HL Essay

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

Word Count: 1437

The poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is Ocean Vuong's attempt to reconstruct the history of his family, fragmented by war, displacement, and violence. A Vietnamese immigrant into America, and a gay man, Vuong has experienced violence at the hands of his father as well as homophobic violence committed against the gay community. Throughout *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, the writer uses motifs of writing and speaking, such as urgent voices, notebooks, sheets of paper, and even carving letters into wood with a knife to tell his own story, his family history, and also stories of other people whose lives have been impacted by violence. His motifs suggest that sometimes violence can be the start of a new story, particularly his own and the story of his family. And, in some cases, Vuong also shows how destruction and creation can sometimes be two sides of the same coin.

Vuong uses motifs of writing and speaking to tell the stories of victims of violence. This can be best seen in *Seventh Circle of Earth*, a poem from part two of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, where Vuong depicts the murder of Michael Humphrey and Clayton Capshaw who were burned to death in their house while sleeping. The poem begins with an epigraph that reproduces the official response to this incident: *"A gay couple… were murdered by immolation."* The word 'immolation' depicts the violence of their deaths by burning, but in the same line the two men are reduced to their sexuality as a *"gay couple",* and the brevity of the quotation is something Vuong finds inadequate. Vuong uses the image of a burning photograph as a way of critiquing how the men's lives were simply forgotten or erased: *"Faces blackening in the photographs along the wall"*. Faces are the site of people's individuality, each face is different from anyone else's. Through the image of 'blackening' Vuong depicts how individuality is taken away through the violent action of burning the two men to death. His unique presentation of this poem, as footnotes at the bottom of a blank

page, further suggests his belief that the story of Michael and Clayton's murder was inadequately told. He use motifs of writing and speaking such as *"Understand me… Speak…"* and *"Tell me the story…"* to indicate a need to know more about who Michael and Clayton actually were as people, beyond their sexual identity alone. These phrases are all in the imperative tense, suggesting the importance of telling their story more fully. Readers can feel the poet's anger and also a sense of urgency to tell the story in a way that acknowledges the violence of their murder and returns a sense of them being real, rounded people to the victims. Across the collection, such as in *Anaphora as Coping Mechanism*, a poem about his friend's death, and *Because Its Summer*, a poem about how gay men need to hide their sexuality out of fear, Vuong uses motifs of writing and speaking to tell stories of people whose sexuality made them victims of violence and at the same time deemed them unworthy of proper representation.

Furthermore, Vuong uses motifs of writing to imply that violence can also be the chance for new beginnings. This can be seen in the poem *Aubade in Burning City* where the bombing of Saigon becomes a new beginning for the 'story' of his family. 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, is also the place in which he begins to trace his family story. Later in the collection, in the poem *Notebook Fragments*, Vuong writes: "*No bombs = no family = no me. Yikes!"* In this line, Vuong uses the = sign to connect the violence of bombing directly to himself and his family, implying that without the war he would never have been born. Because of the war, his maternal grandparents, one of whom was an American soldier, met and conceived his mother. Through the onomatopoeic and exclamatory "Yikes!" the reader can feel Vuong struggling 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. 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.

Later, Vuong uses motifs of writing to expand this idea and suggest that violent destruction and creation are two sides of the same coin. This can be strongly seen in the poem *Torso of Air* when Vuong writes: *"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.

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 responding to violence through 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 the ashes of violence and destruction.

Works Cited

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