“A BAG OF BONES IS NOT JUSTICE”: ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE AND WITNESSING IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S ANIL’S GHOST

Abstract: Michael Ondaatje’s fourth novel, Anil’s Ghost, is almost universally deemed his “most politically ambivalent work” (Marinkova 2011:1) – and that’s putting it mildly. Since the publication of the novel in 2000, both Anil’s Ghost and its author have been accused of aestheticising terror, of an apolitical glance, an uneasy human rights discourse, and of evading the discussion of the actual causes of the Sri Lankan civil war, as summarised by Wendy Knepper (in Mubleisen and Matzke eds 2006: 45-6). While the aim of this paper is not necessarily to defend Ondaatje by refuting all of these claims individually, it nonetheless offers an interpretation of the novel, which implicitly problematises at least some of these assertions. The central argument is that the novel, while expressing unambiguously disillusionment with (violent) political struggle, is political in the sense that it unflinchingly explores state terrorism and one of its weapons, the enforced disappearance: even more so in its representation of the terror-defying potential of ethical witnessing (especially when contrasted with testifying). As the novel is explicitly set in real life “political time and historical moment” (Ondaatje 2001:2), these issues are contextualised within the history of state terror and resistance to it, on the one hand, and criticism of ethical witnessing on the other. In Anil’s Ghost, as in real life historical examples, moreover, both state terror and witnessing centre on torture, so the paper relies on insights by

1 danijela.petkovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs
“A Bag of Bones is not Justice”: Enforced Disappearance and Witnessing in Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost

Avery Gordon, Elaine Scarry and Jennifer Ballengee in particular to support the thesis that Ondaatje’s clinical and poetic focus on the bodies exposed to pain and death under conditions of state terror inevitably incites the empathetic and defiant response from the reader/viewer/the witness. It is here that the political potential of witnessing comes to the fore most forcefully.

Key words: body, enforced disappearance, grief, justice, law, liminality, state terror, torture, witness.

1) Introduction: the 27,000 disappearances

Anil’s Ghost is set in Sri Lanka, during the tripartite civil war involving “the armed conflict between government forces and the People’s Liberation Front in the south from 1987 to 1990, and the conflict between the government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in the north-east, which began in June 1990” (Hayner 2001: 65). The war was characterised by the utilisation of enforced disappearance: the three independent commissions established after the war to investigate crimes against humanity have documented the staggering 27,000 disappearances (ibidem), yet even that number is far from accurate. Defined as “the illegal abduction by state agents (usually military or police units or undercover intelligence officers) of citizens suspected of oppositional political activism” (Fried Amilivia 2011: 174), enforced disappearance is recognised “as a crime against humanity in international human rights law, such as the 1994 Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons and the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance” (ibidem). While Ondaatje shows it as utilised by the Sri Lankan rebel groups (targeting medical professionals in particular), enforced disappearance is first and foremost the disciplinary instrument of state terrorism². It is no accident that

[...] the first massive practice of enforced disappearance can be dated back to World War II, when thousands of people were secretly transferred to Germany from the occupied territories in Europe under the decree known as Nacht und Nebel (“Night and Fog”), issued on 7 December 1941 by the

² I am relying on Ruth Blakeley’s definition of state terrorism, which emphasizes the didactic intent of state-sponsored violence: “a threat or act of violence by agents of the state that is intended to induce extreme fear in a target audience, so that they are forced to consider changing their behaviour in some way. (...) For an act to constitute state terrorism (...) the following elements must be present: a deliberate act of violence against individuals that the state has a duty to protect, or a threat of such an act if a climate of fear has already been established through preceding acts of state violence; the act is perpetrated by actors on behalf of or in conjunction with the state, including paramilitaries and private security agents; the act or threat of violence is intended to induce extreme fear in some target observers who identify with the victim; and the target audience is forced to consider changing their behaviour in some way” (Blakeley 2009: 1-2).
German Führer and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Adolf Hitler. The fate of the arrested people was to vanish without leaving a trace. The practice of enforced disappearance was thus established as a measure against the civilian population to produce a deterrent effect. Hitler clearly understood that effective and lasting intimidation of a civilian population could best be achieved by measures that kept the victim’s relatives and the population in general uncertainty as to his fate (Scovazzi quoted in Westra 2012: xiii).

Tullio Scovazzi adds something of crucial significance for the interpretation of Anil’s Ghost: “He [Hitler] also understood that vanishing without trace may be even worse than dying” (ibidem) – both for the victims, and for those who are “connected to the disappeared, connected viscerally, connected through kinship, connected through a shared social experience” (Gordon 2008: 112).

Enforced disappearance performed by the state agents during the Second World War, therefore, constitutes a historical precedent with astonishing legal, philosophical, and ethical consequences, as evidenced by Hannah Arendt’s insightful comment:

The Western world has hitherto, even in its darkest periods, granted the slain enemy the right to be remembered as a self-evident acknowledgment of the fact that we are all men (and only men). It is only because even Achilles set out for Hector’s funeral, only because the most despotic governments honoured the slain enemy, only because the Romans allowed the Christians to write their martyrologies, only because the Church kept its heretics alive in the memory of men, that all was not lost and never could be lost. The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive) robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life. In a sense, they took away the individual’s own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed (Baehr ed. 2000: 133, italics added).

In addition to effectively destroying the notion that “we are all men (and only men)” and “robbing death of its meaning” (though not of its terror), one of the most devastating effects of state-sponsored enforced disappearance on the level of individual life is “den[y]ing the right to bury one’s dead and ma[king] mourning impossible” (Drudiolle 2011: 22): suspending both the living and the disappeared in the permanent liminal state between the extremes of life and death, hope and grief. As Ondaatje, who captures this state poetically in his novel, summarises, “[d]eath, loss, was ‘unfinished,’ so you could not walk through it” (Ondaatje 2000: 56).
Yet in addition to the undeniable and numerous psychological issues on the level of individual lives, enforced disappearance presents a specific legal problem: the lack of evidence, which transforms the rule of law into travesty. And it is precisely the (lack of) evidence on which both the plot and the politics of Anil’s Ghost are centered. It is important to remember that “[t]he disappearance, conceived as harm, implies not only the kidnapping of a body, but also the denial of information” (Salvi 2011: 48). The denial of information tears down the fabric of family/community through terror and uncertainty: it also initiates a near-perpetual legal travesty. Under the various state terrorist regimes from Argentina and Guatemala to Mexico and Ondaatje’s Sri Lanka, all the legal institutions ostensibly function properly; yet under the conditions of “the really existing”3 terror, no one gets prosecuted for enforced disappearance/murder due to the lack of evidence. Without proof, attaining legal justice via domestic and international institutions becomes impossible for the majority of the population, who are consequently frightened into obedience.

The absence of criminal proceedings results in the preservation of the status quo of terror: moreover, it sends a powerful message to the target audience. In his memoirs published in 1966, documenting the organisation and the enactment of the Eichmann trial, Gideon Hausner makes an extremely important point:

In any criminal proceedings (...) the proof of guilt and the imposition of a penalty, though all-important, are not the exclusive objects. Every trial also has a correctional and educational aspect. It attracts people’s attention, tells a story and conveys a moral (quoted in Wieviorka 2006:66).

In Sri Lanka, the absence of public trials in the aftermath of the civil war leaves the victims and the general population with only one lesson, that of the regime’s power to produce corpses with impunity: the lesson which Ondaatje’s novel both exemplifies and attempts to contest. Indeed, as Priscilla Hayner explains, the three commissions, which “operated with the equivalent of subpoena power”, after documenting the 27,000 disappearances, “called a number of officials to testify, primarily from the army, but most of these officials flatly denied accusations of involvement in abuses and insisted that all the records from the period had been destroyed” (2001: 56). Hayner continues, summarising the severely limited impact of the commissions’ findings and reports: “the president was dependent on the support of the military as the war continued (...). As a result, she failed to publicly comment on the commissions’ reports, did not push for the prosecution of perpetrators who were identified, and was slow to address the commissions’ recommendations” (2001: 65-6).

3 I am borrowing and paraphrasing Samir Amin’s phrase, “really existing capitalism” (Amin 2004: 11).
In the context of Anil’s attempts to identify Sailor, one of the “unhistorical dead” (Ondaatje 2000: 56), in order to build a “clear case against the government” (176) for its “extrajudicial executions” (18) – this being the summary of both the plot and the politics of the novel - it is particularly important to remember the “watershed moment” in the short history of the implementation and prosecution of enforced disappearance - the finding, in Uruguay, in November 2005, of the remains of Ubagesner Chávez-Sosa, a communist activist who was disappeared in 1976. As Francesca Lessa summarises, “this demonstrated that disappearances had occurred in Uruguay too. Crimes until then denied had indeed taken place, as well as their cover up by the state. (…)” (2011: 192). The plural form of nouns is significant: one identified body comes to stand for all the disappeared bodies, and can accuse, thus breaking the vicious cycle of legal travesty and systematic destruction of evidence. Ondaatje makes this identical point: “One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims” (2000: 176). In Argentina, for instance, the “speaking” of corpses and “bags of bones” produced in the “dirty war” initiated a slow shift towards the law that finally recognised the state’s responsibility for the disappearances (Hayner 2001: 177).

But the state’s admission of guilt, conveyed by the “certificate of forced disappearance” (ibidem), is not to be confused with justice: such admission, moreover, is still lacking in both the fictional and the real Sri Lanka.

2) Anil’s Ghost: a ghost story bringing the dead alive

In Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (2008), Avery Gordon discusses the mass enforced disappearances during the Videla regime (1976-81) in Argentina poetically and accurately as the “state-sponsored procedure for producing ghosts to harrowingly haunt a population into submission” (2008: 115). Gordon notes that the response to this came from those closest to the victims - primarily the mothers whose children were made to disappear. It is they who organised themselves into Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) and staged protests, demanding justice, insisting, more than anything else, on “Aparicion con vida” (“Bring them back alive”) (Gordon 2008: 109). The demand to “bring them back alive”, Gordon notes, seemed particularly irrational, as “[i]t would certainly be reasonable to consider ‘the disappeared’ the dead since the probability of death was very high” (2008: 112). Gordon continues:

Why then did the Mothers, those who searched for the disappeared, insist that disappearance, not death, is the salient and crucial condition? Because they wanted to know what happened to the missing ones; they wanted us to know; they wanted those responsible to account for their actions; they
wanted to talk with the missing; they wanted the disappeared returned (ibidem).

Even when faced with the remains of their loved ones – in the form of the titular bag of bones – the acceptance of the fact of death and the expected behaviour (mourning, reconciliation, letting go) is explicitly refused on the part of the Mothers, since, as one mother put it, “[a] bag of bones tells us nothing about disappearance. A bag of bones is not justice. A bag of bones is knowledge without acknowledgment” (quoted in Gordon 2008: 115). Writing “the history of the present” (2008: 195), Gordon elevates “[p]erceiving the lost subjects of history—the missing and lost ones and the blind fields they inhabit” (ibidem) to what “makes all the difference to any project trying to find the address of the present” (ibidem). The history of the present is thus indistinguishable from the genealogy of ghost production; histories of the present are always both ghost stories and indictments – and Anil’s Ghost is one of them. Even though Ondaatje, through Gamini, voices utter disillusionment with (violent) political struggle, Anil’s Ghost is political as well, in the sense of recognising that a bag of bones is not justice: more so in demanding justice and demanding that the reader, Buddha-like and martyr-like, bear witness.

Setting aside the question of justice for the concluding part, what is it that the reader bears witness to, stepping inside this ghost story? Above all, she witnesses the enforced disappearance as the state instrument of discipline, which results in perpetual, existentially exhausting liminality for all who are touched by it. The novel is explicitly set in a liminal zone, “th[e] borderland of civil war among governments and terrorists and insurgents” (Ondaatje 2000: 289) that is Ondaatje’s motherland in the 1990s. Moreover, it abounds in liminal spaces – war hospitals; villages at the border in the process of being wiped out; the anchored ship turned lab; deserted holy places on the brink of becoming holy again. All the characters, too, are liminal people, walking the constantly shifting lines between life and death, health and illness, sight and blindness, and memory and forgetting; the liminal people who are “dying unmoored” (2000: 225) or living insofar that they are unburied and unidentified, as “disappearance is a state of being” (Gordon 2008: 111), and Aparicion con vida means also “the apparition, the ghost of a life”⁴. The readers bear witness, too, to the geopolitical and state production of “the unhistorical dead” (Ondaatje 2000: 56), the anonymous victims of the state-

⁴“Disappearance as a state of being” – as a process, as the form of life - is particularly painfully rendered in the character of Anil’s friend Leaf, who is in her forties and slowly dying from early-onset Alzheimer’s.
ordered and state-executed massacres no one keeps track of and denies (283), from Guatemala to Sri Lanka: the disconcerting laying bare of killing at the root of law, too. “When soldiers burned our village they said this is the law, so I thought the law meant the right of the army to kill us” (Ondaatje 2000: 44). While the villager’s declaration might sound like a perversion of the very concept of the law, and the measure of the violation of it under conditions of state terror, one must remember that, in fact, “law always refers to the sword” (Foucault and Rabinow 1984: 266). Elaine Scarry, too, while discussing the institutions that can be “inverted” and turned into torture – torture being an indispensable feature of state terrorism - declares that “it is in the nature of torture that the two ubiquitously present should be medicine and law, health and justice” (Scarry 1985: 42).

The potential for taking lives is built into the law, but it is not the only instance of violence the readers are asked to witness. There is also Ondaatje’s favourite theme, the profound brutality of official history, which, too, disappears the “unhistorical dead” from the grand narratives of state, nation, and modernity. (It is precisely these absences which reveal that “the systematised unmaking of bodies and persons [is] endemic to modernity, not the sign of its incompleteness” (Cherniavsky 2017: 71).) Finally, readers witness the damage done to the unhistorical alive, who remain suspended in the liminal state between knowledge and uncertainty regarding those to whom they are “connected viscerally” (Gordon 2008: 112) - burdened, for life, with state-produced ghosts, though not entirely disciplined.

The damage done to the unhistorical alive – inseparable from that professional, ethical and personal involvement known as witnessing - is introduced at the very beginning of the novel. Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist, encounters the scene that “she will not forget” - a woman “sitting within the grave”, watching “the remains of the two bodies” who turn out to be her brother and her husband. “There are no words Anil knows that can describe, even for just herself, the woman’s face. But the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, still remembers. The woman rose to her feet when she heard them approach and moved back, offering them room to work” (Ondaatje 2000: 6). The grief of love in the woman’s shoulder represents an early instance of what Milena Marinkova terms “the body in the act of witnessing” (2011: 89), the theme which runs throughout the novel harnessed, in Marinkova’s interpretation, to the questioning of “identitarian discourses” (86) – though it is important, also, to notice the multiplicity of witnesses, including the reader. Death embodied in the living body of a loving woman as early as page 6 will be invoked by Anil’s drunk artist, Ananda, who stabs himself in the throat having finished Sailor’s head – having given the skull the
peaceful face of his own disappeared wife, Sirissa. Sarath’s explanation, “[h]e’s just one of those who try to kill themselves because they lost people” (Ondaatje 2000: 196), conveys both the extent and the severity of the damage. Ananda is “just” one of the thousands lodged somewhere between life and death due to the actions of state terror targeting their loved ones. “Just”, moreover, expresses that “casual sense of the massacre” (Ondaatje 2000: 283); the inevitable numbing of empathy in the face of the overwhelming number of victims: in the context of the 27,000 disappearances, “one victim”, indeed, can and must speak for many victims.

If something is visibly missing from Ondaatje’s ghost story (about) bringing the dead alive, giving skeletons a face and a name, it is the willingness to discuss more narrowly political issues and organised political struggle in detail – though, arguably, this does not mean the novel is apolitical. Sarath’s explanation of the Sri Lankan civil war, directed at both Anil and the reader, is indicative of Ondaatje’s politics:

There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses (Ondaatje 2000: 43).

The repetition of “bodies’ which turn into hidden “corpses” (but corpses nonetheless), points to Ondaatje’s interest in the genealogy of ghosts and the effects of (state) terror on the human/social body rather than “projecting political solutions” as Margaret Scanlan phrases it (quoted in Knepper 2006: 46). Though fighting for radically different causes, in terms of destruction, all three sides are the same.

Crucially, in addition to gauging – clinically and poetically - the extent of the damage done by the state terror’s production of both ghosts and corpses, the novel presents the readers with “stolen moments of tenderness and solidarity with th[e] fellow desaparecidos” (Gordon 2008: 112). Given that the novel depicts medicine – especially surgery under conditions of (civil) war – as the practice which forces the practitioners to keep facing the extreme precarity of the human body and mind, and to consequently lose faith in all the grand narratives, it is perhaps surprising that the moments of tenderness and solidarity take place within the medical context. The best example of this is the affectionate cooperation between Dr Linus Corea and the nurse, Rosalyn, who are both kidnapped by the insurgents and
forced to perform surgeries. Rosalyn is kidnapped from a different hospital specifically to serve as Dr Corea’s assistant. Instead, Corea teaches her to operate alongside him; the strict doctor-nurse hierarchy is disrupted, and Corea realises “this nurse could say anything to him” (Ondaatje 2000: 125). Professional, social and gender hierarchies do not exist for those ghosted by enforced disappearance; after all, “everyone’s equal when they’re dead”, as little Gavroche sings in the musical version of *Les Misérables*. At one point in the novel, also, Anil and Sarath come across a man crucified in the middle of the road whom they drive to a hospital, with Anil washing his hands with saline solution.

As they passed a streetlamp Anil saw that what she was squeezing into his palms was now bloody water. Still she didn’t stop, because the movement kept him calm and awake, kept him from drifting into shock. The mutual gestures—her pull, his giving—were becoming hypnotic to both (Ondaatje 2000: 113).

The mutual giving and taking between a woman and the crucified man— the first, much happier version of Pietà in the novel - exemplify the abovementioned “tenderness and solidarity with th[e] fellow desaparecidos”, but also professionalism in the face of the heightened precarity of human life under (state) terrorist regimes. Very early in the novel Anil’s colleague Manuel explains why he persists in doing his hard work: “[w]hen I’ve been digging and I’m tired and don’t want to do any more, I think how it could be me in the grave I’m working on. I wouldn’t want someone to stop digging for me. . . . I always think of that when I want to quit” (Ondaatje 2000: 34). But Ondaatje is aware of the self-defeating nature of such solidarity, more so of such professionalism, limited as it is to tending the wounds, digging the bones, identifying the cause of death – it is not for nothing that Gami, the dedicated surgeon who so vocally despises “armchair rebels living abroad with their ideas of justice” (132) and is “working himself to death” (186), is described as the “perfect participant in the war” (224). After all, the actual agents of terror are also “professional men of death” (174, italics added).

But there is another implication of Manuel’s words: at the end of the twentieth century, everyone from the Global South is a potential victim of (state) terror; a potential unhistorical dead person buried in an unmarked mass grave. In this context, Manuel’s professionalism is fuelled by the recognition of this near-universal precarity, the shared vulnerability to death at the hands of power.
3) “We are safe here, but of course history teaches”: enforced disappearance in Anil’s Ghost

While Gordon insists on disappearance as an “organised system of repression” (Gordon 2008: 109), she also recognises that “[t]o disappear is to exist in a world where dispossession and unreality rule” (104). Ondaatje, first and foremost a poet, excels at creating the scenes of unreality, recreating the major and minor characters’ liminal moments before the final push into the dispossession of disappearance/death. One such scene depicts a barefoot and blindfolded victim forced to share a bicycle with his potential killer, in broad daylight, in a disturbing “necessary intimacy” with the kidnaper: “[o]ne hand on the handlebars, but the other he had to put around the neck of his captor”. The terrorists, as Sarath recalls, deliberately stage the scene, so that “none of us would forget it” (Ondaatje 2000: 154-5). Ananda’s wife, Sirissa, too, experiences moments of overwhelming (un)reality before being disappeared herself: on her way to work, in the liminal time before dawn and morning, she comes across the severed heads of the students she used to meet regularly, placed on stakes. “She does not even think of releasing them from this public gesture. Cannot touch anything because everything feels alive, wounded and raw but alive” (Ondaatje 2000: 175, italics added).

Yet the terrorists are not the only ones who kill and make their victims disappear, displaying some of the mutilated corpses afterwards for didactic purposes. While not romanticising the rebels, Ondaatje is clearly more interested in the responsibility and the terror of the government – to the extent that commentators like Ranjini Mendis believe that “the novel’s perspective (...) implicitly exonerates the Tamil Tigers while blaming the Sinhalese government” (quoted in Kanaganayakam 2006: 12). Needless to say, the government members whose preferred disciplinary measure is enforced disappearance know what they are doing. “Everyone must know just enough to be terrified, but not enough either to have a clear sense of what is going on or to acquire the proof that is usually required by legal tribunals or other governments for sanction” (Gordon 2008: 110). Ondaatje makes the identical point as both Gordon and Arendt:

(...) the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale. At university Anil had translated lines from Archilochus—In the hospitality of war we left them their dead to remember us by. But here there was no such gesture to the families of the dead, not even the information of who the enemy was (Ondaatje 2000: 11, italics added).
In the context in which even such ghastly hospitality of war - i.e. leaving the bodies to be identified, buried and mourned - is nonexistent; where the law does not guarantee any kind of justice; where Anil is “six hours away from Colombo” yet she is “whispering” while discussing potential governmental involvement in Sailor’s death (Ondaatje 2000: 53), Sailor becomes the fictional Sri Lankan version of Ubagesner Chávez-Sosa: the body that might accuse, the literal body of evidence. And it is partly because he provides Anil with the proof “required by legal tribunals and other governments for sanction” (Gordon 2008: 110) that Sarath is so severely punished. The archeologist is found dead: when his brother, Gamini, starts cleaning the wounds, “as if treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back into his life” (287), Ondaatje lists the acid burns, the twisted leg, hands broken in several places below the elbows that the man was forced to endure before the utter dispossession of death. This second Pietà is much closer to the Christian original; the tortured body even has a hole in his chest, “a mark (...) made with a spear” (289). Unlike Christ, however, who was legally sentenced to death, Sarath is punished extrajudicially. His punishment thus echoes not only Christ, but also the sentence from *The Man in the Iron Mask* Anil remembers earlier in the novel: “We are often criminals in the eyes of the earth, not only for having committed crimes, but because we know that crimes have been committed” (Ondaatje 2000: 54). Wendy Knepper interprets Anil’s choice of “literary citations” (which include a sentence from *Les Misérables* as well) as suggestive of her suffering from “a sense of common guilt” (Knepper 2006: 48). Ondaatje, however, clearly contrasts Dumas’ Romanticism (the knowledge of crime as morally tainting) with state terrorist pragmatism. Sarath is punished by the state agents - criminalised, tortured and executed – partly for arming Anil with evidence. Under conditions of state terror, a criminal is, thus, an easily occupied position – a perpetual empty slot, with the associated ready-made techniques and devices for torture and execution.

But Sarath is eliminated as a witness as well. In the context of the Christian allusions Ondaatje makes while representing Sarath’s dead and tortured body, it is worth remembering the etymology of the word. As Giorgio Agamben elaborates in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2002), contrary to the Latin word for witness, “testes”, which implies only legal action, “in Greek the word for witness is martis, martyr” (26). In the New Testament, specifically, “[t]he ultimate testimony was that of blood, which the two witnesses [in Revelation] poured out after they had prophesied (...) a witness is associated with the destiny of the one to whom he witnesses” (Xavier Leon-Dufour quoted in Wieviorka 2006: 32-3, square brackets in the original). As testifying in the court of law is out of the question under the
conditions of Sri Lankan state terror, Sarath’s *cannot but witness*, and in witnessing, replicate the destiny of the victim. Witnessing the abuse of power thus always carries the risk of torture/death at the hands of said power, in an act of state terror – “the permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy” (Ondaatje 2000: 64), occupied Judea or Guatemala.

4) Witnessing

*Anil’s Ghost* does not end with a legal triumph and posthumous justice won for Ruwan Kumara aka Sailor: its final pages are devoted to the description of Nāṭṭra Mangala, the Buddhist ritual of the eyes. But witnessing, so unambiguously invoked by the eyes, is not without its problems. After Sarath delivers the story about the man he saw taken in broad daylight on a bicycle, Anil asks him what he did. Sarath’s reply is one word: “Nothing” (Ondaatje 2000: 155). Sarath’s reply is in line with the critiques of ethical or sympathetic witnessing summarised succinctly by Susan Sontag: “So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence” (2004: 102). Sontag is by no means the only one calling attention to the pitfalls of witnessing: Michal Givoni offers another, arguably even more damning, critique, claiming that “ethical witnessing has been to nongovernmental politics what discipline has been to the modern state” (Givoni 2013: 6). Simone Veil, moreover, calls attention to what Roy Scranton (2016) termed “war porn”: “the ‘gourmand’ interrogation by those who wanted stories even more horrible than reality to satisfy a sadistic imagination hungry for the sensational…” (quoted in Wieviorka 2006: 72). Investigating the Holocaust, Annette Wieviorka questions the very possibility of objective history against the preference for witnessing: “how can a coherent historical discourse be constructed if it is constantly countered by another truth, the truth of individual memory? How can the historian incite reflection, thought, and rigor when feelings and emotions invade the public sphere?” (Wieviorka 2006: 144).

In *Anil’s Ghost*, the truth of individual memory and “bearing witness to pain suffered [instead of] giving voice to an inner guilt” (Rose 1999: 91) are preferred; moreover, they are implicitly contrasted with testifying in the legal, institutional context. The truth of individual memory and the “feeling and emotions” that Wieviorka dreads consistently undermine the detachment and rigor of Anil’s forensic pathology; Ananda’s attempts to reconstruct Sailor’s head “apparently following the Manchester protocol for rebuilding a face up from the skull” (Keen
2007: 156) end up in the artist producing a portrait of his own disappeared wife: “a work of mourning rather than of recovery” (ibidem). Sailor is finally identified as Ruwan Kumara; his skeleton is stolen and then returned to Anil by Sarath, who will die for this deed; yet the readers never learn whether there was any legal case built on this specific “bag of bones”. Still, Ondaatje has undeniably built a clear case against the government with his narrative fragments of love, loss and reconstructed violent deaths “in the presence of the state”.

Ondaatje’s preference for the truth of individual memory/feeling and the multiplicity of perspectives (on pain), moreover, is not merely an instance of his trademark postmodernist distrust of coherent narratives. Against the valid criticism directed at the “innocence and impotence” of witnessing, in particular, we must set the fact that Sarath, who did nothing while witnessing enforced disappearance in broad daylight, will do something later on - something for which he will be extrajudicially executed. Just like Sailor who was tortured before being murdered, Sarath, too, will be exposed to the “world-destroying” pain (Scarry 1985: 29), not only for providing Anil with proof – we must not forget the limited impact of the three commissions - but for choosing a side, for exhibiting active (though not spectacular) resistance and disobedience. Yet torture, on its own, is not enough: “in order to communicate (...) a message, torture must be presented or represented to a witnessing audience” (Ballengee 2009: 9). Torture and death are for the living, not the dead. Hence the significance of Anil: the significance of the readers too. For torture and enforced disappearance do not always send the message the terrorist regime wants it to: they did not produce a deterrent effect on Las Madres, they did not, ultimately, work on Sarath.

While discussing the novel that turns the readers’ eyes so much to the dead/dying/maimed/sick bodies, it is, perhaps, appropriate to try to interpret this surprising counter effect of torture in terms of bodily responses. According to Jennifer Ballengee, while witnessing torture,

we see a body in pain, and we react with our bodies, with what our bodily memory tells us about pain: the worst that we have experienced, the worst that we can imagine. (...) Torture thus conveys a sense of certainty by means of experiencing or witnessing the body in pain; this is an empathetic, not a logical connection (2009: 9).

Moreover, “[a]s our bodies respond to the pain of other bodies, the sensory becomes the merely sensual; the body of the tortured becomes symptom, wound, spectacle, placed in the service of producing a variety of meanings in the name of politics” (Ballengee 2009: 144). It is in this sense, too, that witnessing is potentially
“A Bag of Bones is not Justice”: Enforced Disappearance and Witnessing in Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost

political: one of those meanings, the intended one, is certainly the demonstration of the power of the regime; other meanings, however, will inevitably be injustice and the necessity of doing something to counteract it, out of the knowledge of common, shared precarity. (Manuel, Anil’s colleague, finds his dedication and professionalism in this knowledge too.) Here it is worth noting that, discussing the body in Anil’s Ghost, Milena Marinkova offers a radically different interpretation. “Ondaatje’s text (...) empowers the human body to act as an ethical and affectionate witness to the inscrutability of pain, the inexpressibility of grief, the silence of the witnesses to pain” (2011: 89). Conversely, we would argue that Anil’s Ghost makes both pain and grief understandable; very loud, eloquent and political. There is nothing inscrutable about “the sound of Anil’s weeping” (Ondaatje 2000: 63) in her hotel room after a phone call from Leaf; nothing inexpressible about Ananda embracing the skeleton to which he will give his wife’s face; nothing silent about this reader’s response to the Pietà scene between the two brothers.

5. Conclusion

In Anil’s Ghost, Michael Ondaatje offers a series of forensic-pathological findings resulting from the examination of state terror and its instruments - enforced disappearance, torture and execution – which are applied indiscriminately to the bodies of civilians, political opponents and/or “criminals”. Appropriating the clinical gaze in his much-criticised, (supposedly) detached perspective, and capturing the destruction of the social fabric through uncertainty in the novel’s “narrative and investigative detours” (Knepper 2006: 45), Ondaatje, as Margaret Scanlan argues, “replicates the experience of terror” (ibidem), which is terror precisely because death is robbed of its meaning; grief is loud, bodily and unfinished; justice via legal institutions is unattainable; the hospitality of war is suspended, and “truth is just opinion” (Ondaatje 2000: 102). His much-noted vagueness as to the actual causes of the war, in combination with the poetic/forensic reconstruction of the victims’ liminal moments – not only in Sri Lanka but in the Global South - conveys the nightmarish (un)reality of both state terror and global necropolitics at the end of the 20th century, in which “the reason for war [is] war” (Ondaatje 2000: 43), and the actual work of torture and killing is carried out by the professional “inanimate men” (Arendt in Baehr ed. 2000: 122). While both clinically and poetically focusing on the bodies exposed to torture and heightened vulnerability to death under conditions of state terror, however, Ondaatje plays upon the empathetic response from the reader/viewer/the witness,
allowing for the political potential of witnessing to come to the fore. This potential of witnessing is labeled political as it leads to direct action, the significant acts of insubordination and fearlessness – and these, just like the mutilated corpses, are inescapably didactic.

Witnessing is, moreover, opposed to testifying: the very form of a “detective novel” (Knepper 2006: 45) implicates the reader in both the search for the truth and the act of watching the tortured/dead bodies while simultaneously demonstrating the failure of “the fleeting administration of justice by (Western) visitors” (Marinkova 2011: 84). Indeed, the whole novel can be interpreted as an extended narrative “ritual of the eyes”, framed as a detective novel or a forensic report. It is in this context that Ondaatje’s focus on gestures of solidarity and gentleness directed at the body is particularly important. Although Milena Marinkova believes that in Anil’s Ghost “the body in the act of witnessing, the witnessing body, attains the potential to disrupt the hegemonic optical regime” (2011: 89), in relation to the readers the hegemonic optical regime is validated. The eyes of the readers witness not only torture, but also gestures of help and compassion, which, just like state terror, are applied indiscriminately towards the living, the dead and those who are in-between. “Here, as in The English Patient, a statue, a skeleton, a dead or dying body is as likely to inspire love as someone with a full set of functioning limbs” as the anonymous Economist reviewer puts it (Internet). And love – unlike the state’s official admission of guilt; unlike reparations; unlike, even, the improbable prosecution and sentencing of all the perpetrators of enforced disappearances and murders – is justice.

**Bibliography**

Danijela Lj. Petković

„VREĆA KOSTIJI NĲE PRAVDA“: PRINUDNO NESTAJANJE I SVEĐOĈENJE U ROMANU ANILIN DUH MAJKLA ANDAĈIJA

Rezime
