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Vanishing points/visible fictions: the textual politics of terror

My paper explores Agamben's formulation of 'vanishing points' – that is, spaces of exception and exclusion where a human being can be killed with impunity – and considers this in relation to the representation of the human body in literary texts on terror. I focus on the way in which gaps and elisions in discourses on terror are registered, marked and filled by literary texts that focus on the precarious vulnerability of those designated as *homo sacer*. I explore how writers presence the being rendered 'sacred' who is placed beyond the protection of the law and in danger of being silenced and disappeared, and examine the ways in which biopolitical discourse helps illuminate our analysis of literary texts such as Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Chris Abani's *Song for Night* and Salman Rushdie's *Shame*. I show how the formal differences between these texts are underscored by a shared concern with an ethical re-evaluation of how best to bear witness to politically sanctioned violence, and reveal how a literary and discursive approach to biopolitics can help identify the ways in which the relationship between the subject body and sovereign power comes to be constructed.

Keywords

Vanishing point; *homo sacer*; state of exception; disappearance; witness

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It is when a country has become to its population a fiction that wars begin. (Elaine Scarry)

The 'War on Terror' is an embattled and foggy term that raises pertinent questions on the discursive construction and mediation of terror itself. On the one hand, it is tautological, claiming to respond to violence and intimidation – that is, terror – by violent means. (In this sense, the term could be loosely translated as a 'war on war'.) On the other hand, it is locked in a logic of spatial and temporal indeterminacy that grants it both immanence and permanence. 'Terror', it could be argued, can always be found somewhere, so this is a war without boundary, limit or perceivable end.

The embattled status of the term is amplified by the mythologising practices of war itself – the production of a polarised discourse marked by the distinction between patriots and traitors, victims and aggressors, sacrificial heroes and implacable enemies. Such practices work to distance war from the material realities of injuring, maiming, killing and devastation, and produce a discourse in which our reading of humanity itself comes under siege. The success of these practices depends on reiterated boundary marking – repeatedly making distinctions between antagonists in relation to moral certitudes – and a practice of exclusion that suppresses alternative discourses and excludes the possibility of mediation in a way that brings the 'human' into crisis.

I have cited the 'War on Terror' as a contemporary discursive paradigm as it shows how the discrete but related discourses of war and terror draw on what Jackson has called a 'sacralising language' that creates a myth of exceptional grievance or victimhood¹ that collectively works to aggrandise one group while dehumanising another. This language promotes a culture in which the impact of violence on the human body – be it the bodies of combatants or of civilians injured or killed in conflict – is suppressed through their displacement into the sacred: a domain where the perspectival lines between the holy and the taboo, the divine and the profane converges to what Agamben might call 'a vanishing point' where the sacrificed body is in danger of disappearing. My aim here is to engage with these vanishing points, these liminal spaces of exception and exclusion, by examining the way in which bodies are made visible and invisible in contemporary literary texts on political violence. While the War on Terror has generated significant critical attention on the spatial manifestation of liminal sites such as Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and the concentration camp, there has been no corresponding sustained attempt to explore biopolitical theories of exception to literary texts in relation to their corporeal manifestation.²

It seems especially important to address such critical neglect, given the fact that states and spaces of exception also constitute spaces where expression is suppressed, displaced and silenced and where bodies are made to disappear. My aim, therefore, is not only to expand the current engagement with discourses on terror by considering the way in which the gaps and elisions in such discourse are registered, marked and filled by literary texts, but also to make some tentative connections between the emergent fields of biopolitics and terror literature. In furthering this aim, I have looked towards the margins rather than the grand narrative and deliberately selected texts that consider exceptionalism from outside the geographical and cultural markers set by the War on Terror. This is not to diminish or devalue the growing number of contemporary texts that directly respond to the 9/11 attacks; rather it is to work towards a culturally and geographically inclusive reading of terror in ways that extend and exceed the discursive paradigms set up by 9/11 literature.

I begin with a consideration of the biopolitical constructions on the bare life and Agamben's formulation of 'vanishing points'. As Agamben and – more recently – Derek Gregory have shown, liminal spaces of exception such as the war prison and concentration camp are vanishing points where the human being is rendered *homo sacer* and *femina sacra* – a being that can be sacrificed with impunity.³ I present these as liminal sites on account of the fact that they mark a space beyond the limit of convergence 'in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another'.⁴ These spaces of exception also mark what Butler might call the unspeakable in that they lie beyond official discourse, and are, as sites of trauma, effectively beyond language.⁵ Yet it is precisely such spaces of exception and the precarious vulnerability of *homo sacer* that form the central concern of much contemporary political fiction. How do writers presence the being rendered sacred who is placed outside the protection of the law and in danger of being silenced and disappeared at the vanishing point of sovereign power? What modes of expression are used to register the impact of politically sanctioned violence on the human body? And, most crucially perhaps, in what ways does the biopolitical discourse help illuminate our analysis of such literary texts? These are some of the questions that drive my subsequent analysis of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Chris Abani's *Song for Night* and Salman Rushdie's *Shame*. I show how these formally divergent – but in many ways politically aligned – texts explore the possibilities of representing the body under threat of disappearance and argue that they all, in their different ways, compel an ethical re-evaluation of how best to bear witness to politically sanctioned violence. I also reveal some of the ways in which a literary and discursive approach to biopolitics can help identify the ways in

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which the relationship between the subject body and sovereign power comes to be constructed.

Vanishing points and visible fictions

When Giorgio Agamben identifies ‘a vanishing point’ in Foucault’s evaluation of power, he presents us with a metaphor that in many ways exceeds the claims he makes for it. For Agamben, the vanishing point is the point of convergence between two forces of power – ‘political techniques’ (or sovereign power) and ‘technologies of self’ (or biopower) – a point of intersection that foregrounds the human being’s vulnerability to sanctioned violence and produces ‘bare life’, that is ‘life exposed to death’.⁶ The convergence of these two forces is marked by states of exception (such as emergency rule) and spaces of exception (such as Guantanamo or the concentration camp), sites where the human being is placed both inside and outside the law. It produces *homines sacri*, that is human beings who ‘may be killed and yet not sacrificed’, subject to exceptionalised violence and disposed of without legal or moral comeback. This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from the law form ‘a zone of irreducible indistinction’ resulting in a state in which ‘we are all virtually *homines sacri*’.⁷ The far-reaching nature of Agamben’s claim gains credence and urgency with the steady erosion of civil liberties that appears to be taking place globally – a context in which a growing correspondence can be found between declarations of emergency rule abroad and demands placed by increased securitisation in the West. The killing of Jean Charles de Menezes by the London Metropolitan police finds *homo sacer* reading a local paper on an underground commute.

What interests me here are not so much the juridico-political implications of Agamben’s formulation, but the social and cultural contradictions underpinning their discursive construction: the way in which the vanishing point marks not only the space of exception and the state of exception but also a *liminal* site in which our reading of what it is to be human is tested. Agamben draws on historically specific archetypes – the *homo sacer* of ancient Rome and the Musulmann of Auschwitz – to develop his analysis of the predicament of those occupying the liminal space of the vanishing point. It is a discursive manoeuvre which, while having the benefit of granting historicity and specificity to the respective paradigms, has the effect of revealing the paradoxes at a play in the construction of the human subject. If we all appear as *homines sacri* in the exceptional realm to be found at the vanishing point, it seems crucial that the paradoxes underpinning our interpellation as sacrificial subjects are exposed and explored.

Both *homo sacer* and the Musulmann are discursive constructs that mark the simultaneous effacement of social and ethical considerations: on the one hand, we have the paradox of the man who can be sacrificed without being killed, and on the other the Jewish detainee who is stripped of race and religion (in his designation as a Muslim) as he slips into the liminal state of non-being or the living dead. The discursive construction of the human being at the vanishing point is marked by a social and ethical violation, a boundary-breaking contradiction that effaces difference as it calls it into being. The vanishing point is thus marked by the *very visibility of its fractured fictional status*, its presence as a discursive construction marked in the play of social contradictions and ethical paradoxes that interpellate the human subject suspended in its disjunctive logic.

Agamben's recirculation of these critical paradigms not only flies in the face of the silences imposed on the human subject at the point of disappearance, but also opens up the multiple contradictions at play at the vanishing point in a way that insists upon new modes of expression. His terminology – tense with dualistic oppositions, doublings and inversions – strains under the weight of the critical discourse of inclusion and exclusion, boundaries determined by working at the juridico-political frontier, the claim for example that sovereign power is marked by the condition of its withdrawal so that it constitutes an 'inclusive exclusion (which thus serves to include what is excluded)' and that 'the exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule'.⁸

It seems that in marking the limit condition of the vanishing point, formal discourse strains under the weight of the paradoxes it is trying to communicate, and that fractures mark the space where alternative discourses may enter. More significantly, it suggests that it is these alternative discourses – be they literary, aesthetic, performative, cinematic, visual, cartographic or personal critical investments such as the psychoanalytically inflected work of Butler – *carry the burden of representation at the vanishing point*. The ways in which writers represent what Butler calls the 'precarious vulnerability' of the modern subject is central, therefore, to not only our understanding of the limits of expression at the vanishing point, but also to how terror itself gets mediated, textualised and broadcast. As Robert Young has observed, 'Terror moves you into a state of producing fiction: it makes you live imaginatively on the borderlines of the real'.⁹ The hyper-visibility of the fictional status of literary texts that foreground language, expression and style over plot and characterisation, is, therefore, of ethical significance, for it simultaneously bears witness to the ways in which political violence impacts upon expression and exposes the conditions that mediate our understanding of terror itself. Absolute witnessing

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is impossible of course – that role, as Elie Wiesel points out, ‘belongs to the dead’¹⁰ – but fiction can enter the vanishing point and rearticulate its silences in its own way, exposing the limit condition of language by revealing the very incommunicability of terror. I will explore this limit condition through an analysis of three radically different fictional reflections on political terror and begin with one of the most searching and ambitious contemporary explorations of this landscape of fear.

Truth and disappearance in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*

Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*¹¹ attempts not only to articulate the silences generated by terror, but to evaluate the links between ethics and aesthetics, between living in and writing on the state of exception. The novel is a quest narrative that merges the search to give human identity to a skeleton – that of a politically disappeared man – and the search for an ethical way of being in a world marked by the abandonment of the law. From its opening epigraph of the miner’s song of burial and rebirth, the reader is thrown into a precarious world in which life is marked and defined by its exposure to death. Here cartography is determined by ethical rather than geographical co-ordinates: truth or material facts are suppressed to the point of invisibility and reality is marked by the bodies of the disappeared – a landscape, it could be said, marked by the truth of disappearance and the disappearance of truth. The instability of ‘truth’ – a word that originally meant ‘plighted faith’ – is, I believe, integral to the exploration of ethical uncertainty in the text. As I will show, the tension between exploring *truth as a register of conformity to facts* (or truth as a register of objective veracity) and *truth as a marker of allegiance to faith* (or truth as register of subjective interpretation) grants scope for an ethical understanding of the space of exception that goes beyond Agamben’s paradoxical play of inverted oppositions.

The novel begins by foregrounding the thwarting of epistemological, fact-driven concerns as the truth of history (how Sailor died) is unclear and discussion is shown to be constrained by fear and uncertainty. Interactions between key characters return again and again to the terms of their constraint so that the truth lies in the space marked by the unspeakable. The difficulties of finding and giving voice to evidential truth thus correlates to the difficulties of critical interpretation within the novel itself. Scraps of text – on ancient Buddhist statuary, on maps – and fragments of information – from human rights files and narratives of violence – punctuate the text and are left free from direct commentary and a clearly defined context. The reader is compelled to create meaning from the scraps, to make their own way through the variety of generic registers

and voices, and give coherence to and a context for this ethically grey zone. While the violence remains largely anonymous – bodies are stripped of identity and perpetrators remain unknown or identified in a way that mimics official discourse of the time that blamed extrajudicial killing as the work of ‘unidentified gunmen’ – what is painfully presented, and rendered without ambiguity, is the human vulnerability to victimisation and death. At the vanishing point of *Anil's Ghost* all life is reduced to bare life and the story falls into ‘a vacuum of . . . disappearance’ (p. 307). Ondaatje’s aim, it, seems, is to show that when the law is abandoned, the raw precariousness of human life is what is left behind. The text thus insists on making visible the human dimension of terror – *this* is the first certainty or residual ‘truth’ offered in the novel.

But Ondaatje’s engagement with truth goes further: it works to give ethical shape to legal abandonment and to connect this explicitly to an ethics of reading and writing terror. The law is repeatedly invoked in the novel, called into being in a way that emphasises it as an absent presence. This anxious repetition registers the thwarted desire of subjects abandoned by the law and an acknowledgement of the inversions registered by Agamben in his description of the state of exception. Here the threshold of the vanishing point – the site described by Agamben as the zone where violence passes into law and law into violence¹² – is repeatedly presented by Sarath who observes ‘Sometimes law is on the side of power not truth’ and that it stands for the right to kill, a belief in revenge (pp. 44, 56). By the middle of the novel, the law is emphatically marked by its spectrality – a space defined wholly by the terror that steps in to fill it: ‘*I wanted to find one law that could cover all of living. I found fear . . .*’ (p. 135; original italics).

In this unofficial, extralegal war, the discourse of law and order no longer has currency and to speak of ‘human rights’ is little more than a gesture. Here, the state of exception is shown to mark a convergence between the transgression of the law and the execution of the law so that what is ‘human’ and what is ‘right’ become pliable and porous. In a space where factual truth is irrelevant, where conventional codes of conduct and Westminster rules are no good (pp. 154, 157), where the exception has become the rule – fear and terror are rendered not merely a ‘national disease’ (p. 53) but a principle of existence that manufactures and creates its own terms and conditions. Here, clearly, a different kind of reasoning, reading and witnessing are required. Ondaatje’s novel explores this mode of reasoning and witnessing to present another reading of truth, one that reclaims its original meaning as ‘plighted faith’ – a reading that, as I will now show, positions it at the intersection of the personal, the social and the sacred.

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The opening and close of the novel are marked by sacred spaces. The novel opens with the sacred space of burial – where the bones of a disappeared man (who might have been praying at the time of his death) are discovered in an ancient burial ground for monks. This is a forbidden zone that is available only to government forces. The novel then closes with a sacred space of regeneration where a Buddhist statue is being consecrated at an ancient site of worship that is now being communally reclaimed.¹³ Both these sacred spaces lie outside official discourse and the law but the shift from one to the other marks a movement from the discourse of exceptionalism to the discourse of aestheticism, from juridico-political concerns on the breakdown in law to metaphysical concerns on how to stay human in such a context, a shift made possible by Ondaatje's reading of 'truth' as 'plighted faith'. It marks a shift in register from the sacred as a space of exception to the sacred as a space of aesthetic perception that reveals a profound shift in Ondaatje's interpretation of witnessing at the vanishing point.

For the novel shows how human beings who live beyond the limit of the law are compelled to rely on intuition or a 'sixth sense' (p. 231), and insists that this state compels a higher order of awareness that can only be accessed if rational logic is abandoned. Palipana's use of false evidence to establish the likely history of the island, Ananda's sculpting of Sailor's skull to reveal the disappearance of his wife, Savi's use of the 'wrong' skeleton to prove the political disappearances in the island, all reveal how truth can only be accessed indirectly and intuitively by working outside conventional codes of reasoning. What is more, the novel marks the significance of this state in overtly aesthetic terms, showing how fictional truths can be more revealing of human realities and truths than mere material facts:

there was no real evidence for the existence of these texts [that Palipana based his claims upon]. They were a fiction [. . . but] perhaps for him it was not a false step, but a step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance. [. . .] In no way did this feel to him like forgery or falsification. [. . .] the patterns that emerged for Palipana had begun to coalesce. They linked hands. They allowed walking across water, they allowed a leap from treetop to treetop. The water filled a cut alphabet and linked this shore and that. And so the unprovable truth emerged. (Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, pp. 81, 83)

Palipana's 'leap' of logic defies conventional, accepted modes of critical inquiry, making connections across gaps through a sustained attention to the human being as a biopolitical subject, one whose bodily actions mark their presence as social beings; the stone mason at work, the dhobi woman washing clothes, the painter's brush following a fault line in rock

(p. 82), these are the 'signs' that Palipana interprets to develop his theory of the country's past. It is the human, communal, interactive world that educates him and brings him closer to his intuitive self, and it is this human world that marks and reclaims the sacred space of the novel's ending when Ananda feels the boy's touch after painting the Buddha's eyes, a gesture that marks a 'sweet touch from the world' (p. 307).

What is striking is the way this aesthetic resistance to the dehumanisation of terror is simultaneously positioned as one generated from inside the space of exception and one that eschews the escapist inducements of the sublime. The novel goes to great lengths to reveal the ethical hollowness of the rational, scientific logic embodied by Anil and to position it as overtly Western, foreign and Other, one that – like the language of the law – is incapable of speaking to the truths that are to be found in the space of exception. Yet the novel goes further than this by showing how the indirect, intuitive mode of engagement that is offered in its place emerges from the terms and conditions set by exceptional violence so that human creation and intervention is shown to lie at the very heart of the sacred – be it the dumping of bodies in forbidden zones, the reconstruction of the face of Sailor, the *homo sacer*, or the creation and consecration of a Buddha statue. The presentation of the intuitive and aesthetic is thus much more than a statement of cultural resistance and reclamation or sublime awareness; it is a statement of resistance to the positioning of the 'sacred' outside the ambit of human intervention. In revealing the sacred as an explicitly human construction, both the discursive logic of the law and science and the vicarious aestheticism of the sublime are here avoided.

Art alone can make visible the terror that fills the space by the loss of law, but, the novel suggests, it is important that we recognise that all art is man-made, an imaginative construct, and that no absolute objective witness to terror exists. The experience at the vanishing points where Sailor, Sirisa and Gamini disappear are of course left out – *homines sacri* as absolute witnesses cannot speak – and the primary protagonist and witness in the novel, Anil, disappears without trace. Instead of direct witnessing, the novel registers an aesthetic retrieval that successfully mediates the discursive boundaries between the speakable realm of the political and the unspeakable realm of the bare life – the life exposed to death – and posits an ethics of reading and writing terror that positions the 'human' in the very space where the human is about to disappear. It is a mode of engagement that foregrounds absence as a limit condition of articulation, that insists upon drawing our attention to the 'vacuum of disappearance' that is the vanishing point. Is it possible to invest in a reading and writing of *homo sacer*, to presence witnessing at the vanishing point, in a way that continues this aesthetic trajectory of mediating between discourses? If an absolute witness to the vanishing point cannot be presented,

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what kind of witness can be brought into being here? I will now explore two very different texts that examine how *homo sacer* might be resurrected in a way that bears witness to art's own artifice.

The body as witness in Abani's *Song for Night* and Rushdie's *Shame*

As Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has shown, spectrality is a powerful and apposite expression of the violence of ruptured identity at the vanishing point, communicating as it does the radically uncertain status of the human being caught in the state of exceptional violence, a state where, in Agamben's words, 'it is impossible to mark the position of the subject'.¹⁴ Both the novels by Abani and Rushdie that I will now consider mediate this subjectivity under erasure by focusing on its relationship with a morally ambiguous terrain. They offer aesthetically contrasting but, in my view, politically aligned readings of the problem of witnessing and representation at the vanishing point, for both texts work to reveal the fact that such witnessing is inevitably *partial* – a term I use to mark both incompleteness and subjectivity. What is more, as I will show, these novels also reveal the cyclical and self-perpetuating violence that underpins the state of exception by paying particular attention to the ways in which personal guilt and shame get communally marked so that they ensure their continuation. Hence witnessing, I argue, is presented in terms that are closely connected to the condition of sacrifice.

Spectrality – or the subject body's (in)visibility and uncertain status – is not only the marker of social and cultural conflict and moral breakdown in these texts, it also registers how human indeterminacy is interwoven with ethical uncertainty in ways that mark the very inscrutability of the vanishing point. To enter this space, these texts suggest, is effectively to enter a point of no return. Where *Anil's Ghost* positions itself on the threshold, on the border between the speakable and the unspeakable, acknowledging that the real story falls into a narrative vacuum where bodies disappear, and thus keeping open a space for the possibility of redemption and return, both *Song for Night* and *Shame* enter the vacuum of disappearance in a way that suggests that those caught and held in the state of the exception are marked and transformed in ways that permanently alter the reality of which they are a part and that the vanishing point itself marks a space of no return. I will begin by exploring spectrality as a limit condition of witnessing in these texts before looking further at these ethical implications and considering their social permutations and the specific politics of these modes of representation.

The novels contain significant formal differences: Abani's *Song for Night* is a moving and lyrical first person narrative mediating the experience

of a dying child soldier from Nigeria; Rushdie's *Shame*, on the other hand, is a bitter political satire on Pakistan that mediates first and third person narrative in 'slices' of vituperative prose marked by high symbolism.¹⁵ Yet both use metafictional means to express the altered reality at the vanishing point. Abani's text is punctuated by lyrical similes – 'Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat' 'Love is a Backhanded Stroke to the Cheek', 'A Question is a Palm Turning Out from an Ear' – that effectively convey the metaphoricity of both the mythic memories that make up the narrative and the sign language with which its mute narrator uses to communicate and mediate with the world. Rushdie's novel matches these overly self-conscious narrative strategies by extending the discursive conventions of fairytale palimpsestically and rhetorically revealing that the novel occupies a metafictional narrative zone: 'the country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space' (p. 29). Unlike *Anil's Ghost* – where metafictionality is internally marked but kept open-ended by the need to negotiate and make sense of narrative fragments – these novels use heightened language and narration in ways that draw attention to the politics of witnessing and reading by embedding translatability as a trope within the texts. In both texts, the *untranslatability* of the vanishing point, its resistance to discourse, is coterminous with the silence or muteness of key characters.

Furthermore both authors reveal the political co-ordinates that determine this silence and do so in ways that draw connections with the sublime. My Luck's muteness and telepathy are the result of having his vocal chords cut when he joined the rebels, his interior monologue itself a register of brute violence; and the discourse of *takallouf* in Pakistan and Sufiya Zinobia's blushing shame are presented as voluble registers of a politically imposed silence, a palimpsestic layering over the Real that marks the sublime, provocatively described by Eagleton as a 'masochistic art-form' that indulges in "virtualizing" distress'.¹⁶ Thus despite their formal differences, both these novels make explicit their status as aesthetic resolutions to social and political conflict so that witnessing at the vanishing point is overtly marked as a compensatory fictional construction, an incomplete and partial vision in what Ahmad has described as 'an aesthetic of despair'.¹⁷

This is especially clear in the representation of the body whose spectrality positions it as, variously, inhuman, posthuman, virtual, ghostly and bestial in ways that mark both the impossibility and partiality of the human being who has crossed the threshold of sacrifice. My Luck's liminal status is marked in multiple ways; the son of a Muslim father and Catholic mother he is neither man nor boy, neither dead nor alive, and is instead 'some kind of chimera who knows only the dreadful intimacy of killing' (p. 136). He is incomplete – his spirit having been thrown from a body which has almost certainly been disarticulated and broken by the blast of a landmine – and

has marked the memories of violence on his skin, scoring every death with a knife so he carries a 'braille cemetery' on his arm. Working as a human mine detector, he is explicitly interpellated as *homo sacer*, a life marked for death, whose job requires him 'to concentrate on every second of my life as though it were the last' and whose vocal chords are severed 'so we wouldn't scare each other with our death screams' (pp. 11, 25).¹⁸ When not telepathically mediated, his language is made up of gestures and signs which require translation – a word that as, Rushdie points out, relates to a bearing across – a movement marking the sacred otherworld of the novel where life is *passing through* death.

In *Shame* too, the bestial body of Sufiya Zinobia is shown to be a product of a 'world turned upside-down' where banditry and political corruption are interchangeable. She is the corporeal manifestation of a suppressed and silenced truth, 'a family's shame made flesh', revealing 'the hidden path that links sharam to violence' (pp. 21, 139), the movement where the discourse of honour and shame found in sharia law passes into violence and violence into law. She is, the narrator is careful to point out, the symbolic ghost of three cases of exceptional violence drawn from the real world, a body grown from the corpses of cases that refuse to die. Rushdie provides clear political co-ordinates for his moral landscape by showing how the metamorphosis of Sufiya from the pristine victim to the pure aggressor comes about in the same two-year period that marks Iskander Harappa's prison sentence: on his death she is released into a violence that cannot be called back 'so that the girl whose fate had prevented her from becoming complete had finally diminished to the vanishing point. What had escaped, what now roamed free in the unsuspecting air, was not Sufiya Zinobia Shakil at all, but something more like a principle, the embodiment of violence, the pure malevolent strength of the Beast' (p. 242).

The strength of Rushdie's work lies in this sustained encoding of allegory onto a real-world context and the extension of this to its logical limit through the extreme desubjectification of Sufiya. If, as Levinas claims, 'Humanity is a rupture of being',¹⁹ then Rushdie's work reveals that at the vanishing point where the human is lost, humanity itself may emerge, suggesting that it is through such desubjectification that we come closest to understanding the constitution of the subject. Shame is central to this dynamic for shame and shamelessness are – unlike good and evil – not part of a Manichean, mutually exclusive morality, but rather cyclically connected and marked by internal and overlapping registers. To be full of shame is to be a guilty innocent and to be shameless is to be innocent of a sense of guilt. Like the Biblical scapegoat of Eagleton's analysis, Sufiya's violence is structural, symptomatic of 'a common condition rather than a personal flaw'.²⁰ And like Abani's child soldier –

another guilty innocent – she is both holy and cursed, both victim and agent, one whose very subjection becomes the source of a destructive and violent power. As the embodiment of the culturally repressed, she is metonymic of the people, as the projection of their guilt, she is metaphoric of them²¹ and it is this dual reach – the insistence on historicising and culturally and politically situating the ethical grey zone while focusing on the process of desubjectification through its central character – that marks *Shame* as an exceptionally searching exploration of psychic disintegration and entropy at the vanishing point.

For shame as a form of inherited guilt marks a very specific form of witnessing: an *actively passive form* that registers both *the disarticulation of the subject* (the impossibility of bearing witness or speaking) and *the transference of culpability* – a kind of bearing across or translation – that is marked by the loss of integrity and coherence of the subject. It is an intimate zone, the space that marks complete identification of the subject with the Other leading to derealisation. As Agamben observes, ‘In shame we are consigned to something from which we cannot in any way distance ourselves’.²² And in words that seem to delineate the tortured (literally ‘twisted’) subjectivity of My Luck – who is horrified by his own capacity for violence – and the derealisation of Sufiya Zinobia, Agamben goes on to claim, ‘In shame, the subject . . . has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame’.²³

This corresponds to what Rushdie has described as the ‘*internal dialectic*’ of terror (p. 241, my emphasis), as the convergence of subject and object, of victim and aggressor result in a subjectivity marked as both sovereign and subject simultaneously. Shame is ‘nothing less than the fundamental sentiment of being *a subject*, in the two apparently opposed senses of the phrase: to be subjected and to be sovereign’, according to Agamben, and to write as a witness of the vanishing point is to attest to this convergence.²⁴ Subjectivity is then, in the partial witnessing available at the vanishing point of *Shame* and *Song for Night*, marked as both a space of erasure and a site of exceptional power. In contrast to *Anil’s Ghost* which marked the vanishing point as a moral aporia, a point where no absolute witnessing is possible, these novels present witnessing through the violated and violent body in a way that connects us directly to the etymological root of the word ‘witness’ as a martyr. Bearing imaginative affinities with the scapegoat, the martyr is also related to the saint, ‘a person’, Rushdie claims in *Shame*, ‘who suffers in our stead’ (p. 141). To write of witnessing at the vanishing point, these texts suggest, is to present us with a character or perspective of one who bears the burden of self-sacrifice for the greater communal good.

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What are the political implications of such a reading? And in what ways does such a representation of subjectivity – as both subject and sovereign – impact on our reading of literary presentations of *homo sacer*, the bare life exposed to death? As has been seen, the literary exploration of the threshold of the vanishing point in *Anil's Ghost* has, variously, testified to the impossibility of bearing witness, exposed the moral aporia at the vanishing point as the space where the violated body disappears, and registered the sacred as fundamentally a human construct. The resulting representation kept open the possibility of redemption, return and renewal through bearing witness to connection with the 'sweet touch from the world'. In contrast, the novels by Abani and Rushdie work to give *homo sacer* a voice – albeit a voice that insists on translation – and present the body of *homo sacer* as itself the witness of its own violation and acts of violence, resulting in a self-referential reading of the vanishing point in which the key character articulates and embodies the very overlap of violence and law, victim and aggressor. The movement is one that works to internalise the violence at the heart of the vanishing point registering what Scarry calls a 'world contraction',²⁵ so that the human is marked as a principle that helps to identify our own humanity: by the end of the novel Sufiya is 'not Sufiya Zinobia Shakil at all' but Shame itself, having 'finally diminished to the vanishing point'. And if, as Bettelheim, claims, it is 'only the ability to feel guilty that makes us human, particularly if, objectively seen, one is not guilty', and if as Agamben continues, 'shame is truly something like the hidden structure of all subjectivity and consciousness',²⁶ then Rushdie's work, by testing the limits of representation and providing an external manifestation of this internal logic, by presenting terror as an internal dialectic that requires translation across the zone of a metafictional hallucinatory otherworld at the vanishing point, is calling us to attend to the way in which the human is to be found at the extreme limit of sacrifice, of martyrdom, and of witnessing itself.

The extent to which these metaphysical and ethical concerns translate into a motivational politics is of course open to question. It could be argued that both *Song for Night* and *Shame* are bound by a cathartic logic, that their presencing of *homo sacer* and witnessing at the vanishing point work to seal off violence into a subliminal realm that 'allows us to perform our own deaths vicariously',²⁷ disengaged from a real world where political intervention and transformation might be wrought. To make such a claim, however, would miss the fact that these texts make no claims to mimesis, that their very attentiveness to the disjunctions between the real and the symbolic draws attention to the fact that their aim is to test the possibilities of representation. Whereas one of the strengths of *Anil's Ghost* lies in its emphasis on the commonality of suffering and vulnerability and its respect for the border between what can be

said, seen and witnessed, these novels work to provoke questions on the constitution of the subject at the vanishing point and its very intelligibility. What is more, by telescoping the texts through characters who are actively passive, whose violence is shown to be directly connected to their own subjugation, these texts throw back on the reader the experience of being actively passive witnesses, calling them, too, to account.

This readerly concern is shared with *Anil's Ghost*, a novel that actively engages with the politics of witnessing, offering a biting rebuke to both Western liberalism and 'armchair rebels living abroad' (p. 132). Ondaatje's work cautions against any easy espousal of principles and human rights, offering a powerful reminder that states and spaces of exception are spaces where *the very abandonment of the law presumes a logic of unaccountability*, so that a culture of impunity is an inevitable by-product of such a site. In this sense, Sarath's voice marks that of the prospective *homo sacer* or spectral presence of *Anil's Ghost*, who, prior to sacrifice, has witnessed and understood the complete inadequacy and inherent dangers of conventional discourses that attempt to make sense of this zone; Sarath has 'seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter' (pp. 156–157).

While these texts register the commonality of suffering in a way that promotes Butler's injunction that we must work in the service of a politics that 'seeks to diminish suffering universally, . . . to recognise the sanctity of life, of all lives',²⁸ they also register the ways in which witnessing at the vanishing point is undercut by the loss of the very ethical registers it is trying to endorse, that the 'universal' is open to question, and that perhaps it is in the difficult and thwarted search for such registers that we find our deepest and most common register of humanity. In a context where political rhetoric and the discourse of war and terror is charged with the paradox of an Orwellian doublethink that registers the ethical overlap between law and violence – where victims are subject to 'enhanced interrogation', rendered 'collateral damage' and subject to 'friendly fire', where women are safely silenced in 'honour killings' – it is perhaps in literature's explicit tussles with the language and linguistic codes found and released at the vanishing point that we find an enabling context for unravelling and discovering the human at the heart of exceptional violence, for experiencing a kind of self-conscious 'layered witnessing'²⁹ that compels us to take stock of our own agency and positionality.

This is not, of course, to lose sight of the fact that the biopolitical discourse that underpins such an evaluation is shaped by a specific cultural history – Agamben is careful to remind us that his ideas develop out of Western political discourse – but rather to acknowledge the significance of such discourse in testing and evaluating the literary mediation of

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victimhood and the agency of witnessing itself. It is also to affirm that there are imaginative and ideological affinities that transcend culture – the construction of *homo sacer*, for example, is not exclusively Western but bears structural parallels to those declared *wajib al-qatal*, a man fit to die, by Muslim clerics³⁰ – to attest to the fact that abject suffering is boundary-breaking and world-contracting in ways that compel us to attend to the constitution of the human subject beyond the friable definitions set by the juridico-political, and to bear witness to the fact that, when stripped of politics, culture and ideology, we are all readily reducible to the raw vulnerability of bare life, the life exposed to death. ‘Can only the dead speak?’ asks the narrator of *Shame*. By revealing the boundaries of what can be said and unsaid, by testing the limits of the speakable, novels such as these work to provide salutary reminders of both the difficulties of enunciation and of the dangers that face us if we fail to speak at all.

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Notes

- 1 Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 36.
- 2 Drawing on Agamben’s study of the concentration camp in *Homo Sacer*, Derek Gregory’s essay ‘Vanishing Points’ focuses on US detention centres and is one of a number of searching essays on spatial registers to be found in *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence*, D. Gregory and A. Pred (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 2007). For an interesting exploration of the connections between biopolitics and the ethics of fiction – albeit in relation to DeLillo’s work – see Marie-Christine Leps ‘Falling Man: Performing Fiction’ in P. Schneck and P. Schweighauser (eds.), *Terrorism, Media and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic Perspectives on Don DeLillo* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 184–203.
- 3 The term *femina sacra* is gaining currency with the growing recognition of the need for a differential analysis of women’s positioning as sacrificial subjects and has been extensively used by Ronit Lentin. While gender difference at the vanishing point is clearly of considerable significance, it lies beyond the scope of this essay. I therefore use *homo sacer* and *homines sacri* inclusively to refer to all human beings, applying it to both men and women who can be killed with impunity.
- 4 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 37.
- 5 Butler makes explicit the connections between the limits of discourse in the public domain – what is ‘speakable’ – and the positioning of the speaking

- subject in relation to discourses on terror. See Judith Butler, *Precarious Lives: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), Chapters 1 and 4.
- 6 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 5, 88.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 9, 115.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 21.
- 9 Robert J.C. Young, 'Terror Effects' in E. Boehmer and S. Morton (eds.), *Terror and the Postcolonial* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 307–328.
- 10 Cited in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 33.
- 11 Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001); all subsequent references are from this edition.
- 12 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 32.
- 13 In *Writing Sri Lanka* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) I have read this in relation to cultural nationalism, but my biopolitical reading of the sacred here demands a different emphasis that engages with the politics of human suffering rather than of ethnic identity and its inscription in the cultural domain.
- 14 Agamben, *Remnants*, p. 120.
- 15 Chris Abani, *Song for Night* (London, San Francisco, and Beirut: Telegram, 2008); Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (New Delhi: Rupa, 1983); all subsequent references from these texts are from these editions.
- 16 Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 46.
- 17 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 115.
- 18 It is worth noting that the novel repeatedly invokes women as the ultimate sacrificial victims; 'I am proper sacrifice', reflects My Luck's dying lover, Ijeoma (p. 44).
- 19 Cited in Butler, *Precarious Lives*, p. 134.
- 20 Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, p. 135.
- 21 I am paraphrasing Eagleton here.
- 22 Agamben, *Remnants*, p. 105.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 25 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1987), p. 32.
- 26 Cited in Agamben, *Remnants*, pp. 93, 128.
- 27 Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, p. 46.
- 28 Butler, *Precarious Lives*, p. 104.
- 29 Emma Brodzinski argues for the effectiveness of such a form of witnessing in the communication and negotiation of traumatic material in 'Bodies of Terror: Performer and Witness', in Boehmer and Morton (eds.), *Terror and the Postcolonial*, p. 379.
- 30 See Aatish Taseer, 'My homeland's long night of blood', *The Sunday Times*, 6 March 2011, p. 4.