

Entering the Cave: Unveiling the Violent Logic of the Dark Interior

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For millennia, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" has remained among the most influential passages of the philosophic canon. No doubt, its discussions of ignorance and superficiality make it a timeless metaphor for the human condition—still, I argue there is another reason for the story's lasting resonance: its setting evokes a carnal fear. There is something of the cave's darkness, the cramped atmosphere, and the distant notion of an "outside" that renders the space an obvious prison—and more importantly, the individuals therein *prisoners*, with all its connotative weight. It is difficult to imagine the allegory in any other setting; its moral force depends upon one's fear of the dark, enclosed interior. Indeed, mankind has come to understand such dark interiors as legal black holes: spaces in which law fails to uphold human rights, where man's physical and psychological dignity cease to exist. Crucially, we possess an impulse to avoid such spaces—after all, the eye is trained to look past darkness. Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and *Poems from Guantánamo* illustrate how the State capitalizes upon this impulse, employing dark, confined interiors—caves, pits, and literal prisons—to control bodies, obscure violence, and commit abuses without consideration of law. The work of literature, however, intervenes: fascinatingly, texts cast visibility into these spaces from a point of temporal aftermath, returning dignity to the contained individuals over time. *Anil's Ghost* and *Poems from Guantánamo* thereby portray the tension between the physically, psychologically, and legally degrading power of dark interiors and the human effort to both break into and push against these spaces' boundaries to repair violence, or, at the very least, reinstate some dignity to the confined.

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje emphasizes the difficulty of breaking into a dark interior to convey the State's intent to conceal atrocities. The novel begins with a literal excavation: a casting of light into darkness. Anil and grieving families are allowed to look into pits, yet the act

of looking is nearly unbearable: “There was always the fear, double-edged, that it was their son in the pit, or that it was not their son (1). The ontological power of the dark interior rests in its neutral state of invisibility. Without an individual’s active determination to find them, such spaces do not register within society: they are tucked beneath the ground, in the side of a mountain, or in literal undefined lands (Kaplan). Moreover, these dark interiors behave much like Schrödinger’s cat, not only assuming simultaneous existence and nonexistence but also *containing* the possibility of both life and death. In turn, the act of breaking into a dark interior—or excavating a pit—carries the tormenting weight of assigning life or death to the contained. By locating prisoners of war within spaces of invisibility, the State thereby imposes an added layer of psychological anguish for outsiders who must actualize the harms committed to the contained if they choose to open the pit. In turn, dark interiors are an effective political tool to keep abuses hidden, as their latent invisibility promotes the layperson’s ignorance as a means of self-protection. Ondaatje further details the abusive possibilities of the dark interior through the anecdote of Ananda’s mine: “The men in the earth worked in a half-crouch, damp with sweat and tunnel water. If someone cut an arm or a thigh with a digging blade the blood looked black in the tunnel light” (92). Even without direct State violence, the mine acts as an extension of governmental harm; the nation’s extreme poverty forces Ananda into a space that tires, contorts, and injures the body. The working conditions are blatantly unlawful, but because the men are literally “in the earth”—as opposed to in a factory, for example—the logic of the dark interior persists, ridding any implementation or even expectation of labor rights. Indeed, the men’s blood turns black in the mine, both literally and figuratively; within a dark, confined space, abuses to the body meld into the landscape, never to be seen. Ondaatje reveals this most straightforwardly in that Anil discovers Sailor in the Bandarawela caves, where “the region felt timeless” (50). The

State conceals a modern crime within this “timeless” space—this legal black hole of a cave—collapsing temporal boundaries to erase accountability. Sarath even remarks that “it was difficult” (45) to receive a permit for the cave. Beyond the literal physical barriers, there are legal barriers designed to obscure evidence of atrocity.

Still, a cave differs from a prison in a crucial way: it possesses an open mouth. In the novel, this open mouth challenges the aforementioned notion of absolute concealment; the cave’s open mouth signals a leakage of its contained darkness—of fear, abuse, trauma—into the whole of Sri Lankan society. Indeed, Ananda is “used to dark paths” (91), as if the entire nation has been swallowed into the cave—as if all of Sri Lanka has become a land without law, where governmental violence will not be seen by the international sphere. Moving away from such abstractions, though, Ondaatje certainly elevates the symbolic value of the cave. He writes that “Cave 14 was once the most beautiful site” but became “a place of a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies, hands broken off” (12). Ondaatje foreshadows that the cave is a site of atrocity, but he also personifies the cave with the word “crime.” He describes with visceral diction how the statues were cut out with “axes and saws, the edges red,” as if the cave bleeds. The imagery is violent; this brutality hints at how the dark interior not only conceals physical harm but also obfuscates moral guilt. Only within darkness is man free to separate heads from bodies without legal or moral repercussions. Reading this scene, one pictures the men ruthlessly hacking away at the stone as the statues remain frozen, unable to defend themselves. One further imagines how individuals—like Sailor—imprisoned within a dark interior are stripped of agency and movement; the cruelty the imprisoned face is inextricable from the setting that allows it. Through this conflation of violence, Ondaatje reveals that within dark, liminal spaces lies the potential for the worst human abuses.

Poems from Guantánamo, however, pushes against the characterized stagnancy of the dark, enclosed space, proving how even within total confinement, the poet's imagination reanimates human dignity. It is crucial to note that each poet—and each poem—possesses a unique relation to incarceration. However, amid the varying sentiments, all the poems share two traits: they were written in a prison, and they made their way out of the prison. By observing the literature through this lens, the poets' words gain unique momentum in pushing against the spatial boundaries of the prison. As written in the book's acknowledgments, "Before the lawyers began to open it up, Guantánamo was truly a 'black hole' from which no information—and certainly not the voices of the detainees—could escape" (ix). There was a "before," but here we are in the after. One cannot ignore that an "opening up" has occurred. Even if a poem bears witness only to degradation, violence, and despair, its presence constitutes a rupture to the silence that the State's prisons demand. Indeed, many of the poems are saturated with anaphora, calling to sound and repetition to batter against the stillness of confinement. Abdulaziz's "O Prison Darkness" powerfully enacts this. In the first line, he addresses the "prison darkness." The act of naming is itself a form of illumination, and he thereby begins to undo the darkness. The poem even calls forth a breaking out of this obscurity: "For after the dark hours of the night, / Pride's dawn will rise" (22, 3–4). Within the rigid logic of the prison, where time and movement are suspended, imagination is an act of resistance. By describing the forces of nature, the poet refuses to let the prison walls sever his connection with the perpetually moving outside world. Abdulaziz continues, "Those who persist will attain their goal; / Those who keep knocking shall gain entry" (22, 9–10). Through anaphora, the poem embodies persistence. Yes, repetition—whether of religious verse, poetic lines, or the image of dawn—builds power with

each mention. By writing and thus imagining, Abudalaziz keeps “knocking” against the dark interior with the hopes of gaining “entry” to the outside.

On the other end, landscapes of vastness can also magnify misery by accentuating the prison condition. In “I Write My Hidden Longing,” Abdulla Majid Al Noaimi writes, “I looked around and was cornered. / Destiny had found me” (59, 2–3). He is cornered by the prison walls, by U.S. propaganda, and by physical violence. Any potential “relief” (59, 8) feels out of reach: “Before me is a tumultuous sea; / The land continues to call me / But I am sailing in my thoughts” (59, 9–11). The natural world no longer evokes freedom but distance and volatility. In response, Al Naomi turns inward, finding consolation in “The book of God” (59,17). Although Al Naomi turns toward the self as opposed to the open land, he similarly rediscovers dignity within the prison via the motion of prayer. His imagination of God and his actualization of God’s grace via recitation reanimates his intellectual and spiritual vigor; he needs not optimism but only the mental capacity to pray. The expansive nature of imagination—whether religious or not—thus pushes against the prison’s darkness, allowing posterity to recognize the prisoners’ resilience *and* the abuses they faced.

In exploring the two texts, the question of *dignity* continually returns. It appears that, in both texts, the intellectual energy of the dark interior lies not in its capability of violence, but in how the “outsider” is supposed to engage with what lies within in order to repair harm. *Anil’s Ghost* offers the first part of the answer—the easiest part: one should break into the dark interior and cast visibility upon human rights abuses, just as Anil and Sarath did with Sailor. However, what Ondaatje does not reveal is what to do once one successfully opens up the dark interior. The novel contains no scene of outright justice, no explanation of Anil’s return to America, no image of a mother peeking into a pit to discover the son is hers. No, Sailor is brought above ground

only to possess a new sort of immobility—one where individuals know not what to do with the body. This sense of unknowing brings us to the starting point of reading *Poems from Guantánamo*. Again, bringing these poems out of prison required deep labor, but this matters little to the reader: the task has been done. In this way, the readers approach the texts the way Sarath and Anil first approached Sailor's body—as if uncovering a story. However, while the poems offer profound evidence of the atrocities the poets endured, they collectively focus far less on the conditions of incarceration and more on the expansive motifs of God, the sea, and the sun. In turn, perhaps one's analysis of these texts should not be a scientific one of “unearthing the truth” but an examination of the text's existential power and engagement with being on the “outside.”

Poems from Guantánamo offers great intellectual complexity in asking what it means to engage with atrocity after it is brought to light. The ontological power of the dark interior suggests there is an ontological power of the bright, exposed space. Is there a way, then, for the reader to utilize the exposed nature of the poems in order to repair some of the violence the poets faced within the dark interior? I had argued that even if a poem bears witness only to despair, its existence powerfully proves that the State's mandated invisibility can fail; in turn, perhaps the act of reading the poem restores a sliver of humanity to the authors because the reader actualizes the poet's voice in face of the prison's function of silence. This assumption may be self-indulgent for the reader, but there *is* an undeniable power to the persistence of voice—to these poets' words breaking out of the cell, out of the island, and onto the pages for an international audience. Still, the international aspect now adds complications, as it raises the question of who has the right to “open” a dark interior and who has the right to repair violence: are these poems meant for academics, for the average U.S. citizen, or for the poets' families? Yet, what can one do with

the poems *but* to read them? There seems to be an inevitable sense of saviorism in the essay through the constructed language of inside vs. outside, darkness vs. light. There is great weight to this criticism, as a prisoner may not desire their humanity to be reanimated, to be reanimated by *me*, or even believe in the possibility of reanimation. Yet the political work of the dark interior—of prisons, mines, and caves—is precisely to sever one from the outside world, and more cruelly, to erase the self: one's body, thought, and voice. The violence within such spaces can never be undone, but its devastating consequences of dehumanization and erasure can be resisted. To engage with the text is to revitalize the body's voice, and more importantly, to break the physical, spiritual, and intellectual structure of the dark interior. Indeed, if confronted with Plato's Cave, I suggest that the moral task lies not only in bringing the prisoners outside but in listening to their stories *to* combat the force of ignorance that first imprisoned them. In doing so, even if reinstating dignity to the confined is an imagined desire, the *intellectual* act of seeing the dark interior ruptures the State's structure of a violent invisibility.

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