 3) 'shouldn't be told (the *antinarratable*)', and 4) 'wouldn't be told (the *paranarratable*)’”, cited in Fredrick (2012: 40; original emphasis).

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