

HL Essay

How does Ocean Vuong use motifs of speaking and writing to respond to violence in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*?

Word Count: 1459

The poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is to some extent Vuong's attempt to reconstruct the history of his family, fragmented by war, displacement, and the violence of his father. Throughout *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, the writer uses motifs of writing, such as pencils, notebooks, sheets of paper, the alphabet - even carving letters with a knife - and speaking in an attempt to respond to acts of violence by preserving and reconstructing what has been destroyed and lost. Moreover, certain motifs imply the difficulty, even the impossibility, of fully reconstructing these lost events. Despite this, writing becomes a way for the poet to reconstruct his own sense of identity out of fragments of the past.

In *Aubade with Burning City*, Vuong uses a motif of writing to imply the end of the Vietnam War is a new beginning for the 'story' of his family. After depicting the fall of Saigon by bombing and invasion, Vuong writes: "*The city so white it is ready for ink.*" Through the colour 'white', this line reimagines the destroyed city as if it is a blank sheet of paper that can be written upon. The image implies that war, as well as being a force of destruction, also represents a new beginning. Later in the collection, in the poem *Notebook Fragments*, Vuong writes: "*No bombs = no family = no me.*" Here, he struggles with the idea that war, a destructive event which impacted and ended the lives of so many, is also an event that directly led to his own existence (his grandfather was an American soldier; if not for the war he would never have been in Vietnam so could not have met Vuong's grandmother). This idea forms a paradox that is at the heart of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*: that forces of violence and destruction also create conditions for new lives and better experiences to be born. In the case of *Aubade with Burning City*, the bombs that destroy Saigon 'erase' the site of Vuong's family history yet symbolically leave a blank page for him to write his own story upon.

In *Seventh Circle of Earth*, Vuong expands this idea beyond himself to consider other victims of violence; this poem uses motifs of writing to reimagine the final moments of a gay couple who were murdered in their own homes by immolation. Similar to *Aubade with Burning City*, this act of violence ‘erases’ the couple’s history as depicted in the line: “*Our faces blackening in the photographs along the wall.*” Here, photographs represent the couple’s lived experiences, so the fire does more than simply kill them, it extinguishes any record of their lives together as if they had never existed. Vuong reinforces this idea through the presentation of this poem as footnotes at the bottom of the page; he intentionally keeps the rest of the page blank. He furthermore uses this choice as a critique of the official response to the crime by quoting a snippet from a local newspaper as the poem’s epigram: “*On April 27, 2011, a gay couple... was murdered by immolation in their home in Dallas, Texas. Dallas Voice.*” It’s clear that Vuong finds this snippet an inadequate way of memorialising the victims. However, as in *Aubade*, Vuong responds to this act of violence by reimagining the couple’s last moments together. The poem contains frequent phrases that point to the act of writing and speaking: “*Understand me... Speak... Tell me the story again...*” Each time Vuong uses the imperative tense by placing the verb at the start of the phrase, which conveys a sense of urgency and importance in the act of writing (and speaking) as a response to violence. This idea is reiterated even more strongly in *Torso of Air*: “*You take a knife to the wall. You carve & carve until a coin of light shines through.*” Here, the act of violence is actually conflated with the act of creation, as the listener wields his knife like the writer might wield a pen. The speaker uses repetition (‘carve & carve’) to imply the importance of persistence and determination, the difficulty of finding solace or redemption after violence. Yet, the result is a ‘coin of light’, a bright, hopeful image that symbolises the reward for such an effort. The visual beauty of this image from *Torso of Air* compares to images from *Seventh Circle of Earth*, in which flames are depicted as not only destructive but beautiful: such as in the image of “*sparrows who flew from falling Rome, their blazed wings*”. Images that craft beauty out of destruction are a rebuttal to the purely factual account of the murder published in the Dallas Voice, and implies how an imaginative reconstruction of the past can have a value that a purely factual, historical

version of events may lack. Therefore, Vuong uses motifs of writing and speaking to reconstruct alternative versions of events that may not be factually accurate, but convey deeper qualities of beauty and dignity after violence has interrupted people's lives.

However, Vuong also uses these motifs to suggest the difficulty – even the impossibility – of reconstruction after violent fragmentation. For example, in *Telemachus*, he writes about finding the body of his father, shot in the back, and hauling him out of the sea. As he pulls, his father's arms drag behind him, "*his knuckles carving a trail the waves rush in to erase.*" Once again, Vuong uses the word 'carving' to convey the desire to find a clue to – or leave a permanent impression of – someone who has suffered a violent death. However, as the waves cover the sand, this trail is erased, suggesting the impossibility of being able to fully reconstruct past events, or being able to find people who have been lost to violence. This is especially true of his father, who he depicts in the poem *In Newport I Watched My Father* as a man who suffers "PTSD" years after the Vietnam War. In this poem, a tattoo on his father's arm stands in for the act of writing through the word 'inked': "*His right arm inked with three falling phoenixes – torches marking the lives he had or had not taken.*" The ambiguous phrase 'had or had not' points to the fragility of memory and reconstruction, Vuong admitting that even where 'written' or inscribed evidence exists, it is not always clear what such writing or symbols mean. Therefore, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* uses motifs of writing to reveal another paradox: while records of the past can be reconstructed, they are still subject to the inaccuracies of memory and the ambiguity of personal recollection.

Finally, though, Vuong suggests that writing is less a way to objectively reconstruct the past, but more a way of reconstructing one's identity by coming to terms with the past. Nowhere is this clearer than in *To My Father / To My Future Son*, which reveals his eventual rejection of his father's violent tendencies. By addressing this poem to a son who doesn't yet exist, Vuong implies that objective reality is less important than personal truth. This poem contains the line: "*I wrote a better hour onto the page*" which represents the belief that his writing doesn't reconstruct the facts, but gives him another chance to live a past moment again, perhaps in a 'better' way. His intention to give himself – and any possible descendants – a 'better' version of the truth is contained in the symbol of a book that he

imagines his son reading one day: “*Turn back and find the book I left for us, filled with all the colours of the sky.*” Rather than violence, this book is filled with vibrant ‘colours’ representing Vuong’s desire to pass on a different history to his own son than his father left for him. The book symbolises Vuong’s identity as a writer, and his belief that, while the version of events he writes is not factually accurate – an impossibility given the violence that has damaged, destroyed, and erased so much of his family history – it still conveys a personal ‘truth’.

In conclusion, Ocean Vuong uses motifs of writing and speaking throughout *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* to point to the act of making poetry as a way of exploring the past, reconstructing forgotten events, and remembering people who have been damaged or destroyed by acts of violence. Ultimately, through poetry Vuong constructs an alternative history that allows him to cope with violence through creativity, making something new – and beautiful – out of fragments of the past.

Works Cited

Vuong, Ocean. *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Copper Canyon Press, 2016.