
Giuseppe De Riso

When Narration Is Made Flesh: An Affective Reading of Geetanjali Shree's *The Empty Space*

If the humanities have a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at limits of its capacity to make sense.
(Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*)

Getting under the Skin

While literature has long been engaged with the problem of giving voice to those who are left voiceless, or to represent the point of view of the oppressed, Geetanjali Shree's *The Empty Space* deals with the suffering of terrorism's victims in India by attempting something different. Narration literally bursts *in medias res*, with the description of human limbs and other body parts floating in air, their former wholeness being destroyed by the explosion of a bomb in a cafe as part of an unclaimed terroristic attack in an unspecified Indian city. Among the nineteen victims claimed by the blast there is the son of a couple sent to study at the local, also nameless, university. The novel concentrates on the lives of his parents who, right after the massacre, adopt a little boy, aged three, who was present in the cafe at the moment of the explosion, yet had inexplicably survived without any injuries. Though the novel is entirely focused on the three characters, their proper names are never revealed. They remain anonymously identified in the course of the narration just as father, mother and son. Similarly kept under wraps are their specific location, motivations and past, of which the reader is given just fleeting glimpses in the few flashbacks scattered in the novel. Even the adopted boy stays silent during the first years with his new parents, refusing to articulate his thought through speech.

If so little is revealed to the reader how, then, can the author make a case for those involved in the dire predicament she describes and what ambition does she nurture with her writing? The answer to both questions is to literally place the reader under the characters' skin. Depriving her characters of fixed verbal signifiers such as proper or geographical names, Shree's writing seems to take as many linguistic and cultural moorings away from the reader in order to foreground the sense of wrath, resentment, and hate. Accordingly, this essay will try to present the novel as a meaningful opportunity to reflect on the performative dimension of literature and how it copes with the human body's role in the emergence of culture and identity.

Indeed, the quickness, ubiquity and unpredictability with which violence can erupt almost anywhere in Indian regions is one of the main motifs which occasioned the novel in the first place. As the author herself admits in an interview published together with the novel, the writing was inspired by a terroristic attack which killed

the son of two close friends of hers. Besides the pain for the loss, what also left a mark in her memory was the fact that “such a calamity can strike anywhere, anytime”.¹ In the attempt to deal with “the impossibility of reaching the core of that grief” (3344), and “also the fact that this story could happen at any location in our times” (3346), Shree devises a performative framework in which perception and sensory activity are re-mobilised and reinscribed with and through writing. Narration gives aesthetic force to the fear, horror and existential anguish which haunt the Indian family, thus putting into effect the affective participation of the body.

Violence and Cultural Aftershocks

Such emotions resonate and interfere in the development of Indian cultural and political domain since the time of its foundation. As Vidisha Barua notes,² the theory to make two nations on the grounds of religion (Pakistan for Muslims and India for those observing other cults) put forward by Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah at the time of Partition in 1947 planted “the seed of the problems” (11) of terrorism in north India, Jammu and Kashmir, for which years of communal violence and genocides ensued. Occasions for violence would also arise due to internal conflict between nationalist parties and the separatist claims of other minority groups. Punjab, a state adjacent to Pakistan which had been broken up during the years of the Partition, saw an insurgency led by a movement demanding a separate independent Sikh state, Khalistan or the ‘land of the pure’. After contributing to its quelling in 1993, Barua reports that K.P.S. Gill, at the time the leading Punjab police executive in charge of the repression, accused political frictions of fuelling violence, especially those produced by the clash between Indira Gandhi’s Congress and the far-right Akali Dal.³ Kashmir Valley, once a ‘Paradise on Earth’, is now a training-ground for terrorists, while illegal migration is rampant in the northeastern region of the ‘seven sisters’, separatist states which despite their fraternal appellation are trying to break away from the Indian Union as a result of the process of ethnic fragmentation initiated by the British Raj in 1826. The spectres arising from Partition, the recently ended Sri Lankan civil war, episodes of religious discord, internal friction and armed dissent like the Bombay (now Mumbai) bombings in 1993 are all reinvigorated in their action by the extreme indigence in which millions of people, often refugees or widows, are left to languish without any kind of assistance.

In places impregnated with trepidation, dread and paranoia, where the body feels vulnerable or in danger, political interests turned such tensions to their advantage by cherishing the dream of national unity as a way to regain erstwhile happiness. In the decades from the 60s to the 90s, nativist parties like Bal Thackeray’s Shiv Sena employed the strategy of drawing on the existing secular and religious heritage to construct the fiction of a Hindu land and history, whose sacred spaces had been tarnished or corrupted by the presence of external forces, the worst being Islam. The feeling of fear, irritation or disappointment which imbues Indian social tissue effectively turns it into a tinderbox prone to the violent reinscription of public space

¹ Geetanjali Shree, *The Empty Space* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, New Delhi, Auckland: Harper Perennial, 2011), 3335. The version used for this essay is the Kindle edition. References are consequently made to locations within the electronic text.

² Vidisha Barua, *Terrorism in India* (Huntsville: Sam Houston State University, 2006).

³ A party holding sway over Sikh religious bodies.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Dubai", *Public Culture*, 12.3 (2000), 627-651.

and law. In many contexts where minds are filled with fear of violence and bodies constantly strained by poverty and scarcity, even ordinary accidents can be the spark for cataclysmic and indiscriminate brutality.⁴ Shree's writing is preoccupied precisely with such feelings, with making readers responsive to suffering and anxiety more than with the problem of addressing the specific political, ideological or financial rationales behind violence. The nexus between riots and pogroms, political and financial interests, bombings and massacres is too complex to single out any reason for the mounting of tensions, making any understanding of violence through binary opposites also inadequate (Hindus against Muslims, Sikhs against Hindus, nationalists against separatists and the like). In order to elicit strong ethical concerns on actions and matters which may seem incomprehensible from the outside, Shree's writing tries to portray violence as an event developing in the everyday where cultural patterns bear the traces and workings of experience.

Skin Writing: Narration as Bodily Contagion

The reader is kept in the dark about the kind of tensions plaguing the geographical area where the novel is set, hinting only that after the explosion "the cafe was now suddenly in a 'sensitive area'. Rioters amok in the city. The cafe a magnet for danger" (317-318). While the specific character of the agitations is not clarified, it can be said that the reluctance to distract the reader with contextual details is in fact essential to the production of a 'danger effect' through writing. The author's concern is epistemological first and foremost. At some point, the survived boy, who is also the main narrator in the novel, states that:

We have mixed up everything. Some eras do that. Knowledge, meditation, generations, conventions, intelligence, essences. Listen to me, listen well. Information is not knowledge and knowledge is not vision. Vision comes from the judgment of experience, which comes from intelligence, which comes from the senses tactile, not from the brain ... (716-717)

Aware of the hegemony of vision in thought and language to the detriment of the other senses, Shree's writing rediscovers the sense of touch and proprioceptive sensibility⁵ in order to highlight the intimately participative condition of contact between the skin and its environment. The author acknowledges in the sense of touch the common root capable of appealing to what is the primary medium for any possible communication: the human body. In this way, the author tries to overcome the cultural juxtapositions inherently produced by ocularcentric ways of considering knowledge and culture, with their traditional dichotomy between subject and object, self and other in favour of a skin or 'haptic' writing that possesses a performative force capable of relocating a narrative of violence from its original context to the body of the reader.

The centrality of bodily relation to the world and its participation in it becomes instrumental to the process of writing and reading. Emphasis is not so much laid

⁵ Proprioception is the faculty one has to be aware of the position and the movements of each part of one's body at any moment in time.

on the representational or mimetic power of language, as on its ability to trace the interaction among forces in time and space. From this perspective, words are not significant for their referential accuracy or truthfulness, but for what they ‘do’ both at a physical, and perceptive level. Presence and absence, movement and stillness, direction and orientation become the foundation of narration, whose primary concern is not the descriptive framing of a scene, but the ability to map potential force relations and interactions between bodies, objects and situations. In the words of anthropologist Veena Das: “Naming the violence does not reflect semantic struggles alone – it reflects the point at which the body of language becomes indistinguishable from that of the world – the act of naming constitutes a performative utterance”.⁶

This is apparent in one of the first flashbacks in the story, when the son that would be later killed in the explosion announces his intention to go to a university located in a city which his parents deem at risk of possible terrorist attacks:

‘And that’s why when he [sic] grew up,’ he said, ‘Let me go there to study. You’re from there, Father, what’s it like, that place, its soil? Where our village is? That famous university nearby, I’ll study there, let me go.’ ‘To be scared all the time? Scared everywhere? I won’t live like that.’ ‘I want it. I will go.’ ‘But there?’ Ma nagged, anxiety on Father’s brow. (215-220)

The parents’ concern at the thought of sending their son to study to a dangerous place is motivated by the fact that the violence of pogroms or bombing attacks can flash like lightnings, striking with exceeding speed to bring mutilation and loss without conceding any time to realise what brought them about or how they hit. Yet, to obtain permission to leave, such apprehension is partly mocked by the son, who compares worries about the unpredictability and suddenness of violence to the rapidity with which the body can be traversed and shocked by electricity:

‘Look at the two of you, carrying on as if it’s not college I’m about to enter, but the doors of death!’

He wouldn’t let up. ‘Then you may as well say, never step out. Not today, not ever, not anywhere. Remember that man ... who went out of his gate just to take a leak, imagine, not even to shit, touched a bare wire and was electrocuted? Just like that. Never any electricity when you need it, but of course, at that moment, flowing in full force through the wire?’ (229-232)

The biological metaphor is then heightened to its maximum effect through the parents’ effort to minimise anxiety with recommendations of bodily and environmental safety:

He was not to venture into the sensitive areas of the town, nor into the desolate ones, nor the crowded ones, no visiting fairs, no getting on to buses, no loafing about in the dark, nor where ruffians lurk, such as railway stations, bus depots. Stick to safe areas. In and around the university. Where nothing has ever happened. Like that cafe. Safe, the university cafe. Where nothing has ever happened. (241-245)

⁶ Veena Das, “Trauma and Testimony, Implications for Political Community”, *Anthropological Theory*, 3.3 (2003), 293.

The more the boy's parents try to prevent hazards, the greater the divide between the chance of any murderous attack and its perceived risk. In fact, the latter poisonously thrives as a paradoxical outcome of all the listed suggestions aimed at finding a safe place for the body. The threat of possible hazards undermines here any reasonable guarantee of finding a secure place for oneself precisely as a consequence of the effort to make the potential danger vanish below any determinable threshold. In other words, the more the parents try to prevent the occurrence of fatal events, the more unpredictable and fearful such events become to the mind and body of the characters and the reader. The absence of a definite threat, which the reader knows is going to eventually materialise, ends up making it all the more pervasive, unnerving, piercing. This strategy reflects in part the process by which, for example, nationalistic parties produced public insecurity by claiming the necessity of increasing surveillance and cleansing in public spaces against the deadly and unforeseeable menace of separatists' attacks.

Likewise, Shree's writing uses public land and space as an affective-aesthetic resource functioning not simply as scenery or setting passively containing characters, but as an energising milieu from which personalities and actions emerge. Language does not dwell on detailed descriptions of objects and characters, nor does it expatiate upon insightful analyses regarding sequences of events or the characters' motivations. Instead, it immerses itself in the stream of sensation buried in the folds of the body so as to reactivate the emotions experienced by inhabiting space. By attempting to rationalise and belittle, the parents bring about a sensorial dissolution and consequent dispersion of violence which has significant implications in Indian culture, making intangible chances of danger crack invisibly through narration.

In the novel, like in Indian social reality, death can come virtually anytime, from anywhere. Any body can become a potential human bomb powerful enough to fling body parts into the air or set ablaze entire buildings: "The bomb will reappear, again and again, from inside, from outside, from near and far, destroying all borders and divides, it will come united in diversity and diverse in unity ... " (1845).⁷ Writing sets up fields of perception whose power brings into play the analogical field of the perceiving body as an emergent event at the crossroads between the nervous system and a turbulent sphere of social arrangements and conflicts. By making ideas of security and the sense of danger intersect at odd angles, the ubiquitousness of menace converges with its fundamental 'nowhereness' in the impossible mapping of a twisted landscape which dwells nowhere, yet it is inescapable insofar as it affects surround and impregnate the perceived space of the body at every level:

But then don't think of the bomb as just a bomb, either. A big bomb might be crude, a smaller one, the latest. ... The bomb is the nation's border, the bomb is a superpower, the bomb is a buffoon. It shatters the earth, it pierces the sky. It terrifies, but oh, look at its terrible beauty. Who sets off bombs? Men, women, educated, illiterate, rustic, computer wizards, kings, gods, demons, communalists, nationalists, dreamers, pessimists, foreigners, natives, touchables, untouchables, apes, bulls, I or anyone else – who can

⁷ This is a clear hint at Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of India, and his idea of 'unity within diversity' with regard to the birth of the Indian nation.

tell, who knows these things and who talks of them; the bomb was waiting forgotten, in that heavy, heavy past, the rest was just empty space and the present that is lost; the today that had stopped still, stopped, waiting to be drawn into the ring of fire, hoping – maybe I too can be blown to smithereens, I too can become meaningful. (948-951)

Material distortions and acoustic touches all contribute to an aesthetic strategy which “produc[es] an empty space waiting to be filled” (2340) by those energies which cannot be directly described, but which traverse writing in full effect. Already in the title of the novel there is a clear tension between materiality and location, since an empty space is somehow also full of its own emptiness, pointing at the same time at its vacuity and the eventuality for a place to be filled, traversed. This makes the space, and the affects produced in it, measureless, it blurs any natural boundary to pierce, fragment and disperse the bodies it contains.

For what does a blast do? It just shreds you and scatters you. Shreds of fire, water, earth, air, sky. Nothing looks like itself any longer. Turns into something else. Anything else. An idli, a finger. So shall we conclude then that on one side stood Ma, her crying, Father, his slap, my dead friend, his smile, town after town on fire, and on the other side, an empty space? (1700-1703)

Only under this narrative conditions can the bomb, or kamikaze, affect the functioning of the field of bodily sensations simply by the awareness of their very existence and by the reactions they arouse. Like a virus, terrorism is everywhere, without a demarcation line to define it neatly. It is not necessary to describe it in detail, it can suffice to stress those aspects which can spread to or ‘infect’ the body of the reader, as when the survived boy recounts the moment of the explosion:

Perhaps it was then. When the bomb exploded. When the bomb exploded and we scattered to pieces. It was then the moment froze in time, and we, in it. Ashes, fire, flesh. Fans, gulab jamun, pav-bhaji, idli, vada, all whirling in the air, like an argument gone astray in the cosmos. You know how cafes are these days. You get everything everywhere now. Idli-vada in the North, pav-bhaji in the East. As for bombs – anywhere, at any time. ... Fragments. Ashes. Ceiling fans caught in the molten fluid poses of a danseuse. Crockery, bottles, napkins, laid out in rows, pitch-black, exhibits of art. ... Bits and pieces, unclaimed still. (252)

Lumps of flesh, fire, food and every sort of material are all thrown together as they are fragmented and yet intermingled by the explosion of the bomb. Every kind of distinction, be it material or cultural, appears meaningless. In the novel, there emerges a milieu where muscular sensation, social forces, attractions or repulsions find their phenomenal manifestation in the form of horrifying spasms, body parts splattering and dashing like splinters into chaos. Similarly, readers’ bodies are made to feel the stressing tensions and the squeezing expansiveness of pierced flesh, torn limbs and bodies found “shuddering in a trance” (1025). Spaces infuse a sense of malaise as they are perceived intrinsically unsafe, menacing, disquieting. Political agitation shocks the body and is assimilated as intimate horror by the characters,

to the point that they can be said to live and breathe precisely because of fear. This is evident in the boy's portrayals of his father's feelings at the death of the son, which the former described as a kind of infection spreading through the body and consuming it: "Standing at the door after the goodbye, his face towards those departing, his back towards me. Slowly his back begins to wilt. I can see the air slipping out of him. Its descent visible. Slowly his spine hunches down. Downwards the shrivelling spreads to his limbs, to his knees, his legs, his feet, the balloon emptying out" (1029-1031).

Fright and uncertainty saturate writing, working as a tremendous energy source which makes experiences strike deeply and produce burning wounds in memory: "The grief so intense that it threatens to pounce on you and devour you" (1023). Everything hurts, nurturing the spirit of revenge which according to Deleuze, in commenting Nietzsche's critique on the origin of Christianity, can only be appeased when it is spread via bodily contagion.⁸ In the words of Deleuze, its aim is for all life "to become sick" (132). Writing aims at making readers respond to descriptions of the body exactly as if it were their own, at making readers become participants in the movement presented to them as a sort of 'inner mimicry', a kinesthetic responsiveness to the events described. Later in the novel, the voice of the adopted boy addresses an unknown character in the story with a generic 'you', as if he were speaking to the reader her- or himself:

This was my attempt. This was what I tried with you. To fill you with everything that was mine. Everything that was scattered around so far, all the pieces, gather them in you. Become one. In one place. But instead what happened was that when I loaded you with my pieces, you fell to pieces. The scattered shards tore into you. Nothing joined up. No. Not yours, not mine. Only wind and rain and sticks and glass and waywardness. All of it in turmoil inside this body, which looks deceptively poised, balanced, coordinated. (2246-2249)

In Shree's writing a part of Indian social reality is thus felt and seen in evocations eliciting a sensory participation analogous to the one we ordinarily grant to the real world.

Performance as Excess

To make a text 'lived' through language, for it to be truly and efficaciously performative, narration must rely on an aspect defying every mode of comprehension, just like the biological and chemical processes of the human body. According to Paul de Man, the technical reliance on the body is what allows language to function together with and independently of subjective investments or symbolic references.⁹ That's because the perceiving body is both the occasion for any possible performative utterance, and the opportunity for an excess or surplus overflowing what is communicated. In the novel, reading is likewise seen as an enactment, a kind of performance or taking place that cannot be reduced to any definite statement or final meaning.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁹ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 300.

As the narrating voice of the boy admits: “The great, the old, stories, action, are all elsewhere. Behind movement, hidden by words” (724-726). Only in the irreducibility between the body and the discourses it occasions can reading involve ‘doing’ without necessarily appealing to thought or rational motivation, so as to more closely ‘reflect’ those processes which, by impregnating bodies and spaces, bring about unpredictable violence: “It follows no order, no chronology, no logic of place or time, after all, when will it all make sense” (954).

The text is therefore performative insofar as it opens reading to radical unpredictability: writing is more a reality effect, an interference between textuality and the embodied dimension of the readers allowing them a very ‘specific’ form of feeling, or cognitive knowing, precisely by refusing to provide any kind of representational or hermeneutic reading which would undermine the impression. The text does not reveal in the same way as one focused on representational reading would, but tries to register what may remain otherwise suspended in the medium, “the murmuring of the unsaid, an absence lurking behind the spoken, some devastation behind everything made explicit, something inward-looking in each clarification” (1166). The form in which sensory perception is enunciated is no doubt what permits the foregrounding of a deeper reality, maybe the deepest and best hidden in the folds of the skin, “that grief can create worlds, and destruction too. So can a bomb. And what happens once has to happen again and again. Less than that, and how will I feel it in my very skin?” (1077-1079).

Violence and fear are able to create a surplus of reality also because of how the body feels and reacts to the circulation of media images, whereby, for example, “The talk circled around and about the headlines and there were so many bombs and so many speeches and behind it all, silent, but not hidden, there he was. The one in pieces. The one in the pictures” (951-952). Such a surplus of reality is like a shock wave which the human body is especially endowed to register and transmit to other bodies. In the novel, the media “collecting pieces” (204), focusing on death through its brutal occurrence make the body secretly vibrate at the startling spectacle of evil, of bodies dismembered and reduced to smithereens: “They needed a living corpse. Yes, living. To touch. To watch as it turns cold, stiffens. To see it distorted into death from vital flesh. To see blood flowing. To see the brains boiling over from the shattered skull. To see the bones unravelled from their seams” (624-627).

Through the participative remediation of the body, the movement of media images and recounts makes resonance with the invisible flowing of perception so as to absorb events and give them new power as a felt and perceived condition. Shree’s novel re-stages a part of Indian social reality as an aesthetic experience which recaptures the sense of identity with one’s own surroundings, to give an understanding of what a place would feel like if we belonged there. The author tries to inscribe intense physical sensations and perceptions directly into language, making the novel akin to an ‘aesthetic signifier’ whose flow synaesthetically ‘affects’ the reader. The dynamic performance engendered in Shree’s writing is not based on separation and absence, but demands continuity. The reader is primarily asked to cast

her- or himself in the flux of narration, not to extract or withdraw from it. Narration relies on the involvement of the body as provider of the sensory information which constitutes, infiltrates, interferes and exceeds the apparatus of language and signification, as well as any set of preordained system of words and ideas:

This is how a story should be heard. Like it has transported you inside itself. Into that whirlpool of sorrow. ... all your senses coming alive with the story so that it seems you aren't listening to it from outside, but have slipped right into the middle of it. ... Listen to another saying of the ancients – it's not the story that goes wrong, but the one reading it. If the reader is gifted, even what's unfinished, what's merely hinted at, uncurl their possibilities. Because such readers don't treat the story like a toke of grass to drug that proud creature called the brain. Oh no, skilful readers fearlessly offer all their senses to the story. Don't care if it drowns them, or sets them afloat or lashes at them like a snake bite. (1827-1834)

Shree is aware that a text could not exist without its readers' complicity. The content of narration can only exist through the encounter with a reader who, in its embodied being, does not just receive but creates meaning by lending words life with his or her feelings, experience, knowledge. In the quote above, the reference to a snake bite can be seen as particularly meaningful, since it embraces both physical and psychological planes. The snake marks the flesh and, as Jung maintained, its bite symbolizes sudden and dangerous action of the instincts upon the psyche. Shree employs the literary medium as a process requiring 'diffusion', or participative engagement, rather than the contemplative detachment established by the subject-object binarism.

Making Sense

On a closing note, Shree's involvement with place and emotions in the novel seems integral to a wider concern to redefine sensory perception with regard to knowledge and art. More specifically, she seems to attempt both an epistemological recovery and a rehabilitation of the original meaning of the concept of aesthetics. A term originating from the Greek *aesthesis*, it was initially introduced into philosophy to refer to the sensory and perceptive processes activated when the body comes into contact with objects, or in the words of scholar F. E. Peters,¹⁰ those concerning "contact, mixture or penetration of the bodies involved" (8). As Hélène Cixous and Roland Barthes have argued, sensory experience has been 'forsaken' in Western culture and epistemology since the advent of Platonic thought, where it was considered unreliable and deceptive.¹¹ Being thus partly separated from authentic truth, sensory information was further damaged when the hierarchy between soul and body, incorporeality and materiality, was established wherein the latter came to be seen as a mere instrument for the former. As a consequence, aesthetics went through the most severe crisis to become paradoxically framed into its opposite, the marginalisation of sensorial perception. All the senses requiring a direct contact or participation of the body were seen as less reliable than the secure detachment of

¹⁰ Francis Edwards Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* (New York: New York U. P., 1967).

¹¹ A very accurate account of the matter can be found in Claire Oboussier, "Synaesthesia in Cixous and Barthes", in *Women and Representation*, ed. by Diana Knight and Judith Still (Nottingham: Nottingham U. P., 1995), 115-131.

vision, whose information proved to be most suitable to the workings of language and its capacity to directly or metaphorically 'represent' objects, situations and their qualities.

By focusing on the participative contiguity of the body with its environment, Shree's text participates instead to the sort of paradigm shift which is currently going on in some branches of cultural theory, a shift from the ocularcentric view on the world and its emphasis on the representation of reality, to an affective one foregrounding the active participation of the body, even if at the abstract level of perception. Indeed, the call to look at what escapes reflection in order to make visible the invisible is the *fil rouge* traversing performance theory from Austin up to this day. When in 1955 J. L. Austin advanced his theory about how utterances can be performative, a major conceptual point concerned the 'actual' power of utterances to be actions in themselves and, as such, to 'occur' in the same way as events or processes do. Afterwards, Jacques Derrida would develop Austin's ideas dwelling precisely on how language can bring into existence the things it speaks about. This helped him expose the hidden character of language's process of creation, whereby the originative event in language conceals its own execution or governs the conditions of possibility under which the illusion can be sustained that what is being talked about is not a discursive product, but precedes the utterance. Derrida brought thus into prominence the importance of 'deconstruction' of cultural texts as a revealing moment of both the assumptions, and preconditions which they dissemble in their own articulation; namely, of what is kept silent or taken for granted, of what is so intimately ingrained in the communicative process triggered by the text so as to remain invisible. Both prerequisites of the performative dimension of a text, progression and concealment, originally depend not on qualities or restrictions internal to a text, but on the presence and participation of a human being: "Performativity", according to Derrida, "will never be reduced to technical performance. Pure performativity implies the presence of a living being".¹² Derrida's reading expands Austin's original notions by recognising the bond between textuality and its necessary reliance on the 'lived', or felt, condition of a human body. This reading proved crucial, for examples, to Judith Butler's¹³ reflections on the illusory 'naturalness' of gendered behaviours and ways of thinking. In fact, such naturalness is the impression produced by the repeated execution of acts participating to a wider system of established social conventions which, in the scholar's terms, "congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43–44). The manifest visibility of the human body becomes paradoxical in that it is as a consequence of its actions that performance, understood as event or process, can simultaneously come about and fade into the experiential background. It is not surprising, then, that its latest developments have seen a growing interest in 'affect' first sparked in 1995 by Brian Massumi¹⁴ and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick¹⁵ in two independent essays. Massumi, whose theoretical framework is mainly employed in this essay, develops Deleuze's notion of 'body' understood as an entity capable of both affecting and being affected by other forces or bodies. From this perspective,

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999 [1990]).

¹⁴ Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect", *Cultural Critique*, 31 (Autumn 1995), 83-109.

¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tompkins", *Critical Inquiry*, 21 (Winter 1995), 496-522.

affect refers to the qualitative variation of perception virtually triggered by the indirect, or abstract, stimulation of the senses experienced by the human body, and which is mainly transmitted via corporeal contagion. The effectiveness of theories of affect lies in its ability to neutralise the properties of the metaphysical Logos, such as the use of binarisms, in order to take into account the innate excess of human feelings which exceeds vision, metaphorical specularity or juxtapositions. Moreover, since a body, in Deleuze's view, is not necessarily defined by its materiality, but can also refer to abstract ideas, an affective approach appears to be especially fruitful in reading a novel like *The Empty Space*, where the affective intensity of the bomb, as it has been discussed here, is especially exercised in its absence, when the perceiving body fears the consequences of its potential manifestation.¹⁶

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988).

Insofar as representation is set apart in favour of a registering of the senses, it becomes paramount both to trace the effects that narration contingently produces as a consequence of its unfolding at the level of the story, and to measure the degree to which narration makes a given spatial and social reality exert varying degrees of 'pressure' on the body and mind of those confronting it. A daunting critical task for which the Humanities have only recently started to build proper instruments, a key task in order to achieve a heightened awareness of the processes involved in cultural communication.