

**UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA**

**Alterity and metafiction:  
poetic design in the work  
of Michael Ondaatje**

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*A Janet Inksetter y a  
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**ALTERITY AND METAFICTION:  
POETIC DESIGN IN THE WORK OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Philip Michael Ondaatje was born in September 12, 1943 in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He is educated in St. Thomas College, Colombo. After his parents' divorce he follows his mother to London, England, in 1954, where he attends Dulwich College. In High School the young Ondaatje confronts British customs and the strict education which makes him evade himself through the reading of poetry until 1962, when he decides to follow his brother to Canada. There, he attends Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Québec, from 1962 to 1964, and later, University of Toronto for his B.A. in 1965, and Queen's University in Kingston for his M.A. Thesis on the writer Edwin Muir in 1967. In 1966 he gets his Canadian citizenship. In Bishop's University he starts discovering his poetic vocation thanks to the influence of several professors and poets such as D.G. Jones. Later, he marries Jones's ex-wife and they come to Toronto where he finishes his B.A. Due to his negative stance towards a Ph.D. Thesis he has to leave Western Ontario University and is admitted in York University while he also gets his first Governor General's Award in 1970.

When Ondaatje arrived in Canada he had written nothing and, although he had a voracious appetite for reading, he had no idea that he would eventually become a respected author. His favourite writers at the time were W.B. Yeats, Franz Kafka and Robert Browning. Like the latter poet, Ondaatje dissolves the lines between prose and poetry: "Moving in and out of imagined landscape, portrait and documentary, anecdote and legend ... Ondaatje writes for the eye and ear simultaneously," Diane Wakoski has stated in *Contemporary Poets*. Ondaatje's success as a novelist, however, has taken him beyond the borders of Canadian success and into the world of international acclaim.

To approach this study of Michael Ondaatje's work we have considered pertinent to begin with an overview of English Canadian poetry from its beginnings and with a special focus on the 1960s and on the possible influences and readings

the writer has been aware of. After a brief vision of Ondaatje's cultural and poetic beginnings, we will analyse the poet's evolution towards a narrative which adds, to the postmodernism of his experimental years, the consciousness of his postcolonial other, and which exposes, beyond a dense and imagistic prose, collective and individual questions of a maturing poet who reaches the international public without losing his sense of Canadianness, namely, his heterogeneous and pluralistic background.

At the end of the nineteenth century, poetry in English Canada proclaimed heavy imperialistic views towards the British tradition. It was not until the Confederation poets where we find a subtle consideration of what it means to be North American and Canadian, and to express a local feeling in any of the arts. English-Canadian poetic beginnings are thus imported and unable to be translated naturally into a new landscape. The Confederation poets -Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman and D.C. Scott- will be the ones to give a new impulse to the local and particular features of the Canadian land despite their traditionalism.

The decade of the 1920s will see, however, the emergence of the long poem with E.J. Pratt and the documentary poems of Dorothy Livesay. These and other poets such as Ross, Finch and Kennedy will be the ones to have a renewed sensibility towards European Aestheticism and will help, with their own means, fight against the Canadian Victorian mentality. In 1936, a modernist manifesto will be published with the anthology *New Provinces*. But modernism will be delayed in English Canada due to the strong attachment to both the Victorian age and sensibility and the lack of a cultural and editorial structure to feel independent and organized as a group.

There seem to be two types of modernisms in Canada: an aesthetic one in the 1920s, and a committed and conscious one in the 1940s. The latter, also called neomodernism, appears in Canada with poets like Earle Birney, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Miriam Waddington and Raymond Souster. Two important anthologies appear in this decade, A.J.M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry*

(1943) and John Sutherland's *Other Canadians* (1947), where an argument will be created to confront tradition and colonialism, a cultural debate which opposes a non-nationalist and a nationalist modernist view. Thus, a reflexive modernism slowly develops after World War II with a narcissistic stance that speaks through the voices of Al Purdy or Eli Mandel. Modern Canadian literature is then being built and will be prolonged through the 1950s and even the 1960s.

Northrop Frye's verbal explosion will take place in the 1960s and has its voice in poets such as Phyllis Webb, Al Purdy and James Reaney, together with the Montreal poets Irving Layton, A.M. Klein or Leonard Cohen. Likewise, a psychic concept of regionalism gradually supplants the cosmopolitan and the European views. Moreover, an independent West Coast poetry -heavily influenced by the American Black Mountain School- is then respected and valued in the new experimental voices of bpNichol, bill bissett or George Bowering who have been very attentive to the poetic trends south of the border. After this verbal and cultural explosion with Frye's *The Bush Garden* (1971) and Atwood's *Survival* (1972), an intellectual dialogue is established in English Canada which proclaims a deep rejection of either thematics of victimism or garrison mentalities, which were a singular proposal to define Canadian literary identity by Atwood and Frye respectively. Thus, Frye's conservative and symbolic literary stance is gradually dissolved, together with Atwood's thematic approach, into new formalist analyses and new experiments with literary forms.

In North America, the community of artists educated under the aesthetics of the Black Mountain School will give a new impulse to develop a fresh sense of creativity and an irreverent look at the past with reactionary linguistic weapons. In poetry, postmodern poetics entered English Canada via the United States and through the Vancouver poets of the 1960s and 1970s. The long poem, self-reflexive, playful, and open-ended, was established by English-Canadian critics and artists who were determined to acknowledge the textual impossibilities of origin and continuity thus making the poetic expectations lie in generic eclecticism. The cultural and literary centre will then move from Montreal to Vancouver to

Toronto, where the postmodernist trend will have its voice in poets such as Frank Davey and bpNichol who introduce local history and the documentary in poetry.

The postmodern, however, will not be as radical as the avant-garde but will be implicated in the dominant culture inasmuch as it will incorporate the past in order to criticize and parody it. Postmodern scepticism will therefore lie in the rejection of both humanist concepts as such and of value judgements which are proclaimed in capital letters; concepts like Truth, Justice or History, which are vulnerable of emotional manipulation. The individual, then, has to be active in order to devalue the canonized master narratives when necessary and to articulate new discourses which may be equally valuable.

We will briefly follow the critical thought of J.F. Lyotard, Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault, and will try to relate these to the validity of master narratives. Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton will also define and describe the different aspects of our culture in the late capitalist society and will then be questioned insofar as they ignore the humorous irony that lies behind all this cultural questioning of old values. Beyond political or ideological speculations which we cannot deal with in our study, our interest will focus on the description of certain textual characteristics that appear in the cultural production of the last decades and which are consciously foregrounded by writers like Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Salman Rushdie or Gabriel García Márquez, whose literary efforts are mainly directed towards self-reflection and discontinuity, plurality and diversification of voices, intertextuality and metafiction, all enacted with the ludic purpose of challenging some dominant ideology or just visit the past with an ironic eye.

Ondaatje develops his creative work entirely in Canada. His first collection of poems, *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), appears in Coach House Press with which he has professional and emotional links with experimental poems of Coleman's, Nichol's or McFadden's. Here, the author shows his influences, his taste for mythological characters and his somewhat impersonal style. He starts developing his poetry with the strong influence and guidance of poets and professors such as D.G. Jones, A. Motley and George Whalley. In 1969 he publishes *the man with*

*seven toes*, a long narrative poem which was taken to the stage in Vancouver and Stratford, in Canada. Here, the poet starts experimenting with the historical documentary, a recurrent tendency in his career henceforth.

In 1970 Ondaatje publishes *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems*, with its challenge to generic boundaries and its merging of literary and popular culture. The text is taken to the stage in North America with big success. In a parallel way, the author is writing a collection of poems, *Rat Jelly* (1973), his best piece of poetry for a long time, where he improves his technique and shows a certain maturity in a poetic imagery and design which, consciously or not, he will repeat all throughout his professional career.

Our proposal is to show how Ondaatje starts writing poetry roughly in the line of Wallace Stevens in *The Dainty Monsters* but will gradually move towards a poetic postmodernist line in long poems which provide a poetic design which merges, in a fragmentary way, poetry and document. These are works such as *the man with seven toes* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. This formal evolution towards postmodernist poetics resides in the blurring of generic boundaries and the extension towards the experimental long poem. After a poetic impulse in the Stevens's mode in his short lyrics, then, the poet moves towards constructions of documentary poems in the Pound tradition, creating an uncertainty and difficulty in the reader who approaches a documentary poem full of intertextual echoes.

In the first part of our study we thus try to design this poetic evolution which begins at the beginning of the 1960s, where the immigrant poet tries to find his voice in a new country. This voice will be deployed through metaphors and symbols expressed in the form of myths, fables and allegories. In chapter 2.1, we analyse these beginnings in *The Dainty Monsters*. Through the reading of concepts like metaphor and allegory we try to elucidate the complex ways the oneiric and the aesthetic may have worked in the young Ondaatje, as well as to approach his poetic impulse, where reality and fantasy, language and myth always played a relevant part. The key concept in Ondaatje's poetics is myth, which is pursued in

its rawness trying to rescue an immediate sensual perception, rather than a historical or symbolic meaning. Here the poem is an artifact which must be rescued from the chaos of life. This view, taken from his admiration of Yeats, Stevens and Auden, will be gradually put aside with the poet's increasing interest in other kinds of poetics.

This hypothesis, only made explicit by the poet and critic Douglas Barbour, is generally ignored by the rest of the critics and is the one we try to demonstrate as, after Ondaatje's first book of poems, is clear how he gradually moves towards openness and procedural forms in the Poundian tradition. In some of his later poems of the 1970s, however, he is still attached to his modernist lyrics as if he now and then liked to construct short lyrics as an imagistic exercise.

Most of the animal poems in *The Dainty Monsters* shift from cool observation to gregarious humour while the symbolic qualities of the figures are essentially ignored or undercut. As a logical consequence of his early years in Ceylon, Ondaatje's jungle is more exotic than violent; this violence appears as intrinsic without being necessarily disturbing, but disguised in an ironic understatement to balance its intensity. Part of Ondaatje's success as a poet is due to his ability to evoke emotional participation in his readers. The shift from purely lyrical separate poems in the first section to a sequence of poems in the second enacts one of the methods by which poetry made the shift from conventional modernism to postmodernism. Accordingly, Ondaatje the poet finds this symbolic closeness too confining and searches for an equilibrium in his love poems. The act of retelling ancient myths is no longer as interesting as the use of popular myths in his narratives. In *The Dainty Monsters*, however, he has begun to discover the power of tactile and kinetic metaphor. In evoking ancient myths and dramatizing them he thus follows a respectable poetic tradition of associating terror and beauty underlying the creative process; and these imagistic and mythic analogues can be understood as poetically emphatic moments that remove his works from an ordinary plane.

In chapter 2.2, we will see how the work of art must be a metaphor for all experience, for how a man experiences reality. This is expressed as a process, so Ondaatje's form moves towards a sequence of poems where the extension of metaphor becomes an allegorical abstraction. George Whalley taught Ondaatje the nature of myth, how it embodies reality to move in the direction of legend. Thus, Ondaatje takes the legend of Billy the Kid to make a new myth of the gunman; this is made by inserting a blank photograph at the beginning to express his distrust of the legend and by ending his text with a photograph of himself dressed as a cowboy. *Rat Jelly*, though published three years later, shows an interesting formal and thematic evolution from the lyric poem towards the long sequence.

In *Rat Jelly* Ondaatje writes the most important poems about his family; they confront, though implicitly, the theme of the search of the father with all its oedipal implications for the first time. Besides, the poet had seldom presented the figure of the writer in his shorter poems as he does in this book. In the beginning of this decade, therefore, the poet starts designing a kind of romantic artist in different forms in the characters of Peter, Billy, Mervyn or Bolden. In the single poem, however, Ondaatje has not yet found the proper architecture of tone by which to juxtapose document and fiction, prose and poetry, into the more complex design he will accomplish in the 1980s.

*Rat Jelly* moves from domestic emphasis to more objective meditations along its three sections. One of the defining poems, "The gate in his head," expresses how the writing mind pours the inchoate materials of experience onto the page, but it must capture them to do so. This contradiction manifests both the terror and the glory of art. The writer seeks to catch the actual movement of the living -not the dead- and he can do it only by allowing words their own indeterminate ambiguity. Other poems are portraits of Stevens's writing that try to suggest the problematic simultaneity of both mind and chaos. The artist is presented in the poems as a spider and raises disturbing questions about the nature of the creative act and the emotional consequences for the artist involved in it.

Many of these poems explore the problems of art's relation to life which will be a constant speculation for future years.

Ondaatje's collection of poems at the end of the 1970s, *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do*, and with which he won his second Governor General's Award, is also written during and after his first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976). They are more strictly autobiographical in their selection, and the references are less mythical or literary. At the end of the 1970s the poet returns to his native Sri Lanka for the first time, and produces a number of travel poems in this collection which foreshadows his future evolution in the 1980s. These poems reveal, for the first time, an immigrant poet from Sri Lanka who looks at the past as a trace in his present Canadianness. Even the poems that invoke history insist that it is only the invocation that can be inscribed, not the actual history. This new collection of lyrics benefit from the practice and mastership acquired in *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* which deserve to be analysed as a new experimental phase in the second part of this study.

Other materials will be incorporated to the domain of poetry, materials which deal with ethical or historical matters to make contact both with the word and with the world. Accordingly, in chapter 3.1, we analyse the extension of both poetic form and subjectivism where the lyric voice of Ondaatje's early years gives way to other voices of the contemporary world. In both *the man with seven toes* and *Billy the Kid* the use of both documentation and historical voices, however fragmented or parodied, makes possible a break from lyric subjectivity towards an attempt at poetic experimentation. Poetic language has thus fallen entirely into the secular realm and Ondaatje's longer poems not only join the Pound tradition, but he also becomes a postmodern writer. The formal qualities of this type of poetics thus include the extension and the mixing of genres as the poet has moved forward under the influence of a particular Canadian tradition, the documentary poem. It aims to respond to his Canadianness and to his historical present in which the stories no longer matter but the movement of the mind and language.

*Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*, however, go further in bringing the reader into the text, in making the experience of the world as unmediated as possible and in acquiring a personal and self-reflexive stance. In *the man with seven toes*, Ondaatje finds a way to attenuate lyric subjectivity while retaining a lyric tone in the speech and tone of some of their characters. The poet subverts the documentary as a form even when he makes use of eclectic ways to novelize the lyric sequence. Accordingly, he begins to suggest the ways in which multiple voices can support and contradict one another. This poetic sequence tries to refuse the acceptance of any single form as adequate to express the fluid quality of experience it seeks to convey. We will try to define Ondaatje's evolution not as a creation in the grand Romantic sense of confessional self-reflection, but as a poetic discourse that collects and sorts both perceptions and experiences in an attempt to chart our moods and attitudes towards the world around us.

In chapter 3.2, we see how the poet's evolution has turned itself into a quest to define the self in relation to his past. The dark references we continually find in relation to historical or legendary characters are now depicted into a more sincere and committed lyric voice in the 1980s. Writing has moved from stylistic exercises of understatement and poetics towards what Ondaatje's critics have called an emotional suicide, that is, the sheer deployment of the poet's privacy. *Secular Love* (1984) merges generic distinctions and approaches life through several lyrical voices in a collage of techniques which comprises both the narrative poem, the serial poem and the lyric poem. In this book, Ondaatje's architectural design finds its place in the recurrence of symbols that have accompanied his poetry throughout all his poetic career: moon, stars, islands, maps, darkness, drowning, drunkenness, dissolution, suicide, friendship, family and community have created a poetic design that pervades the poet's shape and tone, despite the poem's meaning or the divisions between lyric and prose.

Without being strictly confessional, *Secular Love* submerges in emotional shipwrecks and rescues in which there are equal proportions of authorial control and aesthetic distancing. Honesty pervades a long poem of personal and communal

feelings that only tries to depict the essence of experience. Although our study prefers to locate this text in Ondaatje's poetic evolution it must be studied along with his travel memoir *Running in the Family* (1982).

Despite our efforts to see all the actual documentaries made by Ondaatje in the 1970s, the quality of the films avoided a proper analysis of the image. We consider, though, that chapter 4.1 is necessary to approach and value the importance of this visual facet and its relation to Ondaatje's literary works. In spite of the scarce research available, we have been able to share different opinions with critics and friends of Ondaatje's who have witnessed the writer's cinematographic adventure. There seem to be similar techniques of photography and montage that are shared by both film and literary text; several humouristic features and obsessions are present in both the literary works and the movie scripts though the results have not often been so successful in his filmic productions. Film-technique, then, in which distance is created while maintaining a clarity of detail provides an analogy for the mythopoeic process of the poet.

*Sons of Captain Poetry* (1970) is dedicated to bpNichol, the father of concrete poetry in Canada, who is also implicitly mentioned as an intertextual echo in *Billy the Kid*. In the film, Ondaatje plays homage to his poet-friend using the most appropriate visual medium to create a montage-style filmic portrait of the artist. *Carry on Crime and Punishment* (1972), is a comic exercise played by Ondaatje's friends and family which tries to imitate the technique of silent movies. A homage to the theatre is paid in *The Clinton Special* (1972), where a Canadian theatre company, The Theatre Passe Muraille, is working in a rural community in Clinton, Ontario. This is a community album with non-professional actors who wanted to make mythic the landscape they inhabited and which share some similarities with *Running in the Family*. *Love Clinic* (1991) and *Secular Love*, on the other hand, both share a reflection on personal failure and emotional disarray. We could see this last movie on video format and, although it was not successful at all, it has some interesting aspects and intertextual literary references which can be related to Ondaatje's typical imagistic obsessions. These cinematographic

exercises, together with the author's interest in photography, will be considered as humouristic games played between the author and the community of friends and artists that surrounded him in those years. Nonetheless, jokes work in Ondaatje's writing but do not always have the same effect on an objective and anonymous audience.

It is in Ondaatje's literary works where all his previous experiments are shown in print and where, if there is not a direct or an acknowledged influence, there is a clear overlap of images and attitudes towards perception. The very fact of writing *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in order to subvert a known legend of the American West is meaningful in itself. Apart from Ondaatje's collage of photographs and drawings in this book, the text's technique is overtly cinematic and obviously inherited from the visual medium. Amid the artist's attempt to stop time and movement in his texts, photography also symbolizes the creative process in Ondaatje's poems and narratives. The camera is a weapon that substitutes a gun or a pencil but also records the images -or the memory- the human eye cannot capture.

We have considered important to also give an overview of different concepts of photography in chapter 4.2, as well as trying to relate them to a few of the actual photographs Ondaatje has used in some of his works. Our main interest lies in the reflection on photography as a non-innocent tool to mirror the world around us. For this matter we have considered Roland Barthes's reflections on photography and its relation to perception. Umberto Eco and Lorraine York, among others, have also argued on this matter with the purpose of escaping the realistic conventions of the medium. John Berger, together with Susan Sontag, have also analysed photography and its cultural meaning in relation to the observer's subjective perception.

Ondaatje's main motif in using the medium of photography lies in its manipulation as a substitute of memory, namely, as the inseparable rendering of the subject and its meaning, thus making the thing become the interpretation itself. The power of the camera is thus intertwined with the power of language, making the

medium significant as a discourse in itself and making the observer an active protagonist of his own perceptual mechanisms. Ondaatje's obsession with the limits between the perception of an object and its destruction is clearly manifested in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family*. The author uses the camera as a tool to fix any slipping image, thus connecting photography with memory, not with reality. Similarly, throughout Ondaatje's poetry, the conflict between experience and the obsession to capture it in fixed and static moments is explicitly depicted. In *Billy the Kid*, though, photography is used as a structural design to form a collage whose main purpose is to defamiliarize perceptions.

In Part Two of our study we want to focus on generic experimentation in some detail. For that reason we study Ondaatje's experimental works *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family* as the main examples of his formal and aesthetic development which define his main formalistic and thematic concerns until a new phase is gradually developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Accordingly, and being conscious of the amalgam of theoretical discourses, we want to give an overview of the different trends and preoccupations that have surrounded the writer during these years.

In order to approach this formal experimentation we felt obliged to deploy different readings of the different currents of thought and aesthetics that have influenced, consciously or unconsciously, the culture of the late twentieth century. Several theorists appear as necessary to be analysed in order to approach the different trends that have influenced contemporary thought. One of those is Mikhail Bakhtin whose analysis of the novel is crucial to any critic of contemporary fiction. Together with Bakhtinian dialogism, then, we have considered important the reading of Wayne Booth to deal with the concept of irony and thus relate his thought to that of the New Critics to whom the text is totally alien to its possible emotional or ethical powers of persuasion.

Space and time, as Bakhtin would suggest, define language which can hardly be considered a unitary construct but an arena where conflicting discourses,

fragmentation and experimentation have space, where a truly and definite vision of the world is transcended. Bakhtin thus widens the canon to include a plurality of discourses and histories which displace our orthodox conception of a monologic text. For Bakhtin, language itself is the dividing line between self and other, whereas for de Man dialogism works as a principle of radical alterity which transcends any formal self-reflexive or narcissistic structure. We refer not to an enclosed context but to a play among contexts, among different cultural and ideological units.

The importance of Bakhtin's approach lies in his concept of dialogism which calls for an openness in language towards numerous social and ideological forces, centrifugal and centripetal, which endow discourse with dynamism. Accordingly, the novel and the short story have a polyphonic character which other poetic, epic, or dramatic forms lack, because of their monologic character and subjective voice. The word in the novel can no longer exist in a neutral and impersonal state but only as an articulate entity in varied and variable contexts, which the speaker appropriates with determined intentions. Thus, the writer assimilates and adopts literary and extraliterary features to construct his own style and creative personality.

One way of incorporating this heteroglossia in the narrative is through the figure of the author/narrator and its relation to the characters' voices. Likewise, the incorporation of literary and extraliterary genres plays an outstanding role in this process of assimilating reality as heterogeneous. Our main interest will therefore lie in the intricate relationship of the so-called real author and his official versions of himself. Heteroglossia integrates various levels of discourse in the same ontological plane with the effect of a relativizing of authority. The result is the metafictional novel and its rupture of generic boundaries, including those between literature and reality. In Ondaatje's *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, the use of prose implicates novelistic conventions, though always with an ever-present questioning of the historical subject and the fragmented structure. In

*Running in the Family*, another element will be added, transforming history into the author's story, subjected to his family's fictitious memory.

Together with metafiction, the category of the other is derived from a notion of self and of identity. In Ondaatje's texts the question of the other constitutes the opening of knowledge that sets his texts in motion and that seems to return at their conclusion. The author's other narrative self will be a historical or a legendary character who turns into a historiographic metafiction, a character that is no longer history or legend but fiction and narration.

After a theoretical introduction on alterity and heteroglossia in chapter 5.1, we will analyse different aspects of textual violence in chapter 5.2, precisely when it is applied to the figure of the artist as hero or as anti-hero, an aspect that has had some resonance, at least in a thematic level, in the English-Canadian fiction of the last decades. Our concern lies, however, in the recurrent and formal imagery that has gradually been built in Ondaatje's experimental works and which constitutes, ultimately, the architecture or poetic design of Ondaatje's texts. In that sense, Ondaatje's protagonists seem obsessed with death dreams, identified with windows that break, with knives that do harm, and so, they constitute prototypical images of the loser. Furthermore, these characters usually have a strong anti-heroic charge and live in a highly individualistic world. A clear referent would in this sense be Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966) a postmodernist piece whose anarchism and alienation aim to convince the reader, ultimately, to "connect nothing."

In chapter 6.1, we make a further study of the imagistic architecture of Ondaatje's experimental works of the 1970s. The various images that pervade *Billy the Kid* constitute an assault to the senses; Billy's sensual power is depicted through the attention to the dynamics of the text, through his "works," which are both his memories and his murders, and even through the sum of the different versions that have previously appeared. The character's image is nothing but an invention of the author who provides it with a new and unknown sensibility that confronts our common notion of the destructive western cowboy. On an instinctual level, then, Billy is both an artist and a murderer to whom the reader is aesthetically

and sensually attracted to. In *Billy the Kid*, formal strategies such as analepses and prolepses abound and are the sources of textual violence. The book has been created out of apocryphal and fictional fragments which do not exist in the cowboy's legend. This textual and imaginary fragmentation thus transforms the different passages into a recurrence of images which is deployed in different situations and perspectives, always with an ostensible cinematic style. If Billy is the anti-hero, the sheriff Garrett is the hero, a real assassin, who does not live by his instincts but by his brains, a fact that seems to be qualified as the evil power in an ideological level. If Billy perceives and feels through lyric monologues, Garrett imposes his presence through linear structures; whereas Billy is a postmodernist in his instinctual and chaotic actions, Garrett is the analytical modernist who thinks in manichean terms.

The long poem is formed of self-sufficient independent poems which are rhythmically balanced by narrative fragments which widen the metaphor. These narrative fragments are the ones that subvert Billy's lyrical monologues. Both in *Coming Through Slaughter* and in *Billy the Kid* there is a difference between the private and the public life of the protagonists, a frontier which is typically Ondaatjean and which reflects the struggle between their reason and their intuition, and which will always be unravelled by dialectical characters. The only romantic escape lies in Bolden's madness and in Billy's death at the beginning of the book, and which will ultimately turn him into legend. These are not biographies or life stories but mythical and legendary metafiction. There is, in fact, an appropriation of two legendary figures, and subsequently an assertion of both the postmodern and postcolonial imaginative capacity to give a new validity to the worn-out legend of Billy the Kid on the one hand, and the first metafictional treatment of the legendary Bolden on the other.

In chapter 6.2, we continue with our analysis on textual imagery with a special interest in Ondaatjean poetics of gender relations. Throughout his texts gender problematics develop gradually as the poet slowly erases, in a way parallel to his growth to artistic maturity, the generic rigidity and the gender archetypes

that characterize his texts in the 1960s and 1970s. The traditional confrontation between the masculine and the feminine pervades Ondaatje's work from the beginning of his career. In *The Dainty Monsters* the struggle of the sexes already appears in an explicit way. In *Billy the Kid* Ondaatje develops archetypal images to an unlimited exaggeration in the female characters; in *Coming Through Slaughter* the archetype turns seriously committed when the author opposes the figure of the wife to the prostitute. Here, the allusions to the female body are painful and objectified for aesthetic purposes. Bolden also behaves as the typical male character led by a violent energy to hide his own insecurity towards women.

In *Running in the Family*, however, the male and female behave in a comic or dramatic way, as sometimes occurs in *Secular Love*, where these gender wars between men and women seem to hide, in a hilarious way, the emotional unsettlement of his first lyrical texts. From the 1980s onwards, though, the jokes directed against women are of a gentler, less dehumanizing quality.

To approach Ondaatje's writings of the 1980s we also felt the need, in chapters 7.1 and 7.2, to deal with other theoretical discourses related to postmodernism. A reading of the evolution of post-structuralism was also necessary to study the relation of these narratives to their referents and to the traditional concept of History. Thus, post-structuralism is also a reflection of the same issues that postmodern society concerns itself about: the breaking of traditional forms in order to fuse generic distinctions and an interdisciplinary approach to all orders of discourse as language is contaminated by social living and by endless processes of human struggle and interaction. The role of post-structuralism will be directed to question the notion of logocentrism, and to think that any text has literary qualities and is doomed to a certain extent of uncertainty. The multiple relations of difference that constantly occur not only between signifier and signified, but also between signifiers alone, point to the impossibility of ever attaining a full or complete meaning, because, as Bakhtin already foreshadowed, there is always something other suspended by an endless process of articulation and deferral.

It is also important to deal with the concept of defamiliarization as the purpose of any work of art will be to modify our perception of the objects that surround us towards a clear artistic aim. Ondaatje will change our perception through cinematic methods as if he were observing around behind a photographic lens. Through the zoom of the camera or a blank photograph, thus the reader discovers a new action which is no longer automatic but subjective. Defamiliarization thus represents such perception by means of laying bare the author's technique. This may cause both tension and distrustfulness in the reader who now reconsiders data which he at first held to be perfectly straightforward.

On the other hand, the authorial presence can reinforce this technique or not, as an unreliable narrator can disorient the reader and lead him towards a new deep structure that may have been invisible before. The notion of defamiliarization implies a drastic change in the historical development of literary theory as it can both fragment traditional concepts and install a historical dimension between a new literary device and the system that lies behind. Thus, discontinuity and traditional rupture become the basis of the historical projection. Ondaatje will use this defamiliarizing technique to break the psychological or cognitive coherence in the discourse. He makes a peculiar use of his historical characters through the installing of a chronological and spatial detachment which serves him both to distance himself from contemporary issues and to deploy a new version of the myth. This is achieved either by visual and linguistic devices or by silence; the lack of information then can be the perfect means to assure an incomplete story whose meaning is indeterminate and ambiguous.

Together with these techniques the study of historiography also provides the critic with a useful argument to analyse narrative discourse. Accordingly, the reading of Hayden White, among others, has widened our scope towards a proper analysis of discourse and its different ways to construct a verbal image of reality. Literary and historiographic texts should thus be viewed as forms of writing and not mutually exclusive in terms of their qualities of imagination and fact. In this sense we deal with an ontological scandal which reaches the point of locating

historical figures in complete fictional environments, as in the case of Buddy Bolden and Mervyn Ondaatje. These are not cases of historical fictions but of metafiction inasmuch as they integrate history and the fantastic in their characters. Hence, the postmodernist text revises history both ways: modifying the content of the traditional version and transforming the conventions of historical fiction.

The rise of post-structuralism in both literary theory and postmodernist literary practice has cast over the majority of writers in Canada since the 1960s. This seems to indicate a pervasive change in the intellectual and especially in the epistemological matrix of our contemporary Western world view. English Canadian culture can be considered as the multiple encounter of different regionalisms, which are distinctly deployed in different local images which ignore universal or imported metaphors that cannot be translated into its idiosyncratic identity. We thus witness a healthy amount of anti-colonialist pride which, ambiguously paired with its colonial English and French colonial stance, tries to deconstruct a series of new images in order to “unname” the previous British or French cultures. In this search for distinct roots the figure of the exile appears with imagistic strength; great writers already canonized in Western and colonial literatures are immigrants who have contributed with a radical and enriching perspective.

Besides, since the 1960s historians have voiced several attacks against the established view of history, a reaction that has given us a clear indication of the pervasiveness of a mimetic and realistic view of historical representation. Thus, Hayden White tries to introduce post-structuralist notions into the theoretical debate among historians. This debate concerns the fact that historical narratives are verbal constructs which emphasize the importance of the constructive imagination in the historian’s attempt to come to terms with the abundance of the random and incoherent facts of history. Like the novelist, the historian has to meet the demands of formal and aesthetic coherence, and, further, historical events can in itself constitute a story. Interpretation in history is predetermined by the particularities of the stories that historians envisage even before they begin to consider the individual

facts in the historical record, which they will later include in their narratives. It is the existence of these plot structures and the historian's decision to use one or the other which will finally govern the process of selecting, interpreting, and arranging the given historical facts. Even if we definitely admit that literature differs from history in their immediate referents, real or imaginary, we acknowledge that both are gifted with a plot and, thus, with a chronological story. Historical narrative is not only an image of the events, past or present, but it is also an index of the type of actions which produce a type of event we call historical.

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that each text independently refers to an infinity of texts previously written even if we ignore the records and antecedents. Ondaatje's texts constitute a conglomeration of quotations, influences and collected intertexts acquired as a result of his rich and varied cultural inheritance and thus he reflects a postmodern and transcultural world. To give the text an author, however, with his background and his influences, does not necessarily imply a closing of thematic or formalistic boundaries. The text's unity has an intimate connection with the authorial voice but cannot constitute an open arena for the reader to interpret it as he wants. We can admit, though, that the authorial figure is redefined as a textual construct and deprived of his privileged position preceding the text. It is true that the post-structural text is more a process open to structuration than an structure in itself and thus can provide us with new dimensions to unravel.

To that extent, discourse precedes and goes beyond the speaking subject thus making the text anonymous inasmuch as it is always exposed to infinite reinscriptions in the absence of its author. As Bakhtin asserts, discourse is language in context and is dialogically interrelated to both its own and to alien contexts. This displacement or resistance does not involve a nihilist conception of the subject but we agree on a degree of intention and of personal accent in discourse. Dialogism is then identified with intertextuality and considers meaning as produced through complex ways of appropriation. So, as Foucault has argued, the archaeological method intends to focus on those places of dispersion of the subject. What we need

to analyse are both the transformation and redistribution of discursive formations to define the position of the subject in the diversity of discourse. Discourse, however, is constituted as such when it survives the human subject in its reappropriation and reinterpretation of documents throughout history. The subject thus is a discursive construct in a constant process of articulation.

Many theoreticians have welcomed post-structuralist theory as the beginning of a process of connection-making that signals a positive mode towards different aspects of social liberation. New and challenging lines of discourse have then been opened to make connections across disciplines and fields previously separated. Even to the risk of dealing with several critical practices that can disorient the reader of this study, no single approach can account for the complexity of the general text, nor for the constant self-conscious transgression of discursive boundaries happening in postmodern fiction.

In its self-conscious intertextual production, postmodern fiction demands a different conception of the text which is no longer a unified and original work but, rather, a differential system governed by structures of absence constituted by repetition and constant transformation. In order to read the texts of the postmodern, then, we need to enter the intertexts of theory, history, fiction and literary tradition. One such attempt is historiographic metafiction, a kind of fiction that contains in itself the major questions of contemporary literature, history and theory.

Historiographic metafiction is a hybrid form, particularly doubled in its inscribing of both historical and literary intertexts, and in which the ontological line between historical past and literature will not be effaced but rather underlined. Unlike the historical novel, in historiographic metafiction the tensions between fictive and historical representations are never resolved since it is in this irresolution where postmodern discourse finds its source. While exploiting the constructed character of history and fiction, historiographic metafiction does not deny the existence of either; on the contrary, it confirms them as its sources and validates both discursive modes as such. As we will see in chapters 8.1 and 8.2,

Linda Hutcheon's focus on the discourse of history is particularly relevant to the study of contemporary English Canadian fiction, as well as her insistence that contemporary fiction and theory share similar premises, employ the same strategies of self-effacement and mutually inform each other.

Our interest lies in the study of the fictionalization of the historical subject, for Ondaatje's texts reject the possibility of a sharp distinction between narrative and history, and focus on the fact that history can be unveiled only through different representative forms. We deal with a material in which all generic distinctions are subverted. Hence, the author's places *Running in the Family* in a post-structuralist and a postmodernist context at the same time. There is an authorial suspicion about the writing of history which is mirrored in the internalized challenges to historiography in this and the following novels. These novels are metafictional which explore the theory of narrative through its practice, through the different discourses that can reflect the world we live in; the degree of metafiction will then depend on the formal resistance it can accomplish. In it, the authorial figure will be refused as a transcendent imagination or monologic voice and it focuses, instead, on the analysis of the external world through the explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings and, perhaps, with the impossibility of endings.

If we consider historiography as a poetic construct, historiographic metafiction is located somewhere between history and discourse, insisting on its fictive and autonomous nature. Ondaatje's metafictional process is based on archetypal structures that belong to the popular literary traditions: detective stories, the western and the comic. With these the author analyses and parodies deep structures of identity, reason, violence, exile, or any contemporary problem he may share with his audience. Furthermore, the use and abuse of notions of reference in the act of inserting and distorting historical or legendary characters in fiction locates them in the Derridean position of "under erasure" inasmuch as the author uses and erases the historical character without devaluing its referential dimension or its discursive identity.

There have been important works of fiction which tell stories of difference and promote multicultural visions of postcolonial countries. The emphasis on regional forms of cultural expression, such as folklore, local myths and vernacular language in the new understanding of place has been highly instrumental in granting the formerly ex-centric a central position and a decisive voice in Canadian literature. The ideas of relocation and replacing are equally important for those writers who either deal with particular ethnic and cultural groups or present historical figures in their writings. Moreover, historiographic metafiction provides the discursive arena with a dialectical counterdiscourse of the European history and the independent local identity. History, for Ondaatje, transcends nation as a form of discourse; his texts contain self-reflexive gestures which attempt to shatter the illusion of referentiality by foregrounding their fictive and linguistic features. These texts also contain an imaginative reconstruction of the past which insists that history could have been as Ondaatje presents it.

The best mode Ondaatje has found to reenact history's textuality is to approach legendary figures as a device, or virtual representation, that alludes to the vestiges that were never posed as valid or historical, and which now appears as the basis of his characters' personalities. In *Running in the Family*, however, the author will, for the first time, confront the world of his youth, and he will embrace the mythic opulence of the Eastern world in his writing from now on. *Running* continuously reminds us of the power of invention and that act in itself obliterates the possibility of a disguised autobiography. The text will thus produce metafictional displacements in the voices of both narrator and author as well as in the intertextual incursions which favour the novel's heteroglossia. So in this textual and intertextual emplotment the producer is not obliterated but only his role has changed. The alterity we find in monologic and familiar lyrical poems of the 1970s are now revealed in polyphonous form where the author confronts his familiar past in a direct way and through the minds of others.

Ondaatje's particular strength, though, will rest in his presence as both an insider and an outsider. It is not until he returns to Sri Lanka at the end of the

1970s when this duality comes into focus. *Running*, then, confronts the heart of the immigrant's sadness and longing. Ondaatje's position is, therefore, postcolonial and transnational: in the use of discursive strategies of resistance and subversion he reveals his consciousness through images that were oneiric and unexplained in his previous works. Ondaatje's reflections about the immigrant experience have bitter resonance in *Running* as he explores the lost childhood and seems able to integrate his sense of exile in a new sense of belonging for the first time.

This initial search for a thematic level turns out to be a generic exploration at the level of discourse. It is no coincidence that *Billy the Kid*, *Slaughter* and *Running* all end with a first person narrator finding himself alone in a room, disillusioned after a conscious acknowledgement of his image in the creative act. In this search for discovery, however, the author strives to keep a lucid memory of the past but the book will always be incomplete. His writing is thus a process of self-discovery through the use of an arbitrary nature of boundaries. In this respect, his texts often end with a choice of endings perhaps acknowledging the impossibility of endings.

In this sense, *Running*, while ostensibly being a personal travelogue in which the writer attempts to rediscover his Sri Lankan roots, is also a Canadian text that demonstrates a concern with how notions of personal and cultural identity are constructed through language. It shares the preoccupation with origins, and especially with genealogy, that characterizes much of the best contemporary Canadian fiction. The personal quest the writer sets out in *Running* is both a public and a private one: an exploration of the past of Sri Lanka as well as an investigation into his own personal past. A real genealogical quest in which opposed discourses reveal both the arbitrariness of generic classification and the limitations of traditional biographical discourse.

For Ondaatje, then, the map in *Running* becomes a metaphor for a necessary and illusory redefinition. It is a questionable concept, more closely associated with rumour than with truth, that is, a metaphor for the shaping of memory. The fabled island of Ceylon provides the ideal site for this mythology

whose changing names and shapes attest to a history imposed upon it from without. Despite his writing in the dominant language, defamiliarization is always present through specific devices such as parody -the narrator is aware that his roots belong to the invader, and his Dutch surname is the main exponent of the ruling language. Through different actantial imprecisions -that is, shifting points of view or displacing the processes of signification- the writer subverts the authorial control after reconstructing the past in the present in a self-conscious moment of writing.

For the first time in Ondaatje's writing we find a protagonist who transforms romanticism and idolatry towards the anti-hero into compassion. We now discover we do not confront a meaningless and masculine violence but a collective concern against authoritativeness and silent individualism. *Running* is not a confessional and private book as it would be unthinkable without the oral storytelling passed on by family and friends. As we try to unravel in chapter 8.2, the book seems to be an attempt at discovering the roots of the Ondaatjes, a search for their origin in hope for a better understanding of their own identity. Although Ondaatje's book documents a search for identity and origins, he does not analyse the past of Sri Lankan oral traditions until more than a decade later with his book of poems *Handwriting*.

In the Third Part of our study we will approach a new phase in Ondaatje's professional career and in which we would like to emphasize his explicit interest in the diasporic condition of the immigrant writer and his share with the international postcolonial perspective. Accordingly, we would like to deploy a brief overview of postcolonial and postnational studies in general before analysing his internationally acclaimed novels *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) and *The English Patient* (1992).

After World War II it starts a process of decolonization of the European empires. This project starts having a certain resonance in the academic circles with a revolutionary manifesto by Franz Fanon, who radically portrays the effects of colonialism upon colonized peoples and their cultures. Since then, other critics have explored the ways in which literature serves as an important site of struggle

for determination, and for political, social and cultural power. Dealing with resistance in postcolonial writing in chapter 9.1, we will try to examine the different perspectives of personal commitment to resistance.

There have been numerous studies in history and political science in relation to imperialism, racism, slavery, colonies, and so on, and the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s have also made contributions to the change in the political consciousness of Western intellectuals. But, before the appearance of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1979), no text has made a serious inroad into the mainline Anglo-American disciplines of the humanities. At the heart of Said's critique of Orientalism, there is a dismantling of Western textual (or discursive) representations of history, geography and of the Other. Colonialism is almost always a consequence of imperialism which is defined as the theory and practice, as well as the attitudes, of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory.

Even though for the most part the colonies have won their independence, many of the imperial attitudes underlying colonial conquest continue today in different parts of the world. As one critic have asserted, however, the current interest with postcoloniality and multiculturalism seems like another alibi to conceal the reality of global politics defined as a "transnational corporativism."

The concept of otherness as a differential sign is analysed by Homi Bhabha who reflects on the impossibility of adapting these external forces to the so-called tradition. Bhabha's originality lies in his provocative deployment of aesthetic categories -irony, mimesis and parody- for psychoanalytic purposes in the context of empire. The appearance, in the English speaking world, of a great number of postcolonial texts that contest universalist views of both history and fiction by inscribing different and multiple realities through non-linear narratives, has contributed in a decisive way to the shift in focus from authenticity and originality to the particular historical, geographical, cultural and ideological conditions of textual production.

Different critics analyse some of the positive and negative aspects in the relation empire-colony. We will use the unhyphenated form of the term

postcolonialism as we not only point to the historical or chronological sense of the term, but also to an implicit tendency within dominated cultures. The unhyphenated postmodernism does not exclude the possibility of resistance implied in postcolonialism and is moreover characterized by an element of complicity and participation in the colonial endeavour for we consider it more appropriate to analyse Canadian fiction. We also use the term counterdiscourse as a term which emerges from a tradition of rejection of the European style and displaces imperialism's dominative system of knowledge. The term is characterized by intertextual quotations and parodic repetitions of the colonizer discourse and thereby we observe the practice of both a thematic and tropological rewriting and rereading of previous texts acknowledged by the canon. Therefore, to use this strategy is one way of decolonizing inasmuch as it recognizes both the lack of universality in literature and history, and the lack of objective and authoritarian narratives.

There are some similarities between postcolonial and postmodern texts that assimilate the postcolonial to Eurocentric theories of textuality. In Canadian writing the postmodern looks beyond its boundaries to assess its place in an international consumer society and it is postcolonial when it struggles to free itself from the conceptual legacy of colonialism to find terms of self-definition. The parodic use of maps that foregrounds these texts aims to reconstruct our vision of the geographic space and thus revise colonial history. Hence, we can also question the concept of history through a new strategy which, in the case of Canada, is extremely important regarding its geographic boundaries and its multifarious culture. Once more, we discover how the concept of homogenization is not pertinent in order to look for an identity that does no longer give any answers to such a diversified nation. The map can thus be a vehicle to reorganize the writer's space in Canadian fiction, so maps become the metaphor to re-deploy and perhaps subvert imposed doctrines which are either patriarchal or nationalistic.

In a postcolonial country like Canada, the notion of linearity, of nation and identity is deflected into diverse spaces that disrupt any single, unfolding narrative

by introducing multiple sites of language and narratives. In this landscape, English becomes an intersection, a palimpsest that emphasizes the powers of impurity. Such a refusal of an ethnocentric view of literature, culture, history, identity and language leads inevitably to the dismantling of an obvious centre that legislates for these variations and does not permit a return to a pure or authentic state.

We must distinguish between settler colonies like Canada and subjugated ones like many in Africa. Both share a specifically anti-colonial counterdiscursive energy but Canada has an uncomfortable dual historical identity, as both colony and colonizing force. There are, however, important differences like the relations settler colonies have with their aboriginal peoples. Each settler colony has its own history that cannot be ignored. As the example of the United States and Canada reveals, it matters whether a nation has fought for political independence or has evolved a form of government out of imperial institutions.

We propose to approach Canadian identity as a pluralistic and as a rich example of overlapping or concentric identities that can focus around language in order to create a positive nationalism. In Canada, then, postcolonial writers should write from within their own sense of place and try to interpret its particular cadences and rhythms for their own community instead of mimicking other accents of English literature. Through the rejection of any manichean binarism we can approach different literatures via other peoples' contexts and going beyond the aesthetics of colonizer and colonized, that is, being part of a larger political program of cultural transvaluation to incorporate all variety of forms.

We also reject the term Third World as an homogeneous entity inasmuch as it cannot but reflect an heterogeneous section of the world. Thus, the experience of colonialism and postcolonialism is not the same in Canada as it is in Africa or in India. Second- and Third-World cultures do not inhabit the same political, discursive, and literary terrains in relation to colonialism. It would seem as though the binarism that comes from the First World academia tends to drive that transnational region of ex-colonial settler cultures away from the field of postcolonial literary representation. Second-World structures of representation,

like those of settler cultures, are both ambivalent within the colonizer/colonized binary and complicit in colonialism's territorial appropriation of land and voice.

In chapter 9.2 we briefly deploy three theories of assimilation that have dominated the twentieth-century debate over immigrant adjustment. First, anglo-conformity, which demands the value of traditions of the English culture. This position slightly changes after World War II and is replaced by the popular "melting pot," that suggests both a merging or acculturation of settled communities with new immigrant groups and a blending of their cultures into a new Canadian type. A third type would be a cultural pluralism or multiculturalism that still struggles for public acceptance today. It postulates for a communal view of Canadian citizenship and integration of the different cultures into the Canadian society.

The post-war decline of racism and the growing influence of theories about cultural relativism opened the way to the emergence of pluralist ideas. Hence, the arrival of many intellectuals among the post-war political refugees from Eastern Europe and the growth in the number of upwardly mobile second and third generation non-Anglo-Canadians increased the political pressures at both federal and provincial levels for greater recognition of Canada's ethnic diversity. This demand increased during the 1960s in response to the French Canadian assertion of equal rights and the government's measures to assess and ensure the status of the French language and culture.

No doubt that many non-British, non-French groups opposed the view that Canada was bicultural. The place of the so-called "other" ethnic groups in a bicultural society became a vexing question for federal politicians who had originally hoped that steps to ensure French-Canadian rights would go a long way towards improving inter-ethnic relations in Canada. The partial resolution of this dilemma was the assertion in October 1971 by Prime Minister Trudeau that, in fact, Canada is a multicultural country and that steps would be taken by the Federal Government to give public recognition to ethnic diversity through the introduction of a policy of multiculturalism. Canada's future as a multi-ethnic society, however,

depends on much more than a multicultural policy. The different ethnic groups are distant from each other and tend to develop in different ghettos; moreover, the social status moves vertically, so the result is an acculturation of the immigrant society, that is, an assimilation to the so-called non-ethnic world.

Neither in delineating the fundamental similarities and differences between the dynamics of “national” literature in Canada on the one hand, or those of aboriginal literature on the other, can one see the latter as representative of or synonymous with minority literatures in Canada. Like Native literature, the literature produced in Canada by immigrants and their children whose backgrounds were neither British nor French has until very recently been marginalized, that is, not viewed as being Canadian literature in the same sense as the work produced by Canada’s “two founding nations.” It too is postcolonial literature; however, the position it has been written in is not only different from that of the “national mainstream writers,” but also from that of the aboriginal writers. Multiculturalism, then, fosters tolerance while ignoring the more integrating concept of acceptance which has led Canadians into a divisiveness that has encouraged multiple solitudes.

Not surprisingly, a large part of the immigrant story in Canadian literature is the fictional exploration of journeying, of displacement and of finding a place in Canadian society through comparing the new country with the old. In these explorations of immigrant experience, the old and the new binaries can be seen as a decolonizing strategy, since it enables a text to stand outside each cultural space and from this marginal position to critique both.

Political philosopher Charles Taylor asserts that a possible way out is to build a country for everyone, to allow for a level of deep diversity in which we accept a plurality of ways of belonging inasmuch as paradigms of uniformity do not fit in Canada’s experience. The search for identity in Canada is at odds with the search for a mythical national unity as differences stem from tradition and history. Canada’s constituent groups or religions may have a strong sense of identity but the real concern about Canadian identity is a concern for unity, a questioning of what it is that holds them together. The mere acceptance of difference, however, is

not enough to provide the real basis of unity in this country, that is, it will not create a strong sense of common fate and common belonging, an identity.

In chapter 10.1 we will see how the intersection of language and place in postcolonial writing is at the very centre of its identity politics. Geographical position has particular valency for postcolonial subjects since their home locations have been historically constructed as peripheral. The sense of belonging to a place that a man constructs and which forms part of his individuation process appears to be influenced not only by the physical reality of the environment as such, but more significantly, by the nature of his emotional attachment to the beings who inhabit that place. However, when, after realizing the impossibility of his fusion with the other world that he had so much idealized, the diasporic man returns to reappropriate his former space, being painfully aware that the territory of origin is not an entirely different place.

As Diana Brydon has argued, you become uncolonizable by recognizing that no language is neutral. In the United States the issue is race, but the American concept is totally different from the Canadian one. As the Canadian thinks that his is a perfect multicultural society, the racial issue in his case is erasure or invisibility. The irony lies in the notion that, historically, Canada is not the margin but the centre of the diasporic map so the multiplicity of race and origin in Canada collides in instructive ways for current diasporic theorizing. As there are different ways of belonging, then, the best way is to negotiate our origins, to make them concentric and overlapping. That is perhaps the best way to integrate Canadian multi-ethnic complexity. There is, definitely, a need to rethink terminology and speculations in this respect; we have to rethink what is the most appropriate critical language to approach terminology; we have to reconsider citizenship and new ways of belonging as Canadians are caught in circles of denial if they do not reframe the contexts of negotiation beyond the colonist encounters, namely, if they do not reconstruct a truly postcolonial future for Canada.

Writers like Ondaatje describe their homeland as a familiar but foreign place and their selves are made up of the prodigal and the foreigner in one. These are,

therefore, transnational and transmodern writers, readers and writers of world literature and not Western or Third World writers. These postcolonial writers presume their own centre to be a starting point from which to reassemble renewed senses of both culture and author. It is this dialogic configuration of the self that Ondaatje wants to put forward as opposed to the Western “supersubject” installed by colonial narrative in the Western novelistic tradition.

Ondaatje’s characters belong to an era of paradoxes, and they become map makers of a different sort that build “imaginary homelands” anywhere by superimposing the memory of their native lands on the history of their dreamlands. The anonymity of the nowhere man is a necessary counterpoint to the omnipresence of the narcissistic model of the modernist model. The novel is, therefore, designed to illustrate an internationalism, a blurring of literal and imaginary boundaries. The narrative character of history thus reinstates the individual in history, reminding us that the official record marginalizes minorities and valorizes what functions in its favour, what supports or reinforces the control or the ruling power group. Ondaatje includes all the inconsistencies, contradictions and disruptions in this history but he resists the historian’s impulse to assemble the fragments into a cohesive narrative structure. His resistance draws attention to the inadequacy of his text as both history and historiography.

*In the Skin of a Lion* brings together different worlds of self and other, and produces between them both the discovery of an invisible city and heterologies of an open present. With the non-English-speaking immigrants of Toronto, the author follows, in a discovery of the other by his own immigrant sensibility, a whole community that literally crosses boundaries and borders to another reality and a new language. In Ondaatje’s novel, the historical possibility of another history of Toronto comes to life, and with it a multi-faceted mural of the city that its dominant historiography has left in the dark.

Cultural clashes are part of Ondaatje’s novels: from the postcolonial return to Ceylon which has meanwhile become Sri Lanka in *Running*, via the silent -and silenced- multilingual immigration to Upper America in *In the Skin of a Lion*, to

the inter-cultural east-meets-west romance which is blown apart in *The English Patient*. Ondaatje's two novels of the 1980s also provide a useful case study for an exploration of the crosscultural and transnational experience with its attendant traumas and losses as well as its many possibilities. In these texts, the author examines the lived experience and the textual problems faced by subjects who suddenly find themselves thrust into new contexts. In *Running*, the two cultures, Sri Lankan and Canadian, do not coexist happily in Ondaatje's consciousness when he recognizes the claims of the past upon him, and thus the novel responds with a quest which is unresolved. This filial search for the father and fatherland is replaced in his novel by a project of affiliation though.

*In the Skin of a Lion* can be seen as Ondaatje's attempt to write himself into a social history of immigration insofar as it explores and reworks the histories of the east European immigrant labourers in the beginning of the twentieth century, focusing on the efforts to forge a community and an identity in Toronto. Like other writers whose texts sit at the juncture between postmodern and postcolonial writing, Ondaatje grapples with the problems of acknowledging history and identity as fundamentally fictional constructs, while expressing the need to recognize and articulate a historical and cultural legacy which place him in the sociopolitical world.

Ondaatje's novels -*Running*, *Lion* and *Patient*- contain, then, different kinds of cultural clashes, potential seeds of conflict between civilizations. But, instead of emphasizing the difference between groups and generating demonised images of others, the author seems to incorporate the complexities of claims and world views of a multicultural reality in his works. This has made him the target of critics who accuse him of presenting ideas that are not acceptable politically. Ondaatje's novels contain and identify the conflicts: between the positions of colonized, colonizer and postcolonial in *Running*; between immigrant worker and anglophone middle and upper class Canadians in *Lion*; and between western and non-western cultures in *Patient*.

Ondaatje is thus concerned with the indeterminacy of identity and with the resulting oscillation between the desire to articulate a sense of self and of historical subjectivity, and the recognition that such an articulation is mainly a function of desire. Ondaatje's characters face ontological struggles born of cultural, historical and geographical dislocation or displacement. His texts are then carefully structured around moments of disjunction or cataclysm in which suddenly-altered circumstances force his characters to question their previously-held certainties, and often reinvent themselves in response.

This project is to show how these conflicts are presented in each of the novels, what conclusions can be drawn from this, and how political criticism of Ondaatje's work is caught up between his own rhetoric and the literary "facts" of the novels. This will bring into the foreground the globalized claims of political nationalisms on Ondaatje's work. The author acknowledges such claims of "simple truth" in his writing yet transcends them by providing "complex beauty" to his readers. As the bridge in *Lion*, his novels cannot close the cultural civilizational gaps, yet they do provide structures for contact, conflict and exchange.

Political correctness may appear less postcolonial in the criticism levelled at *In the Skin of a Lion*. If anything the book is concerned with working class people but perhaps not in the way in which socialist realism would want to see them on their reality portrayed. The immigrant workers will be presented in their silenced discourse. Ondaatje draws attention to the fact that immigrant workers were among those who constructed such landmarks as Toronto's public networks, the bridge and the waterworks. Aestheticizing these buildings, he changes their public perception and loads them with new symbolic meaning and thus supplements official history. Nicholas Temelcoff and his fellow bridge builders are therefore part of the Bloor Street Viaduct now, and no one can look at the waterworks without thinking of the immigrants watching Alice's puppet show or Patrick and the tunnel workers. The novel has inscribed the immigrant workers into the cityscape. Official history will be thus considered as a unified concept and the author, by

supplementing it with his fictional stories, reveals its incompleteness, complex constructedness and ultimate subjectivity.

Although the reader witnesses the subtitle “a Novel” for the first time, *Lion* exploits and subverts the conventions of realist fiction in a way that is very postmodern, though in a different way from Ondaatje’s earlier works. The initial frame, however, repeats the device we saw in *Billy the Kid*, *Slaughter* and *Running*, an exergue or intentional prologue, which is concerned with story-telling. The fascination with telling the story here is consistent with Ondaatje’s earlier work, but the story which is told surpasses the old stories both in its range and in its treatment of aesthetic concerns. *Lion* is a narrative of loss and recovery, of telling stories and keeping secrets, of cautious publicity and coveted privacy. It is a narrative that, unlike Ondaatje’s previous work, is no longer balancing on the edge of collapse.

Much of Ondaatje’s old vocabulary is here though. Relatively ordinary words like architecture, choreography, nightmare, mid-air, privacy, become exceptional in the landscape of Ondaatje’s text. Moreover, familiar images such as falling, balance, blindness, the room, explosion, darkness or implosion recur. It is a densely patterned novel made up of interwoven strands of recurring imagery, some of the more prominent of which are of fire, and paintings, as in *Patient*; water as in both *Running* and *Secular Love*; animals as in both *the man with seven toes* and *Rat Jelly*. Among these must also be included the peculiar combination of light and darkness, a pattern of imagery that is introduced immediately and that dominates until the end of the text. And yet at first glance this novel seems to be an abrupt departure from Ondaatje’s earlier work in its setting (Toronto), its characters (the working class and the wealthy), its concerns (social justice), and its structure (a story told in a car).

The interrelated imagery of light and darkness is not a purely formal element, merely a feature of the novel’s design, tone and atmosphere; it serves, however, both formal and thematic functions. While light and darkness are therefore central features of the novel’s visual architecture, they are also, within

the thematic framework of the novel, metaphors and symbols that help to carry the novel's meaning. *Lion* is concerned not just with history, but with the possibilities of different types of history and historiography, and the influence of such histories upon an individual's relation to society; in addition, it is concerned with the role of language and narrative in the individual's relation to both history and society.

The novel covers over two decades in the lives of several characters though its small sections and gaps make the text elliptical and fragmented. Ondaatje blends in this text a sociological theme with an incessant, tightly controlled exploration of aesthetic issues which have obsessed him in the past: the role of the artist, the limits of the story, the extent to which a single narrator can create a sense of community upon which all telling depends, the threat of narrative collapse (into madness, silence, or an incoherent text). These concerns are addressed in the writer's attempt to integrate textual architecture with textual accident, to write a text as if a designed structure could harness and order accident. It is this less explicit concern with artistic expression that eclipses the social account of early Toronto with which the novel directly deals. Ondaatje's treatment of personal relationships or individual psychologies, however, is weaker inasmuch as the characters are in many ways less fully developed with respect to each other than they are in relation to their position in the text and in their capacity to express themselves.

Every character is immersed in a search for something or someone but there is another search that informs the various thematic threads at every level: Patrick's search for the vocabulary he needs to convey the intimacy and community that he shares with those by whom he is surrounded, even those to whom he is socially and historically opposed. When Patrick warns Alice that ideology obscures and denies the private he identifies the quality from which the novel itself also gains its strength, a sensitivity to private cares in a public world. Ondaatje also presents the city and its history as being in a constant state of metamorphosis in order to reveal the value of migration. In this way, the novel

touches several contested territories and subject positions in a subtext that is definitely postcolonial and transnational.

Unlike *Billy the Kid*, in which Billy can be interpreted as an artist, and *Slaughter*, in which Bolden is obviously an artist, it seems at first that there are no so-called artist figures here. This feature makes it tempting to privilege a reading of the novel in which the sociological and psychological concerns dominate. But the fact that Ondaatje carefully frames this novel with characters such as the historical Temelcoff and the thief Caravaggio as unconventional artist figures -the artist as builder of bridges and the artist as thief- indicates that the novel will be addressing aesthetic issues that may not be immediately apparent on the surface. In various ways, both Caravaggio and Temelcoff fulfill superior masculine stereotypes through their bodies. Like the author, the protagonist is also influenced by the stereotypic male hero of popular western culture. Yet he recognizes the lack of heroic qualities within himself. His sense of what a man and a hero should be is challenged by what he encounters in the city, and he must locate himself outside the models he has observed. He cannot save other women, rather, it is the women who appear to save him.

With the heroes of the story, Caravaggio and Temelcoff, Ondaatje establishes a thematic balance between architecture and accident that parallels the structure of the text itself. Patrick, however, cannot deal with risks and accidents so easily. His own blindfolded architecture -or identity- is too rigid for the unexpected event. In many ways *Lion* is a re-imagining or a dreaming backwards of a city of Toronto that has not yet been articulated. It is here that the plot intersects with its aesthetic concerns. As in *Running*, the whole story is incomplete. This is the dark private place that Ondaatje's characters all value, a space that the public cannot invade or corrupt. But in *Lion* it seems to have a singularly positive treatment in its celebration of the private. It accepts the complicity of the social fuel or community that helps the private to blend the theme of social justice together with the experiments with aesthetic expression.

The tension between the working class which has no language to express itself and the words in which the novel itself is written must be resolved if the novel is not to be fractured at its core. There is a considerable gulf between the artist's careful selection of image and the realities of the working class. The novel strains most seriously when the characters sound too much like artists themselves, when they are speaking in the narrator's voice. The characterization cannot be convincing when the dialogic sounds like the narrator is speaking to the narrator. Moreover, the conversations that Patrick has with both Clara and Alice are too poetic, too wary, and too measured to be plausible. As such they come close to the false celebration of the working class and this is the gravest flaw in a novel that otherwise treats its subjects with the greatest care and respect.

Ondaatje attempts in this novel to loosen our attachment to established centres of discourse in order to intensify our desire to assume a subject position similar to Patrick's. The author thus wants the reader to feel the experience of being displaced and in need of a female figure. Only when this figure, Alice the heroine, disappears he assumes a cultural initiation that makes him acquire a new social discourse, to use language as a powerful weapon to oppose the dominant culture. Alice's death causes Patrick to face his responsibility for the story. But this responsibility is misdirected into Patrick's radicalization when he burns the Muskoka hotel and dives into the water, the way Gilgamesh crosses the river of death. The last full chapter of the story takes place in 1938, after Patrick's release from prison, where he is transformed into a different man, with his step-daughter, Hana. At this point Clara Dickens returns to his life after Ambrose Small's death. The frame of exergue at the beginning makes sense at last: the two figures in the car are Patrick and Hana going to Marmora to pick up Clara. The responsibility for the silencing of history lies not only in the rich and the powerful, the text suggests.

The bridge becomes the modernist presence and functions as the source of living for the invisible immigrants like Nicholas Temelcoff whose language and identity are not his own until he assimilates. The matter of this text is the unacknowledged history left out of the official texts. In seeking to redress the

imbalance of official history, then, Ondaatje joins a large group of contemporary postcolonial writers for whom the novels inscribe the unhistorical memories of immigrant populations. With this novel the author explores a sphere of the city of Toronto between 1918 and 1938, the lives of working class immigrants, largely Macedonians, Italians and Bulgarians who can be jailed if they do not speak English. Once such a skin of a lion, the integration through language, is attained, the workers are ready to tell their story and to take part in the social event that is the performance of history.

Even if *Lion* does not show a polyphony of the different languages of the immigrants, only a few words here and there in Macedonian, it is thematically and aesthetically an immigrant novel as it shows all the gestures and metaphors of cultural participation. The novel also shows that failure to acquire the new language results in the loss of political power; the language barrier prevents the access of so-called ethnic minorities to society's institutions and this is allegorically presented by the author in a performance on the stage, an ethnic representation within the text, a ceremony which names the enemy and destroys its power through art. With its historical revisionism, *Lion* focuses on political ceremonies, not from the point of view of politicians but from the perspective of the anonymous public. Accordingly, Ondaatje's similes and metaphors bridge history, democracy, horizontal voids and nature from section to section of this novel.

As we have seen above, national identity becomes thus suspect in the face of the appearance of minority discourses which do not fit into the defined official pattern of identity. The consideration of these excluded narratives, with their heterogeneous accents, makes it impossible, in Canada and elsewhere, to sustain the central arguments that construct the nation as a compact and centralized structure of power. In Canada, the overwhelming presence of explicitly transcultural texts within national production questions the model of national unity, be this in the monocultural or in the multicultural form. The strong decentering drive in texts like Ondaatje's represents the breaking of minority discourse into the discourse of nationness, both affirming and undermining its unifying tendency.

The search for a Canadian identity has often attempted to unify cultural characteristics into a homogeneous whole thus ignoring the cultural diversity and a most favourable pluralistic approach. Those who have ignored the heterogeneous character of Canadian culture have mistaken the notion of nationhood. During decades, then, a direct link has been assumed between nationalism and English-Canadian writing. Therefore, all nationalistic readings of Canadian literature are political in some sense. They try to link the literary texts and the cultural or ideological ones. Culture and identity are, therefore, the most frequent words used by critics who are perhaps insecure to speculate with politics without mentioning their neighbour from the south.

The contestation and conflict within one culture are those of gender, class, region, ethnicity and economic practises. One thing is that there is a diverse and plural imaginary landscape designed by a variety of writers coming from different origins, such as Rohinton Mistry's novels, which develop in India and are transnational in that sense. Another thing, however, is to dogmatize and generalize a literature based on a pluralistic culture affirming that it inhabits a postnational space and depicts non-national ideological grounds. This opinion is based on Marshall MacLuhan's concept of global village with its lack of faith in politics and community. This criticism, however, ignores the fact that the rejection of a unified Canadian identity does not imply an erasure of differences but, on the contrary, a celebration of its heterogeneity in an open national space with its counterdiscursivity. The postnational is, therefore, a problematic concept. Nevertheless, it can involve a production and a proliferation of previously excluded heterogeneous narratives of nation, enacting strategic subversions of the supposed unicity of national identity.

Whatever unity and identity the country as a whole may have created after a century of struggle has been challenged by all the events of the second half of the twentieth century, which have posed a legitimation crisis in which Canadians continually question the beliefs and values essential to their existence as a nation. Following Taylor's methodology, we believe that the nation can prosper under a

common purpose or project with the adoption of a pluralist model of a state that distinguishes between different levels of diversity. The crucial fact is that identity must be defined in dialogue with the other, never in isolation. This is the reason why the politics of equal recognition is so central and stressed in Canadian society and culture.

Postnational narrations have struggled to make visible the incoherence, contingency and transitoriness of the national narratives and to reveal this paradoxical space. The postnational, however, might be understood as having opened up the gap within national narratives -in between the state power and how to make sense of it- that national narrativity had covered over. Postcolonial strategies can then be effective resources in the enunciative sites proper to the performance of postnational narration. With their oppositional stance against imperial nationalism, postcolonial intellectuals have deployed an antinational nationalism as a strategic weapon in the struggle against cultural imperialism.

Literary criticism is rooted in specific histories and particular cultural formations. We wonder, however, what it means to speak of Canadian criticism in an era which seems to be engaged in the process of articulating postnational arguments. An era which Marshall MacLuhan predicted some time ago may well be moving towards the end of distinct nation-states. The only way would be to introduce ethics into the discourse of Canadian criticism and be responsible for negotiating and making moral choices.

*The English Patient* turned Michael Ondaatje into an international celebrity in the eyes of those who read and re-read the inspiring, multi-layered love story set against the backdrop of World War II. Ondaatje's acclaimed novel began with a vision: a burning man in the desert, and it tells the story of a Canadian nurse in the bombed-out shell of a deserted Italian villa who opts to stay behind and care for a dying patient, burned beyond recognition and in too much pain to be moved. As he lies dying, the man casts his story of a love, as the nurse, an Indian bomb disposal expert and a thief listen on. The listeners are affected by the patient's story in their own way, defining and re-exploring their own lives in the process.

Inspired in the visual images of the Gulf War, the author submerges in the Second World War to recreate the life of a historical figure, the spy Lázlo de Almásy, who is not English but Hungarian. This historical research took the author to the National Geographical Society in London for four months and to acquire an international reputation which made him receive the Governor General's Award for fiction and the Booker prize (the first time for a Canadian). From this very moment Ondaatje cannot elude being part of a literary and anglophone canon which he seemed to ignore in his poetic beginnings. With the publication of his last novels the author has become an international writer, already well known in North American and European academic circles.

Deemed unsuitable for adaptation to film due to its non-linear structure, few believed a film version of the book would ever come to light, even when rumours began to circulate in 1995 that director Anthony Minghella was working on a screenplay. Minghella, however, could transform some of its brilliant images into a mosaic as if somebody just wanted to remember the best bits though sacrificing a deep structure of postcolonial concerns. Ultimately, Ondaatje's cinematic style did translate brilliantly into film format, thanks to the skilled direction of Minghella, who consulted with Ondaatje throughout the process.

*The English Patient* is Ondaatje's greatest success so far. It is nonetheless a book full of explosives and explosions: everything is mined, nothing is safe or sacred. Particularly in the United States it has irritated critics who seem impressed by the technical skill of Ondaatje's writing though, yet consider the book a failure because it appears morally and politically unacceptable. In a critical regression to Victorian values, they demand that the author of a novel be held responsible for what his characters say, and for his characters' actions which are to speak the truth and nothing but the truth. But Ondaatje does not question the War and the Holocaust, the nazi regime and the Allies. The book does not try or need to prove the moral validity of this position yet again. What Ondaatje's novel does show is that although people are on the winning side in this war, they do not feel like winners, but have been scarred and maimed and traumatized, too. It records the

apocalyptic “ends of the world” the war marked for all its characters and for humanity collectively. *The English Patient* is a book of mourning, which sadly looks back at the “death of civilization,” as what Hana describes as “the end of the world.” These ends have come for all the characters before they arrive at the ruined villa. It is a book of great sadness that faces and mourns the landscapes, buildings, bodies, and minds ruined in this victory, even on the side of the victors. It is also a book that requires all the stylistic skills of someone like Ondaatje to encompass the deeply disturbing stories he relates; stories not usually found in history books.

Around the whole novel there is a historical mystery: richly researched evocations of the desert Englishmen of the 1930s, lilting allusions to Herodotus and Kipling, catalogues of the winds that blow across the sands. Gradually, it begins to come clear that the bandaged European, on his sickbed in 1945, stands for many things that are lost and wounded. And in the dying light of Empire, Ondaatje shows us the end of the world and the birth of another, where people must be map-makers in a different kind of desert.

One way of reading this text would be to treat it as a modernist investigation of the text of imperialism as a close reading reveals it to be an aesthetic work that employs humanist ideas and images. The imagistic design of light and dark opposition repeats again: expanding on such literary allusions, we can also trace the many references to religion, observing as spiritual struggles those between the light of salvation and the darkness of damnation. Throughout the novel, darkness often implies intellectual and moral blindness, light intellectual insight and spiritual salvation, while both emphasize the tension between order and chaos and between life and death. We could also read the novel as a postmodern work where the characters seem fragmented, often caught at moments of change, and separated from territorial connections. Issues of personal or national identity are perplexing because of Ondaatje’s postmodern approach to characterization. Finally, the novel can be read as a postcolonial work which is the one we have chosen as the most adequate in this study. Such reading insists on the profoundly political nature of the text. Ondaatje, in spite of what seems to be his interests in

modernism, particularly in his use of imagery, and his clearly postmodern attention to language and structure, has finally become deeply implicated in the politics of race.

A postcolonial reading of this novel encourages us to interpret the many images of light and dark racially, bringing us back to Kipling, although with a difference. The patient has been burned, and his blackness has to do with burned skin rather than heritage, linking him to the final image of Hiroshima. The landscapes of the novel frequently bring into play questions about nations; the anonymous narrator connects Africa and England arbitrarily by insisting that a part of every Englishman's brain contains visions of Africa. Provocatively, the English patient also refers to connections between areas mapped by nations and various unmapped spaces that raise questions about the importance of nationality.

Caravaggio is the most sceptic of all, he thinks the English patient is Lázlo de Almásy. But the patient does not confirm or deny, his mind, under the effects of morphine, narrates in different persons, perhaps because his identity has been erased by the flames. His anonymity, and his unreadability, make him the perfect blank screen onto which the other characters can project their own passions and provide him with the identities they desire him to have. For the first time Ondaatje has brought characters forward from his last novel: Hana, the nurse, is the adopted daughter of Patrick Lewis, while Caravaggio, the thief who has been turned into a spy by the war, was one of Patrick's friends. It is wonderful to meet them again five years later, a fact that raises intriguing questions about the novelty of the novel and its characterizations. Just as *Lion* can be read as a political book, so can *Patient*. The former is about class war, the rich using the workers to turn their visions into reality. *Patient*, however, is much darker.

The patient might be a metaphor for the British empire, dying slowly, haunted by memory. The novel ends with news that atomic bombs have been dropped on Japan. The young Asian Kirpal Singh flees from the white people in the villa in horror. This bomb is the irony for the sapper's profession, everything is out of hand and there is no forgiveness for him. The image of fire and flames, which

recurs in all of Ondaatje's imagistic architecture, is here haunting again. Hana's father, Patrick, also died of burns in the war so he sees the burned patient as a paternal figure. Hana's biological mother, Alice, not mentioned in *Patient*, also died in an accidental bomb explosion. This deeply marks her relation with the Asian sapper. Kip, who insists that the patient is English, also sees him as a dead father. For Kip, the patient represents Lord Suffolk, his patron in the bomb disposal squad, who also died in fire. And, at a wider level of political allegory, the patient and Lord Suffolk both stand for the paternal relation of England and India, the imperialist power celebrated in Kipling's *Kim* and rejected here by Kip.

Many readers and critics think that the Hiroshima theme is introduced clumsily in the novel. The careful reader, however, is subliminally prepared for this, both by the progression of the dates and by the pervasive imagery of fire. And, secondly, any reader of Ondaatje's imagery notes how shocking images are usually introduced abruptly. In this postmodern text, life cannot be represented by either traditional uses or a linear narrative of historical facts. Accordingly, an interpretation of the interrelation between the historical and the perception of the other is crucial if the reader is going to capture the author's notions of historicity and of the other in the parameters of history and fiction. Almásy, the Hungarian aristocrat and officer-spy is depicted as the other in *Patient*, an alterity that is in no way diminished when we discover who the patient is.

Most importantly, the historical data about the English patient are oblique and analogous to the fictional Almásy of the novel. He has a slippery identity in his historical life which involved curious incidents that point to a marginality strikingly similar to that of his fictional life in the novel. Ondaatje tends to resist overt politicization yet, because of his choice of subjects, they also refuse to become truly apolitical. A Ceylonese-born Canadian, he is necessarily in one way or another a postcolonial writer. He seeks to place the political in a human, fallible context, complicated by the force of powerful and contradictory emotions. A novel of international scope, set at a time of terrible change in the world, *Patient* focuses on the ways of the human heart among a small number of people. Even its ending,

which invokes one of our time's most terrifying images of slaughter of innocents to break its tentative community apart, manages to avoid melodrama.

Ondaatje locates Kip's culture as the centre to voice a counterdiscourse of decolonization. As another "international bastard," the sapper exposes and voices the postcolonial mind of an Indian who has been used by the British government to be in danger in a war that is not his. Indian background is crucial in this novel that marks a return-to-roots discourse and thus reflects the author's further directions in writing. Since Kip becomes the novel's conscience, it would seem that Ondaatje supports his refusal to make distinctions along the lines of nationality. Almásy's ethnicity does not matter as long as he is a white man. This may explain why Ondaatje conceals the identity of his English patient for much of his novel. The mark of the patient's name is like an inscription on the blank space of the desert. So the English patient's desire to erase his name leaves him indeed nameless, professing ignorance of his own identity, and with his body reduced by fire to one all-encompassing scar. The English patient may represent the centre of the Empire, but as a patient he is no longer an active force, and as Almásy he is no longer even English. Englishness is thus written out of the novel, the centre is empty.

If the patient loves and carries western history and culture, Kip tries to reject this role and chooses to return to his birth culture. In the text, therefore, Ondaatje links issues of ownership, money and war with the power of naming. Even Katharine, the female lover who represents western culture and imperialism, accuses him of being inhuman. The vanity of the power of naming disturbs Almásy who wants to erase his name and his origin. When he is burned, Almásy erases all features that identify him. His rejection of names links problematic ownership with the issues of nationalism and colonialism in the text. The novel finally allows Almásy his nameless, nationless state, as his identity is never conclusively determined but rather resolved as irrelevant. Hana has also abandoned other aspects of her identity by removing her uniform and cutting her hair. She is Canadian but lives like a nomad within the ruined rooms that she shares with the anonymous patient. Caravaggio is the one that names Hana, the patient and even

Kip. Once again relationship is the key to identity through names. Ondaatje thereby suggests that allowing oneself to be named, and the creation of a sense of self that goes with it, can be a political act of empowerment.

Ondaatje's book of poems *Handwriting*, nominated for the Governor General's Award, looks back at *Running*, *Secular Love* and *The Cinnamon Peeler*, but goes a step further of his previous poetic works. It returns the material so rigidly excluded in his poetic beginnings, such as the political, philosophical, historical and ethical dimension, and the act of writing is brought to the foreground with new eyes. Ondaatje has turned inward, away from the occasional poem, to explore, to take a long look at himself and at Sri Lankan oral tradition.

His lyric subjectivity has attenuated in the 1990s but he has retained a lyric tone. However, process and perspective are now more important than traditional poetics, and both suggest an ongoing change, that "sense of shift" that Ondaatje refers to in "The gate in his head" (*RJ* 62) as the essence of experienced poetry attempts to convey. As we see in "Women like You" (*SL* 90-92), in several poems of *Handwriting*, the speaker in his myth-making abstracts music from indigenous life, the ethereal from raw, physical realities. By making his adaptation of that ancient communal poem from the fifth-century Sigiri graffiti, he makes it universal and available while conjoining native and western cultures and making them both live together and share their deep experiences of love.

In *Handwriting*, and for the second time, the poet discovers how "(t)hose things we don't know we love / we love harder" (*SL* 99). This recovered sense of connection and continuity opens a new journey for the poet, either by water or by land. A quest that is now, more than ever, an expression of a sense of forward movement in life, not merely a chance to break with the past, for now the poet knows "the arguments of imperialism" (*SL* 126). Another key poem in Ondaatje's poetics, "Breeze," evokes the vitality and sadness that pervades *Handwriting*, when "(w)e sit down and sharpen / the other's most personal lines" (*CP* 193). The same sense of friendship appears in "The Great Tree" (*H* 58-59), an elegiac consolation after the death of a friend. All this intimacy in friendship seems to have

had its origin in *Slaughter*, where we witness the relation between Bolden and Bellocq, but has always been present in his poetry since *Rat Jelly*. Decades later, it is obvious that on some deep level these works constitute a watershed in Ondaatje's development and demand to be read as a continuum in his poetic design.

If *Lion* and *Patient* surprised and signalled another shift in Ondaatje's focus and concerns by the degree of their interest in social history and World War II and nationalism, *Handwriting* will make a leap to return to roots again and maybe definitely. Like *Running*, it is set in Sri Lanka and the narrative voice swerves away from what could be called autobiographical concerns to a lyrical and multi-layered mosaic of a place and its complex (hi)stories. In *Running* it was the lost and buried father who was pulled out of the depths of memory and history. In *Handwriting*, however, it is the entire history of a people that is at stake as the allusions to various eras written in "wild cursive script" are reflected in the references to light, soldiers, assassinations and war. In contrast to the thematic tone of *Running*, the recent violent history of Sri Lanka is part of the book's more comprehensive tapestry, and in this new handwriting other fathers and other children appear, those who have not got a resting place, those who have disappeared after the wars. Such a contemporary and universal elegy is expressed with an astonishing lyric economy of words. This lyric minimalism, however, is not a formal impediment to witness two millenia of Sri Lankan culture and oral tradition which are sketched in nineteen poems that offer several different perspectives of both the stories and the emotions deployed by these others of history.

At first reading, *Handwriting* seems to be less demonstrative, more understated, than his earlier poetry, but this apparent minimalism is rather devious. These poems render up their secrets very slowly after several readings. The result of return trips to Sri Lanka between 1993 and 1998, they deliberately take up the matter of Ceylon Ondaatje so carefully refused in his travel memoir *Running in the Family*. Leaving family and gossip behind, in *Handwriting* he has chosen, with great deliberateness and passionate intelligence, to explore the poetic history of his

birthplace, a history, as he has acknowledged in *Running*, of continual colonization. Yet, what is more interesting now is how the poet is another witness; this absence of voice leaves place to other voices that are absent and anonymous. This path towards the acknowledgement of other alterities within himself in *Handwriting* begins in 1982 with “The Cinnamon Peeler” which starts to address Ondaatje’s curiosity and respect for the culture of Sri Lanka; this new alphabet is also first carved in “Women like You,” an alphabet “whose motive was perfect desire,” but that has no spiritual connection yet within the poet. *Handwriting*, however, passes these things on to the poet’s readers and descendants. These poems, then, bear witness to Sri Lankan history and enact the poet’s inheritance.



**PART ONE: POETIC BEGINNINGS**

## 1.1 From Aesthetic Modernism to Poetic Postmodernism

there are a few things I find more irritating about my own country than this so-called “search for an identity,” an identity which I’ve never doubted having in the first place.

The environment, the land, the people, and the flux of history have made us what we are; these have existed since Canada’s beginning, along with a capacity for slow evolvement into something else that goes on and on. And perhaps I would also include pride. Their total is all that any nation may possess. (Al Purdy 1968, 1968, iii)

English-Canadian poetic tradition begins outside of Canada, and its earliest sources are the models of a tradition of other lands. The earliest poets set out to emulate those poets whose work they knew and admired, and they were certainly not Canadian. The nineteenth-century nationalism was not necessarily of a kind that would be acceptable or even recognizable today. Thus Charles Sangster combines, in his poems, both an imperialist and an anglophone stance: “One with her, the mighty mother, / Britain, from whose loins we sprung; / True to her, to one another, / Proud of her beloved tongue.”<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Charles Mair proclaimed such imperialistic views as if they were Canada’s only true destiny, announcing in 1892 that the right policy for Canada would be “to cling tightly to the Empire, endeavouring at the same time to redeem ourselves from mere colonialism as our status in the eyes of Englishmen.”<sup>2</sup> This type of nationalism, not quite comprehensible today, wishes to assume an equal status within the empire, and is certainly quite different from the type of nationalism that, in the 1940s, characterized the poets connected with *First Statement*, “who were so anxious to throw off the trammels of English

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<sup>1</sup> “July First 1867,” in *Norland Echoes and Other Strains and Lyrics*, ed. Frank M. Tierney (Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1976): 12. Quoted by George Woodcock in *George Woodcock’s Introduction to Canadian Poetry* (1980. Toronto ECW Press, 1993): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Norman Shrive in *Charles Mair: Literary Nationalist* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965): 217.

literary culture that they accepted American models as a transitional stage to creating their own” (Woodcock 1993, 3). Yet these poets, such as Charles Heavyside and Isabella Valancy Crawford, lived in a world and landscape markedly different from that sung about by the British poets, and they inhabited a more democratic society where poetic forms were becoming more colloquial and speech tended towards the American style rather than the British one. Such later poets as Duncan Campbell Scott and Charles G.D. Roberts came to recognize and realize a language practice and diction which was supposed to open up the old poetic forms, and they consequently started a timid imagistic experimentation.<sup>3</sup>

As early as 1870, Robert Grant Haliburton exhorted Mair in this way: “For God’s sake drop the old style. You’re living in a new world and you must write in the language of the living to living men” (Shrive 1965, 51). Thus, this evolution in diction would be slow

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<sup>3</sup> We can distinguish four historical phases in Canadian fiction: (a) colonial, when the historical and gothic romance appear with imitations of Richardson’s *Pamela* or Poe’s stories. In 1769 Frances Brooke publishes the first North American novel, *The History of Emily Montague*, an epistolary novel, while John Richardson publishes *Wacousta* in the style of Fenimore Cooper. Also Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s *The Clockmaker* and William Kirby’s *The Golden Dog*. (b) Confederation, realism and naturalism appear with the influence of Darwin, Zola and Henry James. Charles G.D. Roberts publishes short stories together with D.C. Scott. Big classics of Canadian literature appear such as L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), Ralph Connor’s *The Man from Glengarry* (1901), M. Allerdale Granger’s *Woodsmen of the West* (1908), and Robert Barr’s *The Measure of the Rule* (1907). 1880s-1920s constitutes the pre-Modern or late Victorian period. Here naturalism is combined with 19th-century realism, sometimes using a mythic subtext to provide a deep structure. Frederick Philip Grove (Paul Greve) publishes his fictional autobiographies *In Search of America*, *In Search of Myself* and *Settlers of the Marsh*. Martha Ostenso publishes *Wild Geese*. This prairie or rural realism will be inherited by Margaret Laurence and Guy Vanderhaeghe. Urban realism has its representative in the 1920s in Morley Callaghan. © Modernism appears in the 1940s with a great explosion and variety in Canadian fiction which begins with Hugh MacLennan and Mordecai Richler in Montreal and Sheila Watson in the West. 1959 is a remarkable year with the appearance of *The Watch that Ends the Night*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *The Double Hook*. But also there have appeared A.M. Klein with his *The Second Scroll* and Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House*. Also Ethel Wilson’s *Swamp Angel*, Gabrielle Roy, Brian Moore, Robertson Davies, Ernest Buckler, Earl Birney, Norman Levine and Adele Wiseman among many others. (d) the contemporary period begins in the explosion of the 1960s with a greater attention to complex artifice in the novel, ironic fables and myths and a turning away from big questions to a particular attention of world’s experience. Notions of regional nationalism, psychology of the individual, selfhood versus otherness, and sexual and feminist politics and poetics appear. Robert Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man*, Margaret Laurence’s *A Jest of*

and irregular in nineteenth-century Canada. In practice, E.K. Brown asserts, “the imperialist has drifted unconsciously into a colonial attitude of mind” (1977, 16). It was not until the Confederation poets that we find the first step towards seeing the world around them as it was, a landscape that could be evoked in new images to replace those invented to describe the English countryside: “The Canadian is sympathetically British ... his loyalties are unswervingly to Empire; he is pleased with and grasps at traditionalism ... while he has to admit to himself that he has a far more advanced understanding of the American mind than he has of the Old World mentality” (W.P.Wilgar, in Smith 1962, 70). This colonial view would be present throughout all the nineteenth century, and poets like Archibald Lampman, in his lecture on the poetry of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts and George Frederick Cameron (1891), both articulates and exposes the anxiety about the uncertain direction of Canadian literature which could not have the excellence of the great poets of the empire:

A good deal is being said about Canadian literature, and most of it takes the form of question and answer as to whether a Canadian literature exists. Of course it does not. It will probably be a full generation or two before we can present a body of work of sufficient excellence as measured by the severest standards, and sufficiently marked with local colour, to enable us to call it a Canadian literature. It is only within the last quarter of a century that the United States have produced anything like a distinctive American literature. (in Smith 1962, 27)

Lampman, of course, was unaware that the question he addressed was to become the Canadian aporia *par excellence* that thematizes the “local colour” of Canadian literature and criticism.<sup>4</sup> His recurring points of reference are models outside Canada: the poetry of

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*God*, Kogawa’s *Obasan*, Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*, Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and so forth.

<sup>4</sup> “In a manner of speaking, the dream of a literature was inextricable from the dream of a nation: a literature that stood between British and American, but was different from both, that would articulate a national experience that, though rooted in British and French traditions and unavoidably influenced by the American one, would be somehow different from all three, just as the citizens, though immigrants, would over the

Tennyson, Byron, Shelley, Arnold, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti represent the traditions within which he locates and studies the work of Roberts and Carman. These British predecessors thus function not only as models but as points of origin that authorize the beginning for the nineteenth-century Canadian poet. Such a start is, however, “a pseudo-beginning, for we can trace it back to a past that, although culturally familiar, is not indigenous but imported” (Kamboureli 1991, 8-9)

The long poems in nineteenth-century Canada mark the beginning of a literature that is linear inasmuch as it transfers the British tradition without necessarily adapting it to the colonized country. Accordingly, these poems express an aesthetic and an ideology rather extraneous to Canadian experience. In his “Introductory Essay” to the first Canadian poetry anthology, *Selections from Canadian Poets, 1864*, Edward Hartley Dewart explains the dilemma of the nineteenth-century poet:

Our colonial position, whatever may be its political advantages, is not favorable to the growth of an indigenous literature. Not only are our mental wants supplied by the brain of the Mother Country, under circumstances that utterly preclude competition; but the majority of persons of taste and education in Canada are emigrants from the Old Country, whose tenderest affections cling around the land they have left.(xiv)

These early poets tended to fall into neglect about the turn of the century, when the Confederation poets seemed to be writing a poetry genuinely Canadian in feeling and imagery. In the 1920s and 1930s they were held in contempt by poets with modernist aims, yet from the 1940s onwards, such critics as E.K. Brown, Northrop Frye, and A.J.M. Smith were beginning to consider and develop a much more critical appreciation of them. In 1943,

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generations become ‘Canadians’” (Solecki, “Poetry, Nation and a Canadian Poetic,” Lecture 1996, pp. 6-7, in his forthcoming book on Al Purdy, *The Last Canadian Poet*).

A.J.M. Smith included their work in his *Book of Canadian Poetry*, the definite critical anthology of its time, and almost forty years later, in 1982, Margaret Atwood kept them in her *New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*. In Smith's introduction to his *Book of Canadian Poetry*, however, he appears to be in favour of the English tradition, but he believed authenticity in poetry to be determined by the "pressure of experience":

The modern revival began in the twenties with a simplification of technique. Following the lead of the "new poets" in the United States and of the Georgians in imagery, and limited themselves as far as possible to the language of everyday and the rhythms of speech. These reforms were largely the work of younger poets whose outlook was native rather than cosmopolitan and whose aims were that of realism .... England, Canadian poets turned against rhetoric, sought a sharper, more objective The poets of today...have sought in man's own mental and social world for a subject matter they can no longer find in the beauty of nature -a beauty that seems either deceptive or irrelevant .... Thus modern poetry is divided into two lines of development, one of "simplification...and realism," the other containing "individual and subtle rhetorics" related to the metaphysicals. (Smith 1943, 28-9).

Perhaps it was Malcolm Ross who first gave the name of Confederation poets in the Introduction to his anthology *Poets of the Confederation* (1960).<sup>5</sup> Poets like Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott gave proof of a new and distinctive voice, and reflected the post-Confederation spirit. This group of poets gave evidence of a new literary impulse in a new country; and although they tended to express political opinion, they were more drawn to the local and particular characteristics of the Canadian land. Their own particular landscapes played a part in most of their best poetry that constituted, on the whole, a formal and thematic liberation new to Canadian poetry and, therefore, a transcendental stage in the development of an autonomous Canadian literature. Isabella Valancy Crawford is the only Canadian woman poet of real importance in the last

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<sup>5</sup> *Poets of the Confederation: Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960): ix-x.

century, and her “Malcolm’s Katie,” a long narrative of backwoods life in primitive Ontario, “is the best image a poet has given us of Canadian living in the years following Confederation” (Brown 1977, 42).<sup>6</sup> The poets of the 1880s and 1890s were concerned both with the surface of nature and with its central meaning.

According to Woodcock, there have been successive critical moods at work in assessing the Confederation poets. First, they were received with general approval, as they stood for a fresh look at the world immediately around them, making it tangible to their contemporaries in a Victorian age in which poetry was still publicly appreciated. A second phase was the reaction of the Canadian “modernists,” who sought not only Canadian content but also a new mode of expressing it, whereas the Confederation poets kept their loyalty to traditional forms. Yet the discovery of Canada as a subject of literature in all its particularity was the achievement of these poets, and they prepared the way for the more complete adaptation, in terms of form and diction as well as content and imagery, which the modernists later achieved. On the other hand, they adopted a strategy rather similar to that of their counterparts in painting, namely, the Group of Seven. As Frye comments, “[t]he impact of Lampman, Carman, Roberts, and D.C. Scott on Canadian poetry was very like the impact of Thomson and Group of Seven painting two decades later .... Like the later

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<sup>6</sup> The first group of anthologies, from Dewart’s 1864 *Selections from Canadian Poets* to Carman and Pierce’s 1935 *Our Canadian Literature*, is generally characterized by a principle of inclusiveness. Eager to demonstrate that there was indeed a Canadian literature, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editors cast a broad net and drew in a proportion of women authors (30 per cent) that roughly corresponded with their degree of publishing activity. Yet even here begins a tendency of giving women less space than men. Only Crawford, Moodie, and Pauline Johnson appeared consistently in Canadian anthologies over the past century. From *New Provinces* (1936), which contains no women, the situation could only improve. In Gustafson’s *A Little Anthology of Canadian Poets* (1943) 13 percent of the poets are women; in A.J.M. Smith’s *Modern Canadian Verse* (1967) 18 per cent of the poets are women; this figure rises to 35 percent in

painters, these poets were lyrical in tone and romantic in attitude; like that painters, they sought for the most part inhabited landscape” (in Smith 1962, 103-104). The Confederation poets did not derive from their Canadian predecessors, like Mair, Sangster, Heavysege and Crawford. They realized the importance of being poetic pioneers in the New World, without forgetting their masters Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson or Arnold. Yet, as their contemporary Emile Nelligan has been strongly influenced by the French symbolists and Rimbaud, there is no presence of such an influence in the anglophones; instead,

The philosophical content of most Confederation poetry was a dilution of the already dilute doctrines of American transcendentalism .... Neither Marx nor Bakhtin, with their varying extremities, played any part in the thought of such poets. Yet the direction of their thinking, if not its strength, was significant since it showed them constantly seeking the kind of harmony between humanity and the natural world which today, almost a century later, is the theme of so much writing. (Woodcock 1993, 22)

The nature of most Confederation poetry is its extreme eclecticism. These poets lived an intense search for formal patterns to suit their traditional influences. One of the most common errors, however, has been to see these poets as a clan and as a coherent movement which shared the same objectives. In fact, this type of brotherhood never existed among them; “[t]he five poets were never in the kind of physical proximity that might justify calling them a brotherhood; each of them was well aware what the others were doing .... it was sufficient that they shared the same mental space and wrote with similar preconceptions about the role of a poet in their time” (Woodcock 1993, 24).

The decade of the 1920s has a peculiar significance in Canadian poetry. There did not exist a movement of poets who looked on war with a realistic eye, as there had been in

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Gary Geddes’ and Phyllis Bruce’s *Fifteen Canadian Poets Plus Five* (1978) and to 38 per cent in Dennis Lee’s *The New Canadian Poets 1970-1985* (1985). (See Carole Gerson 1997, 150-54).

Britain. This was the decade when conservative poets like E.J. Pratt or revolutionary ones, like Dorothy Livesay, appeared and began to recognize that a new way of expression had to be found to reflect a different experience to that of the British or the Americans. Pratt had little in common with the early modernists Eliot and Pound, but he developed a great closeness to the English poets of the 1930s, like W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and C.D. Lewis. His poetry stems from a defense of the long poem in order to reflect a Canadian vision instead of the submission to the lyric poem so characteristic in Canadian poetry since the last decade of the nineteenth century, “he has shown that a writer can stand within his own vision and communicate it as he chooses, without bowing to any aesthetic or political imperative, so long as he has strength of purpose and vigour of mind and language” (Woodcock 1993, 37). If Pratt created his own thematic and generic ground for the Canadian long poem, Dorothy Livesay opened up that ground in ways that Pratt’s rhetoric and world-view could not. Livesay’s longer poems mark not only her political conversion to left-wing politics, but also an artistic conversion, which she outlined in her prefaces to these poems and in her seminal essay “The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre”(1969).<sup>7</sup> If W.W.E. Ross was considered the Canadian imagist, whom Livesay and Knister observed closely in order to learn from his close perception and clear, direct statement, it was A.J.M. Smith who encouraged and gave form to what might be called a modernist poetry in Canada through international publication.

The poets of the 1920s manifest a strong influence of European Aestheticism, and this had a significant impact on the development of Canadian modernism. Raymond Knister,

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<sup>7</sup> published in Eli Mandel, ed. *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, in 1971.

W.W.E. Ross, Robert Finch, Leo Kennedy, F.R. Scott, John Glassco, and A.J.M. Smith adopted the themes, symbols, imagery, and diction of the earlier movement. As in other colonial literatures, Canadian poetry began as an extension of the artistic and moral standards of the mother-country and this is what happened in Canadian literature, where it took some time to be reconciled with the realities of the new country. Perhaps, it was the anthology by Edward Hartley Dewart which began the first movement towards Canadian letters. But it was not until the 1920s where an independent national achievement is sought when Carman publishes a second important anthology in 1922, *Our Canadian Literature*.

According to Brian Trehearne, the Aesthetic movement is a late development of English Romanticism to be distinguished from late Romanticism which was dominating Canadian poetry until the late 1920s (1989, 13). Canadian modernism, however, has been defined in imagist terms as practised by Knister and Ross. These poets, though, did not always represent such a coherent and homogeneous Canadian Imagism in their poetry. We could better apply the term of literary Impressionism, a manifestation of Aestheticism that fixes the poet's attention on moments of visual beauty or intensity in the transient impressions received from the visual world. Both Imagists and Impressionists strove for direct representation of the object without discursive reflection, according to Pound's demands for accuracy and concreteness. Imagists focused on static images or objects whereas Impressionists tended to focus on a scene and its sense of flux. The poetry of Robert Finch and Leo Kennedy, though labelled as modern, is rooted in the technical and emotional attitudes of nineteenth-century poetry. In Ross and Knister, Trehearne argues, "we shall discover in these poets concerns with beauty, death, and temporality that converge

in a manner strongly reminiscent of Aestheticism” (1989 73); and this was their way to battle the Victorian mentality of English Canada.

Robert Finch wrote much of his best known poetry during the 1930s; he joined A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, Leo Kennedy, A.M. Klein, and E.J.Pratt in *New Provinces: Poems by Several Authors* in 1936. Smith considered Finch’s poetry as having a “dandyist” taste, that is, a product of a post-aristocratic British culture where the poet “was an accepted outsider in a world of painful elegance to which he wished to belong but from which he was always distanced” (Trehearne 1989, 97). Finch, therefore, demonstrates to be a practitioner of another branch of Aestheticism in connection with Canadian Modernism. Kennedy, yet another contributor to *New Provinces*, provided Canadian modernism with a tradition of “graveyard” verse which made him an exponent of modernist stylistic and decadent spirituality. However, there is still a sense of strong traditionalism in these poets who, inexplicably, resisted the formal opportunities offered by English modernism, or the Pound-Eliot formal tradition. Scott was writing a Tennysonian-Victorian verse prior to his meeting Smith, and he summarizes the spirit of the time in his printed Preface to *New Provinces* in 1936: “This search for new content was less successful than had been the search for new techniques, and by the end of the last decade the modernist movement was frustrated for want of direction” (1936, v).

*New Provinces*, however, is considered the first modernist manifesto. In this anthology, landscape is put aside to be replaced by formal experimentation. Smith tried to define a Canadian tradition in his preface to this book which was rejected by Pratt among others. In it, Smith would affirm that “[p]oetry today is written for the most part by people

whose emotional and intellectual heritage is not a national one” (“Rejected Preface,” 171). In the “Rejected Preface,” published in 1963, Smith shows he has turned away from old Aesthetic themes to play up an aristocratic and modern sense of form, “[n]othing could be more important to him, as he prepared the volume in which his poems would be first gathered, than to make a clean break with the Aesthetic past, to emphasize his modernity and cut himself away from the nineteenth century” (Trehearne 1989, 289).

On the one hand, Smith was deeply concerned with the intellectual and literary inheritance but, on the other, he would never tolerate unilateral sources of influence or inspiration which ignored Britain or even Europe. In Smith’s articles before 1943, he declared a Canadian poetry always located and contextualized in a wide anglophone and European culture. Smith wishes to transcend the Canadian landscape and place of the the national culture within a temporal dimension, searching for a tradition. Thus T.S. Eliot appears as a clear influence with his article “Tradition and the Individual Talent” where he writes: “you must set him [the poet], for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism” (in Lodge, 1972, 72). Smith searches for a counterpart of Eliot’s traditionalism when he tries to develop a temporal dimension in the vision of the Canadian poet. Smith’s importance lies not merely in his recognition that the time for Modernism had come, but also in his energy at seizing that moment. He tried to establish a canon that a few critics have challenged since. His position would be similar to that of Northrop Frye in criticism. Smith, with his friends, the poets Klein and Scott, would help other poets to find a voice that would flourish in the 1940s and 1950s.

Modernism in Canada was delayed by a “time lag” of three to five decades, thus the label of “neo-modernism” (Woodcock 1993, 74). The external influences were the poetry of Auden and Spender, the late Eliot, Williams, and later the “Black Mountain Poets,” which liberated the Canadian poets from the late Romanticism that was still in vogue at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, before modern poetry was properly established in Canada, and before there was any critical understanding on the part of the public as to what modern poetry should be like, a demand was raised for a set of firm critical standards for Canadian literature. It was not before the 1920s and 1930s, that the necessity to go beyond the Victorian age of the Confederation was recognized, especially by F.R. Scott, A.J.M. Smith and their *McGill Fortnightly Review* (1926). Dorothy Livesay also provided a new search for documentary forms in the Canadian long poems, and W.W. E. Ross, with his pseudo-imagistic approach, saw poetry in a different and vivid way.

While Smith’s criticism, poetry, and personal influence meant one of the most forceful contributions to Canadian poetry, his search for a Canadian modernism was not more intense, in this decade, than that of the great poets of America and England whom he imitated, and his apprenticeship to nineteenth-century masters. He had an intimate knowledge of nineteenth-century poetry and thus his influence of Aesthetic concerns and images. Smith’s poems in the *Fortnightly* reveal a poet in process; he was trying to define a poetics which would establish his reputation. The *McGill Fortnightly*, a student magazine he edited in 1926 with Scott, was not a journal of modernist opinion but the beginning of this search for new forms and contents; however, the journal was to be the ground of a number of significant poets who later established their modern tones.

Canadian modernism has been rooted in the late nineteenth century. It was Smith's inclusion of people like Finch in *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943), at the expense of such poets like Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, and Raymond Souster, that initiated the strong reaction against Smith's standards and "set afoot a conflicting current of Canadian criticism that openly devoted itself to crushing the Aesthetic spirit as an unhealthy overgrowth from the nineteenth century" (Trehearne 1989, 306). By the end of the 1920s, most of these poets had turned to modernism from Aestheticism, producing a hybrid which Trehearne calls "Aesthetic Modernism":

This approach will do much to explain the "two Modernisms" in Canadian poetry. Anyone glancing at the poets of the 1920s, and at those of the 1940s, will be able to make certain immediate comparisons: whereas the earlier poets show a tendency to subject matter drawn from myth, landscape, ritual, and 'objective experience,' the later poets tend towards a poetry of ironic realism, urban life, and class-conscious historicity; whereas the earlier poets tend strongly towards traditional forms and seem to have elaborated few of the Modernist formal breakthroughs, the later poets welcomed more openly the formal revolution and shaped their verse accordingly; whereas the earlier poets tend to voice a detached and hence Aesthetic poetry, the later poets create a poetry that is committed, visceral, and often angry. (1989, 313)

If the poets of the 1920s have produced an Aesthetic modernism, the poets of the 1940s have been gradually influenced by high modernism, and altered it to reflect their own experience during the Depression and World War II. There was a delayed modernism shaped by contemporary forces. In fact, "[s]o necessary is Aestheticism to the birth of Modernism that, in a country where no significant Aesthetic period had existed, one had to be created before Modernism could occur" (Trehearne 1989, 314).

Accordingly, modernism in Canada suffered a "cultural lag." As Charles G.D. Roberts shrewdly remarked in 1930, "to Canada modernism came more slowly and less

violently than elsewhere .... Modernism has come softly into the poetry of Canada, by peaceful penetration rather than by rude assault” (in Keith 1991, 99). By the time modernism became respectable in Canada, it had passed its prime elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> In the 1940s this trend of “neo-modernism” appears in Canada with Earle Birney, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Miriam Waddington, and Raymond Souster. All five poets, during the 1940s, were social revolutionaries in their youth. Dudek was the one aesthetically influenced by Pound in his fascination with the meditative poem, which he differentiated from the narrative poem already traditional with Pratt and Birney. Dudek’s long poems, *Europe*, *En Mexico*, and *Atlantis* become philosophical and elitist meditations. This personal stance made Dudek a distant and detached poet from the populist character that Canadian poetry would acquire in the 1960s.<sup>9</sup>

If Dudek is a classic, Layton is the most extravagantly romantic poet of the last decades. The poet, for Dudek, is an intellectual, in Layton’s voice, it is a prophet.<sup>10</sup> Layton

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<sup>8</sup> In a letter from Al Purdy to George Bowering, 24 October, 1982, Purdy states his opinion of modernism in his unacademic fashion foreseeing perhaps the fast overlapping of postmodernism in Canada: “I agree modernism took a long time in Canada. But since -at that time- poetry was something sick people and old ladies wrote and read, it’s not surprising. Besides, what looks modern to us now, when we write as more or less as the Americans write, may be only a stage on the way to the next stop. Writing, like so many things, is a thing of fashions. And while we can’t be concerned with it, writing may end completely in the next few years as the electronic age takes over” (‘George Bowering Papers,’ National Library of Canada, Box 17).

<sup>9</sup> “Birney is no better or worse than Dudek to me -they’re washed up. Just get the occasional good line lost in shit. Birney’s fine personally, but his latter poems you could use for toilet paper. And that goes for the Americans out there too. They’re lost in the wonderment of their own pseudo-genius .... Tell me what I think is most wrong with people like Birney, Daniells and Dudek -they’re writing of the past, not what happened today. What they write about has no direct application to what happens to me in my life. I don’t give a shit. I want to hear about things you run into every day or just about, and glue your philosophy to that if you must have it” (Letter from Al Purdy to George Bowering, July 20, 1963. ‘George Bowering Papers,’ National Library of Canada, Box 17).

<sup>10</sup> Layton carried on a struggle begun by the poets in *New Provinces* to put their own earlier modernism behind them. John Sutherland accurately represented Layton’s particular place as central to “the new social poetry of the forties” written in the wake of W.H.Auden, Stephen Spender, Dylan Thomas, and George Baker, to which Layton added and vulgarized the poetic diction of William Carlos Williams; it was a place Layton never left: “If, however, Layton’s proletarianism, his bawdiness, and his colloquialism ranked him

became the sexual liberator in the poetry of the sixties, though his dramatism and imagistic recurrency provoked an artificiality which has been gradually ignored by the later poets and critics avid with formal experimentation.<sup>11</sup> Miriam Waddington may be seen as the most individual and most personal of the poets who were connected with *First Statement*, whereas Earle Birney fits perfectly in the modern movement and, with the possible exception of Al Purdy, Birney becomes the inexhaustible poet of these years who exerted a tremendous influence on his contemporaries. This decade was a time of finding in Canadian poetry rather than shaping; of discovering the land, its relations with the world outside, and the ways in which all these findings can best be communicated.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, which we can consider as the Canadian modernist period, two different tendencies emerged: a division between modernist and nationalist stances became reflected in the rivalry between the magazines *Preview* and the more nationalist *First*

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with the 'new' poets of his generation, his social preoccupations frequently remained those of certain of the modernists: he writes out of a humanist tradition that decries 'this singular business of human evil'"(Neuman 1990, 57).

<sup>11</sup> Sutherland's attacks to Smith became a prophecy already fulfilled by the 1950s as a group of Montreal poets -Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster, and Irving Layton among them- took the colloquial speech rhythms of William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson for their own. In 1961, the Montreal poets became a (quickly renounced) example for a group of young writers in Vancouver. These writers, who included George Bowering, Frank Davey, and Fred Wah, adopted aspects of the poetics of Olson, Creeley, and Duncan and began editing the mimeographed magazine they irreverently named with the anagram *TISH*. By that time, Black Mountain poetics had become far more influential in Canada than it would ever be in the United States. (See Neuman 1990, 55)

<sup>12</sup> Earle Birney and Dorothy Livesay are seldom alluded to in the trend of a master narrative for postmodernist poetry, both writing since the 1920s and both living in Vancouver in the 1960s; they found new stimulus in the poetic revisionism going on around *TISH* and around the visits of Duncan, Levertov, Creeley and Olson. Earle Birney in his *Collected Poems* extensively rewrote even his 1920 work in the direction of the new poetics, and during the last two decades of his career he experimented radically with verse forms, typography, and concrete poetry in ways consistent with the emergence at the end of the 1960s of sound-poetry groups such as The Four Horsemen and Re/Sounding. Livesay in her earliest work had been an imagist, while experimenting more than any of her contemporaries in the social themes of the 1930s; yet the 1960s turned her from social documentary to a poetics in which concrete images chronicled the subjective experience of woman. Livesay and Birney prove difficult to locate in a narrative of postmodernist

*Statement*.<sup>13</sup> It was the *McGill Fortnightly Review*, and its poets published in *The New Provinces: Poems of Several Authors* (1936), where both tendencies emerged in any clarity: the *Fortnightly* editors saw themselves as pioneers, establishing literary, cultural, and institutional criticism. They took themselves as the heralds of a new criticism, it provided a forum for aspiring modernist poets, Scott, Smith, and Kennedy. *New Provinces* is the bridge between the birth of Canadian modernism in the 1920s and what Smith calls the “renaissance” of the 1940s (Compton 1994, 75-6).

Out of the ferment of little magazines in this period -*Preview*, *First Statement*, *Direction*, *Contemporary Verse*- came the anthology by John Sutherland, *Other Canadians* (1947). In its Introduction, Sutherland launched an attack on A.J.M. Smith’s recently published anthology *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943). As we have seen in Smith’s Introduction to the anthology, the present situation is treated in such a way that a preference seemed to be indicated in favour of the metaphysical and cosmopolitan in the existing alignment. But for Sutherland, as for others, “the true ‘native’ poetry was that of direct realism and simple language, and not the poetry of nineteenth-century romanticism. The ‘modern’ school was not ‘metaphysical’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ but essentially local and particular” (Dudek and Gnarowski 1970, 45-6). Sutherland thus rejects Smith’s concept of tradition: “Our poetry,” Sutherland asserts in his Introduction to *Other Canadians*, “is

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poetry because they adapt the language practices of the 1960s poetic revisionism without entirely adopting its sense of language’s relation to the world. (See Neuman 1990, 59-60).

<sup>13</sup> In the 1940s, *Preview* and *First Statement*, both of which were later absorbed by John Sutherland’s *Northern Review*, and, on the West Coast, *Contemporary Verse*, continued the iconoclastic work that Smith, Scott, and others had begun in the 1920s. In the 1950s, *Contact* and *Delta*, and the *Contact Press*, formed by Raymond Souster and Louis Dudek, carried on Sutherland’s work (editor of *Other Canadians*, 1947), *Contact Press* was a truly autonomous poetry Press dedicated to getting young and little known poets before

colonial because it is the product of a cultured English group who are out of touch with a people who long began adjusting themselves to life on this continent. The lack of all rapport between the poetry and the environment is one of the factors accounting for the incredibly unreal and ethereal quality of some of the new poetry” (in Dudek and Gnarowski, 1970, 57).

The term “metaphysical” appears in relation to Smith in order to include a number of individualistic poets like Margaret Avison, Ralph Gustafson, Jay Macpherson, Anne Wilkinson, and P.K. Page. These poets represent a non-nationalist modernism by maintaining a cosmopolitan stance which includes local characteristics. The rejection of literary nationalism is linked to a cosmopolitan intent, to seeking a way of writing whose appeal is language-wide, even if the origins of specific poems are local and national.<sup>14</sup> Wilkinson was the only one among this group of poets who at no time seems to have been moved by an inspiring or a consoling spiritual vision; the isolation she experienced makes her almost a lonely figure in her generation. Her poetry “is basically elegiac in character, a poetry of sadness, of surrender to destiny” (Woodcock 1993, 104). Smith described modernism as a process divided into two phases: “first came the shifts in subject-matter and diction, and then came the deeper psychological shift. Smith placed the ‘turning back’ to the Metaphysicals in the bridge position between the two stages” (Compton 1994, 67).

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the public, and it is partly owing to the trail-blazing of the Contact Press that there has been an eruption of private presses in the 1960s: small publishers to publish young writers. (See Barbour 1970, 112).

<sup>14</sup> If to the West Coast poets Layton at first appeared as an example to be reckoned with ... then as a force to be reckoned against, Margaret Avison for quite different reasons was first welcomed, then no longer discussed. Her obvious attractiveness included her commitment to language and music in poetry .... her poetic credo at first glance seems akin to the phenomenological poetics being developed out of Olson’s *Maximus* poems, but hers is also a formal and formalist verse, and her poetics of the ‘optic heart,’ which posits the harmony of image, emotion, spiritual journey, and writing, proves more metaphysical than cosmopolitan and more modernist than postmodernist. (See Neuman 1990, 58).

Smith's Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1960) demonstrates how far Smith's thinking on Canadian poetry had developed. Familiar now with the long development of Canadian poetry, early and recent, French and English, Smith confidently describes its patterns. The continuity described in English Canadian poetry -from pioneer to modernist- has nothing to do with the English measure. As a natural development, there arose out of this local poetry a national poetry as the enthusiasm for the local broadened to encompass what lay geographically beyond the immediate. This indigenous literary nationalism grew by way of local pride. The fortunate finding by literary poets of a unique subject matter in Canada did not make for a national poetry (Compton 1994, 35). The poetry movement of the 1940s shifted in this period from a highly concentrated and localized activity to a dispersed and varied literary scene, much of which now became centered in Toronto.

In Canada, modernism translates into symbols of landscape and wilderness stories. It means the inheritance of the imagist lyric and the metaphysical poem. For Eli Mandel, modernism occupies itself thematically with questions of authenticity, the location of the self and consciousness, whereas formally, it breaks apart the context of nineteenth-century thought, its belief in wholeness and coherence. As a late decadent form of romanticism, modernism also presents in its imagery a myth of descent or journey underground or to inner space as a quest for wholeness or integration. Mandel, a Jewish poet deeply rooted in the prairies, talks about his modernist influences<sup>15</sup>:

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<sup>15</sup> Eli Mandel and D.G.Jones belong to a generation caught between generations. In Mandel's transition from learned and formalist rhetoric to the recognition -in long poems such as *Out of Place* and *Life Sentence*- that language mediates rather than reproduces experience, critical emphasis has fallen on his later

I think the whole concept of the speaking voice, of the dramatic voice, of the (Poundian) aesthetic -never write a thing that you couldn't conceive of a person actually saying, of yourself actually saying. A terrific view of language. Or Auden's voice -poetry as memorable speech. The musical quality of Pound and the aphoristic and intellectual quality of Auden. These things influenced me. Stevens was at one time an enormous influence because I saw in him the power of abstraction. Abstract poetry. John Berryman because of his diction and because of the elegiac tone.<sup>16</sup>

The development of a reflexive modernism, in the poetry of Leonard Cohen, Al Purdy, John Newlove and Margaret Atwood could then be considered as the opposite of the myth of descent, a kind of surfacing: "Culturally, modernism has been a great liberating force, and one of its most profound impulses has been to bring into the field of reference of art the new mass culture and contemporary experience. It is this sense of liberation one feels in the postmodernism of writers like Michael Ondaatje and George Bowering" (Mandel 1986, 82-83).

In English-Canadian literature since 1945, there appears to be a marked trend away from the representation of a social reality which characterized many pre-war works towards an exploration of the human consciousness in all its irrationality, subjectivity, ambiguity and fragmentation: "Since World War II, Canadian narrative has been moving from social realism towards novel forms that are concerned with perceptual processes, the aesthetic alienation of reality, and the creative art, in other words towards the auto-referential, 'narcissistic,' parodic forms characteristic of what has come to be identified as postmodernist writing" (Heidenreich 1989, 5). In the Canadian context, the emergence of

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postmodernist work. But the premodern-to-postmodern narrative leap has dealt less generously with a group of poets who belong, broadly speaking, to the tradition of Margaret Avison, poets such as P.K. Page and D.G. Jones who use polished and sometimes traditional verse forms and learned allusions to convey personal epiphanies" (See Neuman 1990, 59).

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Margery Fee, 3 June 1974, p. 22. ('Eli Mandel Papers,' Department of Archives and Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, Box 1).

postmodernist writing represents an emancipation in a broader sense, namely emancipation from the parent literatures. Traditional forms cannot be violated or transcended unless they have been mastered. These new writers are willing to be measured against the very models from whose conventions they deviate. As Neuman asserts, “to represent Canadian poetry as having leaped from the pinnacle of a nature-and-nationalism verse, across the abyss of modernism, to land surefooted on an opposite plateau of postmodernism is at least in part a narrative of postcolonial resistance to colonial debates and tropes that dominated discussion of Canadian literature from the 1930s through the 1970s” (1990, 57).

Canadian writers in English have thus developed in the last decades a concern with exposing the social, cultural and moral deficiencies in the Canadian reality surrounding them. Accordingly, the search for a Canadian centralist definition has always ended in flawed statements or impossible desires to the point that is better to think of Canada in regional terms than in national ones. As Mandel comments, “if you think about the region itself, that is, the area with which you identify, then you’re not alienated .... it’s out of the local and the particular and the rooted that we write and we can’t really be rooted, not in a country with as much diversity, physically and culturally as Canada. You can’t be rooted in the national. You’re rooted in your local and particular.”<sup>17</sup>

The decade of the 1960s has assumed a legendary status. It was a time when, after the slow build-up of modern Canadian literature during the 1940s and 1950s, the “colossal verbal explosion” as Northrop Frye once called it (“Conclusion,” 1972, 318), took place. Phyllis Webb, James Reaney, Al Purdy, Milton Acorn and Alden Nowlan represent that

decade. The English-language Montreal poets, however, have a voice of their own, an attention to images, idiom and sentence rhythm that comes from living simultaneously in more than one culture. Klein, Layton and Leonard Cohen draw liberally on Biblical and traditional Jewish imagery, while Scott, Smith, and, with them, Jones, and occasionally Gustafson, show an awareness of language that comes with continual confrontation and translation. We can talk of a distinctive regionalism in this decade, with the independent development of West Coast poetry, that of bpNichol, bill bissett, George Bowering, and also of younger poets such as Susan Musgrave and Tom Wayman. Inevitably, these poets were more subject to American than Eastern Canadian influence.<sup>18</sup>

There is a popular tendency that affect all the arts. As D.G. Jones comments in *Butterfly on Rock*:

They have set out to take an inventory of the world but scarcely uttered, the world of the excluded or ignored. It would comprehend whatever is crude, whatever is lonely, whatever has failed, whatever inhabits the silence of the deserted streets, the open highways, the abandoned farms. It is the wilderness of experience that does not conform to the cultural maps of the history books, sermons, political speeches, slick magazines and ads. And it is the wilderness of language in which the official voices of the culture fail to articulate the meaning or the actual sensation of living and tend to become gibberish. (1970, 166)

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Allan Thornton, 15 November 1975, p. 10 ('Eli Mandel Papers,' Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, Box 1).

<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Allan Thornton, November, 1975, Eli Mandel sketches this regional and historical evolution from the point of view of his Western Jewish inheritance: "two or three times in the history of Canadian writing, college writers have been, as a group, very important -one group of course was the group in Montreal where Smith and Acorn and Scott founded, as they put it, the modern movement of writing in Canada. There's some dispute over where the modern movement begins, what role Dorothy Livesay plays in this, where does W.W. Ross fit in, after all we're talking about 1920-1940- and lots and lots of things were happening. Later on, in Vancouver in the sixties, of course the Tish group became influential -people like Bowering and Davey and Kearns began their writing there, so that there have been occasions where college writers have played a significant and developing role in Canadian writing. That certainly wasn't the case with the writers in Saskatchewan when I was there" ('Eli Mandel Papers,' Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, Box 1, p. 5).

Neither Al Purdy nor Alden Nowlan belonged to any literary movement and rather ignored the Black Mountain School, which so much influenced the *TISH* group set in Vancouver. They remained individualistic and, perhaps, offered the most striking examples of inspired individualism in Canadian poetry.<sup>19</sup> Purdy's "Ontario Poems" showed, for the first time, the intensity of his sense of place and visual reality, his love of the land. As a poet, Purdy has shown an astonishing power to invent himself. His mentors, Layton in the mid-fifties and, of course, D.H. Lawrence, had their importance, but after his earlier days he escapes the influences and tends towards colloquial speech and evocative imagery.<sup>20</sup> These poets are dedicated 'regionalists,' while their local experiences universalize them. Purdy, in particular, articulated a national poetic which influenced younger poets like Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Tom Marshall or David MacFadden and his poetry represents

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<sup>19</sup> Purdy comments on his poetic influences to Eli Mandel in August 4, 1960: "I've always had the idea that reading a good book of poems improves one's own poetry. I've learned more reading Stevens, Layton, Yeats, etc. ... Much of Stevens baffles me, however .... Still I can't see how a poem can be successful unless it has an anchor line in human life somewhere, and that apart from the author being presumably human" (Eli Mandel Papers, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, Box 14). In another letter to Tom Marshall in March 31, 1966, Purdy goes on reflecting on the future of Canadian poetry saying "with my opinions of what I regard as my own elders also, then I feel also that the field is wide open. We really haven't produced a very very good poet to date. There much much to be said, I mean much much unknown to be discovered and written about. Generally poets feel, I think, that all things have been said before. Which is absolutely untrue. Very little has been said, and whole vast areas of the mind to be uncovered and written about. Technique itself has been regarded with too single-minded an eye, as if there's just one day, whereas I feel there are many many, and most undiscovered" ('Tom Marshall Papers,' National Library of Canada, Ottawa, Box 7).

<sup>20</sup> With the exception of the special Purdy issue in *Essays on Canadian Writing*, number 49, commissioned by Sam Solecki and Russell Brown in the summer of 1993, there has not been a single article about Purdy - or Irving Layton- in *Canadian Literature*, *Canadian Poetry* or *Essays in Canadian Writing* in this decade. There has been a recent marginalization in criticism of those canonical writers whose work is less receptive of poststructuralist and postmodern trends. According to Solecki, "Pratt, Smith, Avison, Layton, Page, and Purdy are part of the national cultural memory and can now be read 'historically' because the phase of Canadian poetic modernism of which they were part ended in the late 1960s, and theses in recent years have tended to all but ignore them. With them, a phase of Canadian culture and economic and political nationalism, in the broadest sense, came to a close at roughly the same time" (Solecki's "Poetry, Nation, and a Canadian Poetic," Lecture 1996, introductory chapter of his forthcoming book on Al Purdy)

both the culmination of the major phase of the Canadian literary tradition.<sup>21</sup> He is considered the Canadian Whitman who forges a native idiom for Canada's imagination. These categorizations, however, are superficial in a poet whose artistic life has been so long and varied.<sup>22</sup> In his forthcoming book, *The Last Canadian Poet*, Sam Solecki argues that Al Purdy is the last Canadian poet of this major phase of Canadian literature, or of the first century of what is called the Canadian nation,

Al Purdy is the major and perhaps last writer of the first phase –the major or constitutive phase- of the Canadian nation ... he is the major or central poet of our experience, the one who has given the strongest, most comprehensive and most original voice to the national, cultural, historical and political experiences and aspirations that have been at the heart of our various nationalist discourses since Confederation. If it makes sense to speak of 'the Canadian experience,' of our collective fabric, then he has been its most original and powerful poetic voice.<sup>23</sup>

Together with his contemporaries, Purdy found his voice amidst Canada's evolution towards political and cultural nationhood and identity. As Purdy stated in his introduction to his *The New Romans* (1968), poetry can only reflect national experience and the individual and collective sense of being Canadian, with a rhythm, syntax and texture that sound Canadian and that go beyond both British and American influences:

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<sup>21</sup> "One of the several ironies of Purdy's career and of the national experience is that he came to prominence and wrote much of his strongest and most original work in the decade surrounding the centennial celebrations of Confederation. The optimism of the period (from John Diefenbaker's northern vision to Trudeaumania and the cultural nationalism of the 1960's) as well as the nearly euphoric cultural nationalism are reflected in a body of work celebrating and offering a poetic 'map' of the country" (Solecki's "Poetic, Nation, and a Canadian Poetic," Lecture 1996, p. 5, in his forthcoming book on Al Purdy *The Last Canadian Poet*).

<sup>22</sup> In a letter to George Bowering, September 26, 1973, whom he considers, together with Newlove, one of the best poets of the West at this time, Purdy asserts, "Why do I detest Whitman? He is monotonous, long-winded and fulla shit. Sometimes, rarely, he can be good, as in 'When Lilacs last' ... I learned much more from Thomas, metric people like Chesterton, Hardy, etc., especially D.H. Lawrence, Layton (whom I loved around 1954-55) ... I dislike his (Whitman's) repetitions, his philosophy of good fellowship and the common man, all the cliches used about him" ('George Bowering Papers,' National Library of Canada, Box 17).

a sensitivity to what D.H. Lawrence calls “the spirit of place” and a new-world desire to lift, in William Carlos Williams’s words, ‘an environment to expression’; a poetic stance grounded in Canadian geography, prehistory and history; a poetic and a vision that take the local ... or regional as the point of departure and as synecdoche for the national and universal; a desire to offer, in an era incapable of epic totality, a comprehensive vision - subjective, provisional, lyrical, fragmentary, syncretic and open-ended- of the nation; influence within the tradition. (Solecki 1999, 12)

James Reaney, considered by Stan Dragland and George Bowering one of the best essayist in the country,<sup>24</sup> gave a new impulse to Canadian drama in the 1960s and was said to belong to a mythopoeic school of poets that included Jay Macpherson and Eli Mandel.<sup>25</sup> Yet it is Phyllis Webb who is the poet’s poet in this decade, the meticulous artificer who has preserved the intensity and humanity of her vision as well as a continuous reworking of her craft. Frank Scott influenced her early years, as well as Smith and Birney. She refined her verse and brought to it the spareness of *The Naked Poems*, discarding metaphor and the vivid images of her contemporaries. This work stands out for a progressive movement towards silence in the poet until today. As Kroetsch long ago pointed out, Webb *Naked Poems* is a core text in postmodern writing in Canada. The first book-length sequence of its kind, a version of the serial poem, it also sang with a lyric intensity too many poems identified as lyrics fail to achieve. Kroetsch’s comments are as true today as when he made them:

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<sup>23</sup> “Poetry, Nation, and a Canadian Poetic,” Lecture 1996, p. 3, in his forthcoming book on Al Purdy, *The Last Canadian Poet*.

<sup>24</sup> See George Bowering’s correspondence with Stan Dragland in the National Library of Canada, Box 7.

<sup>25</sup> The 1958 to 1963 winners of the Governor General’s Awards for poetry can roughly signal the context against which the *TISH* generation of poets defined itself: James Reaney for *A Suit of Nettles* in 1959; Irving Layton for *A Red Carpet for the Sun* in 1960; Margaret Avison for *Winter Sun* in 1961; Robert Finch for *Acis in Oxford* in 1962; finally, Reaney again for *Twelve Letters to a Small Town*. Like Finch, Reaney drew heavily on mythic and archetypal traditions. However, despite the overwhelming influence of Northrop Frye’s archetypal theory of modes on Canadian criticism of the period, poetry such as Finch’s and Reaney’s had little influence in the 1960s and after. (See Neuman 1990, 57)

Our interest in the discrete, in the occasion.

Trace: behind many of the long poems of the 1970s in Canada is the shadow (Jungian?) of another poem, a short long poem.

1965: Phyllis Webb, *Naked Poems*.

A kind of hesitation even to write the long poem. Two possibilities: The short long poem, the book-long poem. Webb, insisting on that hesitation. On that delay. On nakedness and lyric and yet on a way out, perhaps a way out of the ending of the lyric too, with its ferocious principles of closure. A being compelled out of lyric by lyric.

The poet, the lover, compelled towards an ending (conclusion, death, orgasm: coming) that must, out of love, be (difference) deferred. (1989, 118)

bpNichol, Daphne Marlatt, bill bissett and Michael Ondaatje were born during World War II and, with the exception of Ondaatje, lived in Vancouver -being part, with George Bowering, of the West Coast poetry of the 1960s.<sup>26</sup> Bowering was one of the founders of the Vancouver verse magazine *TISH* in 1961, an event that helped to shift the focus of contemporary Canadian poetry from Montreal to Vancouver, while Daphne Marlatt was one of its later editors before the experimental magazine disappeared with the decade. Coach House Press, founded in 1965 by Stan Bevington, and closed in 1997, had bpNichol and Ondaatje among its editors; and either in book form or in its magazine *Open Letter*, published any poet who prompted “an openness that weakens traditional barriers between reader and writer and work, that moves from the verbal to the oral to the visual, and so relates to international and often historical manifestations of sound poetry and concrete poetry” (Woodcock 1993, 130). These poetic tendencies respond to a general movement in

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<sup>26</sup> It is clear that never in the history of Canadian letters there has been as much activity as during the last few years of that decade. A large number of magazines, of which *The Tamarack Review* (the earliest, begun in 1958), *Quarry*, *Tish*, *Prism International*, *Talon*, bpNichol’s now defunct *Ganglia*, and bill bissett’s totally irregular *blew ointment* are the most important, have appeared during the decade in response to the amount of material that is pouring in. For there has never been so much poetry available for publication as there is this time. There can be no doubt, then, that the small presses are filling a real need. Coach House Press, House of Anansi, Talonbooks, Very Stone Press, Oberon Press, and the Quarry Press are all engaged in necessary and quite valuable work. (See Barbour 1970, 112-13).

the 1960s, where poetry emerges as public performance, transcending the privacy of the page towards public readings all around the country. Before that time, only Al Purdy and Irving Layton had been able to create, for a certain while, a populist poetry.<sup>27</sup>

Bowering and the *TISH* group became very early aware of contemporary movements in other parts of the world, like the avant-garde groups in Latin America and in Europe. But, in the beginning, rather like the *First Statement* group of Layton, Dudek, and Souster twenty years before in Montreal, they took their lessons from the American avant-garde of both eastern and western seaboard. Warren Tallman, who arrived to teach at the University of British Columbia, contributed to the American influence. He brought poets like Robert Duncan to Vancouver, whose influence was deep and lasting. The main line of influence on *TISH* was that of the Black Mountain poets, especially Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, who both taught at the University of British Columbia. Each of the *TISH* poets developed independently after the magazine sank into the counterculture at the end of the 1960s.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For more than a decade there have been no new major anthologies for Canadian poetry. The one anthology used in most post-secondary institutions remains *Fifteen Canadian Poets x 2*, 1978, the first incarnation of which *Fifteen Canadian Poets*, appeared in 1970. Despite a general awareness of the extraordinary range of contemporary writing, the basic division between the more or less traditional poetics of mainstream poetry and the radical poetics of LANGUAGE oriented writers persists. Even poets not given to joining groups find themselves partially associated with one or the other of these major forces. It should come as no surprise, then, that, for some time now, the major anthologies in Canada have tended to weigh in on the side of the traditional. Nor that they do so by almost completely erasing the signs of more innovative poetics in the writings of well known poets like Bowering, Kroetsch, or Webb, and by including younger poets whose work falls within conventional lyric expectations. (See Barbour 1998, 3-4).

<sup>28</sup> See George Bowering's correspondence to Frank Davey concerning the *Tish* group and the Black Mountain poets. In a letter to Bowering, November 26, 1963, on the other hand, Purdy criticizes Creeley, Davey and Fred Wah and, of course, Warren Tallman and the Black Mountain and the *Tish* groups. Purdy, however, praises Webb, Layton, Cohen, P.K. Page, MacEwen and Acorn together with Raymond Souster. Talking about the Black Mountain poets he explains how "Natural speech rhythms without something added can be just as deadly and dull as iambics -A fact some of the boys like Olson and Duncan don't seem to realize for all their learning" ('George Bowering Papers,' National Library of Canada, Box 17). In a previous letter to Eli Mandel, August 4, 1960, Purdy had already made his position clear: "Damned if I can get Olson's stuff, no matter how many times I read it .... Smith is out of date as hell to me, and his peculiar fence straddling position accomplishes nothing but torn trousers. Exactly how one can preserve 'a fine

Nichol's immediate roots were in the Vancouver poetry movement of the early 1960s, but he quickly made contact with European concrete poets. In his earliest poems of the 1960s, Nichol was engaged largely in dissecting the constituent power of words, and later came to examining the forms of the alphabet, giving colours to vowels as Rimbaud had done. Even when he wrote conventional poetry, he gave to his poetry an imagist power with an intellectual background. Nichol revealed the depth of thought and the fullness of heart that inspired him in helping people in various needs. Nichol's *The Martyrology* is a long poem in ten volumes of great intellectual complexity, in which Nichol uses the search for spiritual fulfilment as analogical to the search for linguistic purity, but with an irony some critics tend to overlook.

Daphne Marlatt has been the poet as explorer; in the documentaries especially, Marlatt moves between verse and charged prose, and her book of travels in Mexico without knowing the language, *Zocalo*, is a kind of novel. Though he is wildly romantic in temperament, Bill Bissett seems to have ranged over a vast scope of activities, drawing prodigiously and operating for many years his *blew ointment* Press which published the work of others as well as most of his own extraordinary prolific work. An eclectic and abstract poet, he developed a new phonetic spelling to show his lack of conformity with linguistic conventions and rules. He is, still today, the unrepresented survivor from the 1960s, retaining much of all the audacity and feeling of the period.

The powers of nature and landscape in general have been the most recurrent motif in English-Canadian literature in the 1960s; before Atwood's *Survival* (1972), Frye expressed

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detachment' as Smith says, in a world like this one and only, I couldn't say" ('Eli Mandel Papers,' Elizabeth

this feeling which characterized the thematic criticism of these days: “I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature .... It is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest” (1971, 225). For Frye, “earlier Canadian poetry was full of solitude and loneliness, of the hostility or indifference of nature, of the fragility of human life and values in such an environment” (in Staines 1977, 42). Canada is not only a nation but a colony in an empire: “The imperial and the regional are both inherently anti-poetic environments, yet they go hand in hand; and together they make up what I call the colonial in Canadian life” (in Dudek and Gnarowski 1970, 89).

D.G Jones, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, Patrick Lane, and Robin Skelton represent the second generation of the established tradition whose basic presuppositions they instinctively accept. Perhaps D.G. Jones is closest to the older Canadian tradition; encouraged in the beginning by Dudek and Souster, Jones did his M.A. thesis on Ezra Pound and the *Cantos*, though there is no vestige of Poundian influence in his poetry, which has been influenced by Scott, Smith and the Confederation poets. Margaret Atwood has become, in the course of time, more inclined towards the visual, towards recording the image in its sensual fullness rather than transforming it into a metaphysical conceit. Her long poem *Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) follows the life of of Susanna Strickland, who after her marriage came out to Ontario in the 1830s and wrote *Roughing It in the Bush*. In her *Journals* Atwood rewrites the schizophrenic loneliness rooted in the poets of the nineteenth century in the first voice of Mrs. Moodie. Her own criticism has

tended to be strongly thematic and even didactic, as in *Survival*. Aesthetically, however, this thematic perspective has proved increasingly unsatisfactory since it tends to focus on the historical or psychological genesis of the text, rather than on the text itself and its effects.<sup>29</sup> Atwood's political concern with nationalism and feminism is obvious in novels like *Surfacing* rather than in her verse. After several novels with international acclaim, she is the most international of her generation, and her later interests have derived towards the historiographic novel with her last, prize-winning novel, *Alias Grace* (1996). Lee appears as the poet "evangelist" after the great influence exerted by George Grant, from whom he has inherited his great didacticism. MacEwen is the most mythical and timeless in her writing, greatly influenced by mystical topics, by Jung and Egyptian mythology; she should have deserved more attention from the critics. These poets are notably philosophical in their inclinations, with Lane as the nihilist par excellence.

Another poet of some influence, Robin Skelton, died recently. He was something of a magister, an eccentric master of inherited forms, a teacher who helped found the Creative Writing Department at the University of Victoria and was founder-editor of *Malahat Review*. An English immigrant, his poetry developed into elegiac and reflexive verse. He provided Canadian poetry with the knowledge of the British poetry of the 1950s. Pat Lane is

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<sup>29</sup> Thematic criticism dominated the English-Canadian literary landscape in the 1970s. The feelings of isolation, betrayal, alienation, fear, eden lost and a hostile destiny were part of this abuse of the *exile stance* so to speak. Terms like exile neurosis, split-personality or schizoid selves were common in the contents of the poetry as early as the forties in W.P. Wilgar's "Poetry and the Divided Mind in Canada," (1944), the "Oedipus complex" of John Sutherland's *Other Canadians* (1947), and the "Schizoid solitudes" of A.M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" (1948). In the seventies poets and critics exploit this psychic fragmentation and thematic victimism in D.G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock* (1970), Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* (1971), and Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972) among others. (See T.E. Farley *Exiles and Pioneers: Two Visions of Canada's Future, 1825-1975*. Ottawa: Borealis, 1976).

a fine lyricist, or working class background, now well established in the contemporary canon.

For decades, we thought of the prairie as a land of fiction, the home of the Canadian realist novel -realism extending on one side to the European-derived naturalism of Frederick Philip Grove, and on the other, into the popular romanticism of Martha Ostenso. In this fiction, the whole history of prairie rural society is re-enacted, from the harshness and loneliness of pioneer living, represented in their different ways by Grove and Ostenso and Robert J.C. Stead. The isolated and despairing communities of the Depression, however, are best projected in Sinclair Ross's fiction *As For Me and My House* (1941), without forgetting the great Manawaka cycle of Margaret Lawrence's novels. In the 1960s, a sense of unease and isolation, though different from what the pioneers had experienced, was reappearing on the prairies; the social community was beginning to lose its vitality and solidarity as the economic basis for living became more precarious. John Newlove was the first of these prairie poets to achieve a degree of acceptance through poems that gained him a reputation for dark pessimism and for a kind of tenderness that always seemed to verge on cruelty. In some ways, Newlove's poems resemble those of Al Purdy without ever being strictly influenced.

If there is any writer whom one can regard as the real precursor of the prairie movement in verse it is surely Purdy, the poet-wanderer, who wrote of another rural society -that of Southern Ontario. There was really nothing in the prairie past before the 1960s of a poetic tradition -oral or written- that might offer an inspiration to new writers. The presence of Purdy is an example rather than a model behind other poets.

Eli Mandel, Robert Kroetsch, John Newlove and Dale Zieroth constitute a group of the prairie poets, and other names come to mind, like Lorna Crozier, Ken Mitchell, Glen Sorestad, Pat Friesen and Andy Suknaski. John Newlove and Joe Rosenblatt belong to a strong Canadian tradition of the auto-didactic, non-academic poet, which includes such powerful names like Al Purdy, Milton Acorn and Alden Nowlan; like P.K. Page and Gwendolyn MacEwen, Leonard Cohen was never greatly influenced by his University training and, after his great poetic years, tended towards pop art. Eli Mandel, however, was closely involved in the academic world of the 1950s. He was profoundly affected by the Second World War and the horror of the Jewish concentration camps and this is reflected in his poetry; he turned to the prairies and the Jewish settlements in Saskatchewan, and other places, as the area of his vision. A similar feeling of the past in the plains and of the ancestral links with them is evident in the poetry of Robert Kroetsch. He is renowned for his fantastic novels of the West and the North even before he took seriously to poetry. Even the titles of Kroetsch's volumes of verse show the extent to which his work is related to the concrete reality of prairie existence, observed and remembered: *The Stone Hammer Poems*, *The Ledger*, *Seed Catalogue*, *Field Notes*. It seems that Kroetsch prefers the open-ended form that narrative tends to negate; he makes a poetry appropriate to the experience of the prairie, to the sense of space. He has produced some extraordinary poems focused on personal obsessions and family history, developing autobiographical poetry in very original ways.

If there is a generalized "prairie vernacular" poetic, then, due in part to Kroetsch's influence, there are also a number of innovative poetics to be found on the prairies. In Manitoba, where he teaches since the 1980s, Dennis Cooley whose ability to mix and match

vernacular speech and innovative form has led to a number of wildly comic poems, has also been an energetic mentor. Saskatchewan is perhaps the busiest literary scene in Canada, and the poetry of that province does tend toward the anecdotal side of the prairie vernacular. In Calgary we cannot forget Fred Wah and Jeff Derksen.

As Margaret Atwood pointed out some time ago, in her Introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1982), women, for whatever reason, have always had a larger space in Canadian writing than in that of most cultures. As Barbour asserts (1998, 10-11), their voices have never been so loud nor so wide-ranging. More than half the poetry being published in Canada today is by women. Influential were Gwen MacEwen and Dorothy Livesay, along with Webb, Page, Avison and Atwood. Writers with solid reputations include Roo Borson, Di Brandt, Méira Cook, Lorna Crozier, Mary di Michele, Kristjana Gunnars, Diana Hartog, Maggie Helwig, Sharon Thesen, Coleen Thibaudeau, Rhea Tregebov. Perhaps we can say that innovation lies in the hands of women such as Karen MacCormack, whose last work, *The Tongue Moves Talk* (1997), was published simultaneously in U.S and U.K., with cover commendations from both Charles Bernstein and Maggie O'Sullivan. Both Daphne Marlatt and Lola Lemire Tostevin have recently published collections of critical prose as well as novels. Critics hailed Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) as one of her finest and most personal collections of poetry. Webb's last book before she turned to visual art and painting, *Hanging Fire* (1990) is still a great influence and *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems* (1982) remains in print. P.K. Page, whose visionary Lyricism has long been admired, published her latest collected poems in 1997. That four of the five books nominated for the Governor General's Award in 1998

were by women testifies to that vitality (Barbour 1998, 12). The only male poet nominated in 1998 for the Governor General's was Michael Ondaatje for his *Handwriting*, a book that shows new directions in the writer who, despite his sudden international fame for *The English Patient*, has always been a meticulous and sensitive poet that returns to his roots.

There is nothing Canadian in *Handwriting* and, at the same time, it is typically Canadian. More and more poets today are multicultural and have change the poetic map of the country with his imported cultures. In the last decade we have seen an increasing number of books and anthologies concerned with writing from various multicultural sites.<sup>30</sup> Roy Miki, the editor of *West Coast Line*, has done much to promote such writing. In the Winter 1997-98, the magazine offered interesting contributions by Jeff Derksen, Fred Wah and Miki, who analysed the concept of multiculturalism as a contradictory zone managed not by the Canadian people but rather by the federal administration and policy makers in order to project a political and cultural history built on tolerance and inclusiveness. As Miki asserts, "For those who have internalized the networks of racialization, this narrative remains a fantasy that deflects the colonial history of white supremacist power" (1997-98, 90).

There are many writers doing interesting work, Asian-Canadians such as Miki and Wah, Hiromi Goto, the late Roy Kiyooka, Gerry Shikatani, Yasmin Ladha, Lakshmi Gill. African-Canadian poets include Dionne Brand who won 1997 Governor General's Award for poetry, George Elliott Clarke, Claire Harris, Suzette Mayr, Marlene Nourbese Philip,

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<sup>30</sup> Special issues include *Colour: An Issue* (1994), *Transporting the Emporium: Hong Kong Art and Writing Through the Ends of Time* (1996-97), *North: New African Canadian Writing* (1997), and an *Asian Heritage Month Sampler* (1997). As well *West Coast Line* offers continual support for their new writing from all areas in every issue. *absinthe* has also had special issues, including one on writing by aboriginals and people of colour, and it regularly highlights other forms of minority writing. (See Barbour 1998, 14-5).

and Olive Senior. First Nations Canadian poets include Jeanette Armstrong, Joanne Arnott, Marie Annharte Baker, Beth Brant, Marilyn Dumont, Wayne Keon, Gregory Scofield, Daniel David Moses.

One of the interesting aspects of poetry in Canada in the 1990s has to do with the way in which they have begun to honour some of their older poets. The first was in 1986, when Paul Dutton and Steven Smith organized a celebration in Toronto to accompany the publication of *Read the Way He Writes: A Festschrift for bpNichol*. Sadly, Nichol died unexpectedly two years later. In March 1992, many gathered in Vancouver to celebrate the work of Phyllis Webb. Both these poets are the major innovative figures in Canadian poetry. Nichol remains one of the most deeply missed writers of his generation; his personal impact on his many friends was inestimable, but even more “his never-ceasing explorations of the possibilities of writing continue to galvanize other, and new, writers in their own attempts to push the envelope of poetic discourse and form” (Barbour 1998, 5). Some of his followers are young poets who work in Toronto, such as Michael Holmes, Christian Bök and Darren Wershler-Henry, the latter has brought concrete poetry back to the forefront with his work *Nicholodeon: a book of lowerglyphs* (1997). We cannot see anything else but eclecticism in country that still reads some poetry compared to Europe. A recent issue of *Canadian Literature* on contemporary poetics shows contributions of such divergent poets as Erin Mouré, Pat Lowther, George Elliott Clarke, Daphne Marlatt, P.K. Page, and Milton Acorn, and on such subjects as polyphony, the inheritance of Japanese poetry. This, as Barbour claims, “cannot be a bad thing in these theoretical and postmodern times” (1998, 19).

## 1.2 Theorizing the Postmodern: Towards a Poetics

As opposed to modernist experimentation, postmodernists produce open, discontinuous, improvisational, indeterminate, or aleatory structures. They also reject the traditional aesthetics of "Beauty" and of "uniqueness"....The postmodern experience is widely held to stem from a profound sense of *ontological uncertainty*....Neither the world nor the self any longer possesses unity, coherence, meaning. (Selden 1989, 72)

Postmodernism would be the wider context in which post-structuralism and other contemporary theoretical paradigms have been born and developed. The postmodern can thus be considered the state and condition of part of the present culture in the West. Despite the controversy of the term, the 'post' here means neither 'against' nor 'after' modernism (as artistic movement) or modernity (as the philosophical *doxa* of the individual and unitary subject), since postmodernism challenges the very teleological and oppositional basis on which these assertions are made. The 'post' would rather mean both against and from modernism and modernity. Postmodern architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, photography, and cinema incorporate all possible materials from the past and the present by means of non-oppositional, non-teleological strategies. Fiction, then, is particularly relevant in its theoretical awareness of the role of language and discourses in the construction of reigning systems of thought (Darias 1996, 119).

The word *postmodernism* generally refers to a form of contemporary culture, whereas the term *postmodernity* alludes to a specific historical period. Postmodernity, as a style of thought, is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation.

The earliest still relevant use of the term postmodernism must be attributed to the American poet-critic Charles Olson, who employed it repeatedly in the 1950s, without ever offering a proper definition. However, Donald Allen and George Butterick tried to define Olson's postmodernism both as an instant engagement with reality and in their argument that the Black Mountain poets, the Beats and the poets of the New York School essentially took their example from Olson's poetics. For Allen and Butterick, this postmodern poetic practice is "marked with an acceptance of the primordial, of spiritual and sexual necessities, of myth, of the latest understandings of science, chance and change, wit and dream" (Bertens, in Smyth 1991,125).<sup>1</sup>

The publication of the anthology *The New American Poetry*, in 1960, renders clear that there is an alternative view to modernist ideas. Allen and Butterick edit another anthology in 1982, *The Postmoderns*, which encompasses a variety of postmodernist movements in the States after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> At this stage, the term postmodernism refers to different American movements in poetry. Allen and Butterick gather all these trends in order to react against high modernism and thus look for more alternative models to re-enact the concept of language, and its relation with reality and the individual. But most of all they demand a new reader as an active presence in the text. The community of artists in the Black Mountain College gives a new impulse to the long list of modernist artists and writers of the previous decades. Poets like Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, musicians like John Cage and others, develop a new sense of creativity and sensitivity in their approach to the creative process: the union of the arts under the presence of the artist. The presence of these artists was already evident in North American poetry, as was reflected by the Beat Generation

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles Olson's "Projective Verse," *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960): 386-97.

who practised a clear eclecticism in art: a reaction to the establishment through the use of sarcasm as their main weapon. In a parallel way, an educated generation appears in the 1960s, the New York poets, influenced by the European Symbolists, rebellious poets who negate the established canons and who search for the value in the simplicity of objects, mixing different styles.

The term *avant-garde* is an aesthetic metaphor commonly used to identify writers and artists who establish their own formal conventions in opposition to the dominant academic and popular taste. The radical disruptive writings of poets like Rimbaud were to give birth to the literary *avant-garde* of the late 1860s, while in the 1870s, art critics were to use the term to refer to the innovations of the early French Impressionists. The 1910-1930 period, however, has usually been considered as the climax of the *avant-garde*, when expressionism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism, and constructivism were to generate antagonistic and visionary impulses which signalled a vital tradition of social radicalism and social innovation (Bayard 1989, 3-4).

An important debate has arisen in the last decades over the periodization of literary modernism in relation to the twentieth century or historical *avant-garde*: a debate spurred by Peter Bürger's 1974 study *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*.<sup>3</sup> According to Bürger, there is a transformation from quantity to quality at issue within the value-sphere of bourgeois autonomous art. The twentieth-century *avant-garde* is distinguished not so much by an attack on traditional works of art as by an attack on the ideal of works of art 'per se' as something *separated from life-praxis* -i.e., as defined by the value of aesthetic autonomy and established by the bourgeois institution of art. In Bürger's view, the *avant-garde* perceived such aesthetic

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<sup>2</sup> This anthology includes the Black Mountain Poets, the New York Poets, Ethnopoetics, the Beat Generation and other *avant-garde* representatives.

<sup>3</sup> 1974. Trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

modes of negation as ultimately ineffectual, and thus adopted as its program the reintegration of art in the domain of life-praxis, the transposition of the beautiful illusion from the reality of art to the sphere of empirical reality itself. In this sense, “the avant-garde no longer produces ‘works of art,’ but rather demonstrations” (Wolin 1984-85, 14). However, the avant-gardiste attempt to reintroduce art into the praxis of life seems to have failed. Bürger explains how the “*objet trouve* loses its character as antiart and becomes, in the museum, an autonomous work among others” (1984, 57).

The historical avant-garde movements, therefore, were unable to destroy art as an institution; but they did destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity: “The meaning of the break in the history of art that the historical avant-garde movements provoked does not consist in the destruction of art as an institution, but in the destruction of the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones” (Bürger 1984, 87).

It is necessary to distinguish between literary modernism and the twentieth-century avant-garde; a distinction often wanted in Anglo-American critical discourse where the two are usually dealt with synonymously under the rubric of “modernism.” Indeed, the aesthetic objectifications of the avant-garde contain at times a radical attack on the traditional concept of the integral work of art that even modernism would find difficult to accept. Conversely, literary modernism remains committed to several key pillars of the aesthetic program -above all, to the principle of the completed work of art as an end in itself.<sup>4</sup> The postmodern, however, is not an avant-garde. It is not as radical or as adversarial. The postmodern is implicated in the dominant culture not alienated from it. It is not as negating or as Utopic but

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<sup>4</sup> Modernism’s defining characteristics, in addition to subjectivization of narrative structure, are an increased self-referentiality, autonomy of literary ‘signifiers,’ disruption of chronological temporality, and rejection of the classical ideal of the rounded, holistic, integrated work (Wolin 1984-85, 13).

it incorporates its past within itself and parodically seeks to inscribe its criticism of that past. The work of Jean-François Lyotard has been crucial in the elaboration of postmodernism as a means of describing the wider cultural and intellectual condition: the contemporary experience is characterized by epistemological and ontological uncertainty. According to Lyotard, the master -and meta-narratives which have sustained Western society and discourse since the Enlightenment are no longer considered legitimate and authoritative. What is being challenged are the rationalist and humanist assumptions of our culture. This has led several commentators to suggest that the plural nature of social discourse is, in a sense, reflected in the aleatory forms of postmodernist fiction. It is interesting to note the extent to which several critics have come to rely on this reflectionist and even formal realist argument as a means of explaining the connection between postmodern textual practice and what is supposed to characterize the wider cultural condition (Smyth 1991, 12).

Lyotard's scepticism lies in the rejection of value judgements on concepts such as truth or justice, which are always based on emotional manipulation. Stuart Sim defines meta-narrative as the enemy "which is perceived to limit individual creativity: to orient research, to fix results, to determine behaviour" (1992, 88). Sim argues that Lyotard discards big narratives and so leads us to open narratives where the individual participates in an active manner, in order to "negate the didactic dimension of literature, and thus reduce drastically the possibility of it constituting a source of politically applicable value judgements" (Sim 1992, 90).

Yet the crisis of master narratives, with the abandonment of the idea of universal progress and the end of the philosophy of the subject, does not necessarily involve the disintegration of society into atomic particles lost in the technological maze of our era. Instead, with the emphasis shifting from product to process, the questioning of previous

modes of legitimization of knowledge opens up new ways of thinking the world, along which there are always connections, positions of the subject in relation to power. The role of language in the configuration of this new epistemology is, as we will see, crucial. The very possibility of constructing the postmodern subject exists only within the social bond defined by the multiple language games (Darias 1996, 122).

The movements of the 1960s are rooted in this conception of art. The rejection to mimeticism develops into the creation of a language with immanent values, without normative, syntactical or grammatical rules. Important parts of this movement are etymology as the intellectual basis of language games, the multiplicity of signifieds, and phonetic and syntactic combinations. From this derives the dominance of the oral over the written as a rejection of linearity.<sup>5</sup>

The analysis of the postmodern condition recognizes the radical difference in various language games, in alternative feminist discourses, and in other marginal discourses seen as valid modes of expression. Marginality becomes the ‘decentralized centre’ in the postmodernist project, as the articulation of difference becomes the neuralgic centre of discourse. This difference, for Rainer Nägele, is based on discourses extracted from popular culture as the “westerns,” or the detective novels with the intention of detecting their narrative strategies and then “undermine and question the very notion of story and history, because they transform the temporal uniqueness of the event into the repetition of a structure.

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<sup>5</sup> The distinctions between modernism and postmodernism breaks down or holds up at all only if we confine modernism to a symbolist-derived aesthetics running from Mallarmé through Eliot to Wallace Stevens. As Marjorie Perloff shows us in her reading of Harold Bloom’s criticism, such a definition of modernism reifies the lyric “as expression of a moment of absolute insight, of emotion chrystallized into a timeless pattern” (1985, 181) at the expense of fragmented discontinuous narrative and encyclopedic forms. But if we distinguish between “modernisms,” if we grant what Perloff terms “the other tradition” (1981, viii), then the Black Mountain poets’ emphasis on speech idiom and rhythm, as well as the attentiveness writers such as George Bowering and bpNichol paid to Gertrude Stein’s insistence that what writing is takes shape from the process of writing, directed by the word qua word, makes perfect

This does not mean, however, dehistoricization” (Nägele 1980, 17). Thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have also questioned in different ways the validity of master narratives. Lyotard joins Foucault’s efforts to locate the many interruptions and contradictions in the supposedly homogeneous and unified history of human kind. They both emphasize the constructed character of discourse and the role of ideology in those constructions. Derrida draws attention to the absence of the *real* in language and to the textual nature of all experience. In doing so, he underlines the inescapable self-referentiality of our knowledge: the inability to present the object that validates the idea, the lack of reference in any attempt at representation. Derrida is the first to make a serious textual analysis to erase the mask that lies between the signifier and the signified. Signifier and signified are considered cultural constructions. The signifier is no longer seen to depend on a referent but on the differential linguistic play among the signifiers. As a result of this play, the signified is always hypothetical and illusory. For Derrida, “‘differance’ is the ‘lay’ of signifiers that produces the differences on which meaning depends; it is ‘the differing/deferring origin of differences’” (Maltby 1991, 6). Thus interpretation becomes an intellectual process which lacks any original meaning, becomes a play of differences and deferrals to analyse the outcome in the production of meanings: “*Differance* thus comes into play...at the point where meaning eludes the grasp of a pure, self-present awareness” (Norris 1991, 46). Signifiers are then considered “under erasure,” a mark that signals the lack of profundity and its improvised use as well as “the fact that thought simply cannot manage without them in the work of deconstruction. By this graphic means, much akin to the anomalous spelling of *differance*, concepts are perpetually shaken and dislodged” (Norris 1991, 69). The work of Derrida can be understood as a critique of the notion of language as communication and as an assertion of

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sense: Canadian postmodernist poetry, like that in the United States, has its impetus in and is continuous

the materiality of all discourse. Derrida gives the term *logocentrism* to the view that speech is the original source of meaning and the location of its full presence. He questions everything such logocentrism implies, and argues that, far from standing in an accidental relation to the 'essence' of language, writing is evidence of a materiality integral to language itself (Easthope 1983, 13).

For Fredric Jameson, the problem of postmodernism is at one and the same time an aesthetic and a political one (1988, 373); Lyotard's aesthetic positions cannot be adequately evaluated in aesthetic terms, since what informs them is an essentially social and political conception of a new social system beyond classical capitalism, that is postindustrial society.<sup>6</sup> "The point," Jameson argues, "is that we are *within* the culture of postmodernism to the point where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equally facile celebration of it is complacent and corrupt" (1988, 381). What can at least be admitted is an effacement of the older distinction between high and so-called mass culture - a distinction, as Jameson argues,

on which modernism depended for its specificity, its Utopian function consisting at least in part in the securing of a realm of authentic experience over against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch, of commodification and of Reader's Digest culture. Indeed, it can be argued that the emergence of high modernism is itself contemporaneous with the first great expansion of a recognizable mass culture. (1988, 382)

According to this view, pastiche forms part of postmodernist art, and it implies an absence of a linguistic norm which gives way to the merging of different genres and discourses. This concept of pastiche, however, "misses the possibility that past styles may be invoked *antagonistically*. Postmodernist fiction is well known for its exploitation of past literary styles, but often this practice...is neither 'random' nor 'neutral'" (Maltby 1991, 9).

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with this 'other tradition.' (See Neuman 1990, 63).

<sup>6</sup> See "Answering the Questions: What is Postmodernism?" in J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984): 71-82; the book itself focusses primarily on science and epistemology rather than on culture.

Jameson believes that postmodernism is not merely one period style among others but the dominant style which takes its particular significance from the context of late capitalist society. He sees a profound connection between the 'electronic and nuclear powered' technology of the multinational global economy and the depthless, fragmented and heterogeneous images of postmodernist culture.

For Eagleton, however, not only pastiche but also parody intertwine in postmodernist culture either in a conscious or an unconscious way:

What is parodied by postmodernist culture, with its dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production, is nothing less than the revolutionary art of the twentieth-century avant-garde. It is as though postmodernism is among other things a sick joke at the expense of such revolutionary avant-gardism, one of those major impulses, as Peter Bürger has convincingly argued in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, was to dismantle the institutional autonomy of art, erase the frontiers between culture and political society and return aesthetic production to its humble, unprivileged place within social practises as a whole. In the commodified artefacts of postmodernism, the avant-gardist dream of an integration of art and society returns in monstrously caricatured form. (1988, 385)

In this sense, postmodernism springs from a historic shift in the West to a new form of capitalism -to the ephemeral, decentralized world of technology, consumerism and the culture industry, in which the service in finance and information industries triumph over traditional manufacture, and class politics yield ground to a diffuse range of 'identity politics.' Postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' culture, as well as between art and everyday experience (Eagleton 1996, vii).

What Eagleton (and Jameson before him) seems to ignore is "the subversive potential of irony, parody, and humor in contesting the universalizing pretensions of 'serious art'" (Hutcheon 1988b, 19). The end of metaphysics, of the philosophy of the subject, can thus be seen as the opening up of the possibility of change. Postmodernism involves an intersection

of philosophy and arts at the point where representational thought, a system affecting all areas of Western culture, reaches its end. The notion of end, however, does not necessarily mean death ; rather, it marks the site for an endless questioning of that very system (Darias 1996, 126).

According to this view, abstract narratives can no longer function as the ‘maps,’ ‘mirrors,’ or ‘concepts’ of some ontological terrain that is metaphorically regarded as the real. Instead, the real functions in ordinary consciousness as simulations:

The simulation systems of hyperreality play off and of these dissolving differences between true and false, drifting in and out of real and representation. Fact and fiction are interwoven in hyperreality to the point that electronic/cinematic fictions are cited commonly as the ultimate standard for judging material facts. Simulations rest upon absence and negation, eliminating the role of the real or the true in fabricating intersubjective experience. (Luke, 1991, 3)

Luke is influenced by Baudrillard who considers simulacrum as an integral part of postmodernist art. The real has lost its meaning and aesthetics becomes self-reflexive and while parodying the traditional forms. For Baudrillard, there is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality, a resurrection of the figurative when the object and substance have disappeared: “this is how simulation appears in the face that concerns us -a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence” (1983, 13). What postmodern art does, however, is problematize the entire notion of the representation of reality. It is not that truth and reference have ceased to exist, as Baudrillard thinks, but they have ceased to be unproblematic issues: “We are not witnessing a degeneration into the hyperreal without origin or reality, but a questioning of what ‘real’ can mean and how we can *know it*” (Hutcheon 1988b, 223).

For all its talk of difference, plurality, and heterogeneity, postmodern theory often operates with quite rigid binary oppositions: “with ‘difference,’ ‘plurality’ and allied terms

lined up bravely on one side of the theoretical fence as unequivocally positive, and whatever their antithese might be (unity, totality, universality) ranged balefully on the other” (Eagleton 1996, 25-6). Although there is no rupture between modernism and postmodernism, the latter cannot simply be considered a reformulation or palimpsest of the former. Postmodern culture is evidently marked by a decomposition and deconstruction of the autonomous principles of art and literature, such as the questioning of ideas of authority/author, audience/reader, and even criticism. The modern is implicitly embedded in the postmodern, but “the relationship is a complex one of consequence, difference, and dependence” (Hutcheon 1988b, 38).

Furthermore, Connor asserts the appearance of “a generalized mistrust of the capacity of any language to render truths about the world or other forms of language in a simply transparent or objective way” (1989, 203). This mistrust turns to an alternative attention to the “‘petites histoires’: paratactical, paradoxical, paralogical narratives meant to open the structures of knowledge as of politics to language games, to imaginative reconstitutions that permit us either a new breakthrough or a change in the rules of the game itself” (Hassan 1983, 9). Hassan thus offers two complementary tendencies as a result of this new view of Western culture: the indeterminate and the immanent, which both subvert traditional thought: “In philosophy and history, sociology and psychoanalysis, politics and cultural styles, similar tendencies attest to the indeterminate, antinomian, dissenting impulse of our moment opposing the rule of the One....the capacity of the mind to generalize itself in the world, to act upon both self and world, and so become...its own environment” (1983, 10).

In a later article Hassan widens this cultural concept and establishes the origin of postmodern culture in Nietzsche.<sup>7</sup> He underlines eleven postmodern features in which this

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<sup>7</sup> Ihab Hassan (1987, 85), attributes a possible origin of the word postmodernism to Federico de Onís, who used the word ‘postmodernismo’ in his *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana (1882-1932)* published in Madrid in 1934. Still, before Onís there is Bernard Iddings Bell’s

cultural pluralism take shape. 1. *Indeterminacy*, or rather, indeterminacies, which include all manner of ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society.<sup>8</sup> 2. *Fragmentation*. Fragments are all the postmodernist pretends to trust. Hence the preference for montage, collage, the found or cut-up literary object, paratactic forms, metonymy over metaphor, schizophrenia over paranoia. 3. *Decanonization*. This applies to all canons, all conventions of authority. Lyotard's "delegitimation" of the mastercodes in society; we decanonize culture, demystify knowledge, deconstruct the languages of power, desire, deceit. 4. *Self-less-ness, Depth-less-ness*. Postmodernism suppresses or disperses and sometimes tries to recover the deep romantic ego. Losing itself in the play of language, in the differences that render reality its plurality, the self impersonates its own absence, it diffuses itself in depthless styles, refusing, and eluding, interpretation. 5. *The Unpresentable*. Postmodern literature often seeks its limits, entertains its 'exhaustion,' subverts itself in forms of articulate "silence." It becomes liminary, contesting the modes of its own representation. 6. *Irony*. In absence of a cardinal principle or paradigm, we turn to play, interplay, dialogue, polylogue, allegory, self-reflection -in short, to irony. This irony assumes indeterminacy, multivalence; it aspires to clarity, the clarity of demystification. We meet some of its variants in the figures of Bakhtin, de Man, Derrida, and Hayden White. 7. *Hybridization*, or the mutant replication of genres, including parody, travesty, pastiche. This makes for a different concept of tradition, one in which continuity and discontinuity, high and low culture, mingle not to imitate but to

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*Postmodernism and Other Essays* which appeared in 1926. Neither Onís nor Bell, however, use the term in the same sense that we use it today (Darias 1996, 129). Another early use of the term 'postmodern,' dating from the time of the Second World War, was that of Arnold Toynbee in his *A Study of History* (12 Vols. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1934-61). He used it to describe the new age of Western history which, according to Toynbee, began in the 1870s with the simultaneous globalization of Western culture and the re-empowerment of non-Western states. Toynbee did not assume himself that the West was in decline as such, but rather that paradoxically the globalization of Western civilization was being accompanied by a self-consciousness of its own cultural relativization, a process to which Toynbee's own equally totalizing and relativizing history was designed to contribute. (See Robert Young 1990, 19)

expand the past in the present. In that plural present, all styles are dialectically available in an interplay between the Same and the Other. 8. *Carnivalization*. The term, of course, is Bakhtin's, and it embraces indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, irony, hybridization. But it also conveys the comic, chaos, or absurdist ethos of postmodernism. Carnivalization further means polyphony, the centrifugal power of language, the 'gay' relativity of things, perspectivism and performance, participation in the wild disorder of life, the immanence of laughter. 9. *Performance, Participation*. The postmodern text invites performance: it wants to be written, revised, answered, acted out. Indeed, postmodern art calls itself performative in its transgression of genres. 10. *Constructionism*. Postmodernism is radically tropic, figurative, irrealist. 11. *Immanence*. This refers, without religious echo, to the growing capacity of mind to generalize itself through symbols. Everywhere now we witness problematic diffusions, dispersals, dissemination (1986, 504-508) .

Hassan, however, does not institutionalize postmodernist discourse, he does not follow a clear perspective in his effort to transgress limits. He hesitates to locate the postmodern perspective in its desire for transgression of boundaries as part of an institutional discourse trying to break up the invisible boundaries of academic disciplines.<sup>9</sup> Hassan, then, is fond of creating parallel columns or binary oppositions that place characteristics in order to make clear his preference for the postmodern. But he does not resolve any of the contradiction within postmodernism.

Postmodernism, it seems, is a construction of reading rather than a self-contained literary period: it is what the literary institution has chosen to call postmodernism. Nägele, on the other hand, asserts that "the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism takes place

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<sup>8</sup> This would include Bakhtin's 'dialogic imagination,' Roland Barthes's 'scriptible' texts, Iser's blank spaces, and Paul de Man's allegorical readings.

wherever the imaginary closure of the self-reflexive circle is broken, where the reflecting 'self' and reflected 'self' no longer meet in the smooth illusion of the full circle, but dive into the rupture which the symbolic order of the signification processes has opened up" (1980, 7).

What postmodernism refuses, however, is not history but History -the idea that there is an entity called History possessed of an immanent meaning and purpose which is unfolding around us. The political differences which matter are between different conceptions of history. There are those who believe that "history is a tale of progress; those who consider that its is a large story of struggle and exploitation, and those who hold that there is no plot to it at all" (Eagleton 1996, 34). Certainly there is an excess in postmodernism in its regard to history as totally random and discontinuous; "in *over*historicizing, postmodernism also underhistoricizes, flattening out the variety and complexity of history in flagrant violation of its own pluralistic tenets" (Eagleton 1996, 49). Postmodernism is radical in so far as it challenges a system which still needs absolute values, metaphysical foundations and self-identical subjects; against these it mobilizes multiplicity, non-identity, transgression, anti-foundationalism, cultural relativism.

It has become fashionable to apply the word 'postmodernism' indiscriminately to a variety of cultural, intellectual and social practices. Several critics in various fields have of course attempted to provide definitions, yet no single definition has gained widespread acceptance. No consensus exists regarding either the parameters of postmodernism or the precise meaning of the term. As a result of this multitude of interpretations, however, Stephen Slemon establishes two absolute positions in the postmodernist phenomenon: on the one hand, a postmodernism that gathers a concrete historical period, on the other, a postmodernism as a style that represents a cultural plurality. In the first group, Slemon locates

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<sup>9</sup> His schematic 'eleven traits' of postmodernism, however, can be found in several texts not confined to

Jameson; in the second, Hassan. Linda Hutcheon comprises both perspectives by seeing postmodernism as a phenomenon in Western culture and society which does not show incredulity towards traditional meta-narratives, but rather gathers and discusses different representative strategies.

Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts that it challenges. It cannot simply be used as a synonym for the contemporary, and it does not really describe an international cultural phenomenon, for it is primarily European and American. What Hutcheon calls postmodernism is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political. Its contradictions may well be those of late capitalist society, but whatever the cause, these contradictions are certainly manifest in the important postmodern concept of ‘the presence of the past’” (1988b, 4). As opposed to Jameson, then, Hutcheon centers on the historical and political, although contradictory, aspects of postmodernism. The contradiction lies in that postmodernism works against the homogenization of mass culture without denying it. Yet the principles of difference and heterogeneity are always at work from within, breaking all oppositions into endless possibilities.

It is in this context that Ihab Hassan’s table of categories seems insufficient, and at times, inappropriate to account for the complexity of postmodern fiction. His binary scheme becomes problematic when we look at the great number of postmodern texts that seem to acknowledge both purpose and play, hierarchy and anarchy, metaphor and metonymy, determinacy and indeterminacy or transcendence and immanence. By self-consciously mixing opposing discourses and strategies, texts like García Márquez *Cien años de soledad* or

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the postmodern period.

Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* or *In the Skin of a Lion*, among others, tacitly deny the validity of such binary classifications.

A different model is adopted by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1989). Having recourse to the Russian Formalist concept of "the dominant" to account for the change from modernism to postmodernism, McHale puts forward a shift from the modernist epistemological to the postmodernist ontological dominants. This change, however, does not involve an either/or question. McHale himself recognizes that ontological and epistemological issues may overlap in a text. Yet, in postmodernist fiction, he affirms, there is a shift in the order or hierarchy of devices in such a way that "although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more 'urgent' to interrogate it about its ontological implications. In postmodernist texts, in other words, epistemology is 'backgrounded,' as the price for foregrounding ontology" (McHale 1989, 11). As Darias argues, however, the constant stress on difference and heterogeneity in postmodern fiction prevents the reader from easily accommodating into any given category or "dominant," and renders impossible any separation between ontological and epistemological problems, between modes of existence and questions of knowledge (1996, 132).

Accordingly, the contradictory nature of postmodernism installs a concept to later subvert it in a dialectic play which constitutes "a dominant signifying practice whose central rhetorical strategy is intertextual parody" (Slemon 1989a, 6). It is possible, therefore, to identify broadly two distinct ways in which 'postmodernism' has come to be used: first, to designate either negatively or positively the contemporary cultural condition as a whole in all its complexity; or, second, to describe a specific set of textual characteristics which can be gleaned from an analysis of selected literary, dramatic or cinematographic works. In this second sense, it has been applied to a style or sensibility manifesting itself in cultural

productions as varied as fiction, in the work of, for example, John Barth, Salman Rushdie, Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino, Gabriel García Márquez, George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch or Michael Ondaatje, in short, in any creative endeavour which exhibits some element of self-consciousness and reflexivity. Fragmentation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, plurality, metafictionality, heterogeneity, intertextuality, decentering, dislocation, ludism: these are the common features widely differing aesthetic practices are said to display.

It is this supposedly liberating aspect of postmodernism which has been challenged by Eagleton and Jameson, who have both been suspicious of the ahistorical nature of postmodern writing and the links with eclectic 'consumerist' popular culture and mass media. Hutcheon, however, provides a convincing demonstration of the politically liberating effects of postmodern writing as a counterblast to the Eagleton/Jameson position. Her postmodernist subcategory of "historiographic metafiction" encompasses oppositional texts which are both self-reflexive and historical, and problematize the dominant ideology. Hutcheon shows how postmodern writing can challenge the commodification process from within by parodically using multiple popular forms.

Historiography is itself taking part in what LaCapra has called a "reconceptualization of culture in terms of collective discourses" (1985, 46). This does not imply that historians no longer concern themselves with "archivally based documentary realism," but only that, within the discipline of history, there is also a growing concern with redefining intellectual history as "the study of social meaning as historically constituted" (1985, 46).<sup>10</sup> What LaCapra has argued for is a view of historiography as the process of dialogue with the past carried on through a performative use of language which would "involve both historian and addressee in a process of significant change by moving them to respond to the proffered account and its

implications for the existing context of interpretation”(1985, 37). For history to focus on how texts -such as documents- are read would open it up to a consideration of the political and socio-cultural processes in which they are bound and in which they are given meaning by the historian.

This is what historiographic metafiction is doing in works like Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983), Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* (1982) or Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* (1977) or *Famous Last Words* (1981). The re-inscription of the past in these postmodernist works is enacted through a parodic self-reflexivity. Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows the artist to speak to a discourse from within it. It has been the favourite postmodern literary form of Canadian writers, “working as they do from both inside and outside a culturally different and dominant context” (Hutcheon 1988b, 35). These fictions, then, are offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality. They question the centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems, but they do not destroy any entity but rethink any concept of centre, revisit the past with an ironic eye. The challenge lies in some aspects of the modernist dogma: its view of the autonomy of art, its expression of individual subjectivity, and the adversarial status of mass culture and bourgeois society. To put these concepts into question is not to deny them -only to interrogate their relation to experience. The process by which this is done is a process of “installing and then withdrawing (or of using and abusing) those very contested notions” (Hutcheon 1988b, 57). Accordingly, what historiographic metafiction explicitly does is to cast doubt on the very possibility of any firm “guarantee of meaning,” however situated in discourse. The provisional and indeterminate nature of historical knowledge is certainly not a discovery of postmodernism.

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<sup>10</sup> see also Hayden White 1973; 1978; 1980; 1981; 1984.

Nor is the questioning of the ontological and epistemological status of the historical “fact” or the distrust of seeming neutrality and objectivity of recounting. But the concentration of these problematizations in postmodern art is not something we can ignore.

To speak of provisionality and indeterminacy is not to deny historical knowledge, however. Both history and fiction are discourses, both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past. The meaning lies in the systems which make past events into present facts. Postmodernism, therefore, “installs historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in doing so, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 1988b, 89).

The context in which the postmodern historical sense situates itself is the explanatory and narrative employment of past events that construct historical facts. The past really did exist but the question is how we confront its knowledge in the present. Historiographic metafiction “refuses the view that history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity” (Hutcheon 1988b, 93).

The writing of history in the form of narrative representations of the past is a conventional and a literary endeavour. That is not to say that the postmodernist or the historian believe that events *never occurred* in the past. These events, however, are named as historical facts, selected and positioned and, more importantly, we know them because they have been passed on through a discourse either oral or written. Both Derrida and Foucault have asked for a different type of analysis of tradition in behalf of the discontinuity of historical temporality; the particular and the local take on the value once held by the universal and the transcendent. For Foucault, discourse is not reduced to a number of texts, but it is

“from beginning to end, historical -a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity on history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality rather than its sudden irruption in the midst of the complicities of time” (1972, 117). Historiographic metafiction shares the Foucauldian urge to unmask the continuities that are taken for granted in the western narrative tradition, by using and abusing those very contradictions.

Today, postmodernism represents the attempt to re-historicize -not de-historicize- art and theory and one of the tools is the intertextual parody that enables us to revisit the past with new eyes. Such self-reflection and interrogating make us question the modernist assumptions of aesthetic autonomy and unproblematic realist reference. Postmodernist novels, then, do not deny that history existed but merely question how we can know real past events today, except through their traces and texts.

Despite the continued strong presence of traditional realist fiction by Hugh MacLennan, Morley Callaghan, Robertson Davies, W.O.Mitchell, and others, something new began to appear in the seventies and eighties: postmodernism had arrived in Canada. But the form it took was distinctly Canadian. From the usage of the term in describing literature, film, architecture, painting, video, and photography, postmodernism seems to designate cultural practices that are fundamentally self-reflexive, in other words, art that is self-consciously artifice, art that is textually aware of its production and reception as a cultural artifact and that is as related to the past of other art as to the present reality of society. This description, however, could also apply to modernist art, with its belief in aesthetic autonomy and self-sufficiency. The continuity is real and important, but the distinction between the two is that, in postmodernism, textual self-reflexivity is paradoxically made the means to a new and overt

engagement with the social and the historical, which has the effect of challenging out traditional humanist beliefs about the function of art in society (Hutcheon 1990, 18).

As Darias argues (1996, 127), contemporary literature can indeed be considered an intrinsically postmodern form. This is not to mean that all contemporary texts are postmodernist, an affirmation which would dangerously fall in the old trap of totalizations that the very postmodern tries to undermine. The major interest of contemporary history, literature and theory is in the different levels of performativity, that is in the processes and strategies of narrativization of knowledge. In its implicit investigation of the functioning of language and discourses in the construction of subjectivities, fiction, by its very nature, works within the basic tenets of postmodern thought.

Both Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* and Margaret Laurence's *Diviners* are metafictional works, aware of their processes of creating order through myth and art. Despite what some would call postmodern techniques (fragmentation and parody), both reveal more a modernist search for order in the face of moral and social chaos than a postmodern urge to render both problematic and provisional any such desire for order (or 'truth) through imagination. What to many American critics is archetypically postmodern -the extreme self-referential textuality of surfiction- is yet another form of this late modernism, the logical extreme of its aesthetic and aestheticist tenets and its ultimate faith in the human imagination. While clearly derived from these modernist roots, postmodernism is a more paradoxical and problematic beast: "it both inscribes and subverts the powers and conventions of art; it uses and abuses them in an attempt to challenge both modernist artistic autonomy and the conventional notion of realist transparent reference" (Hutcheon 1990, 19).

Geographical periphery and the contradictions implicit in Canada as a Francophone/Anglophone, bilingual/multicultural, colonizing/colonized country turn this

nation into an open space for the double articulation postmodern narratives. Postmodernism in Canada implies a revising of the country's historical narratives; it involves both the recognition and the emancipation of Canadian art from mimetic patterns dictated by the cultural centres (Europe and the United States), and has therefore strong political dimensions (see Heidenreich 1989; New 1989; Keith 1985). Accordingly, Canadian postmodern fiction appears as a juxtaposition of self-reflexive discourses (Darias 1996, 152), which can be more or less innovative on the formal level of technique, but which are often grounded in specific historical and cultural contexts.<sup>11</sup> The intersection between these two discourses or texts, self-reflexive and contextual, produces the kind of signifying practice we call intertextuality. Contemporary Canadian texts seem indeed to work within a number of recurrent and interrelated intertextual strategies. Since the margin might also describe Canada's perceived international position, perhaps the postmodern ex-centric could even be seen as part of the nation's identity. In postmodernism, though, the center and the periphery do not just change places. Nor is the margin conceived as only a place of transgression; the periphery is the frontier, and the margin or border is the postmodern place par excellence, where new possibilities exist. It is also, however, the place where where the center is both paradoxically acknowledged and challenged, whether the center is seen by Canadians as elsewhere. Canada can in some ways be defined as a nation whose articulation of its national identity has sprung from regionalist impulses: the ex-centric Québec, the Maritimes, the West. In a sense, of

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<sup>11</sup> Canadian writers are unencumbered by the ideological baggage carried by American novelists. But surely it is more a matter of Canadian writers just having different ideological baggage, baggage that includes not a revolution and a civil war in its history but a more conservative cultural past as a colony. The Canadian experience may indeed make for a more deference to authority and to a more overt need to sustain a distinct cultural identity that can be found in the United States -or Britain. In other words, Canada has never been in sync with America in terms of cultural history, so it is perhaps unwise to look for exact parallels, even within contemporary postmodernism. (See Hutcheon 1984b; 1988b; 1990).

course, its history is one of defining itself *against* centers, first British and French, and then American (Hutcheon 1990, 20).

A major strategy, which challenges the roots of binary thought, is effected in the act of boundary-crossing between and within genres and disciplines, as well as between fact and fiction. Accordingly, resistance to totalizing views of history and culture becomes particularly urgent in a country as heterogeneous and contradictory as Canada, where the discourses of history and identity are based on the assumption of a national unity that proves, at its best, artificial. In this way, the postmodern challenge to the Cartesian subject is enacted from within Canadian fiction and poetry by way of explicit or tacit references to the history and identity of this nation. Plurality of provisional narrators, points of view, discourses and plots in non-hierarchical, anti-teleological writings, are among the strategies that problematize the construction of subjectivity, undermining ideas of coherence, authority and unity.

In literature, the policy of multiculturalism has meant the reconfiguration and opening of the established canon to the works of past and present writers of a non-dominant origin. Paradoxically, it is the strong presence of these writers in the Canadian literary scene that has challenged the politics of identity. Texts like Marwan Hassan's *The Memory Garden of Miguel Carranza* or Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* or *The English Patient* move away from the official label of multiculturalism towards the concept of transculturalism, implying constant movement and permeability across two or more cultures. As Darias comments,

these transcultural texts have appropriated and transformed the subject-in-process of post-structuralist thought, locating it at the centre of the Canadian debate of identity. This simultaneous move towards both appropriation and difference represents, of course, a typically postmodern gesture; most significant, it also signals how postmodernism in Canada cannot be separated from the political, the social and the historical. (1996, 157).

Peripheral, defined in relation to outside metropolitan centres, Canada has always been located on the margins of culture, history, geography. Moreover, this sense of disjunction works more strongly than ever within the immense territory of a country, unconceivable as a unit not only because of its size, but also because its regional and cultural diversity. This disconnectedness represents a recurrent subject in Canadian writing, often enacting a deconstruction of national myths of cultural unity, be this symbolized by a beaver or a maple leaf (Darias 1996, 159). The questioning of identity is also a questioning of notions of centre and origin, the possibility of liminality here happily pointing to the breaking of oppositions between one and the other, between inside and outside. This epistemological change is of particular importance in the Canadian context. The move away from originality towards a different conception of knowledge based on intertextuality and constructed by archival methods have made possible the celebration of ‘border’ stories, which, by their own nature, work always within transgression. The discentered, liminal identities of Canadian fiction, then, can be approached as follows: “The story is decentred. All the reality of the story, the speech against the silence, is on the circumference. The Margin. We live a life of shifting edges, around an unspoken or unspeakable question. Or, at best, in asking who we are, we are who we are” (Kroetsch 1997, 363).

Self-conscious displacements shift the focus to the figure of the “ex-centric.” Similarly, self-mockery seems to constitute a privileged mode of addressing Canadian culture from within. And this has a long history in Canadian writing. Notice, for example, how the allegedly Canadian feeling of inferiority with regards to the Americans becomes the source of self-mockery in Stephen Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). The setting is the little town of Mariposa, and the occasion, a political speech by the honourable town member, Mr. Bagshaw: “I am an old man now, gentlemen ... and the time must soon come

when I must not only leave politics, but must take my way towards that goal from which no traveller returns.” here was a deep hush when Bagshaw said this. It was understood to imply that he thought of going to the United States” (Leacock 1968, 138). Self-mockery here constructs a certain distance in which the gap between what the text says and what it does not say is foregrounded. In doing so, it implies both a recognition and a critique of given patterns of identity. Self-mockery is thus a form of irony, which, seen in this context, functions not only as a traditional textual device but “as a rhetorical and structural strategy of resistance and opposition” (Hutcheon 1992, 11-12). Postmodern irony would be connected with the texts of history and culture and becomes thus inextricably political. The function of this politicized postmodern irony in the Canadian context underlines, according to Hutcheon, Canadian structural doubleness, since

what the more recent discussions about issues such as cultural specificity (as opposed to humanist universality) have done is to show how irony can potentially engage its critique from the *inside* of that which it contests. Saying one thing and meaning another (the basic semantic part of the definition of irony) is certainly one way of subverting a dominant language from within. Saying one thing and meaning another is also, by definition, a dialogic or doubled mode of address. And any attempt to juggle simultaneously both literal and ironic meanings cannot help but disrupt our notions of meaning as something single, decidable, or stable. (Hutcheon 1992, 13)

Irony becomes then a powerful postmodern intertext. By its very structural doubleness, it opens up meaning, multiplies it, makes it differ from itself. It always embodies a counter-discursive strategy that works against textual closure (inside) and monolithic culture (outside). These two elements, doubleness and resistance, produce a carnivalization of discourse in the Bakhtinian sense, with its emphasis on transgressions. Hence the genuine Canadian interest in disguises; Canadian cultures play repeatedly on the possibilities of anonymity, impersonation, travesty, hiding, masking and unmasking, lying, faking (Darias 1996, 166-67).

Together with fictional experimentations, the long poem proves an ubiquitous (non)genre in Canadian postmodernism. Understood phenomenologically as a poem of process, it finds its apotheosis in *The Martyrology*, which bpNichol repeatedly pronounced ended and which continued to continue. Such work makes quickly apparent the postmodern attributes of recent Canadian long poems: self-reflexivity, playfulness, open-endedness, an acknowledgement of the impossibilities of origin; strategies of deferral and discontinuity, metonymy; formal, rhetorical, and generic eclecticism; intertextuality; a conception of language as inescapably mediating our knowledge or perception of the real; and a repudiation of holistic notions of the self. Such poetry shares with all postmodernism a destabilization of the notion of presence that has underpinned more traditional poetics. In a work such as Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, disjunctures in the self multiply: between the accepted literary sense of "collected works" and the "works" Billy's left (gun) hand effected; between the documentary and the poetic Billy; between the viewpoints of Billy, Angela D., Sally Chisum, Pat Garrett; between interviews, biographies, poems and comic books; between written discourses and photographs; between languages and photographs and the blank frame that opens the book; between Billy's life (ended) and the poet's writing (going on): "It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large .... I smell the smoke still in my shirt" (1970, 105). We can construct no self or persona out of the gaps, ambiguities, and contradictions of these poems; at many moments we cannot even be sure whether we are reading about Billy or the poet or both.

The close connection of Ondaatje with the Coach House Press was a clear example of the collective trend led by poets like Frank Davey and bpNichol, who came to Toronto after the *TISH* experience. The innovative forms Davey and Nichol brought east to Coach House "became a powerful influence on Ondaatje's work. Nichol and his Four Horsemen would also

involve Ondaatje in the avant-garde experiments of sound and concrete poetry” (Waldman 1990,9). The poets who came to prominence in the 1960s changed and expanded the subject matter to include local history and documentary. In the 1960s and 1970s, the politics of Canadian poetry were nationalist, ecological, and regional, while in the later 1970s they turned more feminist or concerned with totalitarian regimes, as in the travel poems of Irving Layton, Eli Mandel, Al Purdy, Patrick Lane, Atwood and others.

The affinities between Nichol and Ondaatje are reflected in Stephen Scobie’s article “Two Authors in Search of a Character” (1985). He based his argument on the fact that in the same year of 1970, both poets published books that might best be described as collages, on the life and death of the same American folk hero. They were Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems* and Nichol’s *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid*. Both books were examples of the twin arts of palimpsest and parody to which writers of this group and time have been particularly inclined to:

Billy theKid -in both the Nichol and the Ondaatje versions- seems to me important because it challenges an elitist critical supposition that was evident well into the 1950s, and inspired the New Critics and their kin. It was that the work of art, whatever its medium, acquired an autonomy that detached it -as a total artifact- from the artist and its background, and even more the reader or viewer or listener who contemplated it. (Woodcock 1993, 136)

In a different way from Nichol, however, Ondaatje has a more international attitude, both in the sense of his artistic links and in his voice of locale and manner. Though he has now lived in Canada for more than three decades, his main heroes were, in the 1970s, American outsiders. In spite of its macabre and at times mildly obscene conceits, his verse tends to be rather formal in the manner of Wallace Stevens, at least in his early years of *The Dainty Monsters*, as if the structure of the poem were the cage containing the inhabiting monsters, just as intelligence contains the demons of the unconscious. In *Billy the Kid*, however, the

possibilities of the western function as a means to explore the perpetual reality of the protagonist. Writing with a filmic syntax the author moves easily, and lyrically, in an area he calls, “border blur,” taking the term from Nichol<sup>12</sup>:

Border Blur refers to the mixed genre form of *Billy the Kid*, its quite extraordinary mixture of documentary, photographs, ballads, prose poems, and lyrics as a means of developing that narrative of Billy’s final encounter with Pat Garret (sic). The mix allows for the film treatment Ondaatje intended through opening up new syntactical possibilities: cross-cutting, foreshortening, montage, dissolves, altered perspectives, close-ups. (Mandel 1986, 72)

Canadian writers, then, are perhaps primed for the paradoxes of the postmodern by their split sense of identity, both regional and national, and by their story. They may feel the link between those postmodernist contradictions and what Robert Kroetsch calls “the total ambiguity that is so essentially Canadian, be it in terms of two solitudes, the bush garden, Jungian opposites” (Kroetsch and Bessai 208). The postmodern irony that refuses resolution of contraries would appear to be a useful cultural framework in which to discuss, for instance, the obsessive dualities in the work of Margaret Atwood (body-mind; male-female; culture-nature; reason-instinct; time-space) or the echoing doubling of the characters and plots in Kroetsch’s novels. Perhaps postmodern is the best way to describe the genre paradoxes of

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<sup>12</sup> *Billy the Kid* is published by House of Anansi in 1970 under the supervision of Dennis Lee whom Ondaatje trusted as an editor. Ondaatje left the press after Lee’s resignation in 1973. In a letter to the press in March 14, 1973, Ondaatje writes that “the contract I signed in ’70 is meaningless to me now and for me it’s no longer valid as a contract” (House of Anansi Papers, National Library, Box 9). In a letter to Lee, August 11, 1970, Al Purdy talks about Ondaatje’s style in *Billy the Kid* before ever knowing that the book would get the GGA: “he seems to me like some kind of illusionist, the lyric and prose parts of Bilythe kid being a flat mosaic of different colours, but which blends into a shimmering kaleidoskope as you near the end of the book. I know that’s fanciful and possibly a wild description, but how else do you describe the modern collage which succeeds in what it attempts? That’s an overall impression, but there are in each part or segment, at least one thing which remains in the mind: like the chicken dragging the shot man’s vein and he saying as he died: ‘Get away from me yer stupid chicken.’ Ondaatje is an exotic in the things that interest him, I mean. Unpredictable in treatment of those subjects too. In a way, he reminds me of those oddballs the Black Mtn. ‘school’ in the U.S. has claimed as part of that school, even though there is no remote connection so far as I can see; except that people like Gary Snyder and Denise Levertov are good. Similarly, in Canada, I can see very little relation between Ondaatje and those with whom he is associated in Coach House, Victor Coleman, David McFadden, etc. And there is this also about Ondaatje: I do not believe he can be influenced noticeably by any school of writing, for he absorbs influences the way a good writer should, for Ondaatje is a very good writer” (House of Anansi Papers, National Library, Box 9).

the work of Ondaatje (biography? fiction? poetry?) or Alice Munro (short story? novel?). Like women writers in general, Canadian novelists must return to their history -as do Wiebe, Bowering, Kogawa- in order to discover, before they can contest, their national myths. First, however, they must deconstruct British social and literary myths in order to redefine their colonial history: myths such as the glory of war (Findley's *Wars*) or imperialistic exploration (Bowering's *Burning Water*). Through generic parody, they have contested the canonical myths and forms of European and American literature: the picaresque (van Herk's *No Fixed Address*) or the *Küstlerroman* (Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*).

The sixties, for all their silliness and presentism, were years of challenges to authority that left their mark on postmodernism in Canada, as elsewhere. It was also the time of an upsurge in Canadian nationalist politics and of the rise of the women's movement. Not surprisingly, the fiction of the writers formed ideologically and intellectually in these years is often engaged fiction, dealing with issues ranging from national identity to gender politics. It has been pointed out that challenges to authority can lead as easily to anarchy as to decentralization of power, but the postmodernism that grew from these early roots has turned out to be more constructively contestatory.

In Canada, the theoretical and the literary have had an especially close connection because of the presence of a great number of these writer-theorists: Robert Kroetsch, Frank Davey, George Bowering, Stephen Scobie, Dennis Lee, and, to some extent, Margaret Atwood. Through these and others, the impact of poststructuralist philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, reader-response theory, and Marxist and feminist critiques has been simultaneously felt by Canadian criticism and culture. The postmodern has recoded the Canadian valuing of regionalism in literature (see New), for instance, into a concern for the different, the local, the particular, in opposition to the uniform, the universal, the centralized: the West of Aritha van

Herk; the Maritimes of David Adams Richards; the West Coast of Jack Hodgins; the Southern Ontario of Matt Cohen. The discrete and the occasional have always been valued in Canadian literature's regionalist emphasis, in contrast with the more American or British monolithic sense of cultural hegemony. To render the particular concrete, to celebrate ex-centricity: this is the Canadian postmodern (Hutcheon 1990, 24-8).

## 2.1 Allegorical Abstractions: Poetic Beginnings in *The Dainty Monsters*

Metaphor has always been defined as the trope of resemblance; not simply between signifier and signified, but between what are already two signs, the one designating the other. This is its most general feature, and the one which justified us in including under this name all the figures called symbolical or analogical ... (figure, myth, fable, allegory) ... the history of a metaphor would not proceed like a journey, with breaks, reinstatements in a heterogeneous system, mutation, unmotivated detours, but like a progressive erosion, a regular semantic loss, an uninterrupted draining of the primitive meaning. (Derrida 1974, 13)

The process of understanding a metaphor is the key for that of understanding literary works; but, at the same time, it is the understanding of a work as a whole which gives the key to metaphor. The “‘metaphorical twist’ is both an event and a meaning, a meaningful event and an emerging meaning in language” (Ricoeur 1974, 103). But, at the same time, it can be a provisional loss of meaning, an inevitable detour, it “is menacing and foreign to the eyes of *intuition* ... of the *concept* ...of *consciousness* ... but it is an accomplice of that which it threatens, being necessary to the extent to which a de-tour is a return tour guided by the function of resemblance under the law of sameness. At this point, the contrasts between intuition, concept, and consciousness become irrelevant” (1974, 73).

There is more in the metaphor than in the symbol in the sense that it brings to language the implicit semantics of the symbol. As Derrida remarks, metaphor “exists only to the extent that someone is supposed to be manifesting by an utterance such-and-such a thought which remains in itself unobvious, hidden, or latent. Thought happens upon metaphor, or metaphor is the lot of thought at the moment at which a sense attempts to emerge of itself to say itself, to express itself, to bring itself into the light of language” (1974, 32). What remains confused in the symbol -the assimilation of one thing to another -the endless correspondence between the elements- is clarified in the tension of the “metaphorical utterance.” The symbol, however, remains a two-dimensional phenomenon to the extent that

the semantic face refers back to the non-semantic one. Symbols have roots, whereas metaphors are just the “linguistic surface of symbols” (Ricoeur, 1976, 69).

In the case of allegory, the one-to-one correspondence generalizes in a uniform set the kinds of correspondences between fictive and real that any literary work must initially embody. Consequently, allegory, too, enters as a circular component, an abstract rhetorical form, into the rhetorical structure of many works not exactly classifiable as allegories. According to Cook, the myth’s pattern of heroic self-realization, which may be seen to underlie any story in some form, from awareness to journey to risk to test to purification, is itself phrasable as an allegory (1980, 258). The example of Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan,” a poem which in complex ways evokes the legendary effect of an encounter between an overriding god and a mortal of divine ancestry, in its long-range historical and social impact, is seen in its conjunction with the amorous, and the amorous with the divine. Two large spheres of reference, moreover, the political and the amorous, leaves open a form of our identification between what language accounts for and what myth expresses:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? <sup>1</sup>

Myth serves us not as a compendium of belief, and still less as a reservoir of history and convenient fiction, but rather as the modality wherein we consciously mediate between fiction and belief, between language and whatever it is that lies beneath or beyond language. Besides, the structure of the surrealist poem works by moving up and down, connecting the aesthetic, the oneiric, and the political. Seen as a poetic act, however, the surrealist poem foregrounds the poetic function just because it is subordinate to the function of the unconscious: this highest use of language is to renounce language in favour of an equivalent for myth. Thus, reference and evocation are inseparable; the speech act of literature has the goal of achieving this connection, “of bringing language and designative structures over into the realm of myth” (Cook 1980, 275). The poem tells us not just about fantasy but about the interaction of reality and fantasy, of language and myth.

Frye's definition of *mythos*, his basic working concept, is carefully maintained throughout *The Bush Garden* (1971) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), and should not be confused with myth in its usual meaning of figurative explanation of natural or historical phenomena. Frye's myth is “the structural principle of the poem itself ... the integral meaning presented by its metaphors, images and symbols” (1971, ix). This definition is very close to Frye's concept of form: “the shaping principle in the individual poem, which is derived from the shaping principles of poetry itself. Of these latter the most important is metaphor, and metaphor, in its radical form, is a statement of identity” (1971, 177). As Belyea comments, “Frye's successors have not been so careful in their definition of myth, and have translated his ‘fables of identity’ into a limited number of truly Canadian themes, on the one hand, and the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse: 1918-1960* (Penguin: Middlesex, 1962): 45.

creation of a coherent, mythic super-poem to which all Canadian writers have contributed, on the other" (1976, 337).

What a writer like Ondaatje is looking for in myth is an original rawness in writing, in which "the original myth is given to us point blank," where the "source is not qualified," and the "official" story is replaced by an utterly other version, full of the "original rawness" of immediate sensual perception.<sup>2</sup> Ondaatje praises O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1960) since it reflects "where the dramatic sources of myth lie. Myth is biblical, surreal, brief, imagistic" (1974, 25). In this sense, the use of allegorical echoes is crucial in that they set up parallels in an otherwise unlogical arrangement.

In his early years, Ondaatje's voice is perhaps more tied to Yeats and Stevens than to Pound and Williams. While most Coach House poets have always belonged to the Pound tradition, as passed down through Williams, Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Levertov, and others in the United States, and so in Canada through their teaching and reading in Vancouver, the young Ondaatje aligned himself with Stevens, who makes an explicit appearance in two of his lyrics, and the symbolist poets in his tradition like Robert Lowell and John Berryman. Unlike the Vancouver poets with their advocacy of open-ended, process form, Ondaatje emerged from the school that believes the poem to be an artifact, something well-made and thus rescued from the chaos of contemporary world and mind. If the Vancouver poets might loosely be said to descend from Duncan, and Victor Coleman from Zukofsky, Ondaatje might be said to descend from Yeats and Stevens. But over the course of his years as a Canadian poet, Ondaatje has come to seek a less British and more American poetics.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Ondaatje's "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle," *Canadian Literature* 61 (Summer 1974): 24, 25. And his Afterword to the new edition of *Tay John* (1960. McClelland & Stewart, 1992): 265-272.

<sup>3</sup> This hypothesis, only made clear by the critic Douglas Barbour in his study *Michael Ondaatje* (1993), is generally ignored by the rest of Ondaatje's critics who do not specify the origin or influences on Ondaatje's poetics. I agree with Barbour and therefore place Ondaatje's early years under the influence

For much of his career, however, Ondaatje has been associated with Coach House Press, a press with strong postmodernist connections in Canada and abroad.<sup>4</sup> Among the major advantages of working with a small press are the personal contact and the resultant concern for craft in design. Coach House has long had a reputation for some of the best design in Canada, but its major reputation is as a publisher of innovative and experimental texts by many of the leading Canadian postmodernist writers, including George Bowering, Wayne Clifford, Victor Coleman, Frank Davey, Daphne Marlatt, Steve McCaffery, bpNichol, and Fred Wah.<sup>5</sup>

In his early poems, Ondaatje had a habit of intensifying the world, of fashioning artifice. In them, we find steady images of brutality, especially of the suffering of beasts as in the verse of Patrick Lane. On reading the first two books of lyrical poems, *The Dainty Monsters* (1967) and *Rat Jelly* (1973), these appear anecdotal, somewhat immature, as sessions of work amid *Billy the Kid* (1970) and *Slaughter* (1976). On the one hand, the maiming and torture of animals is either an obsession or secure access to effect, and, on the other, they are very Canadian in their search for the fashionable thematic line of these years' criticism. For Barbour, Ondaatje "begins as a writer in the Stevens tradition, as a modernist

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of Wallace Stevens's poetics as reflected in his first book of poems *The Dainty Monsters*, gradually developing a sense of openness and process in the Poundian tradition as he matures as a poet in the seventies.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even when his books were published by other presses, most were still designed and printed at Coach House. *Billy the Kid* was designed and printed at Coach House; *Slaughter* was designed there; *In the Skin of a Lion* was designed and typeset there.

<sup>5</sup> Synonymous for most of its life with fine-crafted books and adventurous editorial policies, this publishing house was founded in Toronto in 1965 by Stan Bevington, with the editorial assistance of Wayne Clifford. Clifford was succeeded as editor in 1966 by Victor Coleman, who by 1973 had built Coach House into one of the three largest publishers in Canada of new literary titles. The press's early years, under Coleman's editorship, were characterized by hand-set type, multi-coloured offset printing, collaborations between author and designer, and titles by open-form writers from both the USA and Canada. In the fall of 1996 the Director voted to dissolve the press and return all copyrights to its authors.

lyricist, and generally remains true to that tradition in his shorter poems before *Secular Love*” (1993, 6).

Images and metaphors, as well as highly symbolic figures, comprise much of the text in *The Dainty Monsters*<sup>6</sup>; this characteristic signals its place on the boundary between modernism and postmodernism, as one poem can remain determinedly modernist while the next slips quietly into a postmodern mode. The epigraphs to the book are useful introductions to each section and reflect Ondaatje’s essentially modern stance in these poems. The book is divided into two sections: ‘Over the Garden Wall,’ and ‘Troy Town.’ The first section is introduced by an epigraph taken from W.H. Auden’s “The Witnesses”<sup>7</sup>:

*We’ve been watching you over the garden wall  
for hours,  
The sky is darkening like a stain,  
Something is going to fall like rain  
and it won’t be flowers. ( DM, np.)*

Auden’s “The Witnesses” is a symbolic fable of the early 1930s where the speakers and witnesses are the watchers, not the watched. The lines quoted create an uneasy tone of fear and uncertainty that hovers in a good part of Ondaatje’s first book. The ‘something’ that will ‘fall like rain’ and not ‘be flowers’ could be bombs, especially in the mentality of the late sixties and the Vietnam war. At the same time, the lines suggest an allegiance with the symbolic tradition and most of the poems of the book sustain such a view.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quotations from *The Dainty Monsters* will appear in the text as *DM*.

<sup>7</sup> *The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945): 185-88.

<sup>8</sup> A year later Ondaatje publishes in *Queens Quarterly* 75:2 (Summer 1968): 261, a poem in accordance with the spirit of the sixties. A poem which was reprinted in Al Purdy’s edition of *New Romans* and in *Queen’s Quarterly* 100:1 (Spring 1993): 145.

“Pictures from the War”  
The grass ruffles in gasoline wind,  
beaches white - are geometry  
abstract with oil drums.

The boy with gun

The first section of *The Dainty Monsters* employs patterns of animal imagery and poems about animals to render the world that lies outside the metaphor of the garden wall. Perhaps “the enclosed landscape is the cultivated, arranged and controlled world, with its predictable order and safety, in which man lives. If the wall suggests a comfortable illusion of security, it also attempts to shut out the old monsters” (Kahn 1968, 70).

“Over the Garden Wall” is the title of one of the central poems, a serio-comic fictional autobiography that focuses on animals, as do many poems of this section. The poem anticipates the fanciful spirit of domestic affairs in his later novel *Running in the Family*, as it describes the dividing fictional wall that separates his present Canadianness to his childhood memories of Sri Lanka with all the exoticism his memory can bring:

My mother while caressing camels  
had her left breast bitten off,  
so I was weaned on half a body.

In spite of this I’ve no objections  
to camels, one hump or two,  
and like their quivering jaws  
and crunch bone  
and stones with equal ease,

while the Canadian wolf  
with flailing

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watches her feed a child,  
mud fingers pluck her breast  
and he embarrassed  
lascivious at his mouth.

Beautiful photography  
that holds no morality.

Planes came through dawn  
threw green red flames  
and spilled a paddy field.  
Water jumped eleven feet  
and fell, and hissed into the fire.  
A bullock stood in bones, then dropped.

She laid down child  
skull drained of liquid  
its side unlaced like tennis shoes.

double jointed legs  
is to my mind  
awesome on this continent.

I mean

the infamous camel  
would look profound in a felt hat,  
pigs could trot, cherub white,  
down the high streets,  
leopards in a two-seater  
would be star spangled roues.

Yet, in spite  
of warnings by Daphne du Maurier,  
we find the 'potamus barred from public swimming pools,  
and a vulture calmly resting at a traffic light  
would undoubtedly be shot, very messily,  
by the first policeman who spotted him. (*DM* 33-34)

There is no place for the strange and bizarre, or the wild and naturally gifted creatures, in a world of armed policemen making the world safe for the pedestrian. The vision that impels these poems is restless, energetic, and epiphanic; revelations of the glimpsed and felt world, of myth made manifest. But in pieces like "A House Divided," "Signature," "Biography," "For John, Falling," and "The Time Around Scars," the casual diction, startling imagery, and colloquial rhythms of Ondaatje's maturing voice were already hinted at.

If some of the poems in 'Troy Town' attempt to domesticate mythology, as the choice of Paris as a protagonist suggests, Ondaatje's lyrics of family life in the first section mythologize domesticity. The poems of domestic love appear more traditionally "lyric" than the animal poems: many of them seek to capture a moment of emotion by freezing it in time. Still, these poems simultaneously undercut conventional romantic lyric attitudes in their insistence on family relationships rather than those of obsessive love.

The poems of *The Dainty Monsters* appear more modernist and given to closure or too dependent upon a dictionary of mythology than his later practice would allow. *Rat Jelly*<sup>9</sup> comprises a larger and more mature collection; its selection of poems, aside from the central ones about art and artists, tend to foreground questions of ordinary life, friendship, and family love. If, as so many critics have pointed out, Ondaatje seems obsessed with figures who violently and often self-destructively immerse themselves in the chaotic world of the senses, the choice of poems in *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do*<sup>10</sup> reveals another and equally powerful obsession: the need and desire to “deviously [think] out plots / across the character of his friends” (TK 58). This thematic shift with all its implications about community, communication, and communion, is the emerging theme of Ondaatje’s works as he matures from romantic young poet-hero to more complex and subtle poet-survivor.

Ondaatje wrote the poems of *Rat Jelly* during and after two larger works -*the man with seven toes* and *Billy the Kid*. Many of its poems deal with the question of art's relation to life, which is why critics continue to study them as central statements on poetics and creativity. These include “Letters and Other Worlds,” “Burning Hills,” “The gate in his head,” “Spider Blues,” and “White Dwarfs,” often considered among his fine poems, as well as “Dates,” “Taking,” and “King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens.” Although they present the best clues to his poetics at the time, only “The gate in his head” suggests a direction the later work might take: towards even greater openness and exploration.

Although Ondaatje's shorter poems seem to become more and more autobiographical, he actually “places himself directly before the reader as a *character* instead of an attitude” (Glickman 1985, 73). The “I” who speaks in these seemingly “confessional”

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<sup>9</sup> Quotations from *Rat Jelly* will appear in the text as *RJ*.

<sup>10</sup> Quotations from *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* will appear in the text as *TK*.

poems is purely inscribed, exists in each poem as a subject but alters its subjectivity from poem to poem, though the voice does not usually change. While we should not try to reconstruct the author's life from the written ones of the poems, the writer has chosen to shift the emphasis of his work away from the suffering and violent individual toward the communication and communion that are possible only in family and friends, a stance which, finally, reveals more clearly his own needs. Although this shift can best be seen in the works that follow *Coming Through Slaughter*, the poems on family and friends in *Rat Jelly* mark its beginning.

Ondaatje as a poet has been categorized in a multiplicity of ways: J.E. Chamberlin tells us that he "is a poet of contradictions" (1985, 31). Stephen Scobie describes him as a poet of "equilibrium and balance" (1985, 51), adding that "irony, and the absence of shock, are constants in Ondaatje's poetry" (48). Susan Glickman reads the trajectory of his poetry as a gradually emerging violent myth of the romantic artist, who "needs to hone his edge, to keep himself painfully separate and aware...[while] the man longs for affiliation and comfort and family" (1985, 80). On the other hand, Tom Marshall argues that, throughout his work, "the dominant metaphor...is layering,...Palimpsest perhaps" and adds that 'layering' may be another way of saying metaphor; it may well be that on the same level, these poems are 'about' the mind's poetic process itself (1985, 84-85). Lynette Hunter agrees that metaphor is the core of Ondaatje's vision: "there is a conscious statement that poetry is a metaphor for all existence. While the poet uses the metaphor to express yet control the energy within his own work, he also uses the poetry itself as a direct metaphor for how a man experiences reality" (1978, 50). For Sam Solecki, "a tension between mind and chaos is at the centre of Ondaatje's poetry; and its implications can be seen in the dualistic nature of his imagery, in the deliberate thematic irresolution of his major lyrics" (1985, 94).

Ondaatje's poetry, then, has always provided a map large enough to encompass a wide range of explorations. His early poems are obsessed with animals and birds, often in some violent relation to humanity. The dry voice of many of these poems -keeping a careful distance from what they describe- does not so much present animals in violent opposition to humanity as it presents them as self-sufficient and separate. That voice shares Auden's and Stevens's sense of understatement, placing everything in a photographic frame or freezing it in amber.<sup>11</sup>

"Description is a Bird," the first poem of *The Dainty Monsters*, begins a series of animalistic lyrics where human beings have little part, or they are present only as observing subjects, while the animals serve as symbolic presences and figures whose nature can be parodically altered for the poem's purposes. This first poem illustrates aspects of the kind of

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<sup>11</sup> Stevens's ideas on aesthetics are memorably expressed in one of his most frequently cited poems, "The Idea of Order at Key West," in which he develops the idea that nature in essence is not what is seen but what is imagined and felt, and is not, when viewed in a profound sense, an objective thing but rather the "raw material" for the poetic imagination. Perhaps it does have a spiritual reality of its own but for us the interpretation of its meaning depends primarily upon an act of reconstruction. Nature becomes reality when we see it at once truthfully and symbolically. The poem is dedicated to the "blessed rage for order" that Ondaatje also enacts in several of his finest poems:

...  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,  
Why, when the singing ended and we turned  
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,  
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,  
As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
Mastered the light and portioned out the sea,  
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

(*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Vintage, 1990): 128-130.

surrealism and ironic symbolism that would later influence his writing.<sup>12</sup> The language reaches for a local effect to override a total impact, setting up contrasts as in the first two lines:

In the afternoon while the sun twists down  
they come piggle piggle piggle all around the air.  
Under clouds of horses the sand swallows turn

quick and gentle as wind.  
All virtuoso performances  
that presume a magnificent audience.

The leader flings his neck back,  
turns thinner than whims.  
Like God the others follow  
anticipating each twist,  
the betrayals of a feather.

For them no thumping wing beat of a crow,  
they bounce on a breath  
scattering with the discipline of a watch. (*DM* 11)

An afternoon sun “twists down” constitutes a powerful image to express potential violence which contrasts with the childlike onomatopoeic line that follows which provokes confusion and disorder. The sand swallows of the beach are the virtuoso performances of the second stanza which presume the speaker as the observer of the poem in front of the perfection and discipline of the animals. The similes have a surreal air, clouds are horses and the swallows are windlike. Through abstract comparisons we encounter a typical poem of Ondaatje’s early years which, at a first glance, aligns with the closeness of the symbolist tradition. Ondaatje’s poems, however, tend to refuse a symbolic reading of its figures.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “The surrealist image is born by the chance juxtaposition of two different realities, and it is on the spark struck by their meeting that the beauty of the image depends, the more different the two terms of the image are, the brighter the spark will be,” Dawn Ades, “Dada and Surrealism,” in *Concepts of Modern Art*, eds. Tony Richardson and Nikos Stangos (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974): 125. Quoted in Barbour 1993, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ondaatje’s poems do not usually follow a symbolic reading in the traditional way exposed by J.E. Cirlot’s *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (1971. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983). According to this view, birds would be symbols of thought, imagination and spirituality, etc.

Ondaatje is already reaching towards “undecidability,” a textual situation in which “the symbolic evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which...associations are relevant and which are not” (Perloff 1981, 18). This is a major reason for the difficulty in locating Ondaatje’s poetic influences which, on the other hand, are closer to Stevens than to Pound at this stage, as these early poems belong to the tradition of closed verse rather than that of open form.<sup>14</sup>

“Description is a Bird” represents the kind of poem Ondaatje dropped from his selected poems a decade later, as it implies a sense of closure that the poet’s imagination soon found too confining. There is no doubt, however, that the exotic imagery in *The Dainty Monsters* and subsequent books stem from his childhood memories of Ceylon. The jungle confronts the cultivated and controlled present in Canada, which does no less than activate his full and fertile mind. *The Dainty Monsters* is a kind of modern bestiary, with birds, predatory and domestic animals, and the beast -man- always present. Ondaatje’s love poems, however, stand against these images of violence and terror always trying to match his purpose and later discovery: the search for equilibrium where nature tries to impose its power. Ondaatje, coming from the East, attempts to work his Darwinian alchemy on Toronto itself, as in the poem “A Toronto Home for Birds and Manticores”:

This city with sun spreading down the street  
could be fashioned a delirious herb.

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<sup>14</sup> It is interesting, in this regard, to note that Pound’s critical prose is closely allied to his poetry by its structural properties: collage, fragmentation, parataxis, etc. The Romantic and Symbolist distinction between literary and ordinary language is thus blurred: the rule is that ‘anything goes’ is possible as long as the poet knows, in Olson’s words, how to “keep it moving,” how to make the poem an energy discharge, a field of action. The “how,” for Poundians, thus becomes more interesting than the “what”: if poetry teaches us how to talk to ourselves, it is not because it provides us with a vision of Reality but because its processes imitate the processes of the external world as we have come to know it. See Perloff, 1985, 20-22.

When snows have melted  
how dull to find just grass and dog shit.  
Why not polemic bones of centaurs  
-remnants of a Toronto bullet,  
punishment for eating gladioli.

Luring animal fashions in  
these beasts will nerve the city,  
clog sewers,  
and giving them this head start  
we can establish once more  
a survival of the fittest. (*DM* 41)

“Birds for Janet - The Heron” is the first poem in the 1979 selected poems. Here the bird is created out of its description in an analogical way that will become Ondaatje’s own. The imagistic shift from the sensual to the qualitative plane forces the reader to move back and forth between the world of impression and the world of abstraction. The clipped syntax, short lines, and six separate sections insist that the reader continually adjust to changes in perspective:

The reach

fingers stretching  
backbones

the dull  
burst of fur  
four feet above water

Reflections make them hourglass

When heron sits  
the hairless ankle  
rests on a starved knee

he fingers his food  
off the leaf of banana

drinks from the stone container

bathes in blue zebra milk

When he sleeps  
the soul is jailed  
in tightened claws  
torn  
if he dies in the night

Heron is the true king

eagles only  
muscular henchmen  
with mad eyes  
bedded in black fur

We found the path  
of a heron's suicide  
tracks left empty  
walking to the centre of the lake

Best herons are not beautiful  
but handsome (DM 12-13; TK 2-3)

The opening line describes both the heron's steps into flight but, as we read, the word 'fur' produces a sense of estrangement as it can be arbitrarily meant both for the heron and the eagle. The immense visual power throughout the poem creates minute and visually powerful images which combine with adjectives and alliterations. Thus, the subject of the poem is defamiliarized, though different echoes hold the disparate parts of the poem together. The "stone container" could be the lake and the "blue zebra milk" the water reflecting the heron. The odd descriptions appear to refer to the physical presence of one of Ondaatje's favourite birds, which shifts into a metaphorical mode, a kind of paranoia that leads to one of the author's future poetic conceits -suicide.

Ondaatje reinvents the heron by giving it a nobility and majesty that the eagle's mad eyes no longer possess. Therefore, he transforms it into the true king and, perhaps, into his first anti-hero. This figure, then, becomes the predecessor to other figures like Bolden,

Bellocq and Mervyn Ondaatje. The heron drowns itself, as the ibis does in *Slaughter*, though the poem only gives possibilities without offering any consistent referentiality.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the book's animal poems, however, have a closer resemblance to "Description is a Bird" than to "Birds for Janet - The Heron." They shift from the cool observation of "Pigeons, Sussex Avenue," with their "necks puffed, and red feet / cautiously starring the crusted surface, / holding in fur / a slowing freezing mind" (*DM* 14), to the gregarious humour of "The Sows," "chinless duchesses / [that] sniff out the day, / gauging their loves with a seasoned eye" (*DM* 15-16). The symbolic qualities of the figures in all of these poems are essentially ignored or undercut. Over and over again, these early poems invoke a fantastical vision of the evolutionary theme of the "survival of the fittest" (*DM* 41) where "nature breeds the unnatural" (*DM* 22).

"Henry Rousseau and Friends" shows an irregular verse pattern and a brightness of style which try to oppose ferocity and gentleness among the creatures of a Rousseau's painting *The Dream*. The poet begins describing the painting through visual images of the personified animals to explore the poetic and visual play between movement and stasis:

...  
They are the ideals of dreams.  
Among the exactness,  
the symmetrical petals,  
the efficiently flying angels,  
there is complete liberation.

The parrot is interchangeable;  
tomorrow in its place  
a waltzing man and tiger,  
brash legs of a bird. (*DM* 28-30)

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<sup>15</sup> The poem's last couplet is removed in *Trick with a Knife* without affecting the poem's openness and indeterminacy.

Ondaatje's fascination with Rousseau is visible throughout his poetry. The painter also appears in the zoo poem "You Can Look But You Better Not Touch" (*DM* 36-8). In *Rat Jelly*, the poem "The Vault" (*RJ* 66) proceeds to a discussion of Rousseau's last great painting, *The Dream*, a postcard of which is also to be found in the poet's desk in "Burning Hills" (*RJ* 56). Earlier in the book, Ondaatje uses the famous letter "To Monsieur le Maire" (*RJ* 40-41) as the text for a found poem in which Rousseau, with his usual unsettling blend of naivete and shrewdness, offers *The Sleeping Gypsy* for sale to the citizenry of Laval, the home-town which he shared with the author Alfred Jarry.<sup>16</sup> Ondaatje also inserts a Rousseau reference on the first full page of *Running in the Family*: "I sat up on the uncomfortable sofa and I was in the jungle" (21).

In his art and in his work, Rousseau was one of the most bizarre, and mysterious of all artists. This alone might well account for Ondaatje's interest, since his work shows a lively interest in the bizarre. They are, however, very different artists -Ondaatje works at the level of sophistication and self-consciousness entirely alien to Rousseau. Stephen Scobie describes Rousseau's *The Dream* as a large painting:

thick foliage with spiked leaves in intricate crisscross patterns, exotic pink and blue flowers, oranges. One painter is reported to have counted more than fifty shades of green in the painting. An orange-breasted bird sits on a branch; an elephant hides in the undergrowth; two playfully drawn lions stare around them in a rather baffled manner; a large black snake with a pink belly glides towards a charmer playing his pipe. And plumbed down in the middle of this, dominating the left side of the composition, is a large red couch with a naked woman reclining on it, stretching out her hand toward the scene. (1985, 46)

Describing the painting in "The Vault," Ondaatje emphasizes the intimate connection between the dreaming lady and the landscape she has created for herself in her dream:

In Rousseau's *The Dream* she is the naked lady  
who has been animal and tree

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<sup>16</sup> The best short biography of Henri Rousseau is to be found in the book which Ondaatje acknowledges as his source: Roger Shattuck's *The Banquet Years*, first published in 1958, Vintage edition 1968.

her breast a suckled orange.  
The fibres and fluids of their moral nature  
have seeped within her frame.

The hand is outstretched  
her fingers move out in  
mutual transfusion to the place. (*RJ 67*)

The identity between the dreamer and the dreamed is complete, a “mutual transfusion” (Scobie 1985) has taken place. This is one affinity between the two artists: the coexistence, amounting to interpenetration, of a domestic scene and a jungle. Ondaatje’s poetry reaches towards the kind of balance found in the visual composition of *The Dream*, but for him it is more difficult to attain. Rousseau’s jungle is more exotic than violent; but for Ondaatje, violence is the essence of the jungle, and it continuously breaks through his poems with disturbing effect though disguised in an ironic understatement to balance its intensity. For Ondaatje, therefore, the problem is to achieve some sort of equilibrium. His responses to the entrance of the violent into the domestic are, therefore, rarely phrased as direct statements: at their best, the statement is indirect, controlled by tone, by what is not said. Most of these violent illustrations have centred on the role of animals and the way they retain their integrity and absolute identity as animals at the same time as they provide an almost continuous commentary on what is done in human society.<sup>17</sup>

Later poems, however, shift away from the world of nature strained through apocalyptic eyes to a more complex domestic vision towards the mundane. If the world is a spiritually small place, it holds enough space for a homegrown mythology -and it is this that Ondaatje attempts to create in the other lyrics of this first section, before turning to larger, more ancient, tales in the second.

“The Diverse Causes” is the first poem to represent an apparently autobiographical “I,” and that representation introduces new complexities into the lyric voice of the poem: “I turn the page / careful not to break the rhythms / of your sleeping head on my hip, / watch the moving under your “eyelid / that turns like fire” (*DM* 24-25). Part of Ondaatje’s success as a writer is due to his ability, from the beginning of his career, to evoke emotional participation in his readers. In “Signature,” he starts recalling his past for the first time and giving hints of the emotional dimensions of future poems that were to be published a few years later in *Rat Jelly*. Here, the poet gets involved with his roots and creates an ironic world out of his memories:

The obvious upsets me,  
everyone has scars which crawl  
into the mystery of swimming trunks

I was the first appendix in my family;  
my brother who was given the stigma  
of a rare blood type,  
proved to have ulcers instead. (*DM* 26)

‘Troy Town’ approaches all its mythical subjects in the light of its epigraph, Dmitry Karamazov’s contradictory boast, or apology:

*Indeed I can't help feeling that in telling you all about these inner struggles of mine, I've exaggerated a little in order to show you what a fine fellow I am. But, all right, let it be like that and to hell with all those who pry into the human heart.*

The epigraph taken from Fyodor Dostoyevsky, however, sets up certain expectations that the poems cannot live up to, especially since they are short and lack the psychological expansion of the novel. But it also suggests that contradiction, passionate struggle, and glimpses of character will occur. As will be the case with his later book-length poems, Ondaatje chooses

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<sup>17</sup> Introducing his anthology of animal poems, *The Broken Ark* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1971): n.p., Ondaatje wrote that he was not interested in pretty pictures of animals as pets, but rather that he wanted the reader

to deal with a given and complete story rather than with the continuing act of invention, but he also chooses to leave most of the known story in the interstices between lyric texts. This is the first example of the poet concentrating on text and narration, inviting readers to participate in the act of creation. The poems of 'Troy Town' contain complex mythological characters which are used in a fictional way though function as monologic lyric voices or images. In this shorter section, Ondaatje moves to a series of poems dealing with a locatable past and with legendary or historical personages. There are poems set in ancient Egypt, Troy, Greece -and even Eden; poems about Prometheus, Lilith, Philoctetes, Paris as Helen, which remind us immediately of those poems Gwendolyn MacEwen was to write a few years later with more insight and knowledge of ancient myths.

In "Paris," a seven section poem, is crucial in that Ondaatje was beginning to explore serial, almost photographic images to capture variations and subtleties in character. Ondaatje is thus moving further away from the lyric and into a more narrative prosaic line.<sup>18</sup> Throughout this important sequence, Ondaatje subtly handles a wide-ranging imagery of violence and passion, often with echoes of the poems in the first part of the book. Paris figures throughout as an unheroic man of memory and sensation, who can at best articulate intense impressions rather than profound emotion and thought. He seems more as a character in a fiction than as a figure in a poem. This sequence is Ondaatje's first attempt to create a kind of documentary poem, even if the documents are classical myths.

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to "imagine yourself pregnant and being chased and pounded to death by snowmobiles."

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in the shift from purely lyrical separate poems in the first section to sequences of poems in the second, *The Dainty Monsters* enacts one of the methods by which poetry made the shift from conventional modernism to postmodernism. The sequence of poems that take up the mythic material of the Trojan War is Ondaatje's first attempt to break away from the limitations of modernist lyric closure, hence, it might be argued that "the very attempt at length at mixed viewpoints accomplishes such a break" (Barbour 1994, 108).

“The Goodnight” takes a complex perspective upon its materials and, like most poems of mythical allusion, assumes the reader’s knowledge. The narrative voice suggests that readers join “[w]ith the bleak heron Paris / imagine Philoctetes” (*DM* 69).<sup>19</sup> If the first two stanzas imagine Philoctetes as if through Paris’s eyes, the final stanza shifts perspective and, like a mirror, shows Paris through his killer’s eyes, until the focus pulls back to show them both in the moment just before Paris is killed:

in front of him-Paris  
darting and turning, the perfumed stag,  
and beyond him the sun  
netted in the hills, throwing back his shape,  
until the running spider of shadow  
gaped on the bandaged foot of the standing man  
who let shafts of eagles into the ribs  
that were moving to mountains. (*DM* 69)

Ondaatje creates a series of visual metaphors haunted by abstract symbolism. Paris diminishes to mere shadow before “the standing man” of violent strength who will conquer him. Ondaatje’s violence seems always to bring pain, and wounds are never healed, be they external or internal. Only after this deadly proleptic vision does the text offer Paris’s version of his story, in the sequence that bears his name.

“Philoctetes on the island” may serve as a fitting transition from the early lyrics to the longer works; as a ‘wounded hunter’ Philoctetes is a figure much like ‘Peter’, ‘Potter,’ and ‘Billy,’ as his mind works metaphorically. The “I” of “Philoctetes on the island” is the subject of his aggressive artistry: “Sun moves broken in the trees / drops like a paw / turns sea to red leopard” (*RJ* 34). It is Philoctetes as central consciousness of the poem who sees the sun as

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<sup>19</sup> When Hercules dies, he gives Philoctetes his bow and arrows, which the gods say are required to defeat the Trojans, but Philoctetes is bitten by a serpent, and because the wound is so bad, the Greeks abandon him for ten years on the island of Lemnos. Eventually, they rescue him and take him to Troy. He immediately joins the battle and kills Paris.

'broken', or wounded like himself, yet simultaneously sees it as a hunting animal. In his utter isolation, Philoctetes can only behave in the following way:

And kill to fool myself alive  
to leave all pity on the staggering body  
in order not to shoot an arrow up  
and let it hurl  
down through my petalling skull  
or neck vein, and lie  
heaving round the wood in my lung.  
That the end of thinking.  
Shoot either eye or bird instead  
and run and catch it in your hand. (*RJ* 34)

But he is refusing the temptation of suicide because, however much he retreats from it, he cannot escape from his own thinking. The poem does not mitigate Philoctetes's violence, but it does offer a sense of balance in his lonely world. The open suggestiveness of the final couplet makes interpretation uncertain: "then they smell me, / the beautiful animals" (*RJ* 35). This openness approaches and inherits its quality from its predecessor *Billy the Kid*, marking the transition from the modernist stance of Ondaatje's early poems to the postmodernist features of his later poems.

In "Paris" each section stands alone, a moment cut out of the flowing stream of his life. Part I establishes an indistinct mood, refusing any clear reference: "A lifeless night tonight, I talk to her, / the sky low, and with a surer hand / one could draw a heaven down" (*DM* 70). The uncertainty throughout depends on the reader's knowledge of the whole story.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Paris is exiled to Mount Ida by his father Priam, who has been warned that Paris would bring ruin to his country. There he marries the nymph, Oenone [Oinone in Ondaatje's poem] and lives as a shepherd until the three goddesses appear before him for the Judgement of Paris. This brings him Helen after he awards the golden apple to Aphrodite.

Part II seems to recall the early days of Oinone's love and Paris's freedom from the god's demands. It combines a number of visits into one image -that of Priam aging. Paris can even laugh at himself, losing his dignity at the games:

And seeing Oinone's eyes  
proud and wild  
among my tears of speed,  
hunched my body into a gracious bow  
and left the chariot in a vast  
ignoble, timeless tumble. (*DM 71*)

From the rhythms in which the alliteration of "timeless tumble" seems to stop time, the next stanza turns to a slow unfolding of gentle love and beauty, Oinone's body perceived as "frail in the mornings / and white in the streams / gleaming among the dark rocks of Ida" (*DM 72*). These oppositions serve only to set up the final stanza, which leaves readers as unsure as Paris: "'For Alexandros who understands.' / 'Who understands what?' / 'Everything'" (*DM 72*). The text, blurred and ambiguous, refuses "to unravel if the figure of Paris is a character in a modernist-symbolist monologue or simply a symbol" (Barbour 1994, 116).

Part III establishes an even more dramatic situation, as it is addressed to an apparently specific audience, with readers as a separate audience outside the action. Again, unclear references make it difficult to know from where, or to whom, Paris is speaking:

Sirs, you give me all this glitter.  
The shadowed city I inherit  
and there is only sparkle in the gold.

I, with my whimsied past,  
spend my father's riches with caresses  
and with a nimble swagger  
scar the city with dreams.  
I am a curse to break your city  
to kill your generations.

In whimsy then  
I spill this gold and seed  
and offer apples with a serpent's charm. (*DM 73*)



Having read Paris's version of his story, readers now hear Helen's final lament in "O Troy's Down: Helen's Song." The poem reads like a conventional lament for lost glory, but suddenly, the tone changes as she appears to address her daughter about more complex emotional connections:

My gentle proud daughter  
what can you show but pity  
and that a condescending emotion  
-better agony at all our slow withering.  
I knew a man once  
who never withered.

Now sixteen summers since  
how I still move  
to his imagined dancing in the wind  
on my morning balcony.  
I too dance  
but with no mirror.

If I could speak  
of Paris to you,  
your understanding my dear child  
would stale  
all this uncertain agony.  
And I, in this year,  
need your agony.

He had nightmares of an egg;  
inside the egg  
two inverted lovers  
strained against the shell  
with their passion.

Oh how we yelled with love!

My frail white daughter  
if I should breathe  
these thoughts to you at night  
I would with all the senses  
left now to me call  
Paris, Paris, Paris, Paris, Paris. (*DM* 80-81)

The ironies reflect outward on the readers's inherited knowledge of the character rather than inward on the character's own lack of self-awareness. Helen remembers Paris as a

man “who never withered” -if only because he dies so young and becomes a fallen hero. In “Paris,” therefore, Ondaatje portrays a sense of the artist’s decadence which contrasts the artist’s vindictiveness in “Philoctetes on the island” and the same figure in “The Goodnight.”

Although Ondaatje would soon realize that retelling ancient myths is no longer all that interesting, he would nevertheless continue to figure the mythic in his narratives. He has already, in *The Dainty Monsters*, begun to discover the power of tactile and kinetic metaphor. However, “[n]ot only a precursor to the longer poems that soon follow, but also as a moving achievement on its own terms, the Trojan sequence is well worth remembering” (Barbour 1994, 121).

In evoking ancient myths, or important personages of the past -yet adapting them to dramatize and concretize his own feeling and meaning- Ondaatje follows a long and respectable poetic tradition. It is in the seven poems that comprise the sequence called “Peter,” though, that Ondaatje returns to his dainty monsters; its significant position at the end of the book foreshadows Ondaatje’s experimental move into larger forms in Pound’s tradition.

“Peter” stands for an allusive transposition of the beauty and the beast tale, a fragmented story of brutality, sensual imagery and creativity. This, once again, engages the problem of art that seeks to capture the violence of life. Peter is a figure of the romantic artist as tormented outcast, even if, in this story, others do much of the tormenting to him. He is the first example of such an artist in Ondaatje’s work. The poem is not, however, transcendent and successful, since its structure is ambivalent and its changes in tone create a disturbing emotional ambiguity that goes out of control. Nevertheless, both the Trojan sequence and

“Peter” show Ondaatje’s early desire to escape the confines of the lyric space while retaining its intensity.<sup>21</sup>

A lost, wild child discovered by villagers, Peter is snared, tortured and mutilated, and finally has his tongue cut out, so that, “he began to speak with the air of his body, / torturing breath into tones; it was despicable, / they made a dead animal of his throat” (*DM* 88). The living puppet becomes a live toy for Tara, a young daughter of the court, who eventually grows old enough to ride upon his shoulders. Meanwhile, Peter becomes a mishapen artist who creates metal objects as strange and wonderful as he is ugly and monstrous. As Tara becomes a woman, “her dress hid seas of thighs” and “vast brown breasts / clung to her body like new sea beasts,” he makes “golden spiders for her / and silver frogs with opal gloves,” which, as she grows older, she receives with quiet, new poise. But in the final, explosive poem, monster and beauty are coiled in a rape that recalls Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan.”

The final image of the poem, and of the book, is violent, strange, and impelling. It reverberates with mythical old stories around woman and beast; it is powerful as a psychological allegory in which the abused monster has its revenge, which results in the final image of mother with newborn child. Ondaatje here explores the artist’s ability, or inability, to rise above personality and experience. He creates a myth around a vindictive artist figure which recalls the mad heron of “Birds for Janet” and “In Another Fashion,” the monstrously

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<sup>21</sup> Of the Trojan section, five poems are clearly personal, while the other four imply a specific unidentified speaker. Only three -one of which is “Peter,” the final sequence of *The Dainty Monsters*- appear in Ondaatje’s first collection of selected poems, *Trick with a Knife*. In *The Cinnamon Peeler*, the author has even dropped “Peter”; this elision, along with the continuing out-of-print status of *the man with seven toes*, suggests that the older poet has rethought the values of these early works, perhaps finding their philosophical attitudes, so grounded in the revolutionary forces of the sixties, less tenable than they once were. What is most unexpected in the reorganization of his earlier poems in *Trick with a Knife* is the unacknowledged displacement of “Philoctetes on the island” from *Rat Jelly* to *The Dainty Monsters*. Both in style and content, this poem shows affinities to the “Troy Town” section of the first book. It seems likely that the poem was written with the other Troy poems and was simply left out of the sequence. At any rate, it makes us focus on the poem as a kind of link between the first two books (Barbour 1994, 110-111)

deformed Philoctetes of “The Goodnight,” the decadent Paris whose belly is an “undigested beast” or Prometheus, who is ‘scientifically’ ‘splayed’ on a rock but fights back with ever restored energy.<sup>22</sup> As Harding-Russell comments, “[a]lthough all literature borrows from mythic or story elements as its essential understructure, the creative myth typically stylizes its material and reduces it to archetypal essentials so that a speculative element surfaces within the basic structure and development of the story” (1987, 205).

Rather than following any one borrowed mythological structure, “Peter,” as a creative myth which is built around the tale of the Beauty and the Beast, echoes *The Tempest*, the Golden Fleece, and the Minotaur stories. Here the artist as Caliban and Minotaur figure expresses his sense of persecution and personal frustration at physical handicaps (literally inflicted by society in this story) -first through his art, and later by victimizing the young beauty Tara, who has been the only person to treat him with kindness. Accordingly, Tara may be seen as an Ariadne or Miranda figure.

As with Potter in *the man with seven toes*, the artist in “Peter” is ambivalently presented as victim and victimizer. The convict Potter is, however, depicted as a more positive figure than Peter. Potter, who gains the distinction of ‘seven toes’<sup>23</sup> through brutalizing experience, provides a parallel for the court monster Peter, who, having been deprived of his tongue, must express himself against all odds in a particularly literal and physical manner.<sup>24</sup>

In the first section of the series, Peter is discovered in the gruesome act of reconstructing a cow from its skeleton through ice sculpture. A significant ambiguity in the

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<sup>22</sup> Solecki’s “Nets and Chaos,” in *Spider Blues*, describes these analogues as a “metaphoric shorthand” to disorient the reader.

<sup>23</sup> The number seven is traditional in fairy tales. The series of poems entitled “Peter” unfolds in seven notable installments. See Cirlot’s *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London, 1962): 223.

syntax surrounding “freezing,” and a manipulation of line-endings implies the ambivalent role of the artist as both victim and victimizer:

That spring Peter was discovered, freezing  
the maze of bones from a dead cow,  
skull and hooves glazed  
with a skin of ice.  
...  
that night villagers found the cow  
frozen in red, and Peter  
eating a meal beside it. (*DM* 86)

Ondaatje thus links art with morbid behaviour in which the ice surface, the medium of Peter’s art, is considered a ‘skin.’ In the second section, the hunting party manage to snare Peter and torture him. A ‘brown bitch,’ a familiar symbol in Ondaatje’s poetry representing the survival instinct, “nosed his pain, stared in interest, / and he froze into consciousness / to drag his feet to the fountain, / to numb wounds ” (*DM* 87). Here we identify a ‘freezing motif’ which reflects an attitude necessary to the artist if he is to transcend his own pain through art. In the third section, after the passage of a year, society cuts out his tongue. As an analogue for the persecuted artist, Ondaatje introduces a baited fish which loses matter in its throat when the hook is removed:

difficult  
to unpin a fish’s mouth  
without the eventual jerk  
to empty throat of pin and matter. (*DM* 88)

Maimed, the fish is thus aligned with the artist, Peter. Eventually, however, he overcomes his speech impediment by learning to express himself more fantastically in grunts by using the air in his body:

There followed months of silence,  
then the eventual grunting;  
he began to speak with the air of his body,  
torturing breath into tones; it was despicable,

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<sup>24</sup> We see, therefore, Ondaatje’s physical violence and mutilations on his characters’ bodies from the beginning of his poetic career: Peter, Potter, Bolden, Bellocq as mutilator, and Caravaggio.

they had made a dead animal of his throat. (*DM* 88)

Since society has “made a dead animal of his throat,” the artist, who is reduced to a ‘monster’ by society’s persecution of him, is not entirely responsible for the cruel intensity expressed in his art.<sup>25</sup> Society’s restraints speak through him, and his art is autonomous (Harding-Russell 1987, 206). In the fourth section, the occupants of the castle build a hive or sanctuary for Peter, which suggest the removal of the artist from society on a kind of glorified pedestal of dubious implication. In an interview with Jon Pearce, Ondaatje comments on his dislike of this kind of artist’s alienation - “it cuts you off essentially from the real world” (1980, 141). In the fifth section, Peter is seen as an artist of ‘violent beauty,’ first as an artisan, but later as an expressionist artist. The sacred here takes on a new profanity in which the absurdity of death is represented in art:

All this while Peter formed violent beauty.  
He carved death on chalices,  
made spoons of yawning golden fishes;  
forks stemmed from the tongues of reptiles,  
candle holders bent like the ribs of men. (*DM* 90)

Ironically, at the end of the section, a romantic conception provides a point of departure for Ondaatje’s expressionistic and often surrealistic techniques:

His squat form, the rippled arms  
of seaweeded hair,  
the fingers black, bent from moulding silver,  
poured all his strength  
into the bare reflection of eyes. (*DM* 90)

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<sup>25</sup> The spiritual connection in the fish symbol is apparent when Peter is associated with his biblical namesake. Of course, “Peter” translates as ‘the rock,’ and this artist, Peter, is described as a ‘marred stone.’ Interestingly, Cirlot cites an instance of the stone image as a symbol for reconciliation with the self since it connotes removal from biological processes of decay (Cirlot 229). The ‘marred stone,’ therefore, might imply the inner turmoil and antagonistic feelings which Ondaatje identifies in the artist. Being an imperfect creature him- or herself, the artist must create in order to compensate for his or her deficiency.

In the sixth section Tara outgrows Peter's control and, with his resentment also growing, we find a parallel to the modern artist's alienation from a social reality which has become shapeless through an increasing complexity that can no longer be contained in conventional forms. In a surreal description, Ondaatje describes a splendid autonomy of the girl's body:

And as she grew, her body  
burned its awkwardness.  
The full bones roamed  
in brown warm skin.  
The ridge in her back broadened,  
her dress hid seas of thighs,  
arms trailed to adjust hair that paused  
like a long bird at her shoulder;  
and vast brown breasts  
restless at each gesture  
clung to her body like new sea beasts. (*DM* 92)

Impressionistic touches such as the image of the "long bird" for her hair and her breasts "like new sea beasts" establish, in this context, "a relation between the selectivity of romantic impression and the expressive agency of selective distortion" (Russell 1987, 209). Ondaatje achieves a unique idiom that reflects his interesting position as a postmodernist artist who must combine the techniques of his predecessors in his own way. In the seventh section, in which Peter mistreats his only benefactor, Tara, Ondaatje introduces Christian imagery to dramatize the vindictiveness of the artist. In an implicit fishing metaphor complicated by a mention of the cross, Peter baits Tara and exposes her:

An arm held her, splayed  
its fingers like a cross at her neck  
till he could feel fear thrashing at her throat,  
while his bent hands tore the sheet of skirt,  
lifted her, buttock and neck to the table.  
Then laying arm above her breasts  
he shaped her body like a mould,  
the stub of tongue sharp as a cat, cold,  
dry as a cat, rasping neck and breasts  
till he poured loathing of fifteen years on her,  
a vat of lush oil, staining,  
the large soft body like a whale. (*DM* 93)

Peter places her on a table, a secular form of the sacred altar, where he moulds her with his “stub of tongue.” Accordingly, Tara takes on significance as the female counterpart for the sacrificial bull.<sup>26</sup> A suggestion of the crucifixion in this final scene aligns the sacrificial victim of the girl with the cow of the opening scene; in the end, his guilt and sorrow identify him with his victim, as well as the artist is identified with the subject matter of his art: “Then he lay there breathing at her neck / his face wet from her tears / that glued him to her pain.” (*DM* 93). As in Gwendolyn MacEwen’s vision, we identify an inherently destructive element in the creative process, which perhaps accounts for the suggested spitefulness of this artist prototype.

Ondaatje’s *the man with seven toes* and “Peter” provide examples of what Harding-Russell calls “creative mythopoeia” (1985). *The man with seven toes* draws on a historical germ as a point of departure for an abstracted myth. The lady is never named, and the convict is renamed “Potter,” to establish his role as an artist figure. Here we find a view of the persecuted artist whose alienating perversion and resentment induce love and admiration in the jailor’s daughter. In both poems, an “association of terror and beauty underlying procreative and creative processes is implicit” (Harding-Russell 1985, 25). The occasional intrusion into imagistic or mythic analogues in Ondaatje’s work can be understood as poetically emphatic moments that enhance and remove his works from an ordinary plane.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The cow of the initial scene prefigures Tara’s eventual sacrifice. Although in *the man with seven toes* the artist becomes the sacrificial figure, the artist here ‘crucifies’ his subject-matter as represented in Tara.

<sup>27</sup> Ondaatje’s wounded characters appear for the first time in the figure of “Peter.” A later incarnation of this appears in Bellocq, the crippled photographer who “shoots” the storyville prostitutes in *Coming Through Slaughter*. The identification of hunter with artist, and artist with frustrated lover -implicit in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*- is made explicit in the figure of Bellocq. He stalks women with his camera and slashes their captured images as a way of penetrating them.

## 2.2 Poetic Process: Approaching Reality in *Rat Jelly*

The work of art is so made that it shall carry in its body the intolerable feeling of being immersed in reality....To possess is to destroy; reality is so much more powerful than any person that to possess reality is to be destroyed. To escape reality is not difficult; but the poet seeks to incarnate reality, by becoming a medium through which that reality may pass....If the process is to be cathartic, the expression must assume form -a form growing from within itself and self-bounded, to correspond with the form of the feeling. In this activity the poet discovers to himself the reality in which he is immersed, and extricates himself from it. (George Whalley 1953, 108)

In Ondaatje's work, there is a conscious statement: poetry is a metaphor for all experience. While the poet uses the metaphor to express, yet control, the energy within his own work, he also uses the poetry itself as a direct metaphor for how a man experiences reality. The poet, however, becomes increasingly interested in examining artistic expression as a process, and the form generated becomes a sequence of poems. The narratorial result of the sequences is that the poem may be sufficient on itself, yet there must be connections to construct a whole; in Ondaatje's poems, the meaning is usually expressed in the unifying effect of metaphor which, extended, becomes a sort of allegorical abstraction. On the other hand, Ondaatje's use of myth depends primarily upon "resonating and synergetic metaphors, both imagistic and rhythmic" (Hunter 1978, 62). Whalley describes the process of disintegration of myth saying that:

narrative is an accidental and not an essential feature of myth. Myth is rather a grouping of symbols which brings them into resonance with each other to embody a comprehensive view of reality....Once the myth has taken a narrative form it has started to fall from grace, to move in the direction of 'legend'.... In the legend the cluster of symbols dissipates and becomes confused,...and loses resonance; the emphasis moves from the symbols themselves to the narrative events and the personalities of the actors in those events. (1953, 181-82)

The equilibrium of *Billy the Kid* is based on the poet's creation of the myth of Billy, which functions as a symbol of the artist that organizes control over the structure of the poem. The control units of external force that provide the shape of the book are the italicized interpolations which are often accompanied by blank spaces indicating photographs. This is an external poet's attempt to reach an equilibrium between the vital myth of a man and the facts surrounding him, as presented by the first photograph of a blank square enclosed by a black border. All the succeeding photographs and the comic book are surrounded by this black border which emphasizes the limits and single definitions of such images. Ondaatje announces his knowledge that he only re-creates a view of the man in his distrust of too much external control as exerted by words in relation to the myth itself. He places the same 'warning,' the black borders of limitation, around both his title page and concluding page, which points specifically to the source of his poem: the picture of himself as a small boy dressed as Billy the Kid.

*Rat Jelly*, published three years later, features many poems that expand the structural and imagistic meaning of *Billy the Kid*. "Letters & Other Worlds," a long elegy for the poet's father, that is placed among the other poems here, accentuates the notion of tragic sensibility: love is equal to pain.

"Letters & Other Worlds" is also Ondaatje's first attempt -anticipating *Running in the Family* by almost a decade- to place and placate his father's ghost. The poem moves from a tragic chant to a frightening image of death, and then shifts into a kind of comic gossip before returning to the imagery of isolation, self-destruction, and death with which it began. The "terrifying comedy" of his father's life is represented in dialectical fragments of narrative that look ahead to *Running*, but the beginning and

ending of the poem insist on a lyric and romantic intensity of vision in which terror and despair overwhelm all other possibilities. The first two stanzas of the poem form a litany set apart from the narrative that follows. Through a series of near repetitions, the poet creates, on behalf of himself and his siblings, a complex and “therapeutic” homage to his father in which the use of the first person plural pronoun implicates us in the emotional turmoil the poem enacts:

My father’s body was a globe of fear  
His body was a town he never knew  
He hid that he had been where we were going  
My father’s body was a town of fear  
He hid where he had been that we might lose him

...  
while he himself edged  
into the terrible acute hatred  
of his own privacy  
till he balanced and fell

the blood searching in his head without metaphor (*RJ* 24-26;*TK* 44-6)

The total effect is unnerving, as the father becomes a kind of incredible shrinking man who hid the truth about himself precisely in order that his love might free his children from the troubled inheritance he brought them. The logic of his love inevitably led to a kind of lying, a loss of balance he could not endure in the end. The narrative part of the poem leaps proleptically to the climax, as “brain blood moved / to new compartments / that never knew the wash of fluid / and he died in minutes of a new equilibrium” (*RJ* 24). Equilibrium is a key word here; it is ambivalent and the mood of isolation and loss continues the lamentation of the first two stanzas. The immediate shift into anecdotal farce nevertheless suggests that the father’s life was continually off balance until he reached his final death, not without metaphor. Yet writing is the only way to bring him

back. The writer takes an almost humorous delight in various scenes from the “terrifying comedy” of his father’s early life, remarking ironically that “my mother divorced him again and again.” A balance must be sought, however, and maintained in the control of the poem’s tone, whether it be ironic distance, surreal or affectionate humour, or the highly sophisticated manipulation of various tones.

At any rate, equilibrium is the task of the artist, Ondaatje’s dream which must attempt to mediate between the sections ‘Families’ and ‘Life Bait.’ The effectiveness of this poem, therefore, resides not only in the juxtaposition of generic categories, but, perhaps more suggestively, “in the interplay between what might be called moments of containment and transgression” (Heble 1991, 118). The poem creates a spiral -or the effect of Chinese boxes- in successive eclosing of one image after the other, which contain several acts: a body within space, letters within a room, and love within the letters. Symbolic identifications, however, recurrently give way to disruptive variations of the above: body as a globe or town, letters as room, and so on, merging personal experience with physical space. These metaphors try to balance the relationship between container and contained with the only means of transgressing their limits.

In the first two stanzas, a personal history is mapped, employing metaphors that undermine the stability of reality. Denying surfaces in an implicit way, Ondaatje’s strength will lie in the “forcefulness of concealed gestures” (Heble 1991, 119). These gestures refer to the deep and transgressive exploration he endeavours in his father’s actions: extravagant display of emotion which contrasts with the privacy of his room, where Mervyn Ondaatje achieves a new dynamic “until he was drunk / and until he was sober.” The repetition of lines reinforces the precariousness of the situation, and

anticipates the critical turn of the final stanza. Only in privacy could Ondaatje's father tap his communicative resources; like Buddy Bolden in *Slaughter*, Mervyn solves and resolves his problems and then destroys himself locked away from his family. The poem is "a meditation on the way in which impropriety and self-destruction can lead to a recognition of the meaning and the value of community" (Heble 1991,122).

"Letters & Other Worlds" was the first of the major poems about his family which continues through "Light" and the Coach House manuscript edition "Claude Glass" up to *Running in the Family*. These works confront, directly, the theme of the search for the father with all its oedipal implications. The father in the poem hides in the room of his letters, just as Ondaatje hides the source of the poem's epigraph: *for there was no more darkness for him and, no doubt like Adam before the fall, he could see in the dark.*<sup>1</sup> In Alfred Jarry, Ondaatje finds the paradigm by which to measure his father. An infamous poet, novelist, and playwright, who seemingly devoted his final days to drinking himself to death, Jarry included among his last writings this visionary description of the hero's approaching death that Ondaatje quotes as an unacknowledged epigraph to the poem, while the comment that "Jarry's death resembled nothing so much as drowning" (Shattuck 1968, 223) is echoed in the line "He came to his death with his mind drowning" (*RJ* 24).

At the end of "Burning Hills," Ondaatje surveys the process of his creation: "He has written slowly and carefully / with great love and great coldness. / When he finishes he will go back / hunting for the lies that are obvious" (*RJ* 56). With "Burning Hills," the writer turns from imagining how art operates in others to registering how he operates in

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant Garde in France 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968): 221.

art. A seemingly complex narrative, it continually finds ways to deny normal narrative movement and to uncover layers of memories in the form of snapshots:

The summers were layers of civilization in his memory  
they were old photographs he didn't look at anymore  
for girls in them were chubby not as perfect as in his mind  
and his ungovernable hair was shaved to the edge of skin.  
His friends leaned on bicycles  
were 16 and tried to look 21  
the cigarettes too big for their faces.  
He could read those characters easily  
undisguised as wedding pictures. (*RJ* 57)

To this point, Ondaatje had seldom presented the figure of the writer in his shorter poems. In *The Dainty Monsters*, the writer appears only in "Four Eyes," where he desires to stop time:

I would freeze this moment  
and in supreme patience  
place pianos  
and craggy black horses on a beach  
and in immobilised time  
attempt to reconstruct. (*DM* 53-54; *TK* 17)

In *Rat Jelly* he reappears in the comic story of "Dates" comparing his mother's eighth month of pregnancy with Wallace Stevens's writing a poem in the summer of 1943; and also in the poem "Billboards," this time altering his stance:

Here I was trying to live  
with a neutrality so great  
I'd have nothing to think of,  
just to sense  
and kill it in the mind.  
...  
I am writing this with the pen my wife has used  
to write a letter to her first husband. (*RJ* 15; *TK* 35)

The difficulty and emotional power of "Letters & Other Worlds" derives from its inchoate recognition that the father is the kind of romantic artist Ondaatje's writing

obsessively loves and yet must reject. As such, he is a paradigm of all such figures one encounters in the poet's work: Peter, Billy, Bolden, and the heroes of "White Dwarfs," "who sail to that perfect edge / where there is no social fuel" (*RJ* 70; *TK* 68). In the figure of the father, this romantic artist appears as a writer, and it is as writer that his son must come to terms with what he means. In the single poem, Ondaatje has not yet found the proper architecture of tone by which to juxtapose document and fiction, prose and poetry, into the complex 'gesture' that is *Running in the Family*.

*Rat Jelly's* three sections, 'Families,' 'Life Bait,' and 'White Dwarfs' move from domestic emphasis to more objective meditations. The bizarre humour of the first section establishes the individual's desire for alienation from rational concerns, disturbed by familial matters forming around him, yet accepting the close physical environment. The section closes with the fine elegy to the poet's father. All this is contained in a general domestic framework until the second section plunges more deeply into the monstrous violence of man, whose brain creates schemes of perfection. The third section examines transcendent irrational experiences: King Kong reappears to meet Wallace Stevens, and nightmare spiders erect massive structures to demonstrate their poet-like artistic power. "Rat Jelly," the first poem of 'Life Bait,' underlines the fact that conventional trimmings cannot render truth. The poet believes that nobility belongs to the animal and to the recognized animal nature in man. From this belief grows the basis of Ondaatje's mythology and artistry. The final section of the book 'White Dwarfs,' marries the poetic patterns established in the first two sections of the book to Ondaatje's personal artistic purpose, as outlined in "The gate in his head," a poem he dedicates to Victor Coleman and that "marks his departure, if not in form, at least in intention, from his earlier

predilection for preserving his objects in the amber of his directed emotions” (Bowering 1985, 62):

My mind is pouring chaos  
in nets into the page.  
A blind lover, dont know  
what I love till I write it out.  
And then from Gibson’s your letter  
with a blurred photograph of a gull.  
Caught vision. The stunning white bird  
an unclear stir

And that is all this writing should be then.  
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment  
so they are shapeless, awkward  
moving to the clear. (*RJ 62*)

Artistic control is simultaneously sought and denied in ““The gate in his head,””

which is dedicated to a poet whose

shy mind  
reveal the faint scars  
coloured strata of the brain,  
not clarity but the sense of shift

a few lines, the tracks of thought (*RJ 62*)

The change from personal wounds to written trace occurs through a metaphoric ‘shift’ that conflates reading. But in a poem about the problem of netting chaos in language, the imagery undergoes continual metamorphosis. In a poem of defamiliarizing transformations, the landscape melts surrealistically into

Stan’s fishbowl  
with a book inside  
turning its pages  
like some sea animal  
camouflaging itself  
the typeface clarity

going slow blonde in the sun full water (*RJ 62*).<sup>2</sup>

Only after the first half of the poem has presented a series of rapid transformations does the writer argue his case for doing so, by enunciating what he always tries to do. The writing mind pours the inchoate materials of experience onto the page, but it must capture them to do so. This contradiction manifests both the terror and the glory of art, but the glory is that the writing does come from love perceived as an act of exploration. What the writer seeks to catch is not the dead thing but the actual movement of the living, and he can do so only by allowing words their own indeterminate ambiguity. The poem desires clarity, but it also admits that too much clarity can stop the necessary movement that art seeks to illuminate. What the photograph is, and what the writing should be, then, is a clear vision of the “beautiful formed things” in the process of escaping closure. The balance to be struck here is between the essential beauty of movement, the “sense of shift,” and the artist’s ‘catching’ of that movement: “The resulting image is simultaneously a fixed moment abstracted from time, and a moment which implies and contains the continued “moving to the clear.” It is a clear, unmoving image of a blurred movement towards clarity” (Scobie 1985, 55).

This kind of paradox is also implicit in “Dates,” Ondaatje’s portrait of Wallace Stevens’s writing:

Stevens put words together  
that grew to sentences  
and shaved them clean and  
shaped them, the page suddenly

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<sup>2</sup> This passage has touches of ‘magic realism’; there was such a fishbowl with a book in the editorial office of Coach House Press, founded by Stan Bevington.

becoming thought where nothing had been,  
his head making his hand  
move where he wanted  
and he saw his hand was saying  
the mind is never finished, no, never (*RJ* 21)<sup>3</sup>

Stevens creates a clarity, a fixed moment under his control, which immediately generates a further movement towards a further clarity. In “King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens,” the modernist poet-character “is thinking chaos is thinking fences” (*RJ* 61). The lack of punctuation equates the two activities, while the page becomes “thought where nothing had been,” just as the spider-poet “thinks a path and travels / the emptiness that was there” (*RJ* 63). The poem is structured upon a series of antitheses; the primary contrast is between Stevens, the businessman whose “thought is in him,” and Kong, whose “mind is nowhere.” But, as so often in Ondaatje’s poetry, the opposed terms are ultimately related. Kong, after all, is an aspect of Stevens himself, and the meeting between them occurs not only in the juxtaposing of their photographs but also within Stevens’s mind. The poem, therefore, is suggesting the problematic simultaneity of both the chaos and the fences, in the thinking of Stevens; both the containing form and the the contained are within the mind of the businessman who is also a poet.

In “Spider Blues,” one of the most engaging and challenging poems, Ondaatje imagines the artist as a skillful if deadly spider practising his ambiguous art on the common fly. One of the poem’s enriching ambiguities -generated by shifts in tone, ambivalence and symbolism- lies in the way it allows us to admire Ondaatje’s (and the spider’s) artistry while raising disturbing questions about the nature of the creative act and the emotional consequences for the artist involved in it:

I admire the spider, his control classic,  
his eight legs finicky,  
making lines out of the juice in his abdomen.  
A kind of writer I suppose.  
He thinks a path and travels  
the emptiness that was there  
leaves his bridge behind  
looking back saying Jeez  
did I do that?  
and uses his ending  
to swivel to new regions  
where the raw of feelings exist.

Spiders like poets are obsessed with power.  
They write their murderous art which sleeps like stars in the corner of rooms,  
a mouth to catch audiences  
weak broken sick

...  
And the spider in his loathing  
crucifies his victims in his spit  
making them the art he cannot be. (*RJ* 63-5; *TK* 62-3)

“Spider Blues” uses macabre comedy to undermine, though not deny, any trust of such artists of control that earlier poems might have engendered. If the writer must write and therefore cannot join his heroes in silence, he certainly feels too ambivalent about his art to underwrite it unequivocally. “Spider Blues” allows the subjects of such art their voice. The spider/writer is an explorer who “thinks a path and travels...to new regions / where the raw feelings exist,” but their obsession with power can ‘kill’ the subject and make the writer fall into solipsism while working. The final paradox -“everybody cried at the beauty / ALL / except the working black architects / and the lady locked in their dream their theme” (*RJ* 65)- is art’s central one: the artists are in process, as the present participle implies, but the firm adjectival form “locked” also implies the freezing of the subject of that process. It seems there is no escaping the contradiction at the heart of art,

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<sup>3</sup> Wallace Stevens’s poem “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard” ends with the sentence “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage, 1990): 247.

yet the essentially comic mode of this poem suggests that the parataxis is, finally, acceptable -at least to the writer writing.

Furthermore, as a symbol, the spiders function in resonance with an image in *Billy the Kid*. There, the spiders in a barn were the metaphor for maintaining the social equilibrium with their cobwebs, “Who had places to grow to, who has stories to finish” (*Billy the Kid* 17), even as they captured the flies. In “Spider Blues” the poet begins by identifying his “own devious nightmares” about his wife with the spiders, who “leave their own constructions / for succulent travel across her face and shoulder” (*RJ* 63). The poet, then, moves our perspective onto the actions of the spiders. The detail and care involve the reader in the sense of dream-like precision and the audience becomes metaphorically one with the flies that refuse to be involved.

The epigraph to ‘White Dwarfs,’ like in the other two sections, is about lying and truth telling, and about the dangerous border between the two.<sup>4</sup> Ambiguous relation between ‘confidence’ and ‘truth’ plays across all the poems in “White Dwarfs.”<sup>5</sup> Most of the poems of this section explore the problems of art’s relation to life. This is true even of the fine and moving “We’re at the graveyard,” which joins the other domestic poems

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<sup>4</sup> In the section ‘Families,’ Ondaatje quotes a conversation in Richard Stark’s *The Sour Lemon Score*. In ‘Life Bait,’ O’Hagan’s *Tay John* is quoted with an epigraph on the self-destructive power of living:

“While the ground was yet hot and smouldered, Yaada and some others returned.

They found the skull, fallen to the ground and caught in the black twisted roots of a tree. The stone was still between its jaws. Yaada took a stick and pointed.

‘See!’ she said, ‘he was a great liar, and the word has choked him!’”

In ‘White Dwarfs,’ Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* is quoted:

“So saying, the merchant rose, and making his adieux, left the table with the air of one mortified at having been tempted by his own honest goodness, accidentally stimulated into making mad discourses -to himself as to another- of the queer, unaccountable caprices of his natural heart.”

in *Trick with a Knife*, but which also specifically alludes to the last and title poem in the section -a central statement on the temptations of one kind of art.

“We’re at the graveyard,” the first poem of the section, invokes the far reaches of the universe and the inner workings of mind and heart. An equilibrium between stasis and change exists in the universe as perceived by the poet’s friends:

Stuart Sally Kim and I  
watching still stars  
or now and then sliding stars  
like hawk spit to the trees.  
Up there the clear charts,  
the systems’ intricate branches  
which change with hours and solstices,  
the bone geometry of moving from here, to there.

And down here - friends  
whose minds and bodies  
shift like acrobats to each other.  
When we leave, they move  
to an altitude of silence.

So our minds shape  
and lock the transient,  
parallel these bats  
who organize the air  
with thick blinks of travel.  
Sally is like grey snow in the grass.  
Sally of the beautiful bones  
pregnant below stars. (*RJ* 51)

Stars and friends, the macrocosmic and the microcosmic, are suddenly equal here, where “our minds shape / and lock the transient” in an artistic process that “parallel[s] these bats / who organize the air / with thick blinks of travel.” This paradoxical metaphor, where organized motion is a momentary blindness, implies the utterly exploratory nature of the act of shaping, the act of art. This poem about both friendship

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<sup>5</sup> The white dwarfs comprise a group of stars that represent the last stage of stellar evolution, the last feeble glow of a dying star (L.W. Allen, “Star,” *Enciclopedia Britannica*).

and art returns, in its final three lines, to the beginning. Here everything is held in lovely tension, an equilibrium in which stillness contains the implicit movement of growth and a single human subject contains the universe the poem evokes.

“Heron Rex” offers a supplementary vision of Ondaatje’s favourite bird. While “Birds for Janet -The Heron” simply insists that “Heron is the true king” (*DM* 13; *TK* 3) and tracks the path of one heron’s suicide, “Heron Rex” sets up a series of paradoxical generalizations to create an image of a twistedly symbolic species:

Mad kings  
blood lines introverted, strained pure  
so the brain runs in the wrong direction

they are proud of their heritage of suicides (*RJ* 52; *TK* 55)

This heritage of self-destruction transcends mere madness to emerge as a kind of artistry. At the end of the epic list of suicidal acts, the phrase “and were led away” is repeated three times to suggest that the death sought is as much of the creative mind as of the body. Indeed, “Heron Rex” anticipates *Slaughter* at least as much as “White Dwarfs” does, especially in its climactic fourth stanza:

There are ways of going  
physically mad, physically  
mad when you perfect the mind  
where you sacrifice yourself for the race  
when you are the representative when you allow  
yourself to be paraded in the cages  
celebrity a razor in the body (*RJ* 53; *TK* 55-6)

The sudden shift of the pronoun here expresses the implied author’s own investment in the argument. Celebrity is the danger, as it is “for people who disappear” and who “hover and hover / and die in the ether peripheries” of silence in “White Dwarfs” (*RJ* 70;

TK 68), as does most certainly Buddy Bolden in *Slaughter*. For such people, self-destructive acts seem to be the only way out, and “Heron Rex” initiates a sequence of poems projecting images of the self-destructive artist who seeks to escape into an inviolable silence. The diminution of the symbol in the fifth stanza, however, implies the poet’s deliberate effort to distance himself from such artists, as he begins his deepest exploration in *Slaughter*. The whole poem maintains a delicate equilibrium, balancing silence against speech, the romantic otherness of the heroes who sail beyond society into silence against the classic responsibility of the poet as witness. This poem affirms writing by denying it: that is the paradox the poems on poetics have approached over and over again. In that difficult balance between silence and words, poetry continues to explore what “writing should be then” (RJ 62). In “White Dwarfs,” the poet confronts not just the unconscious, or process or chaos, but is a profound meditation on both life and art; a tribute to those who have gone beyond “social fuel” and language:

This is for people who disappear  
for those who descend into the code  
and make their room a fridge for Superman  
-who exhaust costume and bones that could perform flight,  
who shave their moral so raw  
they can tear themselves through the eye of a needle  
this is for those people  
that hover and hover  
and die in the ether peripheries (RJ 70; TK 68)

The key word here is “moral,” which although slightly ambiguous, does seem to be synonymous with life-meaning or mode of being. Those who “shave their moral raw” live in a condition in which their character or self exists without a social persona, “where there is no social fuel.” Like Ondaatje’s outlaws, alienated loners, and sufferers, they are the ones who can provide a glimpse of what the poem about his father is about. In

“White Dwarfs,” the speaker admires those people whose achievement or experience in suffering is beyond him:

Why do I love most  
among my heroes those  
who sail to that perfect edge  
where there is no social fuel  
Release of sandbags  
to understand their altitude-  
    that silence of the third cross  
    3rd man hung so high and lonely  
    we dont hear him say  
    say his pain, say his unbrotherhood  
    What has he to do with the smell of ladies  
    can they eat off his skeleton of pain? (*RJ* 70; *TK* 68)

A poet that has always been afraid of “no words of / falling without words,” he loves those whose language is an expressive silence. This is a “supreme fiction in which the dualities of nets and chaos, Wallace Stevens and King Kong, art and life, words and objects have been finally dissolved” (Solecki 1985, 109). Paradoxically, this dialectic of language and silence leads finally not to despair but to an affirmation about poetry. The confrontation with reality has not silenced the poet who describes it in its full tragic complexity.

“Taking,” a poem on the artist as audience, insists on “the formal need / to suck blossoms out of the flesh / in those we admire / planting them private in the brain” (*RJ* 55; *TK* 57). “Taking” is an extended image of this process, an act of the writer who becomes reader:

To learn to pour the exact arc  
of steel still soft and crazy  
before it hits the page.  
I have stroked the mood and tone  
of hundred year dead men and women  
Emily Dickinson’s large dog, Conrad’s beard  
and, for myself,  
removed them from historical traffic.

Having tasted their brain. Or heard  
the wet sound of a death cough.  
Their idea of the immaculate moment is now.

The rumours pass on  
the rumours pass on  
are planted  
till they become a spine. (RJ 55)

A spine is both a solid object and something that grows and changes with its body, here perhaps the body of writing itself. Such poems on the nature of the work of art resist explication precisely because “they are written on the margins of their own discourse, where nothing and everything makes sense simultaneously, and where the writer cannot hold to one side of the argument only and still keep writing” (Barbour 1993, 80).

The new poems in the third section of *Trick with a Knife* were written during and after the writing of *Slaughter*. They present themselves as more strictly autobiographical, and the “I” who speaks them seems much more in common with the living writer than before, while the references tend to be less mythical or literary and more ‘real’. Poems of Canada, mostly of rural Ontario -where he arrives as an immigrant- and its history, are balanced against travel poems of Egypt, India, and Sri Lanka.<sup>6</sup> Because the Ceylon he returns to is a place he left before he could possibly have inherited a sense of his place in its history, the poems set there are as arbitrary and free from historical referentiality as the Canadian ones. The final poems return to Toronto, children, parents, and friends, and include a re-vision of Billy the Kid from the point of view of another ‘actor’ in the story.

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<sup>6</sup> In January 1978, Ondaatje took a sabbatical leave to travel across the Indian subcontinent to Sri Lanka, where he spent five months with his sister and other relatives. It was the first time he had returned to his birthplace, and while there he began keeping a journal, recording family stories and responding anew to the exotic qualities of what was to him an essentially new place. Many of the prose and verse entries found their way into a special issue of the *Capilano Review* 16/17 (1979): 5-43, the selection clearly intimating that a larger work was under way. He returned in 1980 to do further research on his own and

Like much postmodern writing, these poems accept the past as such but suggest that it exists as traces. Even the poems that invoke history insist that it is only the invocation that can be inscribed, not the 'actual' history; this is especially apparent in 'Pig Glass' itself.

This new section (1973-78), is a collection of lyrics that benefit from the practice of *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*, partaking on their concern with the ironies inherent in the act of composition, the acknowledgement that a writer cannot 'freeze' a scene for the universal literary museum. In "Country Night" (TK 73) the poet notes the liveliness of the unseen creatures of the farmhouse while people are abed: "All night the truth happens." The section has some travel-to-the-roots poems and, more important, some departures from the regular observing lyric, in the direction of "Elimination Dance," his peculiar and playful pamphlet. There is "Sweet like a Crow" (TK 94-5), two pages of outrageous images, and "Pure Memory/Chris Dewdney" (TK 100-103), a wonderful poem addressed to the Coach House poet which begins with a quotation from Dewdney: "Listen, it was so savage and brutal and powerful / and even though it happened out of the blue I / knew there was nothing arbitrary about it" (TK 100). That message is obviously as important as the photograph of a gull that Coleman had earlier sent from Gibson's. These are good signs that the poet is bringing to his shorter verse the engaging fabrication of his longer works.

The purpose of the selection rests, therefore, as the title indicates, in Ondaatje's desire to chart the evolution of his lyric poetry. While there are very few revisions or significant shifts in the arrangement of the reprinted poems, two minor changes hint at

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his family's past in order to complete *Running in the Family*, but from this first trip he produced a number of travel poems that found their way into *Trick with a Knife*.

the learning process Ondaatje seems to want to record: In *Rat Jelly* he wrote: “All this, I was about to say / disturbs, invades my virgin past” (*RJ* 14). Reprinting the poem, “Billboards,” Ondaatje elides “disturbs” to give “invades” its properly undivided force (*TK* 34). This poem deliberately seems to exhibit a promising progression of the poet’s means, from fancy to phenomenological imagination.

Ondaatje also shifts “Philoctetes on the island,” a study of the inner life of a Homeric hero, the slayer of Paris, from its original place in *Rat Jelly* to the *The Dainty Monsters* (1963-67) section (*TK* 22-3). The shift implies that the poem belongs to an earlier stage of development. He has also omitted a number of animal poems and many of the historical and mythical pieces, like “Pyramid,” “Prometheus with Wings,” “Lilith,” and “Paris,” which might be read as too dependent upon a dictionary of mythology. He has kept poems which have what Frank Davey calls “kinetic mythology”, a mythic tone emerging out of the perceived events of life.

Subtitled “Poems 1963-78”, *Trick with a Knife* is made up of Ondaatje’s selections from *The Dainty Monsters* and *Rat Jelly*, plus thirty-five pages of *Pig Glass*. That Ondaatje has always been interested in animals as figures is apparent from the three titles just mentioned -as well as his anthology, *The Broken Ark* with drawings by Tony Urquhart, published in 1971 and reprinted in 1979 as *A Book of Beasts*. Ondaatje is interested in the experiential philosophy developing from a paradox pronounced early in his verse: “Deep in the fields / behind stiff dirt fern / nature breeds the unnatural” (*DM* 22).

The epigraph to ‘Pig Glass’ is from Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Trans. William Weaver (London: Pan Books, 1979): 20.

*“Newly arrived and totally ignorant of the Levantine languages, Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsacks -ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes- which he arranged in front of him...”*

Lacking a language, Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, or through the use of objects. Thus, the difficulties of communication are emphasized, and the comedy of physical expression that arise from those difficulties. A later part of the passage, not quoted by Ondaatje, adds that, “obscure or obvious as it might be, everything Marco displayed had the power of emblems, which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused” (1979, 20-21). One way of discussing many of these poems is in terms of how they become present emblems. Their power often lies in the emblematic force of their images, rather than in the argumentative force of their narratives. This is certainly true of “The Agatha Christie Books by the Window,” and the beautifully indeterminate “Moon lines, after Jimenez.” “Buying the Dog,” “Moving Fred’s House/Geriatrics of Pine,” and “Bucklake Store Auction” invoke the specific life of rural Ontario. The air of autobiography is palpable in them, and the narrative voice, realistic and anecdotal, seems to provide that air of personal narrative, until the sudden illumination of poetic rhetoric slightly undermines the apparent naturalness of the idiom.

“Farre Off” appears to be a traditionally lyric poem, with a self-conscious sense of beauty and the personal engagement that fits the conventions of lyric utterance, even if the utterance is directed to, or through, other poems rather than a particular beloved person. But its deliberate intertextuality suggests something of its subversive nature. The lyric “I” represents himself specifically as a poet and a reader of poetry, speaking of a new discovery and translating the experience of the reading into his own rural setting.

This is an engaged reader who desires what the poems of Campion and Wyatt, “who loved with the best,” inscribe as desirable: “suddenly I want 16th century women / round me devious politic aware / of step ladders to the king” (TK 80). While the sudden rush of emotion and expression of personal desire are essentially lyric, the arresting encapsulation of the imagery of the earlier poetry is highly self-reflexive.

Such narrative self-consciousness deepens in the deliberately ambiguous reference of the second stanza, which also links this poem to the previous poems of local place: “Tonight I am alone with dogs and lightning / aroused by Wyatt’s talk of women who step / naked into his bedchamber” (TK 80). Ancient poetry is suddenly extraordinarily effective here; the poem presents a variety of illuminations and confounds any sense of literary or cultural inheritance by returning attention to the speaker. “I have on my thin blue parka / and walk behind the asses of the dogs / who slide under the gate / and sense cattle / deep in the fields” (TK 80). These lines veer from Wyatt’s traditional lyric vision to an antilyric naturalism and reinforce the syntactical ambiguity erasing the difference between dogs and speaker. Finally, the speaker seems to move toward an epiphany only to reverse the literary expectation of modernist form and confess that opacity is all that poetry can offer: “I look out into the pasture / past where even the moonlight stops // my eyes are against the ink of Campion” (TK 80). Literature, then, is inscribed in darkness and ink. The mystery of the reader/writer relationship in this poem is not new in Ondaatje’s work, but seldom has it been presented in such a ‘natural’ manner. The poem argues nothing; it simply demonstrates by a kind of handing on its complex sense of cultural inheritance.

“Walking to Bellrock” examines modes of escape from the responsibilities of inheritance that weigh the artist down. It presents a process in which the syntax twists

and turns, pronouns slipping into each other, tenses shifting, different stories sliding over each other:

Two figures in deep water

Their frames truncated at the stomach  
glide along the surface. (*TK* 81)

This is the motivating image of the poem to be followed by the history of the landscape which is erased in the egocentric and romantic adherence to the now of walking and talking. That is what the poem celebrates. “Stan and I laughing joking going summer crazy / as we lived against each other” (*TK* 82) announces the autobiographical nature of the poem and its exploration of the notion of male friendship, how opaque the communication in even the closest friendship is. Perhaps this sense of opacity explains why the speaker insists “there is no history or philosophy or metaphor with us” (*TK* 82), although the rest of the poem denies this assertion with complex metaphors and historical allusions that depend upon a certain degree of documentation constantly erupting into the narrative.

The poem desires to become no more than a record of immediate perception, yet in the process of ordering experience comes up short against the questions the action raises. “Walking to Bellrock” celebrates friendship but denies it any act of cultural viability; its insistence on denying history consistently “resists the conventional attractions of tradition while failing to erase tradition itself from the text” (Barbour 1993, 89-90).

“Pig Glass,” complex and emblematic, suggests the problematic relation to history and inheritance. The “I” of the poem has become his own ‘eye’ of the township

through documentary invasion of a family's privacy, looked at through the glass mirror. But as glass and poem are one, there can be no objectivity, and the text implodes into the present tense as past and present are also one in the transition to subjective perception of the final stanza, where the speaker insists on his possession of an emblem of "[d]etermined histories of glass" (TK 85). The poem represents the indeterminacy of knowledge that so many of these pieces delineate.

"Uswetakeiyawa" is a good introduction to Sri Lanka and, as the alien title indicates, it sets the tone of strangeness for the visitor who travel through the landscape, "the dream journey / we travel most nights / returning from Colombo. / A landscape nightmare" (TK 90). The poem traverses illusion and paradox, as even the sense of smell has to make up for the failure of vision. The sense of transformation is central, and in the final stanzas, the poem itself turns "trickster" rendering an overwhelming sensual confusion that confounds "you" and "we". It can be read as the returning prodigal as it establishes the writer as outsider, a tourist lost in an alien landscape who can sense its power but never know or understand it.

Dedicated to the poet's mother, Doris Gratiaen, "Light" serves as a kind of prolegomenon to *Running in the Family*, where the 'expanding stories' (TK 107), implied by the photographs that are the poem's subject, finally get told. The sense of 'drift' is the essence of this poem; it suggests the evanescence of both the light-projected images, and the stories conjured out of them, both of which stand only in the words describing them, yet the verbal gesture implicates us in the implied story of the writer's telling stories. After pointing to aunts and uncles and the gossip attached to their names, he then turns to his mother and her brother, linking a picture of their childhood to the

story of their deaths. Complex narrative shifts of time occur throughout these two stanzas. The pictures are no longer on the wall; they are no more than memories. The slippage of syntax in the final passage signals the fusion of and the fluctuation among photographs, stories, memory, imagination, and desire that the poem invokes. "Light" is a rich collage of moments in time laid on one another in a complex metaphoric relationship. Written while Ondaatje was gradually involving himself in the task of writing *Running in the Family*, they provide glimpses of that larger work as well as of the other contexts of his life while he pursued it. The poems of this last section, in their more relaxed, less symbolic approach to the idea of the lyric, point the way towards the personal poem sequences of *Secular Love*.

According to Tom Marshall (1985, 90), despite the announcement of crisis, there is a degree of acceptance here, though not without pain and loneliness, of the world and the self; the poem embodies that growing sense of balance found in the poems of 'Pig Glass,' rearranging as it does a number of long-familiar themes and materials. Crises are also opportunities for growth. Ondaatje's highly developed sense of humour has always provided a certain counterweight to his violent melodrama and to the Byronic romanticism. Humour helps to create a complex artistic balance of *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*. And in the shorter poems too it can accompany and lighten the grotesque or violent. "Letters & Other Worlds" is one good example of this. In other, non-violent poems, Ondaatje makes comic instead of tragic art from the conflict of intellect and instinct, art and life. "The Strange Case" is one example"

My dog's assumed my alter ego.  
Has taken over -walks the house  
phallus hanging wealthy and raw  
in front of guests, nuzzling

head up skirts  
while I direct my mandarin mood.

Last week driving the baby sitter home.  
She, unaware dog sat in the dark back seat,  
talked on about the kids' behaviour.  
On Huron Street the dog leaned forward  
and licked her ear.  
The car going 40 miles an hour  
she seemed more amazed  
at my driving ability  
than my indiscretion.

It was only the dog I said.  
Oh she said.  
Me interpreting her reply all the way home. (TK 40)

The notion of 'alter ego' is extremely important throughout Ondaatje's work. Here the passionate and reckless other Ondaatje is laid not on Billy or Bolden or his tragic father but, comically, on the well-hung dog -and thus on an animal, a more "natural" being. This leaves the 'I' of the poem free to be his more 'ordinary' self. Even if Ondaatje's poems explore a psychological reality, they do not have the kind of social, historical or metaphysical scope and range that one finds in the best poems of Al Purdy or Margaret Avison. They have, though, brilliant effects, wonderful immediacy, and impressive emotional depth. Moreover, the artist's "work has become increasingly relaxed and accomplished, as he has moved beyond shock tactics" (Marshall 1985, 92).

### 3.1 Elegiac Consolation: The Extension of the Poetic Form

Each of the larger works summons up a whole world, combining voices, encompassing real and imagined history, collapsing time within the clear, refracting lens of Ondaatje's original vision. Genre boundaries blur. (Bush 1990, 87)

For Marjorie Perloff, postmodernism in poetry begins with the urge to return the material so rigidly excluded -political, ethical, historical, philosophical- to the domain of poetry. Thus, a new poetry emerges and wants to open the field so as to make contact “*with the world as well as the word*” (1985, 181). In this expansion of subjectivism, the lyric voice gives way to multiple voices creating a collage: “the setting side by side or juxtaposition of disparate materials without commitment to explicit syntactical relations between elements” (Perloff 1985, 183).

Hence, poetry can now accommodate narrative and didacticism, the serious and the comic, verse and prose. A postmodern poem is a *kind* of poem, depending on and expressing certain philosophical attitudes or stances. Postmodernism is an ethos conditioning poetic form, it is critical of the past and, because it is, like modernism, based on the imperative to “make it new,” to be different. The problem or paradox arises, however, because the past of postmodernism is modernism; thus it must be critical of what it would repeat; to this extent, it must differ “not only from the past but from itself .... bringing the act of writing to the foreground” (Kern 1983, 27, 29).

A poem has to be understood as language but also has to be grasped as an instance for a poetic discourse. “On one side, Easthope asserts, poetry is a distinct and concrete

practice with its own independence, conforming to its own laws and effects, an order formed by the 'monuments' among themselves. On the other, and at the same time, poetry is always *a* poetic discourse, part of a social formation defined historically" (1983, 21).

In this sense, poetry is an ideological discourse, and subjectivity must be approached not as the point of origin but as the effect of a poetic discourse. So, however much a poem claims to be the property of the speaker represented in it, the poem finally belongs to the reader producing it in a reading. Discourse, then, is for Easthope cohesive and determined by three aspects: "materially, having a certain consistent shaping of the signifier inscribed in it; ideologically, being a product of history, and of a relatively autonomous tradition; and subjectively, as a product of the reader, for whom it offers a position as transcendental ego" (1983, 47). Contemporary poetic practice is, therefore, contemporary social practice as well. A poem is the site of an exchange where the poetic and the extra-poetic lose the certainty of their abstracted categorical boundaries. It is also where synchronic and diachronic dimensions confer. Even within the historically shifting category of the 'poetic,' what is designated as 'poetry' consists of "many different poetries" (Scully, in Frank 1988, 102).

What has consequently emerged among postmodern poets is a new perception of poetic form. Joseph Conte identifies two poetic forms as typical of postmodernism: serial and procedural. Serial form, like the long poem for instance, offers itself as a distinctive alternative to the organic sequence. As a complement to the series, procedural form consists of arbitrary constraints that are relied upon to generate the context and direction of the poem during composition. These forms are strictly postmodern innovations that can easily be distinguished from their romantic and modernist predecessors (see Conte 1991, 3).

For the postmodernist, therefore, language has fallen entirely into the secular realm; he or she experiences the world with a dread, as more than lightly out of control and possibly

beyond reparation. The predominant postmodern impulse has been not to destroy, or rupture, but to mutate, and fuse as a process of “making it new.” The two poetics of modernism and postmodernism, however, can be set in apposition without requiring that the latter wholly rejects, disrupts, or destroys the various activities and products of the former (see Conte 1991, 10-11).

In its postmodernity the serial form supersedes an organic sequence that still hopes to discover an immanent form and unity in creation; the divine order as a single voice of authority has been replaced by a cacophony of channeled voices. Each element in the series is a module that asserts its position in combination with other elements -as can be seen, for example, in the long poem, which has been the measure of many significant modernist and postmodernist poets. And yet, the serial form is a distinctive type of the long poem, and it is remarkable for being the one long form whose characteristics are unique to a postmodern poetics.

Ondaatje’s longer poems not only join the Pound tradition; he himself becomes a specifically postmodern writer. Postmodernism is a poetics in which the ‘post’ is an element of historical consequence and corresponds to Perloff’s “poetics of indeterminacy.” The formal qualities of this type of poetics include extension and the mixing of genres. In a work such as *Billy the Kid*, which has been called a paradigmatic “contemporary long poem,”<sup>1</sup> there is a mixture of prose and poetry “[w]ithout privileging either medium, lyric poem or ‘prose instruction,’ [and the] corollary, equally important for postmodernism, is that the lyric voice gives way to multiple voices or voice fragments” (Perloff 1985, 183). And Ondaatje, although his original poetic impulse was toward the post-romantic lyric in the Stevens mode, has

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Kroetsch’s *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 1989, p. 119.

moved toward the larger collage constructions of the Pound tradition partly under the influence of a particularly Canadian tradition, “the documentary poem.”<sup>2</sup>

As Ondaatje asserts in his introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology*, Canada’s imagery does not respond to the form and structure of, for example, the haiku but to the structure of the long poem -the ideal form to come to terms “with the vastness of our place or our vast unspoken country” (1979, 11). He asserts how some of the best Canadian poets have been involved with process and perspective -Reaney, Webb, Gottlieb, Livesay, Kearns, McFadden or Birney- poems in which not the stories matter, but “[t]he movement of the mind and language is what is important” (1979, 12). That is the credo of Ondaatje, a poet who has “turned inward, away from the individual occasional poem, to explore, to take a longer look at [himself] and [his] landscape, to hold onto something frail -whether the memory or discovery of a place, or a way of speaking” (1979, 12).

Among the most beautiful and influential books of the sixties is Phyllis Webb’s *Naked Poems* (1965); in the seventies, long poems and sequences like Lee’s, McFadden’s, Atwood’s, Geddes’s, Helwig’s, Fawcett’s, Wah’s, Dewdney’s, and Suknaski’s, followed a postmodern tradition in the Canadian long poem already established by Pratt, Birney and Livesay. These long poems are then the best way to explore and “argue their way through a contemporary situation....The need to chart what is around us, to say what is in the pot, creates at first strange bedfellows with the contemporary poetic voice” (Ondaatje 1979, 16).

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<sup>2</sup> Two more important essays on the documentary poem are Dorothy Livesay’s “The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre,” in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), and Stephen Scobie’s “Amelia or: Who Do You Think You Are?” *Canadian Literature* 100 (Spring 1984): 264-285. Reprinted in Scobie’s *Signature Event Context*. By 1979, when Ondaatje edited *The Long Poem Anthology*, he was fully aware of the documentary tradition as attested by his introduction, “What is in the Pot,” where he refers to Livesay’s essay and then suggests that “what is needed now is perhaps a new look at the documentary poem in Canada -how it has changed in intent, how it has become (in Susan Sontag’s term) ‘infradidactic.’ For in spite of the poems being *long*, there is little evidence of a didactic formal voice,” p. 15.

The key word throughout this anthology is process. When Ondaatje argues that “the most interesting writing being done today can be found within the structure of the long poem” (1979, 11), and that it is time to re-examine what we mean when we speak of the documentary poem in Canada, he is really advocating his own preference for what Jack Spicer called the serial poem, a long poem in which narrative and formal didactic voice are replaced by “the movement of the mind and language” (Brydon 1980, 100).

Dorothy Livesay’s 1969 seminal essay “The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre” is a landmark work, the first to direct attention to the Canadian long poem, to attempt to distinguish it from those of other literatures, and also to inquire into its characteristic features. Most of its suggestions remain valid today, particularly the observation that ‘topical-historical material’ has been a major element in the long poem, and that many long poems “attempt to create a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet” (Davey 1988, 129). For Davey, “some of what Livesay termed documentary may perhaps more precisely be seen as appropriation, re-contextualization, literary intervention, historical revision, textual subversion, re-inscription, re-construction” (1988, 133). Anyhow, the writer’s goal is to give the old materials new focus: to offer a new William Bonney, or Susanna Moodie. Further, it is to reveal the old materials to be still operative within the present. Davey doubts that there are purely ‘documentary’ poems -the documents are just a ground against which the poet’s work, rather as a countertext, grows.

On the other hand, Robert Kroetsch considers that “[t]he problem for the writer of the contemporary long poem is to honour our disbelief in belief...and at the same time write a long poem that has some kind of (under erasure) unity.” Kroetsch talks of the long poem’s undoing of “narrative grammars,” its interlacing of epic and lyric intents, its “archaeology that challenges the authenticity of history” (1989, 119), its fragmentation, its obsession with self

and place. The long poem, therefore, has a performative function as “it is not a static system, and its performative function is what renders all its generic boundaries problematic” (Kamboureli 1991, 82).

In this sense, “the dispersion or flickering of meaning occurs in the presence and absence of unity, in the description of a method to attain unity by disunity” (Mandel 1986, 221). For Mandel, however, the long poem is defective and of problematic nature, since it “takes its definition in a period that...resists definitions, as it resists system, grid, cosmology, belief. Perhaps, for that reason it presents itself in a series of paradoxes and remains, in one sense, an unsatisfactory notion....it exists as a poetics that denies its existence” (1986, 226-27).

Historically, three essays have prepared the ground for the long poem: Frye’s “The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry” seeks to interpret the narrative as a long poem capable of important transformations beyond its Canadian nineteenth-century tradition (*The Bush Garden* 145-62); Milton Wilson’s remarks on the importance of the discontinuous long poem (in Mandel 1971, 199); and Dorothy Livesay’s account on the documentary as a Canadian genre, an essay that seems to have had more resonance.

Besides, for Ondaatje, the long poem “is a form or a ‘size’ or ‘structure’ that has been politely ignored by anthologists, schools and general reading public” (1979, 11). To appropriate Hayden White’s words, it is the form of the long poem that ‘constitutes its ideology,’ a form that encompasses questions pertaining both to writing and to cultural problematics.<sup>3</sup> If the poets tended to see the long poem as a form, especially a superior form escaping the limitations of the lyric, its critics tended to see it rather as ‘writing’. It resists definition and, therefore, is a new genre. It “makes itself felt through its discontinuities, its

absences, and its deferrals by foregrounding both its writing process and our reading act” (Kamboureli 1991, xvi). As Livesay argues: “[a]lthough this tradition has been somewhat loosely termed ‘narrative,’ I propose to show that in our literary context it is more than that: it is a new genre neither epic nor narrative, but *documentary*” (1971, 267). The long poem thus defies its limits and it invites the reader to depart from the tradition of readily defined generic categories by its “unconventional positioning” (Kamboureli 1991, 48).

Locality, the self, and the idea of discourse are its major themes. The grounding of the self in the present tense contributes to the discursive form of the long poem. That discursiveness results partly from the long poem’s preoccupation with locality, and partly from its form of enunciation. Although locality is a concern pervading Canadian literature in general, its treatment in the long poem recasts it as a distinct theme that shapes its form. Together with the documentary material that often goes along with it, locality may designate the place that generates narrative; but, more than that, it causes its own temporalization and the liberation of documents from fixed interpretation. At the same time, locality also becomes “the field of writing, namely the space where the long poem’s inscription and process are thematized” (Kamboureli 1991, 103).

Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and Ondaatje’s *Billy the Kid* depart from Livesay’s definition insofar as they do focus on a single character, and they set a particularly important precedent in using that character as the persona, or speaking voice of the poem. The irony of the documentary poem was to become the classic dramatic irony of all persona poems, the division between the voice of the poem and the implied stance of the author. This dramatic irony is the major form taken by the “documentary dialectic” (Scobie 1984, 268). For Scobie, the documentary poem is a long poem, or a sequence of poems, usually of book

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<sup>3</sup> “Getting Out of History,” *Diacritics* 12:3 (1982): 2-13.

length, and narrative in structure. The events are documented although the poet will modify these events, or add to them purely fictional incidents. The idea of the document remains within the poems, as a source of historical fact, and as an element of intertextuality: the central characters are frequently artists. The relationship of poet to his or her persona is one of dramatic irony, and this irony is the major form assumed by the “dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet” (Scobie 1984, 269).

In an effort to categorize English-Canadian poetry, Travis Lane sorts four formal types: the long, dramatic narrative; the meditative essay; two different kinds of lyric, the ‘proletarian’ and the ‘self-displaying’ (1982-83, 182). The dramatic narrative includes epic recreations of historic events and lyric sequences with psychological plots expanded to narrative length in which the voice of dream is pervasive. These would include E.J. Pratt, Earle Birney and, more recently Atwood’s *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, which demonstrates the narrative potentials of lyric verse, together with Ondaatje’s *Billy the Kid* and *the man with seven toes*.

The meditative essay is the only kind of contemporary Canadian verse in English that assumes an educated audience that reads poetry habitually. Examples are A.M. Klein, Margaret Avison, Ralph Gustafson, or Louis Dudek. However, there has been a change in aesthetic interests, from the objective to the subjective, making this form less fashionable. The proletarian lyric expresses its social concerns with the lives of ordinary people. Authors of this type of lyric are Dorothy Livesay, Tom Wayman, Alden Nowlan, Anne Marriott, Miriam Waddington, Milton Acorn and Al Purdy. Since the writers of proletarian verse are willing to think in verse of informal and colloquial kind, their verse is livelier than most dramatic narratives, most cultured meditations, and even most lyrics. Most lyrics of self-display explore the poet/persona/self in its relation to something outside the self -in relation to family and

local history, to nature, to mythic archetypes or to literary precedents, and in terms of sexual identity (1982-83, 188).

Ondaatje's version of the dramatic monologue rarely uses direct speech, characterizing persons by their interior monologues rather than by their communications. In *the man with seven toes*, we are shown primarily the perceptual present of Ondaatje's characters, what they see and feel to be the real world. And it is their perceptions, more than their reflections, that characterize them. The perceptive field of *the man with seven toes*, however, is very limited. The narrator's voice appears as something overheard by the chief female character as if she were dreaming in the third person. Ondaatje's unnamed heroine deliberately enters her nightmare as she faints with heat when she steps off a train into the desert. Shortly after she loses consciousness in the heat of the desert, she enters a camp of aborigines where images of rape, goat-killing, yelling, dancing, and drinking of blood are all described through her perceptions. Hence, Lane comes to argue that *the man with seven toes* "does not reflect a dream but, rather, it presents history as a dream" (1985, 152).

*The man with seven toes* is based on the experiences of a semi-legendary English woman who, like Billy the Kid or Buddy Bolden, existed on the edge of history and about whose existence the accounts are contradictory. A brief note at the end of the book indicates that the source of Ondaatje's story lies in the experiences of Mrs. Fraser who, in 1836, was shipwrecked off the Queensland coast of Australia, captured by Aborigines, and finally rescued by a convict named Bracefell, whom she betrayed once they reached civilization.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This version of the story as summarized by Colin MacInnes and painted by Sidney Nolan in his Mrs. Fraser series (1947-1957) is the only account with which Ondaatje was familiar at the time of writing his poem. Colin MacInnes's account at the end of the book reads as follows:

"Mrs Fraser was a Scottish lady who was shipwrecked on what is now Fraser Island, off the Queensland coast. She lived for 6 months among the aborigines, rapidly losing her clothes, until she was discovered by one Bracefell, a deserting convict who

The story of the shipwreck of the *Stirling Castle* in 1836, and the kidnapping of its crew and passengers by Aborigines, is an extraordinary tale in itself, but its appeal in both then and now is even more fascinating. The Fraser “biographies” -including Ondaatje’s- seem to turn to Fraser because of the susceptibility of her story to political and ideological manipulation. In most texts, Mrs Fraser “becomes a site for contesting various world views, and an area upon which economic, imperial, even Christian ideology is inscribed” (Turcotte, 1997, 103).

Like Atwood’s Susanna Moodie, this woman is compelled into a confrontation in which she must acknowledge violent and primitive aspects of life, both external and internal, that she had previously either not known or ignored. Both Ondaatje and Nolan, and later Patrick White in *A Fringe of Leaves*, and Andre Brink in *An Instant in the Wind*<sup>5</sup> use Mrs. Fraser as the basis of myth. In contrast to Nolan, Ondaatje universalizes the meaning of her experiences by casting her in the image of an anonymous white woman. He further creates the potential for her development as an archetypal or mythic figure by moving the story from the Australian context, in which he found it, to an unspecified time and place. The overall effect

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himself had hidden for 10 years among the primitive Australians. The lady asked the criminal to restore her to civilization, which he agreed to do if she would promise to intercede for his free pardon from the Governor. The bargain was sealed, and the couple set off inland.

At first sight of European settlement, Mrs Fraser rounded on her benefactor and threatened to deliver him up to justice if he did not immediately decamp. Bracefell returned disillusioned to the hospitable bush, and Mrs Fraser’s adventures aroused such admiring interest that on her return to Europe she was able to exhibit herself at 6d a showing in Hyde Park. (*the man with seven toes*, n.p.)

<sup>5</sup> See the Patrick White’s novel (1976. New York: Viking Press, 1977) and Brink’s novel (London: Fontana, 1976). In White’s novel, after the shipwreck of the *Bristol Maid* in 1836, Mrs Ellen Roxburgh (née Ellen Gluyas), after witnessing the stabbing of her husband, the stiff and distant Austin Roxburgh, encounters the Aborigines; she almost becomes one of them, until she meets Jack Chance, with whom she has a passionate relation in the wilderness and who restores her to civilization. Mrs Roxburgh runs to the first farm they see, but Chance retreats into the wilderness where he belongs. *A Fringe of Leaves* is a dialogic-historic metafiction that specifically takes up questions of social language and meaning to which Ondaatje’s poem pays no attention, exploring the problem of how to speak of those experiences whose reality a particular group in a society denies.

of these changes is to focus attention on the story's essential content, the effect upon an individual -her confrontation with a totally alien landscape and a new mode of being. To become mythic, however, the story must be expressed in a form and style that make its reading as unmediated a confrontation with the events as possible. To achieve this, Ondaatje relies on a form made up of brief self-contained, often cinematic, lyrics. The woman moves from experience to experience to encounter a series of sensory and emotional shocks until the surreal world becomes real. In an interview, Ondaatje explains how he came to work on the project:

[It] was quite by accident. When I was at university I had seen some paintings by Sidney Nolan called, "The Convict and the Lady" or something like that, and this was a story about Bracefell and Mrs Fraser. *The man with seven toes* is a book I don't really like very much any more but I began this long poem or this sequence of poems about this convict and Mrs Fraser and in fact I did a lot of research on the whole convict situation in Australia. I had a whole prose document, or section to that poem, which I left out at the end. It was my first attempt at writing a long poem and it was obviously, for me, more a mental landscape than a real one because I had never been to Australia (as one can probably tell by reading that poem). And it didn't work for me although it was published and you know I have sort of kept it hidden in the closet.<sup>6</sup>

*The man with seven toes* is a fine example of little press artistry with a single lyric to each page and a glorious cover illustration,<sup>7</sup> inviting its readers' collaboration. As a typical Coach House Press book of the late sixties, it remains an important document of his transition toward the longer "documentary" works for which he is best known. *The man with seven toes* enlarged his craft while keeping a young man's interests on the legend.<sup>8</sup> Stan

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<sup>6</sup> See Gerry Turcotte, "The Germ of Document": An Interview with Michael Ondaatje," *Australian-Canadian Studies: A Journal for the Humanities and the Social Sciences* 12:2 (1994): 49-50. Turcotte's interview is a transcription of the radio Broadcast, aired on ABC Radio's *Books and Writing*, n 42, November 1992.

<sup>7</sup>A black and white reproduction of *Man and Dog* (1959) by London, Ontario painter Jack Chambers.

<sup>8</sup> In the early summer of 1966, having sent *The Dainty Monsters* off to Coach House Press, Ondaatje was looking for a suitable subject for a new project. Given his interest in the visual arts, as the imagery and the references to Henri Rousseau, Chagall, and Epstein in his first book show, it is not surprising that the paintings of Sidney Nolan constitute the central "documents" from which he built his second book. Nolan, one of the first Australian painters of this century to achieve an international reputation and

Bevington's design of the book, with its broad pages, visually emphasizes the independence of the poems, which themselves tend to contain short flashes of imagery or meaning, resembling photographs or paintings exhibited in a series.

These imagistic poems are related by means of various kinds of montage or juxtaposition as well as through the echoing of images from poem to poem. In *the man with seven toes*, the woman is raped -an image that recalls the rape of Tara by Peter- both by the natives and by the convict (32): she is "tongued" by the natives (14), Potter's fingers are "chipped tongues" (21); and he bends his "tongue down her throat / [to] drink her throat sweat, like coconut" (35); the natives tear a fox open with their hands (16), Potter "crept up and bit open / the hot vein of the sleeping wolf" (29); the natives have "maps on the soles of their feet" (13), and at the book's end the woman lies on a bed "sensing herself like a map" (41). Ondaatje's effect is to create a common ground or structure underlying the separate lyrics. The structure, however, remains indefinite and the images do not shift into a symbolic mode of meaning. The book opens with the following lyric:

The train hummed like a low bird  
over the rails, through  
desert and plane scrub,  
air spun in the carriages.

She moved to the doorless steps  
where wind could beat her knees.  
When they stopped for water she got off  
sat by the rails on the wrist thick stones.

The train shuddered, then wheeled away from her.  
She was too tired even to call.  
Though, come back, she murmured to herself. (9)

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certainly a painter to whom the term "expressionist" can be attached, created a series of paintings about Mrs Eliza Fraser. Ondaatje encountered these paintings in a 1961 art book on Nolan, which also contained the only version of the story about Mrs Fraser he ever learned (Clark, K., C. MacInnes, and B. Robertson. 1961. *Sidney Nolan*. London: Thames and Hudson, 11-35). See the special tribute to Nolan in the *Times Literary Supplement* of the summer 1996.

This opening lyric has a haunting and disturbing quality since, because of its brevity, so much is left unexplained. Its situation occurs without an overall explanatory context to give it some kind of causal perspective; character and scene are isolated in time and space. By itself, and then in relation to the next lyric, this poem establishes how Ondaatje wants *the man with seven toes* to be read.

Each poem in the sequence presents a new scene or a new experience with the effect that the reader follows the woman's path, and often point of view, as she moves from one shocking image to the next. The very form of each unexpected lyric works deliberately against a predictable narrative continuity, so that each poem stands out separately as a complete scene. The revelations come in brief and enigmatic flashes which disappear only to be replaced by new ones; the effect is rather like that of a film in which the director cuts quickly and dynamically from scene to scene, allowing the various kinds of montage to create some meaning. The second poem, for instance, begins with a dog sitting beside the unnamed woman, the third with her entry into a native clearing. There is no temporal, spatial or syntactical continuity indicated between these opening lyrics:

Entered the clearing and they turned  
faces scarred with decoration  
feathers, bones, paint from clay  
pasted, skewered to their skin.  
Fanatically thin,  
black ropes of muscle.

One, whose right eye had disappeared  
brought food on a leaf. (11)

A sense of immediacy is created by the elliptical syntax of the opening line. Because the poem begins with the verb "entered," the reader's attention is focused on the action itself. The ellipsis of the subject achieves an abruptness and shocking directness which is reinforced by the brief imagistic moments. The perceptions appear to be hers but, lacking pronoun pointers,

we cannot be sure. Such undecidability is one of the ways the poem maintains its dream-like quality:

Goats black goats, balls bushed in the centre  
cocks rising like birds flying to you reeling on you  
and smiles smiles as they ruffle you open  
spill you down, jump and spill over you  
while leaping like fountains in your hair  
your head and mouth till it dries  
and tightens your face like a scar  
Then up to cook a fox or whatever, or goats  
goats eating goats heaving the bodies  
open like purple cunts under ribs, then tear  
like to you a knife down their pit, a hand in the warm  
the hot the dark boiling belly and rip  
open and blood spraying out like dynamite  
caught in the children's mouths on the ground  
laughing collecting it in their hands  
or off to a pan, holding blood like gold  
and the men rip flesh tearing, the muscles  
nerves green and red still jumping stringing them out, like you (16)

The syntax, imagery and rhythm re-enact the complex response to an experience she could not have imagined. A series of similes serve to reinforce the hinted-at connection between her violation and the killing and ripping open of an animal. Like her, the natives are never named, and perhaps they cannot be. Unfixed images of the Other, the Aborigines are outside the colonizing power of her language, and even manage to evade her descriptive powers, as the next few lyrics demonstrate.

Ondaatje jolts into awareness of our participation when, in the fourth poem, he undermines narrative convention by changing the identity of the narrator without warning or acknowledgement: the natives “laughed, / then threw / the red dress back at *me*” (12; my emphasis). This shift throws into doubt our previous assumptions and, in the process of doing so, urges us to discern that the shift may actually occur between the second poem and third poem, where the identity of the missing pronoun before the verb “entered” becomes

ambiguous. The shift in point of view, clearly indicated by the use of the pronoun “me” in the fourth stanza, renders questionable our assumptions raised by the first three poems, and leads us into an awareness of those assumptions and the narrative process instigated by them.

In effect, the text moves from an emphasis on story to an emphasis on discourse which obscures the story and our point of reference. The sequence of poems threatens to fragment into individual, self-enclosed units, while we strive to link them together by providing some system of relatedness.

Potter returns the unnamed woman to the world but all the expectations of this rescue are thwarted:

Evening. Sky was a wrecked black boot  
a white world spilling through.  
Noise like electricity in the leaves.  
Stripe arm caught my dress  
the shirt wheeling into me  
gouging me, ankles manacles,  
cock like an ostrich, mouth  
a salamander  
thrashing in my throat.  
Above us, birds peeing from the branches (32)

Unexpectedly, her rape by the natives -never referred to as Aborigines- is a prelude to this rape, and the imagery indicates that the poet wants the two scenes compared: the natives had a “cock like birds,” whereas Potter’s “cock [is] like an ostrich”; the natives had previously been compared to “sticklebacks,” while Potter’s mouth is “a salamander.” Potter has replaced the natives as her keeper, but the nightmare quality of her journey through a “physical and psychological chaos” has not ended (Solecki 1985, 143). Throughout the sections with the convict, the text responds to the expressionist surrealism of Nolan’s. Like the train in the first poem, Potter’s name signals the degree to which this myth moves outside the boundaries of its documentary original story. In its movement of drama, it also signals the

new direction the narrative will take. Page 22 explains the title of the poem, but only through a grotesque event which defies any sense of realism:

In grey swamp  
warm as blood, thick  
with moving. Flesh  
round our thighs like bangles.  
Teeth so sharp, it was later  
he found he'd lost toes,  
the stumps sheer  
as from ideal knives. (22)

She has been supplanted by the secondary figure, her convict rescuer, the titular man with seven toes. Potter, like his predecessor Bracefell, has taken over the central place in the tale, his moment of dubious or exaggerated heroism -enacted through rape and subterfuge- supplanting the courage and tenacity of the female figure. This is the story of the man with seven toes; it is his suffering (the loss of his toes) which is inscribed in the title. The unnamed woman only speaks initially to be supplanted by other voices: she is silenced by physical attacks, and her potential narrative lament is obscured by the “romance” or adventure mode embodied by the convict’s tale. It is ironic, then, that when she finally finds her voice again, at the end of the poem, it is in the midst of a conventional Scottish ballad.

Even as the text appears to enter the story world of its documentary original, it insists upon invention, fiction. Outrageous similes create a world of the imagined body: the fish which bite off only three of his toes are ‘flesh’ which hangs from their ‘thighs’ like ornaments. This space between the primitive and the civilized is a site of eerie transformation, dangerous metamorphosis, which the next sections revel in. As in other Ondaatje poems, the unexpected, the absurd and the surreal gradually become the normal and the familiar: a dog runs away with a knife stuck in its head (27); birds drugged on cocaine stagger across the

sand (28), as Livingstone's dogs in *Billy the Kid*. The woman's attitude is, however, one of passive acceptance at this stage:

So we came from there to there  
the sun over our shoulders and no one watching  
no witness to our pain our broken mouths and bodies.  
Things came out at us and hit us.  
Things happened and went out like matches. (38)

The poem's vagueness is an effective register of her unemotional attitude at this point. The rhythmic and tonal flatness is a preparation for the poem's unexpected simile. After her return to civilization, the violent world seems to pursue her into her safe night at the Royal Hotel:

She slept in the heart of the Royal Hotel  
Her burnt arms and thighs  
soaking the cold off the sheets.  
She moved fingers onto the rough skin,  
traced the obvious ribs, the running heart,  
sensing herself like a map, then  
lowering her hands into her body.

In the morning she found pieces of a bird  
chopped and scattered by the fan  
blood sprayed onto the mosquito net,  
its body leaving paths on the walls  
like red snails that drifted down in lumps.

She could imagine the feathers  
while she had slept  
falling around her  
like slow rain. (41)

The sequence closes with this ambiguous and densely allusive poem whose every image echoes some image or situation that have occurred earlier. It begins with a strong iambic pentameter line that suggests everything will be settled now, but the next two lines stagger and deny the rush to closure. The key to interpretation seems to lie in the dead bird and the woman's attitude to it in the final stanza. There is a new stance of acceptance of the

woman and the wilderness in merging, which can be interpreted as a rediscovery of the instinctual world within the self. As in Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, the physical journey away from civilization is a psychological one as well; the landscape will ultimately reveal the woman's inner states of being.

But the poem could also be interpreted as one of the conventional endings, a moment of peace in the Royal Hotel. Throughout the poem Mrs Fraser is identified as the woman in red -her dress, her wounds- and this dismemberment is symbolic of both her story and experience. The other convention is the traditional ballad form: Mrs Fraser, back in Scotland, is restored to normality. According to Turcotte, Ondaatje "has anticipated the re-visioning exercise of Patrick White and Andre Brink, who have used the Fraser story to show how the act of dissociation not only transforms the individual, and the new world it enters, but also feeds back into the master narrative -the old world- to unsettle it, perhaps at the same time that it is attempting settlement" (1997, 109).

As in other Ondaatje books, *the man with seven toes* has several ambiguous endings. For example, we encounter an epilogue whose first stanza is taken from the anonymous Scottish ballad, *Waly, Waly*. Although the ballad summarizes or comprehends the book's dualities and tensions, it does not resolve them. This deliberate irresolution leaves the sequence with a sense of open-endedness, reinforced by the last sentence which points to the future:

*When we came into Glasgow town  
we were a lovely sight to see  
My love was all in red velvet  
and I myself in cramasie*

*Three dogs came out from still grey streets  
they barked as loud as city noise,  
their tails and ears were like torn flags  
and after them came girls and boys*

*The people drank the silver wine  
they ate the meals that came in pans  
And after eating watched a lady  
singing with her throat and hands*

*Green wild rivers in these people  
running under ice that's calm,  
God bring you all some tender stories  
and keep you all from hurt and harm (n.p.)*

This sense of time, as does the present tense in the endings of *Billy the Kid* -“I smell the smoke still in my shirt”- and *Slaughter* - “There are no prizes”- gives the book an ending without resolution, struggling against closure. The reader is then left with a sense of continuity and its implications into present and future time. *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*, however, go further in bringing the reader into the text, in making his or her experience of its world as unmediated as possible; they are also more personal and self-reflexive.

The clichéd sentiments of the final song -whose first stanza is, ironically, a traditional Scottish song- conventionalize, even trivialize, as they attempt to capture within metaphor an experience that has only been grasped temporally within the narrative act. It hardly does the story justice. In a defamiliarizing way, it reflects ironically on our need for the illusion of static order. As the sense of cohesion fails, the narrative remains an ambiguous sequence of disparate fragments. In terms of its generic qualities, the ballad serves only to place the whole narrative in a similar indeterminate field.

The quotation from Colin MacInnes's essay, “The Search for an Australian Myth in Painting,” with which Ondaatje concludes his book, appears to make an implicit claim to conventional “documentary.” It functions, however, as an irony and subversion of the documentary as a form. As opposed to Atwood, in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Ondaatje works to undercut the obvious document throughout. Where her text elaborates, revises and supplements the documents it acknowledges as the solid background of Moodie's

life and writing, *the man with seven toes* is a more stringent kind of rewriting. It is a palimpsest, “where the erasure of the earliest, now hidden layer of the ‘original version’ of the story ensures a site for the invented one newly inscribed there” (Barbour 1992, 22).

In both *the man with seven toes* and *Billy the Kid*, the use of documentation, however fragmented and parodied, makes possible a break from lyric subjectivity, as does the use of various voices out of legend. Moreover, the insistence on more than one voice in these longer works starts Ondaatje on the path toward what Mikhail Bakhtin would call the “novelization” of his poetry and eventually into forms of the novel itself (1981, 259-422). In these two works Ondaatje finds a way to attenuate lyric subjectivity while retaining lyric tone in the ‘speech’ and ‘thoughts’ of some of their characters. In other words, once Ondaatje began writing in extended forms, he also began to write ‘heteroglossia’ or ‘novelistic’ texts. The documentary impulse shares with the novelistic impulse the desire to listen to and re-present the voices of what Bakhtin calls “a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices” (1981, 262). It engages the factual and out of its compulsive collage or previous or invented texts it makes fictional worlds full of lively gaps. Ondaatje’s desire to speak the inner worlds of figures silenced by either too much documentation -as in *Billy the Kid*- or far too little -as in *Mrs Fraser* or *Bolden*- leads him to produce multivoiced texts full of epistemological gaps that still create worlds that exist only in the writing that conjures them up.

Even if Ondaatje’s work continually aligns him with other makers of “documentary” poetry, novels, or films, it also signals his ironic separation from them. Just as “Peter” ‘forgets’ its mythical original in order to construct a new story on a blank textual site, so too *the man with seven toes* dispenses with almost everything the MacInnes quotation provides for. Ondaatje subverts the ‘documentary’ as a form even as he makes use of the way it allows

him to 'novelize' the lyric sequence. Although he does not achieve the full 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin 1981, 263) of *Billy the Kid* and later prose works, he at least begins to suggest the ways in which multiple voices -here, narrator, woman, and convict- must both support and contradict one another.

In *the man with seven toes*, Ondaatje is not yet the master of varying styles who will make of *Billy the Kid* a masterful collage of voices dialogically competing with one another. The book is too purely lyrical to do that, despite its attempt to provide three narrative voices. The shifts from voice to voice register few if any obvious character traits: the third person narrator sounds no different from the woman or the convict. Ondaatje sought to create "a narrative form as a kind of necklace in which each bead-poem while being related to the others on the string was, nevertheless, self-sufficient, independent, lyrical" (Ondaatje 1975, 24).

In a sense, the poetic sequence, as some Canadian poets use it, represents a refusal to accept any single form, however perfectly realized, as adequate to express the fluid quality of the experience they seek to convey. Ondaatje quotes Jack Spicer as representative of the view of poetry implied in the long poems in his *Anthology*: "The trick naturally is what Duncan learned years ago and tried to teach us -not to search for the perfect poem but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem .... There is really no single poem" (1979, 3).<sup>9</sup> The kind of poetic sequence that results from this view is neither a 'collection' nor a single poem possessing organic unity. Spicer's image for the kind of coherence found in a poetic sequence is drawn from music, from the unpredictable echo effects found in modern

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<sup>9</sup> See Jack Spicer's sequence of poems *Billy the Kid*, divided in ten sections of lyrics and prose. *A Controversy of Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, eds. Paris Leary and Robert Kelly (New York: Doubleday, 1965): 436-440.

aleatory music of various kinds. Poetry, then, becomes, as Ondaatje puts it, not creation in the grand Romantic sense, nor self-expression as the ‘confessional’ poets understand it, but a matter of ‘collecting and sorting,’ in an attempt ‘to chart what is around us.’ What is collected and sorted may vary from one poet to another, producing results as different as Robert Kroetsch’s *Seed Catalogue* and Nichol’s *The Martyrology*. But the same fundamental process is at work in both poems, the same process that informs *Billy the Kid* and *Secular Love* on many levels: in the use of recurrent images, in the juxtaposition of contrasting moods and attitudes from poem to poem, and in the assortment of immediate experiences and concrete objects which Ondaatje orders as a way of ‘charting personalities,’ including his own.

Ondaatje’s *Billy the Kid* develops a myth around the often problematic and contradictory evidence of improperly documented history and rumour. Although bpNichol’s treatment of the same legendary figure achieves the effect of a serious joke so that rumour blurs any absolute account of the truth, Ondaatje reconstructs pseudo-history and legends as myth. Neither poet makes a romantic hero or villain of Billy the Kid in the sentimentalizing manner of his many biographers. Ondaatje, however, manages to draw sympathy for Billy as a figure warranting the proportions of myth. The poet follows the account of Billy’s biographer and apologist Walter Noble Burns, in which Billy’s friend and foe, Pat Garrett, loses our sympathy by killing Billy’s friend Tom O’Folliard on Christmas Eve. Ondaatje’s rendering of Billy, moreover, wins him our favour on several occasions. For example, in order to avoid unnecessary suffering as part of an otherwise inevitable action, Billy takes care to kill Gregory with the first gunshot. Although Billy does initiate some unjustified violence, his behaviour can be attributed to the way of life in the wild west.

By using a collage structure in which flashback directs us back to random points in the past, Ondaatje achieves an effect of mythic time in a timeless setting. By interspersing such documents as a newspaper interview, personal accounts, photographs, and Billy's own reconstructions of memory, Ondaatje approaches, in an unusual way, the impersonality of myth. Facts are sometimes seen to be misrepresentative or even distorting, and rumours at other times are straightened out in what represents an attempt at authenticity. We find Paulita Maxwell commenting on a certain photograph which does not do Billy justice; but she later disproves romantic rumours concerning her prospective marriage to the outlaw (19, 96). Again, Sallie Chisum corrects popular opinion concerning Billy's character, emphasizing his behaviour to herself as that of the perfect gentleman (52). Pat Garrett modifies this positive view by letting on what he considers to be Billy's affectation, but then amends his early impression of the hero's cynicism (43). In this way, "Ondaatje does not merely pursue factual truth, but aspires towards a mythic spirit of truth itself" (Harding-Russell 1985, 96).

While reminding his readers that these reminiscences look back to an uncertain past, Billy offers random details which carry the larger-than-life immediacy of myth. Ondaatje uses established myths to amplify his view of life. Here we find Billy presenting what he remembers as a typical domestic scene on the Chisum ranch (32), or we find Billy reconstructing the occasion when Garrett comes for his arrest, but which he does not in fact witness (46). An underlying metaphor reflects the moving camera's technique in which the close-up is followed by a more distant view establishing the larger setting, and a repetition of the stylized presentation of Garrett's approach suggests the discontinuous frames in film which would convey this action (46). Thus, film technique, in which distance is created while maintaining clarity of detail, provides an analogy for the "mythopoeic process" (Harding-Russell 1985, 98). Ondaatje uses the Billy the Kid story as an analogue in which to create a

dislocated myth of the artist. Accordingly, characteristics of the artist are displaced in the figures of Billy and Pat Garrett, who complement each other. Furthermore, through the cluster of flower, brain, cobweb, wheel, and machinery imagery, Ondaatje places the artist's mind, experience, and art-work on "a continuum with nature, the universe, and a larger creation" (Harding-Russell 1985, 112).

### 3.2 Poetic Design of the Self: *Secular Love*

how he feels now  
everything passing through him like light.  
In certain mirrors  
He cannot see himself at all.  
He is joyous and breaking down. (SL 28)

We cannot analyse *Secular Love* without relating it to *Running in the Family*. In both works we find an autobiographical rupture by which the narrator/author, emotionally naked, discovers his past for the first time. The dark references we continually found in characters like Billy or Bolden have been translated into a more sincere and committed voice. The reader, surprised as he faces a new cathartic process, contemplates the poems from the seventies as stylistic exercises of understatement and poetics. Writing has reached, as Ondaatje warned us in his previous books, an emotional suicide, a “sailing to that perfect edge” that every contemporary poet usually arrives at -his own privacy. From now on, we observe personal problems which, however fictionalized, had been reified behind historical masks.

*Secular Love*'s “structure and plot are novelistic. Each section deals with a specific time period, but the people in them are interrelated. But, of course, they are drawn in a lyric, perceived by a lyric eye” (Ondaatje 1984, 324). Ondaatje's admission that he employed novelistic techniques in *Secular Love* confirms the reader's suspicion that this seemingly lyrical work has been subjected to some substantial aesthetic distancing. *Running in the Family* and *Secular Love* -the two more personal, less fictional works- have benefited from Ondaatje's interest in what happens when the resources of the various genres are combined. The book fragments and deconstructs conventional narrative, confusing generic distinctions,

to approach life and his emotional turmoil through several lyrical voices related to one another. The reader, however, does not read *Secular Love* as a novel, even though it employs some of the rhetorical devices and structural techniques of that genre. More so, the reader also finds that *Secular Love* exploits the techniques and forms of the narrative poem, the serial poem, and the lyric poem. Ken Norris even asserts that the book “attempts to achieve unities of vision and effect by employing a collage of pangeneric techniques” (1994, 44). Ondaatje both searches for an architecture which eludes categorization and for something more physical -“the undercurrents of shape and tone as opposed to just the meaning” (Ondaatje 1984, 323-24).

There is an overwhelming preoccupation with form: tone, rhythm, imagery, pacing, are, for Ondaatje, all architectural concerns, and the recurrence of images map this landscape: moon, islands, stars, maps, horizons, rivers, oceans, darkness, drowning, drunkenness, dissolution, suicide, friendship, family, and community invade *Secular Love* only as a consequence of previous architectural exercises in the seventies, which have created a poetic design in his work despite the division into lyrics and prose. This poetic design is constituted by at least three aspects of continuity in his works in general: the heavily metaphoric style both in prose and in poetry; the tessera of repeated images and key words: brain, skeleton, dogs, silence, mutilation, scars, etc., and the fact that in each narrative there is a mystery that a character and the reader have to solve or understand. Someone is always missing, and even when we find the missing term, understanding may be denied.<sup>1</sup>

*Secular Love* is a book about emotional shipwreck and rescue, and its substance is therefore the complex of emotions and their expressions. For all its emotional content, it has

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Professor Sam Solecki for these last comments on Ondaatje's aesthetic continuities. By mail.

equal portions of authorial control and aesthetic distancing. It manages to be emotionally honest while almost entirely avoiding the excesses of a poetry rooted solely in personal emotion, shunning therefore a denotative approach to the confessional.

Canadian poetic sequences, of which Ondaatje's *Secular Love* is one of the most important examples, represent "a tendency to transform the poetry of personal experience into something resembling a poetry of myth, a poetry that can bring meaning to the personal experience of a community as well" (Eberle 1986, 83). Process and perspective, in Ondaatje's view, are more important than traditional form in these poems, and both words suggest ongoing change, that 'sense of shift' that Ondaatje referred to earlier in "The gate in his head" as the essence of experience poetry attempts to convey.

Each of its four sections is constructed differently, and there is an intriguing movement through first, second and third-person voicings as the book narrates its story. As in *Running*, the book begins with a third-person protagonist, who reflects and distorts the features of his personal surroundings, including both landscape and people. By immediately establishing a distance between narrator and narratee reinforces the generic breakdown between fiction and autobiography that will be maintained in various ways throughout the book is reinforced. As in *Billy the Kid*, the poem begins after its action is complete, setting up the rest of it as a complex series of analepses. It also continually sets up echoes and reiterations that maintain a sense of narrative, however dislocated. Yet the sense of disintegration exceeds the poem's power to hold things together:

And he knows something is happening there to him  
solitary while he spreads his arms  
and holds everything that is slipping away together (SL 14)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations from *Secular Love* will appear in the text as *SL*.

For a reader of *Running*, the references to son and daughter, or to a drunken father, imply that the “he” is an autobiographical subject. But the writing subject is displaying the written subject as a figure of invention as much as of memory. The linguistic echoes, the sudden shifts of point of view and tone, and the various intertexts, all urge us to recall the poem “as written performance rather than transparent rendering of a given autobiographical history” (Barbour 1993, 163). The sudden intrusion of the first person underlines the sense of interruption and fragmentation, even as it offers an apparently sincere confession: “This year I was sure / I was going to die” (*SL* 23). Continual pronominal shifts signal a profound uncertainty in the text as to the autobiographical agenda of the poem; though they are one way of seeking to avoid the conventional egotism of the speaker in traditional lyrics. As in his earlier long poems about other figures, Ondaatje has created a forum for various voices achieving a dialogic heteroglossia that is “novelized” in the Bakhtinian sense (1981, 324-1). The subject focuses many different voices and points of view into one ongoing discourse.

Transferring several poems from *Running* to *Secular Love* transforms them into part of the personal discourse of confession this book sometimes admits to being. But their presence as part of a “confessional” text equally distorts its personal aspects, making it part of an ongoing human and historical drama. The colours of *Secular Love* are more sombre than *Running* but its form is similar. In it, a variety of found objects and personal experiences come together to make a work that can be read, not just as a collection of fragments but as a long poem of a new and experimental kind.<sup>3</sup> The sequence implies an underlying narrative of

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<sup>3</sup> The back cover of *Secular Love* has a somewhat misleading description: “[Ondaatje’s] first collection of poems since *There’s a Trick with a Knife I’m Learning to Do*.” It is not really his “first” since 1979; in 1982 his sequence of poems called *Tin Roof* was published separately in the Island Writing Series edited by John Marshall and Daphne Marlatt. And, as a ‘collection,’ it does not follow the pattern set in *Trick with a Knife*, *Rat Jelly* and *The Dainty Monsters*, in which each successive volume includes a selection of poems from the previous volumes. *Secular Love* breaks this pattern by including none of the poems from this sequence of collections. In form as well as content, the work makes a break with the

events, from breakdown and loss through a period of disorientation and alienation to the beginnings of new forms of life and love. But the story does not follow a straightforward narrative line.

The opening epigraph from Peter Handke's *The Left-Handed Woman* simultaneously warns us about the unexpected stylistic and experiential openness, even rawness of *Secular Love* and offers an implied judgement on Ondaatje's earlier work :

“You're an actor, aren't you?

The man nodded silently and averted his eyes.

'I've seen you in films. You always seem embarrassed at the thought of what you have to say next.'

The man laughed and again averted his eyes.

'Your trouble, I believe, is that you always hold back something of yourself. You're not shameless enough for an actor. In my opinion you should learn how to run properly and scream properly, with your mouth wide open. I've noticed that even when you yawn you're afraid to open your mouth all the way. In your next film make a sign to show that you've understood me. You haven't even been discovered yet. I'm looking forward to seeing you grow older from film to film.'” (SL, np.)

The book is divided into four parts: 'Claude Glass,' 'Tin Roof,' 'Rock Bottom,' and 'Skin Boat,' each with its own epigraph. The opening section is pervaded by images of merging, drowning, darkness, disappearance and drunkenness. This is the book's rewriting in personal terms, of the father's breakdown in "Letters & Other Worlds" and in *Running in the Family*. It is, at once, an apology and the beginning of another story in which the central character -described here only as "he"- is shown at a party on a farm, surrounded by family and friends, and inexplicably drinking himself into oblivion. A disturbing point of departure for the love story to follow, it sketches a suggestive emotional landscape of unfocussed discontent and undefined anxiety and pain, leaving the reader wondering why the central

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past, seeking a new kind of coherence as it follows the course of the current of feelings involved in a personal breakdown and the end of a marriage.

figure feels like an intruder and longs for the darkness of the surrounding fields. The answers can be inferred from some of the details available later in the book; a marriage and a family are breaking up:

In the midst of love for you  
my wife's suffering  
anger in every direction  
and the children wise  
as tough shrubs  
but they are not tough  
-so I fear  
how anything can grow from this (*SL 77*)

His problem consisted of how to transform an intensely subjective set of experiences into an artistic whole while avoiding, on the one hand, excessive subjectivity, solipsistic self-dramatization, and sentimentality and while, on the other, losing the full texture of emotional immediacy through a too impersonal and objective artistry. Ondaatje solves the problem, in part, by beginning the book with a sequence narrated in the third person and following it with the personal pronouns varying between "I," "you," and the implicating "we." Several poems even omit the subject, leaving us with the impression of a pure, unmediated if anonymous voice. Similarly, by omitting the names of the main characters Ondaatje generalizes the potential significance of the events, therefore transcending the individuals originally involved in them. Almost every page shows evidence of Ondaatje's brilliant visual imagination and his auditory sensitivity to the musical possibilities of free verse.

"Claude Glass" is a narrative poem in the third person, perhaps the book's most novelistic moment. It introduces us to the protagonist and his dilemma. The section's title would seem to refer to the author's narrative technique -a "claude glass" being, as Ondaatje tells us in an epigram to the poem, "a somewhat convex dark or coloured hand-mirror, used

to concentrate the features of the landscape in subdued tones”<sup>4</sup> (*SL* 11). The quality of voice here, and the aesthetic distancing of the third person, creates what is essentially a dark experience, an underwater experience in ‘subdued tones.’ Also interesting is the fact that the term Claude Glass, though it denotes an object, a mirror, can easily be mistaken by a reader for a person’s name. The real purpose, however, consists in creating a similar effect by bringing together the main features of his personal landscape during one night of “brilliant darkness” when he is vacillating between feelings of dark, drunken stupor and flashes of illusory lucidity.

The narrative guides us through the author’s/persona’s drunken night.<sup>5</sup> We acknowledge the smashed beer glasses, the longing for a star called Lorca, the “river he has walked elsewhere / now visiting” (*SL* 18). We witness a character who is out of control and whose life order seems in peril. We are told, however, that “with absolute clarity / he knows where he is” (*SL* 19). A series of increasingly vivid memories of that night is set off in the first lines when “[h]e is told about / the previous evening’s behaviour”( *SL* 13). What begins in this impersonal tone turns at once into an intensely personal nightmare vision of that evening:

Starting with a punchbowl  
on the volleyball court.  
Dancing and falling across coffee tables,  
asking his son Are *you* the bastard  
who keeps telling me I’m drunk?  
kissing the limbs of women  
suspicious of his friends serenading  
five pigs by the barn  
heaving a wine glass towards garden

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<sup>4</sup> A convex mirror of dark glass, a device used to create the effect of chiaroscuro painting by bringing together the main features of a landscape while bringing out the contrasts between light and shade.

<sup>5</sup> This image of the lyric voice balancing a glass on his head surprised the Canadian writer Jane Urquhart for its strong ‘intertextual’ echo of her short story “Shoes”: “Later that evening he took off his shoes. He tossed them casually under the grand piano and began dancing. Although he began dancing, he did not stop drinking. He was capable of balancing a full glass of wine on his forehead. He did that now; balancing and drinking, balancing and drinking. The removal of the shoes helped him with the balancing. It also helped him with the dancing. He didn’t need any help with the drinking” *Storm Glass* (Erin, Ont.: Porcupine’s Quill, 1987): 9.



The river's invasion adds a sinister undertone to this strangely peaceful vision which recalls Lalla's magic death in *Running*. The poet "wants to relax / and give in to the night / fall horizontal and swim" (*SL* 18). His desire to be 'riverman,' while recalling his grandmother's 'last perfect journey,' also echoes his father's darkness and drunkenness, and the condensed images in "Letters & Other Worlds" where "[he] came to death with his mind drowning." The possibility of death by drowning, also present in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, haunts 'Claude Glass' with an unclear conclusion that could be a new beginning in 'Tin Roof.' The opening lines of 'Tin Roof,' however, undercut whatever conclusions seem to emerge from 'Claude Glass':

You stand still for three days  
for a piece of wisdom  
and everything falls to the right place  
  
or wrong place (*SL* 23)

This pattern continues for the rest of *Secular Love*, as successive poems undercut, qualify, and add further dimensions of complexity to one another. The tension between modern scepticism and romantic enthusiasm produces a self-conscious poetry, fond of paradoxes, violent metaphors and oxymorons. As in other Ondaatje's longer works, *Secular Love* is full of literary echoes from Lorca, Cervantes, Rilke, Berryman, Stevens, and Neruda. These poems lack the commanding presence of Billy or Bolden, though the fascination with violence, the pleasure and horror in it have not disappeared: "these giant scratches / of pain / the markings of / some perfect animal" (*SL* 36). We again find his love of popular American culture at once vulgar and eloquent, conventional and mythical in Bogart and Bergman, John Wayne and Montgomery Clift. 'Tin Roof' -published first in 1982- opens in a different place, in a different poetic form, and in a different voice. We have moved from the fields of Ontario

to the islands of Hawaii, from a narrative poem in the third person to a serial poem that is primarily in the first person -using the third person at times for a suggestion of cinematic imaging. 'Tin Roof' places its figure-character as a self-deluded loser secluded in Hawaii. The poem offers a resolution to the poet's ongoing discussion with himself about his place in nature and society, not only in its explicit content, but in its dramatic situation, for now it is the poet himself who is on the island of Waikiki. By calling the poem 'Tin Roof,' however, he reminds us that he is housebound, civilized, and that the island is ultimately a metaphor for the artist's necessary position as observer. Through recurring images -cabin, sleeve, gecko, heart, sea, cliff, radio- he weaves together short lyrics in which he meditates on love and art, and tries to commune with the wisdom of the "wild sea and her civilization / the League of the Divine Wind / and her traditions of death" (SL 31).

'Tin Roof,' Ondaatje's most confessional poem to date, follows his coming-to-terms with his ancestors in *Running*. Having placed the past firmly in the past, and Sri Lanka on its side of the Pacific, Ondaatje writes about himself from the edge of North America, in the present tense. 'Tin Roof' presents the poet, "joyous and breaking down" (SL 28), "drowning / on the edge of the sea" (SL 25), but, ultimately, saved from "the tug over the cliff" by "the warmth in the sleeve" (SL 28), by his own hand. Rainer Maria Rilke is the tutelary spirit invoked by the poem, and the *Duino Elegies* are proposed as the model of an undistracted, transcendent poetry, able to live "by the heart and nothing else". But the *Duino Elegies*, for all their inwardness, swoop over a dazzlingly varied landscape of human experience and emotion. Therefore, the fact that Rilke at Duino Castle has replaced "Philoctetes on the island" as an analogue for the poet's internal exile suggests that Ondaatje now sees exile as an inevitable part of the poetic process rather than as a tragic 'fate.' 'Tin Roof' acknowledges,

for the first time, the possibility that “...solitude.../ is not an absolute / it is just a resting place” (SL 37).

‘Tin Roof’ seems to be a transitional poem, sharp in local detail but perhaps a little incoherent in overall structure. We find the poet once again posed on the brink of an unspecified disaster. He is waiting for wisdom, for a solution to his unspecified problem, and perhaps simultaneously for poetic inspiration, whether it comes as “seraphim or bitch” (SL 23). He watches for the “cue cards / blazing in the sky” (SL 23). But he finds no wisdom thus projected or “layered” on the world, only the specifics of the place, a cabin on the Pacific beside the “sea, / the unknown magic he loves / [where he] throws himself into / the blue heart” (SL 25). The poet tells us “how he feels now / everything passing though him like light” (SL 28). He is literally on the edge here -and yet, he remains distinct, intact, part of this union. Simple physical sanity and humour are again his salvation:

Good  
morning to your body  
hello nipple  
and appendix scar like a letter  
of too much passion  
from a mad Mexican doctor (SL 32)

There is sometimes a lady present, and they live for the moment. Their imaginations interact with America and with old movies like *Casablanca*. Ondaatje imagines the Bogart character after the movie’s end bitterly regretting the noble renunciation of his lover. Finally, the poet both identifies with and distinguishes himself from Rilke, whom he addresses directly, making reference to the poems of Phyllis Webb -to whom ‘Tin Roof’ is dedicated- and concludes:

I wanted poetry to be walnuts  
in their green cases  
but now it is the sea  
and we let it drown us,

and we fly to it released  
by giant catapults  
of pain loneliness deceit and vanity (SL 43)

The poem is written in a style reminiscent of Webb's *Naked Poems*, the ultimate example in Canadian poetry of evocative restraint and nudity. Besides providing a powerful ending to the 'Tin-Roof' section, this passage encapsulates a struggle between a poetry of control and aesthetic distancing - 'poetry as walnuts / in their green cases' - and a poetry of confession - 'now it is the sea / and we let it drown us.' It is also intriguing that, as Ondaatje moves to the image of poetry-as-the- sea, the first-person-singular voice is transformed into a first-person-plural one. It would seem that he joins his spirit with that of Rilke's in its plunge into emotion and an uncontrollable image of art.

What begins as the expression of a desire to write one kind of poetry "Oh Rilke, I want to sit down calm like you" (SL 42), ends as the admission that he is writing poetry of another sort altogether. As Eberle puts it,

[w]anting to play the sage and write in the classical tradition poetry that is nucleus (or 'nut') of wisdom encased in a beautiful form, he admits that he finds himself writing as a romantic, a poetry that is the "overflow of powerful feeling" (to borrow Wordsworth's phrase), a poetry that appears to offer no release for personal feeling but drowning one's sorrows in a larger sea of feeling. (1986, 79)

Even this revised view of the kind of poetry he is writing will undergo further revision by the time the work is concluded. Each section seems self-sufficient and works as a separate gesture, yet none can really stand alone. 'Tin Roof', Ondaatje tells us, "was being written during the same time I was working on *Running* so I remember the two works as being together" (1984, 332). The section comes closer to matching the definition of a serial poem than anything else Ondaatje has written, "for its unity depends upon an implicit narrative of

the writing rather than any explicit narrative, which is at best only hinted at, of the written story of some part of the person's life" (Barbour 1993, 166).

The poems of 'Rock Bottom,' especially those with titles, seem to stand more on their own, yet they too are part of a sequence mapping a period of personal change but continually shifting in terms of focalization, point of view, and pronominal indeterminacy. The 'Rock Bottom' section itself is divided into two subsections, two movements. The first explores the author's separation from his lover and his feelings about the distance that now exists between them. For the most part these poems are written in the first and second person, in a spirit of personal and emotional confession. In the second movement, Ondaatje details the experience of being with his lover, as well as some of the particulars of the dissolution of his marriage. Many of the poems are again addressed to the lover, and the reader overhears the intimate declarations. Its epigraph "O lady hear me. I have no / other / voice left" by Robert Creeley, introduces this intimate mode. We have arrived at "the blue heart of the matter" (*SL* 25), where emotional and psychological realities predominate, where the distance between author and persona seems to have been removed:

So here I am  
saying see this  
look what I found  
when I opened myself up  
before death before the world,  
look at this blue eye  
this socket in her waving arm  
these wonders. (*SL* 74)

The last poem in the section, "(Ends of the Earth)," describes how the shattered world of 'Claude Glass' begins to take on a coherent shape again through this new love, "wary / piece by piece / we put each other together" (*SL* 82). He is able to achieve a new,



by different hands  
became one  
habit of the unrequited

Seeing you I want no other life  
and turn around  
to the sky  
and everywhere below  
jungle, waves of heat  
secular love  
...  
we stand against the sky

I bring you

a flute  
from the throat  
of a loon

so talk to me  
of the used heart (*SL* 90-92; *Running* 92-94)

Identified with the gold of the sunlit mountains which are described in contrast to the grey bleached land of the working community, these women represent the metamorphosis of art. For the speaker, the choreography of their form against the sky suggests “analphabet / whose motive is perfect desire.” As in MacEwen’s poetry, a lingual metaphor refers to an expression of quintessential truth. By drawing the “flute from the throat / of a loon,” the speaker in his mythmaking symbolically abstracts music from indigenous life, the ethereal from raw, physical realities.

The title “Secular Love” is a phrase taken from “Women like You,” Ondaatje’s adaptation of another poem shaped by the process of collecting and sorting, a “communal poem” made up of a collection of Sri Lankan graffiti. There, at the site of an ancient fortress, on a pillar of rock rising high out of the plain, “Hundreds of small verses / by different hands” record a variety of experiences of love -its pains, its frustrations, its deep and lasting pleasures. When it appeared as part of *Running*, “Women like You” formed part of a section

called “Don’t Talk to Me about Matisse.” This section’s title is taken from another poem by Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, a poem that bitterly refuses to see anything in common between the ancient native culture of Ceylon and the modern Western culture that tried to dominate or destroy it. In that context, “Women like You” seemed to be part of Ondaatje’s attempt, in *Running* as a whole, to re-establish contact with the exotic and archaic culture that was part of his own family history. In its new setting in *Secular Love*, “Women like You” takes on a larger significance. By making his adaptation of this ancient communal poem a part of an of the ancient poem, making it universal and available to a wider human community while proving Wikkramasinha wrong: ancient and modern cultures, East and West, do fit together and can share their deep experiences of love.

In “The Cinnamon Peeler,” Ondaatje creates a myth fragment around another aspect of Ceylonese life. Here the cinnamon peeler’s ravaging for the exotic spice is extended on a sexual level to suggest that figure’s relation to a loved one:

If I were a cinnamon peeler  
I would ride your bed  
and leave the yellow bark dust  
on your pillow. (*SL* 88; *Running* 95)

The particular fragrance of the cinnamon plant after peeling finds a parallel in the loved one’s assuming the aroma of her lover, which becomes the hallmark of his possessing her. In a reversal of the metaphor, however, the cinnamon peeler also takes on the loved one’s smell. Recalling his subterfuge when the girl is guarded by her family during their courtship, the cinnamon peeler remembers disguising his cinnamon smell, so that her relatives would not smell it on her, and her smell on him:

I could hardly glance at you  
before marriage  
never touch you  
-your keen nosed mother, your rough brothers.

I buried my hands  
in saffron, disguised them  
over smoking tar,  
helped the honey gatherers (*SL 88*)

In acknowledgement of his legitimate possession of her in marriage, the girl now takes pride in the lingering presence of his smell on her. Were it not for this identifying smell, she would be indistinguishable from the lime-burner's daughter, with whom the girl has suggested he might have flirted:

what good is it  
to be the lime burner's daughter  
left with no trace  
as if not spoken to in the act of love  
as if wounded without the pleasure of a scar. (*SL 89*)

Accordingly, the scar image takes on positive implications as a kind of creative culmination resulting from the suggested violence of sex. Proudly, the cinnamon peeler's wife will touch her belly to his hands and say, "I am the cinnamon / peeler's wife. Smell me" (*SL 89*).

In these poems, Ondaatje's memory of Ceylon, which combines knowledge of history, local legend, geography, and specific experience, provides a vision of that country and life itself. Although the poems are not always mythical -employing mythical elements- "their total effect is mythopoeic since the poet's angle of vision is so jagged as his insight so fresh" (Harding-Russell 1985, 273). Similarly, "The River Neighbour" and "Pacific Letter" -relocations of Pound's Tufu-Haiku- tend to place this discourse "as part of an ancient and ongoing poetic conversation crossing all boundaries but the largest one of art itself" (Barbour 1993, 175)

"All Along the Mazinaw" captures this new positive mood in what is almost a love poem addressed to a river, "with the clear river water heart / the rock who floats / on her own deep reflection" (*SL 98*). The sense of time and place has undergone a sea-change. Almost all

the poems in the previous sections were in the present tense. “Pacific Letter,” however, sets the tone for the new attitude towards time as it begins: “Now I remember” (*SL* 100). In the course of the poem, his healed and healing memory begins to connect the ‘now’ of the present with the painful past he remembers. The poem enacts the process of healing, the continuity of life which was created by his separation. Again, water is part of this healing process, “clearing my memory as blue jade” (*SL* 101) after the suffocating images of drowning and need of liberation of the first pages.

Part of this newly recovered sense of connection and continuity is a new openness to a ‘journey,’ whether by water or land. A journey is now an expression of a sense of forward movement in life, not merely a chance to break with the past, the ‘sudden journeying’ he contemplated in ‘Claude Glass.’ A poem in the final section of the book, “Red Accordion -an immigrant song” describes a truly communal party in contrast to the fragmented gathering outlined in “Claude Glass’ -a party of ‘dead men’ whose sleeping faces looked like ‘photographs of yells’. In this party, however, all is movement and joy:

Our boots pound down the frozen earth  
our children leap from and into our arms.  
All of us poised and inspired by music  
friendship self-made heat and the knowledge  
each has chosen to come here driven for hours  
over iced highways, to be here bouncing and leaping (*SL* 118)

Finally, ‘he knows where he is,’ but, in this case, is a place of continuing movement. The volume concludes as it began, with a dream-vision of a river, but this river does not threaten him. In “Escarpment,” his mind travels back to the nameless creek he and his lover explored together that afternoon. As he envisions the scene, his former wish to be ‘riverman’ is granted, but in a way that replaces the self-destructive tendencies of this desire to be with new creative energies: “He slips under the fallen tree holding the cedar root the way he holds

her forearm” (*SL* 126). He lets himself be carried by the water “deliriously out of control” but at the same time secure because he is “still holding on.” It is part of Ondaatje’s method here to express his experience in the informal shape of prose rather than in the more obviously shaped form of poetry; what ensues is the sense of an experience directly felt rather than a poem made from experience. It is a form that “attempts to capture and recreate both the flow of immediate experience and the wisdom that is part of the experience itself” (Eberle 1986, 82). He concludes “Escarpment”, as well as *Secular Love*, with an image of a man in a stream that is also a bed, holding on to a cedar root that is also the arm of the woman he loves.

*Secular Love* best exemplifies Ondaatje’s explicitly emotive or referentially emotional poetry, an elegiac consolation in a cinematic context. This is a love story in miniature, abstracting into the allegorical yet retaining the brief concretions of the senses -a kind of terse impressionism. Critics need to attend to the techniques of poetry when interpreting Ondaatje’s novels. His capacity to provide a linguistic density that evokes an almost physical response is perhaps most evident in his fiction. Ondaatje’s concern with the emotional potential and tactile quality of language, however, aligns his perspective with an aesthetics of pleasure, and an erotics of reading which have their origin in his poetry. *Secular Love* is more than a confessional work, it is formally complex and employs the resources of a variety of literary genres. Thus the confession at the heart of the book “has been filtered by its encounter with Ondaatje’s fine sense of architectural design” (Norris 1994, 50). *Secular Love*, therefore, is not confessional in the way Lowell and Berryman were. Unlike American and British confessional poets, Ondaatje is not concerned with the expression of personal feeling as such, but the architecture of emotions and sensual images is designed to play a role for the modern community of its readers like the role played by “communal poems” of myths in ancient cultures.

In Ondaatje's last selection of poems, *The Cinnamon Peeler*,<sup>6</sup> dedicated to Barrie Nichol, there is only one new poem, "Breeze". It is, however, a new representative whole as he not only reorganizes the poems to tell a new story, as he did in *Trick with a Knife*, but he does some serious editing of individual poems, which he avoided earlier. This retelling begins with his choice of title, and of cover illustration. It is, in fact, the title of Ondaatje's purest and most erotic lyric, coupled with a lovely photograph of two young Mexican lovers in a turn-of-the-century engagement or wedding portrait. This couple, who at a first glance could have been his parents, or at least relatives, comes from a photograph taken in a museum in Guanajuato, Mexico. In other words, the couple that seems so familiar is pure fiction in Ondaatje's life.

The motive behind most of the editing in *The Cinnamon Peeler* seems to tone down the author's proclivity for melodrama, violence, extremes of language and imagery. It seems that these new editorial cuts, in accordance with the title and cover image, is designed to present us with a more loving and generous, yet less morbidly clever soul, than the one we met in *The Dainty Monsters* and *Rat Jelly* -not to mention *the man with seven toes* and *Billy the Kid*, which are not represented here. The collection opens with "Light", taking the direction of capacious, emotional long-lined narrative rather than tight, short-lined, predetermined metaphor; opening up to the large indeterminacies of relationship rather than closing off with a single observation. Ondaatje also includes *Elimination Dance* as part of the selected poems, by way of intermission. He defines it as a "sort of rogue-trobadour poem that seems continually to change -a few lines get dropped and a few get added every year" (*CP* 196). It is based on those dances where a caller decides who should not be allowed to continue dancing, and is clearly a piece of joke and irony typical of the author's humour.

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<sup>6</sup> Quotations will appear in the text as *CP*.

“Light” is paired with “Breeze,” the only new piece in the book, to frame the collection. An elegy for bpNichol, “Breeze” vows for “no more solos” (CP 194), resorting to imagery of sound rather than light, of jazz duets rather than photographs, to situations in which “[o]ne friend sits back and listens / to the other” (CP 193); the intimacy of exchange missed in “Light” is painfully lost here. Despite its sadness, the poem does evoke the vitality that exists when “[w]e sit down and sharpen / the other’s most personal lines” (CP 193), perhaps suggesting that the whole selection, and not just this poem, is a tribute to the values celebrated here. The same sense of friendship and comradeship that Ondaatje has celebrated in the last decade appears in one of his last poems published as a broadside in 1997, “The Great Tree” and later published in his collection of poems *Handwriting* (1998, 58-9). This poem is about an elegy written by the 14th century poet-calligrapher Yang Weizhen to mourn the death of his friend, the poet Zou Fulei, who died “like a dragon breaking down a wall....” Both friends are described as “echoing the other’s art,” and “sharing.../ his leaps and darkneses.” The parallelism to the speaker in “Breeze,” who closes the poem with “I tie you to me” (CP 194) is obvious when, without “flamboyant movement,” asserts “So I have always held you in my heart.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ondaatje has also published another sequence of short lyrics titled “The Brother Thief,” *The New Yorker* (9 Sept. 1996): 76, where four men rob the bronze Buddha and disappear into a mythical jungle, also included in *Handwriting* (1988, pp. 14-6). Also “A Gentleman Compares His Virtue to a Piece of Jade” (H 3-5) and “The Great Tree” were published in magazines before having their place in *Handwriting*.

#### 4.1 Cinematic and Poetic Elements: Interrelated Strategies

I always loved movies. It's the main source of mythologies we have. (Ondaatje 1977, 12)

So many episodes do translate from book to theatre because each is vivid, separate, complete, yet part of an imaginative continuum. (Keeney Smith 1980, 31)

One of Ondaatje's passions in the seventies was the cinema. He co-worked on documentaries and short films where he tried to reflect, in another medium, formal and historical features which are common in his poetry and fiction. The writer's evolution, then, both in his cinematographic and in his literary works is based on formal strategies which are reflected in his documentary style. *Sons of Captain Poetry* (1970) is a documentary dedicated to bpNichol. *Carry on Crime and Punishment* (1972) consists of a short black and white documentary of five minutes, designed in the style of Charlie Chaplin's first comedies and with a jazz soundtrack. *The Clinton Special* (1972) studies the accomplishments and the artistic problems of "Theatre Passe Muraille" in its representation of *The Farm Show* in Clinton, Ontario. In 1990-91, Ondaatje wrote the script of another short story of twenty minutes titled *Love Clinic*, with a similar soundtrack.

The four films use similar techniques and their formal strategies include photography and montage. Moreover, several comic characteristics and obsessions are transferred from his literary works, although images are not meaningful or strong enough in the films to match his more successful literary works.

There are certain important features that recur in both media. Derek Finkle observes certain parallelisms between a series of literary texts and such productions, relating, for example, *Sons of Captain Poetry* to *Billy the Kid* (Finkle 1994, 169). There is an interesting

fictional interview in the book with Billy in jail, “The Kid Tells All: Exclusive Jail Interview,” very similar to other types of interviews that appear in Ondaatje’s documentaries. But in this case, only the reader familiar with experimental poetry in Canada and the relation between the poets will discover that bpNichol is mentioned. bpNichol is the protagonist of *Sons of Captain Poetry*, and Billy comments, “I was up there [in Canada] trying to get hold of a man who went by the name of Captain P”- (*Billy the Kid* 84). Both works were designed in a parallel way; it was a time in which Nichol had a great influence on the young writers connected with concrete poetry and with Coach House Press. In this case, the cinematographic and the literary overlap, and we observe the generic rupture and the intertextual leap between both media. Similarly, Finkle suggests other peculiarities which link both poets and the works:

In *Billy the Kid*, soon after he portrays Billy’s violent death, Ondaatje presents five pages of an actual comic book entitled *Billy the Kid and the Princess*. The inclusion of five pages of comic book material that have nothing to do with Ondaatje’s Billy...was very likely the result of the influence of Nichol’s aesthetics. (Finkle 1994, 169)<sup>1</sup>

In the film, Ondaatje stays aside to let Nichol explain his concept of “concrete poetry.” Nichol talks about how comics are an integral part of concrete poetry, as they are mainly directed to the unconscious. Both of them refer to a specific perceptive level in which imagination plays the main role. Nichol generates literature from the comic culture, a

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<sup>1</sup>bp Nichol publishes, also in 1970, *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: Weed/Flower Press). It is a short story divided into four chapters with a preface by a playful and unreliable narrator: “this is the true eventual story of billy the kid. it is not the story as he told it for he did not tell it to me. he told it to others who wrote it down, but not correctly. there is no true eventual story but this one. had he told it to me I would have written a different one. I could not write the true one had he told it to me. this is the true eventual story of the place in which billy died. dead, he let others write his story, the untrue one. this is the true story of billy & the town in which he died & why he was called a kid and why he died. eventually all other stories will appear untrue beside this one.”

personal mythology that he would later use in his series *The Martyrology*. Ondaatje tries, through the cinematic element, to pay homage to the experimental poet, and this can be achieved only through a visual medium. In the cinema, therefore, he experiments with different scenes and montage to create a fragmented and almost oneiric vision of the artist, making the documentary a visual art piece: “Ondaatje was not trying to make ‘a critical work’ as much as he was attempting to create a montage-style filmic portrait of an artist” (Finkle 1994, 170).

In a parallel way, Ondaatje designs in the same year another portrait of an artist called Billy with similar discursive strategies: fragments of poems, photographs, interviews, drawings and a comic as his documentary sources. Two of the comic drawings that appear in the book, one of a group of cowboys devoured by snakes and another of a prostitute on a bed, are similar to the documentary’s vignettes:

Similarly, a parallel exists between the photographs of Nichol’s family, which reminds us of the mythological characters in his lineage, and the picture of Ondaatje in a cowboy outfit at the age of seven in *Billy the Kid* (as well as the photographs of Ondaatje’s family in *Running in the Family*) in that they all represent the same type of background and germinating process. (Finkle 1994, 171)

The author’s aesthetics resembles the cinematic element, or perhaps there is no difference between them in order to express an art that trespasses the different generic boundaries. Another recurrent image in Ondaatje’s works, especially in *Slaughter*, the window as the symbol of a perceptive limit or boundary, appears in the documentary when Nichol goes through one of the fragmented and broken windows and disappears in the horizon. The audience observes the empty window frame and recalls the continuous images of Ondaatje’s blank photographs. This is an empty frame ready to demand some action from the reader as

in the symbolic blank photograph with which *Billy the Kid* starts, strategically placed on the reverse side of the page which features his killings and his own death at the beginning of the book.

*Carry on Crime and Punishment* is a comic exercise in which two thieves/poets, Ondaatje's friends Stuart Mackinnon and Tom Marshall, steal a dog and two kids run in search of it. It is not exceptional that a dog be the protagonist, since this is a typical role for Ondaatje's domestic animals. This lost animal and the subsequent search can be related to other quests that the author fictionalizes in his literary works where someone is always lost and searched for: Webb searching for Bolden, Garrett for Billy, or the narrator in *Running* for his father's escapades. The role of the thieves is rather comic and ridiculed as an imitation of the techniques of the silent movies. Bart Testa analyses Ondaatje's techniques in this medium which, he writes, were rather simple and without scenic cuts:

Because the film lacks crosscutting and does not display much variety in camera position (the chase is portrayed in a predominantly lateral movement), one can say that here Ondaatje has deliberately regressed to making a film of the type that was very familiar between 1896 and 1907. His film's obvious intertexts are that era's chase films, which involved gypsies stealing children and the adventures of the rescuers. The best known of these is the British director Cecil Hepworth's *Rescued by Rover* (1905), the plot of which Ondaatje has inverted by having the children rescue the dog. (Testa 1994, 156-57)

Ondaatje's participations in the production of *The Clinton Special* reflects his interest in theatre, especially the group "Theatre Passe Muraille" and the productions they were making with the people of Clinton, Ontario. Their work consisted of an interaction with people of the community, and it had as a result a performative act with the interaction of non-professional actors. Ondaatje's friend, the director Paul Thompson, tried, in this performance, to elevate a representation of the natural landscape of a Canadian community

to the category of myth. In this way, the experience would become a dramatic piece made up of the community's stories, rumours, and photographs. This creative work resembles a community's album and can, therefore, be compared to *Running*, for "the scenes, acted and written, envelop a sense of community, and, in doing so, progress without the benefit of a traditional plotline or narrative" (Finkle 1994, 177).

The performative act and the sense of community that Ondaatje tried to enact for the first time in *Running* reflect, then, his connections with the theatre and, specifically, with the Clinton inhabitants who create their own myth in this piece. Thus, Ondaatje comments in an interview: "I got interested....Not so much [in] saying this is an important form of mythology, but, highly subconsciously [in] the idea of making stories, you know, out of formal incidents and making them mythic" (1975, 18). Here the author refers to a cinematographic work as a means to find one's roots in the landscape, "finding your own mythology in your own landscape" (1975, 15).<sup>2</sup>

Finkle further comments on the parallelism between *Love Clinic* and *Secular Love*. Certainly, the contents of both works are similar, especially the tremendous reflection on personal failure and emotional disarray where, for the first time, the frustrated lover is the protagonist. The author's divorce and the appearance of a new lover produce only pain within himselfe and misunderstanding around him:

This year I was sure  
I was going to die (*Secular Love* 23)

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Thompson's play *The Farm Show* is essentially about Thompson and where he grew up in Ontario. Ondaatje learned from that experience of sharing the memories of your community to the point of being the main intertextual and emotional backdrop for his memoir a decade later: "Working on a documentary film like that, where you can go back and rewind and look at this guy's reactions and see the evasiveness and all these tricks, that was a tremendous thing for me to witness and share. I don't think I could have written *Running* without going through that kind of experience" (Ondaatje 1990, 202).

In the midst of love for you  
my wife suffering  
anger in every direction  
and the children wise  
as tough shrubs  
but they are not tough  
-so I fear  
how anything can grow from this (77)

In *Love Clinic* pain is continuously intertwined with sarcasm in order to analyse several failed love affairs through comic understatement. The film describes different situations in a clinic dedicated to heal love failures. Three characters, non-professional actors, play the role of the betrayed victims. One of them, Maggie, is packing her belongings when she takes a book, Robert Creeley's *For Love*. This American author is also mentioned in a section of *Secular Love*<sup>3</sup> titled "Rock Bottom," as an intertextual epigraph:

O lady hear me. I have no  
voice left (*Secular Love* 45)

A defamiliarizing strategy that Ondaatje uses in this film consists of placing a hawk's nose to the characters that have betrayed their lovers as a sign of punishment. This same image is evident in the photographs Ondaatje has made of some of his closest friends, which are published in *Brick* magazine (1987) and in *Capilano Review* (1989) with the title "Who Nose." This play on words between 'who knows?' and 'whose nose?' creates the kind of metalinguistic distance, of language and image, Ondaatje uses so often to distract the reader. Yet, as Finkle explains, "[s]uch side jokes often work in Ondaatje's writing, but do not translate well into film because in that context the authorial figure, the instigator with whom we identify the joke, is much more removed from the audience" (1994, 181-82). The

addressee, therefore, confronts a lack of narration or, rather, a lack of metalinguistic support, finding the author's intentions awkward in his alluding to such a distant referent. Moreover, there are other intertextual referents between literary and cinematographic works, for example the insertion in the script of a fragment of Basil Bunting's poetry or Stephen Crane's as the basis of Maggie's monologues. Bunting's untitled poem is recited by the actress in her message to her ex-lover's answer machine:

You leave  
nobody else  
without a bed

According to Finkle, the most successful monologues are the ones enacted by the novelist and dramatist Leon Rooke, who plays the role of a minister in the film, and the lectures the dentist imparts to the patients as a process of healing in the clinic of love. Both monologues, written by Ondaatje, show his sense of humour and irony regarding the lack of romantic love:

Reverend: "Love is like scarlet fever" -Tolstoy said that. Love is a dog from hell, a damnation of the senses. Chicken bones. Love is an accident no driving lesson can prepare you for.

Dental Hygienist: The tongue is a cesspool, a condominium of filth and garbage. Remember, even the anus is a cleaner organ than the mouth.

Bernice: Well then, I guess you can kiss my ass.

On the other hand, Ondaatje has spoken about his passion for the cinema, which is reflected in the written adaptations of some of his literary works, for example *Slaughter*,

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<sup>3</sup>Note Ondaatje's title *Secular Love* in contrast to the sacred love of the conventional marriage bondage.

*The Man with Seven Toes*, his script of Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands*, and *The English Patient*. Any critic would, therefore, assume the enormous influence that the cinema and theatre have exerted upon his literary works, especially in the cinematic techniques. Despite all the parallelisms noted, Bart Testa thinks that Ondaatje's cinematic adventure has not influenced his literary achievements: "I would deny that Ondaatje's writing owes much at all to the cinema, and surely it owes nothing to the popular cinema this author prefers" (Testa 1994, 156). Nevertheless, we should take into account his imaginative and personal recreation of the Western in such literary works as *Billy the Kid*. In an interview with Solecki, Ondaatje comments on his interest in film in answer to a question as to why Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* is one of his favourite movies:

I'm not quite sure there's an intellectual reason, but emotionally I like that film's expansiveness and I find it a very moving film in the way it deals with the destruction of social violence by the violence of outsiders -something that interests me. And, ah, well I don't really like to intellectualize that film; it is delightful. It also contains the whole history of the western: there's a scene where just before the family is shot all the birds fly off which Leone has literally taken from John Ford's *The Searchers*; the shooting through the boot is from a Gene Autry film and so on. I don't know how Leone gets away with it without seeming too self conscious but he does. (Mandel 1986, 72-73)

The comment locates Ondaatje's Western in its formal and thematical tradition. Ondaatje connects the immediacy of film effects with the perceptual problem that interests him, "the narrative circling its target like a crazed camera wheeling back on the image it has attempted to locate" (Mandel 1986, 73).

*Sons of Captain Poetry* may be Ondaatje's most interesting documentary inasmuch as it is a homage to Nichol, and its techniques anticipate what he later did in *The Clinton Special*. According to Testa, the film uses five different types of footage, three of them

conventional and two idiosyncratic. The longest scene shows Nichol reading and commenting on his poems, in one occasion in a live performance with the sound poetry group “The Four Horsemen.” This conventional footage, common in documentaries, supports the other idiosyncratic ones. Such is the case of a series of prefatory images mixed with different voices in a collage that tries to show, in a defamiliarizing way, that image and word are separate entities. More interesting still is the figure of the poet through a broken window, which, in a metaphoric way, symbolizes the poet’s subversion of conventional language in his works:

The last type of footage (idiosyncratic and iconic) is more aggressively obtrusive. A montage of comic-book images...and movie posters is used to accompany the poems, especially the sound poems. This pop-art appropriation misfires quite seriously...Ondaatje was seeking to create a visual-punning structure that would parallel Nichol’s own visual-sonic juxtapositions. (Testa 1994, 158)

Ondaatje was probably trying to compose a visual structure to reflect Nichol’s poetry: “what people like Barrie [Nichol] were showing me was that concrete came at words from a different angle. That’s partly too why I was eager to do film -to drown in something visual. And that stopped me translating things in front of me verbally” (Ondaatje 1971, 8). The film is nothing less than a playful experiment with a friend, and a creative quest for and the artistic discovery of new forms of poetic experimentation:

When I was working on the script, what to photograph, I wanted to show what I thought were some of the possible roots of concrete poetry, and the most obvious ones are signs....You see the film isn’t really on concrete poetry, I don’t think. It is on bp Nichol as I see him -so in a way it is half fantasy. A fantasy documentary. I simply don’t understand concrete enough, but doing the movie was partly an attempt to discover more about it. (Ondaatje 1971, 7)

*The Clinton Special* was more successful because of the kind of production it meant. Its purpose was to summon a wide audience to express what Testa calls “the plurivocality of history.” Ondaatje’s technique “is to mix and match the spontaneous dialogues, and especially the monologues, of the members of the farming community with the scripted dialogues and monologues of the actors” (Testa 1994, 160). This merging of a professional crew with farmers results in a textual intercourse similar to Ondaatje’s later narrative works: the insertion of real and historical personages in order to create a new mythology of place and time, the enactment of the commonplace to the level of myth:

The moments when his two documentaries are successful are those in which his insights into Nichol’s poetry and into the fiction-making activity of the Theatre Passe Muraille troupe came into clear focus. In other words, it is when Ondaatje allows his filmmaking to come under the influence of the processes of literature. (Testa 1994, 163)

It is in Ondaatje’s literary works where all the previous experiments are shown in print, where, if there is not direct and acknowledged influence, there is a clear overlap of images and attitudes towards perception. The very fact of writing a book in order to subvert a known legend of the American West is meaningful in itself: “Poetry and drama are blood relatives, strongest and most harmonious when the mental landscape, approached through language, controls other elements, those elements being an extension of it. That’s when you get the bullet-like beauty of *Billy the Kid*” (Keeney-Smith 1980, 33). The text’s technique is overtly cinematic and obviously inherited from the visual medium.

On the other hand, “the border blur,” a term that Ondaatje borrows from Nichol, suggests the foggy and suave movement that appears among the different genres and perceptions in a creative work; this is what Ondaatje does in his creation of Billy, and one of the instances is the title of the text, *The Collected Works*, where all types of literary and

popular discourses are grouped without generic distinction. As Eli Mandel comments: “The mix allows for the film treatment Ondaatje intended through opening up new syntactical possibilities: cross-cutting, foreshortening, montage, dissolves, altered perspectives, close-ups” (Mandel 1986, 72). Through different media, then, Ondaatje brings different keys and clues for the reader’s perception, a camera circling and focusing on certain images, the most violent or tender, in order to produce a different perception. Mandel focuses on the poet’s “physiological imagination,” his creative obsession to circle around the most violent or sexual images: “Balanced between sanity and insanity, between human machines and mechanical men, between the gentle hunter and neutral assassin, between the dialectic of violence that is form and energy, the poem seeks an impossible stasis at the furthest edge of being” (Mandel 1986, 74).

Manina Jones has called the text a “docudrama” of a protagonist who narrates his “collected works,” his own documents, his scenes to be represented from this dramatic script:

Photographic and cinematic patterns in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* have been thoroughly and usefully traced by other critics. The poem’s near obsession with poetic images of photographic images suggests the layering of documentary evidence, as well as a concern with writing as a problematic method of documenting Billy’s career, a showing it by telling it....In this light, we might consider [it] as a kind of documentary “screen-play.” It begins, after all, with an empty frame, a blank screen (5), and ends with a list of “CREDITS” which identify the poem’s documentary sources (110). ( Jones 1989, 30)

The majority of the book’s scenes recreate the character’s past through numerous visual details so that the reader or author seems to be behind a camera or in strange angles. A clear strategy is the repetition of the same scene of Charlie Bowdre’s death under three different perspectives. Another cinematic strategy would be Garrett’s approach to

Maxwell's house in a recurrent way and with a slight change of meaning through the punctuation:

Down the street was a dog. Some mut spaniel, black and white. One dog, Garrett and two friends, stud looking, came down the street to the house, to me.

Again.

Down the street was a dog. Some mut spaniel, black and white. One dog, Garrett and two friends came down the street to the house, to me.

Garrett takes off his hat and leaves it outside the door. The others laugh. Garrett smiles, pokes his gun towards the door. The others melt and surround.

All this I would have seen if I was on the roof looking. (46)

Another section reveals to the reader that the eye which observes this situation, the capture of Billy, belongs to one of the horses outside the house. Billy the protagonist of the scene being filmed, is inside the house awaiting his own death:

**OUTSIDE**

the outline of houses

Garrett running from a door

-all seen sliding round

the screen of a horse's eye (94)

On other occasions the narrator manipulates the chronological linear structure and becomes the centre of a slow motion scene, as in the case of one of the most important images of the book, when Billy rests in a barn for a few days and shoots rats:

the long twenty yard space between me and them empty but for the floating bullet lonely as an emissary across and between the wooden posts that never returned, so the rats continued to wheel and stop in the silences and eat each other, some even the bullet. (18)

Nevertheless, Billy may be considered the protagonist who holds the camera; even when he analyses an event, he goes back to focus from another perspective, to stop time, and to rewind an image as if he were conducting the sequel. He compares different situations

from different perspectives. In this way, an analepsis frequently places the reader in a previous event:

His stomach was warm  
remembered this when I put my hand into  
a pot of luke warm tea to wash it out  
dragging out the stomach to get the bullet  
he wanted to see when taking tea  
with Sallie Chisum in Paris Texas

With Sallie Chisum in Paris Texas  
he wanted to see when taking tea  
dragging out the stomach to take the bullet  
a pot of luke warm tea to wash it out  
remembered this when I put my hand into  
his stomach was warm. (27)

Another important image is the effect of the light throughout the text. Billy is only at peace when he inhabits dark rooms, he measures light as if he were a photographer. His week in the barn is remembered as the best environment: “The cold dark grey of the place made my eyes become used to soft light....But it was the colour and light of the place that made me stay there....The colour a grey with remnants of brown...I sat, setting up patterns in the dark” (17). The sepia colours of the old photographs contrast with the strong light of the menacing sun, “a flashy hawk” (26):

I am here on the edge of sun  
that would ignite me  
looking out into pitch white  
sky and grass overdeveloped to meaninglessness  
waiting for the enemies’ friends of mine (74)

The Chisum ranch is a refuge, an environment of dark rooms and protection: “in the long 20 yard living-dining room I remember the closing of shutters, with each one the sudden blacking out of clarity in a section of the room, leaving fewer arcs of sun each time digging

into the floor” (34). Billy seems to control the camera, measures the distance of the light from the image and widens its scope, but never gets too close to clarity to avoid the destruction of the negative:

I am on the edge of the cold dark  
watching the white landscape in its frame  
a world that's so precise  
every nail and cobweb  
has magnified itself to my presence (74)

Hidden in obscurity, in the shadow, he will be safe to see with clarity. Light thus becomes the destruction of vision. “Symbolically,” asserts Perry Nodelman, “Billy retracts into a camera in order to avoid being photographed” (1980, 72). In its intent to stop time and movement, photography thus symbolizes the creative process in Ondaatje’s poems. The camera’s metaphor as a weapon, symbolically parallels a gun or a pencil. Billy connects several visual images around him to photography: “John’s rocker is going slow...I was waiting standing still for the acid in the camera to dry firm” (60). He presents himself as a camera in the process of recording the images the human eye misses: “Waiting / nothing breaks my vision / but flies in their black path / like inverted stars” (74). A photographic eye or a microscopic lens records and immortalizes memory; nothing escapes it, not even the hallucinations induced by marijuana:

I was thinking of a photograph someone had taken of me, the only one I had then. I was standing still on a wall, at my feet there was this bucket and in the bucket was a pump and I was pumping water out over the wall. Only now, with the red dirt, water started dripping out of the photo. (50)

It the end, the legendary murderer has become a photographer and, therefore, an artist of great sensibility: he stops his poetic images in time, framing them in windows and doors in order to analyse the grades of light and shadow and the process of detaining movement:

Michael Ondaatje, composer and collector of these left-handed poems...is both part of the process and outside it observing himself...The book's business is to collect a picture of Billy and a record of the dialect and content of his works, and the poetry communicates this process through the poet's experience of Billy's character and exploration of himself...The book is a series of lenses, all wide open to admit a multiplicity of impressions. (Blott 1977, 201)

## 4.2 Photography and Alterity: New Postmodernist Tools and Illustrations

No writing can give me this certainty. It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself .... language is, by nature, fictional ... the Photograph is ... authentication itself. (Barthes 1981, 87)

As a discourse photography deals with both a conscious reflection of reality and a manipulation on the part of the artist. It is an idoneous tool, then, for the students of objectivity and perception. A medium which reflects or reproduces the external world though not innocently, it lies and, therefore, transforms reality. Lorraine York (1988) makes an extensive and detailed study of photography in certain Canadian texts, and reveals the author's conscious decision to experiment with photography in order to deal with the different perceptual conflicts in his/her fictional texts. She notes that Roland Barthes, was one of the first theoreticians to consider photography one of this century's issues regarding perception and its relation with a referent.<sup>1</sup> Barthes, in fact, defines photography as a message without a code. "Certainly," he affirms, "the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect *analogon*" (1977, 17). Despite his opinion that the photographic message is more complicated than it seems, York considers his definition paradoxical, "since it consists of both an uncoded denotative and a coded connotative one" (1988, 10). As Barthes bestows a greater importance to its denotative message,<sup>2</sup> the paradox lies in the connotative one which cannot be codified. Therefore, any post-structuralist view would discard

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<sup>1</sup> *Image-Music-Text* (Trans. Stephen Heath. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> "Of all the structures of information, the photograph appears as the only one that is exclusively constituted and occupied by a 'denoted' message, a message which totally exhausts its mode of existence. In front of a

Barthes's assertion. Umberto Eco, for instance, asserts the impossibility of analogy between the image and the code: "The theory of the photo as an *analogue* has been abandoned, even by those who once upheld it .... We know that the image which takes shape on celluloid is analogous to the retinal image but not to that which we perceive" (in Burgin 1982, 33). In a similar way, Burgin argues that, despite the consideration of the referent as a photographed object, it does not avoid the photograph to be abstracted from, and mediated by the actual (Burgin 1982, 61). These theoreticians try, therefore, to subvert Barthes's concept in order to escape from the realistic convention of photography. Photography's subjective power is not questioned; the image is conditioned by different perceptual and cultural schemes.

According to E.H. Gombrich, however, we are dealing with a rather limited medium, for "[t]he image cannot give us more information than the medium can carry" (1980, 192). Moreover, another element to consider regarding objectivity is the possible transmission of truth through the image. Hence, while perceiving in a subjective and personal way, we are conscious that the image does not have to be an analogue of a sound truth. It will be, though, a visual truth, depending on the object, light, colour, etc. In this regard, Barthes's question is relevant: "how then can the photograph be at once 'objective' and 'invested', natural and cultural?" (1977, 20). Frank Webster tries to answer this question:

The photographic image both requires a cultural milieu in which its symbols can be comprehensibly interpreted...while simultaneously staying aloof from a context which facilitates the cognition of an image's meaning. Photography both needs culture for effective communication and remains autonomous from culture. (1980, 153)

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photograph, the feeling of 'denotation', or, if one prefers, of analogical plenitude, is so great that the description of a photograph is literally impossible" (Barthes 1977, 18).

This statement, however, bears an implicit contradiction: how can we consider the photograph's aesthetic autonomy and preserve its cultural condition at the same time? A possible explanation may lie in the works of the British writer John Berger, whose books, *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and *Another Way of Telling* (1982), underline the importance of cultural meaning to analyse a visual image. Berger, in fact, comments that “[a] photograph celebrates neither the event itself nor the faculty of sight in itself. A photograph is already a message about the event it records” (1972, 179). This concept is applied to any type of photograph in which the observer has to activate his perceptual mechanisms and interpret either in a subjective or arbitrary way. Berger anticipates Michael Ondaatje, who agrees that the meaning of a photograph lies in the observer's subjective perception. This is what Berger, and later Ondaatje, have called “photography as absence,” that is, “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (Sontag 1978, 16). It isolates and fixes an invisible moment which could not be discerned in a chronological continuum:

A photograph is effective when the chosen moment which it records contains a quantum of truth which is generally applicable, which is as revealing about what is absent from the photograph as about what is present in it. The nature of this quantum of truth, and the ways in which it can be discerned, vary greatly. It may be found in an expression, an action, a juxtaposition, a visual ambiguity, a configuration. Nor can this truth ever be independent of the spectator. (Berger 1972, 181)

Hence, we can consider photography as play, as an exercise to analyse reality, and it is in this way that it is manipulated as an ideological tool or weapon in favour or against our ideas. In his article “Uses of Photography,” Berger responds to Susan Sontag's vision in *On Photography*,<sup>3</sup> asserting his opinion of the power of the camera as a window which

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<sup>3</sup> (1973. New York: Delta Books, 1978). Here Susan Sontag notes that there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera: “What determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness. Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of

manipulates and destroys chronological linearity, making of each moment a mystery fixed in time.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to analyse how the imperfect human eye is replaced by a more accurate lens to fix appearance, and relates this power to memory, the only lens capable of freezing blurred images charged with subjectivity:

The essential character of this preservation is not dependent upon the image being static .... The camera saves a set of appearances from the otherwise supercession of further appearances. It holds them unchanging. And before the invention of the camera nothing could do this, except in the mind's eye, the faculty of memory. Yet, like memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances -with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances- prised away from their meaning. (1980, 50-51)

On the other hand, the camera functions as a substitute for memory, and thus modern society takes advantage of this tool as a producer of images, either as spectacle for the masses or as an impositive ideology. The contrast between public and private photography is, as a result, evident in the free or manipulative use made of it. For Berger, public photography is free of any contextual influence and is thus used for any arbitrary enterprise. In this context, Sontag applies photography to history as a group of arbitrary and useful moments for the historian to escape from contextual and subjective contexts. All this can be interpreted if we see photography as metaphor: the external fact that confronts our own judgement; the photograph, then, does not become the mirror of an external reality, but “the means of rendering the subject and its meaning visually inseparable. The thing interpreted becomes the interpretation” (Berger 1972, 175).

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history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional flow” (19). On the other hand, for the critic, photography enacts a tremendous promotion of the value of appearances (as the camera records them) thus, “photographs have become the norm for the way things appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality, and of realism” (87).

<sup>4</sup> As Sontag explains, “[t]he force of a photograph is that it keeps open to scrutiny instants which the normal flow of time immediately replaces. This freezing of time -the insolent, poignant stasis of each photograph-

Despite Barthes's belief that the denotative value of photography makes it independent from political intentions, we can not ignore certain political connotations that become an ethical issue for the photographer:

This uneasy position is summed up in two Vietnam war photographers' experiments with a camera which could be fastened to a gun, enabling the photographer-killer to capture on film the moment of death. This interplay between camera and gun becomes a favourite image of highly politicized contemporary writers like Timothy Findley and Michael Ondaatje, who begin to suspect that the pen is equally indicted along with the gun and camera in the war to capture and transfix nature. (York 1988, 16)

In this context we can associate the power of the camera with the power of language, a message with a linguistic code. For Barthes, the captions that accompany the photographs in journalism become a repressive system.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, for a writer like Ondaatje the medium is significant as a discourse in itself, and so the observer can activate his own perceptual mechanisms. In certain narrative texts the writer uses photography as an ideal analogue to stop time, for "[w]ith its devices of stopping the action and enlargement, photography defamiliarizes perception and fractures visual assumptions" (Abbas 1984, 95). Abbas agrees with Berger that photography is a mechanism that reflects both the presence of an image and the absence of the object; and so space imposes itself upon chronology and chronology imposes itself upon space. As a result, photography lies and loses its innocence about the image's meaning; as meaning depends on a semiological system, the issue becomes more complex. Hutcheon regards this characteristic as a metafictional strategy:

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has produced new and more inclusive canons of beauty .... the camera's ability to transform reality into something beautiful derives from its relative weakness as a means of conveying truth" (112).

<sup>5</sup> "With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text has thus a *repressive* value and we can see that it is at this level that the morality and ideology of a society are above all invested" (Barthes 1977, 40).

For metafiction writers who are obsessed with both the power and the limitations of the printed word to invoke the absent object, film and photography provide obvious natural sources of a certain kind of image: objects in movies and photos are also inherently self-referential in the sense that their presence literally refers to their absence. (Hutcheon 1984b, 284)

Ondaatje's obsession with the limits between the perception of an object and its destruction is clearly manifested in *Billy the Kid*, *Slaughter* and *Running*. The author uses the camera as a tool to fix any slipping image; thus connecting photography with memory, not with reality. Consequently, he relates it to the writing process. As both protector and destroyer of language and images, he seeks only subjectivity on the part of the addressee:

metafiction...makes clear that there are new metaphoric equivalences drawn from new media, often visual and aural, for the written text: the fixity of the photograph, the illusory kinesis of the moving picture, the deceiving orality of the tape recording. These images are habitually used in literature today to suggest something distanced, frozen, even dead, in a sense; the act of their creation, then, is a killing one: the reduction of dynamic process to static product. (Hutcheon 1984b, 284)

The author's interest in visual arts is reflected throughout his poetic and narrative works. His long poem *The Man with Seven Toes* reproduces on its cover a black-and-white painting by Jack Chambers called *Man and Dog*. But the real artistic connection is the fact that the literary text is the result of the influence of Sidney Nolan's series on Mrs Fraser. The book becomes the transposition in language of a series of images that recurred in his mind:

There's a series of paintings by Sidney Nolan on this story and I was previously interested in Nolan's Ned Kelly series....That's how it grew. I had to be brief and imagistic because the formal alternative was to write a long graphic introduction explaining the situation, setting, characters and so on. (Ondaatje 1975, 20)

Moreover, the author's graphic concern reveals itself more fully in the design of his books. The visual presentation of a poem on the page, and the cover and the page texture,

are key elements of the final product: “I find the editing of a manuscript to be like the editing of a film, that’s when you determine the work’s shape, rhythmic structures, etc” (Ondaatje 1975, 21). Certainly, this spatial sensibility and formal architecture are the result of the author’s experience with the visual arts, which is reflected, too, in the overlapping of generic boundaries in his literary works:

I’d just finished the actual writing of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and there was a real sense of words meaning nothing to me anymore, and I was going around interpreting things into words....It was a very dangerous thing for me mentally....I just felt I had to go into another field, something totally visual. (Ondaatje 1975, 14)

On the other hand, the closest medium to cinema and writing is photography: “A photographer of some talent himself, Ondaatje has tried to bring the sense of stasis created by still photography into the moving, sequential medium of film” (York 1988, 99). In his documentary *The Clinton Special* Ondaatje makes footage out of static images as if they were photographs. After eliminating colour in some scenes, he inserts a sepia colour to characters and landscapes; calling this technique “talking photography”: “I wanted that sense throughout the film that each shot would almost be a static photograph....It’s a talking photography” (Ondaatje 1975, 16). Similarly, in *Sons of Captain Poetry* photographs from the Nichols’ family album appear with a commentary in the background. “This dual response to the photograph,” York comments, “as a key to memory, kinship, a personal history, and as a severe restraint on human imagination -resurfaces in Ondaatje’s later fiction” (1988, 99).

The interest in photography is evident early in Ondaatje’s career. In *Billy the Kid* the reader receives an authorial invitation, “*I send you a picture...*” (5), which functions as a

prolepsis or flashforward of Ondaatje's photograph in the last page. Throughout Ondaatje's poetry the conflict between experience and the obsession to capture it in fixed and static moments is explicitly depicted. In "Four Eyes," for example, the poet observes through his lover's eyes:

I would freeze this moment  
and in supreme patience  
place pianos  
and craggy black horses on a beach  
and in immobilised time  
attempt to reconstruct. (*Dainty Monsters* 46)

This image of freezing time is recurrent throughout his poetry to immobilise emotions and transform them into artistic moments: "We remember the time around scars, / They freeze irrelevant emotions" (*Dainty Monsters* 49). In Ondaatje's next book of poetry, *Rat Jelly*, these images become even more obsessive. In "Burning Hills," for instance, a group photograph merges the poet's four summers in one image:

Eight of them are leaning against a wall  
arms around each other  
looking into the camera and the sun  
trying to smile at the unseen adult photographer  
Except one who was eating an apple. That was him  
oblivious to the significance of the moment.  
Now he hungers to have that arm around the next  
shoulder.  
The wretched apple is fresh and white. (58)

The mature poet cannot recover the past, for he understands there is no possible way to fix the passing of time symbolized by the apple. One of the most celebrated poems in this volume is the one dedicated to the Coach House poet and friend Victor Coleman, "The

gate in his head,”” which expresses this freezing of time as an artistic device translated into writing:

...a blurred photograph of a gull.  
Caught vision. The stunning white bird  
an unclear stir.

And that is all this writing should be then.  
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong  
moment  
so they are shapeless, awkward  
moving to the clear. (*Rat Jelly* 62)

In *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do*, Ondaatje tries to come to terms with his past, and this effort becomes, for the first time, a poetic fixation in his childhood. Here the past and photography are inexorably merged: “layers of civilization in his memory / they were old photographs he didn't look at anymore” (“Burning Hills” 57). In this collection, the personal past substitutes other images through the medium of the photograph. In “Light,” the poet remembers in a dark room: “Those relatives in my favourite slides / re-shot from old minute photographs so they now stand / complex ambiguous grainy on my wall” (“Light” 105). At this moment, the photographs constitute problematic images of a past that obsesses him: “These are their fragments, all I remember, / wanting more knowledge of them” (“Light” 107).

In *Billy the Kid* Ondaatje uses photography as a structural design for the first time. The static images in his poems, as though filmed in slow motion, are intertwined with photographs from the beginning of the century together with others taken by the author, forming a collage or kaleidoscope where the main purpose is defamiliarization and the multiplicity of perceptions: “A series of lenses, all wide open to admit a multiplicity of

impressions” (Blott 1977, 201). Billy’s figure changes, transforms itself depending on the narrator’s position. The book begins in an intertextual manner with an “exergue” in italics, or epigraph, where the real western photographer L.A. Huffman warns the reader about his experiments; or, maybe we should suggest that the alter ego of the artist is telling the reader what he is going to see in the next pages:

*I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked .... I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire -bits of snow in the air- spokes well defined -some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main- men walking are no trick -I will send you proofs sometime. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle without ground glass or tripod -please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in in motion. (5)*

The conflict in fixating the movement is carried to its complete literary practice in this book. The experiments in photographing a horse galloping were made by Eadweard Muybridge<sup>6</sup> and Thomas Eakins at the end of the nineteenth century. Muybridge’s photograph constitutes the first textual image of the book, its cover, followed by Huffman’s words. Ondaatje and Muybridge go hand in hand as artists willing to modify the encapsulated notion of truth in photography or in legend:

in Muybridge’s case it is the belief that a horse extends all four legs off the ground at once when galloping. Similarly, Ondaatje is contravening all of the glamorous versions of the Billy the Kid legend in order to study Billy as a prototype of a certain type of artist -a potential creator who becomes a destroyer. (York 1988, 104)

Conversely, the reader sees through Billy’s camera, through a zoom or an open lens when he “take[s] in all the angles of the room” (21). Garrett realizes Billy’s special qualities and also observes how he “never uses his left hand for anything except of course to shoot.

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<sup>6</sup> Eadweard Muybridge, in his photographic studies in the 1880s, managed to dispel misconceptions about what everybody had always seen (how horses gallop, how people move) because he had subdivided the subject’s movements into a precise and lengthy enough sequence of shots (Sontag 1978, 60).

He said he did finger exercises subconsciously.... From then on I noticed his left hand churning within itself, each finger circling alternatively like a train wheel” (43). Hutcheon summarizes this process as following:

Michael Ondaatje uses photography as the controlling metaphor for perception and (more problematically) for artistic production. Billy tries to perceive reality in a detached, framed, camera-like way; only prophetic flashes to his own death are allowed to break this control, as new organic images invade the predominantly mechanical ones. Ondaatje’s physical presentation of the book as a kind of static verbal and visual picture album is, however, premised upon one important underlying caveat: *appearances lie*. Photos are single and static; life is not. Motion frozen into form comes to be associated with the fixity of madness, though Billy does fight this by dynamic attempts at real understanding: he recomposes, retakes, replays the scenes of trauma, but always as an attempted means of control. (1984b, 285, italics mine)

Photography is, therefore, the metaphor of perception and of the work’s artistic process itself. As a result, the different images create a portrait of Billy which is not static but in constant movement and change: “Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is the maze to begin, to be in” (20). After this pun the narrator is more precise in his intention to disorient the reader who searches for definition: “That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning” (20). We thus confront a labyrinth of voices and images to unlock and unravel, not a design of a known legend.

The book’s architecture is designed to respond to an intersection of prose, poetry and photography as if we were turning the pages of an album; in fact, the different sections uncover this visual design through photographic captions: “Christmas at Fort Sumner, 1880,” “Blurred,” “January at Tivan Arroyo,” “Miss A. Dickinson of Tucson,” “With the Bowdres,” etc. The author merges images and writing in the creative process, the

description and the exposure after a title or epigraph. All is enacted with a lack of chronological line in order to describe several fragmentary moments; analepses and prolepses, therefore, are distributed with an arbitrary logic. According to Nodelman, “Billy’s behaviour could not be explained accurately by the sequential relationships of causes and effects that fluid narratives necessarily imply” (1980, 68). Photographer and writer are parallel in this freezing of time in order to capture image and word.

Billy’s “Collected Works” are his photographs more clearly than his crimes, and they negotiate all the previous images of legend. Significantly enough, though, the author recreates the sources of the legend when he includes a comic photograph from the “Wide Awake Library,” *The True Life of Billy the Kid*, whose image does not correspond to Ondaatje’s Billy. Thus the very title becomes ambivalent as the reader observes a right-handed Billy. The comic photograph negates and subverts the book’s title which “plays up the impossibility of painting a true picture of Billy, for its claim to truth is clearly at odds with Ondaatje’s Billy, who is left-handed” (Grace 1992, 200). Besides, as an additional subversion, Ondaatje inserts an original dialogue from the comic “Billy the Kid and the Princess,” a clear influence from his friend bpNichol. ‘Chinese boxes’ of this kind create confusion for the reader in regarding the sources manipulated by the author, for instance, in using dialogues without mentioning the characters and then eliminating the original photographs, though not their visual frame: “Comic books consist of a series of frames, all filled with pictures that tell a story. Ondaatje removes the pictures from the frames, retaining only the words and the frame” (Grace 1992, 199).

Despite Nodelman's opinion, Ondaatje's Billy is not a static or mechanic figure who represents both an overt objectivity and lack of sensibility; on the contrary, "Ondaatje's use of several perspectives as well as several genres or media suggests that even a simple being -a man has become a machine- may be viewed in a myriad of ways" (York 1988, 106). Certainly, we observe the lack of a transparent and delineated personage, and the best proof for the reader is the blank photograph of the beginning of the book. Another similar device would be the reproduction of the same photograph in pages 45 and 91 in different size and focus. The author's experiment becomes even clearer when he reproduces a photograph of John and Sallie Chisum sitting on their porch; the reader will discover however, that the characters are Stuart and Sally MacKinnon, Ondaatje's friends. Similarly, as a closing complement to the first statement of the book, "*I send you a picture*"(5) and the blank frame, Ondaatje ends the book with the most outstanding device of alterity he has ever used, a photograph of himself at seven dressed as a cowboy: "If analysis and dissection are futile tools in the search for Billy, Ondaatje presents the tool which is alone able to capture fixity-in-flux, life in the very act of being lived: the poet" (York 1988, 107).

The book thus begins with a blank photograph which Huffman had described previously; and which clearly stands for the concept of photography as absence, of image without an object. The reader discovers the implicit historical content when he reads the photographer's intertext and comes back to the blank photograph that stands as a veiled negative. Kamboureli thus analyses the philosophical content of this portrait:

The absent portrait of Billy also announces the "negative" of narration. It becomes, in Jacques Derrida words, an *exergue*, what lies "outside the work," "inscription," "epigraph." It suggests that Billy lies outside the poem, cannot be contained in a single frame. (1988, 116)

Ondaatje's aim is to underline the textual referent at the same time as he disappears as omniscient narrator when he inserts Huffman as narrator in this fragment: Ondaatje can also be the reader in the quotation "*I send you a picture...*" (5), an arbitrary epigraph which will be only the first of other tools to unravel the text's performative function.

Garrett's fixating role in his search and capture of Billy is parallel to the figure of the detective Webb in *Slaughter*. "I need a picture" (50), affirms the detective in his search for Bolden, a friend who, as Garrett, betrays the protagonist. Similarly, Ondaatje, in his archival enterprise, searches for the musician and photographs the surroundings where Bolden lived. The narrator thus stands for the perfect alter ego of the detective who can only photograph to show clear evidence: "I easily hear the click of my camera as I take fast bad photographs into the sun aiming at the barber shop he probably worked in" (*Slaughter* 133). The author, however, provides a powerful tool in the design of this documented fiction in the figure of E.J. Bellocq. Bolden introduces Bellocq as a professional photographer of the prostitutes, making circular the dangerous connection among photography, jazz and the sexuality that will destroy them: "Although Bellocq and Buddy do not wish to destroy their subjects or audience, they share a destructive impulse which finally turns inward" (York 1988, 111). Bellocq could also be the ideal protagonist, for he constitutes Bolden's alterity in his role of destructive artist; a crippled artist who photographs the whores, and later stabs the portraits, clearly symbolizes the destruction of his own art, the result of his impotence and his frustrated sexuality: "wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the bodies" (55). As Hutcheon observes,

Bellocq's picture-taking becomes the measure of his impotence, even his aggression; certainly it is his form of sexual voyeurism. Photographs here not only turn into (literally) two-dimensional objects that can be symbolically possessed, but they also provide inexhaustible opportunities for speculation and fantasy. (1984b, 286)

Ondaatje changes Bellocq's legend for his own aesthetic needs, and so reality becomes fiction to depict the ideal example of self-destruction:

You can see the care he took defiling the beauty he had forced in them was a precise and clean as his good hands which at night had developed the negatives.... The making and destroying from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of. (55)

Bellocq's last work of art is the representation of his own death, thereby creating a real drama in front of a fictional audience "dissolving out of his pose" (67). Bolden learns from Bellocq's art of self-destruction and goes with him to an even more significant death, his own madness. Bolden's psychological suicide merges him with his audience and condemns him to silence. In a somewhat speculative explanation, Solecki argues that Bellocq is not the cause and artificer of Bolden's madness, for "[w]ith or without Bellocq's influence Bolden would have destroyed himself .... Bellocq simply hastened the process by making Bolden self-conscious of the inherent contradiction in his situation" (1985, 262). Nevertheless, Bellocq is a more positive figure than he appears to be as his function in the book is the most humane and intimate of all the characters. "He was the first person I met," Bolden comments, "who had absolutely no interest in my music" (59). Bellocq is the opposed figure to the rational detective, who "[i]n the end ... is carried further away from the essence of Buddy Bolden's life by his researches; Bellocq alone has access to that secret, inner world" (York 1988, 113). Bellocq is, therefore, the therapeutic artificer who "tempted me out of the world of audiences where I had tried to catch everything thrown at me" (91).

One of the most successful effects in the book is the photograph of Bolden's band on the book cover. It is the only source the author-archivist possesses to fix the legend and, in the book, it is Bellocq's talisman which Webb searches for unsuccessfully. As an act of generosity, Ondaatje translates the visual image of the cover into writing in the middle of a page. Within spatial distance he reflects on the dependency between image and writing, for "many readers probably read the testimonies by the band members in the book, flip to the photograph key, and then to the photograph itself, to see the image behind the word" (York 1988, 115):

Jimmy Johnson on bass	Bolden	Willy Cornish on valve trombone	Willy Warner on clarinet
	Brock Mumford on guitar	Frank Lewis on clarinet (66)	

On Ondaatje's trips to Sri Lanka photography becomes a clear testimony of memory, the only resource for the narrator to approach the confusing pieces of a familiar album, "each memory a wild thread in the sarong" (*Running* 110). Memory designs the plot of a text as never before in its imagery and sincerity: "those relations from my parents' generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words" (*Running* 22). Once more the image and the word merge to create a fictional history "based on the complex workings of memory -especially by their similarity to storytelling" (York 1988, 115). The suggestive cover photograph plays the role of the perfect epigraph, the image the narrator has been searching for all his life:

*Running in the Family* includes some wonderfully evocative pictures that are more than simply illustrations of the text. Like the prose, they have the surface of documentary but the

presence of magic. One in particular is central to the narrator's journey: "My aunt pulls out the album and there is the photograph I have been waiting for all my life." The story that precedes the discovery of this snapshot is partly about the way the camera can be made to lie. (Draper 1982, 20)

The photograph belongs to the narrator's aunt who, almost blind, shows it to her nephew and describes it from memory: "She has looked at it for years, laughs at the facial expressions she can no longer see. It has moved tangible, palpable, into her brain, the way memory invades the present in those who are old" (*Running* 112). Photography thus retains a whole tradition of familiar connections and becomes the memory's perfect analogue, though it never represents a window to reality and never becomes a counterpart to the old maps of the island.

Ten years after *Running in the Family*, Christopher Ondaatje would publish *The Man-Eater of Punanai*. Both brothers have as their central purpose their separate attempts at coming to terms with their father by reconciling their own personal memories with those of other family members and with documentary evidence, including photographs. Both are meant to be taken as non-fiction though photography, as biography, are not an "emanation of the referent" (Barthes 1981, 80) any more. In a similar way to Christopher Ondaatje, but with a completely different purpose and literary quality, Carol Shields's *Stone Diaries*, features eight pages of photographs of her fictional characters, including several which are actually of her own children.

Each Ondaatje, however, writes with a different purpose. Michael is a poet who tries to understand in his past other questions of identity and self-discovery that go beyond any personal attempt at biography. For Christopher, known in Canada as a financier, publisher

and millionaire, *The Man-Eater of Punanai* is a journey of discovery of a very different kind, in that it “seeks to reconcile his brother’s portrait with his own,, an attempt to celebrate those qualities in his father that are characteristic of himself” (Adams 1997, 94). Christopher’s novel lacks any poetic or literary quality but he wants, in a somewhat competitive way, to let go the notion that he was the oldest brother, the one that knew their father intimately, who bore the burden of their father’s bankruptcy and alcoholism, “I had been deeply involved with that man, and I had to grapple with his demons, which never seemed either romantic or amusing” (*Man-Eater* 38). The realistic narrative of the older brother depicts Mervyn Ondaatje as an alcoholic whose actions are pathetically embarrassing and who, in his best years shared with his first son a special bond: “more than any other members of the family, my father and I shared a love of the outdoors and of wildlife” (*Man-Eater* 9). Although Christopher praises *Running*, he is careful to suggest that his paternal portrait is the accurate for his younger brother “had been too young to remember it in its heyday” (*Man-Eater* 36).

Another way that Christopher attempts to provide a corrective to Michael is through photography. The photographs in *Running* are often enigmatic and symbolic, such as the picture of a train on Sensation Rock, labelled “The Prodigal,” which suggests both Mervyn’s frequent escapades with trains and Michael’s identification with his father as the family’s prodigal son. Another example is the family photograph of the children labelled “The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society,” an image which echoes the patterns of flooding water that runs throughout the text, and implies that Mervyn’s love for his children was more nourishing than it might have seemed from Christopher’s account. In contrast, the

photographs in *The Man-Eater of Punanai* seem more like snapshots, pictures from the Ondaatje family album deprived of metaphor or meaning. Where Michael worries about his childhood, Christopher is rather concerned with his adult and masculine identity. Where Michael presents his father's death in the "Thanikama" section by assuming his voice and writing as Mervyn in the first person, a literal case of resemblance, Christopher is only concerned with accuracy in that their father "tripped on some matting at the entrance to the living-room off the verandah and smashed his head on the concrete floor" (*Man-Eater* 120).

Ondaatje's humour and sensitivity, however, are present throughout the text. In a significant occasion, the narrator inserts a photograph of his parents' honeymoon. But before we see any image we read its description in a perfect linguistic counterpart to the image that will appear on later pages:

My father's pupils droop to the south-west of his sockets. His jaw falls and resettles into a groan that is half idiot, half shock....My mother in white has twisted her lovely features and stuck out her jaw and upper lip so that her profile is in the posture of a monkey. The print is made into a postcard and sent through the mail to various friends. On the back my father has written "*What we think of married life.*" (*Running* 161-62)

Far from being objective records, visual information recorded in photographs is shown to be crucially dependent on story, on interpretation. Before Ondaatje tells us the story of the photograph of his parents, he inserts an episode which fundamentally questions the trustworthiness of photographs as historical record. During a visit to his father's friend, the ex-Prime Minister Sir John Kotelawala, Sir John relates how his re-election was ruined when a compromising photograph was published in the papers. Some young people had asked permission to take photographs in his beautiful gardens:

Suddenly the man dropped to his knees, lifted the woman's sari and started chewing away at her upper thigh. Sir John who was watching casually a few yards away rushed forward and asked what was happening. The man on his knees unburied his head and grinned at him saying, 'snake bite, sir,' and returned to the thigh of the woman.

A week later three photographs appeared in the newspapers of this blatantly sexual act with Sir John also in the picture chatting casually to the woman whose face was in the throes of ecstasy. (*Running* 159-60)

The message is clear: photographs may be objective presentations of the world, and often simply are believed to present the truth. Ondaatje reminds us, however, that things are not his simple, for photographs are as much in need of an interpretative framework as all the other documentary evidence he has consulted. The story of Sir John's photos reveals the limits of photography as historical evidence and as a mediator of memory. And by extension, it renders relative the story Ondaatje supplies about the photo of his parents (*Running* 162), "the only photo I have found of the two of them together." It is inscribed: "What we think of married life" (162-63). The story which comes with the photo has to be told, otherwise the contorted features shown do not make sense. Ondaatje supplies this story in a chapter called "Photograph": "Everything is there, of course. Their good looks behind the tortured faces, their mutual humour, and the fact that both of them are hams of a very superior sort. The evidence I wanted that they were absolutely perfect for each other" (*Running* 162).

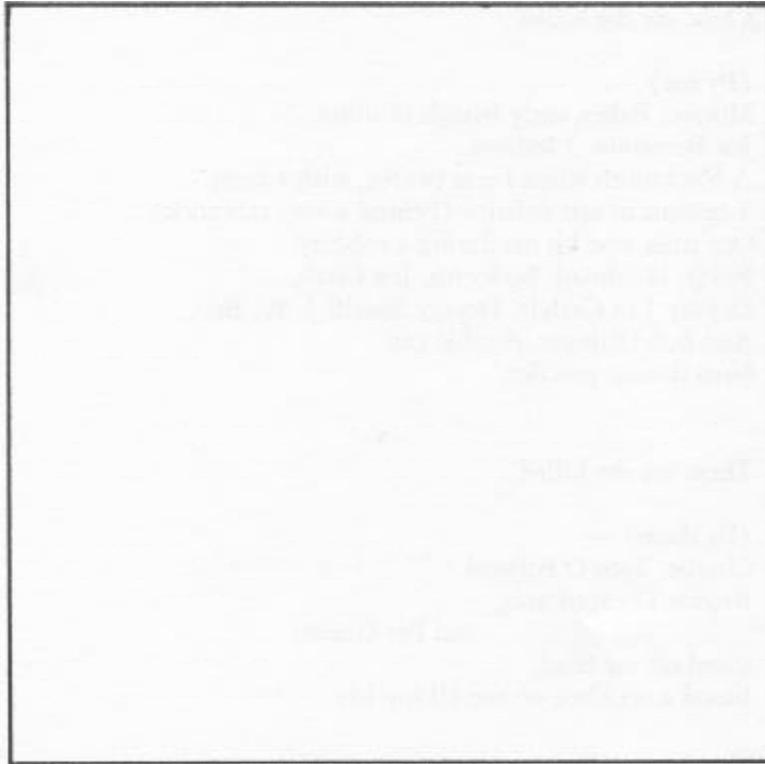
His wish, his need for 'the evidence I wanted, makes him armonize the surface message of the photo's 'tortured faces' and its subtitle 'What we think of married life.' But he ignores that surface message at his peril, for after all, it proleptically indicates what became of his parents' marriage. For sentimental reasons alone, he simply rejects or suppresses this reading of the photograph. But he can, and does, give his readers all the clues to question his reading (Pesch 1997b, 62).

Each recording technique can only represent fragments of history, and even these are in need of relational arrangement and interpretative frameworks. As Ondaatje's reading of his parents' photograph has shown, "such interpretation is often driven by the need of the interpreter.... a total document-based reconstruction of the past is impossible not because of the sheer number of available documents nor because the record is incomplete or disintegrating, but because ultimately all mediated memories require interpretation" (Pesch 1997b, 63).

Linguistic and photographic distortions in the text reveal an important device to manipulate both media at the same time, and the image takes the function both of the text and its documental recount, "photography can both fix our sense of truth and liberate it, by leading us not only into history but beyond history" (York 1988, 120).

Ondaatje uses photography as a tool of comparison with fictional language as he used pencils and cameras as tools and weapons of the creative process. His photographs lack the explicative caption of the journalistic style though they are inextricably linked to the poetic design, for "they defy explanation, they enclose impossible contingencies in dramatic silence" (Bowen 1991, 45). Despite Barthes's opinion, "[f]or Ondaatje, fiction and authentication are not in opposition. As a result, he allows the photographs he incorporates to sustain a simultaneity of plural meanings" (Bowen 1991, 44). The performative effect of voices and images is clearly seen in the book's heteroglossia as each image tells a different story, their value as information being of the same order as fiction. Ondaatje's photographs "turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past" (Sontag 1978, 71).

This does not mean that his project of writing a biography of his family and his father has failed. It rather means that expectations raised by a naive and positivistic historiography will have to be revised.



*I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked — Pyro and soda developer. I, am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire — bits of snow in the air — spokes well defined — some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main — men walking are no trick — I will send you proofs sometime. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle without ground glass or tripod — please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion.*



*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, pp.31, 45, 91





*Coming Through Slaughter, p.3*

Buddy Bolden



ECLIPSE  
PLUMAGE

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A FINE  
ROMANCE

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WHAT WE THINK  
OF MARRIED LIFE

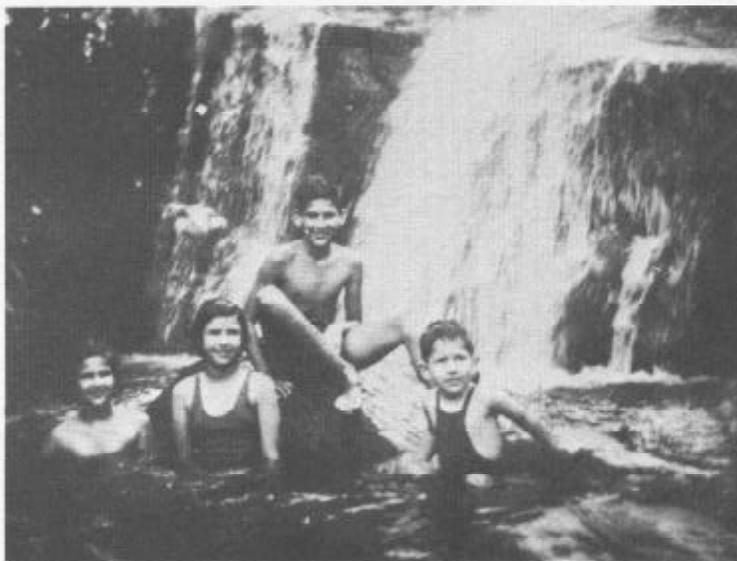
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THE CEYLON CACTUS  
AND SUCCULENT SOCIETY

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## **PART TWO: GENERIC EXPERIMENTATION**

## 5.1 Between Spiritual Desolation and Anarchy: Alterity and Heteroglossia

The novel for Bakhtin is dialogic (and not “poetic”) only inasmuch as it is dialectical (it is not antidialectical either), only inasmuch as it keeps open and unresolved the conflicts or disputes of voices and languages constituting it, only as it resists the temptation to reduce the alterity of the other to the identity of the same. (Carroll 1983, 79)

We come back to Bakhtin to expose how, however dialogic the novel can be, and despite the statement that the author only structures but never decides, certain aspects of language have a clear authorial intention. Therefore, we recognize a series of features in which the narrator reveals himself as the author of the text. Strategies like humour, parody or irony function as independent systems of narration.<sup>1</sup> There are many verbal devices that say one thing and mean another, inviting the reader to reconstruct unspoken meanings. Metaphor, simile and allegory have all been discussed in terms similar to those employed for irony; the difference, however, is that irony cannot be paraphrased in a non-ironic statement. Booth distinguishes between stable and unstable ironies both being either covert or overt. Accordingly, a given word or passage is ironic depending on the intentionality of the creative act and in the reader ‘catching’ those intentions (Booth 1984, 91). Despite

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<sup>1</sup> “Irony is usually seen as something that undermines clarities, opens up vistas of chaos, and either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroys by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation .... Before the eighteenth century, irony was one rhetorical device among many, the least important of the rhetorical tropes. By the end of the Romantic period, it had become a grand Hegelian concept, with its own essence and necessities; or a synonym for romanticism; or even an essential attribute of God. And in our century it became a distinguishing mark for all literature, or at least all good literature, in some of what was said by New Critics like Cleanth Brooks. Perhaps the most original and important critic of our time, Kenneth Burke, has made irony into a kind of synonym for comedy, for the ‘dramatistic’ and for the dialectic .... For Northrop Frye’s effort to comprehend the whole of literature in one grand vision, irony can mean many different things on many different pages; indeed it must” (Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974. Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984): ix; see also Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* 1957; and Hutcheon 1984a; 1988a; 1988b.

Kierkegaard's concept of irony as 'absolute infinite negativity,'<sup>2</sup> our reading experience is radically different today for, "(o)n the one hand we use the literary context, the form that we construct as we read, referring part to part and parts to whole; on the other is the historical context -personal and social- in which the piece was written and printed and read, and to which we may or may not need to refer explicitly in reconstructing its meanings" (Booth 1984, 96-7). What is at stake in irony is the possibility of understanding, the possibility of reading, the readability of texts and that is what Booth does not solve. Authoritative books about irony would reduce it to an aesthetic device or, as de Man puts it "can be described as a moment in a dialectic of the self .... or into a dialectic of history" (1996, 170). Accordingly, there is a total arbitrariness which inhabits the words on the level of the signifier, which undoes the reflexive and the dialectical model which are the basis on any narration: "There is no narration without reflection, no narrative without dialectic, and what irony disrupts ... is precisely that dialectic and that reflexivity, the tropes. The reflexive and the dialectical are the tropological system ... and that is what irony undoes" (de Man 1996, 181).

Wayne Booth belongs to the neo-Aristotelian school, which, opposed to the New Critics, emphasized rhetorical and generic criticism. The Chicago school of rhetorical critics like Booth see texts as primarily to be interpreted in terms of their ethical or emotional powers of persuasion, the text coercing the reader on behalf of the author. The New Critical

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<sup>2</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Constant reference to Socrates* (trans. Lee M. Capel. London: Collins, 1966). For Paul de Man this is one of the best books on irony and it is an ironic title that of Kierkegaard's as irony is not a concept for it is very difficult to define it as a trope. Northrop Frye seems to think it is a trope. He says it is "a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning" (1957, 40). That definition would include all tropes. Booth's approach, however, is more sensible

emphasis on the text, however, included the assumption that poetic texts are designed to produce a peculiarly poetic response: the ambiguity of the text is an objective correlative of a purely contemplative state in the reader, who recognizes that the text is not seeking to denote a reality but to connote an elegantly balanced aesthetic structure. Both the strengths and the weaknesses of New Critical interpretation stem from this extreme focus on the work as a uniquely meaningful object.

In contrast to these two opposed tendencies, Steven Connor describes the new literary tendencies of the later twentieth century as “a carnivalesque interweaving of styles, voices and registers which allegedly disrupts the decorous hierarchy of literary genres” (1989, 126). It is not a question of lack of articulation, but an intentioned and conscious subversion of language and artistic forms in general, whose main features are “the exploration of ecstasy, trance and other extreme states of feeling, the turning of consciousness in upon itself as well as in intense awareness of imminent apocalypse” (Connor 1989, 109). The novel appears, therefore, as a potential construct, always open-ended. Hence, closed and independent systems of knowledge are non-existent inasmuch as each observer describes incongruous events from different perspectives. Accordingly, space and time defines language which, for the Mexican author and critic Carlos Fuentes (1993, 60), can locate different times and spaces, centripetal, centrifugal, and parallel. Fuentes considers the novel “a privileged arena,” though it claims no special rights unless it be the stage upon which the great debates of society can be conducted. “The novel,” Fuentes writes, “is born from the very fact that we do not understand one another, because unitary,

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for he starts out from a question in practical criticism and does not get involved in definitions or in the

orthodox language has broken down. Quixote and Sancho, the Shandy brothers, Mr and Mrs Karenin: their novels are the comedy (or the drama) of their misunderstandings. Impose a unitary language: you kill the novel, but you also kill the society” (in Rushdie 1991, 420). There are other reasons, though, for proposing the novel as the crucial art form of the postmodern age. First, literature is the art least subject to external control, because of its privacy it can still be considered the most free. What is forged in the private act of reading a novel, Rushdie asserts, “is a different kind of identity, as the reader and writer merge, through the medium of the text, to become a collective being that both writes as it reads and reads as it writes, and creates, jointly, that unique work, ‘their’ novel. This ‘secret identity’ of writer and reader is the novel form’s greatest and most subversive gift” (1991, 426).

The novel, then, is not only the art involving least compromises, but it is also the only one that takes the “privileged arena” of conflicting discourses, of fragmentation and experimentation, where all imaginative stories and conflictive languages have space, where a truly and definite vision of the world is transcended. In Bakhtinian terms, the process of assimilation between novel and history goes, necessarily, through a definition of time and space. So he would define the chronotope as the conjunction of time and space. Within the chronotope, then, the facts of narrative are actively organized and time in the novel is added to the space of the novel. Of it depends the form and communicability of the narrative. Brevity and nudity construct the architecture of time and space.

According to Fuentes, Bakhtin widens the canon to include, within his concept of the dialogic novel, a plurality of dialogues, not only among the characters in a realistic frame,

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theory of tropes. (See de Man 1996, 165)

but also among contradictory languages, distant historical epochs, opposed social or historical visions, which, otherwise, would not have had any contact or met through imagination, which is the form of knowledge in literature. Hence each novel constitutes a displacement, in which the reader is drawn to re-read the same text with new eyes as ambiguity and plot are not pre-written. As a result, the contemporary novel has a hybrid character, parodic and imitative, and not very original: it transcends its original impurities through “poeticization,” in which language becomes the image of language. Thus, the closed, polished artifact is no longer accepted, and, in its place, is a non-stable and plural reality in a historical moment, characterized by provisionality and heterogeneity, because of the difficulty in reaching a lasting coherence.

For Bakhtin, language itself constitutes the dividing line between self and other, whereas for de Man, dialogism works as a principle of radical alterity, as a principle of “exotopy”: thus the formal self-reflexive or narcissistic structure is replaced by an assertion of alterity, prior even to the possibility of recognizing it (de Man 1990, 167). We refer not to an enclosed context but to a play among contexts, among different cultural and ideological units. For David Carroll, narrative is, in Bakhtinian terms, a pragmatics which designs dynamic relations among its elements, and which aspires “to alternative narratives and thus to rearrangement of relations and positions” (1983, 75). The importance of Bakhtin’s approach lies in his concept of dialogism, a theory of discourse which calls for an openness in language towards numerous social and ideological forces, centrifugal and centripetal, which endow discourse with dynamism. These are not dialectic but dialogued forces that transform

narrative in a heteroglossia, where a continuous interaction of dynamic signifieds is enacted upon the word in the literary text itself (Grace 1987,119).

Novel and short story have thus a polyphonic character which other poetic, epic, or dramatic forms lack because of their monologic character and subjective voice. The novel is, however, defined as a diversity of social and individual paroles organized in an artistic form. It will be more or less dialogic depending on the author's skill of transmitting the different voices and mixed genres interweaved in the novel to deploy an heteroglossia. Hence, language in the novel inhabits an ideological and cultural context, and participates in a dialogue either with the past or with different social groups of the present, "between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These 'languages' of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying 'languages'" (Bakhtin1981, 291).

The word can no longer exist in a neutral and impersonal state but only as an articulate entity in varied and variable contexts, which the speaker appropriates with determined intentions.<sup>3</sup> Thus the writer assimilates and adopts literary and extraliterary features to construct his own style and creative personality:

The orientation of the word amid the utterances and languages of others, and all the specific phenomena connected with this orientation, takes on *artistic* significance in novel style. Diversity of voices and heteroglossia enter the novel and organize themselves within it into a

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<sup>3</sup> For Wayne Booth, the author's judgement is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it. Whether its particular forms are harmful or serviceable is always a complex question, a question that cannot be settled by any easy reference to abstract rules: Whether we call this implied author an 'official scribe,' or adopt the term recently revived by Kathleen Tillotson -the author 'second self'- it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author most important effects .... Our present problem is the intricate relationship of the so-called real author with his various official version of himself. We mus say various versions, for regardless of how sincere an author may try to be, his different works will imply different versions, different ideal combinations of norms .... the author sets himself out with a different air depending on the needs of particular works" (Booth 1967, 71)

structured artistic system. This constitutes the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre. (Bakhtin1981, 300)

One way of incorporating heteroglossia in the narrative is through the figure of the author/narrator, voices which are usually distant and in which alterity is an ostensible device. Characters are another way of organizing this dialogic process by way of enriching the authorial voice from other perspectives. The character's voice will always be in dialogue with the author's, constituting "one of the most fundamental privileges of novelistic prose, a privilege available neither to dramatic nor to purely poetic genres" (Bakhtin 1981, 320). Likewise, the incorporation of literary or extraliterary genres, each one with its peculiar voice, plays an outstanding role in this process of assimilating reality as heterogeneous. Thus heteroglossia "either enters the novel in person and assumes material form within it in the images of speaking persons, or it determines, as a dialogizing background, the special resonance of novelistic discourse" (Bakhtin1981, 332).

The hybridity that surrounds novelistic discourse is always elaborated in a natural, never artificial manner. It is not a chronicle of unknown voices but a stylistic appropriation of images of different languages which, in the novel, "must represent all the social and ideological voices of its era, that is, all the era's languages that have any claim to being significant; the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia" (Bakhtin1981, 411). Thus irony and parody form part of heteroglossia which will, therefore, "wash over culture's awareness of itself and its language, penetrate to its core, relativize the primary language system underlying its ideology and literature and deprive it of its naive absence of conflict" (Bakhtin1981, 368).

In this context, the traditional concept of Beauty and Harmony has dissolved into a continuous search through fragments, where knowledge loses its tangible nature, becoming an ideological and cultural labyrinth with many exits, which “literalizes or realizes what in Bakhtin is only metaphor: the metaphor of ‘worlds’ of discourse” (McHale 1991, 165). The critic’s aim is then to analyse the architecture of discourse, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relations, in order to discover its dynamic character and reveal that “literary texts are full of unexpected twists and turns, and frustration of expectations. It is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain in dynamism” (Iser 1988, 213).

For McHale, there is a distinction between formal and stylistic heteroglossia in a text, and its potential ideological polyphony. Heteroglossia does not necessarily convey an implicit polyphony or dialogic which some modernist texts lack, but integrate various levels of discourse in the same ontologic plane or, even, “they *strive toward* such an integration and unification; for heteroglossia is not easily kept under control, and tends to exert a centrifugal counterpressure on the text” (1991, 166).

Authenticity does not exist if not in aesthetics; a real and progressive “aesthetization” is being developed, not only in the thought but also in the concept of truth. Now, rhetoric occupies the necessary power to assimilate the multiplicity of discourses “that *always* to some extent question and relativize each other’s authority” (Waugh 1984, 7). The result is the metafictional novel in which the reader becomes the active participant in a game in which the text is a collective creation, an intertextual artifact where fragments try to express the difficulty of transmitting meaning, the narrowness of language to express different realities:

The reader of fiction is always an actively mediating presence; the text’s reality is established by his response and reconstituted by his active participation. The writers of narcissistic

fiction merely make the reader conscious of this fact of his experience. All texts are to some extent “scriptible”<sup>4</sup> that is, produced rather than consumed by the reader. (Hutcheon 1984a, 141)

The reader’s role is to decipher the text, to open the way to its potential meanings and fragments. Reading is itself a creative process which consists of discovering the interpretative process through the creative one. Re-reading is the main factor in the production of meaning as a literary work is not so much an artifact as a process to discover.

For Barthes the structuralist, literature is just technique, a tool, which lacks any cause or end in itself. The different forms of significations are the basis of our concern with a fragmented literature, which cannot be dogmatic, nor can it respond to any authorial idea but can admit a world of signifiers independent of its signifieds. Literature, therefore, exists through the effort to escape from mimesis, to explore various significations that should be the design of any author. Interpretation is, for Barthes, the erasure of conventionalisms in the generic subversion. His notion of text and textuality brings criticism to the modernist ideal of an open and polysemic literature, thus transforming the critic into a creator of meaning not through the message but through the system and structure of the text.

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<sup>4</sup> This term is used by Roland Barthes in his work *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970): 17. For Barthes the classic text is all too readable, its rich fabric of interlocking codes forcing upon the interpreter a role of passive consumption from which only an unreadable text offers any hope of freedom. But Barthes’s own practice and that of the school of critics called deconstructivist suggest that there is an alternative to this passive role. American deconstructivist criticism may be seen as stemming from Paul de Man’s commentary in *Blindness and Insight* (Oxford, 1971) on Jacques Derrida’s *Grammatology*. This critical school saves the reader from passivity by assuming that virtually every text has “areas of blindness” that are in some way crucial to its interpretation. The text cannot say all it means, because its meanings are enabled by its silence on some crucial point. From here it is but a step to Harold Bloom’s insistence that every poem is based on a misreading by the poet of a predecessor’s work (see *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford 1973)), and to other strategies that free the reader from passivity by postulating imperfection or inadequacy in the text. The great virtue of this attitude is that it allows for concentration on the text while encouraging a creative role for the critical reader. It neutralizes the hermeneutic insistence on the intention of the author by assuming that this intention will itself be clouded by bad faith or blindness on the author’s part. (See Scholes 1982, pp. 13)

This act of reading consists of filling the blank spaces that the author left there for two reasons: first, in Eco's terms, because the text is "a lazy or economic mechanism" that lives out of the multiplicity of meanings that the addressee applies to it; and, second, through its aesthetics, the text will lay on its reader the interpretative responsibility, though it normally wants to be interpreted with a certain degree of univocity. An open text then outlines a closed project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy.<sup>5</sup> The important thing, for Eco, is "to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process. Blank space surrounding a word, typographical adjustments, and spatial composition in the page setting of the poetic text -all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities" (1979, 53). Certain narrative texts, therefore, manifest what he calls "actancial imprecisions," that is, some difficulty of recognition, some sudden passages which shift unexpectedly from first to third person, enunciative strategies common to all experimental texts. Eco defines interpretation as the semantic renovation of what the text, strategically, means with the help of its "Model reader": the text as an act of invention constitutes a new code, reveals for the first time certain correlations -among expressive elements and details of content which the semantic system had neither defined nor organized before (see Eco 1993, 254).

The text will, therefore, convey possible worlds through what Eco calls "discursive strategies," to present something as true or false. Yet we should not consider any

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<sup>5</sup> "A text, as opposed to a work, is open, incomplete, insufficient. This is not a quality inherent in any particular piece of writing, but obly a way of regarding such a piece of writing or any other combination of signs. The same set of words can be regarded as either a work or a text. As a text, however, a piece of writing must be understood as the product of a person or persons, at a given point in human history, in a given form of discourse, taking its meanings from the interpretive gestures of individual readers using the grammatical, semantic, and cultural codes available to them" (Scholes 1982, 15-6).

information as true, but only verifiable or non-verifiable texts. Thus a level of distrustfulness will always prevail, especially in situations in which the narrator addresses the reader directly.<sup>6</sup> The reader will cooperate with his own suggestions in the creation of the story. In other occasions we find what the critic calls “ghost chapters,” or empty spaces which result from temporal fragmentation, and that will disorient the reader who must follow some textual tracks. In any case “every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself” (Eco 1979, 49).

Nevertheless, there do exist other texts which will not fit in any of these categories, such texts as Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which analyse the creative process itself. These texts are more dangerous than they appear, as they drive us to ambiguity, altering contents, contradicting themselves through the insertion of different literary genres, or through the rupture of the conventional boundaries between fiction and reality, leading the reader towards a continuous self-reflection in front of the ambiguous text which clearly proposes an active mechanism of reading. Novels like *Tristram Shandy* or *Heart of Darkness* dramatize their narrators with great fullness, making them into characters who are as vivid as those they tell us about. Here the narrator is often radically different from the implied author who creates him. From an author’s viewpoint a successful reading of his book must eliminate all distance between the essential noems of his implied author and the norms of the reader. Booth calls the narrator reliable “when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms

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<sup>6</sup> What John Searle has defined as “fictitious assertion” in his article “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” *New Literary History* 6:2 (Winter 1975): 319-32.

of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not .... Unreliable narrators thus differ markedly depending on how far and in what direction they depart from their author's norms" (1967, 158-9).

Every character (or situation) of a novel is immediately endowed with properties that the text does not directly manifest and that the reader has been 'programmed' to borrow from the treasury of intertextuality, the reader is supposed to resort to various intertextual frames among which to take his *inferential walks* (Eco 1979, 21, 214). The reader's relation to the author's "second self" is always difficult to define. The terms 'persona,' 'mask,' and 'narrator,' are used when referred to the speaker of the work who is after all one of the elements created by the implied author and who may be separated from him by large ironies. The "I" of a work is seldom if ever identical with the implied image of the artist. Booth's sense of the implied author also includes the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all the characters, the style he or she uses, the implicit tone the author uses and his or her technique. In sum, the emotions and judgements of the implied author are the eventual design of great fiction, "the chief value to which this implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life" (Booth 1967, 73-4).

This rupture of generic boundaries, including those between literature and reality, is one of the main discursive strategies in the fictional work of Michael Ondaatje. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems* constitutes a group of poems with a narrative structure which, like a dramatic play or a cinematographic script, is based on a historical or legendary character. *Coming Through Slaughter*, on the other hand, is a fictitious biography of the real Charles (Buddy) Bolden, narrated in fragments which

provoke a tremendous aesthetic and imaginative activation in the reading process. *Running in the Family* is, for its complexity, the biggest challenge to generic boundaries: a fragmented collection of memories, pieces of research, poems, and photographs which try to reconstruct the author's most immediate and personal history: a past in Sri Lanka. The ordering of unknown and surprising facts recreates an unprecedented metafiction which challenges generic conventions and foregrounds a rupture with novel or autobiography:

Of all the Canadian poets who have turned to fiction in the last few decades (Cohen, Atwood, Kogawa, Musgrave, and so on), Ondaatje is the one who seems more aware of generic borders, and of how they can be usefully trespassed ... he takes it outside the boundaries of what we conventionally accept as literary genres and into the discourses of history and biography, even autobiography. (Hutcheon 1988a, 82)

As a result, Ondaatje has rather favoured the dramatic production of works like *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*.<sup>7</sup> Once more, the author is fully conscious of the generic borders and how they can be transgressed. The border between history and biography is trespassed with the use, in his works, of such discursive strategies as exclusion and emphasis, subordinating those supposedly true historical facts to narrative conventionalism "as sites of novelistic investigation" (Hutcheon 1988a, 81).

In his poetic narratives, *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*, the use of prose implicates novelistic conventions, though always questioned for the historical subject matter and the fragmented structure. In *Running*, another element is added to this linguistic tension between art and reality, transforming history in his-story, subjected to his own fictitious memory. Thus, history and narrative become integral parts of the text. Ondaatje becomes author and protagonist, a physical presence in the writing, the "I" of narration, and the mask

behind his characters. Hence, history becomes a process, never a product, in a vivid experience for writer and reader.

Ondaatje's language has always been an open door to the discovery of new voices which merge with his own, showing the instability of any fixed statement in the fictional process. Accordingly, certain voices appear in contradiction with his own, creating a vacuum and an uncertainty in the text, though provoking an activation in the reader's interpretative process. This authorial freedom of closeness and distance in the text and of rejection of the use of a monologic discourse, avoids the rigidity and the possible frustration of having to reveal himself, of having to reveal statements as real or unique. We find, then, a personal leap towards the appropriation of the other's language, "an overcoming of its otherness -an otherness that is only contingent, external, illusory....The primary stylistic project of the novel as a genre is to create images of languages" (Bakhtin 1981, 366).

In a formal perspective the category of the other appears derived from a notion of the self and of identity. In a circular model of discovery and of identity, the movement of the self that lacks its complement leaves its own sphere to get to know the other, and returns to its element. Discovery, however, does not necessarily imply an identification of the other. While we may think of discovery as the appearance of the other in the clear light provided by the categories of our knowledge, a further 'discovery of the other' may also remind us of the incongruity and difference that establish otherness as such (Siemerling 1994, 4). No discovery is final in Ondaatje's texts: the question of the other constitutes the opening or gap of knowledge that sets his texts in motion; it also seems to return, however, in some

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<sup>7</sup> There was a possibility once of a film; Michael Ondaatje hoped that Arthur Penn would direct.

form at their conclusion. The author-name ceases to be merely a signifier and becomes a system of meaning, a system which for most readers the literary text will incorporate. Such a reference is intertextual and incorporates the socially circulating conventions of the genre; but one announcing itself by an author known to a particular community incorporates not only that community's knowledge of him but its readings of his previous texts (see Davey 1993, 20).

Language constitutes a discovery in a text in which the reader, at first, cannot identify a clear protagonist as significant images merge in parallel characters. In *Slaughter*, we are offered a fragmented portrait which some consider a *künstlerroman* of a jazz musician, but, at the same time, a professionally frustrated photographer comes into focus together with a detective who, as a parallel figure of the author in the fictional process, searches for the missing musician. There is a fascination and uncertainty conveyed by the relationship between the narrator and the main character in Ondaatje's *Slaughter*. We are invited to witness a project of discovery that seems to concentrate on Buddy Bolden, a figure based upon the historical jazz cornet player by that name. But the image that appears in the cover of its first edition moves in the opposite direction from the musician it portrays, who has disappeared into silence:

Watching their friend float into the page smiling at them, the friend who in reality had reversed the process and gone back into white, who in this bad film seemed to have already half-receded with that smile which may not have been a smile at all, which may have been his mad dignity. (52-3)

The reader has already seen the photograph on the book's cover without realizing that he will have to search for the clues of his legend. He will not arrive at any conclusion,

though he will assimilate the multiplicity of versions of the musician's acquaintances. This kaleidoscope of voices is added to the metafictional process of the author; he has decided to approach an artist who haunts his imagination, though he clearly rejects the idea of designing a coherent portrait to satisfy his audience. The enigmatic expression on Bolden's face and the aura of the photograph, readable in several ways yet not yielding their truth to discovery, are symptomatic. Eventually, the narrator admits that Bolden appeared differently to all those who knew him. The "I" in *Slaughter* imagines Bolden as its other self but it does not claim completed knowledge either of the self or of the other (Siemerling 1994, 5). Since the other refers in *Slaughter* to a historical figure, these unfinalized and self-reflexive explorations of "the discovery self makes of the other" itself constitutes in this case a hybrid space that has been discussed as "historiographic metafiction."<sup>8</sup> The author's other narrative self is an historical character who is immediately turned into historiographic metafiction, a character who is no longer history but fiction and narration, and who slightly responds to certain anxieties of another artist, Michael Ondaatje. While the particular contexts of historical otherness and self-reflexive fiction make up only two specific aspects of the wider inquiry into alterity, both historiography and metafiction point to the "non transparency, inner logic, and materiality of language on the one hand, and to the discursive situation or context of enunciation on the other hand that play important roles in the constitution of self and other in language" (Siemerling 1994, 6).

In his study *Discoveries of the Other*, Winfried Siemerling uses the term "thetic" in order to indicate the simultaneous and interdependent production of the "I" and of the other,

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<sup>8</sup> See Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988a), pp. 61-77; *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988b), pp.

as well as the limit and horizon of this process of predication and naming. He also finds the term “heterology” useful to refer to textual strategies that both question the discursive dominance of the “I” and orient themselves toward that which lies outside the thetic operation. In this sense, the heterological would refer to that textual space of different discourses we find in Bakhtin’s *Dialogic Imagination* and would function as a backdrop to the thetic and its boundaries. Bakhtin’s major influence on Siemerling’s heterology is evident in the attempt to define a novel’s style through the combination of its different languages and codes, which constitute an open discourse depending on the reader or the different historical moments. And the critic goes farther to affirm that heterology can be contained in one’s language differing at the same time from one’s own, for it is “a discourse of the unknown that marks its own incompleteness and dependency, and seeks to construct, to comprehend, or to follow or to avoid, the unknown other appearing at its conscious boundary” (Siemerling 1994, 8-9).

This type of discovery is the one Ondaatje pursues as a writer, almost in an unconscious way, in the searching of an artist who does not leave a history behind, a search that simulates his own self in writing, though clearly differing from the author’s self. Through different images the author then designs a psychology which has to do with his own scattered information, maybe deployed as the negation of his own self, as the other side of the coin of his portrait.

Heterology, therefore, is a much wider term than alterity; it is not only his other in the mirror but an external object which reveals unknown in order to exert an imagistic

comparison. This process has been uncovered by the writer to sustain his imagery. *Slaughter* does not end with a complete and transparent identification between the author and the character, but with a dialogic struggle between self and other. Ondaatje has learned from his discovery to refuse to give any answer to a process which does not go beyond a mere textual experimentation:

The hero's discourse about himself and about his world fuses organically, from the outside, with the author's discourse about him and his world. With such an internal fusion of two points of view, two intentions and two expressions in one discourse, the parodic essence of such a discourse takes on a peculiar character: the parodied language offers a living dialogic resistance to the parodying intentions of the other; an unresolved conversation begins to sound in the image itself; the image becomes an open, living, mutual interaction between worlds, points of view, accents. This makes it possible to re-accentuate the image, to adopt various attitudes toward the argument sounding within the image, to take various positions in this argument and, consequently, to vary the interpretations of the image itself. The image becomes polysemic, like a symbol. (Bakhtin 1981, 409-10)

The search for equilibrium becomes a desired aim in writing, a balance between violence and 'stasis,' between pure feeling and reason, a stability that the artist never encounters. The lack of equilibrium between the subject and his perception of the object, which varies according to perspective, makes Ondaatje use parody as the ideal inversion to eliminate that faked security of finding an answer in the process. The example of the photography mentioned above has been the author's ideal resource to reflect an equivalent metaphor or to discuss the concept of objectivity. Accordingly, his protagonists rebel against certainty, though at the same time desperately craving security and spiritual calmness. Ambiguity is foregrounded at the end of his books together with the interesting implication of a first-person narrator who is involved as part of the narrative process. Ondaatje has learned from his discovery to refuse to give any answer to a process which does not go

beyond a mere textual experimentation. Ambiguity thus is foregrounded at the end of his books together with the interesting implication of a first-person narrator, considered by the author as a mere authorial intervention, who is involved as part of the narrative process. In *Billy the Kid*, *Slaughter* and *Running* “an undecidable ambiguity blurs the distinction between narrator and central character in a passage, isolated on the page, that could be spoken by either” (Siemerling 1994, 110):

It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. The morning sun has concentrated all the cigarette smoke so one can see it hanging in pillars or sliding along the roof like amoeba. In the bathroom, I wash the loose nicotine out of my mouth. I smell the smoke still in my shirt. (*Billy the Kid* 105)

I sit with this room. With the grey walls that darken into corner. And one window with teeth in it. Sit so still you can hear your hair rustle in your shirt. Look away from the window when clouds and other things go by. Thirty-one years old. There are no prizes. (*Slaughter* 156)

Half an hour before light I am woken by the sound of rain. Rain on wall, coconut, and petal. This sound above the noise of the fan. The world already awake in the darkness beyond the barred windows as I get up and stand here, waiting for the last morning. (*Running* 202)

Self and other overlap in an implicit way; in *Billy the Kid* with the photograph of the author at seven in a cowboy outfit on the last page, or in *Slaughter* when he narrates his identification with the character. In *Running* when alcohol unveils his father’s memory, the author/narrator confronts his other, “[s]cared of the company of the mirror” (189). Various images narrow the distance between narrator and protagonist until we discover, in the “acknowledgements,” that everything has been a fictional experiment.

In *Slaughter*, Ondaatje lets open the final possibility that the artist yields to madness and silence and, therefore, deploys an open end which cannot be considered either optimistic or pessimistic: “Laughing in my room. As you try to explain me I will spit you, yellow, out

of my mouth” (140). Together with Webb, the detective, the reader approaches Bolden’s life after analysing all the versions offered by his friends, “stories [that] were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with everyone of them” (63). In a way surprisingly parallel to the writer’s wishes, Bolden also talks about his desire that the reader/audience open their expectations without narrowing down his concept of art:

I wanted them to be able to come in where they pleased and leave where they pleased and somehow hear the germs of the start and all the possible endings at whatever point in the music I had reached *then*. Like your radio without the beginnings or endings. The right ending is an open door you can’t see too far out of. It can mean exactly the opposite of what you are thinking. (94)

Again, we observe an artistic identification between the narrator/writer and the protagonist. So the narrator comments further, proclaiming that “[w]hen he went mad he was the same age as I am now” (133), breaking his distance with the author who is continuously reflected in the mirror of the protagonist. Mirrors and glass, however, break too easily and can turn into violent weapons in the hands of a protagonist who rebels against the other, the musician or the writer, who shows the insecurity of the creative process, in which “[e]very time you stopped playing you became a lie” (59).

The relationship between the narrator and the fictional detective Webb is even more interesting in the author’s parody of the detective novel (Bjerring 1990, 226-36). The narrator of *Slaughter* functions as the conventional detective’s companion in his search for a close friend. Similarly, the narrator places the detective in awkward and risky situations in which the latter struggles and invents the outcome of his criminal cases. The use of all possible methods to capture the musician is the fictional basis for the narrator’s parody of the detective novel. The order Webb wished to impose upon the work is parodied by the

multiplicity of narrations and documents inserted by the narrator in his fictional quest. Therefore, the authoritarian search that Webb encompasses is displaced by the lack of a single authorial voice who does not look for a transcendent truth or solution in his work of art:

All the time I hate what I am doing and want the other. In a room full of people I get frantic in their air and their shout and when I'm alone I sniff the smell of their bodies against my clothes. I'm scared Webb, don't think I will find one person who will be the right audience. All you've done is cut me in half, pointing me here. Where I don't want these answers. (89)

The narrator/author does not want to find a detective-like solution to his case. "There are no prizes" (156), he asserts at the end of the book, and the conclusion will be the lack of solution before the silence of a musician drowned in madness, "[t]he right ending is an open door you can't see too far out of" (94). This sentence, which could have been uttered by Bellocq, reflects the knowledge the musician/narrator has acquired thanks to the photographer's influence.

Bellocq himself conforms the otherness Bolden wanted to reach when he could no longer breathe, surrounded with that fame where the "reputation made the room narrower and narrower, till you were...full of your own echoes, till you were drinking your own recycled air" (86). Bellocq, however, was his only security, "a window looking out" (59), the only possibility to empty oneself of all that vanity, to free oneself of all the external pressures to be his own. Bellocq's symbolic disease, hidrocefalia, parallels the progressive schizophrenia of his other, Bolden; though it will be Bellocq who will yield to the temptation of any schizophrenic to commit suicide in front of the hallucination of the public.

Subjectivity in language thus typically begins as a lack of knowledge, as the itinerary of a voice that mediates its self in what is unknown and yet appears fascinating, and therefore holds the promise of unrevealed meaning. “Not a story about me through their eyes then,” we read, for instance, in *Billy the Kid*: “Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in” (20). This “quest for knowledge reveals, more often than not, its very nature as quest when it comes up against its other: namely, to bring the other into the horizon of the known, reduce it to more of the same, and thus to annihilate it as other” (Siemerling 1994, 110).

On the other hand, the character of Billy the Kid deploys another authorial fictional analysis, who, in searching for a new equilibrium, designs a self in continuous struggle with violence and, at the same time, reflects an artist’s soul in his lyric monologues. As Stephen Scobie asserts (1985, 210), Billy is the ideal artist for the writer, almost surpassing the figure of the cornetist. Without being conscious of designing an artistic character, the cowboy becomes the narrator of his own experiences before his death, trapped in monologues loaded with unexpected sensuality. As the opposed character who pursues him, Garrett appears as a parallel figure to the detective Webb in *Slaughter*, thus is deployed as Billy’s otherness, immersed in a violence which cannot alter his emotional detachment. Anne Blott, however, is misled in her article “Stories to Finish,” as it is not Billy but Garrett the one that keeps a cold detachment regarding murder, Garrett, with his “ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke” (28). Billy is not Garrett’s parallel figure, but his rebellious other, a character totally immersed in violence who, in a naively romantic way, reveals the search of equilibrium between the poet and the gunman:

/ while I've been going on  
the blood from my wrist  
has travelled to my heart  
and my fingers touch  
this soft blue paper notebook  
control a pencil that shifts up and sideways  
mapping my thinking going its own way  
like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood (72)

Billy's lyric monologue reflects his closeness to his other self, the writer, a permanent first person which merges the artist and the gunman, and whose only working tool becomes the book's major symbol: "I am unable to move / with nothing in my hands" (75). Similarly, the poet, Billy, seems to be conscious of the distortion of his legend so that he tries to escape once more, as the author does, from the linearity of his conventional narrative:

Am the dartboard  
for your midnight blood  
the bones' moment  
of perfect movement  
that waits to be thrown  
magnetic into combat  
a pencil  
harnessing my face  
goes stumbling into dots (85)

The dartboard is one of the masks Billy wears in his struggle with Garrett and also in his death, being likewise the symbol of the act of writing that Ondaatje is enacting:

Writing posits itself as torture, turns the dartboard metonymy upside-down. So when Billy shows his face at the end of this monologue, marked by dots, signs of torture and writing, the face is nothing less than the text itself, the face of Billy's other. Death here refers not only to Billy but also to the drama of death incurred by language. (Kamboureli 1988, 121)

The merging of voices and attitudes, of rupture of generic and historical limits, makes of a long poem like *Billy the Kid* another element in the difficulty of deciphering the

experimentation of the Canadian long poem in recent decades. Hence, a limited heteroglossia is exerted between the narrator and the poet, between the artist and the historical self, in order to re-contextualize a fictional portrait which reveals a poet's vision in which "*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* makes the legend visible through the poet's recreative imagination; in the clothes he wears, in the stances that he takes, Billy the Kid reflects Ondaatje's version of the past" (Kelly 1989, 30).

Authority seems dubiously divided between poet and poeticized object in Ondaatje's title, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems*. The book is extremely personal, written at a crucial time when Ondaatje was actively involved in experimental poetry, specifically "concrete poetry," and under the influence of bpNichol. The fact that the character is an American legend and the action takes place outside Canada, facts that have been surprisingly criticized, are mere disguises in order to analyse other important factors in the artist's life. Ondaatje's protagonists are usually his own age and share the same interests and fascinations at the moment of writing. They even pursue him for several years until they gradually have some fictional shape; thus, the author explains one of his own strategies, the disguise, behind which "I found I could both reveal and discover myself more through being given a costume. I could be more honest about the things I wanted to talk about or witness" (Ondaatje 1990, 89).

In *Running*, the fictional process he designs in the searching for his other is even clearer when we read sentences like "watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble on perception, the shape of an unknown thing" (190). As in his previous works, the discovery of the other is the result of his search for an unknown character who

disappears leaving an unsettling silence behind. The quest for his father Mervyn is enacted from various fragments he collects in the oral tradition and which conclude in an open and indefinite way. In this case, the distance between author and narrator vanishes as the connection between self and other becomes surprisingly explicit. Hence, the parallelism both among the different fictional characters and the narrators corresponds to the one enacted between the narrator and the author in this work.

Here, the “I” searches for its other in a movement of discovery that takes the form of a journey. While we read the narrator’s travelling to the past, we are also invited to witness a writing process that shows him in the mirror-image of his father giving the author a brief moment of identity. Although comparisons remain implicit, for the first time the reader encounters an image of the other which appears as a metaphor of the self (Siemerling 1994, 137). *Running*, thematizing the movement from the self to the other in the author’s journeys from Canada to Sri Lanka, shows the “I” on a journey back as well as forward. The other, as in *Slaughter*, both is an inherent aspect of the self and remains to be discovered. But the invitation to equate author and narrator is extended more explicitly than ever before and will continue being so in the confessional tone of his next book *Secular Love*.

Siemerling considers Ondaatje’s characters assume the function of an “‘objective correlative’ for the internal world of the narrator, he ‘both is and is not’ this narrator. In the self-reflexive text, the historical figure begins to reflect aspects of the speaker who thus becomes another referent” (1994, 198). The names of self and other intersect, meeting in a brief metaphorical equation that produces something new. This principle holds also for the discovery of the other by the travelling ‘I’ -for the textual mediation between Canada and

Ceylon, son and father, and present and past. But the questions remain to what extent the other is admitted, and what the implications of this process are. Images of the written father and the writing son superimpose to the point of mutual identification. Two realities seem to coexist that would normally seem to be separated not only by spatial and temporal distances, but by the ‘ontological’ ones between fact and fiction. These historical figures are not reflections of the author before they are transposed into writing but masks or disguises in order to analyse some fictional purpose. Already as a textual discourse, *Running* will be the place where the distinction between the artist and his father, his own fictional creation, will be erased and, at the same time, reconciled in maturity.

In *Running*, fragmentation reaches unexpected limits through what Barthes would call *biographemes*,<sup>9</sup> both biographical and historical unities of meaning. Here the reader, more than ever, will participate in a historical reorganization which in itself constitutes the formal aspect of the work. An instance would be the section titled “April 11, 1932,” which begins, “I remember the wedding...” (36). The reader expects a detailed description of the event, but the wedding becomes an empty text. In the next section, “Honeymoon,” the reader becomes familiar with a series of social events and anecdotes of the time. The couple and their honeymoon are not narrated, only all the social and historical events which surrounded them: the price of beer, feminine fashion, etc. Further on in the text, however, this textual emptiness or ghost chapters will be partially filled in under the suggestive title “Photograph.” Ondaatje has not ended his play with the reader’s expectations, as not a single photograph appears until it is described in detail in previous pages, becoming a

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<sup>9</sup>Sade/Fourier/Loyola (Paris: Seuil, 1971): 14.

redundant perceptual image. The writer has successfully made words as real as a photographic image.<sup>10</sup>

These types of novels try to confront a written word with an image, a play in which the reader has to be alert and to use the only tool of perception, “the only clear winner being the unconscious, which here finds its ‘voice.’ Photographic illustration, too, can be a form of revenge of the visual against the verbal” (McHale 1991, 189). In other similar texts, the absence of connection between text and photograph makes the latter a simple demonstration of the visual power related to the book’s physicality, adding another type of discourse to the written one to “contribute to and serve to heighten the polyphonic structure of these texts;...they bring worlds of discourse, visual and verbal, into collision” (McHale 1991, 190).

The relation between language and the representation of reality is one of the main facts of Ondaatje’s books; the referent becomes a fictitious universe continuously “remembered” by the author of the historiographic metafiction, through self-reflection, through discursive strategies and through the obvious historical implications which underlie the fictional process.

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<sup>10</sup>Another device used by the author consists in the appearance of a photograph out of context which will be described afterwards, playing in this way with the reader’s perception, and with his memory.

## 5.2 Destructive Nature and Death: The Fate of the Anti-Hero

There is my fear  
of no words of  
falling without words  
over and over of  
mouthing the silence  
Why do I love most  
among my heroes those  
who sail to that perfect edge  
where there is no social fuel  
(“White Dwarfs,” *RJ* 70-71)

At this stage we will try to analyse the poetic design and recurrent imagery in Ondaatje’s experimental works. What started being surprising and defamiliarizing images in *Rat Jelly* will become repeated allegories and symbolism throughout his work. The main images, almost obsessively, move around violent selves, exotic natural elements, and sexual symbology.

According to Bakhtin and Foucault, writing in itself already constitutes a mode of violence enacted upon language when it reconstructs a different universe from the referential one. Within this type of discourse, the speaker can well be hidden behind a mask which allows narrator and author to be intertwined without any perceptual difference. Therefore, alterity appears between a self and an other who describes or narrates in order to create a different reality: “‘self’ positions ‘others’ in a negative relationship to that self. The violence of representation is the suppression of difference” (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1989, 8).

First, we need to differentiate between external violence and the violence of representation itself; in writing, however, that difference vanishes as one leads to the other. Second, formal violence also implies to take part ideologically on traditional

factors against which we rebel; an instance of this interrelation among the different types of aesthetic violence is the one developed by postcolonial countries in their literatures which constitute the social and cultural protest in the form of counter-discourse.

Postmodern culture is characterized by different types of textual violence, mainly through a clear opposition to considering the referent as a priority to representation. Therefore the term discourse is the most adequate to define a valid representation in which “[t]he words we use to represent the subjects and objects of violence are part and parcel of events themselves” (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1989, 24).

Language and textuality have been frequently related to death, normally in connection with the artistic vulnerability of the authorial voice. In his essay “What is an Author?” Foucault discusses this relationship:

Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life: it is now a voluntary effacement which does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer’s very existence. The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author’s murderer. (Foucault 1988, 198)

Writing becomes a risk for the writer, who is therefore another producer of an ever changing discourse in history, a process which can erase him as a figure behind the work, for “[o]nce the discourse is created it literally takes over the *name* of the author and disseminates that name into whatever culture is there to receive it. Authors, then, kill themselves repeatedly with whatever words they write” (Parkinson 1991, 56). For Parkinson writing is an ideal place to destroy subjectivity, where the voice disappears amidst the several subjectivities of the readers; writing would then be considered as power and danger, where each word escapes the authorial subjectivity; “[e]ach writing is a return to death, an erasing of subjectivity” (Parkinson 1991, 59).

From the 1960s on, violence has been an increasingly recurrent characteristic in Canadian literature. Writers such as Hugh MacLennan reject its use when used as a

synonym for evil and unfair causes. Other authors, however, such as Margaret Atwood, assert a justification and even an exaltation of certain types of personal violence in works like *Surfacing*, where it becomes a personal end to define one's identity or moral status. Mathews suggests another type of violence in Canadian narrative, what he calls "the novel of self-indulgence," a personal authorial device to express alienation from society in which "[t]heir protagonists are usually anti-heroes who move increasingly toward being thinly disguised or frankly admitted extensions of the author" (Mathews 1981, 39-40). Hence we encounter a generation of writers who celebrate in their works both the artist's alienation or solitude and the importance of a certain type of individualism in opposition to the traditional conception of the artist-hero who redeems an unjust society. Writers like Rohinton Mistry, Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen, Timothy Findley or Michael Ondaatje represent, among others, this generation of writers who celebrate, in an almost romantic way, a psychological disarray and the primacy of the individual, regardless of a social or political responsibility.

Creative activity is commonly imaged in Canadian literature as not merely crucial but traumatic. In a rather thematic approach, Gaile McGregor (1985) analyses the figure of the artist in the Canadian literary landscape; accordingly, there seem to be two kinds of fear associated with the artist's role in Canada. The first is the fear of being dehumanized and diminished by a commitment to art; not merely emotionally warped, cut off from normal human relations, but, more extremely, implicated in some kind of broadly destructive psychic violence that creates havoc, causes harm and damages others. McGregor wrongly claims, as other critics have done, that Ondaatje's Billy is a "dangerous amalgam of coldness and emotional turbulence" who, together with MacEwen's Julian the Magician, is killed at the end of the story (1985, 281). So, according to this thesis, the greater fear associated with the artist's role in Canada is the fear not of destroying but of being destroyed. And the answer to this dilemma would be the text's ambivalence: "the possibility that it is ultimately impossible to

reconcile the discrepant aspects of the artist's existential position" (1985, 284). After showing instances of how amputation or dismemberment can be archetypes and symbols for creativity in Canadian novels such as *Surfacing*, McGregor asserts how drowning would constitute the symbol which ultimately depicts mental dissolution, for it would be the "most excruciating, and perhaps most inescapable element in the Canadian artist's fear of his own role" (McGregor 1985, 291).

And the exemplary figure here is, of course, Buddy Bolden. Obsessed by death dreams, identified with windows, knives, and ambiguous hand imagery, Bolden, is another "prototypical" Canadian figure for the critic, a loser. Webb, on the contrary, in his quest for the missing Bolden serves as an explicit author-surrogate. As a detective, according to this thesis, he constitutes the model for the Canadian artist. On the other hand, both his methods and his morality are undermined by suggestions of, firstly, incompetence; secondly, manipulateness; and thirdly, illegitimate interest which somewhat connects his subjective modes to the photographer Bellocq, whose art is described as "fetish, a joyless and private game" (64); until the narrator suddenly emerges in his own person and identifies with the fictional subject. For McGregor, this unreliable narrator is at odds with the implied author, so this unreliability fosters anonymity simply by extension, inasmuch as they not only de-emphasize the impression of artifice or authorial manipulation associated with "storytelling" but also appear to minimize the element of subjectivity altogether: "The effect is most pronounced (a) when radically different kinds of fictional material are combined in such a manner that the significance of their interrelation is left undefined, or (b) when fragments of diverse fictional and factual material are mixed together more or less promiscuously, without any clear normative context as in *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*" (1985, 307).

Furthermore, the characters of these works usually have a strong anti-heroic charge and live in a highly personal world. A clear example would be Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, in which "the modern middle class, individualist, anti-hero -the

beautiful loser- wants violence done to him, wants oppression because it provides a state of constant provocation” (Mathews 1981, 41). Another representation of this type of egoist and anarchist artist is the protagonist of *Slaughter*, a black jazz cornetist at the beginning of the century whose only escape from fame is to drown into madness, leaving his contemporaries without a single piece of written music.<sup>1</sup>

*Slaughter* is a “novel” full of violence and alienation; a purposeless violence which gradually will become the personal signature of the author as “it is almost impossible not to see the suicidal cornetist Buddy Bolden as representing not just

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<sup>1</sup> Buddy Bolden (1868-1931) was born in New Orleans and his professional life in jazz music occupies a decade, from 1895 to 1906 approximately; from then on, the cornetist begins to show the first symptoms of madness which will take him to a mental penitentiary for the next 24 years. He is considered the first jazz musician though he did not leave any recording behind him. All we are able to know are the testimony of, among others, Bunk Johnson, Louis Armstrong or Freddie Keppard. The great pianist Jelly Roll Morton composed, eight years after Bolden’s death *I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say*, subtitled “Buddy Bolden’s Blues.” The lives of a number of jazz musicians are so awkward and “damned” in many ways that nobody, except great experimentalists, dare to approach them in fictional form. Julio Cortázar made a great effort in *El perseguidor*, searching for Charlie Parker’s soul. Clint Eastwood shot a serious film based on the same musician, *Bird*. The novelization of a jazz musician’s life is a kind of temerary attempt, in part because none of them are interesting on paper unless they have had a violent or dramatic life which, on the other hand, is difficult to transpose into writing. People destroyed by drugs, alcohol and the need to capture “something else,” the unknown tone and pitch which leads to madness are not challenging for the reader. The topic of jazz also seems to need a destroyed figure which tends to be reflected in a black man in trouble. Then we have the intensive charm and intensive creativity of a Bill Evans, or a Serge Chaloff -whites- or a Thelonius Monk, or a Don Byas -blacks- who are not interesting enough by themselves. Duke Ellington or Dizzy Gillespie’s quiet lives are not relevant but in historical terms or in a musical chronicle for his followers. Bolden, Parker or Billy Holliday, however, constitute the perfect biography for narrators and script writers. Ondaatje’s book is based on a historical reconstruction, but is not a historical book, none of Ondaatje’s books is. But it has a wide and challenging story behind inasmuch as it is a story without sound. Ondaatje has submerged his voice in the character’s, first, using different points of view: his as narrator and others’ such as Bolden’s fictional friends Webb and Bellocq. The key to this narration is the heteroglossia of these voices in the way jazz harmonies work in music and give space to certain solos of other musicians.

Buddy Bolden becomes mad not only in his excesses, but also in his unorthodox search for a perfection based on his musical intuition. There is no program or music written they cannot read but there is that “something else” which is impossible to track in their minds which makes that musical dream dramatic. That is Ondaatje’s great challenge in writing: a text which is a small orchestra where different voices play their tune, and a director behind with his pen. Thus Bolden’s cry of desperation when he proclaims his anonymity in a white room without history where you have to swallow your own echoes. That is, in fact, the cruel and pure relation of the artist with life and with himself, where there is only misery around (see José María Guelbenzu. *El Blues de Buddy Bolden*. 1999. *El País*, 10 July 1999).

Ondaatje but also a particular kind of modern artist” (Solecki 1985, 247). He would as well remind us of other protagonists in contemporary literature. In this case, the character has been designed with extreme care, as it constitutes a legendary figure with no documentary history behind. It could not be otherwise. That is the challenge the reader has to face once more, to analyse a book on both the literal and the figurative levels. The choice of a jazz musician has certainly a deep imagistic importance when silence is still today Ondaatje’s most important strategy:

Bolden’s madness is a literal collapse into silence, it is an emptying of acoustic space in so far as his cornet will never sound again; but for a writer, silence is figurative because in an age of print he never creates noise or sound. Writing is a silent, private act. (Solecki 1985, 248)

The author’s own obsessive privacy has been extended into the figure of an artist whose life becomes a drama: the authorial position behind the character is outstanding, despite his own criticism on the artist’s self-destructive nature. Similarly, a chronological gap is the ideal trope to express, within the necessary authorial detachment, the artist’s vulnerability in confronting a demanding audience that can only know a lack of psychological equilibrium. This is a common case of an artist whom Ondaatje consciously transforms into myth, for “[t]his deliberate merging of past and present, while preserving an ostensible historical distance, is his means of freeing his vision from time and history in order to ground it more definitely in psychology and myth” (Solecki 1985, 255).

The image of the brain is recurrent throughout the “novel,” reflecting the progressive weakness the artist suffers in his constant struggle with oneiric images that haunt him:

Everything is clear here and still I feel my brain has walked away and is watching me. I feel I hover over the objects in this house, over every person in my memory .... So I move from the morning’s energy into the later hours of alcohol and hunger and thickness and tiredness. Trying to overcome this awful and stupid clarity. (100)

me with a brain no better than their sad bodies, so sad they cannot afford to feel sorrow towards themselves, only fear. And my brain atrophied and soaked in the music I avoid, like milk travelling over the border into cheese ....My brain tonight has a mattress strapped to its back .... Their bodies murdered and my brain suicided. Dormant brain bulb gone crazy. (119)

Bolden's hand going up into the air  
in agony.  
His brain driving it up into the  
path of the circling fan.

This last movement happens forever and ever in his memory. (136)

The poignant psychological wreckage gradually turns into madness, the only escape of a destructive art which mutilates the artist. His friend and fellow artist Bellocq has committed suicide. Bolden's romantic escape of madness is another alternative to suicide as he is unable to confront a sickening fame: "celebrity [is] a razor in the body."<sup>2</sup> According to Solecki, this situation implies an irony in the peace he finds in madness, a spiritual tranquillity which brings him to the asylum for the last twenty-four years of his life. Silence becomes, therefore, the escape of the artist whose art is unbearable: "The silence of schizophrenia into which Bolden plunges becomes paradoxically the only mode of being within which his continuing survival is possible" (1985, 264).

This is the first work with a stable narrative structure of an author who had already experimented with the same themes and imagery in his poetry. Maybe the lyric structure was too narrow for the expression of certain artistic obsessions he needed to develop. Within this narrative structure, however, poetry is definitely present, as recurrent words and images of his poetic world extend towards an imagery with a different structural basis. Key words in his work, like *web* and *net*, are important as images which formally structure a whole symbology of the creative process, that is, an

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<sup>2</sup> "Heron Rex" was published three years before in *Rat Jelly* (52-3). Both books must be considered and studied in a parallel way as they both share recurrent imagery. In "Spider Blues" (63-5), the spider functions as the image representing the writer who knits his poetic construction.

architectural process similar to the knitting of a cobweb or a net with innumerable intersections. Thus the protagonist of *Billy the Kid* asserts: “When I walked I avoided the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish. The flies caught in those acrobat nets were the only murder I saw” (17).

According to Steven Heighton, Ondaatje captures an image or an ambiguous sense to surprise the reader as “[w]ords are for him a safety net where he is afraid of silence: He indicates in his poems the kinetic potential of the two most static forms: photography and literature” (1988, 226). The sight of his protagonists in constant movement shows, once more, the obsession to capture the “stasis,” death, or immobility which, literally, reflects the words on print: “*Coming Through Slaughter* represents Ondaatje’s most serious effort to make poetry more public and immediate by integrating language with the kinetic elements of film, music, certain types of photography, the dance, and rhythms of the flesh” (Heighton 1988, 233). Art’s different energies intermingle to represent an eclectic and active art, in which both artistic creation and destruction are melted and confused. *Slaughter* and *Billy the Kid* develop in this upward and downward dynamics of artistic energy; that is, a narrative and poetic composition in which words are both literal and figurative in order to emulate the creative process of the writer. In *Billy the Kid*, the character in continuous motion emulates the writing process, crossing frontiers and generic boundaries so that the narrator vanishes in the monologue to talk about his structural process:

Two years ago Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. Our horses stepped from country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of tree green. The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge of action rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat. That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning. (20)

We thus observe certain moments of “stasis” or trance in the protagonist who contemplates the world around him with a different perception, moments in which the character does not only rebel against the destructive nature that surrounds him but also observes it with a minutely visual detail, as though with a photographic lens which structures landscape under a different perspective. Dennis Lee considers this view as one of the crucial moments of the work, where the protagonist struggles between nature and civilization (1985, 174). We can cite three of the many examples that the text offers:

she is crossing the sun  
sits on her leg here  
sweeping off the peels

traces the thin bones on me  
turns tipping slow back to the pillow  
Bonney, Bonney  
I am very still  
I take in all the angles of the room (21)

Strange how I feel people  
not close to me  
as if their dress were against my shoulder  
and as they bend down  
the strange smell of their breath  
moving across my face  
or my eyes  
magnifying the bones across a room  
shifting in a wrist (39)

I am on the edge of the cold dark  
watching the white landscape in its frame  
a world that's so precise  
every nail and cobweb  
has magnified itself to my presence (74)

Sex and violence occupy the climactic moments in both works. Interestingly enough, they are also framed as destructive moments where blood and corporeal fluids drown the protagonists in physically and psychologically desperate moments:

All my body moves to my throat and I speed again, a river of sweat to her waist ... all the desire in me is cramp and hard, cocaine on my cock, for my heart is at my throat hitting slow pure notes into the shimmy face of victory .... feel the blood that is real move up bringing fresh energy in its suitcase, it comes up flooding past my heart in a mad parade, it is coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet, god can't stop god can't stop it. (*Slaughter* 131)

The beginning of *Slaughter* warns the reader that what he is about to read is the “geography” of a legendary character. *His geography* are the first words which displace us from his history which is to be submerged in his surroundings and space. Similarly, the author has avoided the epigraph, “his biography,” in order to analyse a fictitious and conflictive story of a real character, who lives in the real and suggestive neighbourhood of “Storyville” in New Orleans. Other images are useful for a writer like Ondaatje: glass, ice, windows, photographs, and mirrors which do not reflect the external reality of a realist fiction, but rather the symbology of the fragile and the dangerous, of vulnerability, of the lying boundary that rises between people and objects. Referential narrative will be a false window between the real and the imaginary: “When Webb was here with all; his stories about me and Nora, about Gravier and Phillip Street, the wall of wire barrier glass went up between me and Robin” (*Slaughter* 86).

The novel's title, *Coming Through Slaughter*, suggests birth and death simultaneously, as though we have returned from death in order to capture this marginal character, an anti-hero who died to complete public indifference and who “was buried in an unmarked grave at Holtz cemetery after being brought back from the Asylum through Slaughter, Vachery, Sunshine, back to New Orleans” (*Slaughter* 137). The reader, as the novel's detective, will have to decipher a dark life with one tool, a photograph, as the only source of meaning. The author hence implicates himself in a narrative to offer a few clues which will not be disclosed entirely, therefore provoking his conscious disappearance as an omniscient narrator:

we find the link between writing and death manifested in the total effacement of the individual characteristics of the writer; the quibbling and confrontations that a writer generates between himself and his text cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. (Foucault 1977, 117)

In a fusion of author and character at the end of the book, Ondaatje sees only his own absence in front of the mirror though the complicity with the self-destructive artist is evident:

The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be. (*Slaughter* 133)

A complicity which has led to an intimacy with the role of character/victim is disclosed in the narrator's use of marginal figures like the musician or the prostitute of New Orleans, where neither self-determination nor self-respect exists. Surprisingly enough, Leslie Mundwiler observes that this book is a lacking social involvement with racial injustice:

there is nothing to suggest that his pain and conflict might come from a consciousness of the oppressions of poverty and racism. Bolden appears to act out of an egoism almost wholly preoccupied with sex, art and the violence arising therefrom. He came from nowhere, it seemed to contemporaries, to take up his career as jazz musician, and Ondaatje allows that mysterious boundary between his background and his fame to stand ... in the novelist's field of vision. Nor does Bolden react to the condition of poverty around him except in the carefully limited description of the ruined prostitutes. (1984, 104-105)

Racism, poverty and injustice, however, are outstanding throughout the whole book, as marginal characters are present and are the only protagonists:

The word "black" does not have to be mentioned, since racial oppression is the very atmosphere of Buddy's community. Ondaatje treats jazz as the voice of the people released from one form of slavery into another .... Although there are no slaves identified in the book, there are innumerable victims, most of whom are women. (Kertzer 1991, 37)

The female presence is foregrounded in the book as an object of desire and a source of self-destruction. Moreover, the most revealing transgression involves the mutilated and degraded prostitutes, constantly attacked by a forever present masculine violence:

They walk up and down, keep moving like sentries to show they haven't got broken ankles. The ones that have stand still and try to hide it. A quarter a fuck. The mist has helped them tonight. Normally now the pimps are out hunting the mattress whores with sticks. When they catch them they break their ankles. Women riddled with the pox ... steal their mattress and with a sling hang it on their backs and learn to run fast when they see paraders with a stick. Otherwise they drop the mattress down and take men right there on the dark pavements, the fat, poor, the sadists who use them to piss in as often as not because the disease they carry has punched their cunts inside out, taking anything so long as the quarter is in their hands .... These broken women so ruined they use the cock in them as a scratcher. (*Slaughter* 118)

The last section of the book constitutes its anti-climax, the negation of violence through the silence of madness. Confined in the asylum, the artist lives in silence in his last years: "He does nothing, nothing at all. Never speaks, goes around touching things" (149). Even this passivity becomes extreme when he is the object of rape: "They make me love them. They are the arms looking after me. On the second day they came into my room and took off all my clothes and bent me over a table and broke my anus .... Bolden, who sublime took rapes from what he thought were ladies in blue pyjamas" (139, 148). He is transformed, once again, into the accomplice of the suffering prostitutes, accepting his destiny, paying the price of a victim in a society structured by relations of power.

Ondaatje has always shown an artistic interest in a certain type of violence exerted by masculine protagonists who also possess a special sensitivity. Despite this obvious and recurrent characteristic, the author evades being concrete in describing this fascination in one of his interviews:

I'm not conscious of trying to shock someone when I'm writing with a specific image. That just happens in the process of writing .... It is there, and it's obviously a part of my style. But I don't think I'm a particularly violent poet, which some people feel I

am, I don't think I'm a grotesque poet, as some people think. You know, I think I have a vision of reality that is totally normal to me. (Ondaatje 1980, 133-34)

Such characters as William Bonney in *Billy the Kid*, Buddy Bolden in *Slaughter* and Mervyn Ondaatje in *Running*, are violent and tormented selves who try to use physical violence in order to escape from both a creative and self-destructive sensibility. The romantic backdrop with which the author provides these characters is hardly depicted in an innocent way. There is an authorial criticism underlying all these characters. Moreover, this authorial voice has been gradually moving towards more rational backgrounds, though, in the beginning, directed the reader to a compassion and an empathy towards these romantic outcasts: "Violence in Ondaatje's work represents an aesthetic virtue, but whereas Ondaatje's earlier texts appear to valorize violence enacted for purely idiosyncratic reasons, Ondaatje's later texts begin to reevaluate the ethics of such violence and suggest that it must ultimately serve a social responsible end" (Bök 1992, 109).

This coldness and detachment in confronting extremely violent situations become, in the end, a defamiliarizing weapon which disorients the reader who will, however slowly, uncover the images till he accepts that what Ondaatje pretends is an artistic exaltation of certain situations which put the hero at the edge of an unexpected danger. Violence is a textual trope in postmodernist writing, an innovative effect which leads the reader to desperate and ideologically doubtful situations. Nevertheless, the defamiliarizing and heterodox will become familiar in a work that has turned the decentered and marginal sources into central thematic concerns.

In his early years as a poet, Ondaatje showed a special interest in social isolation, consciously rejecting an ideological profile or a social function in the artist. Gradually, and with some reticence, he has shyly approached his artistic function with more optimism. His symbology is focused on detached and anarchic characters who are revealed socially through a common weapon: silence. Hence, the lack of

articulation is the most common symbol of protest, as “[t]he mystic privacy one can be so proud of has no alphabet of noise or meaning to the public outside” (*Slaughter* 64). We could therefore consider this position as a desire to self-destruction in the poet’s communication, an artistic death in front of the difficulty that lies in linguistic expression: “Ondaatje actually appears to present a psychological argument in which the physical violence of his male aesthetes is in fact a pathological extension of a volatile creativity ... the unmotivated violence of the characters parallels the chaotic intensity of their art” (Bök 1992, 114).

The hero is, in his works, an anti-hero struggling against society, a solitary artist who acts in an anarchic way. So his characters are paired with opposed selves as Pat Garrett and Webb who act in a rational way. Garrett affirms that Billy’s imagination “was usually pointless and never in control” (*Billy the Kid* 43). Frank Lewis, another character in *Slaughter*, asserts that Bolden “was tormented by order, what was outside it” (37). Buddy Bolden “did nothing but leap into the mass of changes and explore them and all the tiny facets so that eventually he was almost completely governed by fears of certainty” (15). As a result, these conflicts turn out to be unresolved in characters who evade categorization from an authorial or authoritative point of view. They escape the critic’s definition so they are located as the narrator’s other. Billy remains enigmatic in this fictional version of his legend, in which “[t]he rather cruel smile, when seen close, turned out to be intricate and witty. You could never tell how he meant a phrase, whether he was serious or joking. From his eyes you could tell nothing at all” (43). Similarly, Buddy Bolden escapes any monologic entrapment warning the reader: “As you try to explain me I will spit you, yellow, out of my mouth” (40).

The creative process of such characters and artists is the main concern of the author, their conflicts and minds rather than the result of their art. As a consequence, the only result of this fragmentation and thematic maze is the one of textual violence, the conscious destruction of traditional literary codes already shyly exposed in his

poetic work ten years before: “maybe something got clarified on *Billy* that didn’t get clarified in the earlier poems, although I think I could go back and see preparations for Billy in *The Dainty Monsters* ... You know, it’s a reality. It’s getting a balance between the two worlds -the violent and the gentle- but both exist” (Ondaatje 1980, 134).

*Slaughter* constitutes the portrait of an extreme and self-destructive artist, itself a reflection of the anxiety and terror of any genius who foreshadows his own inability to deal with his art. Ondaatje, while showing in the mid-seventies his artistic obsessions in this book, explores, in a poetic temptation of alterity, the self-destructive antecedents that warn us of the dangers of fame and the psychological risk for the audience who locates the artist in an ivory tower. This poetic recurrence goes back a few years before and is reflected in the poem “White Dwarfs” which closes his book *Rat Jelly* (70). Narrator and author merge in Bolden’s voice, also recalling “Letters & Other Worlds” (*RJ* 24-6), when we hear that “(m)y fathers were those who put their bodies over barbed wire. For me. To slide into the region of hell. Through their sacrifice they seduced me into the game” (*Slaughter* 95). The title also suggests the trespassing of death into the indestructible boundary of fame in the artist, a title that, at the end of the book, is contradicted by a comment where author and protagonist intertwine, “there are no prizes” (156). There is no permanent immortality, fame is more destructive than rewarding. After a death like Bolden’s, the first jazz musician, we cross the threshold of his legend to recreate a fictional character out of an imagined tormented artist, thus approaching an enigmatic self-victim of his time.

A parallel example of the self-destructive artist is the photographer Bellocq, a historical figure contemporary to Bolden though they never met in real life. Bellocq outlived Bolden several years and, in the book, his presence reveals another tormented artist who tries to transform Bolden into an introverted and self-sufficient self. After meeting the photographer, Bolden realizes what it means to be an artist and the renouncements it implies when he affirms, “I was annoyed till I admitted to myself I

had been lonely and this comforted me” (98). Bolden’s safety and detachment from fame are Bellocq’s ultimate aim, he is the ideal character-victim who perfectly fits into the author’s fictional project: “The photographer E.J. Bellocq ... was a historical character, deformed as Ondaatje described him, and many of his photographs survive. But he did not, historically, commit suicide in a fire (in fact, he lived on until the late 1930s), and Ondaatje himself admits that only ‘(p)riate and fictional magnets drew him and Bolden together’ (158)” (Scobie 1978, 7).

A later biography by Donald M. Marquis, which the author never read, gives some insights into the fictional process developed by Ondaatje. Bolden, a jazz cornetist, never worked in a barber shop nor did he edit a newspaper called *The Cricket*. Ondaatje creates this latter fact as a fictional strategy in his creative process, positioning an artist as an editor of a sensationalist paper which collects fragments and news of doubtful fiability. In a parallel way, the detective who searches for the protagonist is a fictional character who functions as a connecting mechanism, the “newsman’s brain” of the whole fictional process. The Brewitts, a couple who hosts Bolden after his escape, are also fictional, though necessary to express certain authorial recurrences regarding male and female conflicts which, at that time, obsessed the author. Once more, the couple stands as the ideal device to introduce the love triangle which surrounds the protagonists, where masculine betrayal and feminine binary roles have a decisive effect on male vulnerability.

Webb and Bellocq, moreover, are opposed characters and are placed as the positive and negative magnet at the centre of Bolden’s vital struggle; they are the extremes and represent binary opponents through which Bolden’s uncertain future will be outlined: “All my life I seemed to be a parcel on a bus: I am the famous fucker. I am the famous barber. I am the famous cornet player. Read the labels” (106). Webb cannot endure Bolden’s success, his magnetism towards the public, a magnetism Bolden learned from him; only by obliging him to return will Webb have the certainty of his own power over the musician. The key to understanding the artist’s figure must

then lie in Ondaatje's fictional view of art and artistic integrity while confronting the public: "It seems likely that this fear of the restrictive power of audiences and reputation is one of the closest points of affinity between Bolden and Ondaatje himself" (Scobie 1978, 9). Webb, therefore, represents the demanding audience whereas Bellocq relates to Bolden as his friend and partner. Webb's control over Bolden has almost fascist connotations in his concept of a tyrannic friendship, the duty towards the public, despite the fact that Bolden "didn't want to be a remnant, a ladder for others" (102). Bellocq, on the other hand, represents Webb's opposite, "the friend who scorned all the giraffes of fame" (91).

The description of the crippled photographer is the clearest example of the romantic artist in Ondaatje. Bellocq, a psychotic character, reflects the impossibility of social integration, the lack of understanding of the general public made him develop a different kind of job:

HYDROCEPHALIC. His blood and water circulation which was of such a pattern that he knew he would be dead before forty and which made the bending of his knees difficult .... He never shot landscapes, mostly portraits. Webb discovered the minds of certain people through their bodies. Or through the perceptions that distinguished them. (57)

Bolden's vital space, his geography, eventually becomes the plot of the book, a space full of historical and fictional fragments in the attractive city of New Orleans at the turn of the century. There the author travels at the beginning of the 1970s to do some research on this fascinating figure, feeling instead the physical geography in his own skin:

This is where he lived seventy years ago, where his mind on the pinnacle of something collapsed, was arrested, put in the House of D .... The career beginning in this street of the paintless wood to where he gave his brains away. The place of his music is totally silent. There is also so little noise I easily hear the click of my camera as I take fast bad photographs into the sun aiming at the barber shop he probably worked in. (133)

The author assigns great value to the documentary research that precedes any of his books. Through the choice of a piece of history as a starting point of a legend, he becomes both the geographer of a new life and the creator of a new spatial perception, in sum, “conscious of the tension that constitutes the relationship between spatial perception and disbelief in the continuity of accurate knowledge, so that what his own spatial perception lacks in content and precision he supplies by means of his imagination” (Kamboureli 1983, 116). Accordingly, the space or landscape sustains a poignant imagery in the book. The idea of searching that surrounds Bolden through the different landscapes, the parades with his band detailing the geography of the place, make the reader repeatedly consult the map. Even the rooms and corners, which constitute his psychic space, are carefully described with obsessive images of the mind: “The book is a kind of mental landscape, but at the same time, I want to make it real, believable, tactile. I’ve always been convinced by mental or artistic landscapes .... Ideally, I want that mental landscape and the personal story to wrestle against the documentary” (Ondaatje 1990, 92).

Ondaatje’s purpose is not to capture a legend or give some meaning to an unknown story, but rather to recreate a myth out of an enigmatic character and, hence, arbitrarily select the historic fragments that his personal narrative allows to develop into a plot. The author thus reflects only his version of the myth inasmuch as he is not interested in the character’s legend as much as in its potential for interpretation. “When I was writing these two books,” explains the author, “I was in the state of trying to find out something about somebody else. It’s a process of unfolding” (1980, 138-39). Thus, ambiguous fragments merge to create an impact on the reader as they create a new formal inscape, an experimental novel, which has no precedent in Ondaatje’s poetic work: a referent which is New Orleans and a text which is fictional, where the I of the artist, Bolden-Ondaatje, is intertwined in a fictitious self:

Here. Where I am anonymous and alone in a white room with no history and no parading. So I can make something unknown in the shape of this room. Where I am

King of Corners. And Robin who drained my body of its fame when I wanted to find that fear of certainties I had when I first began to play, back when I was unaware that reputation made the room narrower and narrower, till you were crawling on your own back, full of your own echoes, till you were drinking in only your own recycled air. And Robin and Jaelin brought me back to that open fright with the unimportant objects. (86)

Meanwhile, the photographer, Bellocq, commits suicide in the solitude of his room. In front of a fictitious audience he sets the room on fire, as a sacred sacrifice, he is surrounded by chairs in semi-circle like in a Greek tragedy. Surprisingly enough, Bolden loves and envies Bellocq with his self-sufficiency. Bolden's only escape, however, is less romantic, madness, "a kind of transcendental serenity only madness can bring" (Barbour 1993, 133). After his friend's death, the musician reflects on his importance:

Him watching me waste myself and wanting me to step back into my body as if into a black room and stumble against whatever was there. Unable then to be watched by others .... And me in my vanity accusing him at first of being tone deaf! He was offering me black empty spaces .... he was the only one who could stretch up in the barber shop and *not get hit by the fan*. He didn't rely on anything. He trusted nothing, not even me .... he tempted me out of the world of audiences where I had tried to catch everything thrown at me. (91. Italics mine)

Ondaatje tries to reconstruct a past but, in the process, he hints at the problems and difficulties he faces. We are definitely reading a fragment of a fictional history with several layerings of alterity and subjective interpretations. The authorial detachment, however, is evident and intrudes especially in moments where the historical documents are deficient, which happens quite often as they "were not being clear, they were not giving me the story of it all, and I didn't know who was supposed to be the hero of the story" (93).

Writing is here deployed as an emotional suicide, a detachment from the writer's artistic forefathers, a permanent risk for an artist who is at the edge of his emotions and fantasies and who has objectified himself behind conflictive historical characters:

Drawn to opposites, even in music we play. In terror we lean in the direction that is most unlike us. Running past your own character into pain. So they died eventually maybe suiciding for me or failing because of a lost lip who knows. Climbing over them still with me in the sense I have tried all my life to avoid becoming them. (96)

The artist's self-destructive tendencies finally respond to an art which reflects an explosion of inner conflicts and sufferings as he sees in his forefathers and contemporaries such as Galloway, Carey or Scott. Mental breakdowns or suicides are irremediably connected with tormented artists in history, whose "suffering becomes the mark of sincerity in the work itself, and, in popular mythology, the madness or suicide of the artist authenticates the *oeuvre*" (Solecki 1985, 147). Buddy Bolden represents a modern artist with a confessional layering that can be ambiguous inasmuch as it is "the author naked which modern audience demands" (Sontag 1966, 42).

Perhaps "(a)ll suicides, all acts of privacy are romantic you say and you maybe right ... sky beginning to emerge blue through darkness into the long big windows of this house" (101). The cornetist may find a certain relief in his last performance, where his music merges with an exacerbated audience who pushes him to play without stop, "to play an ultimate music in which the self is totally negated, and, contrarily, to find release from his anxiety-ridden compulsion to play" (Solecki 1985, 263). In this moment, Bolden may finally find the peace that only madness can bring, a final rest that the narrator poses as the only path to survival, perhaps "to enact and to examine warily and objectively issues which when lived existentially -as in Bolden's life- could destroy an artist" (Solecki 1985, 264). The author thus sees in this silent madness a final alternative to suicide and therefore submerges himself, in a typical Ondaatjean gesture of alterity, in the protagonist's mind, trying to express what a jazz musician can feel:

Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body, and you like a weatherbird arcing round in the middle of your life to exact opposites and burning your brains out so that from June 5, 1907 till 1931 you were dropped into amber in the

East Louisiana State Hospital .... The excesses cloud up the page. There was the climax of the parade and then you removed yourself from the 20th century game of fame, the rest of your life a desert of facts. Cut them open and spread them like garbage. (134)

If in some ways a juiced-up tale of sex, drugs, and, if not rock 'n roll, then at least some snot-blowing jazz, *Slaughter* is also a classic psychological novel, driven by the voice and character of Bolden. To portray Bolden, Ondaatje uses a pastiche structure, borrowing from conventions as diverse as the police procedural and photographic portraiture. Here are different ways of getting at the truth of a person, and Ondaatje makes this search for the truth or essence of both Bolden and the novel's unnamed narrator the journey or quest -the story, the narrative movement- of the novel itself. The episodic, often circular structure, in which events are sometimes presented from more than one point of view through short, abrupt sections framed by white space -the graceful leaping elisions that suggest what is left out of the story- enable the reader to partake in the process of the fiction. If this kind of reading is a coming through something then the writing is a kind of ghosting, a moving between different worlds. In fact, the journey through the landscape and people surrounding Bolden -through New Orleans' Storyville district in particular- and the drift through Bolden's inner terrain is a journey full of shifting borders, frameworks that make and remake themselves to mirror the make-up and break down of Bolden's personality as he begins to slip from his social self as a dog might slip a leash. Bolden is, above all else, a character abraded by contact with the world around him, suffering from the dissonance between his private and social selves, afflicted by a terrifying awareness of the borders of personality.

In the end, though, we see Bolden through Ondaatje's use of language: "Whether thrashingly over-the-top or spare and suggestive as a whisper -ranging from the high to the low in diction and always studded with the concrete- the words are the thing, so well-controlled that here, for the reader, is where the immediacy and finally

the transparency of the story lies” (Levine 1995, 29). We just go with it, witness to a sleight of hand that suggests far more than the sum of its parts. In many ways *Slaughter* is a book about silence, no matter what one’s aesthetics is and however one stands on issues of the day such as race or gender.



## 6.1 Visual Images, Oneiric Scenes and Madness: An Escape Towards Romanticism in *Billy the Kid and Slaughter*

modern poetry is a poetry of the object. In it, Nature becomes a fragmented space, made of objects solitary and terrible, because the links between them are only potential .... These poetic words exclude them: there is no humanism in modern poetry. This erect discourse is full of terror, that is to say, it relates man not to other men, but to the most inhuman images in Nature: heaven, hell, holiness, childhood, madness, pure matter. (Barthes 1979, 50)

Poetic imagery is one of the dominant features to be analysed in *Billy the Kid*, as continuous images gradually develop to design the book's architecture. On page 6, exactly framed by the empty picture on the previous page, Billy lists his crimes as an anticipation of his own death:

These are the killed.

(By me) -

Morton, Baker, early friends of mine.

Joe Bernstein. 3 Indians.

A blacksmith when I was twelve, with a knife.

5 Indians in self-defence (behind a very safe rock).

One man who bit me during a robbery.

Brady, Hindman, Beckwith, Joe Clark,

Deputy Jim Carlyle, Deputy Sheriff J.W. Bell.

birds during practice,

These are the killed.

(By them) -

Charlie, Tom O'Folliard

Angela D's split arm,

and Pat Garrett

sliced off my head.

Blood a necklace on me all my life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Billy's list has the same structure as Sheila Watson's opening of *The Double Hook* (1959; 1991). In both books the mysterious figure, Billy and James's mother, die on the first page. More than an intertextual reference *The Double Hook* serves as a model for Ondaatje; Watson's novel challenges the burden of colonial fiction that preceded her creating a liberating and emancipatory first

This image of death appears throughout the book and ends with “blood planets in his head” (*Billy the Kid* 104). These imaginary circles are intertwined and form a thematic chain which designs the actual movement and purpose of the text. One of the most successful narrative fragments is also strategically located at the beginning of the text, and symbolizes the different psychic aspects we discover in other episodes of Billy’s fictional life. Billy’s experience with other animals in the barn constitutes his own psychic space. The protagonist’s sensuality and violence increase in dark surroundings towards unlimited degrees, and where the threatening sun only lets in a few rays. The barn is suggestively divided into two floors, and the upper floor or haystack shelters the protagonist’s nightmares: “Above me was another similar sized room but the

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(post)modern novel in English Canadian literature, which reflects another view of Canadian landscape and the existence of a Canadian mythology in her land of British Columbia. More accurately, as David Staines asserts, the novel constitutes “the beginning of the post-colonial voice in Canadian fiction” (Staines 1995, p. 17):

In the folds of the hills  
under Coyote’s eye  
lived  
the old lady, mother of William  
of James and of Greta  
  
lived James and Greta  
lived William and Ara his wife  
lived the Widow Wagner  
the Widow’s girl Lenchen  
the Widow’s boy  
lived Felix Prosper and Angel  
lived Teophil  
and Kip

until one morning in July

Greta was at the stove. Turning hotcakes. Reaching for the coffee beans. Grinding away James’s voice.

James was at the top of the stairs. His hand half-raised. His voice in the rafters.

James walking away. The old lady falling. There under the jaw of the roof. In the vault of the bed loft. Into the shadow of death. Pushed by James’s will. By James’s hand. By James’s words: This is my day. You’ll not fish today. (11)

floors were unsafe for me to walk on. However I heard birds and the odd animal scrape their feet, the rotten wood magnifying the sound so they entered my dreams and nightmares” (*Billy the Kid* 17).

The various images we hear and read in the book constitute an assault to the senses; Billy’s senses are depicted through the attention to the dynamics of the text; his relation with the animals in the barn provides the clues for us to understand and accept a character who has developed a larger sensual capacity than the rest of the human beings. All characters surround and interact, admire or hate him, but will not develop a close relationship with his individualistic world. Billy is certainly conscious that “[t]he others, I know, did not see the wounds appearing in the sky, in the air. Sometimes a normal forehead in front of me leaked brain gasses .... In the end the only thing that never changed, never became deformed, were animals” (*Billy the Kid* 10).

As an imagistic contrast Garrett, “a newsman’s brain” (*Billy the Kid* 11), is rational and pitiless, without any connection with the natural world. He does not understand Billy’s imagination, “usually pointless and never in control” (*Billy the Kid* 43). Control is the sheriff’s ally, a quality lacking in Billy, who acts instinctively. Garrett controls his own violence in a cold and conscious way, for he “does not have Billy’s overdeveloped senses, which is perhaps to say that there isn’t much of the poet about him, while Billy’s imagination pierces the reality that people like Garrett depend upon” (Dragland 1971, 67). Ondaatje’s irony lies in the legendary opposition between the sheriff and the cowboy, which he unravels and destroys in order to design a sensitive and romantic protagonist. This character, though, tries to detach himself emotionally, actually hides an emotional struggle within himself, a constant “angry weather in my head” (*Billy the Kid* 58). Ondaatje thus talks about his aesthetic reconstruction of the historical character:

With “Billy,” I was reacting against the genre of film, where everything was so secure and obvious that nothing really was going to surprise us. I was so fed up with Westerns by the time I was in my 20s, they were so sillily romantic. A lot of the writing in the ‘60s was either very sociological about violence or a cliché. So I

thought, I'm just going to make him dangerous, not just for the sake of being dangerous, but because this is what the reality is. (in Taylor 1994, 45)

According to Stephen Scobie, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* poses Billy as an artist, and thus we can refer to the author both of his complete works and of his murders, even to the sum of the different versions that have previously appeared. Ondaatje could well be using a romantic figure of the artist as antisocial, “for Ondaatje Billy’s status as outlaw is intimately connected with the nature of his perception. He is placed outside society not only by what he does, but by the very way he sees the world” (Scobie 1985, 193). The character’s image is nothing but an invention of the author who provides it with a new and unknown sensibility against our common notion of the destructive western cowboy: “Some people have interpreted *Billy* as an artist, and on some level -on an instinctual level- he is an artist. But he isn’t a portrait of the artist for me; I didn’t intend to make a statement about the artist in *Billy*. In *Slaughter* I probably was .... Every artist is different, every artist begins with a different smell from the bridge” (Ondaatje 1980, 140).

Billy appears as a sensitive man surrounded by friends until he is “hunted” by the evil-like sheriff Garrett, who, paradoxically, functions as the psychotic assassin and whom Ondaatje portrays through an interesting pun to express his insanity: “Sane assassin sane assassin sane” (29). Even when Billy kills Gregory, it seems that he is obliged to do it, as though rejecting the idea of his suffering: “I’d shot him well and careful / made it explode under his heart / so it wouldn’t last long” (15). Billy is, therefore, humane and sensitive in contrast to the representatives of the law who were corrupted. What is evident is that the author observes as much violence as humanity around him, thus trying to maintain an equilibrium between the two: “For me in *Billy* I can see as much gentleness as violence; for me there’s a balance” (Ondaatje 1980, 134).

Both Nodelman and Owens consider Billy an artist who tries desperately to control his impulses, who detaches himself to reach an emotional equilibrium. Nodelman, though, insists that Billy lacks any emotional depth; however, we continually observe an emotional intensity in the book when Billy confronts his friends' deaths or when he is with Sally or Angela D.<sup>2</sup> Billy's lyric poems cannot be considered deprived of emotions, for "one might well argue that Ondaatje is always attracted to characters whose 'equilibrium' is precarious precisely because he knows that their balance will not hold. But that balance is not in itself a negative or life-denying force" (Scobie 1985, 210).

The reading of this long poem is an exercise in the aesthetic of "thinking going its own way."<sup>3</sup> Through his various histories of Billy the Kid, Ondaatje unleashes the story of the artificer, ironically metaphorized as the notorious murderer; he who must destroy in order to attain enlightenment, and he who seeking enlightenment, merely destroys. In casting Billy as creator/artist and the wild west as the canvas, Ondaatje both underscores and undermines the romantic associations of the gunslinger and of the artist. Even as he suggests how perception and artistic vision are free and wild forms existing without boundaries, Ondaatje points to the bizarre trappings of that vision of the sublime. Ondaatje's imagistic and journalistic narrative charts the artist's approach to, and collapse into, sensation, color, texture -where perception and perspective magnify to render doubleness and excess to create this sublime.

Ondaatje's language entices the reader's continued attention through its compelling movement between the familiar or prosaic and the iconographic. The reader, rather than being alienated by the murderer's perspective, finds herself allied with the artist's aesthetic vision. This understanding is created through the magnifying

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<sup>2</sup> Angela Dickinson, Billy's lover, is a fictitious character who happens to have the same name of one of Ondaatje's favourite actresses.

<sup>3</sup> For Ondaatje, the fragmented structure and the fanning out into different voices in his work create a kind of realism, a mirror to the way our minds really work. "It's not a case of postmodernist

of mundane detail and a rendering of objects as icons. Ondaatje's use of simple, oblique description makes the language a seductive environment to "be in." Inanimate objects and substances are vitalized when coupled with verbs: "Neck sweat eating at my jeans" (11), magnifies actions of the insensate world and equates it to the world of human actions, of hostile actions. This double move towards animation, through a language of violence, saturates the poetry. This perspective which animates also violates within the piece: moral vision is suppressed, the aesthetic vision is all that matters, all there is to see.

Though the motif of perception transcends simple reference to physical sight it is dependant on it and the character's ability to perceive is clearly linked to physical vision. Ondaatje repeatedly uses forthright references to "seeing" and to what is seen:

Snow outside. Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh and me. No windows, the door open so we could see. Four horses outside. (22)

The short sentences and listing of details, however, confine the narrator's visual field. This limitation outlines division: hence two of the text's governing tropes -partial vision and the division of interior and exterior. The trope of outside and inside is heavily knitted into the work; interior is associated with internal perception or personal vision whereas the exterior includes the material, surfaces, and the chaos of the external world. Of the two categories of sight, it is a focus on the internal which is the key to enlightenment for the artist. The physical body is the site where the split between internal and external worlds becomes difficult to sustain. Through this repetition of symbolic words and inversion Ondaatje illustrates these tensions as if the act of looking cannot occur without some implication in its object. The look changes and inverts. The destruction of the body is the realization of the artist's desire for interior vision:

I am here with the range of everything

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literature, it's a story, but the story isn't an A-to-Z thing. I've always believed people think like this" (see Taylor 1994, 45).

corpuscle muscle hair  
hands that need the rub of metal  
those senses that  
that want to crash things with an axe  
that listen to deep buried veins in our palms (72)

The doubling of desires that “want to crash things with an axe” and that “listen to deep buried veins” maintains the violence accompanying the desire to hear an internal language. This sensual perception then uses destruction as a pathway to the interior. It is also the key to a kind of knowledge. When Angela’s hand is shot open, Billy removes the bullet and examines the wound:

look at it, i’m looking into your arm  
nothing confused in there  
look how clear  
Yes Billy, clear (66)

This correlating desire for the destruction of the body, the physical, the external, and the viewing of the internal, shows internal perception as a pure form. Ondaatje produces this correlation by repetitive use of the words “clear” and “pure” when describing interiors as well as when depicting Billy’s physical vision. Sallie Chisum’s narrative describes Billy as a “good looking, clear eyed-boy” (52). This relationship between destruction and pure perception produces the optic; the ocular as the sublime.

Purity of the internal, the sensory, also suggests purity in vision understood as the goal of the artist. As the narrative focuses on the internal, sentences lose formal structure, punctuation, and the language becomes more free form (the pen “mapping my thinking going its own way” (72)). For instance, during one of the book’s climaxes, Billy’s “sun-fever,” he imagines a hand searching his physical self:

Down the long cool hand went scratching the freckles and warts in  
my throat breaking through veins like pieces of long glass tubing,  
touched my heart with his wrist, down he went the liquid yellow from  
my busted brain finally vanishing as it passed through soft warm  
stomach like a luscious blood wet oasis, weaving in and out of the red  
yellow blue green nerves moving uncertainly through wrong fissures

ending pausing at cul the sacs of bone then retreating slow leaving the  
pain of suction then down the proper path through pyramids of bone  
that were there when I was born, through grooves the fingers  
spanning the merging paths of medians of blue matter, the long cool  
hand going down brushing cobwebs of nerves (76-77)

The internal becomes a world in itself, with pathways, oases, pyramids and cul de sacs. In contrast to imagist passages earlier in the text, the above passage enacts the artist's loss of self in internal landscapes; the loose grammatical structure suggests the proliferation of images as abandon into the perceptive world. Ondaatje's emphasis of inanimate structures is coloured by the clumping of adjectives and nouns to form descriptions of the sublime ("luscious blood wet oases").

The aesthetic of the sublime is doubled in Ondaatje's blending of the iconography of birds and vision, frequently in a single image. Birds in literature are often associated with transcendence, and/or a universal, all-encompassing perspective, (i.e. "a bird's eye view"). Billy marks the importance of the symbol when examining a dead bird:

Held it in my fingers  
the eyes were small and far  
it yelled out like a trumpet  
destroyed it of its fear (14)

But for all the symbolic weight of the bird image the creature in Billy's hand is dead; its eyes small and unseeing. Later, Ondaatje associates sun and moon as birds, their status as signifiers of vision are linked with the treat of blindness: "and the sun a flashy hawk and you look up and moon a frozen bird's eye" (26). The bird symbol is the transcendent, but it is a transcendence which negates itself. The promise of sight is threatened. The contrast of sun hawk and frozen eye also suggests the conflict at the heart of the artist's agenda; to image the world, to freeze it.

Billy describes the owls in the dark cages with acute detail to their eyes "All I could see were its eyes -at least 8" apart" (37). Later he realizes that his perception

was altered and that his vision was actually of two birds, each blind in one eye. He describes birds as “moving and sensing the air and our departure. We knew they continued like that all night while we slept” (37). Birds as sensual perceptive creatures actually embody the threat of blindness posed within the promise of perceptual acuity.

The idea of frozen or vivisectioning vision recurs when Billy suffers hallucinations. As he stares into the sun he explains that “nothing breaks his vision.” He also realizes: “If I hold up my finger I blot out the horizon” (74). In this scene he seems master of his perception, able to control and alter what he sees, painting the canvas before him. Ondaatje emphasizes the danger posed by the artificer by likening Billy to mythic Icarus, son of Daedalus:

I am here on the edge of sun  
that would ignite me  
looking out into pitch white (75)

Though he nears the sun he realizes his hands are empty and returns

to where weapons are  
is planned by my eye (75)

The eye is roving but paralyzed. Billy’s artistic tools are weapons. Enlightenment lies in destruction of the external. He fixates on a boy who is able to block out light and notes his appearance, “face young like some pharaoh.” The godlike figure is able to control art whereas Billy, without his weapons, remains catatonic:

I am unable to move  
with nothing in my hands. (75)

This is the risk facing the artist, the doubleness of vision and blindness, of innovation and destruction, of communication and silence. New vision and fresh perception will not arise without some form of destruction. Only in the moment of death or destruction might the sublime be grasped. Billy has some indication of this when he watches Charlie Bowdre dying: “while the eyes grew all over his body” (12).

This multiple vision suggests multiple perspectives and this multiplication recalls of the sublime. The dying body sprouts eyes which are also wounds. Sight and blindness are bound up as one. Ondaatje separates and isolates this sentence example after a detailed description of Bowdre's death to reinforce the phenomena of vision as an intrinsic proliferation in the moment of physical destruction.

Ondaatje's production of the sublime is thus both enabled and defined by his awareness of the tension between the bizarre and the mundane. A foreshadowing of this conflict is found early in the piece when Billy describes his moral vision:

so if I had a newsman's brain I'd say  
well some morals are physical  
must be clear and open  
like a diagram of watch or star  
one must eliminate much (11)

Neither Billy nor Ondaatje has a newsman's brain; it is the narrator who tells us that morals are physical and as actions morals are clear. Throughout the piece we have seen that which is clear became clear through destruction, by delving into the interior, and gaining perception that is also a devastation. In order to attain this clear form, "one must eliminate much." In the same way Ondaatje eliminates many of the elements of conventional prose in what we consider a long poem with narrative fragments which function as the structural and imaginary links between in inside and the outside.<sup>4</sup>

In *Billy the Kid*, formal strategies as analepses and prolepses abound and are the sources of textual violence. The book has been created out of apocryphal and fictional fragments which are nonexistent in the character's legend, and violence continuously interrupts a narrative poem in which "(t)he analepses serve to extend the inherited characterizations of Billy by supplementing the usual documentation of his

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<sup>4</sup> All this generic experimentation Ondaatje deploys is the result of his active participation in the Coach House Press and its group of poets such as bpNichol and Victor Coleman: "That landscape did not suggest audiences or reviews, which freed me to try out things and not worry about whether this works or not or whether it reaches an audience in some way. I feel very lucky that I didn't have a public, so I could try anything, poetry or half poetry, half prose as in 'Billy'" (in Taylor 1994, 45).



dreams of peace and love myth and history have denied him” (Barbour 1993, 51). A violence without measure unfolds around him finding no answer: “A motive? Some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence? Was there a source for all this? yup-” (54). This quotation bears a double meaning as there is no source to the surrounding violence, as there is no true history but a multiplicity of versions which make the text anew into another rewritten text, into a new source. On the other hand, it is acknowledged by the author as an intertext of the book *The Saga of Billy the Kid*, by Walter Noble Burns (1926, 48), breaking the reader’s expectations once more. All in all, we contemplate an arbitrary selection of Ondaatje’s sources, historical and fictitious, which are located at random, leaving behind important historical events, like the war in Lincoln County which was crucial in the cowboy’s legend, and which is central in Burns’s book.

Another narrative fragment with an enormous amount of destructive imagery is told by John Chisum about his friend Livingstone, a singer from New Orleans drawn to experiment with animals. Livingstone manipulates dogs in order to create a new breed. Madness, however, will be the result of his experiments. This narrative fragment contrasts with Billy’s sensitivity towards animals: “The others, I know, did not see the wounds appearing in the sky, in the air. Sometimes a normal forehead in front of me leaked brain gasses .... In the end the only thing that never changed, never became deformed were animals” (10). Man is the origin of all these anomalies as a supposedly superior self who controls the fate of the other creatures:

keeping only the two original dogs he had bought, literally copulated them into madness. At least not them but their pups, who were bred and re-bred with their brothers and sisters and mothers and uncles and nephews. Every combination until their bones grew arched and tangled, ears longer than their feet, their tempers became either slothful or venomous and their jaws were black rather than red .... Their eyes bulged like marbles; some were blind, their eyes had split .... Livingstone had often given them just alcohol to drink .... When they found Livingstone there were almost nothing left of him. Even his watch had been eaten by one of the dogs who coughed it up in the presence of the vet. There were the bones of course, and his left wrist -the

hand that held the whip when he was in the pen- was left untouched in the middle of the area. (60-2)

Dennis Lee contextualizes this event as “world assault” or man’s assault against nature. There are a multitude of examples like this one: the massacre of rats in the stable (18), Sally’s inquiry to kill her sick cat (44-5), Garrett’s stuffed birds (88), or other instances in which Billy controls nature:

Crossed a crooked river  
loving in my head  
ambled dry on stubble  
shot a crooked bird

Held it in my fingers  
the eyes were small and far  
it yelled out like a trumpet  
destroyed it of its fear (14)

catching flies with my left hand  
bringing the fist to my ear  
hearing the scream grey buzz  
as their legs cramp their  
heads with no air  
so eyes split and release (58)

For Lee, Ondaatje describes manhood as an evil machine whose weapons are a gun and his mind. Lee, however, seems unable to uncover the search for equilibrium between poetry and violence that the author tries to convey. Billy is certainly surrounded by a certain ideology of human mechanization which is beginning to put an end to the cowboy’s days:

one must eliminate much  
that is one turns when the bullet leaves you  
walk off see none of the thrashing  
the very eyes welling up like bad drains  
believing then the moral of newspapers or gun  
where bodies are mindless as paper flowers you dont feed  
or give to drink  
that is why I can watch the stomach of clocks  
shift their wheels and pins into each other

and emerge living, for hours (11)

This ideology is the one the author exposes but does not share with the protagonist. Earth and civilization clash as opposed entities: “World exists in order to control earth, usually by violence .... The project of world may succeed, Billy knows intuitively, but it will self-destruct at the same time” (Lee 1985, 170-71).

Another character who stands for the power of civilization and lack of tact towards nature is Garrett, who collects dissected birds as a hobby:

(Garrett had stuffed birds .... huge exotic things .... It was beautifully spread in the ice, not a feather out of place, its claws extended and brittle from the freezing. Garrett melted it and split it with a narrow knife, parting the feathers first, and with a rubber glove in his right hand removed the body. He then washed the rotten blood from the wings, the outside, and then took it out onto the verandah to dry.) (88)

Garrett is a rational and an authoritarian being, a consummate and defiant assassin: “Though Billy must fight to subdue his frenzy, Garrett’s imposition is so total that he becomes the consummate murderer in the book. He casually shoots his old friends, then without a twinge watches them die in graphic agony” (Cooley 1985, 230). Indeed an analytic mind, totally opposed to the perceptive sensibility Billy reveals in the book, makes him an unsensitive character, a “newsman’s brain” (11), whom Ondaatje describes throughout as an academic assassin and taxidermist. As a compulsive collector, he seems to be right-handed whereas the fact that Billy is left-handed seems to be symbolically underlined throughout the book and its title. Moreover, the protagonist composes left-handed poems with the same hand that shoots as if we are confronting a different structured mind; whereas Billy perceives and reflects in lyric monologues, Garrett imposes his presence in the book through linear structures. Cooley asserts that the figures of Garrett and Livingstone are examples of the modernist mind ready to confront a postmodernist world in which Billy and Ondaatje unfold their art: “the belief that the world is chaotic and that we’d better impose some order, some superstructure, upon it. Billy gets caught between

these two positions, wanting more than anything to be a modernist, but finally not being able to because Ondaatje's world reveals itself to be essentially postmodern" (Cooley 1985, 232).

The most enigmatic text, however, occurs in a section where Garrett captures Billy and drags him through the desert for several days. Billy, in agony, suffers a sun stroke which eventually becomes the symbolic microcosm of the real danger of the sunlight as an enemy throughout the book. We refer to an exceptional fragment which has no precedent in the actual history of the cowboy:

On the fifth day the sun turned into a pair of hands and began to pull out the hairs in my head .... In two hours I was bald, my head like a lemon. It used a fingernail and scratched a knife line from front to back on the skin. A hairline of blood bubbled up and dried .... The brain juice began to swell up. You could see the bones and grey now .... He took a thin cold hand and sank it into my head down past the roof of my mouth and washed his fingers in my tongue .... touched my heart with his wrist ... passed through soft warm stomach like a luscious blood wet oasis ... the cool precise fingers went into the cistern of bladder down the last hundred miles in a jerk breaking through my sacs of sperm got my cock in the cool fingers pulled it back up and carried it pulling pulling ... so there I was, my cock standing out of my head .... Two hands, one dead, one born from me .... Ive been fucked. Ive been fuckd Ive been fucked by Christ almighty god ive been good and fucked by Christ. (76-8)

This is one of the most awkward fragments of the book, a climax where Billy suffers hallucinations from a sun stroke, a violent aggression in which the protagonist imagines the sun as a destructive power. This is also one of the clearest instances to reflect Billy's confrontation with natural forces. Together with this rejection, however, we also find union and complicity with nature. Lee proposes as an instance of reconciliation an important fictitious fragment at the beginning of the book. Billy remembers a week that he took refuge in a barn to recover from an illness: "I began to block my mind of all thought. Just sensed the room and learnt what my body could do .... There were animals who did not move out and accepted me as a larger breed" (17). Billy is here integrated as another member of this environment though this peaceful state will not last too long. Mad rats appear namely devouring everything and Billy has

to defend himself by the way he knows, shooting. Man and nature will not understand each other for too long, and violence explodes among the animal reign once more:

they abandoned the sanity ... and turned on each other and grotesque and awkwardly because of their size they went for each other's eyes and ribs so the yellow stomachs slid out and they came through that door and killed a chipmunk ... and the ten eating each other ... filled my gun and fired again and again into their slow wheel ... the noise breaking out the seal of silence in my ears, the smoke sucked out of the window as it emerged from my fist ... so the rats continued to wheel and stop in the silences and eat each other, some even the bullet. Till my hand was black and the gun was hot and no other animal of any kind remained in that room but for the boy in the blue shirt sitting there coughing at the dust, rubbing the sweat of his upper lip with his left forearm. (18)

The long poem is formed of self-sufficient independent poems in connection with one another to design the book's architecture. Its rhythm is balanced by the narrative fragments which both widen the metaphor and provide a lighter and descriptive tone amid the lyric tension. On the other hand, the fragments desarticulate Billy's legend and myth which is more specifically followed by the lyric poems. The poet himself "does not finally know the reality of the man he has made myth. Ondaatje makes it clear that he knows that he only re-creates his view of the man in his distrust of too much external control from words to the myth itself" (Hunter 1978, 67).

The author turns this romantic anarchy that characterizes his protagonists into a drama in order to analyse the nature of his own creativity. Both in *Slaughter* and in *Billy the Kid* there is a difference between the private and the public life of the protagonists, a frontier which reflects the struggle between their reason and their intuition, and which will always be unravelled through dialectical characters. The only romantic escape lies in Bolden's madness, which finally merges his public and private selves, asserting finally "what I wanted" (*Slaughter* 131); or in Billy's death which turns him into a transcended self, into legend, thereby giving him the spiritual peace he seemed to crave in his violent deeds:

The end of it, lying at the wall  
the bullet itch frozen in my head

my right arm is through the window pane  
and the cut veins awake me  
so I can watch inside and through the window ...  
the pain at my armpit I'm glad for  
keeping me alive at the bone  
and suns coming up everywhere out of the walls and floors  
Garrett's jaw and stomach thousands

of lovely perfect sun balls  
breaking at each other click  
click click click like Saturday morning pistol cleaning...  
oranges reeling across the room AND I KNOW I KNOW  
it is my brain coming out like red grass  
this breaking where red things wade (*Billy the Kid* 95)

The lyric fragments end with these visual and oneiric scenes. Similarly, Bolden's madness finally explodes after recurrent dreams both of his children dying and of images of suicide or mutilations in dark rooms whose windows and corners torture him:

He lay there crucified and drunk. Brought his left wrist to his teeth and bit hard and harder for several seconds then lost his nerve. Flopped it back outstretched. Going to sleep while feeling his vein tingling at the near chance it had of almost going free. Ecstasy before death. It marched through him while he slept. (*Slaughter* 79)

The structure of these images is so carefully developed that they consist of a recurrent chain of analepses and prolepses which open new paths for the reader. As Billy does not die at the end of the book after a chronological narrative line, Bolden does not drown into madness in a sudden way. From the beginning the author inserts different oneiric scenes in slow motion in which Billy imagines his death. And Bolden hallucinates and destroys as a prelude to his terminal schizophrenia, "[s]cratch of suicide at the side of my brain" (*Slaughter* 89). These nightmares he suffers turn into the ideal disease for unravelling the recurrent hallucinations followed by amnesia and violent outbreaks that condemn the patient to a perpetual silence:

But his own mind was helpless against every moment's headline. He did nothing but leap into the mass of changes and explore them and all the tiny facets so that eventually he was almost completely governed by fears of certainty. He distrusted it in anyone but Nora for there it went to the spine, and yet he attacked it again and again in her, cruelly, hating it, the sure lanes of the probable. Breaking chairs and windows glass doors in fury at her certain answers. (*Slaughter* 15-16)

*Slaughter's* imagery is sustained by glass objects, windows and mirrors, which represent psychic and physical oppression. Sky and clouds, on the other hand, represent the opposite, liberation after seclusion. There is a continuous violence and such objects as windows and mirrors are attacked as they reflect our true identity. A climactic fragment is the fight between Bolden and Pickett, where the violent language merges with liberating images which, through the continuous hints in the book's title, reflect the rhythm and musicality of the whole book in a few lines:

Push again and he goes over the ice through the front window. A great creak as the thing folds over him like a spider web, he goes through, the hook of the strop pulls the chair and me frantic I won't let go and I come through too over the ice and glass and empty frame. And we are on the street.  
Liberty. (*Slaughter* 74)

Hence, Bolden struggles in an inner surreal world with changing images that reflect his own music, jazz, where each note and element are independent, where the mix of sounds and rhythms make an art opposed to linearity and stability. Even Ondaatje makes a suggestive comparison between his personal poetic experience which he shares with his friend and poet Victor Coleman and Bolden's music as if both arts were orchestrated by the same rhythms:

Listening to him was like talking to Coleman. You were both changing direction with every sentence, sometimes in the middle, using each other as a springboard through the dark. You were moving so fast it was unimportant to finish and clear everything. He would be describing something in 27 ways. There was pain and gentleness everything jammed into each number. (*Slaughter* 37)

Water is another important image in *Slaughter*, as well as in *Running* and *Secular Love*; it is a symbol of escape and regeneration and also of submerging into

madness. Water is always an element of transition to another state, either death or madness, perhaps also in the traditional sense of purification:

In the water like soft glass. We slide in slowly leaving our clothes by a large stone. Heads skimming along the surface .... Then beginning to imitate loons and swimming deeper, her head sliding away from me. Below our heads all the evil dark swimming creatures are waiting to brush us into nightmare into heart attack to suck us under into the darkness into the complications. Her loon laugh. The dull star of white water under each of us. Swimming towards the sound of madness. (*Slaughter* 69)

The most common imagistic term the author uses to reflect this public obsession is the pun *fan* which Ondaatje uses two ways: as a trope to address the fanatic masses who surround the artist: “you’d play and people would grab you and grab you till you began to -you couldn’t help it- believe you were doing something important .... Everytime you stopped playing you became a lie” (59); and, at the same time, this trope implies a lack of control in the artist’s movements, the narrative’s circularity and Bolden’s incapacity to develop a rational and responsible art, which results in an obsessive oneiric scene again and again circulating over his head: “Above me revolving slowly is the tin-bladed fan, turning like a giant knife all day above my head ... so you can never relax and stretch up” (47).

Similarly, the image of the hands turns out to be one of the most recurring symbols of both *Slaughter* and *Billy the Kid*. Hands almost always refer to the art of the musician or the poet, certainly an irreplaceable tool to conceive an art that can end destroying us: “So many murders of his own body .... There was a strange lack of care regarding his fingers, even in spite of his ultimate nightmare of having hands cut off at the wrists .... Suicide of the hands. So many varieties of murder. After his child died in his dream it was his wrist he attacked” (49). Thus, voluntary mutilations, cuts with pieces of glass, the violence exerted towards oneself or towards art itself, are present throughout the book, for “the suicidal dream of hands through the glass is the source of both the making of his music and the destroying of himself” (Scobie 1978, 14).

Hands are an ideal and continuous image in the descriptions of the artist's obsessions. The image was also present, in an ambiguous way, in the subtitle of his previous book *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems*,<sup>5</sup> as a collection of works or versions in the life of a gunman, both his murders and his victories, in any case, the collected works of an ambiguous poet who challenges the legend. On one occasion, Billy slowly observes Garrett's hands and defines him later as "Pat Garrett, ideal assassin. Public figure, the mind of a doctor, his hands hairy, scarred, burned by rope .... Ideal assassin for his mind was unwarped .... An academic murderer" (28). In a parallel way, Garrett examines Billy's hands, the real agents of his works, and describes them with admiration and idolatry: "I saw Billy's hand, it was virgin white. Later, when we talked about it, I explained about how a hand or muscle unused for much work would atrophy, grow small .... It was the most hypnotising beautiful thing I ever saw" (43). This image will turn destructive when the sun rays transform into a pair of hands and attack the character in agony in a sun stroke; here the creative and energetic sources become violence and transgression (Watson 1985, 157).

As Ondaatje shows the horror and the violence exerted on marginal characters including prostitutes, the reader is unable to find any value judgement behind the narrator's voice towards a violence always enacted by men, who, unconsciously it seems, respond to the idea that "(t)he making and destroying (came) from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of" (*Slaughter* 55).

These are not biographies or life stories as some critics have tried us to believe, but mythical and legendary metafiction, or, in Hochbruck's words, "biomythographies" (1994, 448). *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter* were originally published six years apart, but even a superficial reading uncovers several similarities.

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<sup>5</sup> Webster's Dictionary offers the following definitions of the term left-handed: 1. having the left hand more serviceable than the right; preferably using the left hand. 2. adapted to or performed by the left hand. 3. situated on the side of the left hand .... 6. ambiguous or doubtful. 7. clumsy or awkward...

Rather than a book of poems, *Billy the Kid* is a typical Canadian long poem of the seventies, a collection of texts mixing, transgressing, and ironizing genres, with interspersed historical documents and a number of photographs commenting on and juxtaposed to the text. *Slaughter*, however, while sharing some of the former metafictional tools is Ondaatje's first novel as such. In both books Ondaatje uses authorial invention as he explicitly acknowledges at the end of both texts. Therefore, to call Ondaatje's assertion of poetic license "an attempt to save the 'true life' of William H. Bonney, alias Billy the Kid, from the popular legend that grew around his figure" (Verhoeven 1992, 181) is a grave misreading as well as Naomi Jacobs's grouping of both texts under the heading "New Fiction Biographies" (1986, 2).

Ondaatje is always clear acknowledging the sources he worked from. In the case of Bolden's story, the main source was *Jazzmen*, a book published in 1939 by Frederic Ramsey jr. and Stephen Smith.<sup>6</sup> An equivalent book had already appeared in 1926, aptly named *The Saga of Billy the Kid*.<sup>7</sup> Finally, there is a third pair of books important in this context: Donald Marquis researched the life of the legendary New Orleans cornetist for more than a decade, and presented his facts in his 1978 book *In Search of Buddy Bolden*,<sup>8</sup> whereas Stephen Tatum declined to try and find out yet another "truth" about the famous western hero but recorded instead how the process of *Inventing Billy the Kid* had taken several turns since his death in 1881.

Relying on Burns's new version of the Bonney myth, Ondaatje takes for granted that it is widely available to the general public through several media and concentrates on the dramatic ending of the hero's life. Using a technique usually attributed to modernist writing (Ondaatje has expressed his admiration for Dos

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<sup>6</sup> *Jazzmen* (1939). The only photograph of Buddy Bolden's band was reproduced in this book before the original was lost after the death of the last member of the original Bolden band, Willy Cornish, in 1942.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Noble Burns, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1926).

<sup>8</sup> Donald M. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (1978). Even if both authors cite the same sources and worked in the same archives, and, even interviewed the same person, Ondaatje does not seem to have read Marquis's book.

Passos), the writer comically reverses the many Hollywood renditions of the Kid allowing the pieces to float within the text and providing no fixed ending. Subversions of historicity in *Slaughter* are not proclaimed as openly as in the different endings of *Billy the Kid*, but they are subtly interwoven into the text like notes in a jazz piece. Bolden listens to John Robichaux's band on a radio belonging to his friend, Webb, at a time when radios did not exist in private households (*Slaughter* 93). In another scene, the mysterious death of his wife's mother is linked through a newspaper article to the famous strangulation of Isadora Duncan, whose long scarf got caught in the wheels of the car she was riding (*Slaughter* 27f.). This death happened in 1927, at a time when Bolden had already been a hospital inmate for years. A casual glance at Bolden's biography brings up his date of birth in 1868 -which would have made him 38 years old in 1906, negating Ondaatje's claim to being of the same age writing the book with Bolden when he exploded into silence (*Slaughter* 156).<sup>9</sup> It is this atmosphere of meta-biographical *differance* which makes *Slaughter* more interesting than *Billy the Kid* in that it invents a whole network on Bakhtinian contradictory discourses. More obvious in *Slaughter* than in *Billy the Kid* is the metafictional involvement of the reader and of the author in the construction of the text: "He float(s) by in a car" at the beginning of the text (*Slaughter* 8) but almost takes over the central role in the text after Bolden's lapse into madness.

Apart from Ondaatje's marked inclination "to conflate the factual and the fictional" (Varsava 1990, 210), there is a densely patterned imagery of mirroring, and breaking out of and through walls, windows and mirrors. Bellocq, surrounded by a fire he has built himself, breaks out through the burning wall and to his death (67); Bolden forces his personal enemy, Pickett, through the glass front of the shaving parlor (74f.), breaks a window by just touching it (16), and in his final appearance in the parade his notes are mirrored by a girl's movements: "God this is what I wanted to play for, if no

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<sup>9</sup> Ironically, the findings of Donald Marquis point to Sept. 6, 1877 as Bolden's birth date, which would make him younger than 30 at the time he went insane.

one else I always guessed there would be this, this mirror somewhere” (130). Billy the Kid’s death was also connected with window imagery: “my right arm is through the window pane / and the cut veins awake me / so I can watch inside and through the window” (*Billy the Kid* 95).<sup>10</sup> It is not difficult to see the recurring patterns of images as representing the themes of an actual jazz piece, the kind of music Bolden played and tried to grasp into his understanding. From this point of view *Slaughter* takes on qualities of the “jazz novel.” For Hochbruck, on the level of style and experimental form *Slaughter* can be interpreted as still grounded in modernism; yet at the same time experiments with form and technique link modern and postmodern writing (1994, 459). The ending of *Slaughter*, however, clearly shows Ondaatje’s inclination towards the postmodern, and an example of this would be Siemerling’s suggestion that the multiplicity of possibilities in *Slaughter* extends to endings:

I would like to suggest that *Coming Through Slaughter* has several endings, endings which I find very hard to reconcile and which perhaps should not be reconciled. These endings “contain” Bolden as much as they may try to spew him back out into history. The “struggle for life” between “author and hero” of which Bakhtin speaks ... can be seen, in this perspective, to continue through the finishing line. The collage of different text forms at the end retains the ideal of Bolden’s music *before* “coming through slaughter.”<sup>11</sup>

In some ways Ondaatje repeats the multiple-endings-technique he used in *Billy the Kid*, but rather than presenting a sequence of fabulations he fades out Bolden with a series of interview bits, acknowledgements, and a repetition of the photographic ending. Stan Dragland’s slightly blurred photo of the author on the back is linked to the equally blurred photo of Bolden and his band on the front cover.

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<sup>10</sup> Ironically, Sam Peckinpah used a similar image in his 1973 movie, when Pat Garrett, after having shot Billy, fires at another perceived target, only to destroy a mirror with his own image in it (see Hochbruck 1994, p. 458).

<sup>11</sup> Winfried Siemerling, “Temptations of Identity: Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter* and Fascination” (Lecture in Osnabrück, Dec. 2, 1991): 12. Reprinted in his book *Discoveries of the Other* (1994).

Even though Ondaatje's treatment of self and other in *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter* as well as in *Running* "seems to invite an interpretation of these texts as autobiographically inspired Künstlerroman," Hochbruck clearly asserts, "such a reading does not give enough credit to the aspect of the legendary that separates the first two texts from the third" (1994, 460).<sup>12</sup> *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter* are not just postmodern biomythographies, they are also metafictional deconstructions of comfortable legends. There is, in fact, an appropriation of two legendary figures, and subsequently the assertion of the postmodern, postcolonial Canadian imaginative capacity to give a new validity to the worn-out legend of Billy the Kid, and the first metafictional treatment to the legendary Bolden. The characters are tropes and "legendary ... in a rhetorical sense, constructed in readings and writings" (Jones 1989, 29). Ondaatje somewhat self-consciously still inscribes Billy into Canada -Billy and his companion Bowdre criss-cross "The Canadian border" (20), and Billy is particularly fond of the music of "a Canadian group, a sort of orchestra, that is the best. Great" (84). Writing Canada into the text of *Billy the Kid* is one simple way of ascertaining that the country exists, that it is accessible. In *Slaughter*, the references are ironic: Coleman (37) as well as Geddes and Moss (137) appear to be standing for Canadian authors and friends Victor Coleman, Gary Geddes, and John Moss. These identifications are contested by Marquis's documentation that a Geddes-Moss funeral parlor did in fact exist in New Orleans; they took care of Bolden's corpse in 1931.<sup>13</sup> Coleman could also indicate the jazzier Coleman Hawkins.<sup>14</sup> Ondaatje, of course,

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<sup>12</sup> See Verhoeven "(De)Facing the Self," (1992, pp. 199-200).

<sup>13</sup> Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden* (1978, p. 131). Scobie, "Fictional Magnets," (1978, p. 6), accounts Ondaatje's inclusion of Geddes and Moss among his "errors (that) are simply private jokes," not realizing the ironic doubling of meanings.

<sup>14</sup> Coleman Hawkins (1901-1969) was not one of Bolden's contemporaries. The character speaking in the passage, however, is not Bolden but Frank Lewis, who died in the 1920s and could well have known Hawkins as a young man; cf. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden* (1978, p. 137). The ironic reference lies in the fact that a final identification is impossible -more readers in the U.S. and possibly even in Canada would attribute the identification to the famous saxophonist. Maxwell, "Surrealistic Aspects" (1985, p. 108), brings the Coleman reference in connection with Ondaatje's friend Victor Coleman as well as with the modern jazzier Ornette Coleman.

points out not only his own liminal concern with historiographic factuality but also his fondness of dropping in ambiguous namings, by crosslisting Billy the Kid in *Slaughter* (141f.) under his real name of Antrim,<sup>15</sup> as a patient who becomes furious over the question whether his weekly shot of medicine ought to be applied into the left or the the right arm -a comical reference to the controversy over the apparently left-handed photo of Billy the Kid. But whereas this reference would likely pass unnoticed by Canadian readers, Coleman, Geddes and Moss signify somebody Canadian outside, somebody American inside the text. Canadian contexts are also available in the simple presence of Canadian author Ondaatje as a literary presence, a repeatedly proclaimed “I.” Neither *Billy the Kid* nor *Slaughter* exists apart from its Canadian premises. Not being obvious items of “Canadiana,” *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter* are not just the result of a literary “out of area”-mission either. They are mockingly defiant comments on the CanLit hysteria rampant in the 1970s (and still productive in the current discussions of Canadian canons),<sup>16</sup> and they transfer two floating myths into a Canadian reading context and imaginative space.

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<sup>15</sup> Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid* (p. 20).

<sup>16</sup> See Robert Lecker studies on Canadian canons; see also T.D. MacLulich’s nationalist essay “What Was Canadian Literature,” *ECW* 30 (1984/85): 17-34.

## 6.2 The Feminine Element: Violence or Security

This midnight breathing  
heaves with no sensible rhythm,  
is fashioned by no metronome.  
Your body, eager  
for the extra yard of bed,  
reconnoitres and outflanks;  
I bend in peculiar angles.

This nightly battle is fought with subtleties:  
you get pregnant, I'm sure,  
just for the extra ground  
immune from kicks now.

Inside you now's another,  
thrashing like a fish,  
swinging, fighting  
for its inch already. ("A House Divided," DM 44)

Throughout Ondaatje's texts gender problematics develop gradually. The poet consciously eliminates, in a way parallel to his growth to artistic maturity, the generic rigidity and the gender archetypes that characterized his texts in the 1960s and 1970s. As Lorraine York affirms: "Gradually, there is more awareness of issues of gender, especially as they relate to ownership -the poet's ownership of the material, the patriarch's ownership of the female, and the imperialist ownership of the colonized" (1994, 75).

For Ondaatje, the female figure reveals as an ambiguous rebel, always observed by the masculine eye. The poet also follows a tradition of a number of recent Canadian poets who revise the sub-genre of the parent-to-daughter advice

poem. A predecessor can well be William Butler Yeats's "Prayer for my Daughter" (1921).<sup>1</sup> Most of these poems are by women poets such as Margaret Atwood, Mary di Michele, and Jan Conn, who rewrite Yeats by turning his patriarchal advice upside-down, that is, these women-poets have stolen the parent-child advice poem out of the hands of the patriarchs. The case of Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter," *Secular Love*, complicates this corrective dynamic as he is a male poet whose subject position is gendered male. He reminds us, however, that as a male poet he can also revise Yeats's gender politics. One affinity which they share with Yeats is that these poets, female and male, preserve the identification of the daughter as a writer-figure. While Yeats's daughter is imagined as a grown woman, though, her poetic genius is confined to the domestic sphere; in Canadian poems, however, these daughter are the poets and therefore advised to be tough and transgressors of rules as a strong reaction to the paternal protectiveness of Yeats's "Prayer."

Venus's beauty -and that of Helen of Troy- function as cautionary tales in Yeats's poem, and yet his first wish for his daughter is for a moderate degree of beauty: "May she be granted beauty and yet not / Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught" (1962, 41). Poems such as Mary di Michele's give more importance to intellect as they disagree with Yeats's belief that 'radical

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<sup>1</sup>*The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse: 1918-1960* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1962): 41-44.

innocence' is recoverable only when 'all hatred' is 'driven hence'(1962, 44). Hence, the world of domesticity is no longer a safe place but the consciousness of being critical to confront the private and the public.

The case, however, gets more complicated when we analyse Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter" where the anxiety of paternal influence is clearly at work. Along with Stevens, Yeats is a dominant figure in the poetic landscape for Ondaatje. The speaker of the surreal drunk poem from *Secular Love*, "Claude Glass," breaks away from his wild party, immerses himself in the vegetation out there, only to realize that another poet has been there before him: "It's all / fucking Yeats and moonlight" (14). In "To a Sad Daughter," the poet can no longer get away with cursing his powerful male predecessor; he engages the Yeatsian advice poem and write both with and against it. Ondaatje's speaker is both repelled and attracted by the protective role of the paternal advisor, and so he veers towards and away from it:

I'm not good at advice  
you know that, but ride  
the ceremonies  
until they grow dark (*SL* 96)

This male speaker's break with paternal protectiveness is bound to be problematic; his subject position is inevitably gendered 'male,' and he can no more escape the power dynamics of the father-to-daughter conversation than he

can escape his gender. Indeed, the poem gains much of its peculiar poignancy from this dilemma. This male speaker, however, shares with the speakers of Atwood's, Conn's, and di Michele's poems a preference for limitlessness. "Want everything," he urges his daughter, "If you break / break going out not in" (97). By contrast, Yeats's reaction to the breakage is to counsel a withdrawal into safe limits:

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house  
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;  
For arrogance and hatred are the wares  
Peddled in the thoroughfares.  
How but in custom and in ceremony  
Are innocence and beauty born?  
Ceremony's name for the rich horn,  
and custom for the spreading laurel tree. (1962 44)

Those poets who have questioned the norms of female limitation and protection implied in Yeats's poem have also wrestled with the form of sexual/textual closure which he offers. Ondaatje's "To a Sad Daughter" draws to a close by invoking that ultimate closure, death, only to pry it open a crack.

The last stanza begins:

If I speak of death  
which you fear now, greatly,  
it is without answers,  
except that each  
one we know is  
in our blood.  
Don't recall graves.  
Memory is permanent. (97)

The tentativeness of the opening “If”, amplified by the denial of ‘answers’ which follows, sends this particular stanza off on an anti-authoritative trajectory, but Ondaatje’s ‘except’ abruptly shifts gears and sets the stanza back on a Yeatsian course. Even here, confronting the ultimate frustrator of human advice, Ondaatje veers towards and away from ‘answers.’

What has arrived in these late twentieth-century revisitations of Yeats is the corrosive instability of authority which has echoed throughout much of the art and world view called the postmodern. Several of these poets initially set themselves up as teachers “This is the first lecture I’ve given you” (96), Ondaatje’s speaker reflects. The teacherly role sits uncomfortably on his speaker’s shoulders: “I’d rather be your closest friend / than your father” (96), he confesses.

There is one possible model for dealing with the issue of gender specificity in writing. In Ondaatje’s ambiguous case, however, we not only confront but engage with the power politics of genre that may be correlated with the writer’s gender. Ondaatje cannot simply confront, oppose, and reverse Yeats’s poem as the women poets do. His is a dynamic of contradiction as a male writer because he must struggle with the Yeatsian authority within him. First he must engage the poetic Father before he may proceed to any act of dethroning. Therefore, only late in the poem does Ondaatje utter his

insubordination of the tradition in and against which he is writing: “How you live your life I don’t care” (97). (York 1992-93, 69).

The traditional confrontation between the masculine and the feminine has characterized Ondaatje’s work from the beginning of his artistic career. In “A House Divided” the struggle of the sexes already appears in an explicit way, and progressively becomes, in his later writings, a thematic aspect which deserves consideration. In *Running*, we observe how male and female occasionally behave in a comic way, as in the section titled “The War Between Men and Women” (42), where a man in the bus happily squeezes Lalla’s artificial breast. Similarly, in *Secular Love*, the gender confrontation appears as a title of a poem, “The Linguistic War Between Men and Women” (64). These gender wars are familiar to the reader of Ondaatje’s poetry, but now he seems to want to hide, in a comic and hilarious way, the emotional unsettlement of his first lyrical texts.

There are clear female stereotypes in *The Dainty Monsters*, where the reader may appreciate a comic effect or just a creative immaturity in their domesticity. In *Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje develops archetypal images to an unlimited exaggeration in the characters of Angie Dickinson, Sallie Chisum, and in the fictitious princess who chases Billy in the comic “Billy the Kid and the Princess”: “Gracias Senor. You are so strong and brave...and very gallant!....

This table needs a man like you, Senor Bonney. Others have occupy that chair but none so well as you” (*Billy the Kid* 99, 100).

In *Slaughter*, Ondaatje widens the female archetype with a rather serious and committed tone. First, he opposes the figure of the wife to the prostitute of New Orleans through a fashionable qualification of their domestic customs, “[t]he women wore Gloria de Dijon and Marshall Neil roses and the whores sold ‘Goofer Dust’ and ‘Bend-Over Oil’” (9). Then he breaks down those stereotypes in the figure of Nora Bolden, married to the protagonist, now a ‘respectable’ wife and former prostitute, a fact that the male protagonist cannot endure:

With the utmost curiosity and faith he learned all he could about Nora Bass, questioning her long into the night about her past. Her body a system of emotions and triggers he got lost in....He was lost in the details, he could find no exact focus towards her. And so he drew her power over himself....For three years a whore before she married Bolden she had managed to save delicate rules and ceremonies for herself. (*Slaughter* 15)

Our visual environment is saturated with images of women presented specifically as *sights* for the viewing pleasure of a spectator who is presumed to be male. Publicity, however, did not invent man as the observer nor woman as the observed. It rather continues an older and respected tradition of post-Renaissance oil-painting which presented female sights for the viewing pleasure of the male spectator which included sights of womens’ naked bodies

conventionalized as nudes. Nevertheless, it is man who is revealed in his objectification of women. Perhaps men must exchange women to realize themselves as men, establish their gender-identity as masculine, and earn the recognition and, more important, the alliance of other men. This is the hidden motor of Ondaatje's exploration of Bellocq's in *Slaughter*, driving him for a final search of freedom which will confirm his masculinity once and for all.

Ondaatje's works have not been studied in a serious way by feminist criticism, though we certainly find various references from the post-colonial perspective, for example, Arun Mukherjee who radically opposes this stereotyped authorial vision. Lorraine York, however, has approached this lack of female sensibility, or, rather, his portrait of a passive female figure in front of the violence exerted by male protagonists. She has called this fact "the male chaotic": "a realm of seemingly random, centrifugal violent energy, associated with males and either opposed or ignored by females. It dominates the early poetry, particularly the first collection, *The Dainty Monsters*" (York 1994, 77). This critical position had been previously exposed by Christian Bok in his study of the politicization of violence in Ondaatje's works(1992).

The masculine chaos York refers to is mainly focused on a group of recurrent images in his poems. The poet describes a female figure who sleeps or who ignores violence besides continuous oneiric scenes and violent outbreaks of

her male partner. In this sense we would rather suggest a continuous idealized and unconscious female figure whose poetic function is the artistic object of desire. The female lover or wife of “Diverse Causes” is sleeping while the male poet observes the moving “that turns like fire” under her eyelid (DM 25); while the wife in “Spider Blues” is similarly unconscious of the chaotic workings of the male artists-spider-poets. At the beginning of the poem, for example, the wife’s body is described as “dreaming,” but later in the poem the poet refers to the ending as a “nightmare for my wife and me” (RJ 65). From *Running* onwards, however, the jokes directed against women are of a gentler, less dehumanizing quality: “A Mr. Hobday has asked my father if he has any Dutch antiques in the house. And he replies, ‘Well...there *is* my mother.’ My grandmother lower down gives a roar of anger” (*Running* 27). In later volumes, such as *Secular Love*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, and *The English Patient*, there is no place for the woman as the target of male jokes, which indicates that the gender issue has turned to be more complex and conscious for the author.

The first poem of Angie D. in *Billy the Kid* describes the erotic and violent relationship Angie maintains with the protagonist. Angie is both angel and devil, his accomplice whom he adores and fears at the same time:

Tilts back to fall  
black hair swivelling off her  
shattering the pillow  
Billy she says

that tall gawky body spitting electric  
off the sheets to my arm  
leans her whole body out  
so breasts are thinner  
stomach is a hollow  
where the bright bush jumps  
this is the first time  
bite into her side leave  
a string of teeth marks  
she hooks in two and covers me  
my hand locked  
her body nearly breaking off my fingers

pivoting like machines in final speed  
later my hands cracked in love juice  
fingers paralysed by it arthritic  
these beautiful fingers I couldnt move  
faster than a crippled witch now (*Billy the Kid* 16)

The imagery that surrounds Billy and Angie places them in a recurrent situation of both attraction and elusion. Billy seems to reject her power over him, whereas Angie, expert in her seductive arts, captures him between her legs, “catching me like a butterfly” (25). According to Nodelman (1980, 72), Billy fears to lose his controlling power in front of Angie for “her toes take your ribs / her fingers your mind” (64). This lack of control exposes Billy’s vulnerability, a fact which is foregrounded by the author through several images in order to destroy the legend of the detached and cold cowboy.

In the second of the Angie poems, Ondaatje reconstructs a similar situation, though with some variants on the side of the female figure. As Judith Owens asserts, both poems end with the inert and exhausted figure of Billy, but,

in the second, Billy overtly surrenders to feminine power (Owens 1983, 126). In this second poem the sexual images are less violent but have a larger symbolic significance. Billy observes how Angie blinds him with the dangerous sun rays, whereas Sallie has always protected him from clarity. Oranges, like the sun balls at the end of the book, surround the white room which symbolizes the psychic space that torments him. A camera zoom draws back to give a wider perspective of the protagonist, opening the spatial focus. Billy, larger in perspective this time, assumes the control he lacked in the first poem, which was elaborated with a more violent, less cinematic language. This device “signals a wish to purge the moment of its immediacy, a desire in Billy to distance himself from the event by rendering it impersonal” (Owens 1983, 127):

on my sheets - oranges  
peeled half peeled  
bright as hidden coins against the pillow

she walks slow to the window  
lifts the sackcloth  
and jams it horizontal on a nail  
so the bent oblong of sun  
hoists itself across the room  
framing the bed the white flesh  
of my arm

she is crossing the sun  
sits on her leg here  
sweeping off the peels

traces the thin bones on me  
turns toppling slow back to the pillow  
Bonney Bonney

I am very still  
I take in all the angles of the room (*Billy the Kid* 21)

The character's vulnerability is always present in the presence of Angie. Her feminine power absorbs all the space and even controls the poetic action as we can see in the verbs used. Moreover, Angie is described as a tall woman in front of the skinny Billy, and so the traditional vision of the passionate cowboy with his sweetheart has been subverted, and Billy incarnates the passive role played before by a female figure:

Miss Angela Dickinson of Tucson  
tall legs like a dancer  
set the 80's style  
by shaving them hairless  
keeps saying  
I'm too tall for you Billy  
but we walk around a bit  
buy a bottle and she stands  
showing me her thighs  
look Billy look at this  
she folded on the sheet  
tapping away at her knees  
leans back waving feet at me  
catching me like a butterfly  
in the shaved legs in her Tucson room (*Billy the Kid* 25)

Smaro Kamboureli defines this female figure as the representation of a series of personifications or prosopopeias which incarnates the pure allegory of eroticism. She argues that the fact that she is always called Angela D., and not Angela Dickinson, stresses this representation of desire, the alterity of the

unconquerable. Thus she personifies pleasure, fear, and violence, that is, she stands for the authentic and simultaneous paradox of attraction and rejection that Billy experiments in her presence (1988b, 126):

Miss Angela D has a mouth like a bee  
she eats and off all your honey  
her teeth leave a sting on your very best thing  
and its best when she gets the best money

Miss Angela Dickinson  
blurred in the dark  
her teeth are a tunnel  
her eyes need a boat

Her mouth is an outlaw  
she swallow your breath  
a thigh it can drown you  
or break off your neck

Her throat is a kitchen  
red food and old heat  
her ears are a harp  
you tongue till it hurt

Her toes take your ribs  
her fingers your mind  
her turns a gorilla  
to swallow you blind (*Billy the Kid* 64)

The only woman who never threatens the protagonist is Sallie Chisum who, having met the real Billy, has refused to admit the fear legend had instilled in her. She cares for him in a motherly way, exerting no seductive or violent power upon him, but playing the archetypal role of the ideal female figure according to the traditional conventions. Billy imagines Sallie, however, with

sensuality and desire, not precisely prototypical for a cowboy's mind, and therefore releases himself from the violent eroticism which Angie enacts upon him. Another oxymoronic element is the backdrop of their meetings, an environment in darkness which always surrounds Sallie and suggests a symbology of quietness and uncertainty opposed to the sheer clarity and chaos that surround Angie:

It was only later, when the sun eventually reached the bed and slid over her eyes, that she slowly leaned up to find her body, clothesless, had got cold and pulling the sheet from the strong tuck fold at the foot of the bed brings it to her, wraps it around her while she sits in bed, the fists of her feet against her thighs trying to discover which was colder -the flesh at her feet or the flesh at her thighs, hugging the sheet to her tight until it would be a skin. Pretending to lock her arms over it as if a tight dress, warming her breasts with her hands through the material. (*Billy the Kid* 32)

One of Ondaatje's most common metaphors in his female descriptions is the protective role of the house as a feminine dominion. Sallie walks around the house all morning, doing the little jobs John Chisum has commanded. Significantly, the character in return "demanded of John that she be given a pet of some strange and exotic breed....Still every animal that came within a certain radius of that house was given a welcome, the tame, the half born, the wild, the wounded" (*Billy the Kid* 36). The maternal side in Sallie counterpoints the childish and vulnerable Billy, who idealizes and adores her:

Once last year seeing her wrapped I said, Sallie, know what a mad man's skin is? And I showed her, filling the automatic indoor bath with warm water and

lifting her and dropping her slow into the bath with the sheet around her and then heaving her out and saying that's what it is, that white thing round you....So that at eleven in the morning all she did was close and lock them all until the house was silent and dark blue with sunless quiet....And Sallie like a ghost across the room moving in white dresses, her hair knotted as always at the neck and continuing down until it splayed and withered like eternal smoke half way between the shoulder blades and the base of cobble spine. (*Billy the Kid* 33)

Sallie is a ghost-like and ethereal character, lacking strong or destructive passions. She takes care of the house and hosts the visitors, giving them shelter and security from the outside world. She maintains a platonic and maternal relationship with Billy, protecting and healing his wounds. Sallie represents the quiet and stasis Billy does not find in others:

And I sat there for three days not moving an inch, like some dead tree witnessing the tides or the sun and the moon taking over from each other as the house in front of me changed colour....And Sallie I suppose taking the tent sheet off my legs each morning once the shutters closed....Sallie Chisum resting on my chest, my hands rubbing them, pushing my hands against them like a carpenter shaving wood to find new clear pulp smelling wood beneath. My own legs black with scars (*Billy the Kid* 34-35)

There is no place in Ondaatje's work, however, where the allusion to the female body is so objectified and crude as in *Slaughter*. The author here makes a hard and painful exposition of the perception of the New Orleans prostitute at the beginning of the century. In the first pages of the book is an implicit pain and hardness which unsettle the reader who contemplates the female market in the Red-Light District of Storyville. A fatalist realism which approaches the crudest

naturalism and leads us to reflect on the central motif of the book: the sheer identification of the jazz musician with the prostitutes' fate (*Slaughter* 119). Bolden is complicit with Bellocq's project of photographing the prostitutes in that he convinces some of the women to pose. That assistance not only marks him as a patron of the more sensitive elements of the artwork but it also makes him complicit with the knife slashes Bellocq inflicts on those photographed bodies. We have here an implicit portrait of the artist as complicit commodifier of the female (York 1994, 81)

The historian Al Rose gave Ondaatje information about the Storyville district and this has helped us analyse the strong intertextuality and the historical fragments the author has reconstructed as the documental basis in *Slaughter*. Rose provided Ondaatje and the reader with entertaining information of the New Orleans of the time and the importance of jazz as a reflection of such society.<sup>2</sup> The next paragraph constitutes an illustrative paraphrasis that Ondaatje extracts on page 15 from Rose's text:

Here the famous whore Bricktop Jackson carried a 15 inch knife and her lover John Miller had no left arm and wore a chain with an iron ball on the end to replace it -killed by Bricktop herself on December 7, 1861, because of his "bestial habits and ferocious manners"....And here "One Legged Duffy" (born Mary Rich) was stabbed by her boyfriend and had her head beaten in with her own wooden leg. (Rose 1974, 8-9)

Rose exposes a historical vision of a decadent society at the turn of the century; and Ondaatje, once more, feels attracted to certain characters who, at least unconsciously, may lead him to remember the life his Burgher ancestors led in Sri Lanka. Alcohol, parties, free love and decadence were key features of a society totally apart from the rest of the inhabitants, an unconscious and privileged class which ignores the historical conditions of the time. Ondaatje has here for the first time analysed another type of marginality and has successfully fictionalized a historical document in order to explain the roots and environment of Buddy Bolden.

In the next fragment, Ondaatje modifies Rose's historical document in pages 84-5, but always keeping the hilarious and anecdotal tone of its original:

Or at 335 Customhouse (later named Iberville), the street he went crazy on, you could try your luck with French Emma's "60 Second Plan." Whoever could restrain his orgasm with her for a whole minute after penetration was excused the \$2 payment. (*Slaughter* 9-10)

York observes a complicity between the author and Bolden as the promoter of the market of whores. The musician is the one who introduces them to his friend Bellocq for photographic sessions. In a parallel way, one of Bolden's patrons is Tom Anderson, a historical entrepreneur who makes money

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<sup>2</sup>Al Rose, *Storyville: New Orleans: Being an Authentic Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1974). Louis Malle's film *Pretty Baby* was based on Rose's book.

in the brothels; a rather singular personage, “[o]pen-handed and closed-mouthed, he became a kind of neutral ground upon which politicians and criminals could reach agreements and treaties” (Rose 1974, 43).

As a result of this chain of relationships Bolden becomes the accomplice of Bellocq’s destruction of the prostitutes’ photographs. So the protagonist reflects both a portrait of the self-destructive artist who narrates and the personification of the masculine power exerted upon women as objects of desire:

Some of the pictures have knife slashes across the bodies. Along the ribs. Some of them neatly decapitate the head of the naked body with scratches....you think of Bellocq wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the bodies....The making and destroying coming from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of. (*Slaughter* 55)

The rather mysterious and attractive figure of the photographer Bellocq is unravelled in Rose’s book. There we find out that Bellocq did not commit suicide but lived till the end of the 1930s. Even though Rose defends the thesis that it was Bellocq’s brother who destroyed the photographs, Ondaatje’s source, *J.E. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*,<sup>3</sup> questions such a hypothesis. The latter contains a historical dialogue with the prostitutes and different personages who met the artist, and they clearly reject the idea that Bellocq’s brother, a

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<sup>3</sup>John Szarkowski, ed. *E.J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970). This source reflects the photographs of the prostitutes some of which are not included in Rose’s book.

mysterious priest nobody met, would come into Bellocq's studio to destroy the negatives. That is, however, Rose's version which is based on rumour:

After Bellocq's death, many of the glass plate negatives were defaced by, it is said, the photographer's brother, a Roman Catholic priest who seemingly wished to conceal the identities of the subjects but refrained from simply destroying the plates. The logic governing Father Bellocq's curious course of action is obscure. (Rose 1974, 60)

The sexual imagery is recurrent as an inescapable metaphor to express the vital energy the different personages cannot elude. The character of Nora Bolden is significant in its transformative sexual role which remains obscure throughout the book. The musician will eventually abandon her in his male outbursts of a suspected infidelity on her part. He behaves as the typical male character of Ondaatje's books, as a male chaotic led by a violent energy to hide his own insecurity towards women.

In the same way as Billy seeks refuge in Sallie, Bolden escapes from Nora's stability to fall into the arms of another woman, Robin Brewitt. Robin simultaneously stands for both the sexual power and the sheltering security. Again a love triangle is created between a married couple, Robin and Jaelin, and the intruder: "Jaelin and Robin and Bolden. Robin and Bolden. There was this story between them. There was this deceit and then there was this honour between them" (*Slaughter* 65). The love triangle, a common device in Ondaatje's work, is a situation where deceit and betrayal lurk upon a stable

couple; where a woman feels trapped between two men, though generally choosing passion and violence to the security and fidelity of a family:

Till I attack her into the wall my cock cushioned my hands at the front of the thigh pulling her at me we are hardly breathing her crazy flesh twisted into corners me slipping out from the move and our hands meet as we put it in quick *christ* quickly back in again. In. Breathing towards the final liquid of the body, the liquid snap, till we slow and slow and freeze in this corner. As if this is the last entrance of air into the room that was a vacuum that is now empty of the other histories. (*Slaughter* 61-62)

Accordingly, Sallie and Angie create the equilibrium that Billy needs to acquire balance and control over his passions. In a parallel way, Nora and Robin are equally opposed, though these female figures are indispensable to the poet in his fictional design. Bolden seeks refuge in Robin, for she does not demand Nora's certainties but gives protection, as Sallie does with Billy, from the menacing dangers of an outer world and fame:

And Robin who drained my body of its fame when I wanted to find that fear of certainties I had when I first began to play, back when I was unaware that reputation made the room narrower and narrower, till you were crawling on your own back, full of your own echoes, till you were drinking in your own recycled air. And Robin and Jaelin brought me back to that open fright with the unimportant objects. (*Slaughter* 86)

Women's art, in *Slaughter*, seems dependent on a man's art, in more ways than one; while Buddy Bolden watches a woman, probably Robin Brewitt, slicing carrots, he translates this domestic 'women's work into a commentary on his own art: "As with all skills he watches for it to fail. If she thinks what she is

doing she will lose control” (*Slaughter* 31). And Nora’s mother, Mrs. Bass, figuratively becomes a woman artist -the dancer Isadora Duncan- only through the male investigator Webb’s deduction that the circumstances of her death were the same as Duncan’s. But female emulation of Duncan takes on a more subversive cast in *Running*, where “Doris Gratiaen and Dorothy Clementi-Smith would perform radical dances in private, practising daily. Both women were greatly influenced by rumours of the dancing of Isadora Duncan” (33). What’s more, unlike Nora Bolden and Robin Brewitt, they soon carry their art into public performance.

The male self represents, as a result, the anarchy of the romantic artist. In addition to the backdrop of the Chisums farm as an isolated shelter to provide privacy, the Brewitts home transforms Bolden’s escape into a stable environment to return his sense of privacy and self-assertion. Women have the responsibility and burden of endowing the protagonists with personal and professional stability. The poet is conscious, however, that all equilibrium rooted in escapism and irresponsibility leads to another kind of solitude:

This last night we tear into each other, as if to wound, as if to find the key to everything before morning. The heat incredible, we go out and buy a bag of ice, crack it small in our mouths and spit it onto each other’s bodies, her tongue slipping it under the skin of my cock me pushing it into her hot red fold....We give each other a performance, the wound of ice....As if everything in the world is the history of ice. (*Slaughter* 86-87)

In a similar way, in *Running*, the couple's lack of understanding ends with the solitude of the protagonist. Mervyn will be paralleled and compared to the previous protagonists as an anarchic and violent example of self. In this case the female role has evolved into a serious and committed design:

My mother...walked into that darkness, finding him and talking with him for over an hour and a half. A moment only Conrad could have interpreted....They survived that darkness. And my mother, the lover of Tennyson and early Yeats, began to realize that she had caught onto a different breed of dog. She was to become tough and valiant in a very different world from then on, determined, when they divorced, never to ask him for money, and to raise us all on her own earnings. (*Running* 149)

Ondaatje's "masculinism" gives way to a recognition of the politics of power, both in an analysis of colonialism and in gender relations. Ondaatje's treatment of "gender has become more complex and problematic" (York 1994, 80) than in his earlier works as he turns his attention to the survivors of a social destruction that is beyond their control, such as Clara and Patrick in *In the Skin of a Lion*, and Hana, Almásy, Kip, and Caravaggio in *The English Patient*. It is in the 1980s when Ondaatje's work turns into a less egocentric and individualistic narrative, concerned with the social problems of his generation. Gradually the reader finds a clear evolution that starts in *Running* and begins to transform the experimental years of *Billy* and *Slaughter* into a confessional narrative and poetics in *Secular Love* and *Handwriting*, where the poet needs a wider poetic space and feels concerned with other matters. And this progression

and amplitude enact, in the mature artist, a commitment towards new areas characterized by an artistic internationalism in the treatment of new issues such as immigration and postcoloniality.

Unlike earlier works, Ondaatje's attention now includes female protagonists. An analysis of the relationships among the male and female characters in Ondaatje's work can be useful in providing a sensitive measure of the changing structures of power and meaning in his work. For example, as Bök has pointed out, the women in the earlier works, such as Angela D., Nora Bolden, Robin Brewitt, and the mattress whores, remain the passive objects of the male explosive creativity, and female artists do not appear at all (Bök 1992, 116).

York analyses the waning of Ondaatje's "woman-object jokes," from a series of breast jokes in earlier works to more muted versions and finally the elimination of woman jokes altogether in *The English Patient* (1994, 79-80). She also acknowledges a development beyond Ondaatje's earliest visions of woman as "the unconscious, dreaming, art-object" witnessed by the "poet-speaker" who can take pleasure in looking at her beauty, and exclaim at it in his poem. York contains that later works rethink this fairly straightforward commodification of woman. In *The English Patient*, Hana, Katharine, and Anna, the German officer's mistress who has taken Caravaggio's photograph, all direct

some penetrating looks of their own in a “complicated dance of gazes” (York 1994, 82) as they study the men in the novel. As York describes it, some of “the sleeping women of Ondaatje’s early works have woken up to assume narrative and to direct the gaze” (82).

An examination of both *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter* reveals that the women in the texts exist only in their relationships to the men and the primary homosocial relationships of the men to each other. For example, Buddy Bolden’s male-female-triangle relationships with Nora, his wife, and Pickett, her former and suspected current lover, and with Jaelin, a fellow musician, and Robin, Jaelin’s wife, can clearly be seen as power relationships between the men which feature the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men. Bolden recognizes the pattern when he says “Nora and Pickett and me, Robin and Jaelin and me. I saw an awful thing among us” (99). In particular, Buddy’s wrestling match with Pickett, including the bloody shirts, a slashed nipple, broken bone, razor cuts, razor strop, smashed mirror, flying mirror shards, broken window, pouring rain, and the two men locked in a violent dance has more passion than any male-female encounter in the novel, and is the dazzling set piece of the book. In this exchange, it is the power relationship between Pickett and Bolden

that is at stake, and Nora figures as the object of exchange between them, not as one of the participants.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is useful to contrast the bloody Bolden/Pickett/Nora exchange with *The English Patient*'s triangular scene of Hana, Kip and Caravaggio stalking each other through the villa, culminating in a confrontation in the dark in the ruined library. Equally, as physical as Bolden and Pickett's battle, the characters of *The English Patient*, and the ones of *In the Skin of a Lion*, take delight in playfully outwitting each other through stealth and skill in the dark, the bounce of sapper lights all over the room. Unlike Bolden/Pickett battle over Nora, Hana is neither a bystander nor an object of exchange between the men. She unwits them both, using Caravaggio as the trick to outmanoeuvre Kip, and wins the contest. She crows her victory –“I got you. I'm the Mohican of Danforth Avenue” (224)- while riding on Kip's back, and Caravaggio withdraws. It is not possible to fit this scene into the pattern of “male traffic with women” anymore (see Ellis 1996, pp. 32-3)

## 7.1 Post-Structuralism, Defamiliarization and the Use of History

If post-structuralist politics implied the dispersal of history into new areas, it also implied a historiography which was both more and less than the transcription of lost experience. (Belsey 1988, 404)

The Saussurian revolution in the linguistic disciplines brought the displacement of the referent, the real object in the external world, and the affirmation of language as an autonomous system governed by a play of differential relations among its elements: the unit of signification is the structural sign. By revealing the arbitrariness of the relation between sign and referent, structuralism decenters the transcendental subject of metaphysics, the supposed locus of essential knowledge and meaning, as a linguistic construction. Yet this move does not bring about a real questioning of concepts such as origin, presence and centre: the very structure, the system that makes possible the functioning of language, comes to occupy the place of the rejected subject. Since everything is language, and language consists of an endless play of differences, it is understood that there is no fixed origin but a constant movement of signifiers and signifieds within an immobile closed structure. The contradiction lies in that this centre of the structure needs to escape structurality in order to remain the centre. If structuralists acknowledge the contradictory relation between the sign and its referent, and postpone the problem by bracketing out the referent and concentrating on the sign itself, based on an arbitrary but structural relation between signified and signifier, post-structuralism goes further and unveils the existence of the same relation of substitution within the sign: there is only a play of signifiers that come to stand for their signifieds in an infinite chain of substitutions (see Darias 1996, 69).

According to post-structuralist theory the signified is not a static component of the sign, it has fragmented throughout a whole chain of signifiers which will acquire

some meaning depending on the context in which they appear. Eagleton asserts in his *Literary Theory* that post-structuralism not only produces the split between the sign and its referent but also goes beyond making the signifier an independent entity from the signified:

The shift from structuralism to post-structuralism is from seeing the poem or novel as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings ... to seeing it as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning. (1990, 128)

For Raman Selden (1989, 70), post-structuralism appears in the 1960s not only as a rupture but also as a continuation of the previous movement and its scientific purposes. If structuralism was heroic in its desire to “dominate” the world, post-structuralism is certainly anti-heroic, even comic, in its rejection to pose its pretensions in a serious and determined way. This last movement has thus discovered the essentially inestable nature of meaning. For Selden, Saussure could not envisage how the unit of meaning can break down when the systems become structures. So the post-structuralist thought is, to a certain point, a reflection of the same issues that postmodern society concerns about:

Modernists remain tragically heroic, while postmodernists express exhaustion and display the resources of the void .... Just as the postmodernist writers break down every conceivable boundary of discourse by fusing forms, and confusing different realms, so the post-structuralists deny the distinctions between the traditional orders of discourse (criticism, literature, philosophy, politics), leaving an amorphous universe, a “general text.” (1989, 72)

The post-structuralist critic will therefore coin a new term, the “subject in process” so, instead of considering language as an impersonal system, it will always be articulated together with other systems and through a subjective process called discourse, for “[l]anguage cannot be neatly dissociated from social living; it is always contaminated, interleaved, opaquely coloured by layers of semantic deposits resulting from the endless processes of human struggle and interaction” (Selden 1989, 76).

Another branch of post-structuralist thought is the one led by Michel Foucault and his disciple Edward Said. Following Nietzsche, “Foucault denies that we can ever possess an objective knowledge of history. Historical writing will always become entangled with tropes; it can never be a science. There are no absolute ‘true’ discourses, only more or less powerful ones” (Selden 1989, 100). Discourse thus is an active part of human actions, not as a universal text, but as a centre of ideology and power which will react as an opposition depending on the historical era. Discourse could then never be universal and unchronological and it will always be rooted in a social institution for different social and political powers are usually intertwined in every discourse. Post-structuralism questions though never gives answers as its struggle is a never-ending escape from logocentrism; that is the reason why it is always doomed to uncertainty towards the meaning of any text which can only be considered as literary.

The shift from work to text (Barthes 1986, 155-64) is brought about by a view of language no longer as structure but as an endless process of structuration. Critical attention moves accordingly from the search for categories such as coherence and unity to the identification of textual gaps and differences. In this sense, post-structuralism would come as a subtle form of liberation from (subversion of) structures of language and, with it, of meaning: “In writing, the tyranny of structural meaning could be momentarily ruptured and dislocated by a free play of language; and the writing/reading subject could be released from the straitjacket of a single identity into an ecstatically diffused self” (Eagleton 1989, 141). If meaning is never present in the sign but the result of articulation, division or difference from other signs, the meaning of a text is never identical to itself but always a compound of repetition and of negative relations between what is and the traces of what is not. The multiple relations of difference occurring constantly not only between signified and signifier, but also within signifiers alone, point to the impossibility of ever attaining a full or complete meaning because, as Bakhtin had already foreshadowed, there is always

something other, something still to come, suspended by an endless process of articulation and deferral. In this new arena, the structure of language opens itself up to indefinable possibilities:

Instead of being a well-defined, clearly demarcated structure containing symmetrical units of signifiers and signifieds, it now begins to look much more like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through everything else. (Eagleton 1989, 120)

At the heart of this debate of the structure is the dismantling of the founding metaphor of logocentrism: the idea of origin, whose questioning constitutes perhaps a common basis within an otherwise heterogeneous and contradictory post-structuralism. If meaning cannot be, at least totally, either located in the authorial intention, or in the text itself, it nonetheless depends on recognizable and historically variable discursive practices. Hence the shift in focus from the writing to the reading process as the locus of production of meaning.

It seems useful to note here that, whatever the limitations and problems that contemporary theories of reading may present, attention to the reader's function does not necessarily mean that a text can mean anything the reader wants it to mean personally and regardless of the socio-historical determinants in which the text has been written and read. Rather, the consideration of the reader as an active part in the production of the text involves two related changes in the traditional conception of textual meaning: in the first place, it implies that meaning is always ideologically - historically, politically, culturally- determined. Secondly, if meaning is produced by repetition, difference in meaning is contextual. Contexts differ from one another, are open to new elements in such a way that there is no context identical to itself. Accordingly, meaning is always subject to new possibilities (see Darias 1996, 73-4).

The concept of defamiliarization was coined by Viktor Shklovsky during the initial period of Russian Formalism. For Shklovsky, the purpose of any work of art will be to modify our perception of the objects that surround us towards a clear artistic

aim. In his article, "Art as Technique," he clarifies the concept arguing that art's commitment is to reflect the perception of objects, turning them into strange elements and making their form difficult and, therefore, modifying their perception (1988, 16-30). Accordingly, the object of the artist is to transform the artistic experience even if the object loses its importance. So the language of the novel becomes a re-enactment of the different levels of language, for,

[t]he purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an esthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.* (Shklovsky 1988, 20)

Hence, the actual actions are defamiliarized and fragmented, and they can be interrupted or modified. Ondaatje changes our perception through cinematic methods, usually observed behind a lens which is always present. In a camera's zoom or a blank photograph, the reader discovers a new action which is no longer automatic but subjective, an action portrayed in a singular or ambiguous way. We learn how defamiliarization does not accept common perception in itself, but only as the "representation" of such perception. This emphasis on the process of presentation of an image is called "laying bare," that is, the process to undress the author's technique as the main factor of his art.

Formalists had a mere technical interest in this process and frequently related discourse theory to the notion of defamiliarization.<sup>1</sup> For Wolfgang Iser, the artistic

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<sup>1</sup> On a superficial examination the Russian formalists appear to have shared many critical assumptions with the New Critics. They too emphasized texts and insisted that any worldly context or persuasive purpose could not be of major importance in a poetic text. Their views are fairly compressed into Jakobson's notion that a poetic text is one which emphasizes its own textual form. The formalists differed from the New Critics, however, in their extreme interest in devices and conventions of poetic structure. They always sought the poetic in poetry and the prosaic in prose, so that even their studies of individual texts always came to turn on a point of poetic principle that could be applied to other texts in the same genre. Thus, their interpretive strategies tended to move from an emphasis on texts to an emphasis on the codes that govern the production of texts (see Robert Scholes, 1982).

recreation consists in conscious interruptions of the narrative in order to obtain an experimental efficiency. Therefore the reader goes further, goes back, decides, doubts, and is surprised to contemplate a dynamic recreative process: “Elements of the repertoire are continually backgrounded and foregrounded with a resultant strategic overmagnification, trivialization, or even annihilation of the allusion” (Iser 1988, 223). This defamiliarization, Iser asserts, provokes a tension and distrustfulness in the reader. Similarly, we are dealing with several fragmented texts without any transition, or actantial imprecisions according to Eco, so the reader has to make up the connections and therefore “reconsider data we at first held to be perfectly straightforward” (Iser 1988, 223). On the other hand, the sudden presence of the writer reinforces this technique, so an “unreliable narrator” (Booth 1967, 211) can appear unexpectedly, disorienting the reader and thus overlapping a new deep structure which was invisible before. Iser concludes:

We may find that our narrator, by opposing us, in fact turns us against him and thereby strengthens the illusion he appears to be out to destroy; alternatively, we may be so much in doubt that we begin to question all the processes that lead us to make interpretative decisions. Whatever the cause may be, we will find ourselves subjected to this same interplay of illusion-forming and illusion-breaking that makes reading essentially a recreative process. (1988, 223)

The notion of defamiliarization implies a drastic change in the historical development of literary theory. The concept could well be considered structuralist as it treats technique as Saussure would treat language, that is, as a “system of differences.” But now we are not dealing with a new way of perceiving but a real novelty in the way that perception is expressed. The Russian Formalism focuses on the medium and not on the message of the literary artefact so objects lose their “familiarity,” making the forms difficult, and “darkening” perception. As the perceptive process is an aesthetic aim in itself, all perceptive spontaneity is vanished.

On the other hand, the Formalists did not search for universal truths but rather they have tended to see the history of literature as a phenomenon in continuous

evolution. Each new artistic advancement will be a rejection of the old concept of passive reading of a literary text.<sup>2</sup> Art thus consciously exerts a strangeness in the things that were usual and automatic in the reader. Poetic language is not defined by a special use of structures or vocabulary but rather by its formal devices which act upon language in order to modify our perception of objects and sounds. These poetic devices are thus foregrounded according to their defamiliarizing effect: the image, hyperbole, parallelism, simile, or any other trope would be perfectly effective to enact a poetic violence in ordinary language, and this is the differential function that counts in literature. From a diachronic point of view, defamiliarization also fragments traditions and installs a historical dimension between a new literary device and the system that lies behind. Thus, discontinuity and traditional rupture become the basis of the historical projection.

Ondaatje produces discontinuity in the reader's referential points in a metonymical or metaphorical way. He therefore ignores the reader's own mental image of common experience to provoke a different poetic effect. He uses defamiliarization to break the psychological or cognitive coherence in the discourse, that is, in his descriptions through the character's point of view. So Billy the Kid observes around him in an extremely subjective and cinematic way ignoring the reader's perceptions of the same event. In *Billy the Kid*, the author has successfully

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<sup>2</sup> The formalist and structuralist emphasis on codes has led to the development of a semiotic approach to literary study that has proved quite compatible with the rhetorical approach of the Chicago Aristotelians to which Wayne Booth belongs. It makes a good deal of sense, for instance, to see Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* as a development of Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*, and Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* is also in this unified tradition, which emphasizes an approach to texts through generic codes and stylistic conventions. It is precisely this impact that worries the structuralist Barthes who privileged popular and mythic texts in his interpretive essays. In his post-structuralist phase, Barthes has tried to show that the classic text is just as un-original as the popular, just as dominated by received opinions and formulaic gestures. Realism, Barthes tells us, has nothing to do with reality; it is simply a text that is readable because it is composed entirely of what is already known. The classic realistic text is a tissue of clichés because all codes are finally coercive. Barthes denounces the readable text in *S/Z*, and asks for a writable text, a text that is sufficiently free of logic and grammar to allow the reader to take an active role in textualization: to write (see Scholes 1982, p. 12).

merged the old legendary documents with the treatment that the character has had in the cinema. The author's handling of the story subjects the reader to a process of defamiliarization in which the standard western is made new. Every aspect of his version emphasizes both the difficulties inherent, and the artistic problems involved in recreating that reality in art. He makes the reader a direct witness, a temporary insider of the events themselves. Despite Billy's death, the book remains open-ended. The end suggests that Billy's story will be written again, interpreted again. His historical treatment is hence symbolic and subjective, which, in the early 1970s, is still a real experiment in Canadian poetry.

Ondaatje makes a peculiar use of his legendary figures, as this chronological and spatial detachment serves him to distance himself from contemporary issues and turn his story into a myth. Any aspect of this new version underlines the inner difficulties and the artistic problems which entails this recreation of reality in art. The reader once more enters a confusing and fictional world which makes him alert and conscious of the difficulties that the perception and description of reality entails.

Other defamiliarizing devices could be the allusions of a blank photograph of Billy, maybe simulating a failed negative, and reasserting once more the impossibility to capture the legendary hero; also the episodes that affirm that appearance has nothing to do with reality. The blank spaces which abound in several pages would stand for those undeveloped photographs, those historical silences that were never told. The book tries to subvert the legend, see Billy as an example of modern consciousness. Moreover, the lack of information is the perfect means to assure an incomplete story whose meaning is indeterminate and ambiguous. In this way the original uncertainties are not revealed in order to question the destructive creativity of the artist.

According to the "New Historicism," the French historian Michel Foucault opens the path to a new concept of textuality. History is, in any case, a narrative and a representation of a past without formal purity. The idea of a uniform and harmonious

culture would then become a myth imposed to history and spread by the leading conventions of the era. The study of the past is no longer objective and detached so the new relation between literature and history must be rethought.

George Bowering suggests that the argument about history comes from the confusion regarding just what history is: is it what happened or is it what the historians have written? (1988, 3). Determinists, among them progressives, tend to think that history is an inevitable force in which human groups are caught up. On the other hand, people on the fringes of history believe that history is a kind of narrative composed in the centres of power. Fiction writers that believe that history is someone's act of narrative tend towards myth and invention -such as Conrad, Borges, or Kroetsch. For Bowering, Ondaatje's most celebrated work is *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, a collage of altered and forged documents -diary entries, newspaper reports, interviews, in which the author makes use of a variety of older literary and cinematic treatments of the William Bonney legend. His purpose is not to highlight the historical gunman but rather to transform his story in a parable about the artist-outsider in North American society. His Billy is a careful, articulate and perceptive anti-hero, a man more eager to love than to kill. He is brought into being by Ondaatje's deliberate alterations and additions to already suspect traditional material. His openly subjective and symbolic treatment of history and document contrasts profoundly with other treatments of history in Canadian poetry.

In the 1960s and 1970s, New Historicism challenged the older concepts of history establishing a new set of assumptions. There is no longer a stable and fixed history to be used as a basis for literature. History thus consists of a story about the past which uses other texts as its intertexts; so the old historicism is challenged with a new vision (Selden 1989, 104):

1. There are two meanings for the word "history," one would be the events of the past, and the other would be "telling a story about the events of the past." History

is always narrated and therefore the first sense is untenable. The past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in the forms of representations.

2. Historical periods are unified entities. There is no “single history,” only discontinuous and contradictory “histories.” The idea of a uniform culture is a myth imposed on history, and propagated by the ruling classes in their own interests.

3. Historians can no longer claim that their studies of the past are detached and objective. The past is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds, which we construe in line with our particular historical concerns.

4. The relations between literature and history must be rethought. There is no stable and fixed history which can be treated as the “background” against which literature can be foregrounded. History is always a matter of telling a story about the past, using other texts as our intertexts.

Accordingly, the historian Hayden White has asserted that history and literature have much in common, employing narrative devices and systems of rhetoric to construct a verbal image of “reality.” He suggests that what distinguishes the literary from the historical is not fiction versus fact, but different textual properties. Literary and historiographical texts should thus be viewed as forms of writing, and not mutually exclusive in terms of their qualities of imagination and fact. This reworking of history helps us to further define intertextuality. Indeed, historical background becomes itself a form of text which may be aligned with a literary text.

All historical novels imply the use of the new strategy of “transworld identity,”<sup>3</sup> that is, a dynamic identity that hovers both around the fictional characters in the novels and the historical characters in real life. If these fictional and real identities differ when they trespass the ontological barrier, then they are mere homonyms and not transworld identities. Likewise McHale also explains how a character can be the same in a novel and in a historical novel, or how the author can turn his biography into a historical metafiction, for “the relations between the worlds is one of *asymmetrical*

accessibility. The fictional world is accessible to our real world, but the real world is not accessible to the world of fiction” (1991, 35). McHale focuses on those characters who suffer a “demystification,” moving from the profane to the sacred. Moreover, they can also suffer the inverse process, that is, they move from the historical to the fictional planes, or among different fictional environments.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, “[p]ostmodernist fiction draws upon a number of strategies for constructing/deconstructing space, among them *juxtaposition*, *interpolation*, *superimposition and misattribution*” (McHale 1991, 45).

According to this view, we deal with an ontological scandal which reaches the point of locating historical figures in complete fictional environments, as in the case of Charles (Buddy) Bolden in *Slaughter* and William Bonney in *Billy the Kid*. For McHale, the process consists of trespassing or destroying “the constraints of ‘classic’ historical fiction: by visibly contradicting the public record of ‘official’ history; by flaunting anachronisms, and by integrating history and the fantastic” (1991, 90). Hence, the postmodernist text “revises” history both ways: modifying the content of the traditional version and transforming the conventions of historical fiction. In a parallel way, however, “they imply that history itself may be a form of fiction .... Conversely, fiction, even fantastic or apochryphal or anachronistic fiction, can compete with the official record as a vehicle of historical truth” (McHale 1991, 96).<sup>5</sup>

The rise of post-structuralism in literary theory and the extraordinary spell postmodernist literary practice has cast over the majority of writers in the United States and Canada since the 1960s seems to indicate a pervasive change in the

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<sup>3</sup> Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula* (1993, pp. 200-66).

<sup>4</sup> As in the case of *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), where the characters of Hana and Caravaggio appear five years later, in real and fictional time, in *The English Patient* (1992). Similarly, real characters play fictional roles in Ondaatje’s works or pose as protagonists for historical documents and photographs.

<sup>5</sup> Another device common in these postmodernist texts is the *trompe-l’oeil*, in which the diegetic level is trespassed taking the reader to a level in which the character becomes a myth to be demystified later on. An exegesis in which the alert reader learns of a new ontological reality. Another type of

intellectual and especially in the epistemological matrix of our contemporary Western world view. The validity of the concept of realistic or factual representation with its notion of a mimetic connection between art and reality is no longer taken for granted.<sup>6</sup> The authorial self-effacement which had been a prime characteristic of traditional fiction has given way to a self-conscious and self-referential treatment of the processes by which we construct both the phenomenal world around us and its alleged representations in the work of art. The positivist-empirical model of knowledge on which realistic art formerly based its claim to both the authority and authenticity of its representations is now challenged by a sceptical relativism which radically unmasks the ideological basis of our belief in definite, undeniable, and transcendently guaranteed truths (see Engler 1994, 15).

The development of the theory of history in the course of the 20th century gives ample evidence of the enormous reluctance of historians to acknowledge the degree of fictitiousness of their historical reconstructions. The extraordinary critical attention the historian Hayden White was able to win with his seemingly revolutionary and iconoclast attacks on the established view of history gives us a clear indication of the pervasiveness and longevity of a mimetic, realistic view of historical representation.

Seen in the context of the post-structuralists' deconstruction of traditional concepts of cognition and the mimetic mirroring of reality, White's critical questioning (in such seminal studies as *Metahistory*, *The Tropics of Discourse* and *The Content of the Form*) of commonly held positions seems fairly cautious and even sparing. In his inquiries into the epistemological status of historical explanation and the relative

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*trompe-l'oeil* consists of the strategy of freezing an image or producing a cinematic effect to provoke a new perception which the reader shall interpret (see McHale, 1991, pp. 115-18).

<sup>6</sup> As Bernd Engler comments (1994, 14), the meaning of the term "realistic" should not be restricted to the denotations literary critics have in mind when they refer to the 19th-century Literary Realism as a narrowly circumscribed epoch with specific literary conventions. We will use the term very much as the historian Hayden White used it, i.e. as referring to techniques or strategies in discourse which -

authority historical accounts may claim, White rather modestly tries to introduce post-structuralist notions into the theoretical debate among historians, notions which elsewhere had already gained wide currency. White and others<sup>7</sup> found themselves confronted with the paradox that, despite decades of a more or less open acknowledgement of the essential fictionality of history, the belief that history is an immediate representation of reality had almost remained as vigorous as it had been in the 19th century. White had to face the disturbing situation that, although historians and philosophers of history explicitly commented on “the essentially provisional and contingent nature of historical representations and of their susceptibility to infinite revision in the light of new evidence or more sophisticated conceptualization of problems,” they nevertheless had been extremely reluctant “to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (White 1978b, 41-72).<sup>8</sup>

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by claiming that they provide a factual representation of reality- attempt to deceive the reader as to the epistemological and ontological status of their statements.

<sup>7</sup> We do not try to minimize the importance of other philosophers of history. Since the 1960s historians have voiced views which are similar to those expounded in White's studies. The focus on White is, however, justified as it was primarily the reception of his studies which finally foregrounded metahistoriographic issues in the present debate to an extent that has not been envisioned before. Among the many studies which deal with aspects of a narrative theory of history the following are of special importance: E.H.Carr, *What Is History?* (1962); Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965); W.B.Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (1968); Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis: Sozialphilosophische Studien* (1967); Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (1975); *The Writing of History*, ed. R.H. Canary and H. Kozicki (1978); Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* (1983); Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (1985), etc.

<sup>8</sup> In his essay “Fictions of Factual Representation,” (1978a, 126), White criticizes his fellow-historians as being “so fetishistically enamored of the notion of ‘facts’” and so “hostile to ‘theory’” that they charge everyone who tries to explicate the relationship between the so-called facts and narrative concepts of “having defected to the despised sociology or of having lapsed into the nefarious philosophy of history.”

Since the beginning of the 19th century historians have been eager to insist on the putative authority of their representations of the past.<sup>9</sup> This is even more astonishing if one recalls that before the 19th century neither historians nor philosophers of history had shown any intention to invest historical knowledge with a specific epistemological status. Aristotle's famous distinction between history and poetry did not -as many 19th-century readers have come to believe- mark the writing of history as superior to the writing of poetry.<sup>10</sup> It was not until the end of the 18th century that the traditional view of history and its association with literature became problematic. The rise of positivist theories of history, which, throughout the 19th century, aimed to enhance the status of historiography, may be regarded as a reaction against the extreme denigration the work of historians had suffered before. By claiming to possess the kind of objectivity which before was only attributed to the natural sciences, history sought to steal a share of the high prestige the sciences then enjoyed. Historical truth -historians proudly asserted- could be discovered or reconstituted by methods similar to those employed by scientists. Historians claimed that their representations of historical reality were factual in a way which implied a point-by-point correspondence to the extratextual "reality" of verifiable occurrences or

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<sup>9</sup> The term "philosophy of history" was invented in the eighteenth century by Voltaire, who used it for the first time in its modern sense, that is, a critical or scientific history, as distinct from the theological interpretation of history. The same name was used by Hegel and other writers at the end of the eighteenth century; but they gave it a different sense and regarded it as meaning simply universal or world history. A third use of the phrase is found in several nineteenth-century positivists for whom the philosophy of history was the discovery of general laws governing the course of the events which it was history's business to recount. For Voltaire, philosophy meant independent and critical thinking; for Hegel, it meant thinking about the world as a whole; for nineteenth-century positivism, it meant the discovery of uniform laws (Collingwood 1956, 1).

<sup>10</sup> It is essentially a Christian and Hebrew assumption that history is directed toward an ultimate purpose and governed by the providence of a supreme insight and will -in Hegel terms, by spirit or reason as "the absolutely powerful essence." Hegel is the last philosopher whose historical sense was still restrained and disciplined by the Christian tradition. Voltaire and, unintentionally, Vico emancipated secular history from sacred history, subjecting the history of religion to that of civilization. Hegel translated and elaborated the Christian theology of history into a speculative system, thus preserving and, at the same time, destroying the belief in providence as the leading principle (see Löwith 1949, pp. 54, 192).

events.<sup>11</sup> According to empiricist convictions, phenomenal reality is not only perfectly intelligible to human understanding, but is also coherent in its very structure (see Engler 1994, 18-9).

In “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” Hayden White delineates the development of historical thinking, especially the gradual shift towards the extraordinary fetishization of historical objectivity and authenticity the 19th century witnessed. “In the early nineteenth century,” White concludes,

it became conventional, at least among historians, to identify truth with fact and to regard fiction as the opposite of truth, hence as a hindrance to the understanding of reality rather than as a way of apprehending it. History came to be set over against fiction, and especially the novel, as the representation of the “actual” to the representation of the “possible” or only “imaginable.” And thus was born the dream of a historical discourse that would consist of nothing but factually accurate statements about a realm of events which were (or had been) observable in principle, the arrangement of which in the order of their original occurrence would permit them to figure forth their true meaning or significance. Typically, the nineteenth-century historian’s aim was to expunge every hint of the fictive, or merely imaginable, from his discourse, to eschew the techniques of the poet and orator, and to forego what were regarded as the intuitive procedures of the maker of fictions in his apprehension of reality. (1978a, 123)<sup>12</sup>

Although 19th-century historians were quite aware of the fact that their allegedly factual representations of past events produced almost as many different reports and explanations as there were historians, they still kept to their belief that if one only tried hard enough to avoid distorting ideologies and attempted to be true to

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<sup>11</sup> The Positivists, anxious to stake out their claim for history as a science, contributed the weight of their influence to this cult of facts. First ascertain the facts, said the Positivists, then draw your conclusions from them. In Great Britain, this view of history fitted in perfectly with the empiricist tradition which was the dominant strain in British philosophy from Locke to Bertrand Russell. The empirical theory of knowledge presupposes a complete separation between subject and object. Facts, like sense-impressions, impinge on the observer from outside and are independent of his consciousness. The process of reception is passive: having received the data, he then acts on them .... This is what may be called the commonsense view of history. History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts (see E.H. Carr 1967, 9).

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the development of concepts of history in the 19th and 20th centuries see especially White’s essay “Interpretation in History,” (1978a, pp. 51-80, originally

the given facts, historical objectivity could easily be achieved.<sup>13</sup> These historians began to examine the scientific status of historical knowledge critically. Thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche and Croce challenged the belief in the empiricist notion of historic authenticity. In contrast to “realist” historians who thought that an objective view of the given facts was a fundamental prerequisite to historical knowledge, they emphasized the role of the historians’ individuality and subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> Hegel, Nietzsche and other philosophers of history placed historiography among the literary arts and asserted that historical knowledge was as much based on a critical and disinterested assessment of historical evidence as on the historian’s subjective inclinations, predispositions, and poetic intuitions. Moreover, history was understood as the result of a dialogue between the past and the present which is necessarily inspired by present purposes and the historian’s present interests. Indeed, the notion of the objectivity or at least disinterestedness of historical representation was uncovered as mere fiction. According to this perspective, we only preserve from the past those events which have some relation to our personal interests or the values in which we believe.

Thus historical selection immediately reflects the very questions the present asks of the past; it cannot claim a validity which transcends the perspectives and preoccupations prevalent in a specific society (or person) at a specific point in time.

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published in 1972-1973 in *New Literary History*, no. 4; and Gossman’s contribution to *The Writing of History*, “History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification,” (1978, pp. 3-39).

<sup>13</sup> “‘Good style,’ when it did not simply occult the problem of ‘voice,’ restricted the historian to an ‘objective’ description and analysis of facts. ‘Objectivity’ implied the dominance of an impersonal or ‘voiceless’ voice, and ‘subjective’ interventions (marked by the use of a first-person pronoun) had to be largely confined to a preface or conclusion. More occasional interventions of ‘non-objective’ tendencies in the body of the historical text threatened to disrupt established rules of decorum, and anything approximating a more complex ‘dialogue’ between past and present (or historian and documentary evidence) seemed to be ruled out *ab initio*” (LaCapra 1985, 117).

<sup>14</sup> All history is “contemporary history,” declared Croce, meaning that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and that the main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording? In 1910 the American historian, Carl Becker, argued in deliberately provocative language that “the facts of history do not exist for any historian till he creates them.” Croce was an important influence on the Oxford philosopher and historian Collingwood, the only

Both those who espoused positivist views and those who sympathized with relativist views agreed that the responsible historian and the erudite reader could always distinguish between those elements in a historical account that were founded on verifiable facts and those that were produced by the interpretation of the historian. Thus, the consensus remained that, despite the obvious selectiveness and speculation of evidence gathering and interpretation, the factual bedrock of history remained and could be ascertained with a fair degree of certainty by those trained in and skilled at historical criticism (see Engler 1994, 20-21).

Most 20th-century historians who have come to acknowledge the importance of subjective intuition or of the creative imagination in the construction of historical explanation have also been most interested in maintaining the traditional distinction between history and mere fiction. Thus R.G. Collingwood, one of the most influential promoters of what Hayden White and others called a “narrativist” theory of history, always emphasized the importance of the constructive imagination in the historian’s attempt to come to terms with the abundance of the random and incoherent facts of history.<sup>15</sup> But, as if to contradict his own theory, he also made every effort to stress the notion that the “true” story of the past is always buried in those facts. The “conservatism” of Collingwood’s concepts becomes fully evident when, in comparing the task of the historian and that of the novelist or storyteller, he reasserts the conventional contrast. While he says he regards the novelist’s task as limited to creating a coherent picture of reality, he notes that the historian has to fulfill a double task. Like the novelist he has to meet the demands of formal and aesthetic coherency,

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British thinker in the twentieth century who has made a serious contribution to the philosophy of history (see Carr 1967, pp. 21-30).

<sup>15</sup> “Historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the redoing of this, the perpetuation of the past acts in the present. Its object is therefore not a mere object, something outside the mind which knows it; it is an activity of thought, which can be known only insofar as the knowing mind re-enacts it and knows itself as so doing. To the historian, the activities whose history he is studying are not spectacles to be watched, but experiences to be lived through in his own mind; they are objective, or known to him only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own” (Collingwood, 1956, 218).

but -in addition- he also has “to construct a picture of things as they really were and of events as they really happened .... the historian’s picture stands in a peculiar relation to something called evidence” (Collingwood 1956, 246).

What Collingwood was not able to see was -as Hayden White points out- “that no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story” (1978b, 41-62). Although Collingwood was able to realize that many 19th-century historians could not yet comprehend, namely, that facts do not speak for themselves but are conceived as such by the historian’s selective and interpretative intentions, he nevertheless could not accept the notion of the ultimate fictionality of all historical representation.<sup>16</sup>

Extending and elaborating on the concept of “pregeneric plot-structures” or archetypal story-forms which Northrop Frye had developed in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, White criticizes Collingwood’s notion of the “constructive imagination.” The historian, he declares in “Interpretation in History,”

does not bring with him a notion of the “story” that lies embedded within the “facts” given by the record. For in fact there are an infinite number of such stories contained therein, all different in their details, each unlike every other. What the historian must bring to his consideration of the record are general notions of the *kinds of stories* that might be found there .... In other words, the historian must draw upon a fund of culturally provided *mythoi* in order to constitute the facts as figuring a story of a particular kind, just as he must appeal to that same fund of *mythoi* in the minds of his readers to endow his account of the past with the odor of meaning and significance. (1978a, 60)

Interpretation in history, White emphasizes again and again, is predetermined by the particular kind of story historians envisage even before they begin to consider the individual “facts” in the historical record which they intend to include in their narratives. The stories historians may choose are not hidden in the historical record

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<sup>16</sup> “Many human emotions are bound up with the spectacle of such bodily life in its vicissitudes, and biography, as a form of literature, feeds these emotions and may give them wholesome food; but this is not history. Again, the record of immediate experience with its flow of sensations and feelings,

and thus they cannot be discovered -as Collingwood claims- by means of an *a priori* constructive imagination.<sup>17</sup> The stories which are available to historians are provided by their cultures; they are the “pregeneric plot-structures” and archetypal story patterns which become manifest in the literary heritage of any given culture (see Frye 1957, 162ff.). It is the existence of these very plot structures and the historians’ conscious or intuitive decision to use one or the other as the basic structural pattern of their narratives of events, which will finally govern the process of selecting, interpreting, and arranging the ‘given’ historical facts in a way that seems to endow them with a pre-existing, inherent significance and meaning. But, indeed, once historians have chosen the kind of story they want to narrate, the very process of selection and emplotment (i.e. integrating the various facts into a meaningful plot) of the seemingly chaotic and incoherent material of the story is predetermined by the structure of the given arche-story (see Engler 1994, 23-4).

Historical events do not have intrinsic meanings.<sup>18</sup> If they appear to be tragic, for instance, they do so only because they are emplotted in a manner which we as

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faithfully preserved in a diary or recalled in a memoir, is not history. At its best it is poetry; at its worst, an obtrusive egotism; but history it can never be” (Collingwood 1956, 304).

<sup>17</sup> In his essay “Interpretation in History,” Hayden White is willing to treat Collingwood’s notion of “constructive imagination” as another way of describing the faculty on which the historian’s choice of an arche-story is based. “(If) Collingwood is right in his analysis of the workings of the ‘constructive imagination’ in the composition of historical narratives,” White says, “then it is possible to conclude that the constructive element which he discerned in every such narrative is contained precisely in the historian’s choice of a ‘pregeneric plot-structure’ or ‘myth’” (1978a, 61). Collingwood’s “constructive imagination” and what White regards as a more or less conscious choice in favor of one story structure over another are, however, referring to two quite different mental activities. Collingwood still asserts the notion of some comprehensible truth hidden behind the chaotic surface of historical facts and he also seems to imply (as does Frye) that the historian proceeds inductively and tries to avoid informing patterns except those which he sees emerge from his material. In contrast, White favors the view that the historian “works ‘deductively’ *from* an apprehension of the pattern that he intends to impose upon his subject” (1978a, 58).

<sup>18</sup> As Hayden White has demonstrated in “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7:1 (Autumn 1980a): 5-27, even collections of obviously random and irrelevant historical data such as we find in medieval annals, are governed by an implicit story structure. As White shows, even the most unorganized collection of data reflects strategies of emplotment. Rpt. in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987).

readers might perceive as being tragic. Our perception of the tragic import of a story is itself but the result of our knowledge of the patterns of tragic emplotment in the archetypal story-forms perpetuated by our cultural heritage. How plausible the emplotment of a set of events may finally appear does not depend on any pre-existing coherence of the story material, but -as White declares, “on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot-structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, that is to say, fiction-making, operation” (1978b, 41-62).

If we follow White’s argumentation to the point of accepting that historiography is nothing but a fiction-making process and that the historical text is nothing but a literary artifact, we once more are confronted with the notorious question of what historical representations are or if they are far from being representations of some universally comprehensible historical reality. White asserts that the historical narrative, once it is regarded as a system of signs,

points in two directions simultaneously: *toward* the events described in the narrative and *toward* the story type or mythos that the historian has chosen to serve as the icon of the structure of events .... The historical narrative thus mediates between the events reported in it on the one side and the pregeneric plot structures conventionally used in our culture to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings, on the other .... Properly understood, histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that ‘liken’ the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture. (1978b, 41-62)

When the reader finally considers history as a type of narrative, as he does with epic, comedy, or drama, we can say he has understood the meaning of discourse, that is, the form of narrative. Therefore, we should consider any narrative representation as a figurative narrative as it is deployed through language. For Paul Ricoeur, all language requires an interpretation, that is, a “translation” from one discursive community to another. Thus an understanding of certain events through several hermeneutic principles to confront past events. For him, plot is not a structural

component that only concerns fictional or mythic stories but is altogether important in historical representation. History pretends to reconstruct a retrospective chain, so historical objectivity consists precisely in this ambition to elaborate historical chains in a different intellectual level. Moreover, all historian focuses on past events from his own human experience. Ricoeur comments on what he calls a “good subjectivity” in the historian, conscious and responsible with the events in his discourse, in which the definition of objectivity is no longer logical but ethical (see Ricoeur 1990, 25-32).

As the historical writer is not innocent, the model reader can no longer be passive in front of a historical text so he approaches other versions to compare and to have an opinion. Even if we admit that literature differs from history in their immediate referents, real or imaginary, we acknowledge that both are gifted with a plot and, thus, with a chronological story. The importance lies, according to Ricoeur, in the structures of temporality, and his most characteristic example is the historical chronicle, which is not literature but an experience lived within temporal boundaries: historical narrative is not only an image of the events, past or present, but it is also an index of the type of actions which produce a type of event we call historical. Finally, narrative will be history’s ally in its reflection on temporality, emulating the historical fact of telling stories and lived experiences, so all historical narrative is an allegory of temporality (see White 1987).

In contrast to Linda Hutcheon, who has come to regard historiographic metafiction as the most prominent expression of the postmodern attack on the traditional view of art as a realistic or mimetic representation of reality (1988b, 53f.), most critics do not even acknowledge postmodern literature’s fundamental concern for the complex epistemological issues which surface in the current debate on the problems of historical representation. Yet, historiographic metafiction not only foregrounds the postmodernists’ “quarrel” with the conventional differentiation between fact and fiction, it also makes the question of the epistemological status of narrative representation the chief focus of its critical inquiry (see Engler 1994, 13).

Historiography is no longer taken to be a disinterested or even an objective recording of the past. As facts do not speak for themselves but represent the particular meaning historians give to events, historiography is less an attempt to comprehend the past than to master it by means of culturally transmitted strategies of narrativization. In spite of the mask of factuality and coherence which historiographic representations wear, both their meaning and their structural order are unstable, relational and provisional.

Postmodern historiographic metafiction can, however, gratify our culture's desire to understand its present state as the result of previous representations only in a highly unsatisfactory way and -as it were- with a revenge that boomerangs on itself. Seen as an immense pastiche in which the texts of the past remain inscribed and are constantly re-presented as elements of signification in new combinations and contexts, the present becomes a mosaic of randomly resurging pre-texts. The more contemporary philosophy of history and historiographic metafiction thematize the problematic strategies of emplotment by which both fiction and historiography familiarize the unfamiliar and incomprehensible, the more they subvert our endeavours to achieve mastery over reality in an act of ultimate signification. The postmodern distrust of the "master narratives" of our culture finally unmasks all modes of signification as arbitrary acts by which we re-inscribe our personal patterns of world-making and our cultural ideologies back into reality.

But if historiographic metafiction unavoidably confronts us with the extremely disconcerting insight that all allegorical interpretation is relative and that, in the end, our constructions of reality will never be able to validate the meaning they seem to promise, propose and project, why should we then privilege the interpretation of history offered by contemporary metafictionists as being more in accordance with (contingent) reality than any other. By celebrating the ubiquity of relativism and the triumph of pure fiction over base fact, historiographic metafiction questions the very referent of its own discourse, destroying the illusion of objectivity and discovered

meaning which it requires to justify its unmasking procedures. With that destruction, historiographic metafiction eliminates both its reason for and possibility of being. If history is a mere fiction then the writing of historiographic metafiction becomes an oxymoronic endeavor (see Engler 1994, 32-3).

Historiographic metafiction attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, and it does so both thematically and formally. History and fiction, however, are not part of the same order of discourse. They are different, but they share social, cultural, and ideological contexts, as well as formal techniques. The protagonists of historiographic metafiction are anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures: Saleem Sinai in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the Ondaatjes in *Running in the Family*, Mauberley in Findley's *Famous Last Words*, Barney Panofsky in Richler's *Barney's Version*, or Grace Marks in Atwood's *Alias Grace*. The purpose is the play upon the truth and lies of the historical record: historical details are falsified in order to foreground the possible failures of recorded history. Historiographic metafiction incorporates historical data without assimilation: we watch the narrators of *Running* or *The Wars* trying to make sense of the historical facts they have collected. As readers, we see the process of collecting and ordering.

Hutcheon distinguishes two modes of narration in historiographic metafiction which problematize the whole notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view, as in D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, or an overtly controlling narrator, as in Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1988b, 117). In both there is an amazing inability to know the past with any certainty. This is the problematization of subjectivity into history that theory has taught us. Postmodernism establishes, differentiates, and then disperses stable narrative voices that use memory to try to make sense of the past. The use of intertextual parody, therefore, is the formal manifestation to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context.

As Robertson Davies has remarked, “we all belong to our time, and there is nothing whatever that we can do to escape from it. Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age.”<sup>19</sup> The novel concerns itself with time, therefore, there can be no history, and no novel either, without memory of some sort. All novels are, in this sense, historical novels insofar as they make reference to a time that is not the time in which the reader is reading the book. Figures of the Canadian past were always present in the Canadian novel, Anne Hebert’s *Kamouraska* in 1970, Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* in 1976 and Marian Engel’s *Bear* in 1976, Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* in 1973 and *The Scorched-Wood People* and Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* in 1977. In the eighties and nineties the trend intensified, as in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*, and Brian Moore’s *Black Robe*, George Bowering *Burning Water* and Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic*, and Jane Urquhart’s *The Whirlpool*, *Away* and *The Underpainter*, Findley’s *You Went Away*, Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on your Knees*, Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* and Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy*.

All of these are set in the past but not all use the past for the same purposes. Atwood distinguishes different reasons in this attempt to fictionalize the past. Some, Atwood says “attempt restitution of a sort, or at least an acknowledgement of past wrongs” (1997, 22), and she locates Rudy Wiebe’s novels and Guy Vanderhaeghe’s in this category in their approach to the North American deplorable treatment of Native Peoples. She locates Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* in the category of political class struggle of immigrants. Others, like MacDonald’s and Atwood’s deal with the past as it was lived by women under past conditions, etc. This explosion of historical novels in the past decade, Atwood acknowledges, is because Canadians are more confident of themselves: “we are part of worldwide movement that has found writers and readers,

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<sup>19</sup> “Fiction of the Future,” *The Merry Heart: Selections 1980-1995* (1996, p. 358).

especially in ex-colonies, turning back towards their own roots, while not rejecting developments in the imperial centres” (1997, 24).

On the other hand, the past is safer than the present of a country that threatens to split apart. While visiting the past, the writer escapes backwards in another world where he or she can recreate, “by taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves” (Atwood 1997, 27). Such stories about the past are selective in their historical approach, but, most of all, they are about human nature, truth and lies, disguises and revelations: “The past no longer belongs only to those who lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it” (Atwood 1997, 39).

Literary historians have approached literary studies because they are, after all, storytellers. As Eric Hobsbawm says, history “is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function is to do so,” concluding that “all historians, whatever else their objectives, are engaged in this process inasmuch as they contribute, consciously or not, to the creation, dismantling and restructuring of images of the past which belong not only to the world of specialist investigation but to the public sphere of man as a political being” (1983, 13). Likewise historiography may benefit from modes of critical reading since there is a growing conviction that documents are texts that supplement or rework ‘reality’ and not mere sources that divulge facts about ‘reality.’ The problem is how to relate, in theory and discursive practice, the historian’s use of texts as documents in the inferential reconstruction of “reality” (or the “broader context”) and his or her critical reading of texts in a manner that may itself affect both the conception of former “reality” and activity in the present (see LaCapra 1985, 21).

White’s theoretical work on historiography, which Louis O. Mink justly sees as the culmination of the tendency to view historical understanding in terms of

narrative, both stresses the role of rhetoric and threatens to subordinate it to relatively confined documentary, logical, and dialectical models of cognition. On one level, White's theory of the figural origins of historical knowledge reverses ordinary scientific preconceptions in a manner that both produces a potentially beneficial shock effect and reopens questions that seemed to be closed. But, on another level, his theory remains within the same general frame of reference as the "scientific" views are turned upside-down. For LaCapra, however, the problem of subjective relativism in White's "poetics" of historiography stems from a neo-idealist and formalist conception of the mind of the historian as a free shaping agent with respect to an inert, neutral documentary record (1985, 34-5).<sup>20</sup> Thus, historiography is dialogical in that, through it, the historian enters into a conversational exchange with the past and with other historians, it thus undergoes the appeal of different interpretations, employs self-critical reflection and makes use of modes such as irony, parody, self-parody, and humour, that is, double or multi-voiced uses of language (see LaCapra 1985, 36). The contemporary scene reveals a high degree of internal alterity and dialogization. Different cultural perspectives convert the plot into different stories. The novel is pertinent to historical research to the extent that it may be converted into useful knowledge or information. A move in a desirable direction is made when texts are understood as variable uses of language that come to terms with -or 'inscribe'- contexts in various ways -ways that engage the interpreter as historian and critic in an exchange with the past through a reading of texts.

One consideration of general significance is that all contexts are encountered through the 'medium' of specific texts or practices, and they must be reconstituted on the basis of textual evidence. For the past arrives in the form of texts and textualized

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<sup>20</sup> White selects ideology rather than tropes as the determinative level in discourse, and he complicates his model by focusing on the role of code-switching. But his emphasis remains on codes in the analysis of usage and texts. White's "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Theory," *History and Theory* 23:1 (1984): 1-33, provides a critical survey of theories of narrative in

remainders -memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments, and so forth. The supplementary point is that texts interact with one another and with contexts in complex ways, and the specific question for interpretation is precisely how a text comes to terms with its putative contexts. The novel has a distinguishing characteristic vis-à-vis historiography that is obvious but important. It may borrow from a documentary repertoire, and this process brings into play a carry-over effect that invalidates a conception of the novel in terms of pure fiction or a total suspension of reference to 'external' reality. Decontextualization itself, which has been a forceful movement in modern literature, depends on its effect upon contextual expectations. But the novel, unlike historiography, may invent characters and events and give rise to configurations that are not available in the writing of history. When this elementary distinction between history and the novel breaks down, one has the appearance of myth. It is on other levels of interpretation, composition, and style that the relations between the novel and historiography become more engaging and controversial (see LaCapra 1985, 127-29).

The unproblematic assertion of the radical alterity of the past is often complemented of an excessively homogeneous conception of the present (or the self), and it really induces a lack of critical self-reflection and a denial or repression of transferential relations toward the 'other'. Alterity, in other words, is not simply 'out there' in the past but in 'us' as well, and the comprehensive problem in inquiry is how to understand and to negotiate varying degrees of proximity and distance in the relation to the 'other' that is both outside and inside ourselves. Dwelling on the wonderful strangeness of the past may turn into a pretext for avoiding what unsettles one's own protocols of inquiry and troubles the flow of narrative.

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contemporary thought. This ground-breaking essay indicates how White's own work goes beyond the genetic structuralism that appeared in his earlier writing (LaCapra 1985, 35)



## 7.2 Intertextuality and Artistic Internationalism

Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (Barthes 1988, 168)<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand postmodernism, we need to understand textuality and its possible independence from both the authorial voice and from the external reality to which it may allude. Roland Barthes has analysed this concept arguing that we should approach a text from different perspectives so that it will pose a “difference,” a textuality in itself. Therefore, each text independently refers to an infinity of texts previously written, and this intertextuality allows the reader to be only a consumer of a determined meaning. As Scholes argues, “(a) text always echoes other texts and it is the result of choices that have displaced still other possibilities. The records of these textualizing activity may or may not be available as manuscript drafts, but the process must be assumed anyway. A text is always the result of an arbitrary decision to stop writing at a particular point” (1982, 16).

This phenomenon is an important and determining fact in the works of Michael Ondaatje in general. His texts constitute a conglomeration of quotations, influences and collected intertexts acquired as a result of his rich and varied cultural inheritance.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes is the precursor and founder of modern literary studies precisely because he located literary practice at the intersection of subject and history; because he studies this practice as symptom of the ideological tearings in the social fabric; and because he sought, within texts, the precise mechanism that symbolically (semiotically) controls this tearing. He thus attempted to constitute the concrete object of a learning whose variety, multiplicity, and mobility allow him to ward off the saturation of old discourses. This knowledge is in a way already a writing, a text. The originality of Barthes’s writings probably lies in this double necessity: (1) that scientific approaches be simultaneous and that they form an ordered set giving rise to Barthes’s concept of semiology; (2) that they be controlled by the discreet and lucid presence of the subject of this “possible knowledge” of literature, by the *reading* that he gives of texts today, situated as he is within contemporary history

Ondaatje reflects in his work a postmodern world; he searches for disorientation, for a textual openness in which the fragments drift and derive from other literary or extraliterary works, providing a new meaning. His works do not transmit universal values, but they pretend to analyse issues like death and the nature of an apocryphal history. So he subverts and modifies a past history either of legendary figures or of his own past. Carlos Fuentes argues that each story modifies and changes in each reading, becoming the story as a momentaneous possibility; it moves, becoming another version in the same way as a man plays the hero now and the traitor in the next version (see Fuentes 1993, 67).

For Barthes, all work necessarily descends from previous literary texts, not in the conventional sense that it has this or that influence, but in a more radical sense in which, each word, each sentence is a rewriting of previous works which precede or surround this particular story. There is no such a thing as literary originality or a first literary text, for all work is intertextual, as if it lost the necessity to be original and it would start anew with others' material as the starting point. Thus, a specific story does not have concrete boundaries or defined limits, but vanishes and merges with a whole surrounding literature, generating hundreds of different perspectives which disappear in the work's periphery. It is language, the one that "talks" in the literary work, in all its plurality and polysemy, not the author as a private entity:

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not the author. (Barthes 1988, 171).

Barthes thus rejects the traditional idea of the author as the origin of the text, the source of its meaning and the only authority to interpret it. The reader will be the one to gather all the quotations he can and will give them unity and coherence; so the work's meaning lies in its addressee as the writer is no longer the key for its meaning.

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(see Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1977; 1980, pp. 93-4).

The reader's role will not, however, be to discover the text's meaning, but to conceive its plurality, the openness of its meaning, its architecture, for, argues Barthes, "[t]o give a text an author is to impose a limit to that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (1988, 171).

The school of the New Critics similarly thought that the text's unity did not lie in the author's intentions but rather in the text's inner structure. This implicit unity, however, has intimate connections with the author, for it is formally linked to his intuitions of the surrounding world "provid[ing] the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications .... The text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author" (Foucault 1988, 204).

Barthes's much quoted declaration seems the result of a realization of the opacity of language, and therefore, of the text: the lack of transparency between the system of linguistic signs and the reality to which it supposedly refers obviously stands against the activity that aims to explain the meaning of a literary work in terms of its author's intention or consciousness. This realization implies two major ontological changes regarding the writing subject. It means that this subject is never unified in the first place, since language is always in the middle between reality and the subject's consciousness, both of which, in turn, become textualized, or seen as within language. The question of who speaks loses its traditional relevance in this entanglement of the textual web. Secondly, "the death of the author" signals the end of the idea of originality in writing and, with it, the birth of intertextuality: a text is always already constructed through other texts, other discourses, already made material always within language; it is "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" which the writing subject cannot but approach and arrange by means of repetition. The author figure is thus redefined as a textual construct, and deprived of its privileged position preceding the text: it is now produced along with it by way of inscription. The text, seen as an endless process of intertextuality with no identifiable

origin, needs a place where to inscribe its own multiplicity. The birth of the reader, Barthes claims, must be preceded by the death of the author.

Critiques of Barthes's theories of textuality abound. This death of the Author can be seen as bringing a reification of the reader figure, a textual reader, on whose competence the successful inscription of intertextuality depends. Additionally, Barthes's ahistorical perspective, his insistence on writing as a neutral space presents a number of problems as to whether his proposed textual analysis admits textual reconstruction and can really account for the socio-historical circumstances in which the text is produced, that is, written and read (see Johnson 1980). All in all, his conception of the text as tissue, always interweaved and unfinished, has opened up textual meaning to the possibility of multiple readings. As Catherine Belsey writes: "The Death of the Author, the Absolute Subject of literature, means the liberation of the text from the authority of a presence behind it which gives it meaning. Released from the constraints of a single and univocal meaning, the text becomes available for production, plural, contradictory, capable of change" (1990, 134).

The transition from structuralism to post-structuralism consisted of seeing a narrative or a poem as a private entity, with a definite and irreplaceable meaning, to discover how it finally transforms into a plural play of signifieds and aceptions which is never tied to a centre, to an only essence or meaning (see Eagleton 1990, 128). The text, therefore, is more a process open to structuration than an structure in itself, and the critic will be the one to shape it and make it meaningful, perhaps providing a new dimension which was unappreciated before. Literature will thus be the terrain for ambiguity, the place where the reader is suspended between a literal and a figurative meaning, without being able to decide which way to follow. Most of the contemporary theory comes from the discourse of philosophy. This interdisciplinary criss-crossing constitutes the basis of post-structuralist practice, grounded in the writings of European philosophers, mostly French (Foucault, Barthes, Derrida), and imported and transformed by Anglo-American literary theoreticians (de Man, Hillis Miller). The old

desire to occupy a centre is called “logocentrism”; however, the American deconstructionism, led by Paul de Man, will put plurality in its place clearly rejecting the authoritarian unity and enacting an skepticism towards absolute systems. The texts are therefore not strictly literary or philosophical in the traditional sense of the term. But their purpose is the challenging of boundaries within disciplines.

A Foucauldian concept of textuality implies a group of social and historical structures of meaning that govern the relation between knowledge and power and thus connect the notions of ideology and the subject. Discourse precedes and goes beyond the speaking subject making the text anonymous inasmuch as it is always exposed to infinite reinscriptions in the absence of its author. Meaning can no longer be conceived as a transparent, natural and universal element able to provide human consciousness with an unmediated access to the world outside. Resistance to a transcendental concept of the subject can be found in the writings of Bakhtin, who argued against Saussure’s static structure of language based on the belief of a transcendental signified. Bakhtin sees language as a social, historical, contextual and ideological practice, and considers the linguistic unit a focus of struggle and contradiction. In his essay “Discourse in the Novel” (1981), Bakhtin privileges the novel over other traditional genres because it can incorporate the contradictory languages that constitute the general condition of social heteroglossia. As other theoreticians question the nature of signification, Bakhtin also shifts away from the quest for an implicit meaning and focuses, instead, on the possibility of a multiplicity of meanings within a single sign across history and contexts, becoming the product of an endless dialogue of social languages. Language therefore contradicts Saussure’s concept of *langue* in that it multiplies itself in an infinite number of discursive practices. Like the word, discourse, or ‘language in context,’ is also dialogically interrelated to what is not: “Discourse lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context” (Bakhtin 1981, 284).

This displacement of the subject of discourse prevents him from having control of the meaning of its own discourse. This displacement nonetheless does not necessarily involve a nihilist conception of the subject, on the contrary there is intention and personal accent in discourse. Bakhtin's conception of the "literary word" as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point or fixed meaning, as a dialogue among writer, addressee and cultural contexts is what, for Kristeva, allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism. The word is then considered as the minimal structural unit in order to situate the text within history and society, which are themselves texts read and rewritten by the writer. Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality. In this perspective, "a text cannot be grasped through linguistics alone. Bakhtin postulates the necessity for what he calls a *translinguistic* science, which, developed on the basis of languages' dialogism, would enable us to understand intertextual relationships" (Kristeva 1980, 65, 69).

This dialogical approach foreshadows the tenets of post-structuralist thought in a number of ways: first it depends on the self-conscious critique of its own methods and materials; secondly, it does not drive towards resolution but assumes whatever conclusion it reaches as a provisional one awaiting transformation by further dialogue; thirdly, it dramatizes the gaps and conflicts in our forms of conceptualizing reality. Finally, by drawing attention to the materiality of the word, the dialogical approach to language accords no privilege or anteriority to the signified, but considers meaning as produced every time through complex processes of appropriation (see Darias 1996, 52-53).

Even if Bakhtin's parameters are different from those of contemporary theory, his role of ideology in the production of discourses has contributed to the opening of new and interdisciplinary fields of research. The role of ideology as discourse and the place of the subject within this discursive formation has been dealt with by Michel Foucault (1977) in his conceptualization of discourse as the diversity of complex

“social formations” governed by rules constantly transformed in the search for knowledge and power in Western societies. Foucault’s notion of discourse contradicts the Western concept of origins, unity, convergence, resolution and conclusion in that revolutions, wars, and other types of social and ideological ruptures have been traditionally modified by changes in the discursive practice and the relocation of discontinuous phenomena as accidents within the overall structure of continuity. This double play between the discourse of continuity and the subject ideology is designed, as Foucault puts it, “to preserve, against all decentrings, the sovereignty of the subject” (1977, 12).

Foucault’s concept of discourse therefore reverses this unifying tendency and leaves the subject in a state of inevitable alienness in relation to discursive formations. Given the impossibility of locating the essence, origin or centre of consciousness, the old Cartesian cogito becomes obsolete. In its place, what matter are the relations of difference among and within discourses as the subject becomes a function of discourse, which “leaves no privilege to any center” (1977, 205). Foucault’s archaeological method thus intends to focus on those places of dispersion of the subject in the history of epistemology. What is needed is an analysis of the transformations and redistribution of discursive formations in order “to define the positions and functions that the subject could occupy in the diversity of discourse” (1977, 200).

But how can the subject break free from the “transcendental narcissism” (Foucault 1977, 203) of discourse without renouncing its capacity to construct itself in it? There is a necessity of considering discursive practices as historical and political constructs, so whereas it is impossible for the subject to escape discourse as such, there are still ways to transform the discourse of ideology, a process in which the subject’s consciousness becomes displaced, and dispersed. Discourse then, seen as the constant reappropriation and reinterpretation of documents throughout history, constitutes itself inasmuch as it survives the speaking subject. Therefore, the very condition of discourse deprives its subject of the traditional authority at the centre of

it: “I have deprived the sovereignty of the subject of the exclusive and instantaneous right to it” (Foucault 1977, 209).

The subject cannot be conceived in terms of origin and unity, but rather as a discursive construct in a constant process of articulation. “It is not a question,” Lacan notes, “of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather the knowing whether I am the same as that of which I speak” (1977, 165). This question, the desire for unity that is never satisfied, sets the subject in movement throughout a number of positions within discourses. It is this condition of inescapable self-referentiality that renders inadequate the permanence of a system of thought based on a unified consciousness. If the role of ideology is to address the subject as a unified whole, constituting it in the belief of its centrality, and thus preventing its movement, then, the recognition of the subject as always in the process of constitution liberates the possibility of change. Instead of being immobilized in a pre-established position of supposed ontological privilege, the subject can actively engage in discursive structures occupying multiple, even contradictory, positions within them (see Darias 1996, 63). This is possible because subjectivity can only be “linguistically and discursively constructed and displaced across a range of discourses in which the concrete individual participates” (Belsey 1990, 61).

The concept of intertext appears in the 1960s in France. It will have great importance as the figure of the author can no longer be considered as the basis of textual meaning: the author has been decentralized in the interpretative process. Instead, the text is now considered as a multitude of texts which are rooted in other circulating discourses. So the author is no longer the origin of the text, the creative genius, but the mind that has organized the linguistic material.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the story

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<sup>2</sup> A different approach to intertextuality is provided by Gérard Genette who classifies under the general category of *transtextuality* five different modes of textual strategies. Our purpose, Genette argues, will not be to study the isolated text but its literariness, or, as he called it, the *architext* (1989, 9). Within this category we would practically include all the aspects we have been discussing, that is, types of discourse, either poetic or narrative, literary genres, etc. Genette would later change the term

becomes a repetition (even when the narrative action is totally invented), and repeated since ever: the contemporary narrator can be the hero of the story the same way as the old one was (see Lyotard 1989, 47). Thus intertexts are echoes of previous texts but with a new representation. Barthes thus affirms in his “Theory of the Text,” that “[a]ny text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc., past into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text” (1982, 39). For Barthes, this textual multiplicity that any writing reflects shall be unveiled by the reader, not the writer. So as we mentioned above, the text’s unity does not lie in its origin, but in its addressee, the reader, who, for Barthes, “is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that ‘someone’ who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (1988, 171). The reader’s role will not be to discover the meaning of the text, but to unveil its plurality, its openness, to “analyse the work through its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relationships” (Foucault 1988, 198).

The term intertextuality, however, must be attributed to Julia Kristeva, whose reworking and updating of Bakhtin’s concepts have decisively given a Bakhtinian edge to many contemporary literary studies. But it is in a psychoanalytical context that Kristeva first posits “intertextuality” as a transposition or passage from one or more signifying systems into another, a process involving a transformation of the thetic phase (the threshold between semiotic and symbolic processes). In a recurrent combination of psychological and socio-linguistic theories, Kristeva mentions the

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for *transtextuality*, considered a wider term where we can group all different types of textual relations. A first type would be *intertextuality* which would only include quotations, plagiarism and allusion. A second group would be the *paratext*, or the relation the text has with with the preface, title, subtitle, epigraphs, credits, and even drafts, etc. Although very helpful in his attempts to theorize this complex phenomenon, Genette seems to consider intertextuality as a product rather than as process. Based on a concept of the literary work as a closed organic unity, these theories seem insufficient to account for the complex working of intertextuality in postmodern fiction.

novel as an obvious transposition of different sign systems. She summarizes her views on the role of theory and literature within the present technological era as follows:

(C)onsidering the complexity of the signifying process, no belief in an all-powerful theory is tenable; there remains the necessity to pay attention to the ability to deal with the desire for language, and by this I mean paying attention to art and literature, and, in even more poignant fashion, to the art and literature of our time, which remain alone, in our world of technological rationality, to impel us not toward the absolute but toward a quest for a little more truth, an impossible truth, concerning the meaning of speech, concerning our condition as speaking beings. (Kristeva 1980, ix)

Both the writing subject and the addressee are constituted within the discourse of past and present texts. That is so because “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*” (Kristeva 1980, 66). Kristeva thus coins what could be considered one of the major features of postmodern fiction. One could, of course, argue that intertextuality, seen as the intersection between the text, in the traditional sense of the word, and the general text, is in fact a major characteristic of all writing. Yet postmodern fiction foregrounds intertextuality not as a simple characteristic, but as the mode of production of meaning and knowledge in fiction and, by extension, in all areas of human experience. In doing so, it demands a different reading as it rethinks traditional categories of genre and discipline. The reader of a postmodern text must strive “to define the specificity of different textual arrangements by placing them within the general text (culture) of which they are part and which is in turn, part of them” (Kristeva 1980, 36).

Although Kristeva’s intertextuality is obviously based on Bakhtin’s dialogism, the two concepts are not interchangeable. While Bakhtin centered his theory of dialogism in the novel on the semantic aspects of the word, intertextuality involves the whole act of enunciation. This would not only include the semantic, syntactic and phonic differences but also affect the status of the (reading and writing) subject, which

becomes an effect of the textual plurality, a polyphony or kaleidoscope, a “subject in process.” In other words, the subject here becomes a function of the text and is therefore defined in terms of infinite relation between language and space (see Darias 1996, 138).

Literary textuality may seem to be a type of literary recycling; however, the new relations among the different textual discourses will assure that the literary text will never be the same, will never be completely repeated. We have to take into account that, despite Barthes opinion, in reading a text we may add our own references even ignoring the author’s. So we cover the text with our own cultural discourses and experience, which may depend on the place, the time and the reader in particular. Therefore, Foucault asserts that

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, its is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network ... the book is simply not the object that one holds in one’s hands ... its unity is variable and relative. (1976, 23)

Similarly, the fact that a literary work is interpreted in different ways depending on the historical moment, transforms the act of reading into an infinite and relative process, therefore lacking a stable meaning. This statement draws us to the concept of deconstruction forever present in North American critical thought today. Nevertheless, “it is not enough to declare that we should do without the writer and study the work in itself. The word ‘work’ and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author’s individuality” (Foucault 1988, 199). Foucault thus refuses the simplistic notion of the death of the author, who, undoubtedly, “performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function .... The author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse” (1988, 201). The author may not constitute an infinite source of meaning or a constant polyphony, instead “the author is the ideological figure by

which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (Foucault 1988, 209).

As stated above, Bakhtin’s poliphony or dialogy consists in a variety of discourses which reflect different ideological positions without being judged by an authorial voice; this authorial voice would disappear in the decentralized linguistic discourse. Then authorial voice would simply organize the different levels “with *almost no direct language of its own*. The language of a novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language (Bakhtin 1988, 130). There is not a single language or unitary style in the novel, but a system of interrelated planes, though we cannot ignore an ideologic and verbal centre in it. The author, however, “is to be found in at the center of organization where all levels intersect. The different levels are to varying degrees distant from this authorial center” (Bakhtin 1988, 131).

According to Catherine Belsey, intertextual relations are never purely literary, as we do not move to previous narratives but to the knowledge of other historical periods, to the discourses that have circulated in the past and which have constituted the centre of power of an era:

Narrative necessarily depends on the establishment within the story of fictional forms of control and resistance to control, norms and the repudiation of norms. From the Renaissance to the present, the criterion of verisimilitude, towards or against which fiction has consistently pressed, has necessitated that these concepts of control and normality be intelligible outside fiction itself. Thus, sovereignty, the family, subjectivity are designed and redefined in narrative fiction, problematised and reproblematised. (Belsey, 1988, 407)

Umberto Eco, on the other hand, calls the intertextual processes “stereotype situations,” which are derived from a precedent textual tradition and have thus been gathered in the encyclopedia, for they are susceptible of different combinations, and with them the author can decide, cheat or surprise the reader (1993, 119). An example would be the classic duel between the sheriff and the gunman or the narrative situation

in which the hero defeats the villain of the story. Eco thus distinguishes between stereotyped intertextual structures - “drunkard redeemed by love”- and stereotyped iconographic unities - “the figure of the nazi”-. We are actually interested in those intertextual structures that are not only recognized by the audience “as belonging to a sort of ancestral intellectual tradition but that also display a particular fascination” (Eco 1988, 448).

Archetype is for Eco an indication of a previous preexistent narrative which appears quoted and recycled throughout several texts and which produces an emotion and a familiarity in the addressee. Therefore, no text is read independently from the reader’s experience, so intertextual competence establishes its own frames and structures and will thus compound all the semiotic systems to which the reader is familiarized (see Eco 1993, 116). An intertextual archetype does not have to be necessarily universal, as it can belong to a recent textual tradition. It can simply be considered as a known situation gathered from a cultural or historical period. All story will have one or more archetypes in its content.

The practice of Paul de Man can be considered the most rigorous exercise on unreadability. In *Allegories of Reading* (1979), de Man undertakes a close reading of philosophical and literary texts, focusing on those elements that resist understanding. As Foucault searches for discontinuities in the history of discourse, so de Man draws the reader’s attention to “the hidden articulations and fragmentations” which constantly jeopardize our desire for unity and coherence in a text (1979, 249). For de Man, a text is unreadable inasmuch as its closure or univocal reading is necessarily based on the exclusion or suppression of other possibilities. De Man also shifts from an analysis of the unicity of a text to the production of intertextuality within it. Since the question of referentiality in language cannot be taken as given but as construction, the search for the referent of a particular word would lead to another word, and this to another in a process that never ends but directs us to yet more and more language. Thus de Man sets out to reconstruct text upon text in an infinite operation that unveils

the fundamental condition of unreadability of all texts: “The questioning points back to earlier texts and engenders, in its turn, other texts which claim (and fail) to close off the textual field” (1979, 204-205).

Furthermore, de Man’s intertextual analysis takes into consideration other readings of the same text in such a way as to weave intertextuality inside and outside the text itself. Any attempt at conclusion is always jeopardized by the possibility of further commentary. In these circumstances, it seems, then, that the task of criticism would be to confront, intertextually, the irreducible condition of unreadability not only of a particular text but also of the very reading the critic produces.

Unlike those who criticize deconstruction as an apolitical, ahistorical practice, many theoreticians and critics have welcomed post-structuralist theory as the beginning of a process of connection-making that signals a positive move towards different aspects of social liberation (Culler 1989; Eagleton 1989; Belsey 1990). As Darias argues, one of the implications of Derrida’s deconstruction of philosophical oppositions is the revision of the categories of Man and Woman, a revision that unveils sexism and gender roles as affecting a whole system of thought, and thus as inscribed in a certain ideology and politics of power: “Whatever the insufficiencies of Derrida’s theoretical discourse -as such, it cannot substitute actual political action- its radical questioning attitude contains an unprecedented revolutionary potential” (Darias 1996, 103).

In spite of the many difficulties of the new literary practice, the theories of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Barthes and others, as well as the practice of many contemporary critics and writers, have opened up new and challenging lines of discourse that still await further work. Post-structuralist criticism means the abandonment of the project of a poetics of narrative. In turn, it proposes a kind of textual analysis which, though relying on a close reading of the texts in question, focuses rather on the possibilities of discourse, as a complex group of signifying practices. In this sense, post-structuralist criticism activates a connection-making

process across disciplines and fields previously separated. Critical practice should then be interdisciplinary inasmuch as no single approach can account for the complexity of the general text, nor for the constant self-conscious transgression of discursive boundaries happening in postmodern fiction.

The attention to the modes of production of discourse must also affect the critical text. Given the impossibility of attributing an ontologically privileged status to any particular text, or discourse, the reader's choice of texts and focus cannot be justified except in terms of strategy. This is, of course, nothing new: that discourse is never neutral but interested, whether acknowledged or not, is something generally agreed upon. The innovation consists perhaps in the introduction of a self-conscious practice which not only acknowledges its interested position but also openly undermines itself by drawing attention to its textual strategy.

Whether the origin is elusive, it is still possible to begin somewhere. For, according to Said, who proposes "beginning" as a working concept, "whereas an origin 'centrally' dominates what derives from it, the beginning (especially the modern beginning), encourages non-linear development, a logic giving rise to the sort of multileveled coherence of dispersion we find in Freud's text, in the texts of modern writers, or in Foucault's archaeological investigations" (1975, 373). It is perhaps this "multileveledness" that provides the connection among theoretical and fictional discourses (see Darias 1996, 115-16).

In its self-conscious intertextual production, postmodern fiction demands a different conception of the text no longer as a unified and original work but, rather, as a differential system governed by structures of absence constituted by repetition and constant transformation. The notion of intertextuality defended here is, in this sense, very close to the Foucauldian interdiscursivity (see Hutcheon 1988b). If textuality is a structure of organized knowledge responding to certain ideological positions, the general text is, then, a mixture of discourses, an interdiscursivity whose ontology and epistemology can only be approached strategically (see Darias 1996, 142-43). In order

to read the texts of the postmodern, we need to enter the (inter)texts of theory, history, fiction, and literary tradition. One such attempt is provided by Linda Hutcheon, in whose study *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988b) the term “historiographic metafiction” is often used as a synonym of postmodern fiction. According to Hutcheon, by focusing on the processes of narrativization of knowledge, and problematizing (historical, cultural) reference through metafictional and parodic strategies, this kind of fiction contains in itself the major questions of contemporary literature, history, and theory.

The structure of Ondaatje’s *Running* includes all types of intertexts, both literary and historical. For Douglas Barbour, the intertext is the principal obstacle for the autobiography to be turned into a novel:

While the various fragmentary tales of past and present Ondaatjes appear to represent familial and personal histories, there are sudden moments of textual *mise-en-abyme* that call us back to the book in our hands and our reading of it as the activity of discovery parallel to its writing. (1993, 138)

The book’s architecture is composed by fragments impregnated of images which conform a labyrinth that the author cannot unravel in its totality. This labyrinth appears in the figure of the grandmother, Lalla Dickman, in a fragment surprisingly similar to García Márquez’s so-called “magic realism.” Images and dreams intermingle in memory to enrich the memory’s romantic escape:

combining a brittle tone of social comedy with an elegiac awareness of lost youth and missed opportunities -implied intertexts include Noel Coward, P.G. Wodehouse, and F. Scott Fitzgerald- it condenses a great deal of information into sentences that convey both the comedy of a situation and its ethical uncertainties. (Barbour 1993, 140)

Similarly, aside from the rest of the book it appears half a page written in italics, as an authorial epigraph, which is a very common method in Ondaatje. This device is called *exergue* by Smaro Kamboureli (1988, 82); it consists of a rhetoric which is internal and external to the text itself, a narration in the third person, which plays the role of an “actantial imprecision,” and that juxtaposes both strong and

significant images of ice, dream and temporality which bring us to the post-colonial writing of García Márquez.

On the other hand, a section titled “Historical Relations (39),”<sup>3</sup> passes unnoticed till we find out that *An Historical Relation*<sup>4</sup> is the title of a biography by Robert Knox, a man that was kept captive in the isle of Ceylon, Sri Lanka today, for twenty years, and which constitutes one of the principal historical sources of the country and its traditions. This work, according to the author, has been the only truthful source which has reflected its customs and which, at the same time, served as an intertext to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Ondaatje thus trespasses the title in an intelligent way to structure his own story.

Other intertexts surround the author’s personal and familial memory, which he tries to organize and relate through dates and fragments. Moreover, the narrating of a story demands an hermeneutic process in order to interpret past events, and the most complicated part will be the interviews with the people involved, etc. We realize that truth vanishes with history, and people’s memories become subjective and modified with time: “There is so much to know and we can only guess .... In the end all our children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues” (200-201). His story will always be an incomplete one, the past evades as it is the last intertext whose meaning is as desired as ungrasped: the final intertext which may become a lie when turned into writing.

Another intertext, perhaps the clearest from the reader’s point of view, is conformed by the most important of the postmodernist novels, García Márquez’s *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.<sup>5</sup> In both books, the author focuses on the oral tradition

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<sup>3</sup> “Historical Relations” is considered as the ideal title for the author for it comprises a linguistic play between the term “relations,” either with history or with his own past, and the “relatives” that compound his story. This double meaning underlines and intertwines the chaos of the actual historical facts with the historical order that the historian pretends.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of Ceylon* (1966).

<sup>5</sup> Any contemporary book that opens with references to ice, dream and chronology should be related to this great novel. And this is the case of the opening of another Canadian postmodernist novel,

and he tries to reflect his origins in similar surroundings and characteristics. The writer belongs to the world he creates and describes, both inside and outside its boundaries, both present and absent in the writing. Two generational tales in which the Buendías and the Ondaatjes share a similar historical situation, a landscape altered by internal disension, by insurrection and imperialism. It is interesting to note how the thematic and politic dimensions in both historiographic metafiction are added to the aesthetic parallelism:

Years later, when Lalla was almost a grandmother, she was standing in the rain ...  
(42)

Many years later, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice ....<sup>6</sup>

In Ondaatje's book the Sri Lankan poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha is quoted, and the poet reads while he transcribes it:

to our remote  
villages the painters came, and our white-washed  
mud-huts were splattered with gun fire. (86)<sup>7</sup>

The author answers with another poem, not about the foreign painters, but about the Ceylonese inhabitants who struggle against the foreign power. Tradition has been turned into novel and into history. Ondaatje, however, goes beyond in trying to put it in poetry as an example of oral tradition:

The first poem in the book is self-consciously about orality: its epigraph is a quotation about the Sinhalese being the least musical people in the world, with no sense of pitch, line, or rhythm (76). What follows is a poem about a voice without music, but it is a poem with a very fine sense of pitch, line, and rhythm. (Hutcheon 1988a, 89)

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Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words* (1981). Another formal similarity is obvious for the reader in the style of Jack Hodgins' *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* (1979).

<sup>6</sup> *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1969; 1971): 11.

<sup>7</sup> In the acknowledgements, the writer specifies that this stanza of the poem titled "Don't Talk to me about Matisse," with which he has titled one of the sections in *Running*, belongs to the book *O Regal Blood*, a significant title by Wikkramasinha published in Colombo in February of 1975.

Other intertexts constitute the author's own personal memory which the narrator desperately composes, "trying to swell ... in the order of dates and asides, interlinking them all. In this way, history is organized" (26). Ondaatje thus reflects a dominant metaphor throughout the book, which Tom Marshall calls "layering" (1985, 82-92), that is, the overlapping or introspection of different images or entities. Layering consists in a repetition of a landscape, a temporal or psychic geographic reality. Moreover, we unveil the overlapping of Sri Lanka and Canada: the mythic past, either personal or historical, yields temporarily to the mundane present of Canada; passion and instinct to reason and technology, thus art lies upon life. This concept of "layering" can also be transformed into the violent and aggressive transgression of generic boundaries, and even the poet's inner struggle; a personal and historical struggle which is reflected in the writing. So it seems that, in this merging of past and present, of Sri Lanka and Canada, we glance at a personal development, a reconciliation of these and other polarities that make possible a new type of poetry.<sup>8</sup> Foucault describes this device as follows,

In a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, nor the present indicative refer exactly either to the writer or to the moment in which he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author-function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance. (1988, 205)

Parody today repeats itself towards intertextuality, to create a product close to pastiche whose main function is not comic but rather aesthetic criticism. There is no referent to imitate but a succession of languages and cultures; there is no mimetic attraction of the parodied world, but the appearance of various languages in the same literary artefact; so a major complexity appears together with a multiplicity of readings

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<sup>8</sup> Other Sri Lankan poets use this same overlapping of exotic images in opposition to a desolate Canadian landscape. Immigrant writers like Rienzi Crusz or Shyam Selvadurai and other postcolonial poets reflect a painful layering of feelings which confront the crudeness of the new world. See Arun Mukherjee's criticism, especially her *Towards an Aesthetics of Opposition* (1988).

which can well result in a whole allegory. Eclecticism will therefore be the main characteristic to denote and connote the artistic process itself. We thus experiment with a language full of echoes of other languages, all seen under a contemporary eye. We no longer proclaim unique and true statements inasmuch as certain dogmatism and value judgements are fought against, hence textual integrity is lost in favour of an enriching pluralism.

This enriching pluralism that pervades postmodern fiction is sought to open itself up to history. But this openness is no longer innocent but paradoxical in its merging with history. It is this kind of seriously ironic parody that often enables this contradictory doubleness: “the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature” (Hutcheon 1988b, 124). This embedding of both literary and historical texts in fiction, however, is problematic by the assertion that both history and fiction are human constructs. The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction offers a sense of the present in the past but only through its traces, either literary or historical.

Historiographic metafiction is then a hybrid form, particularly doubled in its inscribing of both historical and literary intertexts, and the ontological line between historical past and literature is not effaced but rather underlined. It is an ironic and problematic way to ascertain the fact that history is not the transparent record of any sure truth. Instead, it corroborates that “the past arrives in the form of texts and textualized remainders - memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments, and so forth” (LaCapra 1985, 128). This complex interaction of texts, however, does not deny the value of history-writing, it rather redefines the conditions of value. Historiographic metafiction like García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things* or Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, use parody not only to restore history and memory but, also, to put into question the authority of any act of writing “by locating the discourses of

both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality” (Hutcheon 1988b, 129).

Unlike the historical novel, in historiographic metafiction the tensions between fictive and historical representations are never resolved, since it is in this irresolution, in the impossibility of synthesis, where postmodern discourse finds its source. But, far from involving a negation of reality as such or of the possibility of communication, the problematization of reference in these texts draws the reader attention to his or her own access to that reality, to the processes by which we know and represent it.

Despite Hutcheon’s insistence that the postmodern should be seen as a contradictory “ongoing cultural process or activity” (1988b, 14), Hutcheon’s own attempt at describing a poetics of postmodernism, however loose, open, and processual, reveals a similar desire for order, selection and exclusion. This drive is seen in her limitation of postmodern fiction to historiographic metafiction, a parodic, metafictional mode with a complex problematized historical reference.

Hutcheon’s attempt to defend the political implications of postmodernism distinguishes between postmodern literature and the commercialization of the postmodern. In the process, Hutcheon seems to despise the result of the latter as a fashionable postmodern assimilated into mass media culture (see Hutcheon 1988b, 230-31). Given the anti-hierarchical, anti-oppositional nature of postmodernism it is impossible to draw a line between the “art object” and its cultural context, this including its modes of production, its institutional and public reception, and even its “vulgarization” by reigning cultural standards. Besides, the postmodern, however contradictory, is part and parcel of mass-media, marketing and technological culture. Because of that, Hutcheon’s intended separation between the two cannot be understood as an unacknowledged privileging of aesthetic value in the traditional sense.

Despite of these postmodern contradictions, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* remains one of the most influential studies of postmodern fiction to date. Resistance to

the contradictions of the postmodern seems not only to confirm the power of humanist belief, but also proves the need for some ground, however fictional and under constant threat, from which to operate. By centering on the metafictional and parodic uses of history in postmodern fiction, Hutcheon provides one such ground. While exploiting the constructed character of history and fiction, historiographic metafiction does not deny the existence of either. Much to the contrary, it confirms them as its sources and validates both discursive modes as such. As we will see in the following chapters, Hutcheon's focus on the discourse of history is particularly relevant to the study of contemporary Canadian fiction.

## 8.1 Beyond History and Biography: A Historiographic Metafiction

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many readings. Reality is built on our own prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our own perceptiveness and knowledge. (Rushdie 1991, 25)

In a formal analysis, the most adequate model to apply to Ondaatje's experimental works is the one of "historiographic metafiction" which goes one step farther from the historical narrative, itself rather limited (Hutcheon 1988b, 5). Historiography is the written discourse that claims to be true, a text written on someone's past whose contents have suffered a process of narrative and stylistic elaboration, "which reflect upon their own status as fiction, foregrounding the figure of the author and the act of writing, and even violently interrupting the conventions of the novel, but without relapsing into mere technical self-absorption" (Connor 1989, 126).

Ondaatje's protagonists constitute historical or legendary subjects who have gone through a process of fictionalization and distortion. Our interest lies in the study of the fictionalization of the historical subject, for these texts reject the possibility of a sharp distinction between narrative and history, and focus on the fact that history can be unveiled only through different representative forms such as the narrative: "Historiographic metafiction is always part of a larger set of discursive practices; languages and linguistic rules conditioned by their relationship to specific social institutions or relationships and having a close and effective role in relationship of power" (Connor 1989, 127)

We deal with material in which all generic distinctions such as poetry, narrative, biography and even history are subverted. For Hutcheon, the author's

consciousness places *Running* in a post-structuralist and postmodernist context at the same time,<sup>1</sup> that is, there is an authorial scepticism or suspicion about the writing of history which is mirrored in the internalized challenges to historiography in these novels: “they share the same questioning stance towards their common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology” (Hutcheon 1988b, 106). Here we have, therefore, a self-reflexive narrative which turns the story into an artifact, and dissolves the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. In this process, “such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (Waugh 1984, 2).

Derrida’s denial of the transcendental signified is neither a denial of reference nor of any access to extra-textual reality. It means, however, that meaning can be derived only from within texts and through a process of deferral, through *differànce*. This kind of post-structuralist thinking has obvious implications in historiography and historiographic metafiction, for “[i]t radically questions the nature of the archive, the document, evidence. It separates the (meaning-granted) facts of history-writing from the brute events of the past” (Hutcheon 1988b, 149).

In this sense, all metafiction explores the theory of narrative through its practice, through the different discourses which could reflect the world we live in. This metafictional tendency is inherent in all novels to a greater or lesser degree, that is, it lies in the construction of a fictitious illusion as real; the solution, then, depends on the formal resistance it can accomplish, “which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion” (Waugh 1984, 14).

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<sup>1</sup> See Hutcheon 1984-45, pp. 228-38; 1985, 301-314; 1987, 169-84; 1988a; 1988b.

The contradictions posed in the metafictional work are essentially ontological in that they work on the nature or substance of reality. The traditional figure of the author is refused as a transcendent imagination or monologic voice; instead, realistic conventions are examined in order to discover a fictive form which can attract the contemporary reader. Hence, metafiction focuses on analysing the world through the arbitrary system of language, for, these texts often “begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings, of boundaries .... They often end with a choice of endings or they may end with a sign of the impossibility of endings” (Waugh 1984, 29).

The most characteristic narrative labyrinths then are formed by blurred boundaries, a multitude of stories, Chinese boxes, a multiplicity of narrators, etc. The real world merges with oneiric hallucinations or historical representations that the reader confuses with what is apparently real. The intrusion of the author -which Patricia Waugh calls “surfiction” (1984, 14)- constitutes a relevant feature in which the illusion of reality is destroyed. These cases in which the character has an extremely close relationship with the narrator thus provoke the reader’s scepticism, as the narrator is conscious of our reading the narrative as though it were history, for “to some extent, each metafictional novel aims to unsettle our convictions about the relative status of ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’” (Waugh 1984, 34).

An important feature of this type of narrative is the function of metalanguage: a recontextualization in which language is handled with aesthetic means, even at the risk of creating a distance from the narrative line that will disorient the reader. This metalinguistic text becomes the vehicle for both contexts, insufficient at times, as in the case of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *Running*.<sup>2</sup> In these texts, the characters

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<sup>2</sup> For a study of historiographic metafiction in García Márquez and other Latin-American writers see Amalia Pulgarín’s *Metaficción Historiográfica: La novela histórica en la narrativa hispánica postmodernista* (1995). For a detailed study on historiographic metafiction in North American fiction see *Historiographic Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature*, eds. Bernd Engler and Kurt Müller (1994).

start acting in a fantastic manner and amaze the reader. Ondaatje's text, for instance, consciously scatters different linguistic and thematic contexts without the necessary metalinguistic comment, so the hierarchies between form and content are obliterated, merging history and fantasy which "are always held in a state of tension, and the relationship between them is the main focus of the text" (Waugh 1984, 38).

Metafiction suggests not only that the writing of history is a fictitious act, maybe a linguistic vehicle to create another model of the world, but also that history in itself is surrounded by a multitude of stories which go beyond human experience. If we consider historiography as a poetic construct, historiographic metafiction is located somewhere between history and discourse, insisting on its fictive and autonomous nature. In Ondaatje's work, historical metafiction "tends to push scene after scene away from the realistic documentation history depends upon. The text frees itself from fact inviting the reader to believe in the truth of fiction" (Barbour 1993, 93).

In *Narcissistic Narrative* (1984a, 31-33), Hutcheon establishes different paradigms in the metafictional novel. One paradigm would be the detective novel in which an enigma must be solved, whereas the fantastic paradigm would create an imaginative world. For Hutcheon, all writers create symbolic or fictitious worlds, though the fantastic paradigm should not be too far beyond the empirical world in order to be captured by the reader. There is a third paradigm which Hutcheon calls structural play, and a fourth or erotic paradigm, which pretends to seduce the reader. These paradigms are coined "diegetic models" and are not exclusive of the metafictional novel, but constitute metaphoric structures similarly available in all self-reflexive texts. Narcissistic literature is, for Hutcheon, an egoist vehicle, enclosed in itself. The function of the writer is never social but pragmatic in that it poses a fantasy where time and space are only textual arrangements, for "all novelists must convince the reader of the reality of their fictive worlds during the reading act; and they must do so through language alone" (Hutcheon 1984a, 92).

Ondaatje's metafictional process is based on these parameters in its escape from traditional conventions to approach the popular literary tradition reflected in the cinematic representations of his youth: the detective stories, the western and the comic, among others. He thus adheres to a somewhat archetypal structure, visible only in the superficial structure, in order to analyse and to parody the deep structures of identity, reason, violence, or any other contemporary problems he may share with the audience. The use of popular themes in literature "is therefore crucial for undermining narrow and rigid critical definitions of what constitutes 'good literature.' Their continuous assimilation into 'serious fiction' is also crucial if the novel is to remain a serious form" (Waugh 1984, 86).

All writers of these metafictional texts confront two problems: one is the paradox of the characters' identity, the other the problem of referentiality. Both are closely related and make us believe that these texts posit a verbal construction, a world of arbitrary relationships. As a result, the more they insist on their linguistic condition, the more we detach ourselves from the empirical world of realistic narrative, in which "[f]rames are set up only to be continually broken. Contexts are ostentatiously constructed, only to be subsequently deconstructed" (Waugh 1984, 101).

Besides, what we accept as "real" and "true" in historiography, as in fiction, is that which "wears the mask of meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only *imagine*, never experience" (White 1980a, 24). In other words, only by narrativizing the past will we accept it as true. The work of Hayden White has had more impact in literary than in historical circles. By opening history up to the rhetorical strategies of narrative, White has also answered questions that contemporary fiction has been asking. Historiographic metafiction asks the same central questions about the nature of reference that are being asked in many other fields today. The use and abuse of notions of reference in the act of inserting and distorting historical or legendary characters in fiction, is not unlike the Derridean strategy of writing "under erasure." The writer both uses and "erases" that historical

character without devaluing its referential dimension which is nothing else than a discursive entity: “[h]istoriographic metafiction renders problematic both the denial and the assertion of reference” (Hutcheon 1988b, 145). The given past, which we can only recollect through paper, that is, its documents and traces, is therefore a constructed past. The border between past event and present praxis is where historiographic metafiction self-consciously locates itself. That past was *undoubtedly real* but is now displaced as a trace of the real since facts, as portrayed in historiographic metafiction, are overtly discursive.

The merging of actual or biographical characters in the metafictional work, as in the case of *Running*, depicts the illusion not only of verosimilitude, but of the writing of history. These characters and events can perfectly correspond to the real ones, though they will “always” be recontextualized in the act of writing history, and so they do not constitute an innocent vision of the lost past. The author’s work “can hardly be entirely nostalgic or vituperative, and that explains the impulse to subvert expectations, mix genres and fuse a self-conscious narrative mode with a strikingly mimetic surface” (Kanaganayakam 1992, 38). These characters depict identities and meanings modified according to the context. Hence, history, though a real and material presence, is transposed within textual limits, hence its fictitious character. History appears as a personal reconstruction in which we select, we construct, we compose our pasts and hence make fictional characters of ourselves.

If the autobiographical ‘self’ is a fiction, then, autobiography theoretically becomes a possible element in the traditional genres of fiction. Autobiography, however, has changed in this century from being a genre mainly used by the socially and politically empowered near the end of their lives, to being one employed by people on the margins of power near the beginning of their writing careers to construct grounds for future action. As Frank Davey notes, it is notable that in recent Canadian writing by women there have been quite a few books that have played with the traditional genre of autobiography, “offering fiction but hinting at autobiography”

(1997, 131), from Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* to Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* and Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash*, or Daphne Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone* and *Ana Historic*.

Equally important in contemporary works of fiction has been those which tell stories of difference, namely promote multicultural visions of Canada. Besides, the emphasis on regional forms of cultural expression, such as folklore, local myths and vernacular language, the new understanding of place has been highly instrumental in granting the formerly ex-centric a central position and a decisive voice in Canadian literature.<sup>3</sup> The ideas of relocation and replacing are equally important for those writers who either deal with particular ethnic and cultural groups or present outstanding historical figures in their writings. This is true for Wiebe's Mennonites, his Cree Chief Big Bear and Métis leader Louis Riel, Margaret Laurence's Scottish settlers of her imaginative Manawaka, Gunnars's Islandic community, Kogawa's Japanese Canadians, or Hodgins's Vancouver-Island characters. All these, as Klooss suggests, together with other historiographic (meta-)fictions of Atwood, Kroetsch, Bowering or Ondaatje "must be considered important contributions to contemporary versions of identity construction. At the same time, they stand for the most recent formal developments of a genre, that has traditionally played an eminent role in Canadian writing" (1994, 59).

Historiographic (meta)fiction, moreover, provides the discursive platform for a hybridised culture which involves the dialectical counterdiscourse of the European history and the independent local identity.<sup>4</sup> Identity construction in Canadian

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<sup>3</sup> The reader can think of works such as Rudy Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970), *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977); Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970), *The Diviners* (1974); Kristjana Gunnars's *The Prowler* (1989); Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981); Jack Hodgins's *The Invention of the World* (1977).

<sup>4</sup> Klooss, however, notes that political and literary multiculturalism derive originally from two antagonistic ideological concepts. Whereas political multiculturalism is largely the result of another centralist, i.e. Ottawa-based approach towards Canadian identity, multiculturalism in literature has its roots in an ex-centric, namely peripheral or regional consciousness (see Klooss 1994, 74).

historiographic metafiction “emerges as a discourse about the hiding and ‘unhiding’ of difference. The (imperial) master narrative of an all-encompassing Canadian identity is replaced by a post-colonial notion of an identity beyond nation” (Klooss 1994, 78).

For Ondaatje, history, therefore, transcends nation as a form of discourse; it is a palimpsest of potential meanings and a playground for an endless and transnational proliferation of revisions and reinterpretations. As a writer of fiction and poetry, he is not so distant from Hayden White’s conception of the historian, for whom historiographic texts follow the same “literary” rules as other kinds of writing and are formed according to strategies called *emplotment*. Such strategies include, for example, the *suppression, subordination, or highlighting* of various elements:

The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like -in short, all the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. (White 1978b, 47)<sup>5</sup>

The boundaries between the writing of history and the writing of fiction are not as clear-cut as they may traditionally have appeared. Historical narratives are, to some extent, metaphoric assertions of past events in order to admit a variety of perspectives, for “[t]he historical narrative does not reproduce the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events with different emotional valences .... It is this mediative function that permits us to speak of a historical narrative as an extended metaphor” (White 1978b, 52).

Ondaatje’s texts, through their selection and interpretation of past events, are “engaged in an examination of this problematic relationship between history and fiction. By writing an imaginative account of the historical past, Ondaatje involves himself in one of postmodernism’s central paradoxes” (Heble 1990, 98). His texts

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<sup>5</sup> In *Metahistory* (1973a), White makes clear his debt to Frye’s pre-generic categories. See also White 1976; 1978a; 1987.

contain self-reflexive gestures which attempt to shatter the illusion of referentiality by foregrounding their fictive and linguistic features; they simultaneously contain an imaginative reconstruction of the past which insists that history *could have been* as Ondaatje presents it (Heble 1990, 99). The crucial point, as White argues, “is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings” (1978b, 48). In fiction the ways of emplotment are countless because no referent needs to exist or be accounted for; in history, on the other hand, there is a limit of points of view and emplotment. In any case, by including in his texts a commentary on their own fictive and linguistic features, Ondaatje shows us, in White’s words, that “the process of fusing events, whether real or imaginary, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the *object* of representation is a poetic process” (1978a, 125).

The best mode Ondaatje has found to re-enact history’s textuality is to approach legendary figures, preferably unknown by the general public, as in the case of Buddy Bolden, a jazz musician of the turn of the century who did not have the means to record his music. In order to show such “musical textuality,” Ondaatje decides to open the book with a reproduction of sonographs, that is, he tries to transmit the musical language, through dolphins’ sounds as a unique metalanguage that the reader can only read about. Similarly, in Billy the Kid’s case, the author offers a version never recorded before: the potential sensibility and imagination of a gunman. This type of device is called “virtual interpretation” by Heble (1990, 106); that is, to allude to the vestiges that were never posed as valid or historical, and which now appear as the basis of the two artists’ personalities.

In *Slaughter*, Ondaatje travels for the first time to the original location of his protagonist in order to collect the necessary documentary material. While the author was trying to write another book that was to be published in 1987, he reads in a

London newspaper a comment on the jazz artist Buddy Bolden (1876-1931): “who went berserk in a parade.” From this moment on, the image of this character destroyed by his art resounds in his mind and he travels to New Orleans where he takes photographs, in the 1970s, of the environment and also documents himself in the East Louisiana State Hospital archives. The archivist’s work is transformed into chronicle and revealed on page 132 in *Slaughter*. The rest becomes a metafiction where fictitious and real characters talk about the musician. Danielle Miller observes how, finally, “Bolden’s life [is] nothing more than media and context. Owing to a shortage of direct evidence ... pieces together the musician’s life through a series of secondary sources, such as interviews and film reels, interspersed with doses of historical context” (1993, 213-14). As in some of his books, the author brings an ignored historical figure, an unrecorded artist, which transforms the book into a historiographic product, in which “[t]he narrator forces the reader not only to accept the incongruity that characterized the musician’s life, but to reassess the character constantly in light of new information” (Miller 1993, 215).

In *Running*, the author had, for the first time, confronted directly the world of his youth, and the mythic opulence of the Eastern world is embraced in his writing. The physical and emotional landscapes are so lush and thickly overgrown that one almost does not notice that he has not defined his own place in it. “We cannot tell a story that leaves us outside,” writes George Bowering in *Burning Water*, “and when I say we, I include you .... We are making a story, after all, as we always have been, standing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction.”<sup>6</sup> In *Running*, Ondaatje continuously reminds us of his power of invention in order to obliterate the possibility of a disguised autobiography. Accordingly, he produces

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<sup>6</sup> *Burning Water* (1980; 1995): 10. This historiographic metafiction has been highly praised by Michael Ondaatje and discussed with Bowering through mail (see ‘Bowering Papers,’ National Library of Canada, Ottawa, Boxes 7, 13, 17, 36).

metafictive displacements in the voices both of author and of narrator as well as in the intertextual incursions which favour the novel's heteroglossia.

To stress the textual and intertextual nature of both literature and history, however, is not to obliterate the producer, it merely changes his status and role. The alterity we already experienced in such domestic poems like "Spider Blues," "Light," and "Letters & Other Worlds" now reveals itself in the narrative form, where the author confronts his past in a direct way, making it historiography of his poetic discourse, "I witnessed everything. One morning I would wake and just smell things for the whole day, it was so rich I had to select senses" (*Running* 70-71). This sort of catharsis is produced in a determinate moment in his life in which "the intensity of his encounter with the geography of the past has also liberated his present Canadianness. He is more free now, and probably willing to tell his landscape. And perhaps to articulate his own identity in relation to the terrain of his chosen home" (Kareda 1983, 46).

Ondaatje's particular strength, though, rests in his presence as both an insider and an outsider, and it probably was not until he returned to Sri Lanka that this duality came into focus. In *Running*, definitely, the author confronts the heart of the immigrant's sadness and longing. This creative power is due to his condition of postcolonial and transnational writer, in the use of discursive strategies of resistance and subversion. This is hardly revealed in his writing until he returns to his native island when his subconscious reveals images which were oneiric and unexplained in his previous works.<sup>7</sup> Thus we find comments on a country he is no longer a part of: "[w]e own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens or invaders" (*Running* 81). In the book this could seem an innocuous remark, nestling in a paragraph about *Othello* and colonialism, but Ondaatje's words have a bitter resonance. He explored the lost

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<sup>7</sup> Helen Tiffin has identified the use of history as a key strategy in postcolonial texts, underlying its role within the literary genesis. See Tiffin 1983; 1987; 1988; See also Brydon 1984; 1987; 1989; 1993; 1995.

childhood so central and outstanding in any immigrant's experience, and now he seems able to integrate his sense of exile into a new sense of belonging. As Sharon Thesen explains,

These works are not memoirs, nor are they autobiography. They are, rather, accounts of the recovering of language and self in a context saturated with memory .... Ondaatje's prose enters a narrative that has begun before his birth, and story leads to story as things are prodded, evoked, unearthed, re-searched. (1979, 3)

In the characters of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, Ondaatje placed himself between both a historical or real referent and a textual or historiographic one. In *Running*, however, he adds another element to this tension between art and reality, namely his own personal history, his own fictionalized memory:

Sit in my room and transcribe names and dates from the various envelopes into a notebook. When I finish there will be that eerie moment when I wash my hands and see very clearly the deep grey colour of old paper dust going down the drain. (*Running* 68)

Ondaatje emphasizes the materiality of historical reconstruction, the process of researching old ledgers, transcribing information and that final, almost tragic concluding detail of washing away the dust and remnants of old paper from his hands, as even written documents in time disintegrate and vanish leaving no trace behind. Nevertheless this process stands out in clear contrast with that of collecting information through gossip, since "talk evaporates into the air before it reaches the listener" (*Running* 27) and one is left with no material evidence of one's discoveries. Even in the chapter "Monsoon Notebook (i)," written in the Ceylonese jungle, the author-narrator calls attention to his work in process,

Reading torn 100-year-old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand, information tough as plastic dolls. Watched leopards sip slowly, watched the crow sitting restless on his branch peering about with his beak open. Have seen the outline of a large fish .... driven through rainstorms that flood the streets .... Have sat down to meals. (*Running* 69)

The reader is immediately made aware of the contrast between the work of the researcher gathering historical information from documents, and other performative activities like driving through the countryside and eating meals, “so that life and textual performance become, through language, indissolubly linked” (Fenton 1990, 47).

The relationship between language and the representation of reality is basic in Ondaatje’s work. The reader, then, is faced with difficulties in the process of reading as the fictional nature of the referent is continuously underlined by the writing, together with its undoubtedly historical nature:

[T]he constant shifts in perspective, the foregrounding of textuality, the anxiety to belong and the need for distance, the awareness of history and the self-consciousness about historiography -all combine to create the effect of a complex quest in which the notion of identity needs to be explored in all its multiplicity. (Kanaganayakam 1992, 35)

In *Running*, we have reached a point in which the documentary and narrative processes are an intrinsic part of the text. Ondaatje is not only the researcher, organizer, and the narrator of a past, but also its own protagonist. The brief section that precedes the main text of *Running* functions as Ondaatje’s own preface or epigraph to his book, hence its italics. The section is untitled, and as such it is not included in the book’s table of contents. The fragment, like other italicized texts in the author’s work, plays a certain role of intertext; at the beginning it seems disconnected though it is a defamiliarized device as in the case of the sonographs in *Slaughter* or the blank frame in *Billy the Kid*. This half-page subverts the concepts both of novel and of omniscient narrator. It functions as a disruptive device, thus foreshadowing the long series of generic disruptions and unconventional characters Ondaatje is going to use. This passage constitutes the place where the author masks himself with the persona of a third-person narrator (Kamboureli 1988a, 82-3):

*Drought since December*

*All across the city men roll carts with ice clothed in sawdust. Later on, during a fever, the drought still continuing, his nightmare is that thorn trees in the garden send their hard roots underground towards the house climbing through windows so they can drink sweat off his body, steal the last of saliva off his tongue.*

*He snaps on the electricity just before daybreak. For twenty five years he has not lived in this country, though up to the age of eleven he slept in rooms like this ...*

*Dawn through a garden .... This delicate light is allowed only a brief moment of the day. In ten minutes the garden will lie in a blaze of heat, frantic with noise and butterflies. (Running 17)*

The passage concludes with a defamiliarized gesture that further destabilizes the reader's generic expectations about the text and his contract with the author: "*Half a page -and the morning is already ancient*" (Running 17). In this last line not only do present and past merge, but the author also unveils himself and appears as the writer:

What is foregrounded significantly in this half page of text is the issue of writing, and also the activity of reading, because the fragmented and evocative nature of what we have read demands our immediate participation in constructing a meaningful text from what is otherwise only sensation. (Giltrow and Stouck 1992, 161)

Throughout the book, though, the presence of the first person is constant and overwhelming: "The air reaches me unevenly with its gusts, against my arms, face, and this paper" (Running 24). While obviously employing the discourse of (auto) biography, however, *Running* shades off into history, legend, myth, poetry, to become a poetics of the imagination, in which the writer

postulates a notion of the author as the historiographer of an "authentic" self -his own self or that of others .... Again and again persons get lost in Ondaatje's stories -lost in legend, ... lost in the past, lost in history, lost in memory, lost in myth- and in each case people go after them in order to recover them, to remember them, or to recreate them: hence the remarkable array of archivists, historians, detectives, reporters, and biographers that crowd Ondaatje's books. (Verhoeven 1992, 181-82)

This search of the thematic level turns out to be a generic exploration at the level of discourse. It is no coincidence that *Billy the Kid*, *Slaughter* and *Running* all

end with a first-person narrator finding himself alone in a room, weary and disillusioned after a conscious acknowledgement of his image in the creative act. “I go writing,” Ondaatje notes, “to discover as many aspects of myself and the world around me as I can. I go to discover, to explore, not to state the case I already know” (1990, 198). In this search, however, he strives desperately to keep a lucid memory though frustration appears when he discovers that his father was “one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut” (*Running* 200). These pages have to be invented or rediscovered through a past you cannot reach, for “[t]he book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we thought we could be able to fully understand you. Love is often enough” (*Running* 201). His writing is thus a process of self-discovery through the arbitrary nature of boundaries. In this respect, his texts often end with a choice of endings, perhaps acknowledging the impossibility of endings. All that is possible is the process of creation.

In this sense *Running*, while ostensibly a personal travel journal in which the writer attempts to rediscover his Sri Lankan roots, is also a Canadian text, demonstrating a concern with how notions of personal and cultural identity are constructed through language. And it shares the preoccupation with origins, and especially with genealogy, that characterizes much of the best contemporary Canadian fiction, such as Margaret Atwood *Surfacing* (1972), Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* (1974), Robert Kroetsch’s *Badlands* (1975) and Jack Hodgins’s *The Invention of the World* (1977). The personal quest the writer sets out in *Running* is both a public and a private one: an exploration of the past of Sri Lanka as well as an investigation into his own personal past. A real genealogical quest in which opposed discourses reveal both the arbitrariness of generic classification and the limitations of traditional biographical discourse.

Both literature and historiography use, in Ondaatje's work, similar discursive strategies to impose an impression of meaning and order upon an indeterminate mass of events and experiences. In *In the Skin of a Lion* he states that "[o]nly the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best art can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and the order it will become" (*Lion* 146).<sup>8</sup>

The question about the validity of "his" historical truth becomes evident when the writer includes two epigraphs that allude to myth and to linguistic imperialism; two narrative pieces external to the text and, however, valid as elements of the metafictional process:

"I saw in this island fowls as big as our country geese having two heads ... and other miraculous things which I will not here write of." Oderic, (Franciscan Friar, 14th century)

"The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor thought that the earth was flat." Douglas Amarasekera, *Ceylon Sunday Times* 29. I. 78

The first epigraph diminishes, in an explicit way, the reader's blind faith on what he is going to read. Truth has disappeared with the memory's effort to transcribe it. For Ondaatje, the map in *Running* becomes a metaphor for a necessary and illusory redefinition. It is a questionable concept, more closely associated with rumour than with truth, that is, a metaphor for the shaping of memory. A fabled island provides the ideal site for this mythology whose changing names and shapes attest to a history imposed upon it from without, "not merely through the effects of military invasion and commercial enterprise, but also through the redefinitional strategies of a dominant language" (Huggan 1994, 80). The power of language to reconstruct the world,

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<sup>8</sup> Maybe Ondaatje's use of chaos here as synonymous with reality says a great deal about his somewhat sentimental and melodramatic view of reality. Reality may not be as chaotic but rather confusing, unsettling, or disturbing. To many artists reality is not chaos, so Ondaatje's use of the word is very revealing -a signature moment, a Freudian slip, a symptom. I am indebted to Professor Solecki for this comment. By mail.

suggests Ondaatje, depends on the power and influence of the society and culture that use it. That is the reason for the writer's highlighting of linguistic excentricity in his text to combat cultural imperialism. Despite his writing in the dominant language, defamiliarization is always present through specific devices and through parody and pastiche: "By demonstrating the inherent instability of the map, Ondaatje is able both to celebrate his own multiple ancestry and to expose the false consciousness with which dominant nations/cultures seek to construct, stabilize, and consolidate their own authority" (Huggan 1994, 81).

One of the most important landmarks in the history of Sri Lanka is the 1971 insurgency, but following the true spirit of the local culture and of its inhabitants -and through the postmodernist character of the book- this is turned into a parodic event, for "(t)he insurgents were remarkably well organized and general belief is that they would have taken over the country if one group hadn't mixed up the dates and attacked the police station in Wellawaya a day too soon" (*Running* 99-100). When the insurgents arrived at Rock Hill, the narrator's home in Ceylon, as part of an expedition on the island to collect weapons, "they proceeded to play a game of cricket on the front lawn. They played for most of the afternoon" (*Running* 101).

Thus parody forms part of the linguistic and historical inheritance of the island, the author-narrator reveals that his ancestor arrived in 1600, "a doctor who cured the residing governor's daughter with a strange herb and was rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language" (*Running* 64). Parody is extended to other literary genres as well, particularly to those that are closest to the textual genre the author-narrator is using in performing his book. This is particularly evident in his recollection of one of his childhood experiences, a recollection that also functions as an intertextual reference of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Gillian begins to describe to everyone present how I used to be bathed when I was five. She had heard the story in detail from Yasmine Gooneratne, who was a prefect with her at Bishop's College for Girls .... The first school I went to was a girl's school in Colombo which accepted young boys of five or six for a couple of years .... It is the kind of event that should have surfaced as the first chapter of an anguished autobiographical novel. (*Running* 137-38)

The author is constantly and physically present in the work, and thus he affirms that as a child he associated the act of writing with a linear and mechanic process: "For years I thought that literature was punishment, simply a parade ground. The only freedom writing brought was as the author or rude expressions on wall and desks" (*Running* 84). The author here refers to graffiti as acts of transgression and rebellion, and also as a symbol of his search of freedom through writing, which compels "[a] communal protest this time, the first of my socialist tendencies" (*Running* 84). Other similar instances appear, reflecting that endless poetic struggle with restrictive structures, and, subsequently, clearly relating writing and its connection with art and life:

In the 5th Century B.C. graffiti poems were scratched onto the rock face of Sigiriya - the rock fortress of a despot king .... The anonymous poets returned again and again to the same metaphors. Beautiful *false compare*. These were the first folk poems of the country. (*Running* 84)

The obvious self-reflection becomes foregrounding when the reader observes at the opening of the book: "*Half a page -and the morning is already ancient*" (*Running*17). Here the reader acknowledges the complexity and the demands he has to accomplish as his generic expectations turn invalid. Is here where past and present merge, and the author unveils himself as writer of this section, "which brackets the author and foregrounds the writer as being synonymous with the product of his writing activity" (Kamboureli 1988, 84). The creative process coincides with the reader's present. Through different actantial imprecisions, the writer has subverted the author's authority after reconstructing the past in the present as a self-conscious moment of writing. As Fenton asserts, "the author-narrator's physical journey into

space has brought him round to a shift in point of view whereby language no longer discloses the truth about people and history, but is disclosed to be an ever displacing process of signification” (1990, 53).

Following an epigraph which suggests the power of language upon perception, the narrator goes further to affirm his will to tell the story of his familial past: “I wanted to touch them into words” (*Running* 22). So the author travels to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980, a place, he comments, whose history is the history of invasions, which claimed “everything with the power of their sword or bible or language” (*Running* 64). The narrator is aware that his roots belong to the invader, being his Dutch surname the main exponent “of the ruling language” (*Running* 64). He then travels to his ancestor’s land and in the church reflects on his privileged roots, “to kneel on the floors of a church built in 1650 and see your name chiseled in large letters ... in some strange way removes vanity, eliminates the personal. It makes your own story a lyric” (*Running* 65-66). The physicality of language is the most recurrent motif in the text; as a schoolboy, he asserts, he learned the beauty of the Sinhalese alphabet, comparing the curvature of the letters with the smallest bones of the human body, there he will discover “[h]ow to write. The self-portrait in language” (*Running* 83). The word “alphabet” appears recurrently as the image of language and identity: “Years later ... I came across a whole page depicting the small bones in the body and recognised, delighted, the shapes and forms of the first alphabet I ever copied from Kumarodaya’s first grade reader” (*Running* 83). In this trip to the past, there is a continuous insistence on naming the island by its colonial name, Ceylon. There is no sense in using a postcolonial name like Sri Lanka with which the narrator does not identify; the context of his memory goes beyond the purely ethnic vision.

Hutcheon comments on how the importance that writing has in the book does not subdue the power that reading acquires in it. Ondaatje describes the great tradition that precedes him: “my father swallowed the heart of books and kept that knowledge

and emotion to himself. My mother read her favourite poems out loud, would make us read plays together and acted herself” (*Running* 168). Ondaatje inherited his introspection and privacy from his father. His mother provided his great dramatic power; she was always the model to follow in her dramatic merging of life and art, living a fictitious life with his father: “[w]hatever plays my mother acted in publicly were not a patch on the real-life drama she directed and starred in during her married life” (*Running* 171).

Nevertheless, all this dramatic play ends with a final truth in fiction: the ultimate encounter with his father. After an endless preoccupation with the power of language, “[w]ords such as *love, passion, duty*, are so continually used they grow to have no meaning -except as coins or weapons” (*Running* 179). Suddenly the narrator, unable to confront his father directly, goes on with a circular narrative in the third person. Now, relieved after the narrative distance, the writer meditates on his father’s feelings after the separation, and follows him home where Mervyn Ondaatje looks for a book he had been reading the day before. He finds it in the washroom opened to page 189 in a vivid image of a disintegrating book:

In the bathroom ants had attacked the novel thrown on the floor by the commode. A whole battalion was carrying one page away from its source, carrying the intimate print as if rolling a tablet away from him. He knelt down on the red tile slowly, not wishing to disturb their work. It was page 189. He had not got that far in the book yet but he surrendered it to them. (*Running* 189)

The passage conveys the distinct sense that the text itself is disintegrating at this point, particularly since the page on which it comes is in fact “page 189.” Language as a mirror image, as a *mise en abîme* of the self, is again foregrounded on page 189: “He had not got that far in the book yet but he surrendered it to them. He sat down forgetting the mirror he had been moving towards. Sacred of the company of the mirror.” The book his father has been reading becomes, through the corresponding page 189 of the book the reader is reading, an image of his father who is looking at his

face in the mirror, “so that language becomes a self reflecting mirror image a self portrait” (Fenton 1990, 38). Even handwriting, the visual representation of language, becomes a self-portrait of his mother’s changing existential condition when, half way through her life, she leaves her husband and goes to live and work on her own in London:

If you look at my mother’s handwriting from the thirties on, it has changed a good deal from her youth. It looks wild, drunk .... As if that scrawl was the result of a great discipline, as if at the age of thirty or so she had been blasted, forgotten how to write, lost the use of a habitual style and forced herself to cope with a new dark unknown alphabet (*Running* 150)

Earlier there has been a similar passage in which silverfish are seen as destroying the photographs in family albums, photographs which are a paradigm of the kind of genealogical evidence that the text is investigating:

the silverfish slid into steamer trunks and photograph albums -eating their way through portraits and wedding pictures. What images of family life they consumed in their minute jaws and took into their bodies no thicker than the pages they ate. (*Running* 135-36)

As Thieme has suggested, the genealogical difficulty of portraying the past makes it primarily a text about “the problematics of constructing a discourse of the past” (1991, 43). And this reclamation can only be achieved through fictive speculation. This is the actual page where the reader and the writing stand together. Ondaatje relates the frame of the page to the mirror his father evades, while remembering the words already pronounced: “Duty, he thought. But that was just a fragment gazed at by the bottom of his eye. He drank. There” (*Running* 189). Within the characteristic circularity, and after identifying his otherness in his father’s, the author returns to the initial writing, relating his creative consciousness to the power of nature, a recurrent motif of his poetic work:

Sweat down my back. The fan pauses then begins again. At midnight this hand is the only thing moving. As discreetly and carefully as whatever animals in the garden fold

brown leaves into their mouths, visit the drain for water, or scale the broken glass that crowns the walls. Watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble casually on perception, the shape of an unknown thing. (*Running* 190)

Together with the creator, the reader observes how the narrator struggles in vain for a lucid memory, and thus finally defines his father as “one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut” (*Running* 200). The novels he refers to, Hutcheon asserts, reflect “an affirmation of the final fictional status of any attempt to capture the past” (1988a, 92). In a fictive way, though, the approach and search for his father implied an emotional exercise in the author, a linguistic quest that will constitute the redemption of his otherness through art:

“You must get this book right,” my brother tells me, “You can only write it once.” But the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we thought we would be able to fully understand you. Love is often enough, towards your stadium of small things. Whatever brought you solace we would have applauded. Whatever controlled the fear we all share we would have embraced. That could only be dealt with one day at a time -with that song we cannot translate. (*Running* 201)

As in *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*, the author closes with his acknowledgements, which form an integral part of the novel and which clarify, and elude, the importance of the documentary process, this time with the addition of his family and friends and dissolving the biographical character when he affirms that “[a] literary work is a communal act. And this book could not have been *imagined*, let alone conceived, without the help of many people” (*Running* 205). At the end of the book, in fact, he thanks all who helped him to capture his past and affirms:

While all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or ‘gesture’. And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts. (*Running* 206)

The work can well constitute the best piece of creativity he has accomplished. It is divided into seven sections, each one composed by short stories, epigraphs,

photographs, poems and intertextual quotations. These sections are written without any chronological linearity, though with great structural precision. The metaphor constitutes, once more, the design of the creative process: “The fan hangs on a long stem, revolves lethargic, its arms in a tilt to catch the air which it folds across the room. No matter how mechanical the fan is in its movement the textures of air have no sense of the metronome” (*Running* 24). The recurrent symbol of the fan accompanies his writing in its circularity and represents its metaphoric movement, the air simulating his language.

Either autobiography, historiographic metafiction, personal history, collection of anecdotes, or a mixing of all these, *Running* “keeps its final intelligibility forever at bay by practising a deferral of meaning and of generic definition related to the autobiographical elements of the book” (Kamboureli, 1988 80). This terminology supports Hutcheon’s thesis that the work implies the author’s biggest generic challenge. Memory constitutes the main documentary source, resulting, therefore, in a dialogic text in which each voice emerges from a fragmentary backdrop to compose the metafictional process in which “[t]he text asserts this loss of ‘history’ in the very act of (re)creating it. The scandal here is one of writing, of exceeding the limits of social discourse, yet it is precisely its scandalous nature that grants it a place in this text of generic excess” (Barbour 1993, 154).

The referential level of any autobiography is deconstructed in the work and, according to Kamboureli, this happens for two reasons; first, because Ondaatje himself designs an elliptic self-portrait and, second, because genres intertwine to show that this is not only autobiography. Therefore, at the end of the book Ondaatje suspends the referential level in a discourse centred in the writer, not the author, for the two “do not merge with each other, do not lead to a textual apotheosis of thematical and structural wholeness. Author and writer stand apart, separated by the inconspicuous limit drawn by Ondaatje’s signature and proper name” (Kamboureli 1988, 81).

The work cannot be considered autobiography for, following the author's subversive narrative, the overlapping of author/writer, and his use of genres, there is a clear deconstruction of referentiality in order to obliterate such an assumption. The final success of the book lies in the way Ondaatje projects both a national and a private identity in order to express the personal quest in a problematic country. The collage structure gathers a multitude of information which does not necessarily correspond to the epigraphs in each of the sections. Finally, he closes the vital quest after the conscious decision of imposing the private upon the public. Like other exiled and immigrant writers, the author has deeply felt the urge to create an experimental and metafictional structure, drifting between reality and fiction, memory and imagination, individual and collective consciousness.

As Rushdie suggests, exiles or emigrants are haunted by a sense of loss they need to reclaim in the distance, from elsewhere. And this fact makes him "speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal" (1991, 12). But the past is not remembered for the same reasons in every case. The teller of a tale need not be involved in his story, as the author admits in several occasions when he admits he was too young to be a witness, whereas a quest for authenticity and a sense of loss often inform the recollection of memories. *Running* is a fictional memoir in that it goes beyond the confessional mode of biographical writing. Memoirs, then, can be a private recording of public life where individual and collective memories are recalled. But truth is never preserved in the recollection of memories, because "one of the simplest truths about any set of memories is that many of them will be false .... whenever a conflict arose between literal and remembered truth, I would favour the remembered version" (Rushdie 1991, 24). In this way, Ondaatje tries to portray Ceylon as a place that grows "from mythic shape into eventual accuracy" (*Running* 63), which is never accomplished when postmodernist travel memoirs are subversive and oppose the objectivity of documents. If traditional biographies were intended to

illustrate the singularity of human experience, Ondaatje's memoir tends to capture the universality of individual experiences. This reversal of perspective helps him escape the novelistic logic of solving the riddle of the self. Besides, fiction enables the author to reject the oneness of the self, in other words, the certainty of identity, by inventing alternative lives.

## 8.2 From Oral Tradition to Written Text: Documentary Design in *Running in the Family*

Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations. There was a large social gap between this circle and the Europeans and English who were never part of the Ceylonese community. The English were seen as transients, snobs and racists, and were quite separate from those who had intermarried and who lived here permanently. (*Running* 41)

All the reader must know about the familial history of the Ondaatjes appears in this magical book published in 1982.<sup>1</sup> Ondaatje's roots are Dutch, English, Sinhalese and Tamil. We encounter different fragments of his ancestors, priests, lawyers and biologists, which bring us back to the seventeenth century. In the twentieth century his family acquires a certain local notoriety, famous for their parties, disguise contests and squandering of money. Many were drowned in alcoholic outbreaks, among them one of the most representative figures of magic realism present in the work, the grandmother Lalla. "It was her last perfect journey," writes the narrator, "not even watching her magic ride, the alcohol still in her -serene and relaxed" (*Running* 128, 129).

Much of his material has come to him from oral storytelling sources. This oral quality is presented in the form of dialogues, some of which attributed to specific

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<sup>1</sup> His brother Christopher Ondaatje would publish *The Man-Eater of Punanai* a decade later, a realistic account of the past of the Ondaatjes in Sri Lanka. In his book, Christopher Ondaatje mentions that Michael "got several things wrong." Such a comment can only be made if someone believes in the "correspondence theory of truth," i.e. that words and things can coalesce to some degree, that some accounts are closer to original events than others and that we have ways of determining which those are. In *The Man-Eater of Punanai*, Lalla's death lacks any sense of metaphor, as she dies in her sleep after alcoholic intoxication. Both brothers feel obliged to express the obsession of their respective pasts as a therapeutic exercise, Michael submerged in a mythological quest, and Christopher in a frank and somewhat competitive manner.

speakers, the writer's siblings or aunts, others of which are left anonymous, reinforcing the author's assertion that this "literary work is a communal act" (*Running* 205).<sup>2</sup> One of the book's stylistic qualities is its humour for the Ondaatjes' identity is presented as comic and bizarre and is thus expressed at one point when we see the photograph of Mervyn and Doris after their marriage (*Running* 163). One of these examples of outrageous behaviour and hyperbolic mode emerges in a passage which summarizes this storytelling reportage most applicable to the writer's maternal line:

She belonged to a type of Ceylonese family whose women would take the minutest reaction from another and blow it up into a tremendously exciting tale, then later use it as an example of someone's strain of character. If anything kept their generation alive it was this recording by exaggeration. Ordinary tennis matches would be mythologized to the extent that one player was so drunk that he almost died on the court. An individual would be eternally remembered for one small act that in five years had become so magnified he was just a footnote below it. (*Running* 169)

This is one of the many portraits that make up this family album. Among the many other modes of discourse employed in *Running* are photographs, journal entries, quotations and poems that avoid any linear reading hence dispersing any attempt at an absolutist historical pattern. The continuous shifting from art to life, from oral and written biographical fragments to text, all within the highly self-reflexive framework of an author-narrator who is constantly drawing attention to the processes of textual production, are characteristic features of the postmodernist perspective on art and life as overlapping entities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ondaatje presents the memories of the lives and times of the Ondaatjes in popular songs, magazines, poems, the fictional writings of D.H. Lawrence and Leonard Woolf, crumbling Church records, barely legible names inscribed in Church stone floors, National Museum publications, biology textbooks, graffiti poems, history books published abroad, judicial records, memorised and real photographs, tape recorded and written notebooks, visitors' books with pages ripped out, oral narrative of disembodied and identified voices (see Pesch 1997a, 111).

<sup>3</sup> As Fenton asserts (1990, 31): "The loose, fragmentary structure of the text, which wavers between the travel journal and the novel, and yet is also made up of interviews, memories, written documents, photographs and poems, renders problematic the collocation of *Running in the Family* within a specific genre." Hutcheon has also emphasized that Ondaatje's works are "both historical and performative. In other words, they indeed do seek to represent a reality outside literature, and one of

*Running* starts with visual images of the island of Sri Lanka, the reader has already visualized an inaccurate map of the island and cover photograph, always meaningful for the author, where a group of people are partying in the tropical landscape. Later on we discover the strength of these epigraphs: a photograph of a Burgher family ignorant of the calamities of the natives, a map with cartographic mistakes or a text in italics constitute the microcosm of a story that challenges the past, but they are, in themselves, the only visual fragments the writer can provide. The symbolic strategy of the dream as an element to construe images recurs throughout this text. We discover a personal conflict of a narrator who, from his Canadian home, confronts for the first time an almost forgotten tropical landscape buried in his childhood memories, which he has decided to unravel as a process of therapeutic redemption.<sup>4</sup> Again, Canadian snow contrasts with the exhausting heat: images of sweat and water start reverberating in his memory in an obsessive way in order to uncover the real purpose of this imaginative effort, the nightmare of his father's memory. This memory is stored in the narrator's subconsciousness, and is released in "his nightmare" presented as a dawn prologue to the novel. As it is, this nightmare is just fictitious, a "false" prologue which leads on to the fantastic terror of the real nightmare which started the book:

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the connections between life and art is the performing narrator, whose act of searching and ordering forms part of the narrative itself" (1985, 303).

<sup>4</sup> Sri Lankan writers are reaching a wider audience with questing novels. The most popular novel so far is Romesh Gunasekera's *Reef*, which was nominated for the Booker Prize in 1994. But the novel that best conveys what it is like to grow up in Sri Lanka is perhaps Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. Selvadurai and his family decided to leave Sri Lanka for Canada in 1983, and he is a good example of the immigrant novelist who writes in the new country while his imagery lies strongly in his childhood memories. "What these books share is a pang for a tropical paradise lost after 1956, when politicians started pitting the country's ethnic groups against one another. But the Sri Lanka jungle, with its howling gods, was always there. It was the setting of Leonard Woolf's 1913 classic, *The Village in the Jungle*, a novel that has gained in power only since the slaughters of the 1970s and 1980s, when Sri Lankans, even in the cities, felt that the jungle had moved to engulf them all. As Woolf wrote, 'All jungles are evil ... The rule of the jungle is first fear' (see *Time Magazine*.20 March 1995, p.55).

What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto .... I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were screaming and barking into the tropical landscape. The noises woke me. I sat up on the uncomfortable sofa and I was in the jungle, hot, sweating. (*Running* 21)

The “bright bone of a dream” reveals itself as the perfect evocation of an inner world he needs to decodify. Together with these visions, alcohol also deploys a false vision of reality since “once a friend had told me that it was when I was drunk that I seemed to know exactly what I wanted” (22). For the first time in Ondaatje’s writing we find a protagonist who transforms romanticism and idolatry towards the antihero into compassion. We now discover we are not witnessing a meaningless and masculine violence but a collective concern against authoritativeness and silent individualism. The bright bone of a dream also proleptically relates what Ondaatje later describes as the “story about my father I cannot come to terms with” (*Running* 181). It is a story told towards the end of the book by Arthur, a friend of his father’s:

My father is walking towards him, huge and naked. In one hand he holds five ropes, and dangling on the end of each of them is a black dog. None of the five are touching the ground. He is holding his arm outstretched, holding them with one arm as if he has supernatural strength. Terrible noises are coming from him and from the dogs as if there is a conversation between them that is subterranean, volcanic. All their tongues hanging out. (*Running* 181)

The dream that marks the book’s point of departure is thus later confirmed by oral history. Ondaatje seems to have discovered the story at the centre of the rumour: “the memories stored in his subconsciousness and mediated in a dream have been verified by an independent source. This verification does not solve the mystery of the nightmare, though, but deepens it” (Pesch 1997a, 113). The only explanation offered is that Mervyn “had captured all the evil in the regions he had passed through and was holding it,” which only gives more obscurity to the motivation of this “man who loved dogs” (*Running* 182) could have. The fact that the narrator has a nightmare about the incident before he learns of the incident, further adds to the mystery: “Even where the

factual accuracy of mediated memories has been ascertained, this will not suffice, for the meaning of this incident of his father's life remains obscure" (Pesch 1997a, 113).

Farther on, he declares the impossibility of deciphering the history of his father Mervyn, an introverted and self-destructive character addicted to alcohol. The narrator's stance is ambivalent, acting as both insider and outsider; as both *karapotha*, his niece's term for foreigner, and *prodigal son*. He presents himself most of all as a listener, "as the reader, selector and orderer of the various elements that make up the text, he is the key figure, even when his own narrative voice is suspended" (Thieme 1991, 44). The merging of listener and reader then conforms to the communal effort to elucidate memories and anecdotes:

We will trade anecdotes and faint memories -trying to swell them with the order of dates and asides, interlocking them all as if assembling the hull of a ship. No story is ever told just once .... Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgements thrown in. In this way history is organized. (*Running* 26)

*Running* would be unthinkable without the information passed on orally by family and friends.<sup>5</sup> Ondaatje admits this in the "aunts" chapter: "How I have used them .... They knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong" (*Running* 110). Aunt Phyllis, the minotaur of this storytelling, may pluck "notorious incidents from her brain" -and use the room's architecture as "cue cards for stories" (*Running* 25).

In this way Ondaatje creates a dialogic text through the fragmented memories he shares with his family and friends. The polyphonic structure creates a conscious impossibility for the writer to express the self in a monologic way since he always undermines or calls into question even the possibility of a unified narrative. What is

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<sup>5</sup> The book seems to be an attempt at discovering the roots of the Ondaatjes, a search for their origin in hope for a better comprehension of their own identity. Although Ondaatje's book documents a search for origin and identity, he does not analyse the past of oral traditions, but exposes their multiplicity and constructedness. The "carefree pre-war era of his parents' generation" that Lönnecke

ostensibly a metafiction absorbs many genres and serves as a documentary source to reconstruct a version of his past, a discourse which is not so much about the author as it is about the writer seeking a truth he can find only in language: “If anything, *Running in the Family* challenges or alters rather than confirms or establishes any fixed notion of identity. It produces a network of roots, of information of different sort and quality, with no clear centre or boundaries” (Pesch 1997b, 57). The narrator is fully aware that ultimately “truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships” (*Running* 53). This is where histories and biographies are bound to fail -and the narrator is aware of this failure when he addresses his father: “Not that we ever thought that we would be able to fully understand you” (*Running* 201).

Paradoxically, the failure to account for the father seems to be the result of the multiplicity of media utilized by Ondaatje in his attempt to produce as clear and precise a picture as possible. The greater the number of facts he gathers, the more the remaining gaps become visible. When history and memory fail, he has to invent, to guess what the historian ignores, and so for the writer, history, and maps, become metaphor, “the burned down wall that held those charcoal drawings whose passionate conscience should have been cut into rock. The voices I didn’t know. The visions which are anonymous. And secret” (*Running* 85). Ondaatje even employs a medium that is supposedly more objective and accurate than the human brain: the tape recorder. This technical device enables him to compare his recorded memories of Sri Lanka with what he hears “Now, and here, Canadian February” (*Running* 136). The tape reproduces not just the peacocks he had recorded,

but all those noises of the night behind them -inaudible then because they were always there like breath. In this silent room (with its own unheard hum of fridge, fluorescent light) there are these frogs loud as river, gruntings, the whistle of other birds brash and sleepy, but in that night so modest behind the peacocks they were unfocussed by the brain- nothing more than darkness. (*Running* 136)

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identifies (1995, 39), is but a surface for the struggles, affairs, disasters, and nightmares which are funny only in hindsight.

As Pesch notes, “There can be no question of inaccurate mediation of memory here, yet the perception of what has been recorded changes if that record is decontextualized -and transposed across space and time” (1997a, 115). Even if the medium is objective, the message it delivers is not, as it depends on the context it is deployed; therefore historical memories are contaminated and even sometimes revealed to be a fraud.

Critics such as Arun Mukherjee and Suwanda Sugunasiri have ignored the metaphoric and literary quality of the text to focus exclusively on what they consider to be the author’s lack of social and political commitment. For Mukherjee, “Ondaatje’s success has been won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada” (1985, 50). Her criticism seems to be inspired by the desire for an “authentic” ethnic writing: one that expresses the experience of social marginality. In her wish to cast aspersions on Ondaatje’s “universalism,” Mukherjee states that the author “does not write about his otherness .... there is no trauma of uprooting evident in his poetry; nor is there a need for redefinition in a new context; the subjects that preoccupy so many immigrant writers” (1985, 51).

Surprisingly enough, Mukherjee proposes that Ondaatje’s success has been won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past, and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada when she overlooks the fact that much of his work has to do, precisely, with otherness. Many of his fictional characters are constructed semi-autobiographically as go-betweens, hybrids, outsiders, while a major theme of his poetry, as of his fiction, is that of the migrant’s “double vision.”<sup>6</sup>

Mukherjee, however, is not alone in seeing the book as an Orientalist travelogue and its self-conscious aestheticism as irresponsibly apolitical. Chelva

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<sup>6</sup> See Rushdie’s concept of double perspective and “stereoscopic vision “ (1991, 19) together with Ondaatje’s interview with Linda Hutcheon (1990, pp. 196-202).

Kanaganayakam, among others, agrees that Ondaatje's memoir lapses into solipsism: it glosses over a history of bloody conflict in Sri Lanka, preferring, instead, to bask in a comforting world of private myth. The answer to this criticism, however, depends on the extent to which the book is seen as ironic, for "the ironies in *Running in the Family* are conspicuous, and ... they derive from Ondaatje's sense of the impossibility of his autobiographical task (Huggan 1995, 118).<sup>7</sup>

If the book presents a satire on the search for ethnic roots, it also mocks the attempt to recover a fabricated history. Ethnicity scorns the exotic, yet it partakes of the exotic. Ondaatje negotiates this double bind by striking a delicate balance: "between the recuperative mythologies of ethnic autobiography and the pseudonostalgic longings of exoticist travel memoir" (Huggan 1995, 119). In this sense, Huggan sees the text as a "recuperative elegy" that seeks to restore the past; Ondaatje's text contains also a persistent urge towards escapism though, both to meet his family and to keep them at a distance "when his runs in his family, he is running both toward it and away from it" (1995 119). If there is a quest for ancestral origins, this quest is doomed from the start, both because those origins are fictitious and because of the gaps in the discourse: "My father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was probably more valid about three centuries earlier. Emil Daniels summed up the situation for most of them when he was asked by one of the British governors what his nationality was - 'God alone knows, your excellency'" (*Running* 41). Knowledge then dissolves into humour, family chronicle into fable: Ondaatje's text prevents itself from unravelling the threads of its own history. In this sense the book claims "ethnic immunity" (Huggan 1995, 120) and profits by that obscurity.

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<sup>7</sup> See Ajay Heble (1994, pp. 186-203). Heble, who recuperates the political dimensions of Ondaatje's writing, also argues that its many ironies spring from a rhetoric of excess. The cultural politics of *Running* reveals a plethora of allegiances; it celebrates a cultural syncretism that it simultaneously acknowledges as unsustainable (1994, p. 194). For a different, but not incompatible, view, see Siemerling's concept of "heterological fiction" which, in *Running*, involves the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous worlds, and Ondaatje's negotiation, between them, of the interstices of self

Coming across his family name inscribed on a plaque in a seventeenth-century Colombo church, the author confronts a past that part of him apparently wants to keep uncertain:

the sound which came immediately out of my mouth as I half-gasped and called my sister spoke all (the) excitement of smallness, of being overpowered by stone.

What saved me was the lack of clarity. The slab was five feet long, three feet wide, a good portion of it had worn away .... To the right of that slab was another .... Gillian wrote on a brown envelope as I read

*Sacred to the memory of Natalia Asarrapa -wife of Philip Jurgen Ondaatje. Born 1797, married 1812, died 1822, age 25 years.*

She was fifteen! That can't be right. Must be. Fifteen when she married and twenty-five when she died. Perhaps that was the first wife -before he married Jacoba de Melho? Probably another branch of the family. (*Running* 66)

The passage captures the balance in Ondaatje's text between inscription and erasure - between the desire to retrieve the past and the need to cloak it in suspicion.<sup>8</sup> In the poem "High Flowers," for example, his atavistic portrait erases the traces of its own memories:

From his darkness among high flowers  
to this room contained by mud walls  
everything that is important occurs in shadow-  
her discreet slow moving his dreams of walking  
from tree to tree without ropes.  
It is not vanity which allows him this freedom  
but skill and habit, the curved knife  
his father gave him, it is the coolness up there  
-for the ground's heat has not yet risen-  
which makes him forget necessity.

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and other. This negotiation is conducted primarily through the figure of his father, who is at once the writer's mirror self and his unknowable alter ego (see Siemerling 1994, 106-112, 137-53).

<sup>8</sup> Christian Bök sees this tension in terms of Ondaatje's accountability to society. For Bök, Ondaatje's later work oscillates between "two conflicting, artistic impulses: the will to social retreat and the will to social contact" (1992, p. 112). *Running*, in this context, would seem to be a watershed text, retaining vestiges of Ondaatje's earlier sociopolitical indifference but moving in the direction of a more engaged view of society. See also Heble's carefully modulated discussion of *Running*, which reasserts Ondaatje's belief in the transformative power of fiction, and which reads Ondaatje's ambivalent relationship with Sri Lanka as a dialogue between displacement and the possibilities of solidarity (see Heble 1994, pp. 186-203).

Kings. Fortresses. Traffic in open sun.

Within a doorway the woman  
turns in the old pleasure of darkness.  
In the high trees above her  
shadows eliminate  
the path he moves along. (*Running* 88-89)

The vivid images of dream cloud over while memories fade. The sense of continuity is lost. The poem -like the rest of the text- restores a vision of a past that it simultaneously effaces. It hovers at the threshold between recollection and amnesia. To dream in *Running* makes the past out of focus.

While the memories can never be completely recovered, they can be multiplied, put in ever new media, ever new shapes. One example of this is the minor incident in which Mervyn has picked up a cinnamon peeler on his journey home, and as “the smell filled the car, he did not want to stop, wanted to take him all the way past the spice gardens to Kegalle rather than letting him out a mile up the road” (*Running* 187). Ondaatje takes up this incident in the sensuous poem “The Cinnamon Peeler” (*Running* 95-7) which opens with the line: “If I were a cinnamon peeler,” mixing memory and desire. In the poem the narrator slips into the role of the cinnamon peeler, but the context reveals that the love poem is also an attempt to become Mervyn’s companion in conversation.<sup>9</sup> Like the book as a whole, the poem is “in memory” of the father, Mervyn Ondaatje, and keeps that memory, however mythologized, alive. By the end of the book, the memory of Mervyn Ondaatje and his family have been inscribed into our brains, just as they are inscribed in the book, in stone, and in all the

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<sup>9</sup> Giltrow and Stouck quote Ondaatje, “My loss ... was that I never spoke to him as an adult” (179), and continue: “In the remainder of the book he attempts in fact to engage his dead father in a dialogue and in a wholly imagined scene he becomes his father, momentarily achieving the purpose of his journey. This is achieved by the act of writing” (1992, p. 167). “The Cinnamon Peeler” is another expression of the same desire. Linda Hutcheon’s contention that the poem prefigures the identification of Michael and his father (1988a, p. 92) misses the dialogical element, though. This -

crumbling documents and notebooks: “The meaning of such memories may be forever troubled and troubling, but there can be no doubt that they exist -and signify. Ultimately, the incoherent and subjective information mediated in Ondaatje’s book, reflects its mediation and turns out to be superior to any attempt at presenting anything like ‘truth’” (Pesch 1997b, 69). The truth claims of travel memoir are always open to suspicion. The book insists that it has witnessed places and events it may just have invented; instead of recording facts, it may be spreading rumours:

The exoticism of travel memoir consists in its appeal to a homegrown audience; it supplies this audience with the wonders, thrills, and scandals of other times and other places. These times and places might be strange, but they are often strangely familiar, for travel writers frequently see what others have seen, or claim to have seen, before them. The strangeness of their ‘discoveries’ is thus paradoxically reassuring -their work seeks to defamiliarize a world whose wonders are already known. (Huggan 1995, 121)

By mediating his experiences of Sri Lanka through an exoticist “discourse of the other,” Ondaatje disengages himself from the very culture that he claims to be approaching. Ondaatje explores his own ethnicity in an ironic way, through myth, rumour and emphasis on strangeness, and he thus confronts his own alienation and gives him insight into his divided cultural allegiances.

Ondaatje’s fictional portrait in *Running* thus engages in the poignantly arduous task of representing the reconstruction of identities denied, displaced, disabled, and disavowed by the forces of personal and historical migrations and cultural relocations. He re-presents and recognizes the provisionality of the nature of the personal, cultural, and geopolitical identifications as he delineates a symbolic cartography that is never entirely detached from the Sri Lanka locatable on a map. This text can thus be characterized as highly self-conscious, paradoxical, and in some ways indeterminate version of the *bildungsroman*. In effect, as Sonia Snelling remarks:

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and other “touchings into words” (*Running* 22)- are his way of bringing his father out of “the well of total silence” (*Running* 199) and giving voice to him (*Running* 188).

The absence of a direct engagement with the colonizers seems less a side-stepping of the issue, and more a deliberate ploy to exclude them from his history in a mirror image of European history's traditional exclusion of the colonized. Ondaatje's text seeks to unsettle colonial history on many levels: the narrative disruptions and inconsistencies, his refusal to conform to the Western emphasis on grand-scale historical events, both personal and political ... the many voices and versions that coexist in his biography, all provide a significant challenge to the coherence and authority of Western historiography. The text as a whole unsettles notions of colonial control. (1997, 31)

Despite Mukherjee's belief, the text constructs a cultural identity through the act of remembering and forgetting, listening and writing. Ondaatje is conscious of the possible traps of this kind of criticism, and places the narrator both as the foreigner or prodigal son that hates the invader (*Running* 79), writing in a room in Sri Lanka twenty-five years after his departure from it. Though this moment is nostalgic, a characteristic shared by most exiles returning home after an interminable delay, the paradoxical status of the prodigal foreigner that is never quite resolved in the memoir is captured in the contrasting descriptions of the Sri Lankan landscape with which the text opens (Ray 1993, 38-9). Moreover, the desire for change and difference is captured early in the narrative in the significant auditory distinctions between Asia and the West. Language is, as always, the medium through which the text constructs place and identity and foregrounds aspects of the signification process, and he mouths the east in the distance:

Asia. The name was a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered, would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe, America, Canada. The vowels took over, slept on the map with the S. (*Running* 22)

The opposing metaphors provide a critique of certain tropes common to the autobiographical genre. The desire to travel back to his family, to revitalize his parents' generation, requires both writer and reader to construct and generate constantly a double layer of meaning. Ondaatje's use of oppositions establishes contrasts between cultures and geographical locales; at the same time, the construction

of identity through the act of travelling, dreaming, listening, and writing reanimates the “frozen opera” of his memory and denies the reader access to a moment of stable or fixed self-possession. In the denial of a singular identity Ondaatje always foregrounds location, language, time, and class, that is, the most explicit characteristics of all postcolonial writing. He does not allow the reader, in other words, to step outside of the material conditions that construct a shifting identity.

As a result, the fragmented form of this narrative functions less as a postmodern experiment than as a postcolonial reflection of the material conditions of moving between cultures, nations, and generations. Ondaatje’s juxtaposition of Canada’s frozen landscape with the tropical heat of Sri Lanka not only locates him geographically but also locates the significance of a shifting cultural imaginary. Geographically, he is the foreigner coming from a brief visit from his home in Toronto, Canada. Generationally, however, he is the native son connected to the homeland by his family lineage. Even as the familial is associated with the homeland, this identity is refuted by the “hybridity” of family history. Although Ondaatje situates the family securely in a Sri Lankan social and geographical landscape, he uses history and literature to construct his family as simultaneously Sri Lankan and international. Ondaatje uses the generational linkage as a way of dislocating them geographically. It is through these intersections that he establishes the impression of an autobiographical narrative -one that seduces the reader into believing that identity and home will come together while denying the realization of this desire by showing the incongruities between the generational and the geographical (Ray 1993, 41-3). As Italo Calvino says in *Invisible Cities*, “[a]rriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places” (1979, 25).

The keynote of European versions of Sri Lanka, shown implicitly and explicitly through intertextual references to Leonard Woolf, Robert Knox, Joseph Conrad or D.H. Lawrence, however, is the exotic mythologization of the kind that Edward Said

writes about in *Orientalism* (1979), and this is viewed as informing even European cartographical constructions of the island:

At the edge of the maps the scrolled mantling depicts ferocious slipper-footed elephants, a white queen offering a necklace to natives who carry tusks and a conch, a Moorish king who stands amidst the power of books and armour. On the south-west corner of some charts are satyrs, hoof deep in foam, listening to the sound of the island, their tails writhing in the waves.

The maps reveal rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellers' tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese and medieval records. The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape, -Serendip, Ratnapida ('island of gems'), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon- the wife of many marriages, corted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. (*Running* 63-4)

Maps are an important medium for storing memories. Ondaatje uses them at the beginning of his book to orientate his readers and himself. A map of Sri Lanka is reprinted as a frontispiece -as if to plan his journey back, Ondaatje "spread maps onto the floor and searched out possible roots to Ceylon" (*Running* 22). Unlike memories stored in the subconsciousness or passed on in oral histories, maps seem objective enough: idealized, abstract representations of the world:

On my brother's wall in Toronto are the false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The results of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of the sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations -by Ptolemy, Mercator, François Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt- growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy. (*Running* 63)

Cartographical and linguistic relations are thus seen as problematic as historical relations, equally subject to the ideological impositions of culturally partial views. Later, the writer gives his own version and vision of the map - "Ceylon falls on a map and its outline is the shape of a tear" (*Running* 147). The novel's approach must be postcolonial in order to decipher a resistance that should be analysed as a metaphor, never under a sociological or political perspective: "This recognition of the impossibility of negotiating a stable sense of belonging, it seems to me, is ... roughly

akin to the probing of the relationship between self and place that we find in the works of other transcultural writers” (Heble 1994, 189). Thus, despite those who blamed the author of ignoring the historical context, these scenes that could be interpreted as irresponsible by the postcolonial critic, have a clear artistic purpose, for they “come alive in fantastic, unreal, poetic imagination convey ... the real fact of the lives of these people, the spirit in which they *should* have lived; if they had extended their situation to its logical conclusion” (MacIntyre 1985, 317).

Language and cultural identity are intertwined in this book and come across a passage that foreshadows the spirit of Ondaatje’s last book of poems *Handwriting*, where the physical curvature of the Sinhalese alphabet is presented as a self-referential element to define its people in opposition to the tough verticality of the Sanskrit. Hence poetic language transcends the writing in English and touches the writer’s ancestral origins:

I still believe the most beautiful alphabet was created by the Sinhalese. The insect of ink curves into a shape that is almost sickle, spoon, eyelid. The letters are washed blunt glass which betray no jaggedness. Sanskrit was governed by verticals, but its sharp grid features were not possible in Ceylon. Here the Ola leaves which people wrote one were too brittle. A straight line would cut apart the leaf and so a curling alphabet was derived from its Indian cousin. Moon coconut. The bones of a lover’s spine. (*Running* 83)

The book’s magic moment is developed in the section titled “The Passions of Lalla,” an event described with a great dramatic power: “My Grandmother died in the blue arms of a jacaranda tree. She could read thunder .... Perhaps she was a shy child, for those who are magical break from silent structures after years of chrysalis” (*Running* 113). Different narrative versions and fantastic scenes coalesce losing all documentary validity. The only written evidence or proof the author can work with is the one based on rumour and metaphor, for “those who told the writer the story will speculate about what really happened. No story can be freed of revisions based on

such speculation; all the stories are part of an ever-changing, ever expanding, shared oral text” (Barbour 1993, 150).

The narrative thus dissolves amid the recreating process and the generic subversion, “as gossip erases the boundaries of both genre and class, Ceylon emerges as a country in which all boundaries are blurred” (Barbour 1993, 155). Whether the material is fact or fiction is for the reader to decide. Thus the book remains an incomplete story, unable to be articulated, in which “its undecidability rests in the inability of anyone to know another fully, and in the writer’s recognition that the only perspectives he can offer are partial, fragments of various genres jostling one another for preeminence and all equally incapable of rendering the ‘truth.’” (Barbour 1993, 159).

Ceylon offers much more than a historical narrative. It offers a mythological impulse because of the literary impact that García Márquez and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* caused on the writer, and the resulting influence of postmodernism. The mythology of Sri Lanka becomes atemporal, for “[t]he past invades us .... The past is still, for us, a place that is not yet safely settled.”<sup>10</sup> History and narrative become a vivid experience that writer and reader share, a sensual historical reconstruction, where physicality becomes language and where “[t]here is a direct involvement of the artist, and the viewer is not allowed to contemplate these icons of domesticity in a state of cool detachment, these objects pulsate with spiritual significance” (Paterson 1985, 28).

The author’s memory mixes the conscious facts with the probable, with the events that could have happened but did not. The mythical status in Ondaatje’s works will be thus reached after pondering over other people’s realities; an image or a dream which obsesses him will be turned into incredible fantasies captured in a sensuous language. His language is selective, paratactic, imagistic, continually revised and rewritten, in order to make it a counterpart of memory.

As a result, “the past becomes text, a version of an imagined reality, and an illusion in which our history is a fiction that exists only in the books that have been written about it” (Hancock 1985, 33). We lose our sense of perception, a differential sign to distinguish between the real and the fantastic, to be consciously submerged in the play of invention. Geoff Hancock distinguishes several common features in this type of works: exaggerated comic effects; the use of the hyperbole; the intertextual consciousness; the use of fantasy to make us doubt of the nature of the real; an absurd recreation of history, a metafictional consciousness and the collective sense of a folkloric past (1985, 36). The novel’s energy will depend on the imagistic power of language, which constitutes “a fantastic reflection of something that once happened however distorted it may be in the retelling .... The writer accumulates precise details around a probable event, or a probable legend, or a likely hyperbole” (Hancock 1985, 41).

Ondaatje’s narrative breaks the boundaries of reality in *Running*, unveiling a fragmented and secret history which vanishes amidst the story. Reality becomes language. The author reveals himself as the inventor of images, ignoring chronological perceptions and the notions of cause and effect in the plot, though, most of all, the certainty of the empirical fact. Influenced by the reading of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Hutcheon observes the connections Ondaatje deploys in his own historical memory are both present and absent in the writing: The old island of Ceylon has a city called Colombo, apart from many resemblances with the ‘Colombian’ city of Macondo: the extremes of heat, drought and flood; the exuberant vegetation; the incessant insect activity; the almost mythically exaggerated inhabitants who make the environment a real place where anything is possible- all culminating, in Ondaatje’s case, in Lalla’s “magic ride” to her death by drowning in the flood of 1947<sup>11</sup>:

Lalla fell into deeper waters .... The water here was rougher and she went under for longer and longer moments coming up with a gasp and then pulled down like a bait,

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Ondaatje, ed. *The Faber Book of Contemporary Short Stories* (1990, p. xiv).

<sup>11</sup> 1947 would, of course, be a very significant date for any postcolonial critic. We immediately recall Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980; 1991).

pulled under by something not comfortable any more, and then there was the great blue ahead of her, like a sheaf of blue wheat, like a large eye that peered towards her, and she hit it and was dead. (*Running* 129)

The mythical characters of the novel have brought their own national myths to the oral tradition, like the tongue of the lizard called “thalagoya” which possesses magic effects to produce, if not death, magic verbal articulation.

Similarly, the island invaders are called “karapothas,” ironically symbolized by the metaphor of the retreating beetle:

the beetles with white spots who never grew ancient here, who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the “inquisitive natives” and left. They came originally and overpowered the land obsessive for something as delicate as the smell of cinnamon. Becoming wealthy with spices. (*Running* 80)

In this section the author intertwines modernist intertexts by Leonard Woolf and D.H. Lawrence in order to pose, with these epigraphs, their colonialist experiences in the jungle. This postcolonial perspective is new in Ondaatje’s work, and it mingles his social feeling with his emotional roots, the history of his genealogy, which is, however, the product of those invasions.

The book demands a careful reading in order to confront reflexive moments from the postcolonial point of view. These moments appear as the most fantastic as where poetry and ideology merge in the intertextual discourse of the Ceylonese poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, who considers the writing in English a cultural act of treachery (*Running* 85-6). This quotation makes evident Ondaatje’s position as postcolonial, and expresses the relationship between a privileged culture and the experience of the people and dramatizes this relationship in terms of the link between high culture and imperialist brutality. The poem then counteracts with four poems in English which praise the indigenous qualities and the cultural syncretism. Thus the fact of quoting the Sinhalese poet “is in itself a political act for Ondaatje. It is at once a way of undermining the representational legitimacy of his project ... and of declaring

his faith in acts of imaginative understanding” (Heble 1994, 195). The novelty then lies in the way in which the text elaborates, from certain cultural conventions, a discourse that questions its own representativity.

Thereby the use of the imagination, a necessary tool to rescue the past; a rereading of the rumours, or the poems on the inhabitants, in which the authorial voice is highly ambiguous. Poems that depict his own creativity are the ones which “articulate the possibility of circumventing that gap through the process of imaginative understanding” (Heble 1994, 199). Through the poems “High Flowers” (87-9), “To Colombo” (90-91), “Women Like You” (92-4) and “The Cinnamon Peeler” (95-7), the authorial voice expresses what was fragmentary and dialogic in prose. The book moves between the twin poles of an essentially apolitical Canadian postmodernist discourse and the conventions of the gently cursive Sinhalese alphabet (see Thieme 1991, 48).

The emotional state gradually goes darker and darker in the book, and the fictional character is more recurrent and explicit when the author speculates on his father’s solitude. Using a Shakespearean intertext, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, Ondaatje establishes the comparison with the characters of Edgar and Gloucester, wishing that Edgar, his metaphorical other, would have revealed himself to his father. Lamenting this loss, he asks for another opportunity “to search for a lost father through the exhausting regeneration of art” (MacIntyre 1985, 318). In this quest, the author proceeds in two different ways: first, he reveals the inevitable destiny of his father in the colonial Ceylon; and second, with the mercy of time, maturity and memory have eventually dissipated the possible inconsistencies of that era:

Where is the intimate and truthful in all this? Teenager and uncle. Husband and lover. A lost father in his solace. And why do I want to know of this privacy? After the cups of tea, coffee, public conversations ... I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover. (*Running* 54)

According to John Russell, the novel's architecture is not irrational at all. In fact, all of Ondaatje's structural designs are carefully planned. The main sections and subdivisions are carefully set in a parallel way from the thematic and formal point of view. This division lies in the symbology and the different photographs. For Russell, then, nature's power is hidden in this deliberate architecture in which "[e]ven the photographs are arranged to make the even-numbered sections (like Mervyn's) the ones full of mystery and concealment, opposed in a binary way to the sections preceding them, which flash with legend and natural triumphs" (1991, 28). In a rather thematic and subjective analysis, Russell considers that the sections "Don't Talk to me about Matisse," "The Prodigal," and "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society," function in an empirical way, and their photographs allude to the dangers of nature, whereas their symbology surrounds an enigmatic past which is questioned and craved for. However, the photographs in "A Fine Romance," "Eclipse Plumage," and "What We Think of Married Life," would happily reflect descriptions of his family without using any natural and external danger.

Oral narratives are rather reflected in the chapters "Lunch Conversations," "Dialogues," and "Aunts." In "Lunch Conversations," oral narration is transmitted in conversation that often confuses the listener. He repeatedly has to interrupt the flow of conversation to ask: "Wait a minute, wait a minute! When did all this happen, I'm trying to get it straight" (*Running* 105). To complicate matters further, two of the tellers contradict each other. Which is and is not true, the biographer is not able to unravel. The "Dialogues" chapter presents another variety of orally transmitted stories. Here the sections are numbered and less conversational than those of the earlier chapter. Although the narrators are not identified, it is clear that Mervyn Ondaatje's children are exchanging memories of his father.

Yet even the exchanges of his closest relatives do not generate a coherent picture of the father, who remains enigmatic and elusive: we learn of his utter recklessness and abandon during his drinking phases; of his charm and grace, and of

his sadness and depression in old age (*Running* 173-78). Aunts are special sources of oral histories. Aunt Phyllis plays a prominent role here as Ondaatje is “especially fond of her because she was always close to my father” (*Running* 25). With her and her sister, he spends a morning “trying to trace the maze of relationships in our ancestry” (*Running* 25). As she has intimate knowledge of the distant past, and has been a witness of more recent events, she is an ideal source of information: an ideal medium of memories who “presides over the history of the good and bad Ondaatjes” (*Running* 26). To a large extent “the book depends on her communicative and collective memories for information, stories and tall tales -just as she and her memories depend on the book for preserving and further mediating these memories across time and space” (Pesch 1997b, 64-5).

Ondaatje’s imagery has also been qualified as “magic naturalism” by Mundwiler (1984, 129), as it supposedly describes a naturalist fatalism in detail, specifically in Lalla’s death. This chapter, for Mundwiler, “is carefully constructed, in Ondaatje’s distanced observation language, largely from facts garnered from oral history and from precise, naturalistic description of people and things” (1984, 143). Ondaatje provides, however, a fictitious narrative where language is anything but distant and hardly based on historical facts seriously researched. His purpose, then, consists of writing a fiction inspired by the death of his grandmother which escapes the real facts of that tragic moment. Only in *Running*, and not in any familial record, “she slept till noon, and in the early evening rode up to Moon Plains, her arms spread out like a crucifix behind” (*Running* 126). Mundwiler, lacking a proper argumentation, affirms that strange and opposed facts like this one characterize a work without a proper philosophic vision. This imagistic tension would thus lack any coherent basis and would conceal imaginative conflicts behind an outstanding modernist objectivity. Certainly, Mundwiler would have liked Ondaatje to write a conventional and linear story. Regarding a similar case in *Slaughter*, he comments that “[o]ne does not have to be a historian to feel that early experience, race and work must have been more

significant in Bolden's story that he suggests" (1984, 111). To this thematic statement Jerry Varsava answers:

Nor does one have to be a behavioral psychologist to know that human behaviour is not always explicable in terms of social determinisms. The presentation of Bolden's insanity as, for example, an icon of racism, in the absence of evidence or enabling inference, risks making of Bolden's life a sentimental melodrama, a narrative based on cliché. (1990, 209)

Other narrative factors appear behind the two main protagonists, Lalla and Mervyn, who are depicted as the book's metaphoric basis and whose shared connection is "their imaginary experience, their evasion of the immediacy of recorded conversation, present events, and present environment" (Mundwiler 1984, 135-36). We are dealing with a narrative structure that goes beyond the mere recollection of the past, and it occupies the terrain of the fantastic narrative. The book, then, constitutes a clear defense of the imaginative process which transcends the supposedly verifiable facts and of which "we have the clues that the ineffable is being touched upon, that the communications to follow do not belong to the common order of reality" (Mundwiler 1984, 142).

This defence of the imagination is the product of the author's interest in archetypal structures and in myth, which have been transposed to the island of Ceylon, and there they are provided with a perfect folkloric environment. Thus is reflected in different passages of the book, as in the section titled "Tongue" or in his poem "High Flowers." In the section "Thanikama," [aloneness] the fictitious process is even more clear; the author penetrates his father's mind, after having directly established the connection between him and Edgar, who tries to stop Gloucester's suicide in *King Lear*: "Who if I look deeper into the metaphor, torments his father over an imaginary cliff" (*Running* 179). Through a circular structure the author returns to the beginning of the book, and through an oneiric interpretation he is turned into a first person again: "I long for the moment in the play where Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester and it never happens. Look I am the son who has grown up. I am the son you have made

hazardous, who still loves you” (*Running* 180). In this section the author approaches an intersubjective sense of history defined by R.G. Collingwood:

Historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the redoing of this, the perpetuation of past acts in the present. Its object is therefore not a mere object, something outside the mind which knows it; it is an activity of thought, which can be known only in so far as the knowing mind re-enacts it and knows itself as so doing. To the historian, the activities whose history he is studying are not spectacles to be watched, but experiences to be lived through in his own mind; they are objective, or known to him, only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own. (Collingwood 1956, 218).

Ondaatje’s search for his father in *Running* becomes, necessarily, an extension of the research that as an artist he had accomplished in *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*, the latter being a mask of the author’s personal quest as an artist. The choice of legendary characters who become artists secretly reveals certain personal impulses which the author confronts as a creator. Similarly, the lack of communication with a father or an ancestor is a recurrent image in his work, as though it were a personal obsession, and this opens in the active reader new symbolic clues to approach an ambiguous text: a father or master lead the reader to an ever-present disarray; or the female power over the masculine ego, or love triangles are recurrent symbols all along his fictional works. Daniel Coleman does not find a final solution to these familial conflicts, though he analyses how Ondaatje works on power relations through his family portraits in which

the text closes in profound ambivalence, certain about the need to re-establish ties with the past, but uncertain about the possibility of meeting that need; certain about the inescapable influence of the father upon the life of the son, but uncertain about how to trace or interpret that influence (1993, 73)

As a result, *Running* becomes an erasure of the symbolic mask ever present in the previous works; and it signals the beginning of a new and more personal facet in the writer, where other familial and identity problems are approached. These are the ideal occasions to confront his own artistic otherness, “the son’s attempt to make peace with his forlorn spirit; it is an act of homage, frustration and love” (Abley 1982,

66). The significance of the father for the author is clear enough, for he is the progenitor of the author and the generator of the book.<sup>12</sup> But the signifying father is as torn in his own world of contradictions, impulses, and alcohol, as everyone else. He may be dangerous, but is no overpowering hero. Mervyn Ondaatje “is *one* of the plurality of sources and origins which have shaped the family and Ondaatje himself, but he is not *the* source or origin. Ondaatje may fail to solve the patriarchal enigma, yet in doing so, presents a discourse of the social network in which there are many such untraceable and incomprehensible elements” (Pesch 1997b, 69).<sup>13</sup>

His longer works are good representatives of the new literatures in English which indicate both the need to situate the self in discoveries of the other, and a refusal of definition in this respect. The multiplicity of languages as a crossroads for the encounter with the other is evident in the recurrence of polyglossia in the texts. Ondaatje’s reference and quotation of Sinhalese in *Running*, or his extensive thematization of the immigrants’ experience in *In the Skin of a Lion*, bear witness to a multilingual space (see Siemerling 1994, 12, 18). *Running*, thematizing the movement from the self to the other in the journey(s) from Canada to Sri Lanka, shows the “I” simultaneously on a “journey back” as well as forward. The other, is an inherent aspect of the self and remains to be discovered; the connection between self and other is directly patronimic in this book. The subject thus affects itself in the process of writing the other -the two emerging in a form of dialogic and overdetermining alterity (see Siemerling 1994, 138).

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<sup>12</sup> Barbour even extends this father-son relationship into a parallel in which the public scandals of the father are related to the no less public literary scandals of the son: “This scandal in behaviour (of the father) can stand as partial explanation for the scandal in literary form that the writer has perpetrated in *Running in the Family*, a book that breaks literary codes the way the father’s behaviour broke social ones” (1993, pp. 153-54).

<sup>13</sup> Unlike Verhoeven, we are not sure whether Ondaatje “sets out to discover his father, but instead finds himself” (1992, p. 198). No doubt there are elements of self-discovery and of exhibiting his rootedness to Canadian readers. But beyond that the multiplicity and fictionality of roots, past or origin is exposed, revealing the accidental and subjective nature of what we accept and believe to be our roots, past or origin.

Reflecting his own position in history, Ondaatje writes himself into the story he writes. He renounces the perspective of the objective outsider and blurs the object of his writing into a subject and *vice versa*. In this way he manages to mediate himself into the memories his book is recording, and acknowledges his position inside and outside his (hi)story.<sup>14</sup> To state that Ondaatje “fails to engage with the social and political realities of Sri Lanka,” as Mukherjee insists (1988), and to attack Ondaatje for his “tendency to aestheticize political and cultural issues” (Heble 1994, 187) is not just a mis-representation of the text, but also an attempt to force the book back into a mode of historiography it has been resisting throughout. We agree with Heble’s conclusion that “(o)nly by exhibiting a willingness to enter into the imaginative realm ... can texts *-this text seems to say-* address other cultures and histories in a critical sensitive manner” (1994, 200).

In narratives as Salman Rushdie’s or Ondaatje’s, where East and West collide and overlap, the most significant mode of bridging used is the confessional. It is very difficult to say what prompts the quest for another place, that departure towards the Other. When he realizes that this fusion with the other world has been idealized, the diasporic man returns to reappropriate his former space, being painfully aware that the territory of origin is not an entirely different place. The awareness of this historic dislocation leads the writers to dig deep into childhood memories, for memories and traces are the symbolic link between beings in space. The symbolic sharing of their pain and nostalgia helps build a kinship across cultures which Ganapathy-Dore calls “the conjoining strategy” (1994, 5). Writers like Rushdie and Ondaatje thus describe their homeland as “a familiar but foreign place.” This hybridity is the essence of the postcolonial self: it is made up of the prodigal and the foreigner in one. Thus the

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas Barbour’s observations confirm this: “As writer, he is also reader, gathering and inscribing, finally, a version of the stories he has heard and now interprets, if only by the way he ‘re-writes’ them. The stories he now proceeds to tell -of both the past and the present, and of the telling itself- compose the writer in the act of writing the text we read; but they discompose the author as a subject of autobiography” (1993, p. 140).

notion of the prodigal son as an apt metaphor for the relativity of the postcolonial point of view. Ondaatje calls himself “an international bastard,” as does Rushdie with his term “bastard child of history” (1991, 394). The exile loses language and home, to become invisible or a target for others, “it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul. But the migrant is not simply transformed by his act; he also transforms his new world. Migrants may well become mutants, but it is out of such hybridization that newness can emerge” (Rushdie 1991, 210).

Rushdie and Ondaatje are transnational or transmodern writers; their own centre is the English language, a starting point from which to reassemble renewed senses of both culture and author. Writing from the periphery is, in fact, writing from the centre; thus such binary notions of centre and periphery, eurocentrism and marginality, appear less and less in contemporary postcolonial works. The literary centre is everywhere, so these writers locate their writing at a point on a global map in which all roads lead toward home. Marginality, therefore, would not remain an unprecedented source of originality in an uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious world (see Strongman 1993, 158).

The sites of novels such as *Running* do share a common postmodernist ground in terms of how they are constructed to dramatize cultural imperialism, postcolonial relations to power, and imaginative strategies of resistance. For instance, Tamil and Sinhalese story-telling apparently inform *Running* but Ondaatje’s knowledge and practice of postmodernist strategies heightens the novel’s cultural work as a post-colonial expatriate’s text (see Leahy 1992, 67). *Running* would negotiate the difficult and ambivalent terrain between postcolonial and postmodern strategies of resistance typical of the settler colony or a Second World text. The title suggests an inherited familial trait while at the same time indicating something frightening and elusive, both rebellious and portable of the ruling class ancestry.<sup>15</sup> Like

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<sup>15</sup> The title implies that genetic inheritance of a dark temperament, drinking and privacy. That runs in the family as does the family breakup. In *Secular Love* -a title that comes from the poem “Women

other references by Ondaatje to his own seduction by and invasion of Sri Lanka, there is an acceptance of the limitations of his ability to logocentrically know and transmit the island's history. This does not mean that he is a revisionist apologist for colonialism. Through different intertextual quotations, Ondaatje turns familial chatter and gossip into fantastic and seductive reminders of its civilizing function and cultural value, conjoining fact and myth. In that way "history is organized" (*Running* 26).

Ondaatje clearly shares the doubts and scepticism of academic historians and chooses to tell his story in a way which allows him to express these doubts. Yet he also seems to insist on telling his family biography as fictional history. He thus is more true to the chaos and confusion of real life than most stories: "He mediates the chaos of life and the memories of it into a book which reflects that chaos, and reflects on it, without being utterly incomprehensible" (Pesch 1997b, 65). Contrary to the imperial necessity of trying to pass off its ideology as objective and the local as insignificant, *Running* revels in the subjective blurring a multiplicity of everyday facts and in consequent re-centering of the local as primary as opposed to the peripheral (Leahy 1992, 69).

*Running*, however, is a self-critical text which leaves some of the above questions unresolved. Ondaatje remains aware of the self-destructiveness of his own, and his family's arrogance and decadence, therefore, of the link between exoticism and imperialism. The "exotic" maps of old Ceylon on his brother's wall in Toronto hold out the promise of untold wealth. Historically, the island has been the exoticized/eroticized object of imperial ambition and the family name, he tells us, is "(a) parody of the ruling language" (*Running* 64). He writes now in another. Ondaatje's ethnicity advertises his own perceived ambivalence but it also concerns itself with alternative ways of inventing himself, thus challenging the distinction between "mainstream" and "ethnic." In that resistance lies the value of his difference

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Like You" (*Running* 93)- the poem "To a Sad Daughter" also expresses the same inherited preoccupation towards his daughter Quintin who suffers her parents' breakup through anorexia.

and his ethnicity, a word that should only proclaim a celebration of diversity. Ondaatje's trauma generates a family history beyond history, and autobiography which reveals and conceals the narrator, that is neither "auto" nor "biography" and which transcends both history and biography, into the art of the novel.

### **PART THREE: ARTISTIC INTERNATIONALISM**

## 9.1 Alterity and Resistance in Postcolonial Writing

History, for the most part, is written from the vantage point of the *colonizer*, not the *colonized*. Consequently, the colonized do not see their own lives reflected in the history books of the dominant society -at least not with any dignity. (Elliot 1979, xi)

Postcolonial theory has led to a variety of important reassessments of various power structures and discourses, and of their interrelatedness. It has opened up new areas of literary study and suggested new approaches to that enterprise. Accordingly, the postcolonial perspective seems particularly useful for clarifying the various positions and interrelationships of minority literatures in Canada.

Postcolonial studies grew out of the work of Franz Fanon, whose *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) described the lingering cultural effects of imperialism, suggested the significance of language in creating and sustaining those effects, and called passionately for a blend of national and cultural liberation.<sup>1</sup> Since then, a variety of analyses such as those of Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), Homi K. Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* (1990), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *The Post-*

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<sup>1</sup> What has been new in the years since the Second World War during which, for the most part, the decolonization of the European empires has taken place, has been the accompanying attempt to decolonize European thought and the forms of its history as well. It thus marks that fundamental shift and cultural crisis currently characterized as postmodernism. This project could be said to have been initiated in 1961 by Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. The book is both a revolutionary manifesto of decolonization and the founding analysis of the effects of colonialism upon colonized peoples and their cultures. "Decolonization," Fanon comments, "which sets out to change the order of the world is, obviously, a programme of complete disorder" (1968, p. 36), and no more so than in the disorder it sets up in the values attached to European humanism. Sartre's remarkable Preface to the book which, by contrast, is specifically addressed to the European reader, marks the opening move by a European

*Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (1990) have explored the ways in which literature serves as an important site of struggle for determination, for political, social and cultural power.

In *Orientalism*,<sup>2</sup> Said unveils the relations between discourse, knowledge, and power that sustain and justify an intricate self-legitimizing colonial operation by which the West enters and codifies the Other, turning it into an object of knowledge, appropriating it through stereotype descriptions and thus acquiring supremacy over it. At the heart of Said's critique of Orientalism, there is a dismantling of Western representations of history, of geography, and of the Other. Accordingly, his analysis of colonial discourse is based not so much on the veracity or correctness of what is represented as it is on the textual (discursive) strategies which legitimate representation as "truth." That is so because

that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, "there" in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient. (Said 1991, 22)

This approach to the production, reproduction, legitimization, and maintenance of the alliance between knowledge and power about/over the Other reveals connections and complicities between the Western institutions of History and Literature in past colonial and present imperial undertakings (see Darias 1996, 183).<sup>3</sup>

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in the critique of European culture from the perspective of its involvement in colonialism (see Robert Young 1990, pp. 120-21)

<sup>2</sup> Examining history from the perspective of personal commitment to resistance, Said's *Orientalism* dramatically heightened the consciousness of power and culture relations, vitally affecting segments of disciplines in the humanities. Of course, there had been numerous studies in history and political science in relation to imperialism, racism, slavery, colonies, and so on, and the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s had also made contributions to the change in the political consciousness of Western intellectuals. But, before the appearance of Said's book, no text had made a serious inroad into the mainline Anglo-American disciplines of the humanities (see Miyoshi 1993, p. 727)

<sup>3</sup> "imperialism' means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism,' which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implating of settlements on distant territory .... In our time, direct colonialism has largely

As Said asserts (1993, 16), even though the most part of the colonies have won their independence, many of the imperial attitudes underlying colonial conquest continue today in Europe and Africa. The problem we face now, Miyoshi asserts,

Is how to understand today's global configuration of power and culture that is both similar and different vis-à-vis the historical metropolitan-colonial paradigm .... The current academic preoccupation with "postcoloniality" and multiculturalism looks suspiciously like another alibi to conceal the actuality of global politics. Colonialism is even more active today now in the form of transnational corporativism. (1993, 728)<sup>4</sup>

One of the most prominent critics in postcolonial discourse is Homi K. Bhabha, who analyses the representation of the concept of "otherness" confronting Western discourse. "What is denied," Bhabha affirms, "is any knowledge of cultural otherness as a differential sign, implicated in specific historical and discursive conditions, requiring construction in different practices of reading" (1986, 151). Hence, colonial discourse constitutes a differentiating process which clearly alludes to a re-contextualizing of the colonized subject, maybe more agonizing than antagonist. The ideal of postcolonial literary theory draws from the European impossibility to

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ended; imperialism ... lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices. Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with words and concepts like 'inferior' or 'subject races,' 'subordinate peoples,' 'dependency,' 'expansion,' and 'authority,'" (Said 1993, p. 9).

<sup>4</sup> For political history the event that separates the colonial and the postcolonial is called "independence." In that sense the United States has been a postcolonial society since the late eighteenth century, Haiti and most of the South American countries since the early nineteenth, and Cuba since 1898. Many of the British West Indian islands finally became postcolonial in 1970s. Meanwhile, Martinique and Guadeloupe remain "colonial," although formally they are not colonies but simply parts of France. Puerto Rico cannot be postcolonial since it is not independent: it is a colony, according to many Puerto Ricans, but to the United States it is an associated commonwealth (see Peter Hulme 1993). There are six interrelated developments in post-World War II history that cannot be considered in isolation: (1) the cold war (and its end); (2) decolonisation; (3) transnational corporativism; (4) high-tech revolution; (5) feminism; (6) the environmental crisis. There are adjacent cultural coordinates such as postmodernism, popularization of culture, cultural studies, de-disciplinization, ethnicism, economic regionalism, and so on (see Miyoshi 1993, p. 728)

define the complexity of external voices whose generic and stylistic characteristics cannot adapt to the so-called tradition:

the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the “margin” turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious. Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy. (Ashcroft, et al. 1989, 12)

The appearance, in the English-speaking world, of a great number of postcolonial texts that contest universalist views of both history and fiction, by inscribing different and multiple realities through non-linear historical narratives, has contributed in a decisive way to the shift in focus from authenticity and originality to the particular historical, geographical, cultural and ideological conditions of textual production. In these texts, “the condition of postcolonial discourse appears already implicit in the contradictions of colonialism, and in particular, in the latter’s use of mimicry as a discursive strategy to maintain and reinforce power over the Other” (Darias 1996, 186). Bhabha takes the idea of mimicry into the colonial arena and in turn subtly explores mimicry as “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (1984, 126). In Bhabha’s schema, mimicry is a flawed identity imposed on colonized people who are obliged to mirror back an image of the colonials but in imperfect form: “almost the same but not white” (1984, 130). Subjected to the civilizing mission, the mimic men (for Bhabha they seem to be only men) serve as the intermediaries of empire; they are the colonized teachers, soldiers, bureaucrats and cultural interpreters whom Fanon describes as “dusted over with colonial culture” (1963, 47). The lineage of these mimics, Anglicized men who are not English, can be traced through the writings of Macaulay, Kipling, Forster and Naipaul (see McClintock 1995, 62). In order to be effective, Homi Bhabha has showed, mimicry must also produce an excess or slippage: the colonial subject is fixed only partially since it must be “*almost the same, but not quite.*” Viewed in this way, the colonial becomes a kind of forked-tongue discourse: “The success of colonial

appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 1984, 127).

It is this excess, the relation and the gap between resemblance and menace, mimicry and mockery, mimicry and mimesis, that the postcolonial text exploits, turning contradiction into a tool that effectively reveals the partiality and camouflage operations of mimetic/realist modes of representation:

Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the *fixation* of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge in the defiles of an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the *authorization* of colonial representations. A question of authority that goes beyond the subject’s lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an *object* of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation. (Bhabha 1984, 131)

Bhabha’s originality lies in his provocative deployment of aesthetic categories (irony, mimesis, parody) for psychoanalytic purposes in the context of empire. The mimic men are obliged to inhabit an uninhabitable zone of ambivalence that grants them neither identity nor difference; they must mimic an image they cannot fully assume. Herein lies the failure of mimicry as Bhabha sees it, “for in the slippage between identity and difference the ‘normalizing’ authority of colonial discourse is thrown into question .... and is displaced less by shifting social contradictions or the militant strategies of the colonized than by the formal ambivalence of colonial representation itself” (McClintock 1995, 63).

Furthermore, in the analysis of postcolonial texts, the evidence of many years of historical subjugation is always coupled by the presence of cultural exchanges working inevitably both ways. In this sense, Gayatri Spivak wonders, “What is an indigenous theory?” It is virtually impossible to ignore or suppress the historical record of postcolonial countries: “I cannot understand what indigenous theory there might be that can ignore the reality of nineteenth-century history .... To construct

indigenous theories one must ignore the last few centuries of historical involvement. I would rather use what history has written for me” (Spivak 1990, 69).

One detail Benita Parry notes in her analysis of the problematics of colonial discourse is that “in focusing on the deconstruction of the colonialist text, (critics) either erase the voice of the native or limit native resistance to devices circumventing and interrogating colonial authority” (Parry 1987, 34).

According to this view, Spivak would be one who posits the native, male and female, as an historically-muted subject, so the colonized has no speaking part. Bhabha, on the other hand, sets out to liberate the colonial from its debased inscription as Europe’s shackled Other, but his reappropriation, although effected by the deconstructions of the post-colonial intellectual, is made possible by uncovering how the master-discourse had already been interrogated by the colonized in native accents (see Parry 1987, 40). If, for Parry, Spivak and Bhabha deny the radical force of transgressive appropriations in a reverse discourse that contests the master text on its own terrain, Abdul JanMohamed,<sup>5</sup> argues that racial difference is represented in literature through the device of “manichean allegory” (1985), that is, positive representations that subvert through inversion the received colonialist version. Thus the ideological mission of African writing is to retrieve the value and dignity of a past insulted by European representation: “By representing the dialectical relationship between ‘man as individual’ and ‘man as social being’ proposed by Lukács in his writing on realism, such fiction restores to the dislocated colonial the image of the collective subject, of the integrated self in vital interactions with an authentic cultural community” (Parry 1987, 47).

Diana Brydon uses the term postcolonial in order to analyse all the positive and negative aspects in the relation empire-colony. We thus could consider countries which are currently imperialist, as the United States, at the same level as the

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<sup>5</sup> See also Abdul JanMohamed’s *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (1983).

independent or neocolonial countries, as it seems to be the case of some ex-colonies. “My focus,” Brydon asserts, “falls on the cultures of countries that are officially independent yet suffer the continuing pressure of economic and psychological dependency .... They share a tension between imposed or inherited language and culture, and an experienced place” (1987, 4). The purpose of the postcolonial writer then consists in the subversion of the imperialist vision, creating new narrations in order to activate new perceptual mechanisms in the reader, so “[t]he post-colonial literatures in English appear to use the same language, yet use it very differently. They seem at once familiar and strange, neither English nor completely foreign” (Brydon 1987, 10).

For Stephen Slemon, though, the term postcolonial does not uniquely address a country that has suffered historical dependency, but also deals with certain discourses emerged after or against a previous colonization, a discourse “which begins in the moment that colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others and which continues as an often occulted tradition into the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations” (1989, 6).<sup>6</sup> We therefore use the term “counter-discourse” as a term which emerges from a tradition of rejection of the European empire. Slemon foregrounds in that type of discourse the intertextual quotations and parodic repetitions of the colonizer discourse defined as “a power which interweaves itself throughout colonial societies, making the imperial culture appear referentially seamless and the colonial culture appear radically fractured” (1989, 7-8). Hereby we observe the practice of a rewriting of previous texts acknowledged by the canon, as is

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<sup>6</sup> There are at least two different, but not self-excluding, forms of post(-)colonialism: on the one hand, a hyphenated periodized form, in which ‘post-’ points to the historical, chronological sense of “after the formal period of colonization” and involves elements of resistance, opposition, even revolution against the set of relations defined by the second term; on the other hand, an unhyphenated, historically unperiodizable postcolonialism that refers to an implicit tendency within dominated cultures. As the unhyphenated postmodern, this second form, while not excluding the possibility of resistance implied in post-colonialism, is characterized by an element of complicity and participation in that which the ‘post’ precedes, that is, in the colonial endeavour. As Darias argues,

the case of *The Tempest*,<sup>7</sup> which clearly exposes the new ideology. We also come across new figurative versions of history such as Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* or Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words*. These textual strategies, therefore, so fashionable in postcolonial discourse, are in close relation with intertextual parody and has already been acknowledged by Hutcheon as an active part of postmodernist discourse. Furthermore, this counter-discourse which displaces imperialism's dominative system of knowledge

rests with those engaged in developing a critique from outside its cultural hegemony, and in furthering a contest begun by anti-colonial movements, theorists of colonial discourse will pursue the connections between imperialism's material aggression and its epistemic violence, and disclose the relationships between its ideological address to the colonial world and the imperialist culture of the metropolitan powers. (Parry 1987, 55)

Counter-discourse, however, becomes a theory of survival and a cultural and specific issue, which makes it different from the postmodernist discourse which has already become a Western institution. Our aim would then be to decolonize such established culture that results from the modernist evolution:

Writers such as J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, Chinua Achebe, Margaret Atwood, and Jean Rhys have all rewritten particular works from the English "canon" with a view to restructuring European "realities" in post-colonial terms; not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based. (Ashcroft, et al. 1989, 33)

It is obvious, though, that we cannot come back to a pre-colonial mentality in order to recuperate the lost innocence neither have we to forget the influence of European history. Nevertheless, we can analyse European discourse and its strategies from the periphery and from a new textual concept in which "[s]uch a view of post-colonial literatures as counter-discursive rather than homologous sponsors a rereading

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this second form of postcolonialism, as connected with other "postmodal" conditions, provides a more appropriate theoretical paradigm in the analysis of Canadian fiction (1996, pp. 179-80).

<sup>7</sup> See Diana Brydon, "Rewriting *The Tempest*," *World Literature Written in English* 23:1 (1984): 1-14.

and rewriting that is tropological as well as thematic” (Tiffin 1987, 29). So this aim to “decolonize” European narratives, or make them lose their “correct” and universal characteristics, is widely accepted inasmuch as it recognises both the lack of universality in literature and history, and the lack of objective and authoritarian narratives. Said deploys three great topics in decolonizing cultural resistance: one is to restore the community’s history and language; second is the idea that resistance is an alternative way of conceiving human history and is based on breaking down barriers between cultures, writing back to the metropolitan cultures -the voyage in- and, third, to pull away from separatist nationalism toward and integration of human community and human liberation (see Said 1993, 216).

Helen Tiffin’s critique (1988) of the ongoing postmodern and post-structuralist appropriation of postcolonial texts, for instance, responds to a generalized conception of the former theories as imposing a neo-universal hegemony of text and word, as well as to a rather hermetic view of the postcolonial. For Tiffin, the similarities between postcolonial and postmodern texts are due to the fact that many aspects of postmodern fiction were already present in the postcolonial text and assimilated by “Eurocentric” theories of textuality, but, as Darias argues, “(t)he multiple cultural interactions occurring especially in postcolonial societies, and inexorably in the Canadian case, would exclude the question of priority” (1996, 192). Canadian and Australian writing is postmodern insofar as it looks beyond its boundaries to assess its place in an international consumer society; it is postcolonial insofar as it struggles to free itself from the conceptual legacy of colonialism and to find terms more compatible with its own transformation (see Huggan 1994, 168).

Works such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* constitute significant texts to confront European discourse and thus coin the process of otherness in their reproduction of the aggressive contours of the high imperialist undertaking and with an ironic awareness of the post-realist sensibility:

when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When grow up I will go there.<sup>8</sup>

The cartographic fascination of some postcolonial writers has as a result the practice of interesting rhetoric strategies, “such as the reinscription, enclosure and hierarchization of space, which provide an analogue for the acquisition, management and reinforcement of colonial power” (Huggan 1989, 115). Huggan locates in the same plane the cartographic and the colonialist discourse, so the map becomes both a strategy of power and failure:

The “contradictory coherence” implied in the map’s systematic inscription on a supposedly “uninscribed” earth reveals it ... as a palimpsest covering over alternative spatial configurations which, once brought to light, indicate both the plurality of possible perspectives on, and the inadequacy of any single model of, the world. (1989, 120)

The parodic use of maps that foregrounds these texts aims to reconstruct our vision of the geographic space and, why not, revise colonial history. Hence, we can also question the concept of history through a new strategy which, in the case of Canada, is extremely relevant regarding its geographic boundaries and its multifarious culture. Once more, we discover how the concept of homogeneization is not pertinent in order to look for an identity that does no longer give any answers to such a diversified nation:

the “new spaces” of post-colonial writing in Canada and Australia can be considered to resist one form of cartographic discourse, whose patterns of coercion and containment are historically implicated in the colonial enterprise, but to advocate another, whose flexible cross-cultural patterns not only counteract the monolithic

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902; 1983, p. 33). According to Said, Conrad, Forster, Malraux and T.E. Lawrence take narrative from the triumphalist experience of imperialism into the extremes of self-consciousness, discontinuity, self-referentiality, and corrosive irony, whose formal patterns we have come to recognize as the hallmarks of modernist culture, a culture that also embraces the major work of Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Proust, Mann, and Yeats. These prominent modernists, for Said, “include a response to the external pressures on culture from the *imperium*” (1993, p. 188).

conventions of the West but revision the map itself as the expression of a shifting ground between alternative metaphors rather than as the approximate representation of a “literal truth.” (Huggan 1989, 124-25)

The role of cartography in these countries, therefore, constitutes a creative revision that searches for a new spatial perception. The colonialist map is subverted to represent a cultural change. The map can be a vehicle to reorganize the writer’s space in Canadian fiction, so maps become the metaphor to re-deploy and perhaps subvert imposed doctrines either patriarchal or nationalistic. As Huggan asserts, the map no longer features as a visual paradigm for the ontological anxiety arising from frustrated attempts to define a national culture, but “operates instead as a locus of ‘productive dissimilarity’” (1994, 152). Here, in the postcolonial world, the notion of linearity, of nation and identity is deflected into diverse spaces that disrupt the single, unfolding narrative by introducing multiple sites of language, narrative, his-stories and her-stories, and a heteronomy of different pulses. In this landscape, English becomes an intersection, a palimpsest that emphasizes the powers of impurity. Such a refusal of a mono- and ethnocentric view of literature, culture, history, religion, music, identity and language leads inevitably to the dismantling of an obvious centre that legislates for these variations. But it simultaneously “does not permit the possibility of the native-whether white English or black Jamaican- returning home to a pure or authentic state” (Chambers 1994, 75).

Allegory is the ideal strategy in deploying the postcolonial counterdiscourse, perhaps due to post-structuralist influence, the power of textuality and, of course, irony.<sup>9</sup> If we relate these strategies to history the text becomes an interesting arena for intertextuality, for “an awareness of the passage of time is at the heart of allegory, and because of this, all allegorical writing is thought to be inherently involved with questions of history and tradition” (Slemon 1988, 158). If colonialism constitutes a

broad form of structural domination, we have to keep in mind that there are many varieties of it, for “to be one of the colonized is potentially to be a great many different times” (Said 1989, 207; see also Said 1993). Likewise, there must be distinctions among the different postcolonial countries, communities, and, of course, different kinds of colonies -for example between settler colonies like Canada<sup>10</sup> and subjugated ones like many in Africa (see Tiffin, Brydon, Ashcroft et al.). Both of them, however, may partake of that “specifically anti-colonial counter-discourse energy” (Slemon 1987, 3).<sup>11</sup>

Canada, however, has an uncomfortable dual historical identity, as both colony and colonizing force; yet the postcolonial and feminist intellectuals have used the tool of irony as their counter-discourse to fight this very ambivalence.<sup>12</sup> Irony is, therefore, one of the best ways to problematize authority from within as it is

a discursive strategy that depends on context and on the identity and position of both the ironist and the audience .... The infinite variations and combinations possible are what make irony both relatively rare and in need of markers and signals. It is almost a miracle that irony is ever understood as an ironist might intend it to be: all ironies, in fact, are probably unstable ironies. (Hutcheon 1997, 385-86)

Critics such as Hayden White and Michel Foucault have made it clear that history is culturally and ideologically motivated and based on language which clearly

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<sup>9</sup> On allegory as a useful term for analysing postcolonial literatures see Stephen Slemon, “Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing,” *Kunapipi* 9:3 (1987): 1-16.

<sup>10</sup> To generalize, settler colonies are those in which new arrivals (in Canada’s case, from Europe) could be motivated by any number of reasons -from enforced exile to adventure; they often marginalized or exterminated the indigenous populations, rather than merging with them; they transplanted and internalized (while deracinated) Old World culture and traditions, including language, of course (see Hutcheon 1997, p. 395)

<sup>11</sup> There are, however, important differences like the relations settler colonies have with their aboriginal peoples, of course. In addition, each settler colony, like each forcibly colonized nation, has its own history that cannot be ignored. As the example of USA and Canada reveals, it matters whether a nation has fought for political independence or has evolved a form of government out of imperial institutions: breaks and ruptures force an articulation of difference and enable the creation of a discourse of identity. This may explain why Canada perpetually lives out its identity crisis (see Hutcheon 1997, p. 395).

makes our vision of the past biased, as a result discourse destabilizes our preconceived visions of chronology and temporality:

the allegorical levels of meaning that open into history are bracketed off by a literal level of fiction interpollated between the historical events and the reader so as to displace the matter of history into a secondary level of the text accessible only through the mediation of the primary fictional level. This mode of representation foregrounds the fact that fiction, or writing, mediates history; that both fiction and history are discursive practises .... and that history, like fiction, requires an act of reading before it can have meaning. (Slemon 1988, 160)

History, then, becomes a discursive practice widening the spectrum of possibilities of the story. It is a strategic appropriation which uses allegory to revise the past through imagination. Postcolonial language refuses the mimicry of imperialist discourse in order to construct a new context, a new voice to foreground its differences. It is not only a question of liberation from imperialist discourse, but also a new search of discursive alternatives through a cultural comparison, a quest “that can move beyond the violent suppressions of the Western need for unity” (Brydon and Tiffin 1993, 76).

On the other hand, the case of American literature shows that the literary products of a country that gains independence are no longer counted as English colonial literature from the moment of independence acquiring a separate identity. It is perhaps in order to avoid these and related problems that from the 1950s the term “Commonwealth literatures” was introduced, next to “English” and “American” literature. More recently, the term “literatures in English” was introduced to refer to all English language literatures, including those of England itself and of the United States. Even more recently, the terms “new literatures in English” and “emergent literatures” were coined to denominate each of the literatures of the former colonies: Australian, Canadian, Indian, Ghanaian, Nigerian, South-African, West-Indian or Caribbean, etc. Each of these “new literatures” is postcolonial with respect to English

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<sup>12</sup> See Bhabha 1984 and 1990 about the indeterminacy and ambivalence of irony as a mode of

literature in the same sense as American literature; and each of these literatures claims its own place and history within the larger compound whole of English language literature (see D'Haen 1993).

Inherent in the definition of postcolonial is the realization of an identity crisis; an unease, a discomfort even, with one's own culture, a being hostage by two cultures and yet not belonging to either. In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), postcolonial literatures are approached and defined as emerging from the same origin and living in a continuous manichean struggle with the imperial power.<sup>13</sup> Irish literature, for instance, goes unmentioned, although Ireland certainly has taken up a marginal position in relation to Britain for years. The same thing applies to "peoples" or ethnic groups without there having been a process of colonization in the classical sense of the word, as for instance with the African-Americans in the United States. And what about the literature of the descendants of the immigrants from former colonies to Europe, or of migrant workers; and how are we to label the literatures of autochthonous populations in countries whose literature is already itself postcolonial? the First Nations in Canada and the United States, the Aborigines in Australia, the Maoris in New Zealand. Gayatri Spivak explicitly links colonized peoples, marginalized social classes, and women; and Linda Hutcheon compares Canadian literature to women's literature, and labels both "ex-centric" with regard to metropolitan centres of power (see D'Haen 1993, 13-4).

The debate over the question of language use in "Commonwealth literature" has traditionally concentrated on the so-called Third World nations where English has been imposed upon countless indigenous languages and cultures, ignoring and minimizing the significance of the issue for countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These nations are often viewed simply as sharing a common language

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knowledge and power.

<sup>13</sup> "What each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their

tradition with the imperial power. However, to the extent that these countries are also subject to a quality of linguistic and cultural “doubleness” -that characteristic tension between the colonizer’s code and the new territory- theirs is the experience of writing and speaking difference (see Dever 1988, 33-4). Hence, by suggesting that these literatures are bonded together by a seemingly uniform use of a language is to deny the significant impact of cultural and geographical difference, potentially the most revealing facet of the colonial literary experience.

The use of the English language by Commonwealth writers represents a challenge to invest the inherited language with new meaning, to restructure inherited forms of perception (see Dever 1988, 42). This partial rejection of a simple appropriation of English words and their accompanying meanings into other new English language contexts represents, for Robert Kroetsch, a rejection by colonial writers of the system which threatens to define them once again in traditional terms. He refers to this process as “the necessary act of decreation” (Kroetsch, in Dever 1988, 42).

In addition, the use of the definite article before the term legitimizes a singularity that erases the crucial differences between various countries too easily included under the all encompassing rubric postcolonial. As Ella Showat writes:

The globalizing gesture of “the postcolonial condition,” or “postcoloniality,” downplays multiplicities of location and temporality, as well as the possible discursive and political linkages between “postcolonial” theories and contemporary anti-colonial, or anti-neo-colonial struggles and discourse. (1992, 104)

The word must be used carefully, not really interchangeable with “Third World Literature,” which we consider inappropriate. It can be used selectively, however, or along with other terms that would enable a more cogent political critique of the abhorrent imbalances of power that continue to proliferate in the current arena that is not entirely postcolonial. Though, generally speaking, in settler colonies like Canada

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difference from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial” (Ashcroft et al. 1989, p. 2).

the postcolonial writer seeks to decolonize, “not simply getting rid of the trappings of imperial power, but seeking non-repressive alternatives to imperialist discourse” (Brydon and Tiffin 1993, 12). Tiffin asserts, for instance, that “[t]his dismantling, demystification and unmasking of European authority that has been an essential political and cultural strategy towards decolonisation and the retrieval or creation of an independent identity from the beginning persists as a prime impulse of all post-colonial literatures” (1988, 171). An independent identity can be created or uncovered, but there is an obvious impossibility of constructing it as simple and as detached substitution, or as if on a linguistic and cultural *tabula rasa*: “the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up. The extraordinary importance of this change is that it is willed, called for, demanded” (Fanon 1968, 35).

There must be a cultural transition where society’s concentric or overlapping identities would be focused around language in order to create a positive nationalism. The term ethnicity, therefore, should be applied to all populations in their struggle between languages and cultural spaces which is the case in almost every country today. National identity is thus considered an imaginary construct in which people can affirm themselves either within or against the dominant landscape that surrounds them. The things rejected by these new literatures in English have to be named if others are to understand this act of rebellion through writing. This writing is the expression of an otherness against a hegemony in which the terms of reference are dictated by the preoccupations of those who have established themselves as the centre of a dominating culture. In Canada and Australia, for instance, the nationalist position argues that postcolonial writers should write from within their own sense of place and try to interpret its particular cadences and rhythms for their own community instead of mimicking the “foreign” accents of the English literature (see Brydon and Tiffin, 1993, 58).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Biculturalism in Canada misrepresents the English/French relation by positing a relation of dominance as a symmetrical relation of equivalence; but it also serves to distract attention from the

Freedom would consist, then, in having no absolute Other opposed to me, but in depending on a content which I am myself. Therefore, “by refusing, realigning, deconstructing the ‘master narrative’ of Western history, by interrogating its tropes as well as its content, these new writers are recapturing notions of self from ‘other’ and investigating that destructive binarism itself” (Tiffin 1988, 179). That manichean binarism of the so called First and Third World literatures would erase the dialogic principle that Mikhail Bakhtin asserts when he comments that language,

lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half some else’s. It becomes one’s own only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language, but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (Bakhtin 1981, 293-94)

Our first point is that yes, we may be forced to discover/uncover our otherness -our ethnicity, our gender or our economic powerlessness- by encounters with those more powerful, those with the authority to name -but we are never initially an “other” to ourselves (see Brydon 1989, 97). On the contrary, the postcolonial critic Arun Mukherjee believes that the decentring of the individual subject has been the main difference between the Western and Indian and African novel and that this decentring was related to our different notions of the individual. So, according to her, the writers in the new Commonwealth countries have had to reject the individual-centred novel as it does not reflect the important role of kinship relationships in the cultures of their countries. Their use of parabolic structures, indigenous story-telling conventions, folk

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suppressed cultures of the indigenous peoples as well as of other immigrant groups. Because of the need to maintain a separate identity in opposition to the United States, Canada developed essentialist and geographical fictions in order to stress its innate difference. The dominance of these models translates into Canadian criticism’s preference for the thematic or theoretical/formalist above the interrogation of discursive systems and the intersections of knowledge, language and power .... Canadian critics frequently lament the lack of a national myth or ideology, failing to recognise that this particular belief is the colonial ideology par excellence” (Brydon and Tiffin 1993, pp. 65-71).

tales, parodies of Western and indigenous forms and rituals have not attracted adequate attention due to the critics' obsession with western categories. Literary appreciation as well as literary production are culture based and no universal criteria can be worked out that will apply regardless of cultural differences (see Mukherjee 1988, 17).<sup>15</sup>

Theory as an ambiguous tool inasmuch as it comes freighted with the cultural baggage of dominant Western culture. One of its outcomes has been an emergent form of reading for figural resistance in various kinds of postcolonial literary texts. In this figurative resistance, the reader should focus on textual echoes or repetitions and examine the way those texts “work” the linguistic and narrative patterns of the imperial centre through a complex rhetoric of intertextual quotation. We thus discover certain strategies of these new literatures to resist, such as an insistently reiterative language and fictional structure playing the role of counter-discourse. That is, taking hold of the discursive machineries of colonial power and driving it outwards, to a new order of reference. The problem posed is the danger of returning to the discursive orbit of dominant Western power. The book or text should then become the material site in and against which so much post-colonial counter-discursive activity comes to direct its transformative energies.

The “literariness” which inhabits the text is seen here to be freighted with history and implicitly positioned within a dialectic whose initiating term is imperial power and its mobilisation of textuality. This historical “unsettlement” in linguistic reference articulates an inescapable “pre-text” for postcolonial writing and establishes postcolonial representation as necessarily marked by its status of conditionality. Resistance also assumes a new kind of mimeticism at work in the postcolonial

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<sup>15</sup> According to Yasmine Gooneratne, the idea of *universality* itself is false, a misleading pointer that should be erased from criticism of post-colonial literatures. In its place we should support the concept of “place,” and immerse ourselves in the difficult task to approach each different culture with new eyes: “We certainly find Western criticism ‘self-centred,’ flawed by the willingness or inability of

reiterative text. This double movement of writing back or ambivalence constitutes a defining characteristic of this new approach to Commonwealth studies (see Slemon 1989, 106).

In the first place, we can consider repetition as a natural reflection of postcolonial social reality unasmuch as the intertextual quotation is a dual, ambivalent condition of all representation. And, secondly, we should keep in mind that postcolonial repetition is inherently a reactive mechanism which affords a productive and destabilising reading of colonial discourse at the level of textual construction and performance to differentiate and disperse the hegemonic power. So postcolonial repetition is ex-centric rather than reflective (see Slemon 1989, 115). This ex-centric discourse, however, does not mean a return to a transparent realism, but rather a starting point beyond the manichean aesthetics of colonizer and colonized.

In Benita Parry's view (1987), critics should be concentrating on articulating the margins, and gaining control of the way in which the marginalized are represented. As far as Said is concerned, on the other hand, the destructive forms of representation used by both colonizer and colonized alike must be replaced by more positive and conciliatory modes which emphasize the overlapping of cultural boundaries and the interdependence of the historical narratives belonging to either side. This would involve abandoning fixed ideas of settled identity and culturally authorized definition, by placing what the Third World has to say on equal terms with its own explanations (see Maxwell 1991, 75).

According to Fredric Jameson all Third World texts have an allegorical nature are to be read as *national allegories*. They necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: "*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (1986, 69). So in distinction to the unconscious allegories of our own cultural texts,

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Western critics to accept the post-colonial writer's oneness with his or her place of origin" (1986, p. 15).

third-world national allegories are conscious and overt. This article of Jameson's has come in for heavy criticism, much of it justified. Aijaz Ahmad, for instance, completely denies the concept of "Third World Literature" be constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge (1992, 96). Certainly Jameson's own text is so centrally grounded in a binary opposition between a First and a Third World, it is impossible to proceed with an accurate conception of literature based on the experience of colonialism and imperialism. To say that all Third World texts are necessarily allegorical is to say that any text originating within that social space which is not allegorical is not a true narrative. Allegory, however, is also a necessary critical term to discuss the mode in which the novel operates, it suggests that the development of the novel takes place in accordance with imperatives that are not those of realism. As Hulme suggests, "awkwardness is not a sign of a failure to adhere to a norm but, rather, a symptom of a breaking away from that norm toward a new way of writing (and reading) which has yet to be fully formulated" (1993, 132).

First and Third World are themselves imprecisely defined. Ahmad and Jameson provide two parallel discourses that never seem to meet. Both methods and experiences are valuable but seek to exclude all other perspectives instead of contributing to a larger collective effort of understanding. Perhaps we should see our work as part of a larger political program of *cultural transvaluation*, that is, to listen, to speak as more than simply someone else's other (see Brydon 1989, 89). It is not a matter of exclusion, but of a silent and incorporated disparity that persists in a variety of forms. Therefore, the challenge the postcolonial literatures pose is that of re-thinking the organisation and function of knowledge, so our task is to define a *program of interference* (see Brydon 1989, 93).

The term Third World cannot thus be taken to imply an homogeneous entity. It is inadequate "insofar as it offers a univocal description of an extremely heterogeneous section of the world" (Young 1990, 11). Canada, Australia and New Zealand are part of the West and a part of the opposition to it. The United States themselves can be

seen as both a key player in Western hegemony and as an adversary of Europe in its cultural history. It underwent the colonial experience and it can be considered imperialistic today.<sup>16</sup> As Said comments, “it’s strange that in many writings on anthropology, textualization and otherness there is almost a total absence of any reference to American imperial intervention as a factor affecting the theoretical discussion” (1989, 214). We are concerned here with narratives that have attained a major cultural convergence, which have widened their thematic and formal scope, and which have been transformed from a formal pattern or type to an activity in which “politics, tradition, history, and interpretation have converged” (Said 1989, 221). These narratives act as a *resistance* within the context provided by the history of imperialism, a history whose underlying contest between white and non white has emerged in a new and more inclusive counter-narrative of liberation; therefore, “representation” becomes significant and extremely decisive as a political choice (see Said 1989, 224). As a result, exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can provide us with new narrative forms or, in John Berger’s phrase, with *other* ways of telling. In these new ways of expressing themselves, exile becomes something closer to a norm, an experience of crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance of the classic canonic enclosures:

Liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages. (Said 1993, 332)

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<sup>16</sup> “United States military interventions since World War Two have occurred (and are still occurring) on nearly every continent, many of great complexity and extent, with tremendous national investment, as we are now only beginning to understand .... empire as a way of life. The continuing disclosures about the war in Vietnam, about the United States’ support of ‘contras’ in Nicaragua, about the crisis in the Persian Gulf, are only part of the story of this complex of interventions” (Said 1993, p. 55).

On the part of the settler culture the twin experiences of immigration and settlement not only constitute a recurring theme; they have also lent shape and direction to a predominant pathway or narrative of each country. In certain cases, this narrative pathway seems to go a reversal, as when writers take imaginative possession of the “Europe” of their ancestry. But doing this can be the sign of a personal “aesthetic of incorporation” so strong that it risks becoming an imperialism of the imagination, with virtually no limit set to the experiencing of different places and cultures.<sup>17</sup>

Imperialism, as Said points out, had been an unprecedented integrating factor, making territories overlap and cultures get involved in one another. Thus the ideas that define a man’s bond to his place of birth -land, home, belonging- have acquired a disturbing ambivalence in the postcolonial context. The paradox of the contemporary world is that people are reclaiming a cultural territory of their own, while also wanting to be part of the global nation. They have lost their territory and their history due to what Ngugi wa Thiong’o calls imperialism’s “cultural bomb,” whose effect is “to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (1986, 3). Caught between the nebulous frontiers of the dream land and the home land, belonging to both and misfit everywhere, the postcolonial man can at best be defined as a melancholic person in love with his lost space (see Ganapathy-Dore 1994, 3). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said calls for an “internationalist counter-articulation” (1993, 309-311). This counter-discourse that he proposes would

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<sup>17</sup> See Josef Skvorecky’s reflection in “Some problems of the Ethnic Writer in Canada,” where he discusses the public and official policies in contrast to the real experiences of the immigrants in Canada and the United States: “the hard fact of life is that, as an ethnic Canadian, you can retain elements of your culture and traditions, perhaps even customs, to some degree. But the language is *largely* lost in the second generation, and *entirely* lost in the third. Naturally there are exceptions, but they are rare. After all, our government and our multicultural ministry cannot very well encourage the New Canadians to forget about the official languages and stick to their mother tongues -unless they would want to create a force of practically mute ethnic labourers, unable to hold any jobs except the most menial” (1987, p. 86).

articulate “the contrapuntal lines of a global analysis, in which texts and worldly institutions are seen working together ... all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography” (1993, 318). Contrapuntal reading “must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded” (Said 1993, 67).

Postcolonial studies in English now find themselves in a shifting and confused moment, where three different critical projects collide on the space of a single signifier. First, the term postcolonial is an outgrowth of what formerly were “Commonwealth” literary studies, to move the concept of a unitary and national idea of “English.” Second, the term implies a subjectivity within Third- and Fourth- World cultures, and within black, and ethnic, and First- Nation constituencies dispersed within the First-World. But a third field of study has emerged which analyses different literary discourses of colonialism and which identifies different kinds of anti-colonialist resistance (see Slemon 1997, 230). The big problem for Slemon is that the last two fields of study have been confused: “when the idea of anti-colonial resistance becomes synonymous with Third- and Fourth- World literary writing, two forms of displacement happen. First, *all* literary writing which emerges from these cultural locations will be understood as carrying a radical and contestatory content .... And secondly, the idea will be discarded that important anti-colonialist literary writing can take place *outside* the ambit of Third- and Fourth World literary writing” (Slemon 1997, 231). This excises the study of anti-colonialist Second-World literary activity from the larger study of anti-colonialist literary practice. The experience of colonialism and postcolonialism is not the same in Canada as it is in Africa or in India. Second- and Third-World cultures do not inhabit the same political, discursive, and literary terrains in relation to colonialism. This is what Slemon calls “semi-periphery” or the radical ambivalence of postcolonialism’s middle ground (1997, 232). It seems as though the binarism that comes from the First World academia tends to drive that

transnational region of ex-colonial settler cultures away from the field of postcolonial literary representation. For Slemon, resistance literature, under these circumstances, can be seen as a struggle for national liberation but it fails to address that centre/periphery notions of resistance can reinscribe these notions and secure dominant narratives. The problem is that you can never *easily* locate the sites of anti-colonial resistance when it contradicts colonial authority without ever reversing its power. It is ambiguous and incomplete in both discursive worlds.

The contradiction, for Slemon, is that the First World which confronts Third-World structures of representation “*also* wants to assign ‘Second-World’ or ex-colonial settler literatures unproblematically to the category of the literature of Empire, the literature of the First World, precisely *because* of its ambivalent position within the First-World/Third World, colonizer/colonized binary” (1997, 236). Slemon defines the Second-World as a reading position, a critical manoeuvre in which “the *illusion* of a stable self/other, here/there binary division has never been available to Second-World writers, and that as a result the sites of figural contestation between oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized, have been taken *inward* and *internalized* in Second-World post-colonial textual practice” (1997, 237). The Second-World text and the Second-World writer have always been complicit and ambivalent in colonialism’s territorial appropriation of land, and voice, and agency.<sup>18</sup> This ambivalence of emplacement is the condition of their possibility since the beginning so these compromised literatures have a big amount to tell to ‘theory’ about the nature of literary resistance:

We need to specify our resistances to power, but we need also to recognize the ubiquity of resistances and to understand their incompleteness, their strengths, their

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<sup>18</sup> See M. Nourbese Philip (1997) where the writer and critic argues about the binaries and dichotomies that exist between dominant and sub-dominant cultures in a Canadian city like Toronto: “Working in Canada as an ‘Afrosporic’ writer, I am very aware of the absence of a tradition of Black writing as it exists in England or the U.S. The great Canadian void either swallows you whole, or you come out the other side the stronger for it. The Black writers here are, in fact, creating a tradition which will be different from both the English and American traditions of writing and literature by Black writers” (1997, p. 13).

loses and their gains .... There is also a second world of post-colonial literary resistance, but it inhabits a place -a place of radical ambivalence- where too much post-colonial criticism in the First World has so far forgotten to look. (Slemon 1997, 239)

Nourished by the Canadian Council (established in 1957), Canadian literature continued to be seen by many during the 1960s as a reflection of national culture. During this period of assertive nationalism in English-speaking Canada, literature was widely regarded as a site where the remnants of the old colonial relationship with Britain and the new colonial relationship with the United States could be resisted and subverted. English-Canadian writers and critics such as Margaret Atwood in *Surfacing* (1972), and more explicitly in her critical work, *Survival* (1972), attempted to illuminate the quintessential patterns of Canadian literature; Robert Kroetsch in a variety of works like *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (1989), and Dennis Lee, particularly in his article “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space” (1974), waged what we might now call a postcolonial struggle partly aimed at deconstructing “false” images but particularly aimed at asserting an authentically Canadian voice. Canadian culture continues to be seen as a site of struggle, particularly with the United States, and many Canadians are concerned about national unity regarding Québec nationalism as well as for what they see as the fragmentation of Canadian society and culture perpetuated by official Multiculturalism -an anxiety articulated, for instance, by Neil Bissoondath in *Selling Illusions* (1994)- and reflected in the appeal of the Reform Party of Canada. The idea that either of Canada’s two major literatures might be regarded as constituting a single voice representative of the nation is virtually dead.

Canadian literature cannot express a single national character as we have seen through the vast majority of Canadian literature, mainly fiction since the 1960s, as well as through postmodernist approaches like Hutcheon’s (1988a; 1988b) or in the context of increasing globalization (see Davey 1993). Postcolonial analysts are right

when they tell us that an assertive national literature is an important site for the settler colony's effort at decolonization, which are centred primarily in adapting the imported language to local experience. So too are they right when they highlight Native literatures as an important site for the invaded Aboriginal culture to struggle against the settler colony (see Palmer Seiler 1996, 153). That these two enterprises are clearly at odds is nowhere more evident than in the settler colony's efforts to seek connection with the "new world" it occupies through appropriating various elements of Aboriginal culture. The project of decolonization, therefore, is considerably more complex and many-layered from the invaded position than that from the settler position.<sup>19</sup> Settler cultures are sites of rehearsal and negotiation between the contending authorities of Empire and Native. As Lawson explains (1995, 26-7), the settler subject represents, but also mimics, the authentic imperial culture from which he is separated. But doing this can be a sign of a personal "aesthetic of incorporation so strong that it risks becoming an imperialism of the imagination" (J.White 1993, 22).

This is mimicry in Bhabha's sense, that is, both a subjection and a menace. An authority that is always incomplete, as the Cree chief Big Bear in Rudy Wiebe's novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) recognizes. Mimicry, however, is a necessary and unavoidable part of the repertoire of the settler culture. The settler mimics, appropriates, and desires the authority of the Indigene, he or she displays Aboriginal art as a signifier of the recoverable, and desires to inherit the Natives' spiritual rites to the land as we see in numerous settler narratives in Canada and which brings us back to a tradition that begins in *Wacousta*, which follows the line of James Fenimore Cooper's "The Leatherstocking Tales" in this sense.

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<sup>19</sup> "The effacement of the U.S. First Nations (a term that will take much longer to take root in the discursive politics of America than it has in Canada) is part of the same politics that wishes to efface other invader-settler colonies from the domain of the postcolonial, and this is because these settler colonies might remind the U.S. of the repressed memory of its own historical circumstance and of its painful and tricky need to negotiate its own idealized constructions of origin" (Lawson 1995, p. 23).

Both in Canada and Australia the cultural anxiety about one's relation to the land is heightened by the presence of precolonial populations. While the Noble Savage conception that informed earlier generations' views of aboriginal populations has largely disappeared, the anxiety it induced has not. Indeed, it has been much exacerbated both by ecological concerns and by recent land claims and constitutional demands by the First Peoples in Canada and the Koori in Australia. As Lawson asserts (1995, 28-9), the Second World narrative has a double teleology: the suppression or effacement of the Indigene, and the indigenization of the settler. The term Second World has an strategic function as it draws attention to the bifocality, bivocality, and doubleness and duplicity of the 'in between' condition of subjects in the settler colonies. Lawson sees it as caught between two First Worlds, two origins of authority and authenticity, the imperium and the First Nations. And this is a space of negotiation, "toward both the absent(ee) cultural authority of the imperium and the effaced, recessive cultural authority of the Indigene" (Lawson 1995, 29).

A considerable group of Canadian artists is formed by writers who have not been born in this country. There is an individual tradition that does not respond to the collective sequence that we see in other countries. Many authors such as Ondaatje, Ricci, Mistry, Skvorecky or Bissoondath neither belong to the anglophone nor the francophone cultures, they do not reflect any cultural or artistic homogeneity. What is persistent is a "respected" multiculturalism without any kind of assimilation, in which being Canadian means to be "a global immigrant dreaming the future, not conqueror but supplicant, outcast, exile, artist; creator of both past and point of arrival" (van Herk 1984, 79).<sup>20</sup> Language then becomes a major and powerful tool in these writers'

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<sup>20</sup> As Said comments, many postcolonial writers "bear their past within them -as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire. One sees these aspects in Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, Pablo Neruda, and Brian Friel" (1993, pp. 30-31).

works whose narrative and poetic structures are densely self-reflexive and full of metaphors and tropes that define a new sense of place:

The nineteenth-century poet wanted to define an identity, whereas the contemporary poet often and resolutely resists the proposition that there is such a thing as identity; the older poet wrote out of a belief in the truthfulness of history, while the poet of today sets out to unwrite or rewrite history by deliberately suspending its purported objectivity and inclusiveness; place, the locus of equally strong anxiety and astonishment in the previous century, is rendered now as a palimpsest of geographical and textual layers that the poet has to sift through .... the twentieth-century poet tends to write against tradition's grain. (Kamboureli 1991, 4)

The figure of the immigrant has thus a privileged position in Canadian literature. Robert Kroetsch analyses this experience alluding, in a thematic level, to the ideas of success and failure in ethnic writing. Failure, then, “harbours darker and more complex and possibly more exciting possibilities .... That word can be or is made, at times, to lose its traditional meaning and come to signify success” (Kroetsch 1985, 67). Other tensions in immigrant writing could group concepts of superiority and inferiority, integration and resistance, etc., but more important is the tension between the signifier and the signified, for “(t)he gap between signifier and signified has become the subject itself, a question mark over what it is we mean by the act of writing” (Kroetsch 1985, 69). As a result of this tension, the only resource the writer possesses is the repetition of already known narratives: “In ethnic writing there is often an attempt at healing by rewriting of myths. The myth most often retold, at least on the surface of ethnic writing, is the garden story .... in search of a new version of Eden” (Kroetsch 1985, 69). Nonetheless, this rewriting of the old myth not always relates to the acquired experience, so silence appears as both the only resource and as a weapon, as “part of the experience of migrating peoples, and part of the narrative of that experience. And that erasure becomes palimpsest, it leaves its trace” (Kroetsch 1985, 71). Similarly, Dennis Lee finds in silence the ideal device for the writer who craves to escape from the colonial inheritance. In his article “Cadence, Country, Silence,” he asserts:

To speak unreflectingly in a colony, then, is to use words that speak only alien space. To reflect is to fall silent, discovering that your authentic space does not have words. And to reflect further is to recognize that you and your people do not in fact have a privileged authentic space just waiting for words; you are, among other things, the people who have made an alien inauthenticity their own. You are left chafing at the inarticulacy of a native space which may not exist. So you shut up. But perhaps ... our job was not to fake a space of our own and write it up, but rather to find words for our space-lessness .... Instead of pushing against the grain of an external, uncharged language, perhaps we should finally come to writing with that grain. (1974, 163)

Lee tries to offer a solution to this type of writing though this silence assumes a passive position on the part of the writer. Certainly, this silence “as a way of breaking free from the dominance of the centre is an acknowledgement of isolation, of being completely surrounded by -and therefore cut off by- the other” (Bennett 1987, 19). One of the strategies is the demarcation of the individual in a relevant position that confronts the technological and industrial society, and thus create a new individual discourse, as Margaret Atwood does in *Surfacing*. The outstanding acceptance of realism in Canadian narrative, however, has darkened these strategies of reconstructing a new discourse, which Bennett calls “destruction of marginality,” and divides in three different phases in the 1960s and 1970s: “‘mythic structuralism,’ ‘destructive unnamings,’ and ‘determinist aesthetics’” (1987, 21). The latter remains the most successful for it removes marginalization in discourse, whereas the previous ones remain active under binary processes of centre and margin. This somewhat pessimist vision makes Bennett qualify Canadian narratives as fake realism: “When we look to ourselves in terms of America, we appear to name ourselves; when we look at ourselves internally, we unname ourselves as quickly as possible. This double perspective is the characteristic Canadian viewpoint” (1987, 24). So the solution would not lie in defining our boundaries but rather in influencing the outer world with an autochthonous aesthetics.

It seems that in Canada discursive strategies have been analysed with too much generosity and some superficiality; so we find the so-called “magic realism” -a rather

popular term than a discursive strategy which is questioned and continually discussed by Spanish intellectuals- in places where we rather would interpret an “hyperrealism” for the detailed descriptions of certain narratives. However, works such as Jack Hodgins’s *The Invention of the World* (1977), Robert Kroetsch’s *What the Crow Said* (1974), or Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* (1982), have caused great expectation for their formal innovations and openly admitted the influence of García Márquez. These works pertain a polyphony and an absence of the authorial voice as the centres of the narrative, showing “the clash between the reader’s rational way of looking at reality and the mythic world views of the indigenous people or the exuberant, popular and exaggerated vision of local rural communities” (Delbaere 1992, 100).

These writers have opened new perceptual perspectives, new transcultural links and thus have tried to create a new Canadian mythology. Magic realism never had an excessive influence in English literature, though as its nature develops from the margin in its merging of reality and fantasy, it has become pertinent in some Canadian texts for its dialectical vision of reality as an escape of the imposed otherness that we see in other traditional Canadian texts. In this postcolonial context, then “the magic realist narrative recapitulates a dialectical struggle within the culture’s language, a dialectic between ‘codes of recognition’ inherent within the inherited language and those imagined codes -perhaps utopian or future-oriented- that characterize a culture’s ‘original relations’ with the world” (Slemon 1993, 12).

The Canadian texts mentioned above, then, reflect a postcolonial discourse in their process of recuperating new voices to reconstruct a new reality, where the text “is a localized region that is metonymic of the post-colonial culture as a whole. And in each text, history is foreshortened so that the forces operating in the real social relations of the culture are brought metaphorically into play” (Slemon 1993, 20). These postcolonial texts demand an active reader whose imagination uncover the “codes of recognition” the writer proposes, and which create a literary response in the mode of complicity:

The existence of these shared themes and recurrent structural and formal patterns is no accident. They speak for the shared psychic and historical conditions across the differences distinguishing one post-colonial society from another. For instance, the theme of exile is in some sense present in all such writing since it is one manifestation of the ubiquitous concern with place and displacement in these societies, as well as with the complex material circumstances implicit in the transportation of language from its place of origin and its imposed and imposing relationship on and with the new environment. (Ashcroft, et al. 1989, 29)

As we have seen above, in a settler colony like Canada there are certain characteristics which can lead us to confusion, since “(w)hen Canadian culture is called post-colonial today the reference is very rarely to the native culture, which might be the more accurate historical use of the term. The culture referred to most frequently is the English-language one of the descendants of the whole colonial settlers” (Hutcheon 1989, 156).<sup>21</sup> Certainly, both postmodernist and postcolonial movements “have made assimilationist and homogenizing moves” (Mukherjee 1990, 3). Even though both movements share similar strategies like allegory and the escape from realism, the theoretical basis of postcolonialism is rooted in a different political motivation, in which “the European ‘master narrative’ of history will always seek to contain and confine post-colonial self-interpretation” (Tiffin 1988, 173).

Hence, postcolonial narratives aim to liberate themselves from the imposed otherness that history has laid upon them and thus regain the real essence of the self. It is not a question of destroying authority but of restoring a creative process that has been erased by history and contemporaneity, “(b)y refusing, realigning, deconstructing the ‘master narrative’ of western history, by interrogating its tropes as well as its

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<sup>21</sup> Postcolonial might be an excellent term to use to describe Canadian literature, but it will not do to describe Native literature. The Native writer Thomas King (*Medicine River*) prefers terms such as tribal, interfusional, polemical, and associational to describe the diversity of Native writing and its particular literary landscape: “Tribal refers to that literature which exists primarily within a tribe or a community ... that is presented and retained in a Native language .... Polemical ... concerns itself with the clash of Native and non-Native cultures or with the championship of Native values over non-Native values. Like Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree* or Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* .... Associational .... describes a Native community .... creating a fiction that de-values heroes and

content, post-colonial writers have been and are recapturing notions of self from 'other' and investigating that destructive binarism itself" (Tiffin 1988, 173).

Cultural differences certainly demand vigilance against totalizing what defines texts as signs of postcolonial or resistance literature. But the sites of the novels in question do share a common postmodernist ground in terms of how they are constructed to dramatize cultural imperialism, postcolonial relations of power, and imaginative strategies of resistance. For instance, Tamil and Sinhalese story-telling apparently informs *Running* but Ondaatje's knowledge and practice of postmodernist strategies heightens the novel's cultural work as a postcolonial expatriate's text (see Leahy 1992, 67). In Slemon's terms, then, *Running* is a Second-World text or an ambivalent example of literary resistance which would negotiate the difficult terrain between postcolonial and postmodern strategies of resistance. The title suggests an inherited familial trait as well as something frightening and elusive. The author's quest as an expatriate is "to touch (his family) into words" (22), in order to grapple with its postcolonial familiarity and strangeness. Like other references by Ondaatje to his own seduction by and invasion of Sri Lanka, there is an acceptance of the limitations of his own ability to logocentrically know and transmit Sri Lanka's history. Through different intertextual quotations, Ondaatje turns familiar chatter and gossip into fantastic, and seductive, reminders of its civilizing function and cultural value conjoining fact and myth.

In sum, three paradigms have been generated to describe the relationship between dominant and subordinate cultures in neocolonial history (see Moore-Gilber 1997, 38-9). First the assimilationist model proposed by Commonwealth Literary Studies; then the counter-discursive model of postcoloniality became dominant; but two different paradigms of hybridity are now perhaps predominant. The first, articulated most clearly in Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, is conceived in terms of a

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villains in favour of the members of a community, a fiction which eschews judgements and conclusions" (King 1997, pp. 244-46)

more or less unitary contemporary world cultural system based on a common imperial history. The problem is that Said's vision is hard to square with the current neo-colonial system of global exploitation which has been sanitized under the rubric of "new world order." It also assumes that the formerly colonized will be willing to accept as part of their common heritage the same cultural ensemble which was so deeply complicit in the histories of their material oppression by the west. By contrast, Homi Bhabha offers a different model of hybridity in which the formerly subordinate cultures are not sublated into a common culture which then ignores legitimate demands for the recognition of difference based on the huge variety of experiences of colonialism. On the one hand there is not homogenization but negotiation, but, on the other, Bhabha assumes that there are such things as non-hybrid cultures. Bhabha thus fails to take account of the internal differences in the monoliths the West and the Third World cultural nationalism respectively.

It is an imperative that these theories of hybridity address the question of solidarity and alliance between, first, different kinds of postcolonial cultural histories and social formations; and, second, between these and those of other kinds of marginalized constituencies whose disadvantages do not stem in the first instance from the same histories and hierarchies of discrimination.

## **9. 2 Dispossessed of Identity: The Conflict Between Ideologic and Private Discourse**

We are lenient here in Canada; we allow a mosaic instead of a melting pot and congratulate ourselves for our tolerance, never dreaming the im/ of migration seeping into our bones, our pretense at settlement. We try to neuter out displacement, talk not of immigration but “ethnicity.” A dastardly word, convenient cultural ghetto to a people’s replaceable habits .... but does not touch any inner quality, does not define the migrant of Canada, his leaving and reasons for that .... “Ethnic” has been co-opted as a piece in the jigsaw of Canada’s identity. (van Herk 1984, 77)

This comment by Aritha van Herk summarizes the contemporary feeling of an immigrant after analysing the last hundred years of immigration in Canada. Three theories of assimilation have dominated the twentieth-century debate over immigrant adjustment. First, “anglo-conformity,” which demanded that immigrants renounce their ancestral culture and traditions in favour of the behaviour and values of the English Canadians. This view changed after World War II and was replaced in the popular mind by the “melting pot” theory of assimilation, and envisages a merging or acculturation of settled communities with new immigrant groups and a blending of their cultures into a new Canadian type.

Currently, a third theory of assimilation -cultural pluralism or “multiculturalism”- struggles for public acceptance and “postulates the preservation of some aspects of immigrant culture and communal life within the context of Canadian citizenship and political and economic integration into Canadian society” (Palmer 1990, 192).

Politicians and English-Canadian historians have adopted the term “mosaic” as opposed to the American “melting pot” approach. Perhaps immigrant groups did not “melt” as much in Canada as in the United States, but this is not because English-

Canadians were encouraging the survival of ethnic minorities in a distinct way.<sup>1</sup> In fact, “there has been a long history of racism and discrimination against ethnic minorities in English-speaking Canada, along with strong pressures for conformity to Anglo-Canadian ways” (Palmer 1990, 193).

In the second half of the nineteenth century there was no recognition of ethnic diversity aside from the British-French duality.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the period of this first large influx of non-British, non-French immigrants -up until World War II- “anglo-conformity” was the predominant ideology of assimilation in English-speaking Canada. Between 1867 and 1945, therefore, there was no explicit federal government policy with regard to the role of non-British and non-French ethnic groups in Canadian society. It was generally assumed, however, that immigrants would eventually be assimilated into either English-Canadian or French-Canadian society. The government policy was pragmatic and concerned primarily with economic growth and “nation building.” Yet there was a central contradiction in Anglo-Canadian attitudes toward ethnic minorities. Non Anglo-Saxon immigrants were needed to open the west and to do the heavy jobs of industry. This meant not only the introduction of culturally distinctive groups, but groups which would occupy the lower rungs of the socioeconomic system. The pre-1920 period was the period of the formation of, and the most acute expression of, what was later called the “vertical mosaic.” Anglo-Canadians were not used to the idea of cultural diversity, nor the degree of class stratification which developed during this period of rapid settlement and industrialization.

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<sup>1</sup> See Josef Skvorecky’s reflections on this matter in his “Some Problems of the Ethnic Writer in Canada,” where he affirms: “The theory goes that the Canadian ethnic groups should be encouraged to preserve their cultural identity, so as not to be cocktailed in a melting pot similar to the one of the United States. There, supposedly, the ethnic cultures disappear in the abyss of commercialism. Whoever brought forth such a theory, by the way, did not know much about ethnic cultures in the United States” (1987, 85).

<sup>2</sup> Immigration policy gave preference to farmers, and most non-British immigrants came to farm in western Canada. However, some immigrants ended up working in mines, laying railway track, or

One of the major factors preventing assimilation was discrimination by the Anglo-Canadian majority. What developed throughout English-speaking Canada during this period therefore was a vicious circle of discrimination. Patterns of discrimination paralleled preferences of immigrant sources, “with northern and western Europeans encountering relatively little discrimination, and non-whites encountering an all-pervasive pattern of discrimination which extended to almost all aspects of their lives” (Palmer 1990, 198-99). This “vertical mosaic” had the British on top, and so on down to the Chinese and blacks who occupied the most menial jobs. Non-British and non-French groups not only had very little economic power; they also would not even significantly occupy the middle echelons of politics, education, or the civil service until after World War II. The very word “ethnic” carried, for many people, such an aura of opprobrium that even recently there have been attempts to expurgate the use of the word. Ethnic food and folklore were regarded by most Anglo-Canadians as not only “foreign,” but “backward” and lower class (see Palmer 1990, 199).

Thus, the 1920s saw the emergence of the second ideology of assimilation, the “melting pot,” and several powerful sectors of Canadian society believed that only a limited immigration could be expected from the “preferred” countries and that probably only central and eastern Europeans would do the hard work of clearing marginal land. With improving economic conditions in the mid-twenties, the Federal government responded to this pressure and changed its policy with respect to immigrants from central and eastern Europe. The Liberal government of Mackenzie King authorized the railways to encourage potential immigrants of the “non-preferred” countries to emigrate to Canada and to settle as “agriculturalists, agricultural workers, and domestic servants” (Palmer 1990, 200).<sup>3</sup>

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drifting into the urban working class. During this first main wave of immigration between 1886 and 1914, three million immigrants came to Canada (see Palmer 1990, 193).

<sup>3</sup> “Through this agreement, the railways brought to Canada 165,000 central and eastern Europeans and 20,000 Mennonites. They represented a variety of ethnic groups and a diversity of reasons for emigrating. Most of the Ukrainian immigrants were political refugees. Poles, Slovaks, and Hungarians

During the late 1920s, a new view of assimilation, “the melting pot,” developed greater prominence. This view of assimilation, which arose partly as a means of defending immigrants against nativist attacks envisioned a biological merging of Anglo-Canadians with immigrants and “a blending of their cultures into a new Canadian type” (Palmer 1990, 201-202). Although the symbol of the “melting pot” was not used explicitly when discussing assimilation, their ideas reflect the emergence of a new society which would contain “contributions” from the various immigrant groups. Advocates of the “melting pot,” unlike the promoters of “anglo-conformity,” saw assimilation as a relatively slow process, and saw some cultural advantages in the mixing that would occur. The growth during the 1920s of an autonomous Canadian nationalism helped the spread of “melting pot” ideas. Some English-Canadian opinion leaders began to discuss the need for conformity to an exclusively Canadian norm rather than “British” norm as “non-British immigrants could not be expected to feel loyalty to the British empire” (Palmer 1990, 202-203).<sup>4</sup>

Paradoxically, although the depression of the 1930s witnessed the high point of discrimination against non-Anglo-Saxons, it was also during the 1930s that the first major advocates of cultural pluralism in English-speaking Canada began to be heard. During the arrival of the third wave of immigration in the late 1940s and 1950s, many pre-war prejudices lingered, and ethnic minorities encountered considerable pressures for conformity. The post-war decline of racism and the growing influence of theories about cultural relativism opened the way for the emergence of pluralist ideas. Hence,

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were escaping poor economic conditions. German-Russians and Mennonites were fleeing Civil war, economic disaster, and the spectre of cultural annihilation in Russia. Often they chose Canada since they could no longer get into the United States because of its quota system and the Canadian route was the only way they could get to North America. With this new wave of immigration, the proportion of the Canadian population that was not of British, French, or native origin rose to more than 18 percent by 1931” (Palmer 1990, 200).

<sup>4</sup> The relationship in the public mind between ethnicity, lower social class origins, and political “unsoundness” explains why during the late 1920s so many second generation non-Anglo-Saxons who were anxious to improve their lot economically made deliberate attempts to hide their ethnic background, such as changing their names. Ethnic ties were clearly disadvantageous for those non-Anglo-Saxons seeking economic security or social acceptance (see Palmer 1990, 205)

the arrival of many intellectuals among the post-war political refugees from eastern Europe and the growth in the number of upwardly mobile second- and third-generation non-Anglo-Canadians increased the political pressures at “both federal and provincial levels for greater recognition of Canada’s ethnic diversity” (Palmer 1990, 207).

The demands for greater government recognition of “other ethnic groups” increased during the 1960s in response to the French-Canadian assertion of equal rights and the government’s measures to assess and ensure the status of the French language and culture. The more specific contours of ethnicity in Canada, of course, can be adumbrated with reference to the context and the consequences of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. The commission, according to “Appendix I: Terms of Reference” in its preliminary report was

to inquire into and report upon the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by the other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution. (Royal Commission 151)

No doubt that many non-British, non-French groups opposed the view that Canada was bicultural. Subsequent to the commission’s final report in 1969, Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s announcement of a “Policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework” in the House of Commons on 8 October 1971 prepared the ground for the Canadian Multicultural Act, assented to in 1988.

By 1961, 26 per-cent of the Canadian population was of other than British or French ethnic origin. This feeling that biculturalism relegated all ethnic groups who were other than British or French to the status of second-class citizens helps explain the resistance some of these groups expressed to the politics and programs that were introduced to secure the status of French language in Canada. The place of the so-called “other” ethnic groups in a bicultural society became a vexing question for

federal politicians, who had originally hoped that steps to ensure French-Canadian rights would go a long way towards improving inter-ethnic relations in Canada. The partial resolution of this dilemma was the assertion in October 1971 by Prime Minister Trudeau that, in fact, Canada is a *multicultural* country and that steps would be taken by the Federal government to give public recognition to ethnic diversity through the introduction of a policy of multiculturalism.

The term has three different meanings: a social policy to guard the different ethnic traditions and their *complete* participation in Canadian society, a philosophy or ideology of cultural pluralism, and a society characterized by ethnic diversity. Canada's future as a multi-ethnic society, however, depends on much more than on a multicultural policy. The different ethnic groups are distant from each other and tend to develop in different ghettos; moreover, the social status moves vertically, so the result is an acculturation of the immigrant society, that is, an assimilation to the so-called non-ethnic world.

The fact is that we are all "ethnics" and that both the decentralization in all levels of culture and the "ethnic mosaic" as a symbol of the Canadian multicultural policy do not work. Although most political leaders in English-speaking Canada have accepted and proclaimed the desirability of Canada's ethnic diversity, the Canadian public has not given unanimous support to pluralism. The discussion about the role of immigration and ethnic groups in Canadian life is still an important, and unfinished, debate which has its roots in our concept of identity and nation. The knowledge of our identity comes from a knowledge of history, from self-examination and from an open and vigorous debate. It seems, though, that the Canadian government prefers regulations and the imposition of legal barriers which are perhaps necessary but which dismiss uncomfortable truths.

Hence, in 1971, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, with his government sliding into unpopularity (thanks to a policy of bilingualism that had been both badly explained and implemented), initiated a federal policy that would change the face of the nation

forever, the official policy of multiculturalism which is declared to be “the policy of the Government of Canada to recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage” (Canadian Multicultural Act).

Like an indictment, then, multiculturalism appeared at the moment as an opportunistic political policy, not so much an answer to necessary social accommodation as a response to pressing political concern. It responded, however, to the expectations of immigrants who arrived in the country after the Second World War and whose assimilation had not been completed. But it was also a way of refusing to recognize the bicultural nature of the country, reducing perhaps the Québécois specificity to an ethnic problem. Even if the Act seeks to seduce in that it recognizes the common origin of certain communities and promises to enhance their development, it never addresses the question of the nature of a multicultural society, what such a society is and what it means for the nation at large and the individuals who compose it. Moreover, the document is striking in its lack of any mention of unity or oneness of vision. Its provisions seems aimed instead “at encouraging division, at ensuring that the various ethnic groups whose interests it spouses discover no compelling reason to blur the distinctions among them” (Bissoondath 1994, 43).

No consequence of multiculturalism is as ironic as this simplification of culture. The public face of Canadian multiculturalism is flashy and attractive; it emerges with gaiety from the bland stereotype of traditional Canada as “ethnic” festivals around the country. At Toronto Caravan, for instance, various ethnic groups rent halls in churches or community centres to create pavillions to which access is gained through a purchased passport. Implicit in this cultural show is the peculiar notion of culture as commodity and kitsch, perhaps a devaluation of culture. As a result, then, multiculturalism encourages the devaluation of that which it claims to protect and promote. Culture becomes an object for display rather than the heart and the soul of

the individuals formed by it. A sense of one's racial and cultural background is essential to an individual sense of self. Confusion over one's ethnicity, the desperate search for a personal centre and a meaning to one's life, leads to despair in a country as diverse as Canada. Integration, which does not mean assimilation or acculturation, is the only way to get on with one's life, the only way to take full advantage of the new possibilities. That is a reality multiculturalism fails to recognize. Immigration is renewal, Neil Bissoondath tells us in his book *Selling Illusions*, "not the turning of ethnic communities into museums of exoticism" (1994, 111).

The term ethnicity is very limited and somewhat incorrect when applied to Canada since it only refers to any group that does not belong to the anglophone or francophone community. Moreover, it is "a sign of ambiguous significance, and to be ethnic poses a problem of socioeconomic dimensions that has by now attained global magnitude" (Blodgett 1982, 86). The fact is that, together with the term "political correctness," multiculturalism was "coined by the left as an internal criticism of moralizing dogmatism, the term has been seized by the right and used to disqualify all critical efforts" (Scott 1992, 13). Canada cannot avoid to install a double cultural identity in its immigrant members which has, as a result, a feeling of otherness that resists definition.

Scott analyses how in the 1960s and 1970s proponents of affirmative actions and identity politics took economic, political, and social structures for granted in their analyses; but in the 1980s and 1990s the ideological pendulum has swung back to individualism. Now individuals claim to speak for a whole group that historically is made ambiguous: "the project of history is not to reify identity but to understand its production as an ongoing process of differentiation ... subject to redefinition, resistance, and change" (Scott 1992, 19).

Study of ethnicity in Canada as a North American process is best understood when integrated into a spatial, in this case, an urban, frame. No great North American city can be understood without being studied as a city of immigrants, as a destination

of group and individual migration projects. The result is diglossia or bilingualism in two languages of uneven status in society. Typically the family language, or immigrant language, is the more comfortable medium but the one valued less in the city; and the result of this duplicity, in emotional and practical ways, is irony, for, in Linda Hutcheon's words, "it is the trope that incarnates doubleness, and it does so in ways that are particularly useful to 'the other' to address the dominant culture from within that culture's own set of values and modes of understanding, without being co-opted by it and without sacrificing the right to dissent, contradict, and resist" (1991, 49).

In this respect, it is very interesting to see the research work of several anthropologists of the University of Barcelona such as David Iglesias and Luis Vaca. In a paper given in Belfast in October 1998, Vaca examines the emotional and social conflicts of the second generation Portuguese community living in Montreal. He explains how a conflict of double loyalty appears among second generations which could generate two different sets of identities, the familiar way of life and the social way of life. Therefore,

in situations where two cultural models are present, a role model does not exist. The subject is forced to build a new ethnic identity .... During the process of adapting to the conditions and demands of the new society, some values and beliefs are highlighted, and often assume new meanings .... This process of change is given in form of a conflict. The experience of the second generation is an example of social change and of the re-construction of ethnicity. The growth and development of a life in a place where one is given more than one culture, allows such subject to create a new cultural map that allows him/her to operate between different options. To grow up as a Portuguese in Montreal is a process of constant change and re-evaluation of the social rules and beliefs. (1998, 1-9)

Toronto, which means "gathering place," is a polyethnic city where information arrives in a fractured way to the different ethnic neighbourhoods which have a different spatial definitions of the city itself. Robert F. Harney defines neighbourhood as "a combination of individual cognitive maps and psychic worlds for immigrants and their children provided their focus and anchor in the city" (1985, 14).

Many of Toronto's newcomers had been cultural or religious minorities in their land of origin. Each ethnoculture seemed to hold differing attitudes on the importance of group coherence. Ethnicity has thus been the continuing organizer of existence in the city for many people. The patterns of ethnic settlement reflect not just ethnicity but also the reality of the ethnic neighbourhoods as "little homelands," ambiances which were neither simply fossils of the old country nor fully of the new. Such little homelands "were the settings for evolving identities, for sub-economies and ethnocultures constantly in process" (Harney 1985, 21).

The concept of ethnicity then could be defined as the almost unreachable search for a voice or style which reflects the various elements that could create an identity. This concept, however, parts from a dynamic process of endless influences and attitudes in a crossroads. Michael Fischer argues, rightly, that ethnicity is never a given: its is "a process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions" (1986, 201). Yet this process is often skewed: like so many apparently reciprocal operations of cultural interchange, ethnicity is based on asymmetrical relations of power:

Whether ethnicity is adversarial or assimilative, whether it articulates diversity or divisiveness, whether it protects the status quo or promotes the need for social change: all of this depends on the influence, as well as the effectiveness, of those who represent it. For ethnicity is not a natural but a socially constructed category: its definition is shaped by the moment, placement, and power of those who champion its cause. (Huggan 1995, 116)

Ethnicity, construed this way, becomes a function of the exotic. The valorization of the ethnic other is motivated, above all, by fear. By exoticizing ethnicity, the dominant culture avoids confronting it; it seeks to alienate the ethnic other even as it claims to be attracted by it. Many immigrant writers are understandably opposed to exoticist mystifications for the otherness of ethnicity is the result of lived experience: it corresponds to the daily reality of those who inhabit the social margins. If one of the criteria for ethnic writing is its exploration of the reality of otherness, that exploration is not well served by a discourse that invents its others. In

Eli Mandel's definition, ethnic writing is "a literature existing at an interface of two cultures, a form concerned to define itself, its voice, in the dialectic of self and other and the duplicities of self-creation, transformation, and identities" (Mandel 1977, 99).<sup>5</sup>

Neither in delineating the fundamental similarities and differences between the dynamics of "national" literature in Canada on the one hand, or those of Aboriginal literature on the other, can one see the latter as representative of or synonymous with minority literatures in Canada. Like Native literature, the literature produced in Canada by immigrants and their children whose backgrounds were neither British nor French has until very recently been marginalized, that is, not viewed as being Canadian literature in the same sense as the work produced by Canada's "two founding nations." It too is, in a very real sense, post-colonial literature; however, the position from which it has been written is not only different from that of the "national mainstream writers," but also from that of Aboriginal writers (see Palmer Seiler 1996, 154).

Not surprisingly a large part of the immigrant story in Canadian literature is the fictional exploration of journeying, of displacement and of finding a place in Canadian society through comparing the new country with the old. Such a comparison fuels much of the work of early first-generation immigrant writers such as the German immigrant Frederick Philip Grove, the Caribbean-born Austin Clarke, South Asian immigrant Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parmeswaran, M.G. Vassanji or Michael Ondaatje. In these and many other literary explorations of immigrant experience "the old/new binary can be seen as a decolonizing strategy, since it enables the text to stand somewhat outside each cultural space and from this marginal position to critique both" (Palmer Seiler 1996, 158).

The increasing diversity of Canadian immigration throughout the twentieth century has transformed not only the country's demography, but also its culture which is increasingly being recognized as pluralistic and polyphonic. This development

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<sup>5</sup> See "Ethnic Voice in Canadian Writing," *Another Time* (1977, pp. 91-102).

coincides with an evolving postcolonial struggle against a constrictive, hierarchical construction of ethnicity including the notion of a unitary Canadian literature. This similarity to and difference from Aboriginal writing lies precisely in the distinction between Native and ethnic positions in Canadian society and culture: “the object of ethnic struggle has been inclusion; that of the Aboriginal struggle a much more radical re-thinking of North American history and its underlying values and assumptions” (Palmer Seiler 1996, 159). Nevertheless, writers like M.G. Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath or Michael Ondaatje might be seen to have as much in common with the work of Tomson Highway, Maria Campbell or Thomas King. Exploring such connections among the texts emerging from the various postcolonial spaces that Canada’s particular evolution has created “would seem an important part of a reading strategy appropriate for Canada’s literatures, one that could enhance the dialogic power of these texts” (Palmer Seiler 1996, 160).

A postcolonial, multicultural aesthetic can allow an appreciation of both as discourses that, in complex interaction, express Canadian experience on the margins of several empires -an experience that continues to be shaped not just by difference, but by various kinds of difference, as well as by complex hybridity that is never static.

In *Selling Illusions*, Bissoondath laments that “because we have failed to establish the limits of diversity, because we have so blithely accepted the mentality of division, we find ourselves lost in the confusion of values” (1994, 143). The question now is how far we, or any society, can go in accommodating diversity without designing a psychic apartheid where we see no limits, where we retreat in barricades of self-imposed ghettos. Multiculturalism, then, fosters tolerance while ignoring the more integrating concept of acceptance which has led Canadians into a divisiveness that encourages multiple solitudes.

The act of migration involves reestablishment, a creation of a new experience. One is no longer simply who one was in the first part of one’s life. To pretend that one has not evolved, as official multiculturalism so often seems to demand of us, is “to

stultify the personality, creating stereotype, stripping the individual of uniqueness” (Bissoondath 1994, 211). In this sense, ethnicity confronts and opposes the communal sense that multiculturalism encourages, as it consists of the way the individual values himself and views the world around one’s racial, cultural and historical backgrounds. Heritage thus belongs first and foremost to the individual.

The Canadian mosaic and American melting pot can thus be illusory as they can be an exercise to falsify the self, living in the past of our parents, on the one hand, or assimilating to the American model, on the other. Human personality develops by circumstance and experience. Canadian policy should then blend the cultural diversities into a new vision of Canadianness, “pursuing a Canada where inherent differences and inherent similarities meld easily and where no one is alienated with hyphenation. A nation of cultural hybrids, where every individual is unique, every individual distinct. And every individual is Canadian, undiluted and undivided” (Bissoondath 1994, 224).

In his *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, political philosopher Charles Taylor asserts that the way out of the country’s current political malaise is “to build a country for everyone ... to allow for a second level or ‘deep’ diversity, in which a plurality of ways of belonging would also be acknowledged and accepted” (1993, 183). In Canada, imported paradigms of citizenship that demand uniformity do not fit Canada’s experience; Canada and the world need “other models to be legitimated in order to allow for more humane and less constraining modes of political cohabitation models that are exploring the space of deep diversity” (Taylor 1993, 183).<sup>6</sup> A careful look at Canada’s literary history suggests that the critical aesthetic appropriate to its political, social and cultural space is one that is analogous to the strategy of federalism embodied in Taylor’s phrase,

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Malaise of Modernity* (1991), Taylor develops his vision on modern civilization and the individual citizen who is left alone in the face of the vast bureaucratic state and feels powerless: “Perhaps something like this alienation from the public sphere and consequent loss of political control is happening in our highly centralized and bureaucratic political world .... the loss of political

“exploring deep diversity.” While “neither uniform nor tidy, such a strategy would likely enrich and enlarge our collective imaginings” (Palmer Seiler 1996, 163).

Canada’s problem with identity is made more acute by its close contact with its giant neighbour to the south as Americans set a very definite and obtrusive standard of what it is to be a country. The search for identity seems to be at odds in Canada with the search for a mythical national unity as Canada’s differences are not just ones of regional separation and economic interest, but are often based on history, background, and tradition. Its constituent groups or regions have a strong sense of identity but the real concern about Canadian identity is also a concern for unity, a questioning of what it is that really holds them together. For Taylor, “British Canadians had no identity problem. But that was at the expense of the non-British Canadians who had to suffer the King, the Empire, and all the rest. British North America is passing; but its successor, the more polyglot ‘English’ Canada, has inherited its intolerance towards the rights of the French language” (1993, 26).

The mere acceptance of difference, however, is not enough to provide the real basis of unity in this country, that is, it will not create a strong sense of common fate and common belonging, an identity. As Taylor asserts

we can only be brought together by common purposes; our unity must be a projective one, based on a significant common future rather than a shared past .... In fact, three important common goals arise from our situation. The first is the building of a bicultural society, not just in the sense of a society in which the rights of both languages are respected, but in the sense of a society in which both groups can learn from each other and be enriched by living side by side. This country is one of the few that can show the world how to make diversity a source of richness, from the diversity between francophone and anglophone to the lesser one between Canadians of different backgrounds and cultures of origin. Canada is a natural locus for the experiment in the dialogue society. (Taylor 1993, 27)

A second goal would be Canada’s place in the world and for that it should change its priorities and spend less on defence and more on aid and, above all, sink no further

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liberty would mean that even the choices left would no longer be made by ourselves as citizens, but by irresponsible tutelary power” (1991, 10).

into satellite status beside the United States. But the third and main goal is the creation of a more egalitarian society through a program of regional and social development. What Taylor calls the politics of polarization should then be an essential condition of a more meaningful unity and survival.

But Canada has a weak sense of common purpose. If French Canadians must learn to understand the English anxiety about unity, English Canadians must learn that the identification with “the French-Canadian nation” is not at all the antechamber of separatism. To many French Canadians, separatism means simply that the anglophone goes, and with him the jobs he gives. The sense of dependence is one of the prime targets of separatist intellectuals, who berate this attitude as a vestige of colonialism. In this sense, “separatism means an affirmation of collective confidence” (Taylor 1993, 33). The continuance of Canada may therefore depend on our giving a more meaningful content to the positive sense of being part of a bigger country, which most Quebeckers still feel.

Different groups in Canada translate their search for recognition into a concept of equal justice, which then seek to set in concrete, regardless of the consequences for others. A wide coalition, including those who pressed for a policy of multiculturalism, some women’s groups, and others, saw the answer to their aspirations in a Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), conceived as guaranteeing equality between individuals. This may be a good solution for certain categories of citizens who seek recognition as such; but for minorities who define themselves as historic societies and want this acknowledged, it cannot serve. If the principle of the equality of individuals is taken as ruling out such a recognition of distinct societies, then in effect the answer to the aspirations of some groups is being defined so as to exclude others -in this case Québécois and aboriginals. In a similar way, the sense of regional alienation has been

translated into a concept of justice that entails equality between provinces. This is then taken as incompatible with a recognition of a distinct society (see Taylor 1993, 194).<sup>7</sup>

A democratic society needs a sense of common citizenship, that is, a common understanding of what it is to be a member of this society, which must include the equality and autonomy of all citizens. That is why the modern democratic state generated something like a national identity -in, for instance, the United States and France- before the process began to be reversed and (linguistic) national identities began to demand statehood. That is why “Canadians have felt the need to seek a national identity as a condition for the survival and flourishing of Canadian political society” (Taylor 1993, 197-98).

According to Taylor, if Canada survives its current crisis it would unquestionably be dual in one important respect. There would be two major societies, each defined by its own dominant language. But each of these societies within itself would be more and more diverse: “First, each would be more and more ethnically varied and, in different ways, multicultural; second, each would have significant minorities of the other official language; third, each would contain aboriginal communities with substantial but varying degrees of self-government. Neither would be a tidy, uniform republic” (Taylor 1993, 200).

The cultural and the economic structures and attitudes have then to be open to permit entry without assimilation or segregation. Firstly, pluralism coupled with equal opportunities implies abolishment of a vertical mosaic that keeps certain groups in the lower echelons of society. It also implies sanctions on derision of “foreign cultures.”

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<sup>7</sup> “One of the reasons why it really obfuscates things to use the term “distinct society” for both the aboriginal and the Quebec cases is that the model of society is very different. Quebec already is -and is further developing as- an immigrant society in which people of diverse origins and traditions converge on a French-speaking culture that will develop out of it without being identical to the historical culture of French Canada. By contrast, aboriginal societies will mainly be made up of descendants of their present members; they will not want to assimilate large numbers of outsiders, nor will they be able to. This increases the range of formulae of belonging which Canada will have to incorporate within itself if we take the path of deep diversity; it is another case where we have to avoid imposing the formula of one group on others” (Taylor 1993, 201).

Canada's policy of multiculturalism in its first goal has attempted to achieve cultural recognition for the newcomers but has only begun to move to ensure economic equality. Secondly, the governmental policy to grant respect to the cultures of newcomers has to become a state of mind -not merely a philosophy- for the resident population whether charter group or recent immigrants of a different ethnicity. Thirdly, given the changes in cultural expression and affiliation, the citizens do have to be offered a chance to declare themselves "Canadian" in census and other questionnaires. The policy concerning origin statistics has to be amended to yield a more adequate rendering of the cultural changes. Under the threat of hostility in the receiving society or because of deep resentments towards their society of origin, immigrants may want to opt for a conscious change of culture.

All the bigotries perpetrated throughout history can be attributed in some measure to an obsession with a perverted and false sense of identity. It takes such forms as racism, nationalism, religion -in fact, chauvinism in its many aspects. The need for some sense of identity on a social and individual level cannot be overestimated and it is central to all art. This need is most apparent perhaps for us in the modern novel (see Adamson 1980, 85-6). Society provides outward signs of collective identity which art reinforces or modifies or challenges. There is an obviously crucial connection between identity and individuality and one of the deeper effects of this metaphoric illumination is the experience of self-discovery. This experience pinpoints our humanity in that it establishes a tension between individuality and the individual's feeling of oneness within a social body. Identity, then, is to be found only through interaction with a contrary; and a contrary here is the outer world that is potentially within us as vision. Regionalism is, of course, a nexus of place, time and culture and, therefore, geographical implications cannot be isolated from historical and cultural realities. A sense of identity is, largely, what is derived from the confluence of these things that add up to regionalism: "It is the feeling of one's place in that confluence" (Adamson 1980, 86). It seems that a central theme in our literature today

is one that expresses a *lack* of integration, which reveals an *inability* to achieve whole identity. Our very insistence on the quest for identity is itself an indication of our unease, of our need for assurance. This is perhaps not only a Canadian phenomenon, but characteristic of modern Western man generally.

Until recently, the ethnic has been a shadowy presence within Canadian literature, but his or her voice has been totally silent. Barbara Godard proposes another model for the so-called “inappropriate/d other” and its place in the binary pairing anglophone/francophone which only conceals the hegemonic position of English. She envisions a network that “conceptualizes the multilingual situation of Canadian literatures, making distinctions according to culture, history and ideology, though dividing by language” (Godard 1990, 153). It would be important, then, to see Canadian and Québec literatures as minority literatures within major languages, that is, a writing of authorized subversion, a site of counterdiscourse. The writing of linguistic minorities exposes a contradiction in which Canadian and Québec literatures are situated, namely the non-literariness of their literature. Language is the mark of nationality in literature. If Canadian and Québec writers find themselves in a double bind with respect to the writing of France and England or the United States, even greater is the disjunction of writing by someone whose language is other than French or English which, in addition, “inscribes a difference with respect to mainstream Quebec and English-Canadian writing” (Godard 1990, 154-55).

Ethnic writers, therefore, experience the conflict of heteroglossia in a specific way as a deterrent to participation in a national tradition. This translation effect or defamiliarization “may involve a transfer from one language to another: it also involves the transfer of a cultural reality into a new context as an operation in which literary traditions are variously challenged or supported in the encounter of differing modes of textualization” (Godard 1990, 157). Canada is a bilingual country with large ethnic groups that have vibrant literatures in their native tongues, a situation which may be described as polyglossia, though is experienced as diglossia by the individual.

Within this context, minority writers are confronted with a choice of languages in which to write, a choice that has ideological as well as aesthetic implications: “They may buy into the language of power (English) or they may opt to interrupt and disrupt it by emphasizing the diglossia of their subordinate situation, that is, by writing bilingually or in structures of thought and language from their native tongue transposed into English” (Godard 1990, 158). This exemplifies the one-within-the-other, the double-voiced characteristic of dialogic or polyphonic writing as described by Bakhtin. For Godard “(t)he key to the concept of minority literature is a shift from the referential use of language, no territory being possible, to an intensive one which offers a possibility of reterritorialization, a physical one through the senses, to compensate for the loss of making sense” (1990, 159).

Ethnicity gained additional critical mass and weight in criticism only in conjunction with, and partially as a consequence of, other developments. We have seen that a plausible line of explanation for the attention to ethnicity and the contribution made by the other ethnic groups in Canada grew, by implication, out of the official responses to the demands created by Canadian bilingualism and biculturalism. There are, furthermore, several levels of interaction with the different situations and the debates in the United States that have, to some extent, facilitated emphasis on ethnicity in Canada. The frequently mentioned United States melting pot has often helped to articulate an opposing Canadian identity founded on the rejection of such an homogenizing principle; yet “the more recent developments to have influenced Canadian discussions are, on the contrary, due to the fact that emphasis on unconditional assimilation in the United States has given way to a widespread acceptance and endorsement of neoethnic attitudes modelled on the more radical positions that developed out of the civil rights movement in terms of race and subsequently of gender” (Siemerling 1995, 10).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> While Canadian multiculturalism as initiated in the 1960s and 1970s can be seen as an extended response to the historical and demographic dimensions of bilingualism, current debates about

The growing corpus of minority writing, however, has not yet had a corresponding impact on the critical conceptualization of Canadian and Québec literatures. Some changes, though, are apparent in English Canada; writers such as Skvorecky and Ricci have won Governor General's Awards, and journals like *Canadian Literature* have accommodated to a certain degree of cultural diversity. This growing diversity of Canadian and Québec literatures, however, makes traditional approaches -such as Frye's or Atwood's criticism- less and less adequate in providing a general literary critical framework.

Accordingly, Enoch Padolsky calls for a pluralistic and cross-cultural approach (1997, 25). From this pluralistic approach, therefore, the first task is to replace the current terminology - "mainstream" and "ethnic" writers/writing- by the terms "ethnic majority" and "ethnic minority." This distinction tends to represent a more objective cross-cultural frame of reference which the binary "mainstream-ethnic" lacks:

First, majority writers are no longer treated as if ethnic issues were not applicable to them, and new emphasis is put on the fact that, socially, they are in majority position. Second, minority writers are no longer marginalized into categorical "ghettos," but are fully comparable on the basis of ethnicity and status to majority writers. (Padolsky 1997, 26)

Ethnicity, however, is a minefield of contradictions.<sup>9</sup> A pluralistic approach may well provide a useful reinterpretation or a different perspective on many of the critical analyses that have been made. First we could relate questions of intra-group relations and Old World connections, and focus on inter-group relations from the

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multiculturalism in the United States are often modelled on arguments about race. Ethnicity has been extensively staged in the United States debates concerning the literary canon. Pursued in an increasingly explosive setting involving, in particular, educational issues are producing a considerable backlash in the infamous debate over "political correctness," these debates were originally fuelled, to a large extent, by the often converging concerns of African-American and feminist theorists in the areas of institutional recognition of works and writers (see Siemerling 1995, 11).

<sup>9</sup> There is also the definitional dispute between a particularist ('us-them') and a universalist ('we are all ethnic'). Any pluralistic view of ethnicity has to imply a universalist definition.

perspective of majority status.<sup>10</sup> The identity crisis of British-Canadian writers in the 1960s can also be related to an ethnic identity crisis among British-Canadians as they became more aware of themselves as “merely” another ethnic group in Canada - instances are the flag debate, resistance to the metric system, the appearance of British pubs and clubs, the advent of groups to “defend” the English language in Canada, changing attitudes towards French Canada, etc.

A pluralistic perspective brings minority writing out of an “ethnic” periphery and into a common Canadian centre so it can be studied not just for its “ethnic characteristics per se,” but also for how it manifests this ethnicity in minority Canadian situations. A diverse perspective is what counts as we have seen how an assimilative critical approach ignores the special value that a diverse perspective offers in the wide Canadian context. The issue would be what the differences (and similarities) are in different groups of writers, and what significance we can give to the difference between majority and minority perspectives on ideological and social issues. Ethnicity and social status are reflected in Canadian literature on a multiplicity of ways, though. Immigrant writers, aboriginal writers, third-generation minority writers, and so on, all see the world from different vantage points, have different attitudes toward dominant Canadian groups, and different histories within Canadian society. A group of factors, therefore, enter into discussion: regional, historical, or political aspects of the majority experience, immigrant or aboriginal experience, visible or invisible minority status, socio-economic status, cultural characteristics, acculturation attitudes, etc. So the pluralistic approach is a comparative and rich approach to be taken into account in the

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<sup>10</sup> Seen from this perspective, early British-Canadian literature reflects an ongoing process in the development of a new ethnic group and ethnic identity. Many of the literary histories or other “mainstream” overviews of this period -the transplantation of cultural traditions from Old to New World, the growth of Canadian nationalism with the Confederation poets- may be described as participating in this process of ethnogenesis. The works of early writers such as Susanna Moodie, Stephen Leacock, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Ralph Connor, and Charles G.D. Roberts, reflect a struggle to redefine individual and group ethnic identity through loyalty to a British heritage, adjustment of cultural perceptions to a new situation. These features marked the changing boundaries and ethnic characteristics of the developing British-Canadian ethnicity (see Padolsky 1997, 28-29).

study of Canadian literature. Today, research has to be multidisciplinary and complete in order to offer a more comprehensive view of how the diversity and complexity of Canadian society is reflected in its literature (see Padolsky 1997, 38).

The question of authenticity is one of several problematic areas at the intersection of both ethnicity and literature. Literary theory has to approach them when trying to understand how the term ethnicity can be meaningfully employed in literary discussion, and what kinds of problems and qualities it can elucidate in literary texts. At the current stage of research, such inquiries are more likely to produce a list of problems than a list of answers. While one area has been defined by thematic interests in cross-cultural encounter, the issue of authenticity has often also led to an emphasis on the relationship between author and text. Such an emphasis “invokes a host of critical problems related not only to the ‘relative autonomy’ of literary productions with respect to sociological categories but also to the specificity of texts” (Siemerling 1995, 17). Although a “grammar of ethnic writing” has yet to find its contours, approaches that deemphasize static patterns of difference and identity (defined in terms of pure opposition and negation) promise to continue to be productive fields of research. In many areas, such as the study of double consciousness, irony, dialogism, the construction of literary categories in the context of ethnicity, and in research that pays specific attention to language (see, for instance, Godard) and to the construction of discursive subjectivity, work on ethnicity can clearly play an innovative role for literary studies in general. Hence, we do not need a special treatment for “other literatures” in Canada, but a more adequate pluralistic approach to its heterogeneous culture.

## 10.1 In the Skin of the Other: the Dialogic Configuration of the Self

I don't feel much of 'England' in me. I *do* feel I have been allowed the migrant's double perspective. (Ondaatje 1990, 197)

In *Decolonising Fictions*, Helen Tiffin and Diana Brydon attempt to show how literature and literary criticism can play a major role in decolonizing imaginations and opening up a new model for international relations based on mutual respect for national and other differences. In Canada, writers of different origins such as of First Nations, of settler-invader, and of multicultural immigrant descent have approached the problem of cross-cultural encounter from very different experiences and perspectives (1993, 48-9).

This concession to the plurality of the postcolonial text is, however, occluded by *The Empire Writes Back* in its overriding tendency to unify postcolonial discourse. Thus, for instance, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, the literature of postcolonial countries, regardless of the different patterns of colonization as well as of the geographic and cultural specificities, has developed along three stages: identification, mimicry, and abrogation /appropriation. The particularities of each situation seem somehow secondary to an increasing concern about the relation between displacement and self. In formerly settler colonies, the already problematic relationship between place and self, and between self and language, acquires further complexity because the language, English, be this inherited or imposed, obstaculizes both the process of construction of a new reality and the articulation of difference from the imperial centre. It is in these circumstances that the multiple interactions and overlappings that occur between colonized and colonizer in all postcolonial societies can be best appreciated (see Darias 1996, 212).

*The Empire Writes Back* recognizes the complex situation of the settler colonies, but warns the reader against the unreflexive adoption of European theories to

account for such a situation and denounces the presence of homogenizing practices within:

The complication of time meeting space in literary history and historiography, with its attendant clash of the “pure” and the “hybrid,” is well illustrated by the contradictions that have arisen in the Canadian situation. In Canada, where the model of “mosaic” has been an important cultural determinant, Canadian literary theory has, in breaking away from European domination, generally retained a nationalist stance, arguing for the mosaic as characteristically Canadian in contrast to the “melting pot” of the USA. But the internal perception of a mosaic has not generated corresponding theories of literary hybridity to replace the nationalist approach. Canadian literature, perceived internally as a mosaic, remains generally monolithic in its assertion of Canadian difference from the canonical British or the more recently threatening neo-colonialism of American culture. (Ashcroft 1993, 36)

*The Empire Writes Back*, however, pays no attention to Canadian writers of origin other than British, native and immigrant literature are only mentioned *in passim*. Whether the critics reject the essential/inessential opposition, their approach to cross-culturalism still appears determined by a Fanonian manichean view of postcolonial literature, one unable to exit the empire/colony dichotomy because it fixes the colonial subject into a permanent opposition to a supposedly foreign cultural centre. European master codes have been transformed in such a way that “they have stopped being perceived as foreign by a large sector of Canadian population which either did come from Europe or has been in Canada for long enough to incorporate and transform them into their own transcultural experience” (Darias 1996, 214).<sup>1</sup>

The Canadian situation is complex inasmuch as it responds to double or even multiple patterns of colonizations marked by diverse sets of relations: in the first place, between natives and settlers; secondly, between settlers and the imperial centre(s); and last but not least, among the different ethnic and racial groups within an increasingly pluri-ethnic Canadian society (see Hutcheon 1989). The articulation of this complexity, and, in fact, of any one of these sets of relations, seem to demand equally complex theoretical tools. The writing produced in contemporary Canada often rejects

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<sup>1</sup> An exception to this is, of course, the experience of recent non-European immigrants. A further complication is provided by the Indian cultures. It is in this context that Dennis Lee’s words become significant: “Instead of pushing against the grain of an external, uncharged language, perhaps we should finally come to writing *with* that grain” (1985, 514).

oppositional representations and posits, instead, a concept of literature as contamination and hybridization. It is precisely the elements of contamination and heterogeneity in Canadian writing, involving a positive cultural and linguistic exchange, that can provide a transcultural focus to specific instances of writing as an alternative to the somehow abstract multicultural model of Canadian identity: “This focus would make possible the articulation of internal differences without necessarily excluding the text’s access to postmodern strategies. The (de)construction of the subject in terms of (dis)placement seems to constitute indeed an important part of transcultural texts” (Darias 1996, 224).

Some recent studies of Canadian literary production have appropriated the term transculturalism,<sup>2</sup> wider than cross-culturalism, because, in contrast to the multicultural model of identity, it makes room for the constant and changing interactions among the different Canadian ethno-cultural groups. Transcultural representations seem most evident in, although by no means exclusive to, the production of Canadian writers of origin other than the dominant ones. Indeed, the construction of the subject in Canadian fiction appears further complicated in the texts which are explicitly situated on the border between heritage and dominant cultures. Fictions of international writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Sandra Birdsell, Arundhati Roy or Michael Ondaatje do seem to undermine traditional concepts of identity as something unitary and fixed. In doing so, “they posit different and multiple ways of constructing the subject in relation to larger social and cultural determinants of identity” (Darias 1996, 225-26).

As Darias asserts (1996, 227), contemporary Canadian texts adopt the notion of identity as a strategy that undermines the very logics of fixed identity by means of producing a number of positions resulting from the notion of difference in context, or *différance*. Given the impossibility of an overall postcolonial theory, of relating nation, national and identity, then, we can still focus on particular instances of writing,

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<sup>2</sup> It was the Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz who first posited this concept of transculturalism in 1940 to refer to the cultural phenomenon he observed in the Cuba of the time (see Darias 1996, 224).

recognizing in the process the inevitable partiality of our access to the cultural texts of postcolonial production.

The theoretical formulations of the poetics of autobiography continue to ignore postcolonial writings even though many of the texts emerging from these locations, particularly in the past twenty years, are “life writings.” Generally, Euro-American autobiographical theory focuses on its own cosmopolitan space. Displaying an all too familiar geographic and ethnocentric bias, theory is made in the West. Because of this bias, theory tends to ignore the issue of place -that is, spatial and geographical location- as a constitutive element of the autobiographical “I.” Where the “I” is, theory says, does not really matter. But this ignores the fact that the literary selves are always deeply rooted in specific places and histories. As Calvino argues: “The ‘I’ of the author is dissolved in the writing. The so-called personality of the writer exists within the very act of writing: it is the product and the instrument of the writing process .... Once we have dismantled and reassembled the process of literary composition, the decisive moment of literary life will be that of reading” (1986, 15). Spatial location is therefore crucial to postcolonial autobiographical self-representation, and the forgetting of the locatedness of the subject betrays or reveals an imperialist assumption of centrality that has never been possible for the postcolonial writer (see Warley 1993, 23). Certainly, for postcolonial writers the intersection of language and place is at the very centre of their identity politics. Always aware that his or her place has at one time been marked red on the imperial map, and that views of both “home” and “away” have been configured and frequently distorted by the colonial past, autobiographers from these locations struggle to construct a viable representation of the “self” as a located “self.”<sup>3</sup> The postcolonial autobiographer is thus engaged in a project of imaginative possession of place, an act of self-articulation at once necessitated by and working in opposition to the invention of both territory and mind enacted by Europe upon colonial space. So

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<sup>3</sup> We should not overlook the fact that the so-called distortion is one’s history and one’s past. Therefore, it is questionable as well whether it is a so-called distortion: the word assumes that an alternative was historically possible. I am indebted to Professor Solecki for bringing this point to my attention.

geographical position has particular valency for postcolonial subjects since their home locations have been historically constructed as peripheral.

As Huggan has argued, tropes of maps and mapping -representations of a spatial sensibility- recur in postcolonial literatures. For him the construction of a conceptual map was an important means of disseminating colonial discourse, and thus postcolonial writers deconstruct the map in the process of decolonization (see Huggan 1989, 115-131). Nevertheless, spatial locations also have other meanings. Spaces “speak,” they are coded, meaningful signs. Spaces are permitted or taboo, safe or unsafe. They are measured, hierarchized, gendered. They mark race, ethnicity, and class. Location positions the subject socially. And, of course, the specific meanings of spaces are culturally mediated. The relation of self to place, then, is not natural; rather, space operates in discursive fields, and our understanding of our position within certain spaces or places, and also how others position us, is always biased. Further, “where you are” conditions what you say. Location makes available certain discourses but not others. The located autobiographical subject produces utterances that could not have the same meaning elsewhere. This does not mean, however, that particular locations - say, nations- produce singular, homogeneous identities.

Indeed, a variety of discourses interact with the discourse of space, so that the located subject is figured at the intersection of multiple meanings. Certain autobiographies inscribe a peculiarly ambivalent identity common to the settler colony - the subject as de-colonized in relation to England but as colonizer in relation to indigenous peoples (see Warley 1993, 25). Although there is no simple overlap between the “I” and its location, we can find, however, a necessary relation, especially in postcolonial contexts; for subject, place and language form a nexus that is bound up with other political issues that have to do with appropriation and abrogation of both physical and psychic spaces -the “I” in place is always a negotiated subject. Therefore, the particular geographical and micro-spatial location of the autobiographical “I” must be read as an important element of textual identity, for all autobiographical subjects are located subjects. Recognizing this will help us understand that the location of the speaker shapes all utterances and the meanings they produce (see Warley 1993, 28-9).

In narratives such as Salman Rushdie *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*, or Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, where East and West, North and South collide and overlap, the most significant mode of bridging used is downright confession. The sense of belonging to a place that a man constructs and which forms part of his individuation process appears to be influenced not only by the physical reality of the environment as such, but more significantly, by the nature of his emotional attachment with the beings who inhabit that place. So it is very difficult to say what prompts the quest for another place, that departure towards the other. However, when, after realizing the impossibility of his fusion with the other world that he had so much idealized, the diasporic man returns to reappropriate his former space, being painfully aware that the territory of origin is not an entirely different place. The colonial past hangs over it like a heavy mist, the result being that the people who were then at home in their land are affected by this transformation and feel dislocated.

The awareness of this historic dislocation leads the writers to dig deep into childhood memories, for memories and traces are the symbolic link between beings in space and make life palpable. The symbolic sharing in their pain and nostalgia helps build a kinship across cultures which Ganapathy-Dore calls "the conjoining strategy" (1994, 5). Writers like Rushdie, Roy and Ondaatje thus describe their homeland as "a familiar but foreign place." This hybridity is the essence of the postcolonial self: it is made up of the prodigal and the foreigner in one. In other words, a self inherited from its history and blood translated into a self-made self. So we frequently find the notion of the prodigal son an apt metaphor for the relativity of the postcolonial point of view. Visiting Colombo, Ondaatje declares "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (*Running* 79). The journey home is an occasion for experiencing the sliding of identities deeply felt both by the expatriate as well as the inland writer. To bridge the gulf between the two cultures, the strategies used are either to set them in contrast so that they inform each other (see Ganapathy-Dore 1994, 7), or to create a dialectic/dialogic conflict with the other which is endless and unresolved.

Rushdie and Ondaatje are transnational and transmodern writers as they are readers and writers of world literature, English speaking and other, so we can hardly maintain the distinction made by critics like Makarand Paranjape who clearly sets apart the Western novel and the Third World Novel (see Paranjape 1991, 19-32). These writings by and about the other are now central to our understanding of the changing cultures from which they are arising. They have also, in various ways, a preoccupation with identity, very often an amalgam of identities which the former empire sought to assimilate and abrogate in the process of colonization. More than this, however, these literary stratifications are becoming less meaningful as the system of “binary oppositions” that characterizes Anglo-American postmodernism begins to crumble under the weight of its own theoretical abstraction (see Strongman 1993, 147). These postcolonial writers presume their own centre to be a starting point from which to reassemble renewed senses of both culture and author.

Writing from the periphery is, in fact, writing from the centre, or rather those notions of centre and periphery are becoming increasingly redundant and interchangeable. Thus such notions of centre and periphery, eurocentrism and marginality, configure less and less in contemporary postcolonial works. The centre is everywhere, so these writers locate their writing at a point on a global map in which all roads lead towards home, even if these roads have not yet been charted. One strategy would be juxtaposition, a technique frequently used by the new writers to bring continents closer. But the deliberate search for nearness does not totally annihilate the distance between cultures. Imitation is perhaps the connecting device used since the colonial days. Subjected peoples imitated the accent, behaviour and way of life of the dominant people whose culture was judged as superior and the one to identify with. But the immigrants rather seek to recreate and even un-name their original figure. The multicultural allusions help to suppress the hierarchical rapport between the European and the non-European literatures and bring them into a horizontal plane (see Ganapathy-Dore 1994, 8).

Furthermore, as in other transcultural writings, history is as much the metaphorical protagonist of Ondaatje's *The English Patient* as of Salman Rushdie's

*Midnight's Children* or *Shame*. The blackness of Ondaatje's burnt protagonist stands for many things; he seems to simultaneously embody the dying empires and the ailing humanity, black and white. The characters' temptation to suppress the other to preserve the self is symptomatic of the tension prevalent in today's world. If we can recognize the strangeness in us and the intimacy of the other, then these patterns of perception instead of being shattered can be subjectively connected: "Tenderness towards the unknown and the anonymous, which was a tenderness to the self" (*Patient* 49), Ondaatje seems to propose.

It is this dialogic configuration of the self that Ondaatje wants to put forward as opposed to the Western "supersubject" installed by colonial narrative in the Western novelistic tradition (see Said 1993, 35). Ondaatje's characters belong to an era of paradoxes, that is, in order to keep peace, "we are either running away from or running towards a war" (*Patient* 93), which means that nobody can escape anywhere, people born in one place and choosing to live in another, "fighting to get back or get away from their homelands all their lives" (*Patient* 176). Faced with the crucial question of "where and what is home, they become mapmakers of a different sort, building "imaginary homelands" (see Rushdie 1991) by superimposing the memory of their native lands on the history of their dreamlands. The anonymity of the "nowhere man" (Ganapathy-Dore 1993) is a necessary counter-point to the omnipresence of the narcissistic model of the modernist novel.

East meets West in this brilliant subversion of the marginal into the normal as the author goes on to denounce the vanity of ownership and the hypocrisy of all social bonds affirming that "(w)e become vain with the name we own" (*Patient* 142). The novel is therefore designed to illustrate an internationalism, a blurring of literal and imaginary boundaries. Thus, in order to reckon with cultural pluralism as ideology, the contemporary man, he be from the East or West, has to learn to become, in Ondaatje's words, "unconscious of his ancestry" (*Patient* 246).

The very same novel form which embodied and fortified the imperialistic outlook is now used by the new writers as a tool to forge the symbiotic postcolonial discourse that connects culture with experience. Contemporary critical theories suggest

that history is one of many cultural narratives that attempt to explain the world by imposing an ordering structure on the “chaos” of events. Since it is written in language, however, history is unavoidably encoded with the attitudes and beliefs of the culture, more particularly, of the dominant group within culture, that produces it. Ondaatje’s novels highlight how this attitude frequently excludes minorities from the “official” history, which seeks to present an homogeneous image of society. The shift in focus reinstates the individual in history, reminding us that the “official” record marginalizes minorities and valorizes what functions in its favour, what supports or reinforces the control or the ruling power group. Ondaatje includes all the inconsistencies, contradictions and disruptions in this history but he resists the historian’s impulse to assemble the fragments into a cohesive narrative structure. His “resistance” draws attention to the inadequacy of his text as both history and historiography. The textual remains on which history is constructed are subject to errors, lies, gaps and omissions, and therefore, any “history can only ever be local and provisional and, ultimately, uncertain” (Ratcliffe 1993, 27-8).<sup>4</sup>

Although the subject of the discourse is Ondaatje himself, that discourse is not so much about the author as it is about the writer who betrays his autobiographical project as he avoids discovering himself. The split self indicates that the structure of writer and reader in autobiography can only be understood as a disfiguring mirror, a mirror defacing the self (see Kamboureli 1988, 89). As we watch him moving painfully towards the recovery of the people of his unrecollected past, everything else pales into insignificance. Though, in the end, Ondaatje is not the first writer to discover that a

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<sup>4</sup> According to Italo Calvino, there are two wrong ways of thinking of a possible political use for literature. The first is to claim that literature should voice a truth already possessed by politics; that is, to believe that the sum of political values is the primary thing, to which literature must simply adapt itself. This opinion implies a notion of literature as ornamental and superfluous, but it also implies a notion of politics as fixed and self-confident. The other mistaken way is to see literature as an assortment of eternal human sentiments, as the truth of a human language that politics tends to overlook, and that therefore has to be called to mind from time to time. Behind this way of thinking is the notion of a set of established values that literature is responsible for preserving, the classical and immobile idea of literature as the depository of a given truth. *In the Skin of a Lion* is necessary to politics above all when it gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, when it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude (see Calvino 1986, pp. 97-8).

voyage round one's father brings one back, invariably, to oneself (see Gooneratne 1983, 361-64).

The literatures of formerly British colonies express with particular intensity the concept of being a citizen of a country, or of the world. In theory, nation-building -after the geographical or poetical mapping of the territories is over- "must eventually include the building of cities and their emotional appropriation into the literary consciousness" (Perosa 1993, 183). The Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje offers a good case of exploring this duality and consciousness which become complicated by the fact that the author writes in a postmodern style, "by leaps and starts, moving back and forth in time and space, retracing his steps, re-telling (or being re-told) the same stories (or fragments of stories) from different angles or by different people" (Perosa 1993, 183).

In *In the Skin of a Lion*,<sup>5</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is retold and recreated in the figure of Patrick Lewis who wanders through the city as an angry outsider and an enemy of the establishment: "He has always been alien, the third person in the picture. He is the one born in this country who knows nothing of the place .... He was a watcher, a corrector" (*Lion* 156-57). Born in Abashed, Ontario, Patrick is and remains "a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country" (*Lion* 157).

Ondaatje uses different frames from the Gilgamesh myth bestowing different facets of the hero on different characters of the story. Thus, the Gilgamesh who is King of Uruk and makes his name by building public works is Rowland Harris, and Patrick Lewis assumes the role of adventurer. Caravaggio becomes the figure of Enkidu, Gilgamesh alter ego created by the gods in retaliation for the King's excesses and associated sexual misdemeanours. Whereas in the Sumerian and Akkadian myth,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cited hereafter as *Lion* within the text.

<sup>6</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh* recounts the deeds of a famous hero-king of Ancient Mesopotamia and is rich with adventures and encounters with strange creatures, men and gods alike. But though these provide a lively and exotic story line, the central concerns of the Epic are really human relationships and feelings -loneliness, friendship, love, loss, revenge, regret, and the fear of the oblivion of death. Gilgamesh was a famous king who left eternal monuments of both his royal and personal accomplishments. As a punishment for his oppressive treatment of the people of Uruk, the gods create a counterpart to him, Enkidu, a primal man, born and raised in the wilderness who sets free the animals caught by trappers. This epic then reflects the classic

Gilgamesh is incited to make a final journey to Utnapishtim to gratify his remorse over Enkidu's death. In Ondaatje's story, Patrick is incensed by his lover Alice's senseless death at the hands of an anarchist and swims the waterworks at great personal risk to arrive in Harris' office (see Harding-Russell 1987, 97). The title of the book refers to haunting lines in the original Sumerian poem in which Gilgamesh in remorse for Enkidu's death relinquishes hope, resorting to madness and roaming the wilderness: "The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when / you have gone to the earth I will let my hair / grow long for your sake, I will wander through / the wilderness in the skin of a lion." In the rich texture of this novel, dream and reality are fused and confused.

Ondaatje has mythologized the historical roots of Toronto which is the real protagonist of the story. Its building becomes not only one of the central themes or myths of the book. The building of bridges, viaducts and tunnels are politically meant for the new nomads in the new city. Baudelaire is quoted at one point: "The form of a city changes faster than the heart of a mortal" (*Lion* 109). The city is partly human in perpetual motion and change: "Harris saw the new building as a human body" (*Lion* 220). As Perosa asserts, the book "expresses and celebrates the new aspect, the new quality and the very essence of the new city, in which the qualifying traits are bridges, viaducts, underground tunnels, subways, trainways, waterways and even motorways" (1993, 189).

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confrontation of civilization against nature. After a confrontation between them Gilgamesh wins and they become devoted friends. Gilgamesh is approached by the beautiful goddess Ishtar who wants him to marry her but he rejects her. The gods decide that Enkidu must die a long and painful death. Gilgamesh is devastated by the loss of his friend and rebels against mortality. He sets out to find the secret of eternal life from the only survivor of the Flood, Utanapishtim. Along the treacherous journey he meets with strange and wondrous creatures who all warn him of the impossibility of his quest, immortality. Gilgamesh returns older and empty-handed for there are no second chances in real life. The story of Gilgamesh's quest ends suddenly where it began praising Gilgamesh's wisdom and understanding of life. As the translator Maureen Kovacs affirms in her Introduction to *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (1989, pp. xvii-xxxiv), there are different versions of the epic. The standard version was based on an earlier epic of Gilgamesh that was first composed in the Old Babylonian period (1800-1600 BC) and that seems to have soon existed in two or more variants. The original epic was not an act of pure imagination, nor does it seem to have derived from ancient folktales but from prior written literature. There existed a number of independent, short heroic tales in the Sumerian language about Gilgamesh and other myths unrelated to Gilgamesh were incorporated.

*In the Skin of a Lion* brings together different worlds of self and other, and produces between them, in their “meeting place,” both the discovery of an invisible city and heterologies of an open present. With the non-English-speaking immigrants of Toronto, Ondaatje follows, in a discovery of the other by his own immigrant self, a whole community that literally crosses boundaries and borders to another reality and a new language. Patrick Lewis follows the traces of immigrant pioneers into unknown territory, and reminds us both of Webb’s search for Bolden, and of Michael Ondaatje’s exploration of his father’s world: “*In the Skin of a Lion* thus continues a shift away from the solitary encounter between self and other, a shift already discernible in *Running in the Family*, where the searcher discovers not only the traces of his father, but the oral history of a whole group” (Siemerling 1994, 154).

When Patrick Lewis moves to an immigrant neighbourhood in Toronto he discovers a whole world of the other, outside his familiar boundaries (and for us beyond the horizon of a Toronto history written predominantly in English). Most significantly, with the discovery of the silent immigrant, and his journey into a foreign language and culture, Patrick translates himself into a new reality as much as he is transformed by it (see Siemerling 1994, 158). He moves into the neighbourhoods of the Macedonians and Bulgarians and begins to perceive similarities between contrasting worlds of self and other. “For me,” Ondaatje asserts, “that’s the pleasure of writing: learning about things, discovering the work of Lillian Petroff, and so learning about where the Macedonians were living in Toronto and how they lived in this city. That moving out from the self and into the wider sphere is what I enjoy. In *Lion* and *Running* I wanted to move out from the focus on one individual as in *Slaughter*, for instance” (1990, 199).

As an English-speaking Canadian Patrick becomes the foreign other of the foreigners in his own land. Simultaneously he recognizes his own position as an outsider in their image: “The people on the street, the Macedonians and Bulgarians, were his only mirror” (*Lion* 112). As Barbour asserts, the immigrant Ondaatje “sees the country from a new perspective and creates a protagonist who, despite belonging to the race and gender that control Canadian power, is alienated from them. A working-class

country boy comes to the city, he is as much an outsider as the immigrant workers he finds himself among and whose community he eventually joins” (1993, 181). In Ondaatje’s novel, the historical possibility of another history of Toronto comes to life, and with it a multi-faceted mural of the city that its dominant historiography has left in the dark.

Throughout the novel, the searcher Patrick ends up finding the perspectives of those ex-centrics that history has neglected: besides the story of the actual historical figure Nicholas Temelcoff, those of ethnic minority immigrants, and those of women (see Siemerling 1994, 168-69). This openness toward the space of the other is accompanied by a self-reflexive awareness of mediality on the part of the writing self, which both discovers and opens itself to the silences, and the oral history, of the other. “Who is speaking” is an extremely important question in a novel that claims to call into question the large numbers of people -women, workers, immigrants- who are silenced by the “official histories” of Canadian literature. The novel explicitly argues that it is Patrick who takes up “the skin of a lion” and assumes responsibility for the narration of the lives of whom official history leaves nameless and silent. On numerous occasions it shows Patrick finding language or saving or giving the stories of others (see Davey 1993, 144-45).

At the same time the complexity, wit, and range of references of the novel suggest that very closely behind Patrick “speaks” and names the writer of the novel, Michael Ondaatje, immigrant from Sri Lanka, canonical Canadian poet, university professor, younger brother to financier Christopher Ondaatje- “You don’t want power. You were born to be a younger brother,” the novel has Alice Gull remind Patrick (*Lion* 124). Responsibility for the narrative moves entirely to its writer (see Davey 1993); it becomes a text consciously reconstructed in 1987 that is selected and invented by an urbane, highly educated professional writer who argues that

When characters in books are lesser than the writer, there seems to be a great loss in the subtleties and truths being discovered or discussed .... Also the thing about writing is that you want to represent or make characters who are believable, who are fully rounded, and that stops you from making them just politically good or politically vicious. I’m more interested, I guess, in making people as believable and complex and intricate as possible than in making an argument in a novel or even a memoir -which is

also a kind of political statement, I think. I think if you enter a novel with just an argument, you reduce the book. (Ondaatje 1990, 198)

In Patrick's subjective voice, therefore, the narrator questions the effectiveness of collective social action, preferring to act as an individual, a stance we have already seen in Ondaatje's himself in several interviews: "I don't believe the language of politics, but I'll protect the friends I have. It's all I can handle" (*Lion* 122). Ondaatje's Patrick is a curiously passive character who ultimately fails as a revolutionary because "he is a decent human being who does not really believe in violence .... He is by temperament one of life's observers, and thus a potential artist like Ondaatje's earlier protagonists" (Marshall 1987, 16).

The fact that the book's male characters are immigrants to the city and to the country developed slowly as a result of coincidences. Ondaatje attended a Macedonian celebration and there he found out about the historical characters of Nicholas Temelcoff, an actual bridge builder. By coincidence, the typist Donya Peroff was Macedonian and also a baker's daughter who provided information about Macedonian recipes. On the other hand, the immense Asian immigration of the last decades were not of much interest as the writer did not want it to be interpreted as a personal saga: "I wanted to step away from a private story into a public one, a social one -although obviously much of the emotion that the migrants feel in the book has a personal source" (Ondaatje 1990, 199).

As a Canadian writer, Ondaatje holds the passport of a nation which has written multiculturalism into its constitution. Nonetheless he is aware of the tensions and contradictions which many other users of the term seem to ignore. Cultural clashes are part of all his novels, from the postcolonial return to Ceylon which has meanwhile become Sri Lanka in *Running*, via the silent (and silenced) multi-lingual immigration to Upper America in *Lion*, to the inter-cultural east-meets-west romance which is blown apart in *Patient*. While Ondaatje tried to integrate these conflicts and contradictions of different and divergent cultures into a harmonious whole in earlier works, they erupt openly in *The English Patient* (see Pesch 1995, 2).

The many layers of appropriation and re-appropriation which make *Running* special have also made it a target for critics,<sup>7</sup> because “we do not have any reference to writers of Sri Lanka or other Third World countries that would alert us to other ways of perceiving the world” (1988, 34).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, *Running* is said to give us “no contemporary picture of Sri Lanka” (1988, 39). However, Ondaatje does not write a political or social picture of Sri Lanka, and therefore much of Mukherjee’s criticism is beside the point.<sup>9</sup> He rather tries to present a portrait of his family, which is part of a country where “everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burguer blood in them going back many generations” (*Running* 41). This racial mix is complicated further by his own position as a Ceylon born, Canadian writer educated in Britain and Canada, who also explores the ambiguities of interaction between his colonial/colonized or colonizing past and his neocolonial/postcolonial

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<sup>7</sup> Displacement may generally be known to be a traumatic experience, but this certainly does not mean that it always is. After all Ondaatje describes another “traumatic” experience of being drenched in cold water and scrubbed clean as a five-year old, and comments: “I am dreaming and wondering why this was never to be traumatically remembered. It is the kind of event that should have surfaced as the first chapter of an anguished autobiographical novel” (*Running* 138); a clear allusion to the opening chapter of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

<sup>8</sup> Mukherjee contradicts herself later in her essay when she points out that, “For me, the only redeeming feature of the book was the one stanza Ondaatje quotes from a poem of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha” (1988, 40). Furthermore, Ondaatje mentions Ian Goonetilleke, with whom he talks of Sri Lankan history, but who has to publish his books in Switzerland because of censorship imposed by the postcolonial government (*Running* 84-5). But perhaps this would upset Mukherjee’s simplistic ‘good’ (Third World) vs ‘bad’ (Colonizers) duelist. Mukherjee simplifies Ondaatje’s complex ancestral relationships as well as his cultural heritage when she addresses him as “Third World intellectual” (1988, 49), which he is not. This seems to suggest that his place of birth and his first ten years in Ceylon are of greater importance than his education in England and Canada as well as his adult life in Canada, which make up more than forty years. Ondaatje’s position is complicated further by his colonial and colonized past in Ceylon, and his postcolonial present in Canada which becomes neocolonial on his return to Sri Lanka. For further discussion of this aspect see Heble (1994, pp. 192-95).

<sup>9</sup> Read superficially, *Running* may be perceived as a collection of funny anecdotes, but a further reading and closer analysis quickly reveals the cultural clashes which the novel contains. Ondaatje should be praised, not chided, for his “voice that always remains calm and controlled” (Mukherjee 1988, p. 40), for he does not turn “a blind eye to the here and now” (*ibid.*). He rather presents these clashes -if not always along the perceived fault lines of colonizer/colonized- and allows his readers to draw their own conclusions. The reference to Ian Goonetilleke’s histories (*Running* 85), and the listing of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha’s book *O Regal Blood* in the “Credits” (*Running* 207), enables his readers to locate work by Sri Lankan authors. *Running* therefore may have done more to alter the perception of Sri Lanka of mainstream readers than many politically correct poets who use poetry to preach what they believe to be ‘right’ consciousness (see Pesch 1995, 4).

present in the book. If, like Ondaatje, you are on all sides at once, the cultural clashes you experience are both internal and external (see Pesch 1995, 2).

Ondaatje's two novels of the 1980s provide a useful case study for an exploration of the cross-cultural and transnational experience with its attendant traumas and losses as well as its many possibilities. In these texts, Ondaatje examines simultaneously the lived experience and the textual problems faced by subjects who suddenly find themselves thrust into new contexts. In *Running*, the two cultures, Sri Lankan and Canadian, do not coexist happily in Ondaatje's consciousness. It is through such incursions of the "then-and-there" into the "here-and-now" -which are often registered as ominous and threatening- that Ondaatje comes to recognize the claims of the past upon him, and he responds by embarking on a search for a history which, in his own words, he has "ignored and not understood" (*Running* 22).

This filial search for father and fatherland is replaced in Ondaatje's next novel by a project of affiliation. *Lion* can be seen as Ondaatje's attempt to write himself into a history of immigration in Canada insofar as it explores and reworks the histories of the European immigrant labourers in turn-of-the-century Toronto, focusing on their efforts to forge affinities and to work towards shaping the landscapes, communities and identities which they come to inhabit. In both texts, Ondaatje "rejects a simple model of the juxtaposition of cultures within a nation or an individual, and focuses instead on processes of transformation and metamorphosis -of individuals, polities, and geographical spaces- as these notions of community, identity and affiliation are reimagined, re-enacted, realigned" (Sparey 1996, 134).

Like other writers whose texts sit at the juncture between postmodern and postcolonial writing, Ondaatje grapples with the problems of acknowledging history and identity as fundamentally fictional constructs, while expressing the need to recognize, articulate and act upon a historical and cultural, legacy which situate him and/or his characters in the sociopolitical world. Ondaatje is concerned with the indeterminacy of identity and with the resulting oscillation between the desire to articulate and assert a sense of self and of historical subjectivity, and the recognition that such an articulation is principally a function of desire. Ondaatje's characters face ontological struggles born

of cultural, historical and geographical dislocation or displacement. His texts are carefully structured around moments of disjunction or cataclysm in which suddenly-altered circumstances force his characters to question their previously-held certainties, and often to reinvent themselves in response.

*Running* and *Lion* are very distinctive novels in terms of stylistics, generic experimentation and temporal trajectories. They are markedly different in the shapes which they take, in the uses which they make of primary documents, and in the ways in which they involve the reader, although both are fundamentally concerned with questions of historiography and subjectivity within a cross-cultural context. In terms of form, *Running* is eclectic and experimental, and draws upon and reworks the conventions of such genres as travel writing, biography, autobiography, lyric poetry, social history, family chronicle and fantasy as it playfully interrogates and refashions the personal and public histories of Ondaatje's immediate relatives.

The history with which Ondaatje is concerned in *Lion* is explosive, multiple and multifarious, but more significantly it is a more conventional history of the turn-of-the-century Toronto. Both books experiment with historiography, both are polyphonous and highly intertextual, and yet where a sense of indeterminacy and disconnection seems to propel *Running* towards its hyperbolic and fantastical excesses, *Lion* "is structured around images and tropes of connection,, of spatial and historical contingency, and of the accretion of meanings and identities" (Sparey 1996, 136). Individual agency is taken a step further in *Lion*; rather than acting principally in response to the pressures of external circumstances, the various characters of the book work individually and collectively to shape or reinvent the political, social, cultural and geographic worlds in which they live, while at the same time recognising the influences of these worlds upon them. *Running*, however, constantly shifts between alternating possibilities for reading history, without working towards the sense of community and political commitment which propels the histories recounted in *Lion*. Although the later novel offers a critique of the linear, sequential, Victorian progressivist vision of history espoused by Commissioner Rowland Harris, it nevertheless offers alternative strategies for working towards collective goals, principally but not exclusively by introducing the

dimension of space in a dialectical relationship with historical time (see Sparey 1996, 137).

One of the main differences between the two texts rests in Ondaatje's use of the devices and tropes of staging, that is, identity as performative. Staging, in *Lion*, moves beyond the playful daily theatre of Lalla and the other members of the Burgher community in *Running* to become an active, dialectical process, and a foundation for a committed community-based politics. Ondaatje, of course, is aware that the performance of a given role does not guarantee that it will be received in the way it was intended to be. The power relations existing between actors and audience are constantly foregrounded as the quest for community and identity is played out. Just as migration can be either imposed, an act of flight, or voluntary and strategic, an act of will, so can metamorphosis and the wearing of different skins be enforced -the tannery workers, for example, have of necessity to sport the coloured skins of the dyes with which they are working- or tactical, such as in the cases of Alice and Caravaggio, who deliberately disguise or assume different alternative names and personas (see Sparey 1996, 139-40).

A crucial turning point in the novel involves Patrick's intervention into Alice's performance and life as he mistakes her staged cry of desperation for those of the actual immigrants by whom he is surrounded. Here, Patrick confuses active performance and passive victimization, as well as the "dangerous country of stage" with that in which the immigrants are played out (*Lion* 116). Backstage, where "all that had been theatrical seemed locked within metamorphosis," Patrick observes that he himself is moving like a puppet and is unable to discern readily whether those whom he encounters are composed of flesh or wood. This disorientation reveals to him the nebulous nature of the border between art and life, as well as all the urgency and possibility of acting, politically.

And it is no accident that the second of the political actions that Patrick undertakes in Alice's memory is described very explicitly as "Maritime Theatre." The chapter titles in Book I - "Little Seeds," "The Bridge," and "The Searcher"- suggest patterns of organic growth, systems of linkages, and strategies of detection which have

come to be associated with the reading of classic realist texts; but by the final chapters of Book III, the emphasis has very clearly shifted towards a notion of experience and identity as performative rather than pre-given and governed by natural laws of organicism. The little seeds, in fact, turn out to be seeds of dynamite suggesting the explosive and often accountable changes which shape the courses of personal and public histories, and which require human innovation in response. In “Maritime Theatre,” Patrick, Caravaggio and his wife Gianetta appear in flamboyant costumes - Patrick parading as a thief, and Caravaggio assuming the role of a pirate- as they mingle with the élite of Toronto in order to procure access to the harbour, from which Patrick will set out to bomb the city’s waterworks, to bring the establishment to its knees. The performers obviously delight in the knowledge that eventually they will be seen precisely as thieves and pirates, but for the time being their costumes register no such signification, and enable them to wander freely among a crowd of perfect strangers, to infiltrate the ranks of the moneyed and powerful just as Patrick will go on to infiltrate one of the principal symbols of that power.

In *Lion*, Ondaatje’s characters respond to the traumas of dislocation with affirmative and communal action, enabling them to expose the power relations which frame them, and to effect metamorphoses of the political and social structures and of the geographic spaces and the subjectivities which they inhabit. Performance and communal politics become interdependent. This strategy of staging the migrant experience enables Ondaatje to bridge the gap between the textual inscription and the lived experience of migrant subjectivity in a cross-cultural context, moving a step beyond the oppositions set up in *Running* between the wholly open-ended and undirected outcome of Lalla’s story, and the terrifying and isolating closure of Mervyn’s tale (see Sparey 1996, 140-141).

In *Lion*, immigrants from Eastern Europe swell the ranks of the working class - orientals exploited by the English-speaking upper and middle class Canadians. They never find public voices. Their stories have to be told (and brought back to them as history) by Patrick Lewis (*Lion* 148-49). Even class struggle is fought on their behalf by English-speaking activists like Alice. She is fighting for the “grand cause” (*Lion*

124-25), but has to admit, that “of course some (of the immigrants) make it” (*Lion* 123). Patrick, on the other hand, is certain that “They don’t want your revolution” (*Lion* 127). Canadian authorities have “imposed laws against public meetings by foreigners. So if they speak ... *any* language other than English, they will be jailed” (*Lion* 133). Unlike most of his fellow white Canadians, Patrick is not xenophobic. His status as “the internal migrant” (Pesch 1995, 5) allows him to live and work next to the immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. But even he “knew nothing about the men around him except how they moved and laughed -on this side of language” (*Lion* 136). The cultural gap remains. It is only broken in gestures, sentiment, and single words:

He had discovered the Macedonian word for iguana, *gooshter*, and finally used it to explain his requests each evening at the fruit stall for clover and vetch. It was a breakthrough .... Four women and a couple of men then circled him trying desperately to leap over the code of language between them .... Patrick felt ashamed they could discover so little about him .... And suddenly Patrick, surrounded by friendship, concern, was smiling, feeling the tears on his face falling towards his stern Macedonian-style moustache .... He looked up and saw the men and women who could not know *why* he wept now among these strangers who in the past had seemed to him like dark blinds on his street, their street, for he was their alien. (*Lion* 112-13)

The majority culture has here become a minority; “other” is shown to be a relational, not an absolute term. Only Alice manages to bridge that gap when she “speaks with her friends, slipping out of English and into Finnish or Macedonian” (*Lion* 132). But then, she is blown up before the story ends. The silent clashes of the novel - dramatized in Alice’s pantomime- are not silenced. Even Patrick is made to realize slowly how little he knows about life in the country he thinks of as his own: “He has lived in this country all his life ... it was only now that he learned of the union battles up north where Cato was murdered some time in the winter of 1921 .... And all of his life Patrick had been oblivious to it, a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country” (*Lion* 157).

Though born in Canada, Patrick “knows nothing of the place” (*Lion* 156-57). But that is hardly surprising: having migrated from remote, rural isolation, he is a stranger to the cultural codes, norms and patterns of behaviour in the city. The fault

lines of culture follow nationality much less than place of birth and class, particularly at a time when there is no balance of power. When Patrick is released from prison later in the book, “Many dissident groups were already voicing themselves within the city. The events in Spain, the government crackdown on unions, made the rich and powerful close ranks. Troops were in evidence everywhere” (*Lion* 220). And by 1938, “over 10.000 foreign-born workers had been deported out of the country” (*Lion* 209). Nicholas Temelcoff knows Commissioner Harris “by his expensive tweed coat that cost more than the combined weeks’ salaries of five bridge workers” (*Lion* 43). Yet, he is also the one who has vision, who plans and constructs public networks which link people, particularly bridges and water supply systems. Harris is not one of “those with real power (who) ha(ve) nothing to show for themselves” (*Lion* 242), and as he points out himself: “I was practically *born* in City Hall. My mother was a caretaker. I worked up” (*Lion* 235). Without his vision and his projects even more workers would have been without a job, and Nicholas Temelcoff could never have bought his own bakery. Harris thinks that there is a common ground to be negotiated between the worlds of Harris and that of the nameless workers. When Patrick wants to stop the conversation and says: “I don’t want to talk of this anymore,” Harris replies: “Then it will be a nightmare.” Patrick then confirms that “It *will* always be a nightmare, Harris” (*Lion* 239) with a rather pessimistic and realistic stance.<sup>10</sup> He seems to be saying that cultural clashes are inevitable. Yet, he decides not to blow up the waterworks -and Harris does not hand him over to the police. Ondaatje encompasses the nightmare in a frame narrative which does not end the novel in darkness, but with “Lights” (*Lion* 244).

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<sup>10</sup> The echo to Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922; 1986) is evident. To Stephen Dedalus, “History ... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (Joyce 1986, p. 28). For Patrick there seems to be no such hope.

## 10.2 Temptations of Identity: *In the Skin of a Lion*

Their bodies standing there tired, only the heads white. If he were an artist he would have painted them but that was false celebration. What did it mean in the end to look aesthetically plumaged on this October day in the east end of the city five hundred yards from Front Street? What would the painting tell? That they were twenty to thirty-five years old, were Macedonians mostly, though there were a few Poles and Lithuanians. That on average they had three or four sentences of English, that they had never read the *Mail and Empire* or *Saturday Night*. That during the day they ate standing up. That they had consumed the most evil smell in history, they were consuming it now, flesh death, which lies in the vacuum between flesh and skin, and even if they never stepped into this pit again - a year from now they would burp up that odour. That they would die of consumption and at present they did not know it. (*Lion* 130-31)

Although the reader witnesses the subtitle ‘a Novel’ for the first time, *In the Skin of a Lion* exploits and subverts the conventions of realist fiction in a way that is very postmodern, though in a different way from Ondaatje’s earlier prose works. The initial frame, however, repeats the device we saw in *Billy the Kid* and *Running*, an *exergue*, or intentional prologue, which is concerned with the telling of several stories that are ‘gathered’ in a car:

*This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through darkness. Outside, the countryside is unbetrayed. The man who is driving could say, “In that field is a castle,” and it would be possible for her to believe him.*

*She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms. And he is tired, sometimes as elliptical as his concentration on the road, at times overexcited - “Do you see?” He turns to her in the faint light of speedometer.*

*Driving the four hours to Marmora under six stars and a moon. She stays awake to keep him company. (n.p. emphasis mine)*

The same story may be presented in many different disguises; the fascination with telling the story here is consistent with Ondaatje’s earlier work, but the story which is told surpasses the old stories both in its range and in its treatment of aesthetic concerns. This passage that frames the text calls into question the relationship between inner and outer, structurally and thematically, when we consider how an outsider like

protagonist Patrick Lewis comes to inhabit a lion's skin. Reader, writer, and rider together gather Ondaatje's story, participating in a dialogic process. But who is in the driver's seat -Hana Gull or Patrick Lewis? In this opening frame Hana is the passenger, but at the novel's end Hana drives, adjusting the rear-view mirror to her height while Patrick talks the gears to her. In response to his opening question, "Do you see?" Patrick concludes the novel with "Lights" to focus cinematically on an unbetrayed countryside and an equally betrayed history, to highlight horizons of inner and outer. Through her looking-glass along the roadway to Marmora, Alice Gull's daughter reviews Toronto's past in fact and fiction.

*In the Skin of a Lion* is a narrative of loss and recovery, of telling stories and keeping secrets, of cautious publicity and coveted privacy. It is also a narrative of lies and truths, of charting a territory and moving past that territory. But, more importantly, it is a narrative that, unlike Ondaatje's previous work, is no longer balancing on the edge of collapse. Much of Ondaatje's old vocabulary is here, however. Relatively ordinary words like "architecture," "choreography," "nightmare," "mid-air," "privacy," become exceptional in the landscape of Ondaatje's text. Furthermore, familiar images such as falling, balance, blindness, the room (and the room as text), explosion, implosion recur.<sup>1</sup> The interrelated imagery of light and darkness is not a purely formal element, merely a feature of the novel's design, tone and atmosphere; it serves, however, both formal and thematic functions. While light and darkness are therefore central features of the novel's visual design and atmosphere, they are also, within the thematic framework of the novel, metaphors and symbols that help to carry the novel's meaning. *Lion* is concerned not just with history, but with the possibilities of different

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<sup>1</sup> This novel is also described as a "tenebristic narrative" by Fotios Sarris (1991, p.183). It is a densely patterned novel made up of interwoven strands of recurring imagery, some of the more prominent of which are of fire, and paintings, as in *The English Patient*; water, as in both *Running* and *Secular Love*; animals, as in both *the man with seven toes* and *Rat Jelly*. Among these must also be included the peculiar combination of light and darkness, a pattern of imagery that is introduced immediately (in the prologue), dominates the close, and suffuses the narrative in between. Without these unifying devices, the work's architecture, that is, the building of its images -expansive, diffuse, and unruly as it is- "would have had difficulty sustaining the book's progression" (Butterfield 1988, p. 166). This narrative, moreover, presents a number of thematic similarities to oral narratives, such as its emphasis on the tall-tale and its resistance to closure.

types of history and historiography, and the influence of such histories upon an individual's relation to society; in addition, it is concerned with the role of language and narrative in that individual's relation to both history and society.

And yet at first glance this novel seems to be an abrupt departure from Ondaatje's earlier work in its setting (Toronto), its characters (the working class and, to a lesser extent, the wealthy), its concerns (social justice), and its structure (a story told in a car). These divergences in vocabulary and image thus mark a crucial difference.<sup>2</sup> This novel marks a shift in Ondaatje's writing insofar as it approximates more closely than any of his previous publications to conventional conceptions of the novel. This, however, should not be taken to signal an abandonment of experimentation with form.

Ondaatje blends in this text a sociological theme with an incessant, tightly controlled exploration of aesthetic issues which have obsessed him in the past: the role of the artist, the limits of the story, the extent to which a single narrator can create the sense of community upon which all telling depends, the threat of narrative collapse (into madness, silence, or an incoherent text), the publicity -constitutive of storytelling- which does not sacrifice privacy. These concerns are addressed in the writer's attempt to integrate textual architecture with textual accident, to write a text in which a designed architecture can harness and order accident. It is this less explicit concern with artistic expression that eclipses the social account of early Toronto with which the novel directly deals. Ondaatje's treatment of personal relationships and individual psychologies, however, is weaker inasmuch as the characters are in many ways less

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The notion of audience participation is also featured in its egalitarian voicing of previously marginalized perspectives (see Gamlin 1992).

<sup>2</sup> The novel, relatively short, covers over two decades in the lives of several characters. It is divided into three books, each book into chapters, and each chapter into even smaller sections. The physical gaps between all these fragments, the large blank spaces and empty pages in the book, embody actual gaps or patches of darkness in the narrative itself. We are warned in the prologue that "the man's" narration is "elliptical." In one book, Nicholas Temelcoff is a bridge worker; in the next he appears as a baker. The chapter entitled "The Bridge" introduces the character of the nun; the next chapter, "The Searcher," introduces a woman called Alice Gull. Not until the final book is there a connection revealed between the two, and then only in the tenuous form of a scar on the nose. All other connections remain in darkness.

fully developed with respect to each other than they are in relation to their position in the text and their capacity to express themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The quiet, private, frequently “anonymous” Patrick Lewis is the main character who agrees to tell “the whole story” (*Lion* 244) -even the portions he cannot possibly know- to his sixteen-year-old adopted daughter Hana during a four hour drive from Toronto to Marmora.<sup>4</sup> The structure recalls Ondaatje’s poem “To a Sad Daughter” (*Lion* 95-7), in which the poet advises his sixteen-year-old daughter. Patrick is from a “pale green nameless” Ontario town and his own frantic search shifts from the official search for the millionaire Ambrose Small (Patrick is hired as a “searcher”), to the romantic search for Clara Dickens (lover to Ambrose and Patrick), to the tragic search for Alice Gull (lover to Patrick, mother to Hana), and, finally, to the plotted search for Harris, designer of the Waterworks.<sup>5</sup> But there is another search that informs the

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<sup>3</sup> One finds characters repeatedly urging one another to “tell” their story to the point where the text itself becomes a sophisticated and very human example of Freud’s “talking cure.” But this focus circles back to the aesthetic interest that underscores the novel. The characters here emerge from the inevitable room with which Ondaatje’s previous prose texts have closed, and the final call for “Lights” is not the warning of explosion (literally of the Waterworks, figuratively of the text itself) but rather the daring of exposure, the naming of the country. This open exposure would also answer, in aesthetic terms, the modernist criteria (design, hierarchy, totalizations, centring) and both its opposition and merging with postmodernist criteria (chance, anarchy, decreation, dispersal). According to these, millionaire Ambrose Small and Commissioner Rowland Harris would be masters of modernism in Ondaatje’s historiographic fiction, while most of the other characters pitted against them would constitute counter discourses of postmodernism (see Greenstein 1990, p. 116)

<sup>4</sup> The role of the reader as the principal organizing agent of the fragmented text is no less crucial in *Lion*. Most critics agree that the novel’s point of view might more accurately be seen as that of Hana, Alice’s daughter, who, at the end of the novel, prepares to drive through the darkness and listen to the “whole story” of her “mother’s best friend” that Patrick, in the passenger’s seat, has promised to tell her (*Lion* 244). As “This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning,” the point of view here is that of the hearer, not the teller (see Sarris 1991, 189).

<sup>5</sup> Patrick appears in the first chapter as a rural boy born in a place “which did not appear on a map until 1910, though his family had worked there for twenty years and the land had been homesteaded since 1816” (*Lion* 10). These “Little Seeds” are the familial roots of the first chapter where we find the personal history and naming of the protagonist who “belongs to the central racial and gender group that controls Canadian life, but he is working-class, from the country, the son of an ‘abashed man’ who was an outsider” (Hutcheon 1988a, 94). Patrick is depicted as the first ex-centric of the book who meets other nameless immigrants who build the Bloor Street Viaduct (1915-1918) to complete another’s dream. Arriving by train, “he spoke out his name and it struggled up in a hollow echo and was lost in the high air of the Union Station. No one turned. They were in the belly of a whale” (*Lion* 54). By 1924 we find Patrick trying to find an identity for himself and, ironically, he becomes a searcher for the historical Ambrose Small, a millionaire who disappeared in 1919. He falls in love with Small’s mistress, Clara. In E.L. Doctorow’s *Loon*

various thematic threads at every level: Patrick's search for the "vocabulary" he needs to convey the intimacy and community that he shares with those by whom he is surrounded, even those to whom he is ostensibly opposed. When Patrick warns Alice that ideology obscures or denies the private he identifies the quality from which the novel itself also gains its strength, a sensitivity to private cares in a public world.

"Little Seeds" begins in the third-person present tense, a historic present occasionally switching to past even as spatial shifts from window to window create a cinematic, surrealistic effect in the early dawn. "If he is awake early enough the boy sees the men": this conditional announces the awakening of Patrick Lewis from nameless boyhood to manhood, a coming of age parallel to Toronto's growth earlier this century. These men are foreign loggers that constitute a "strange community," a "collection of strangers" who do not own land around Bellrock. "It takes someone else, much later, to tell the boy" (*Lion* 8) their identity, but for now these estranged immigrants remain an enigma to Patrick and his uninitiated reader.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the reader's expectations are progressively challenged in the novel. The "Little Seeds" of the first chapter are not only the symbols of growth and development of this story but also seeds of dynamite, from which hard lessons are learned and by way of which the unexpected unfolds. Linear narrative is undermined by a circular narration which focuses on certain moments of epiphany, such as the nun's fall from the bridge or Alice's death. Also gaps and omissions are insistently left in the stories recounted within the novel. Both Spearey (1994) and Greenstein (1990) analyse Ondaatje's presentation of the city and its history as being in a constant state of metamorphosis in order to reveal the value of migration. Despite their excessive theoretical views, they are right to assert, however, that the novel touches several contested territories and subject positions in a subtext that is definitely postcolonial and transnational.

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*Lake* there is a suspiciously similar character named Clara who experiences a parallel love triangle.

<sup>6</sup> If we have to wait later for revelation, then we have to read earlier to locate Bellrock, not on a map of Ontario, but in an earlier poem by Ondaatje. "Walking to Bellrock" describes two figures (supposedly the poet and his friend Stan Dragland) "in deep water," wading through the silt of history: "The plot of the afternoon is to get to Bellrock" (*TK* 1979, pp. 81-3).

Two key characters do not figure in Patrick's various searches: Nicholas Temelcoff and David Caravaggio. Nicholas plays a prominent role in the first section of the book and then effectively disappears and resurfaces as a minor character much later, whereas Caravaggio appears out of nowhere in the final section and becomes the focus of the narrator's attention. Both, however, play crucial roles in the architecture of the text. Unlike *Billy the Kid*, in which Billy is frequently interpreted as artist, and *Slaughter*, in which Bolden is obviously an artist, it seems at first that there are no so-called artist figures here. This feature makes it tempting to privilege a reading of the novel in which the sociological and psychological concerns dominate. But the fact that Ondaatje carefully frames his novel with Nicholas and Caravaggio as unconventional artist figures -the artist as builder of bridges and the artist as thief- indicates that the novel will be addressing aesthetic issues that may not be immediately apparent on the surface. In various ways both Caravaggio and Temelcoff fulfill superior masculine stereotypes through their bodies. Patrick desires to achieve heroic status as well, but his coming to terms with his self and his body is a long process.<sup>7</sup>

Nicholas "is a spinner. He links everyone .... No one dreams of doing half the things he does ... free-falling like a dead star. He does not really need to see things, he has charted all that space .... It does not matter if it is day or night, he could be blindfolded. Black space is time .... He knows his position in the air as if he is mercury slipping across a map" (*Lion* 34-5). This passage captures concerns which are typical of Ondaatje's aesthetics: Nicholas is a spinner like the spider/writer; he links everyone like the narrator; he is a falling star like the imploding stars in "White Dwarfs" (*RJ* 70-71); and he combines his sense of architecture (the charting of empty spaces) with the potential for accident that one always encounters when blindfolded. There is a danger involved of which Nicholas is constantly aware: "Travellers have collapsed twice before

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<sup>7</sup> Like the author, Patrick is also influenced by the stereotypic male hero of popular Western culture: physically superior, silent, a man of action, a loner rescuing females in distress. The paradigm of the hero is established in the literature Patrick reads as a boy: "In the books he read, women were rescued from runaway horses, from frozen ponds incidents" (*Lion* 61). Yet, he recognizes the lack of heroic qualities within himself. His sense of what a man and a hero should be is challenged by what he encounters in the city, and he must locate himself outside the models he has observed. He cannot save other women, rather, it is the women who appear to save him.

this and fallen to the floor of the valley. He is not attaching himself to a falling structure. But he hangs beside it, in the blind whiteness, slipping down further within it until he can shepherd the new ribs of steel onto the end of the bridge” (*Lion* 40).

Nicholas’ careful avoidance of “falling structures” parallels both the spider figure of his poems and the care that Ondaatje himself takes in constructing the “ribs of steel” from which the story is also built. In Ondaatje’s words the writer must “learn to pour the exact arc / of steel still soft and crazy / before it hits the page” (“Taking,” *RJ* 55). Unlike the father in “Letters & Other Worlds,” Nicholas has not “edged / into the terrible acute hatred / of his own privacy / till he balanced and fell” (*RJ* 26). The spinner or spider is “(a) kind of writer I suppose. / He thinks a path and travels / the emptiness that was there / leaves his bridge behind / looking back saying Jeez / did I do that?” (“Spider Blues,” *RJ* 63). Nicholas makes the bridge and disappears. A novel which begins with such a network of imagery is not likely to be unaware of the aesthetic implications of the story.

Caravaggio, the Italian thief with whom Patrick becomes friends in the Kingston penitentiary parallels Nicholas as artist figure. Unlike the Italian painter of the same name (who also served time in prison) Ondaatje’s Caravaggio is a small-time burglar. But this profession is translated into art by the narrator. Caravaggio has learned “the art of robbery,” and the only item that the reader knows he steals is a Jeffrey painting. Caravaggio’s artistic side is made ironically explicit in the fact that the menial labour to which the prison inmates are assigned is painting a roof blue: “Why an intentional blue roof? They could not move without thinking twice about where a surface stopped” (*Lion* 179). Earlier, “Nicholas slides free of the bridge”; in much the same way Caravaggio literally disappears into his art.<sup>8</sup> Painted blue, matching the sky,

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<sup>8</sup> Ondaatje has, on several occasions, alluded to the influence of the visual arts upon his writing, but one need not go beyond *Lion* to find evidence of that influence. For instance, paint and colour form one of the novel’s most prominent currents of imagery, and there are, furthermore, several references to specific pieces of art, for example, “Judith and Holofernes. St. Jerome and the Lion. Patrick and the Two Women” (*Lion* 79). But the influence of painting is perhaps nowhere more profound than in Ondaatje’s use of light and darkness in the visual modelling of the novel. As in the ancient epic of *Gilgamesh*, repetition intensifies the images of darkness and claustrophobia. This modelling particularly recalls seventeenth-century baroque realism, a style introduced in the early 1600s by Caravaggio. A distinguishing feature of Caravaggio’s style is that light in his

he swings into the air. Both characters fall into a freedom that, for the most part, was not possible in Ondaatje's earlier work. Patrick and Caravaggio become uncertain of clear boundaries so that the painted painter becomes undistinguishable from the sky. Through this visual metamorphosis the prisoner Caravaggio gains his freedom: "Demarcation .... That is all we need to remember" (*Lion* 179). And the reader remembers these instructions when Caravaggio later makes Patrick invisible in preparation for dynamiting the tunnel. "Demarcation" (*Lion* 228), Caravaggio repeats, and we get the sense that it means its opposite, perhaps "an effacement of all distinctions in air or water, fire or earth, four elements for a dynamics of making and destroying" (Greenstein 1990, 119).

Likewise, the combination of "architecture and accident" (Leckie 1988, 286) is expressed in Nicholas' natural ease with night, with black spaces; and this ability to sense his surroundings "blindfolded" is a quality that he also shares with other characters in the novel. Ondaatje establishes a thematic balance here between architecture and accident that parallels the structure of the text itself; Nicholas knows the architecture of the bridge and it is this knowledge that allows him to incorporate the accident into his precise choreography of knowledge. Hence when a nun unexpectedly falls into his arms as he swings in mid-air he is equipped to deal with the "accident."<sup>9</sup>

Patrick conveys a similar desire to map out a place in his mind and then to travel through it blindly: "Sometimes when he is alone Patrick will blindfold himself and move around the room, slowly at first, then faster until he is immaculate and magical in it" (*Lion* 96). Unlike Nicholas, Patrick cannot at this point deal with accident. His own blindfolded architecture -or identity- is too rigid to allow for the unexpected event. It is

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paintings generally emanates from a single source, usually undefined or lying outside the frame, producing on the canvas patches of illumination and a sharp contrast between light and dark. This style is often referred to as the "dark manner" or "tenebrism" (Sarris 1991, p. 184). Its influence during the seventeenth century was widespread, affecting not only Italian artists, but also such artists as Zurbarán and Velázquez in Spain and, of course, Rembrandt.

<sup>9</sup> "On rare occasions, a job, despite or because of its inherent danger and unpleasantness, proved a source of good income or mobility for an unskilled Macedonian. As an employee of the Dominion Bridge Co., Nicholas Temelcoff, who had no apparent fear of heights, found that he could make good money as a construction worker on the Bloor-Danforth Viaduct building project during the latter years of the First World War. Temelcoff received about \$1.00 to \$1.25 per hour

likely no coincidence that Harris too describes his rise in the world of public planning specifically in terms of blindness and intuitive seeing: “When I woke from the dream the sense of familiarity kept tugging me all day .... These *were* all real places. They could have existed” (*Lion* 237). Earlier Ondaatje remarks that “(b)efore the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting” (*Lion* 29). In many ways *Lion* is a re-imagining or a dreaming backwards of a Toronto that has not yet been articulated. It is here that the plot of the text intersects with its aesthetic concerns. Ondaatje’s recognition of the constitutive value of art prompts him to articulate a time, place, and people that would otherwise be silent.

As in *Running*, the “whole story,” however, is consistently incomplete. There is a dark private place that Ondaatje’s characters all value, a space that the public cannot invade or corrupt. It has been variously translated as madness, or silence; but finally in *Lion* it seems to have a singularly positive treatment in a celebration of the private. It is perhaps in Patrick’s swim underwater to sabotage the Waterworks that the difference between this text and Ondaatje’s earlier work is most pointed:

Patrick swims in darkness, just the pull of water to guide him .... Most of all his body fears no air if the tank runs out, and the danger of silence among the pumps a mile away so he will suddenly move only at human speed. These fears are greater than the fear of no light or the remembered nightmare where he embraces the lost corpse. So his body, moving without thought, listens for silence. (*Lion* 230)

One can compare this passage to the frequently cited section from “White Dwarfs”:  
“There is my fear / of no words    of / falling without words / over and over    of /  
mouthing the silence / Why do I love most / among my heroes those / who sail to that  
perfect edge / where there is no social fuel” (*RJ* 70). This passage generally elicits  
comments on Ondaatje’s interest in aesthetics that mines silence for its expressive  
potential. Ondaatje’s interest in the private seems to suggest that one gets to “that  
perfect edge” in privacy, in private spaces. But such an intense privacy inevitably invites  
madness or silence.

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while he worked dangling far above the Don Valley. His countrymen in the factories were earning between 40 and 50 cents an hour” (Petroff 1995, p. 35).

*Lion*, on the contrary, accepts the complicity of the social, a social fuel or community that operates like words between which there is “perfect white” (the private). Unlike the burned out stars “who implode into silence,” and Buddy Bolden who goes “mad into silence,” and Ambrose Small who “imploded,” Patrick does not implode. Patrick may find himself almost exploding the Waterworks (water itself may be interpreted as a loose metaphor for the story); but it is no small victory that the potential collapse is carefully sidestepped. In the end, Patrick gets caught and falls asleep in Harris’ office. Ondaatje at this point inserts the following quotation from an unidentified source: “He lay down to sleep, until he was woken from out of a dream. He saw the lions around him glorying in life; then he took his axe in his hand, he drew his sword from his belt, and he fell upon them like an arrow from the string” (*Lion* 242). The title identifies the two threads that run most consistently through the novel: the theme of social justice and the experiments with aesthetic expression.<sup>10</sup>

Patrick and many of the immigrants in Toronto work in a tanning factory. Ondaatje focuses most closely on the men who immerse their bodies in dyes mixed for the purpose of tanning animal skins and, as a consequence, find their own skin indelibly coloured. Alice objects to what this job makes of these people: “But they must turn and kill the animals in the slaughter-houses. And the smell of the tanning factories goes into their noses and lungs and stays there for life .... It brutalizes. It’s like sleeping with the enemy. It clung to Hana’s father. They get burns from the galvanizing process. Arthritis, rheumatism. *That’s* the truth” (*Lion* 124). It is this truth that Patrick cuts through both literally and figuratively in the story he tells. Patrick awakes from a dream and, like an arrow, attacks the constrictive skin of the lion; in doing so he frees himself to the positive quality that the ambivalent status of the skin permits. The story itself is

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<sup>10</sup> The book’s cover features two male workers in an illustration by Frederick B. Taylor called “Hull Rivetting.” One worker rivets while the other holds his arm steady. Here we have physical labour and necessary cooperation between workers vividly presented by the positioning of the bodies. Throughout the novel there are sections devoted to descriptions of the labours of male workers: logging, building a bridge, a tunnel, working in a tannery. Although the workers’ bodies are made to work like machines, and are apparently considered mere means of production by the rich, we are constantly reminded that they are human. The bodies are the means of survival for the workers, but also of communication. Many of them are immigrants and communicate to each

linked then to the skin of the lion. The skin shifts from the grim reality of the working day to the detached refinement of aesthetic representation.

Accordingly, *Lion* opens with multiple epigraphs, dedications, and acknowledgements that signal its intertextuality. The first epigraph is taken from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Babylonian legend of creation:

The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when  
you have gone to the earth I will let my hair  
grow long for your sake, I will wander through  
the wilderness in the skin of a lion. (n.p.)

These words are spoken by Gilgamesh, the godlike builder, after the death of his friend Enkidu, a wild or natural man. In Ondaatje's allegory, Patrick Lewis and Nicholas Temelcoff, two heroic builders and men of nature, lament the death of Alice Gull. Moreover, what Ondaatje further emphasizes in the course of his narrative is a process of "allegorical metamorphosis from high to low as he progresses from Ovid through Kafka and beyond" (Greenstein 1990, 117). And if his first epigraph deals with an ancient epic or high mimetic model, his second epigraph from John Berger, Marxist postmodernist, goes a long way to undercut any sense of epic totality. "Never again will a single story be told as if it were the only one" reminds us of multiple perspectives and fragments for reader and writer wandering through a verbal wilderness.<sup>11</sup>

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other through gesture and a recognition that they share the same pain in their labours and such pleasure as a meal in the company of others (see Overbye 1992, p. 2).

<sup>11</sup> This same quotation is used by Arundhati Roy as an epigraph to her acclaimed first novel *God of Small Things*. George Bowering has also been influenced by John Berger in *Burning Water* whose title coincides with Carlos Fuentes' *Burnt Water*, which deals with the paradox of creation and destruction. Similarly, Ondaatje's intertextual network extends to John Hawkes' *Second Skin* with its opening chapter "Naming Names." We can also recall Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941) that reveals that Ondaatje's novel both challenges and has significant affinities with Canadian tradition in that both juxtapose real events in twentieth-century Canadian history with fictions which present revisionist readings of history from marginalized points of view; both novels give shape and meaning to the history and fictions by using archetypes from ancient literature (see Beran 1993). Other intertexts are turn-of-the-century socialist polemical novels, such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, and Kipling's story "The Bridge Builders" from the 1914 collection *A Day's Work*, which is re-fashioned by Ondaatje in his chapter "The Bridge" and removed from its setting on the Ganges to Toronto's Don Valley. As Spearey rightly comments, "Through these allusions and revisions, Ondaatje commemorates and extols the enactment of heroic deeds, while opening to question the conventions of epic narration, and its suitability for a contemporary context" (1994, 46). Other intertexts are Baudelaire, H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad and Canadian poet Anne Wilkinson (1910-1961), who wrote a personal memoir titled *Lions in*

The tension between a working class which has no language to express itself and the words in which the novel itself is written must be resolved if the novel is not to be fractured at its core. There is a considerable gulf between the artist's careful selection of image and the realities of the working class. The novel strains most seriously when the characters sound too much like artists themselves, when they are speaking in the narrator's voice. The characterization cannot be convincing when the dialogue sounds like the narrator speaking with the narrator. The conversations that Patrick has with both Clara and Alice are too poetic, too wary, and too measured to be plausible. As such they come close to the "false celebration" of the working class and this is the gravest flaw in a novel that otherwise treats its subjects with the greatest care and respect.

The artist, however, is Ondaatje's perfect character inasmuch as he chooses his disguise: the license to tell the story. Ondaatje demonstrates this freedom through the image of the actresses who share the costume of the heroine: "even a silent daughter could put on the cloak and be able to break through her chrysalis into language. Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story" (*Lion* 157). When the novel closes Patrick's daughter Hana is at the wheel of the car, learning to drive. Earlier we were told: "The facts of the story had surrounded Hana since birth, it was part of her. And all of his life Patrick had been oblivious to it, a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country, a blind man dressing the heroine" (*Lion* 157). Patrick's search for a "vocabulary," a "set of clothes" with which to tell his story is successful when he combines his own voice with those by whom he is surrounded. Patrick, however, expresses himself without the communicative power -and responsibility- that is derived from wearing false skins. And it is through this form of telling that Alice's truth emerges.

The isolation and silence of Patrick's early years serve a very specific function in the novel. There are many approaches to a comparative study of *Lion* and *Gilgamesh*. Gamlin, for example, discusses the corresponding oral implications. Other

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*the Way* (1956), and who appears in Ondaatje's novel as a metafictional author-presence by the same name (see Butterfield 1988 and Acheson 1995).

critics, such as Beddoes, Beran, Duffy and Sarris have also offered comparative readings of the two texts, and a general consensus exists in viewing Patrick in the image of the ancient hero Gilgamesh.<sup>12</sup> Both narratives tell the story of how these two characters respond when encountering a civilization wherein a majority of the inhabitants is oppressed by a dominant figure of power. Ondaatje attempts in this novel to loosen our attachment to established centres of discourse in order to intensify our desire to assume a subject position similar to Patrick's.

The author thus wants the reader to feel the experience of being displaced. And, in his displacement, Patrick may even adopt Clara -and to a lesser extent, Alice- as representing his absent mother (Schumacher 1996, 11). And only after she disappears he suffers the terrible lack that makes him abandon silence and passivity. It is an initiation -like a bildungsroman- that makes him approach the Macedonian community, a cultural initiation that makes him acquire a new social register. Alice, then, initiates Patrick in politics: "I'll tell you about the rich" (*Lion* 132), she says to him, and Patrick stubbornly begins to realize that language is also a powerful weapon, and that the power in Alice's words is dangerous and necessary: "By becoming a subject within the discourse of the marginalized, he has unknowingly and unavoidably situated himself in opposition to dominant culture" (Schumacher 1996, 14). The theme of breaking silence, of giving voice to what lies beneath the surface of events, Schumacher rightly argues, is too important an issue in the novel, and Patrick's silence is much less an act of denial than an inability to articulate grief (1996, 17).

In this fictional performance, Ondaatje plays with notions of horizon in his cinematic levelling and dissolving.<sup>13</sup> In a Macedonian performance, similar to one the author witnessed, Patrick meets Alice Gull who plays the heroine of the story, a woman

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note a similar correspondence exists between Enkidu and Ondaatje, as both arrive in a civilization of which they have no previous knowledge, yet both step boldly forward to address existing injustice. Enkidu, perhaps the oldest example of what we now refer to as Rousseau's "noble savage"; Ondaatje, the contemporary writer from the margins. Carol Beran also views Commissioner Harris as "one of the most surprising alter egos" for Ondaatje, as both imagine "wonderful structures and then bring them into being" (1993, p. 72).

<sup>13</sup> Patrick's entry to Toronto is marked by a sign in Union Station -HORIZON- at some distance from Sinclair Ross's prairie town in *As for Me and My House* (1941). "Horizon" seems to imply

with no history but with strong politics. A single mother, she raises Hana, the child she has had by Cato, a murdered revolutionary activist. It is Alice who sets up one of the major image networks in the novel, by “the way Alice came to him it seemed in a series of masks or painted faces ... like the sea through a foreground of men” (*Lion* 128). Alice reads a Joseph Conrad letter that provokes Patrick to tell her that the trouble with ideology “is that it hates the private. You must make it human” (*Lion* 135). It is Alice’s death, however, that causes him to feel true human sorrow and to “wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion.”

Like the author, Patrick researches in the library archives finding out Nicholas Temelcoff’s role in building the Viaduct and figures out that Alice is the flying nun who was blown off the unfinished viaduct. It is at this moment that he realizes the complexity of his life through his other, the writer:

His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night web -all of these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day. A nun on a bridge, a dare-devil who was unable to sleep without drink, a boy watching a fire from his bed at night, an actress who ran away with a millionaire- the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned. (*Lion* 145)

The library archives also reveal the configurations of public history as well: “Official histories and news stories were always soft as rhetoric, like that of a politician making a speech after a bridge is built, a man who does not even cut the grass on his own lawn” (*Lion* 145).<sup>14</sup> In restoring Alice’s past to himself and to us, he also restores memory to Nicholas Temelcoff, a similar figure to Kip in *Patient*, the man who saved Alice’s life:

Nicholas Temelcoff never looks back. He will drive the bakery van over the bridge with his wife and children and only casually mention his work there. He is a citizen here, in the present, successful with his own bakery .... He stands exactly where Patrick left

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“barrier”; Patrick’s relationship with Alice has a horizon (*Lion* 137), and he becomes aware of his own inner horizon beyond which he cannot leap (*Lion* 157).

<sup>14</sup> Ondaatje has continued to base his fictions on characters and records retrieved from the archives, and on stories which these findings have brought to life. A list of such media would include archival records, personal photographs and mementoes, dramatic scripts for both radio and theatre, lyrics of popular songs, films, atlases, newspaper clippings, letters, tall tales, blueprints and even dreams. For the first time, however, the majority of the primary documents upon which he draws are not presented directly to the reader. These are either referred to or described within the text by one of the characters or by the narrator.

him, thinking, as those would who believe that to continue a good dream you must lie down the next night in exactly the same position you awakened in, where the body parted from its images. Nicholas is aware of himself standing there within the pleasure of recall. It is something new to him. This is what history means. He came to this country like a torch on fire and he swallowed air as he walked forward and he gave out light. Energy poured through him. That was all he had time for in those years. Language, customs, family, salaries. Patrick's gift, that arrow into the past, shows him the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories. He is a tentative man, even with his family. That night in bed shyly he tells his wife the story of the nun. (*Lion* 149)

Alice's death causes Patrick to face his responsibility. But this responsibility is misdirected into Patrick's radicalization when he burns the Muskoka hotel and dives into the water, the way Gilgamesh crosses the river of death.<sup>15</sup> The last full chapter of the story takes place in 1938, after Patrick's release from prison, where he has transformed in a different man, with his step-daughter, Alice's daughter, Hana. At this point Clara Dickens returns to his life after Ambrose Small's death. The frame or *exergue* at the beginning makes sense at last: the two figures in the car are Patrick and Hana going to Marmora to pick up Clara. The responsibility for the silencing of history lies not only in the rich and the powerful, the text suggests. This is part of Alice's legacy to Patrick, killed by a mistake, a clock bomb hidden in a bag she carried by accident, a bomb that Patrick himself likely had created. This is a book about "ex-centricity and its power through naming and language" (Hutcheon 1988a, 103).

The dancer in the Macedonian performance, Alice Gull, is also a friend of Clara's: "But his relationship with Alice had a horizon. Even her stories about Hana's father, though intricate, gave nothing away of herself. She was never self-centred in her mythologies. She would turn any compliment away" (*Lion* 137). It is important to notice how the following development of Patrick's politicization by Alice is a reversal of the usual gendered narrative portraying the sexual romance of politics in which

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<sup>15</sup> On release from prison, Patrick ties up with the escaped prisoner Caravaggio, the immigrant turned thief. Together they plan the grand anarchic act of blowing up the water filtration plant, which involves Patrick swimming down the tunnel he and the immigrants have built, from Lake Ontario and into the building, planting explosives as he goes. Bruised and wounded by a small escape blast, he succeeds, and walks up to Harris's office where the man is working. There the political discussion lines up. Harris attempts to calm Patrick by telling him of his working-class origins, how "he hated the officials of the city but now he loved City Hall" (*Lion* 235).

women follow powerful men into class action because of their bodies.<sup>16</sup> In a sense, Patrick's politicization is a way for him to begin to insert himself into historical narrative; his skill with explosions can help him take on the role of anarchist and challenge the powerful. And he does so, though his identity and self-security is always balancing, for he feels "nothing but a prism that refracted their lives ... when not aligned with another -whether it was Ambrose, Clara or Alice- he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community. A gap of love" (*Lion* 157).

The bridge becomes the modernist presence and functions as the source of living for invisible immigrants like Nicholas Temelcoff, who "has no portrait of himself" (*Lion* 42). Even his language is not his own as for immigrants language and identity are connected: "If he did not learn the language he would be lost" (*Lion* 46). The book's subtitle, 'A Novel', calls attention to genre as none of Ondaatje's other books has done. All his longer works at least occasionally traverse its generic geography, but *Lion* sets itself up as a novel in the larger sense of historical reclamation, multiple characters, interwoven narratives, and political reflection, the latter of which some critics find lacking in Ondaatje's earlier works. "One of the things a novel can do," says the author, "is represent the unofficial story, give a personal, complicated version of things, as opposed to competing with the newspapers and giving an alternate but still simplified opinion" (Ondaatje 1990, 96). This novel does not so much plot a single trajectory of narrative -none of his books does- as offer moments of illumination and action in a number of lives, creating a larger, more complex collage than any of Ondaatje's previous books.

The matter of the text is history, then, but the unacknowledged history left out of the official texts. In seeking to redress the imbalance of official history, then, Ondaatje joins a large group of contemporary postcolonial writers for whom "the novel is one way of denying the official, politician's version of truth, and inscribing the 'unhistorical' memories of immigrant populations" (Barbour 1993, 179). As Ondaatje

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<sup>16</sup> Note the metamorphosis of a silent and nameless nun into Alice Gull, vociferous political agitator. Abandoning her religious habit, she saves Temelcoff with her veil, an exchange of skins. From the radio's lyrics, from the Macedonian bar, from Temelcoff's injured skin, she

explains: “That is certainly what I’m drawn to, especially the unspoken and unwritten stories -the ‘unhistorical’ stories. That’s one of the areas I think writers should write about” (1990, 198). Ondaatje’s interests, therefore, shift to unwritten history, to the forgotten threads of community.<sup>17</sup> With this novel the author explores a sphere of the city of Toronto between 1918 and 1938, the lives of working-class immigrants, largely Macedonians, Italians and Bulgarians who, “if they speak this way in public, in *any* language, other than English, they will be jailed. A rule of the city .... in this neighbourhood intricate with history and and ceremony, Patrick smiles to himself at the irony of reversals” (*Lion* 133).

After a documentation that lasted almost a decade, Ondaatje enriches the skin-imagery in the tannery scenes, in which one’s skin is emblematic of the gaining of a new cultural identity. At the same time, the workers’ tales revise romanticized official accounts of an early Canadian trade: “(men) leapt in embracing the skins of recently slaughtered animals ... pulling wet hides out after them so it appeared they had removed the skins from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries” (*Lion* 139).

Thus, the “skins” of the workers are associated with their cultural identity and with their position in the social power structure and around them. In both the *Gilgamesh* epic and in Ondaatje’s novel, the skin of the lion, therefore, suggests the acquisition of previously foreign attributes and qualities. Like the lion skin of the epic, these new qualities ultimately come to define the individual. Once such a “skin of a lion” is attained, the workers are ready to tell their story and to take part in the social event that is the performance of history. The process of acquiring a skin or identity is also accompanied by another obvious prerequisite to audience participation within the oral tradition. Nicholas Temelcoff soon notes that the immigrant’s first step towards social consolidation is language acquisition, for “(i)f he did not learn the language he would be lost” (*Lion* 46). Shortly after his arrival in Canada -the country he chooses

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learnt a new language. Alice’s penetration of society, her fall from an established church order, parallels Nicholas’s absorption into Upper America, for they both learn new languages.

<sup>17</sup> The book is dedicated to the memory of four of his friends, all of whom died violently before their time, passing into the grey of unrecorded history.

after listening to “Daniel Stoyanoff’s tall tales” (*Lion* 44)- he participates in performance arts, as a first step towards adopting a new culture and language. The process begins in silence and ends in a unified uproar: “the audience around him was silent ... (then) a terrible loudness entered the silent performance. The audience began to clap in unison” (*Lion* 117). Yet, the process need not always be charged with tension: “watching a Chaplin film he found himself laughing out loud, joining the others in their laughter. And he caught someone’s eye, the body bending forward to look at him, who had the same realization -that this mutual laughter was conversation” (*Lion* 138).

Here, the popular medium of visual story becomes a meeting ground. In the absence of an audible narrative, audience members become aware of their articulated reactions. Subsequently, the audience response to the presented images turns into a sub-story. The laughter sparked by the performance gives the audience a feeling of security and thus liberates it from external and internal censors. In this relaxed atmosphere the new language becomes accessible to all levels of learners: “Most immigrants learned their English from recorded songs or, until the talkies came, through mimicking actors on stage” (*Lion* 47). As the new Canadians enter the work place, the live performance becomes their metaphor and means of successful association and first step towards cultural participation.

Failure to acquire the new language, on the other hand, results in the loss of political power. For example, Alice’s silent puppet show demonstrates how the language barrier prevents the access of so-called ethnic minorities to society’s institutions (*Lion* 116-17). But Alice’s show does not end here. Following the exposure of social injustice, her presentation turns didactic. The climax of her performance requires audience participation for its resolution, and one evening Patrick commits himself and steps onto “this dangerous new country of the stage” (*Lion* 116). His dramatic intervention is both allegorical and actual. Thus, the open medium prompts Patrick’s response and exemplifies how the newcomers’ acts help to create a “neighbourhood intricate with history and ceremony of their own” (*Lion* 133). For

Alice, at least, “(y)ou name the enemy and destroy their power” (*Lion* 124), so that the audience participation leads eventually to audience empowerment.

Just as the Finnish loggers in “Little Seeds” do not own the land they traverse, so these immigrant tarrers of the Dominion Bridge Company “don’t own the legs or the arms jostling against their bodies” (*Lion* 25), for they are alienated labourers (*bitumiers, bitumatori*) without a voice in history. A man “is an extension of of hammer, drill, flame” (26) involved, like an artist, in the process of building bridges. With its historical revisionism, *Lion* focuses on political ceremonies, not from the point of view of politicians but from the perspective of an anonymous public. The way the candles the workers carry across at night are “like a wave of civilization, a net of summer insects over the valley” (*Lion* 27), Ondaatje’s similes and metaphors bridge history, democracy, horizontal voids and nature from section to section of this novel. The metaphor of the text, therefore, is that of the *network* (see Barthes 1977, 161).

The darkness in the tunnel below Lake Ontario is oppressive. The isolation, degradation, and dehumanization of the worker here reach their lowest depths. The enveloping darkness embodies the workers’ alienation from their work. They advance through darkness, agents of “progress,” oblivious to the grand design and their place in it: “The cut of the shovel into clay is all Patrick sees digging into the brown slippery darkness” (*Lion* 105). In the tunnel, blindness reduces a person to uncomprehending animality. Man works alongside horse and mule, “(t)he brain of the mule no more and no less knowledgeable than the body of a man who dug into a clay wall in front of him” (*Lion* 108).

Along with the darkness, silence is used as a recurring motif to further underscore the characters’ isolation and alienation: “During the eight-hour shifts no one speaks. Patrick is as silent as the Italians and Greeks towards the *bronco* foremen” (*Lion* 106). The lack of a common language distances Patrick from his community and makes him a minority: “The southeastern section of the city where he now lived was made up mostly of immigrants and he walked everywhere not hearing any language he knew, deliriously anonymous” (112); we are also told that Patrick “knew nothing about the men around him except how they moved and laughed -on this side of language”

(136). The phrase “on this side of language” suggests language’s function as a nexus. Language serves as a link between the individual and the people around him, the material world, and the past. The individual’s integration with these is thus achieved through words. Knowledge is attained when the referent is joined to its name:

-so they were *Finns*...

Now in his thirties he finally had a name for that group of men he witnessed as a child. She looked at Patrick, who was smiling as if a riddle old and tiresome had been solved, a burr plucked from his brain. (*Lion* 151)

Narration and narrative are instruments of social and historical integration. The darkness of Patrick’s own country is partly dispelled by Cato’s letters: “He had lived in this country all of his life. But it was only now that he learned of the union battles up north where Cato was murdered some time in the winter of 1921, and found under the ice of a shallow creek near Onion Lake a week after he had written his last letter. The facts of the story had surrounded Hana since birth, it was a part of her” (*Lion* 157). Narrative then serves as a link between the individual and society, as the thread that sews Nicholas to history and binds Hana to her dead father. As Patrick learns more about Cato’s life and the “union battles up north” (*Lion* 157), and about the history of his own country, he begins to feel it is time to give up his role as a passive observer and assume responsibility. But the imagery of violent revolutionary action suggests, if not an oppositional, certainly a problematic, relationship between such action and art. Hence, “one of the implied functions of *In the Skin of a Lion* is to humanize history and, consequently, its corollary ideology. But, at the same time, however, the novel suggests that such a history militates against radical, revolutionary action. Revolutionary action in *In the Skin of a Lion* stands in sharp contrast to the humanization the novel extols” (Sarris 1991, 196).

Even when he presents the official version from Commissioner Harris’s viewpoint, Ondaatje challenges traditional historical accounts. To map history, a tall tale follows: five nuns march across the bridge, one is blown off, disappears yet is saved by Nicholas Temelcoff, unsung hero and artist. The structure of Prince Edward Bridge or Bloor Street Viaduct is the structure of society with its various levels; and the nun’s fall initiates a levelling metamorphosis when she abandons her habit to emerge as Alice

Gull. Just as Temelcoff saves Alice, so Ondaatje rescues him from archival oblivion: “Again and again you see vista before you and the eye must search along the wall of sky to the speck of burned paper across the valley that is him, an exclamation mark, somewhere in the distance between bridge and river. He floats at the three hinges of the crescent-shaped steel arches. These knit the bridge together. The moment of cubism” (34). A metafictional exclamation mark on paper and an intertextual reference to Berger’s “moment of cubism” place *Lion* squarely in the tradition of postmodernism.<sup>18</sup>

For this very reason, *Lion* is a novel about discovering language (see van Herk 1987; Jannetta 1991), about the nature of silence and naming. Again, the dark side of this novel is the artist, a watcher, a corrector, “but still alien to the very country and language that he or she has been born with .... veiled in flesh, a political actor inventing history, a blind acrobat, blindfolded, moving through a world that refuses to be still, but moves to cause collision. And what is most striking is his invisibility, his absent presence at every moment and event” (van Herk 1987, 136). The text has been a series of performances whose fluidity and transformations resist the stasis of an authority that builds monuments to men like Commissioner Rowland Harris. The stories are there, the ordinary people whose effort has built the country have been named, but the text refuses to pretend that this naming can replace the official histories; at best it can supplement them and demonstrate the contingency of their truths: “He himself had kept his true name and voice from the bosses at the leather yard, never spoke to them or answered them. A chain was pulled that forced wet steam into the room so that their bodies were separated by whiteness coming up through the gridded floors, tattoos and hard muscles fading into unborn photographs” (*Lion* 136).

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<sup>18</sup> John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays* (1969). Ondaatje’s cubistic moment arises out of Berger’s description of an unhappy period earlier in the twentieth century: “An interlocking world system of imperialism; opposed to it, a socialist international; ... the increasing use of electricity, the invention of radio and cinema; the beginnings of mass production; ... the new structural possibilities offered by the availability of steel and aluminium” (1969, p. 5). Like Patrick and his father, Hazen Lewis, Temelcoff is a solitary artist bridging the century, knitting modern to postmodern. Like Bertha in Leonard Cohen’s *The Favourite Game*, he is a spinner linking everyone. Cohen has influenced Ondaatje in poetry and in his experimental novels *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*.

Although *Lion* sometimes betrays a confused ideology, its power lies in its ability to express the variety of stances to be found in any society, not as arguments but as visceral gestures, to make us see the lives of all these figures most feelingly (Barbour 1993, 204-205). In *Lion*, Ondaatje says, "I was writing more of a normal kind of novel; the characters were more invented and therefore much more a part of myself" (1990, 201). The narrative, which is enclosed in the framework of a remembering of the central character's lovers, begins with his childhood as a lone child -inspired in Al Purdy's childhood- living with a father who is by turns silent and explosive, for he is a dynamiter. The boy too learns how to explode and uses this talent later on both for work and for political purposes.

But first he becomes a searcher, trying to win an enormous reward by finding a rich man, Ambrose Small, who has run off. Small is the hero -and initially was to be the main character of the story. In Patrick's case love intervenes, and by the time he finds Small, the man has become a recluse, the hero who evades fame. If Patrick "was a hero he could come down on Small like an arrow" -but he has been told by his lover Clara who would lead him to Small, "never to follow her" (*Lion* 83) and so initially he does not; but "(a)ll his life Patrick Lewis has lived beside novels and their clear stories. Authors accompanying their heroes clarified motives. World events raised characters from destitution. The books would conclude with all wills rectified and all romances solvent. Even the spurned lover accepted the fact that the conflict had ended" (*Lion* 82). Soon his sexual memory tells him differently and he goes off in pursuit of Clara, only to find Small back in Patrick's own childhood home town when Patrick doesn't want him any more.

Alice, Patrick, Cato (Alice's earlier lover and Hana's father), Caravaggio -all of these anarchists are acting from commitment to and memory of another person, because there is no tangible community out there; it is their only way of writing themselves into history, by spinning faster and faster around to suddenly crash into the monolithic system of power and explode. This is an image that Ondaatje continually gives the reader throughout his writing from the stress of machines with "the one altered move that will make them maniac" (*Billy the Kid* 41), to Patrick's literal

blindfolded physical explosion around his small room detonated by Clara's small change of position (*Lion* 80).

In a completely different generic stance from the detective story quest for answers, it is possible to read *Lion* as a vast physiodrama peopled by an allegory of types. Caravaggio, Temelcoff, Alice, Small, Clara, Cato, Harris: all become wild figures stamping and dancing on the periphery of Patrick's vision; all these possibilities for personal action are in effect refractions of Patrick, rather than he the prism refracting them. Each of them acquires at times the extraordinary metaphoric density that Ondaatje's poetics can confer. Caravaggio disappears literally "into the blue," and appears "out of the blue," as the blue-painted man camouflaged against the blue-painted ceiling of the penitentiary hall. Ondaatje's writing has a deep trust in the literal base for language, as his thematics have a deep trust in the possibility for communication in love. Yet this physical body of the text is refocused quite clearly on the necessary interaction with history.

Magic, together with history, is something the novel regards quite seriously. *Lion* demands the exercise of both the intuition and imagination of the reader, faculties that play a central role in the narration itself. There are a number of scenes or emotions, for instance, about which the protagonist could have no knowledge. Patrick could have no way of knowing the details of Ambrose's death and his final dialogue with Clara before expiring (*Lion* 213-15). Such details could only be provided by the storyteller's imagination. The author thus tries to capture the essence of a historical subject whose vagueness forces him to draw upon all he knows and can guess about it. And, by leaving much out, the novel forces the reader to engage in the same sort of guesswork and divination. *Lion*, however, aspires instead, in its very ambiguity and lack of clarity, toward the "best" that art can be: "*Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become*" (*Lion* 146). Ondaatje chooses, as a result, an order that is "very faint" but also "very human" (*Lion* 146).

There are hints of other ways to engage memory: when Patrick presents Temelcoff with a photograph to remind him of the time he saved a nun from falling, he

remembers “the exact date which his memory had lost -and pleasure and wonder fill him” (*Lion* 148). Patrick’s searches, researches, are not simply to find answers. They become part of a process by which individuals can connect themselves to their communities; construct common histories appropriate to their needs. This analogically directs the reader back to the structure of the book, which is a memory of Clara that Patrick is recounting to Alice’s daughter, after all these events are over and on their way to meet Clara. His willingness to talk is in contrast to his attempts to remember Alice while in prison, where he “protected himself with silence ... as if saying even one word would begin a release of Alice out of his body. Secrecy kept him powerful. By refusing communication he could hold her within himself” (*Lion* 212). Only once, when his friend Caravaggio is attacked does he break his silence because “his father’s neutral song slid out as warning” (*Lion* 212). Silence, refusal to communicate, may be generated by a fear that we will discover there to be nothing appropriate to say if we articulate our memory. Yet silence about the personal, a peculiarly male trait in western culture, also leads to explosion and destruction. His willingness to share his memories of Clara is partly because she is still there to help him reconstruct her back into his life: “There would always be something careful about her. As if she had been badly scalded and so would approach all water tentatively for fear it was boiling. With her there would be brief conflicts, a discussion, and then everything was settled. She would not be bossed and she was self-sufficient. She didn’t expect forgiveness” (*Lion* 137).

Political correctness may appear less postcolonial in the criticism levelled at *Lion*. As Julie Beddoes puts it, “the novel’s self-subversion, its lacunae and ambivalences, make it impossible to assign clear meaning to the political violence that it describes” (1994, 207). She goes on to state that “working-class lives are not recorded in the novel” (1994, 210), and that the novel’s “postmodern aesthetic practices neutralize -or even oppose- its tentative thematizing of a radical class politics” (1994, 206). She even accuses Patrick Lewis, the book’s central character, because for him “it is easy ... to make love to a revolutionary as to the mistress of one of the ruling class” (1994, 208). But then, the two women are both artists -and themselves intimately related in that they both share powers that are rooted in sexuality and the language of

performance arts. Furthermore, Clara's lover Ambrose Small may be a millionaire, but he is also a drop-out, who came "from nothing into the world of theatre management" (55), to disappear into nothingness: hardly a respectable member of any "ruling" class. Significantly, Beddoes fails to analyze Patrick's decision not to blow up the waterworks at the end of the novel. It presents only one question to her: "On which side is this text?" (1994, 213).

The answer is simple, for throughout the text we see very little of the Torontonians ruling class. If anything the book is concerned with working class people, but perhaps not in the way in which socialist realism would want to see them or their reality portrayed; even so, the description of the working conditions of the dyers in the tannery leaves very little to be desired: workers are dyers / diers in both senses of the homophone here: "Nobody could last in that job more than six months" (*Lion* 131). Ondaatje's novel "departs from the stereotyped ascription of roles which supports the opposition We/They (Vauthier 1990, 72). Vauthier's analysis of Patrick Lewis' role reveals the complex lines of Ondaatje's strategy of presentation:

By a neat inversion, Patrick Lewis, who by virtue of his birth and native tongue, not to mention gender, belongs to the dominant group, is made an outsider. In this fictional choice, we can observe an oscillation between a mainly synecdochal / metonymic and a metaphorical use of characters. An "immigrant to the city," Patrick "is the one born in this country who knows nothing of the place." He shares, and emblemizes, the displacement fundamental to the adventure of immigration .... In relation to his Macedonian and Bulgarian neighbours, he is in minority, "their alien" .... There is no contrast here between the Anglo-Celtic Canadian who masters the dominant language and the ethnic who does not. The lesson is clear: on the margins of Canadian society, English, the majority language, becomes a minority language; and the whole idea of socio-cultural dominance is undermined. (1990, 72)

Vauthier has analyzed Ondaatje's techniques of presenting and representing the silenced discourse of the immigrant workers. She praises the puppet show scene in the waterworks in which Alice performs the silence of the immigrants in a pantomime, calls it a "masterstroke" in which the author duplicates "in the textual space the very theme of his novel for a wide readership." Both the character and the author "have given a voice, though a silent one, to the confrontation between the immigrant and the new world." She concludes that "there is no totalizing voice overriding the others, no

expropriation of the other's discourse, no pre-given unmediated reality" (Vauthier 1990, 78, 86).

The question of sides is misleading -even for two characters who at first seem to be clearly on different sides: Nicholas Temelcoff, construction worker on the bridge, and Rowland Harris, Commissioner of Public Works. In the "Bridge" chapter, Harris is one of the bosses: "his expensive tweed coat ... cost more than the combined weeks' salary of five bridge workers" (*Lion* 43). Yet the "sides" they are on are not static, but dynamic: the immigrant Temelcoff invests the money he makes on the bridge to start his own business: a bakery; he uses the bridge he has built to transport "his bread and rolls and cake and pastries ... (to) the multitudes of the city" (*Lion* 149). Harris, on the other hand, reveals towards the end of the novel that he was not born rich: "I was practically *born* in City Hall. My mother was a caretaker. I worked up" (*Lion* 235). Any one class will not do to encompass the complexities of their positions.<sup>19</sup> In the climactic confrontation between Harris and Patrick, with its oral narrative echoes, the values of periphery confront the values of the centre. Harris resorts to tales to delay the threatening execution of Patrick's plans. He is talking for his life (*Lion* 235), and hastily he assembles limited stock arguments to justify capitalist excesses (*Lion* 236). Thus he invokes canonical authority to stay in power. Patrick, however, seeks an exchange that will put him at peace with himself and others. Harris, therefore, does not convince Patrick through argumentation; through his rhetoric, Harris not only gains time, but his strategy also leads to an unexpected opening. Patrick shares his story of Alice's death, and unburdens himself. In the end it becomes apparent that Patrick has sought the confessional more than the destruction of the waterworks: "For him, the telling of the tale has inherent healing powers" (Gamlin 1992, 70).

Patrick's decision not to blow up the waterworks may have been inspired by a realization of all this. Nonetheless, "(t)he confrontation between Patrick and Harris replays but does not resolve the opposing political visions the novel has articulated" (Barbour 1993, 203). His conversation with Harris may have made him see that in that

violent action he would have destroyed something of himself, obliterating a record of his and his fellow workers' history. Politically radical and correct as such destruction may seem to some, it is questionable whether it would have changed anything, except destroying a beautiful building, and disrupting the supply of water to everyone, including working-class people. Despite Beddoes's argument, then, we cannot see any clear meaning to be attributed to such a destructive action. Moreover, the last thing Ondaatje's novel would do is "to assign clear meaning to the political violence that it describes" (Pesch 1997d, 102), a final argument that is also valid for Ondaatje's next novel. Patrick endorses the struggle but rejects the position of final dominance. To do otherwise would be a betrayal of his father, of his friends and even of Alice: Patrick would be written into history to be used by would-be followers to their ends: "Just as Patrick rejects the power and finality of a destructive blow, Ondaatje surrenders the authority of a closed narrative system. In each episode his oral narrative strategies instead allow several points of departure for further tales. Ultimately, Toronto's civic history is negotiated in an interpretive retelling of events" (Gamlin 1992, 76-7).

Patrick is not a conventional or romantic hero that has to change the world order. As Patrick puts it -almost foreshadowing the voice and mind of the author- "I don't believe in the language of politics, but I'll protect the friends I have. It's all I can handle" (*Lion* 122). His evasion of any final commitment is an affirmation of life, but it also obliges him to rely on others to carry on where he leaves off. Patrick's course of action thus allows for further communal participation, in accordance with oral narrative aesthetics. Unlike the heroic individual at the centre of conventional historiography whose actions are said to be felt by generations to come, Patrick is part of a human web and is influenced by others as much as he influences them. His portrayal thus undermines conventional history and its official chronology of conflicts among "historical figures" (Gamlin 1992, 75).

The process of constructing communal life has its central metaphor in the bridge, the Bloor Street Viaduct, that is built by immigrant workers. Harris takes

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<sup>19</sup> Barbour acknowledges Harris' "visionary force able to turn dream into reality," but points out that "after the Inferno-like vision of the workers toiling in the tunnel, it creates a tension that

personal pride in the realization of his visions of the city. The Bloor Street Viaduct and the water purification plant are his brain-children. And he may well be proud, for while Harris was into construction, across the ocean others were engaged in the mindless and devastating destruction known as the Great War -the bridge was completed in October 18, 1918 (*Lion* 27). Many of his workers were “national guerrillas. Political activists. Freedom-fighters in Bulgaria and Turkey and Serbia (who) were tortured” (*Lion* 122; see Petroff 1995) as Alice tells us. They would have been cannon fodder in this war, had they not escaped to Canada. Temelcoff would not have been able to buy his bakery without the bridge, which facilitates his social and physical mobility.

Furthermore, the bridge and waterworks which Harris designed and which the workers constructed do not just serve the private pleasures of the happy few. They are integral parts of communal networks, public utilities that link people, serve them. Without them, no life can flow through the city. It is these that Harris invests his life and skills in, turning them into works of art, even, with “herringbone tiles in the toilets ... and copper roofs” (*Lion* 236). They are monuments of civic pride, landmarks of public achievement, democratically serving all.

The text cannot escape, however, a “romanticized individualism” (Bök 1995, 13), inasmuch as it presents revolutionary ideology as itself potentially oppressive, an ideology of which the protagonists must always beware in order to sustain their individual humanity. The text privileges visionary idealism over dialectical pragmatism as Ondaatje has always tried to disavow the sociopolitical implications of his writing: “I’m not interested in politics on (a) public level” (1972, 20); but, he later admits that he has an interest in “the destruction of social violence by the violence of outsiders” (1975, 46). As Bök rightly asserts, Ondaatje “expresses a burgeoning tension throughout his career between two conflicting, artistic impulses, the will to social retreat and the will to social contact” (1995, 18). As Davey (1993) has also commented on, Ondaatje is interested in the effects of political *praxis* upon private experience, that is, he privileges the integrity of the individual over the integrity of the community though there is an obvious attraction to the mystique of revolutionary politics.

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complicates the arguments and actions of the rest of the novel” (1993, p. 192).

Ondaatje incorporates these public networks, the bridge and the waterworks, and draws attention to the fact that immigrant workers were among those who constructed these landmarks of Toronto. Aestheticizing these buildings, he changes their public perception and loads them with symbolic meaning they did not have previously, thus supplementing official history, so that Temelcoff and his fellow bridge builders are part of the Bloor Street Viaduct now, and no one can look at the waterworks without thinking of the immigrants watching Alice's puppet show or Patrick and the tunnel workers. *Lion* has inscribed the immigrant workers into the cityscape. This inscription is further complicated by the fact that most of the workers portrayed in the novel are immigrants. Heble has tried to come to grips with the complex interaction and overlay of racism and internal colonialism which Ondaatje deals with. For Heble, "there is no escaping the fact that colonization is part of our cultural and political history" (1995, 244). Indeed, Canada's role as a colonial, anti-colonial, and post-colonial power in this novel has been commented on very little so far. As Heble points out, the "recovering (of) lost histories" is only "available through the agency of literature" (1995, 250).<sup>20</sup> The question thus becomes not a matter of sides, but one that tries to discover "the extent to which history itself is suspect" and "the novel's ability to negotiate a territory fraught with complex cultural predicaments and tensions" (Heble 1995, 250). In *Lion* Ondaatje has taken on official history as a unified concept, and by supplementing it with his stories, revealed its incompleteness, complex constructedness, and ultimate subjectivity: "Far from purporting to offer an accurate account of these histories, *In the Skin of a Lion* ... reminds us that we are reading his (Ondaatje's) imaginative reconstruction of them" (Heble 1995, 250).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Vauthier takes a similar position when she says that "Ondaatje's novel has slain some of the lions of official history and, putting on a lion's skin, has sung a fragmented multiplistic epic for our time." To her it has "the authority of story-telling, which, however challenged by postmodern thought, remains operative. It is not the authority of the story itself, only that of the performance" (1990, p. 87).

<sup>21</sup> Macedonian immigrants to Toronto have never had until now a comprehensive history of their early years in the city. Lillian Petroff (1995) evokes their moving, sometimes tragic history, charting their living and working conditions, their social and religious life, and their deep and complex relations with their troubled homeland from the early twentieth century to the Second World War. For Macedonians, the sojourner period in Toronto was approximately 1903-12; the settler era, the 1920s and 1930s. The 1910s virtually froze the community in its tracks: the

Accounts of migration abound throughout the novel. These include Temelcoff's harrowing passage from Macedonia to Canadian shores; Patrick's voyage from hinterland to metropolis, followed by his repeated journeys between various peripheries and centres; Ambrose Small's mysterious disappearance underground; the equally strategic manoeuvres of Cato in his efforts to fortify union organization while avoiding the threats of company authorities; and Caravaggio's numerous and clandestine odysseys. By alluding to and reappropriating received stories, traditions and generic conventions, Ondaatje stakes his claim to a crosscultural inheritance, and pieces together an alternative literary tradition that answers to his most pressing concerns as a migrant writer. Similarly he shapes connections with old worlds and new, situating himself in relation to their various geographies and histories.

The novel is a political act to "betray official history" by humanizing it, by making it private. As Sarris explains, Ondaatje's novel's "insistence on the humanization of history includes the humanization of the enemy, a process that militates against the adoption of violent means to fight that enemy" (1991, 199). Sarris sees the lack of a final combat and Patrick's falling asleep as a "forfeit of moral responsibility" that results from humanizing the enemy. However, this scene marks the book as typically Canadian, for Patrick must give up his personal revenge against Harris when he realizes the truth of what Harris says: "Alice Gull was killed by an anarchist" (*Lion* 238). Subversion and revolution are rejected as Patrick accepts shared guilt and Harris acknowledges the heroism of Patrick as Gilgamesh, making it possible for "peace, order, and good government" to take precedence over individual pursuits.

Ondaatje's choices of marginalized people and events and the relatively unfamiliar Babylonian epic as intertext validate the term "ex-centric" to describe *Lion*; however, Ondaatje's excentric novel upholds "traditional Canadian values" (see Beran

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partition of Macedonia by the Treaty of Bucharest after the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 shattered their dream of return, and the First World War blocked the exodus of family members from the homeland. Individual and collective memories of the Macedonian experience in Toronto have already inspired writers of fiction such as in Hugh Garner's *Cabbagetown* (1950) and Ondaatje's *Lion*. Lillian Petroff's book *Sojourners and Settlers: The Macedonian Community in Toronto to 1940* is the product of oral testimony collected through hours of interviewing: "only individuals' memories, letters, photos, and possessions, and the record of the institutions that they created, can help us recapture the history and magnitude of the community" (Petroff 1995, p. xvi).

1993, 81). The novel ends with the characters moving to reunite fractured families, pointing towards the reestablishment of order and balance in their personal lives. Ondaatje's texts constantly remind us who we are, who we were, and who we might become. As Robert Kroetsch states, "we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" (1970, 63).

### 11.1 Post-National Arguments: Narrative as Minefields

I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, from *your* country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour .... You and the Americans converted us. With your missionary rules. (*Patient* 283)

The concept of “nation,” born within the belief of a centered structure and thus part of the philosophy of Western metaphysics, has played a constitutive role in both the colonial and postcolonial periods. In the former, the (imperial) nation serves as a universal model which the subjugated territories must imitate. In the present postcolonial phase, the nation becomes the site for nationalist claims of political independence and cultural specificity. The modern nation-state appears as the result of an equation between public and private interests, with its attendant contradiction between the supposed universality of the state and the cultural specificity of the nation (see Darias 1996, 195).

Homi Bhabha has thus attempted to deconstruct this concept in his Introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1991, 1-7), by laying bare the strategies that construct the peoples as nation and by situating them within a discourse of cultural identification. Thus “nationness” constitutes a doubtful term of definition for postcolonial discursivity in that it is based on the exclusion of the other: “The nation reveals, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation, the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference” (Bhabha 1991, 300).

In its drive to unify the people in a common ideology, the concept of a national identity depends on the erasure of the process of its own construction as well as on the exclusion of specific social categories (race, class, gender, etc.) which determine

different approaches to identity-construction. As we have seen above, national identity becomes thus suspect in the face of the appearance of minority discourses which do not fit into the defined official pattern of identity. In this way, as Donald Pease has commented, the minorities' increasing awareness of the allocation of power in the national comes along with a realization that "the negative class, race, and gender categories ... were ... a structural necessity for the construction of a national narrative" (Pease 1992, 4).

The consideration of these excluded narratives then, with their heterogeneous accents, makes it impossible, in Canada and elsewhere, to sustain the central arguments that construct the nation as a compact and centralized structure of power. In Canada, the overwhelming presence of explicitly transcultural texts within national production questions the model of national unity -be this in the monocultural or in the new, but, often, equally assimilative, multicultural form (see Craig 1989; Itwaru 1990). That seems to be the case of fictions by Canadian writers like Marwan Hassan, Thomas King, Bharati Mukherjee, Michael Ondaatje, and others. The strong decentering drive in the texts of these writers represents the breaking of minority discourse into the discourse of nationness, both affirming and undermining its unifying tendency (see Darias 1996, 197).

The search for a Canadian identity has often attempted to unify cultural characteristics into an homogeneous whole thus ignoring the cultural diversity and a most favourable pluralistic approach. Frank Davey (1993) argues that there is no monological Canadian nationalism and the ones that have ignored both the conflict and the heterogeneity active in Canadian texts have mistaken the concept of nationhood. National arguments are, for Davey, what signal a separate society in Canada. During decades a direct link has been assumed between nationalism and English-Canadian writing. Therefore, Canadian literature in English was the national literature and evolved from the colonial to the modern (Woodcock), from the Victorian to the postmodern (Kroetsch), from the romantic to the high modern (Keith), or from the

colonial to the postcolonial (New). It has developed national mythologies like “two solitudes” or “survival,” isolation or the perfect arena for postmodernism and irony.

All nationalist readings of Canadian literature are political in some sense. They try to link the literary texts and the cultural or ideological ones. Atwood uses the victim metaphor in *Survival* whereas Gaile McGregor portrays Canadian ideology in contestation with the American in *The Wacousta Syndrome*. Culture and identity are, therefore, the most frequent words used by critics who are perhaps insecure to speculate with politics without mentioning the neighbour from the south.<sup>1</sup>

The contestation and conflict within one culture are those of gender, class, region, ethnicity and economic practises:

A reluctance to acknowledge this contestation, or to recognize that people located at different positions within the complex of situations and codes that constitute any country have different and conflicting interests on most issues, can result not only in inarticulate debating of such critical issues as ‘free trade’ but in misleading, harmonious constructions of Canadian literature, politics, and culture. (Davey 1993, 18-9)

Davey analyses a group of Canadian novels arguing that the world they inhabit is a global field rather than a determined geographical space. One thing is that there is a diverse and plural imaginary landscape designed by a variety of writers coming from different origins, such as Rohinton Mistry’s novels which develop in India and are transnational in that sense. Another thing, however, is to dogmatize and generalize a literature based on a pluralistic culture affirming that it inhabits “a post-national space,

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<sup>1</sup> A certain phase of Canadian history and the Canadian experience came to an end in the two decades between the 1967 centenary and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. The Canadian state can be the same, but the concept of nation, its attitudes, values, and traditions, have changed for different reasons such as the rise of the separatist movement in Québec, the Free-Trade Agreement, and the continuing domination of the Canadian economy and of Canadian mass culture by multinational corporations, the shift in immigration from European immigrants to immigrants from the developing countries, the rise in influence of postcolonial studies in the humanities and social sciences, the development of the global village unified by transnational electronic media, and the Canadian Multicultural Act. As Solecki asserts, “many of the constitutive assumptions and myths of our first century, as well as the questions we thought worth asking about identity, nation, and culture,

in which sites are as interchangeable as postcards, in which discourses are transnational, and in which political issues are constructed on non-national (and often a-historical) ideological grounds” (Davey 1993, 259). According to this view, in this post-national model we include novels such as *Obasan*, *The English Patient* or *In the Skin of a Lion*, where the aesthetic alternative is not the nation but the individual, where national boundaries are not relevant any more for the isolated protagonist.

Davey’s opinion appears “determined by the agonistic view of McLuhan’s global village with its lack of faith in politics and community and its atomized individuals living under a compulsorily homogenized culture” (Darias 1996, 200). Accordingly, Davey’s already known anti-thematic criticism ignores the fact that the rejection of a unified Canadian identity does not imply an erasure of differences but, on the contrary, a celebration of its heterogeneity in an open national space with its counterdiscursivity. The post-national is therefore a problematic concept. The term, however, has been used differently elsewhere. It can involve a production and proliferation of previously excluded heterogeneous narratives of nation, enacting strategic subversions of the supposed unicity of national identity (see Pease 1992). Davey’s argument thus attempts to claim universal values in literary texts which are really concerned with the impossibility of maintaining a concept of nation as cultural and historical unity. In Davey’s view, also, the postcolonial would become diffuse and homogenizing through the undifferentiation of postnational and multicultural discourses. It would become, in Masao Miyoshi’s words, “another alibi to conceal the actuality of global politics” (1993, 728; see also Said 1993).

There have been different approaches in the theorizing of Canadian literatures. Cynthia Sugars (1997) firstly identifies a literary-separatist position -paralleled by political separatism- in which Québécois and Canadian literatures are distinct, sharing no common tradition or influences so they should be considered in isolation. English-

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no longer have the same frame of reference they once did. It’s as if the key words -including nation and culture- have themselves shifted, and continue to shift, in meaning” (1999, p. 4).

Canadian critics belonging to this group defend this separation because they cannot judge Québécois literature as they are ignorant of the language and culture. W.J. Keith falls in this category, or Terry Goldie, who defines this position as cultural relativism, or anthologists such as A.J.M. Smith, Desmond Pacey and Carl Klinck. In the 1960s and 1970s another approach came to the fore, the nationalist, centralist, or mainstream. These critics would prefer a larger heading of Canadian literature to include French and English and they argue that both literatures share a similar tradition and influences, but, more overtly in this case, there is an obvious desire for national unity. There is another approach, a position of reconciliation, a bicultural position based on the notion that both cultures have followed parallel but distinct paths, and they have experienced separate literary traditions in English and French like in the case of critics such as Louis Dudek, Archibald MacMechan, Lorne Pierce, Sherry Simon, etc. A fourth approach is called “sovereignty-association” whose prominent advocate is Blodgett. Its purpose consists of separating both literatures completely so there is a Canadian and a Québécois literature without any unifying implication. For Blodgett, it is the notion of Canada what is debatable: “despite the fact that Canada is at least two nations whose federal jurisdiction is still in the process of definition, literary critics continue to behave ... as if Canada were one country with literatures in two different languages” (Blodgett 1982, 17). In this sense, the figuration of place in the Canadian imagination is “ideological” (Blodgett 1984-85, 66). This, however, is a “binary configuration” (Sugars 1997, 278), and the only way to overcome these binary oppositions is a multicultural and pluralistic approach to Canadian literature.

As we have seen above, Taylor offers a way out of this dilemma with a more coherent means of allowing for both unity and diversity within the Canadian polity. The first level of diversity valorizes the multi-ethnic composition of the country, but sees each member as sharing a uniform sense of belonging to one multicultural mosaic that protects individual rights. A second level or deep diversity accounts for other

ways of belonging like are the First Nations and the people from Québec. Diversities must be combined to construct a federation based on mutual recognition and respect.

Whatever unity and identity the country as a whole may have created after a century of struggle has been challenged by all the events of the past sixty years, which have posed a “legitimation crisis” in which Canadians continually question the “beliefs and values” essential to their existence as a nation.<sup>2</sup> Davey’s methodology, on the other hand, is flawed and pessimistic and clearly opposed to Taylor’s for whom the nation can prosper under a common purpose and project (see Taylor 1993, 26-7), use the Charter of Rights as “a common reference point of identity” (Taylor 1993, 161), and adopt a pluralist model of the state that distinguishes between what he calls the “deep diversity” of French-Canadians and the First Nations and the “first-level diversity” of other Canadians (see Taylor 1993, 182-3).<sup>3</sup> Taylor thus acknowledges the presence of a multicultural Canada but resists the pressure -explicit in supporters of multiculturalism and postcolonial theories- to grant the same historical status to all groups of the Canadian mosaic. Identity, for Taylor, is defined in dialogue with the other, never in isolation. This is the crucial fact by which the politics of equal recognition is so central and stressed in Canadian society and culture.

The referenda in Québec, for instance, announce repeatedly a change in the national situation while challenging Canadians to reflect on or entertain the possibility that the country may be radically different in the future, both as nation and state.

Contributing to the confusion are several alternative views of the nation -usually

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<sup>2</sup> “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (Taylor 1997, p. 98).

<sup>3</sup> The former acknowledges that Quebeckers and the aboriginal peoples have a prior membership in their own historical communities that predates their membership in Canada and that that membership distinguishes them and gives them a status different from Canadians with other national origins.

grounded in postmodern or multicultural or postcolonial assumptions about nationhood- not far different from and almost as unworkable as Woodcock's earlier vision of a decentred and decentralized Canada. Accordingly, Solecki comments that for a nation, postcolonial or not, to exist it needs a commitment to something more than a heterogeneous pluralism, a politics of difference, or a recognition of the equal value and validity of all of its cultures, languages and traditions. One may believe in the value of difference and diversity, yet suspect that a community or nation cannot be founded on what Gad Horowitz has wittily termed a "masochistic celebration of Canadian nothingness." (Solecki 1999, 7)

Solecki and Taylor, therefore, acknowledge the presence of a poly-ethnic Canada but resist the pressure to grant the same historical status to all groups of the Canadian mosaic. In Will Kymlicka's terms, on the other hand, French Canadians and the First Nations constitute national minorities, while other Canadians can be described as ethnic groups (1996, 6).<sup>4</sup> Taylor, like Kymlicka, however, is sympathetic to the

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This status is implicitly acknowledged in the Supreme Court decision of 3 October 1996 in which Algonquin "ancestral rights" are recognized.

<sup>4</sup> Solecki reminds us that most modern definitions of the nation are imprecise and inclusive (1999 pp. 15-16): "Most postcolonial nations, for instance, can't recognize themselves in Ernest Renan's comment that 'a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle' that is 'the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion.' Closer to the historical reality of a country like Canada are Eric Hobsbawm's suggestion that a nation 'is any sufficiently large body of people whose members regard themselves as members of a nation' and Rupert Emerson's view that a 'nation is a community of people who feel that they belong together in the double sense that they share deeply significant elements of a common heritage and that they have a common destiny for the future.' Even nations that claim a lengthy historical pedigree with origins shrouded in 'the mists of time,' perhaps especially such nations, are recent historical constructs that in their more myth-making moods have invented their own roots."

demands from nation groups for some sort of differentiated citizenship or group-differentiated rights.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century in Canada the dream of a literature was inextricable from the dream of a nation: a literature that stood between British and American, but was different from both, that would articulate a national experience that, though rooted in British and French traditions and influenced by the American one, would be somehow different from all three, just as the citizens, though immigrants, would over the generations become Canadians.<sup>5</sup>

The Canadian Charter of Rights (1982) aligned Canada's political system in this regard with the American system. The big question was then how to deal with the claims of distinctness put forward by French Canadians, particularly Quebeckers, on the one hand, and the aboriginal peoples on the other. The result was the clash of collective and individual rights, and the pursuit of the collective end may involve treating insiders and outsiders differently as it occurs with Law 101 which forbids francophones and immigrants to send their children to English-language schools, but allow Canadian anglophones to do so.<sup>6</sup> The requirement should be, not the

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<sup>5</sup> See Charles Taylor's comment that "Faced with this model (the American model of a nation), it is natural for Canadians to wonder whether we have an identity. For we have not and could never have one of this kind. In this respect we are more like a European country; that is, we have a greater ideological spread in our politics, and no one set of ideas can be help up to be 'Canadian values' or to be the foundation of a 'Canadian way of life.' A Committee on Un-Canadian activities could only be a joke at the expense of our neighbours. But if the American model does not fit, the European one does not either; for these nations are for the most part united by language, by culture and often by a long history" (Taylor, 1993, p. 25).

<sup>6</sup> "This sense that the Charter clashes with basic Québec policy was one of the grounds of opposition in the rest of Canada to the Meech Lake accord. The cause of concern was the distinct-society clause, and the common demand for amendment was that the Charter be 'protected' against this clause, or take precedence over it. There was undoubtedly in this opposition a certain amount of old-style anti-Quebec prejudice, but there was also a serious philosophical point .... Each society misperceived the other throughout the Meech Lake debate .... The rest of Canada saw that the distinct-society clause legitimated collective goals. And Quebec saw that the move to give the Charter precedence imposed a

presumption of an ideal equal value, “but a willingness to be open to comparative cultural study of the kind that must displace our horizons in the resulting fusions .... an admission that we are very far away from that ultimate horizon where the relative worth of different cultures might be evident” (Taylor 1997, 126).

Both globalization and postcolonialism begin with the assumption that while the nation-state may not be dead exactly, it has undergone a drastic change in role: “The time bound and enclosed nation-state whose institutional form once foreclosed other possibilities has given way to more complex patterns of interdependence grounded in the belief that the local and international are inextricably intertwined” (Pease 1997, 2). Globalization and postcolonialism, however, differ radically in the concept they have of the nation’s change of status. Postcolonialism analyses the processes whereby anti-imperial nationalisms speak back to transnational capital in the name of different and disparate peoples, whereas in globalization transnational capital manages national populations in the name of the state. The postnational is, therefore, that complex site wherein “postcolonialism’s resistance to global capital intersects with the questions the global economy addresses to the state concerning the nation’s continued role in its management” (Pease 1997, 2).

Postnational narratives can be belated accommodations to global capital or to narrate forms of resistance. Together with postcolonialism, however, the nation undergoes a drastic historical orientation in that postcolonialism sorts national narratives into at least three separate though overlapping categories: national, antinational, and postnational. Postcolonialism often deploys national narratives strategically as forms of local resistance to the encroachment of global capital.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the discourse of globalization, though, postcolonialism constitutes an immanent critique of the nation as an ideological mystification of state power. National

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form of liberal society that was alien, and to which Quebec could never accommodate itself without surrendering its identity” (Taylor 1997, pp. 117-18).

<sup>7</sup> See See Partha Chatterjee, 1986, pp. 1-35. For a stern critical position see Aijaz Ahmad 1992, and Homi K. Bhabha, 1990, pp. 1-7.

narratives then derive both their coherence and their claim to universal value from their opposition to other national narratives. But the contradictory relation between difference and sameness out of which national narratives and national identities were fashioned could only be resolved into a unity through the state's intervention:

when it exercised the power to make a unity out of difference, however, the state also threatened its individual subjects' relation to this unity with disruption at the paradoxical space wherein unification was accomplished .... insofar as an individual could only consider him or herself as a part of the nation after recognizing his or her apartness from it, her (or his) national identity could only be achieved through an act performed by this part lacking the whole. (Pease 1997, 5)

The representations of other racialized or stateless persons effect the illusion that, rather than identifying with the nation-state, the condition of apartness refers only to non-nationals and results from the national people's abjection of racialized others. Racism, therefore, "effects the collective illusion of the nation as a concretized universal (of nationalism) through its occlusion of the paradoxes associated with the nation's identification" (Pease 1997, 6).

Postnational narrations have struggled to make visible the incoherence, contingency and transitoriness of the national narratives and to reveal this paradoxical space.<sup>8</sup> These narratives have materialized the post-national as "the internal boundary insisting at the site where stateless individuals have not yet consented to state power and the state has not yet integrated the stateless into its national order .... these acts of narration take place *as* the double apartness (and extensive in-betweenness) of state power and peoples apart from the state" (Pease 1997, 8). The postnational might be understood as having opened up the gap within national narratives -in between state power and how to make sense of it- that national narrativity had covered over.

In *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha has usefully complicated this description of the relation between national narratives and the discourse of colonialism by describing them as doubles whose relation is not calculable as a similitude. Bhabha designates the

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<sup>8</sup> See Bhabha 1990, pp. 291-321.

colonial state apparatus as the disavowed agent of national narrativity and postcoloniality as the limit internal to (post)national narration:

It is precisely in reading between these borderlines of the nation-space that we can see how the “people” come to be constructed within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement .... In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation. (Bhabha 1991, 297)

For Bhabha, therefore, postcolonial strategies are effective resources in the enunciative sites proper to the performance of postnational narration. The “pedagogical” refers both to the subjects structured within national narratives and to those subject to the colonial state. With their oppositional stance against imperial nationalism, postcolonial intellectuals have deployed and antinational nationalism (see Pease 1997, 12) as a strategic weapon in the struggle against cultural imperialism.

Literary criticism is rooted in specific histories and particular cultural formations; we wonder, however, what it means to speak of Canadian criticism in an era which seems to be engaged in the process of articulating post-national arguments; an era which Marshall MacLuhan predicted some time ago may well be moving toward the end of distinct nation-states. The only way out may be to reintroduce ethics into the discourse of Canadian criticism, to make oneself responsible “for negotiating and making requisite moral choices” (Heble 1997, 80).

We certainly need to move beyond nationalist frameworks and into a cross-cultural work, to be able to listen to multiple voices, that is the only way to find what Said calls a “contrapuntal” approach to reading Canada: “a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (Said 1993, 51). Canadian criticism has focused on Canada’s political and cultural wholeness and homogeneity for too long; we, however, should listen to other voices like Hutcheon’s

and Kroetsch's who "insist(s) on staying multiple, and by that strategy we accommodate to our climate, our economic situation, and our neighbours" (1989, 28). In Said's words, we should create a space of subaltern cultural traditions to "assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (1993, xii). An alternative vision must be sought to accommodate all the different levels of diversity.

Memory and writing thus provide ways for the individual to engage in public activity and to define concepts of self. Memory, when articulated in writing, makes possible communication between individuals and their larger communities: specifically within the nation-state structure defined by nineteenth and twentieth-century western politics (see Hunter 1996, 185-86). One of the most consistent elements in many of the challenges to nation-state ideology is the reaffirmation of the individual as a fixed essential identity.

There is a distinct difference, however, between the postmodern moves toward ideology of a nation-state such as Canada, empowered but working always under the pressure of an awareness of external economic control, and the postmodern moves of colonizing, imperial nation-states. More generally, there are many differences among the ideological moves of postcolonial nations, differences that depend upon the coincidence with or separation from the ideological moves of the specific nations involved with their colonization. In common with Latin American postmodernism, Canadian postmodernism since the 1950s and 60s, has used the artificializing of national ideology to warn about the growing strength of multinational power, predominantly from the United States. The postmodern works rhetorically through the stance of fantasy: It foregrounds artificial structures within the ideological conventions of realism, and uses them to build alternative worlds "which remain stable by becoming as isolated and systematic as ideology" (Hunter 1996, 189).

Writers in the contemporary English-language canons of literature in Canada were, for many years, crudely separated into thematic and structural groups. There are writers who are taken to form a canon that critiques ideology by taking on its

immediate issues and by addressing the genre conventions for conveying these issues instilled by educational training. Among these are Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and we would argue Michael Ondaatje. Their writing squarely and courageously faces the dilemma of social action, and deals both with foregrounding the artificiality of ideology as well as the way individuals naturalize the artifice. At the same time there are Canadian writers whose writing can be taken to form a canon that critiques ideology by destabilizing its representative conventions of language and structure, writers such as bpNichol, Robert Kroetsch and Daphne Marlatt. Taking the artificiality of ideology as a given, a necessary obscurity to be broken down, the burden of their work is the building of social action on different common ground.

Public memory of history engages the past in a social present for the group. Personal memory of self engages the past in present process or in present fixity for the individual. Public or historical memory uses structures most appropriate to the politics of the place; it is responsible for the construction of private identity in nation-states, just as it is responsible for the construction of fragmented identity in the postmodern world where the power of nation-states is effaced by that of multinationals. Personal memory is often a structure or action that we are not used to articulating: "It is a delicate weaving of not necessarily consciously constructed memories which filters one's life, orders it, leaves us beaten when it sets itself up against the flow, and which we need to attend to but usually take for granted, which plays tricks on us" (Hunter 1996, 194).

The appropriate location for the individual and how it may be determined by memory is an issue taken up throughout the works of Michael Ondaatje. His writings are concerned with the historical framework for the individual that emerges in the generic definition of his texts, and the writings run between the positions of a liberal humanist identity and the ideologically defined subject called into being by social pressures. The seductions of fame offered by the grand narratives of history are a dominant element in his work. He is an acute observer of cliché, classical allusion,

contemporary intertextual reference, into all of which he explodes rapidly flowering images taken from the central cultural metaphors of North American obsession: cowboys, stars in space, jazz, sex. All of these narratives, whether prose or poetry, tell about the destructive search for a fixed personal identity that will challenge the way that the state/public history forgets and erases individuals. Yet, at the same time as the search for a reconstruction of history that will validate that image of self-identity, there is hovering around all the narratives which carry a history that reponds only to the immediate.

From *Billy the Kid* to *Slaughter*, to *Running* and *Lion*, the writer concerns himself with the negotiations between personal memory and historical memory, and with the commodification of self necessary to fame and to all public heroes. Billy the Kid is a public icon, a cultural cliché with so fixed an image that it can proliferate wildly through North American media. This is also the cultural icon as outlaw, and links directly to the idea of the artist as hero: both maintaining and destroying the representations necessary to society. *Slaughter* shifts the focus onto the personal and the interactions that the artist as person has with the artist as historical figure. The concern with the artist is also a concern with how we make figurations, not only how we enter history but how we can make history part of ourselves.

Ondaatje's figures are classic neo-Romantic figures whose image of the lone artist against the system is part of the economy of the vicious circle inscribed by nation-state and private individual. In conventional romantic style they hover on the borders of madness and criminality, and end either as insane or dead in his first works. But Ondaatje controls the myth in order to examine it. Most of the narratives have the structure of a detective story foregrounded as a conscious device. Answers are only posited to indicate their inadequacy. And, increasingly, these narratives turn from questions about truth to pursuing the tensions between the historical fixity of identity and personal ambivalence. For Hunter, *Running* "loosens the tensions of Ondaatje's poetic control. Rather than riding out to the manic edge where the individual

challenges ideology by evading its representations and jumping into chaos, the writer here turns away from the drive to commodify self, insert it into historical memory, and turns toward personal memory” (1996, 206). One of the conditions of an individual within a nation-state is the need to simultaneously acknowledge and deny the constructed status of history. At the same time, the writer-narrator is writing a history, yet trying to create it not from national memory but from personal memory. The ambivalence of *Running* lies in our knowledge that these personal memories are of people who mediated the rule of the colonizing nation-state.

*Lion* may be read as an elaborated account of the detective story, in which the observer casts the criminal, anarchist, artist, thief *against* hero, as figures without an historical memory against the commodified individual who has acquired fame. The elusive centre of the book is the construction of the self of the teller, which we can only read by way of the series of his stories: a series of contexts where the personal and public memories meet. For many Canadians, the history in which Ondaatje places Patrick is as unknown to them as it was to him. Ondaatje makes Patrick the alien insider who “knows nothing of the place” (*Lion* 157), but who, when attached to a community, can assume “responsibility for the story” (*Lion* 157). Personal memory thus enters the public arena by negotiating with the facts of history. Ondaatje is concerned to demonstrate that the facts alone do not help but the contexts that make those facts appropriate to personal need are vital. Storytelling becomes not a way of commodifying self into heroism, but of inserting oneself into a dialogue with a larger community (see Hunter 1996, 211). The generic devices are thus used for indicating both the artificiality not only of ideology, the ethos of the nation-state, but also of personal identity. For the private individual in a nation-state, retaining stable versions of history, requires the double process of forgetting and remembering (see Hunter 1996, 227-28).

Culture may surface from ideology but it may also be wrested from ideology in a conscious attempt to dismantle the stability of the nation-state or the power that

structures the private lives of individuals. Nations will remain, with their cultures, but the power of the nation-state, which depends on the obscuring of artificial representations necessary to maintain its grounds, will be lessened. At the end of the twentieth century, when in effect ideological stability is found more and more only in multinational, global power structures constructed by contemporary economics, national ideologies are more and more apparent as cultures, as artificial modes of representing grounds upon which we form our current agreements about society. Indeed nationalism today, with the severance of nation from state structures of power controlled by economic forces may now be a way of legitimating multinational ideology by obscuring its activities. But national culture may also move toward a destabilizing and foregrounding of multinational ideology, just as mixed ethnic and racial cultures have questioned the nation-state (see Hunter 1996; Miyoshi 1993).

For these writers foregrounding culture as artificial public memory is not only a way of insisting on personal memory but also a way of dealing with national power, indicating its limits, insisting on its contingent legitimacy. Ondaatje's writing works as if ideological narratives exist separately from the personal; you can participate in them but you cannot change them. If you participate in them you commodify yourself, just as other cultural artefacts are commodified: you enter the processes of fame. However, personal memory permits change, even enables change: constructing it allows you to construct a self. The way that individuals remember differently and make ambivalent their identities is here specifically deployed through the body memory of sexuality and dream, released and potentially stabilized by the experience of love which Ondaatje does not analyse consciously.

*The English Patient* is not about the technical aspects of bombs, even though it subverts the old prejudice that Westerners are brilliantly skilled mechanics and technicians while Asians are technically hopeless mystics. The sapper and bomb disposal expert Kirpal Singh "come(s) from a country where mathematics and mechanics were natural traits" (*Patient* 188). In *Patient*, Canadian Hana has turned to

the orient, the east, to serve as nurse in the European war, while Kirpal Singh has turned west to serve as a sapper and bomb disposal expert in the same war. They meet in a ruined villa in Italy towards the end of the war in Europe before the nuclear bombs finally end the Pacific War and World War II. These bombs expose and explode Kip's calm and control. Hearing about them on his radio, he "looks condemned, separate from the world, his brown face weeping" (*Patient* 283). East has met west, but instead of a multicultural romance we witness how Kip becomes a hater of Europeans and takes on the advice of his fanatic brother: "Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans .... Never shake hands with them" (*Patient* 284-85). He does not even look at or talk to Hana. Her appeal to him, "Kip, it's me. What did we have to do with it?" (*Patient* 288), remains unanswered. He had always seen "solution and light" (*Patient* 272), even when Hana saw none. But the light he had seen has now turned into an all consuming fire: "One bomb, then another. Hiroshima, Nagasaki .... If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom" (*Patient* 284).

In the face of this, a sense of triumph is not what should have been the dominant emotion in a just and rational people: "Smell it. Listen to the radio and smell the celebration in it. In my country, when a father breaks justice in two, you kill the father" (*Patient* 285). To him, this is "the death of civilization," and thus his verbal attack, "American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown faces of the world, you're an Englishman" (*Patient* 286), is not an attack on nations but on Western culture. In this he brings to the logical conclusion the position of the patient, who remarked earlier: "We are deformed by nation-states" (*Patient* 138), and exclaimed: "Erase the family name! Erase nations!" (*Patient* 139). From Kip's point of view nations are but a surface phenomenon: "the cultural gaps and oppositions run much deeper and are far more fundamental. And he is right: we are formed and

deformed by cultures, and so the fundamental outcry should have been ‘Erase cultures!’ It is immediately apparent that this is self-defeating: “This outcry carries its own deconstruction in itself: without culture, human life on this planet is unthinkable” (Pesch 1995, 8).

Yet on closer inspection, it becomes less and less clear which cultures were clashing, and why. This is reflected in the patient’s question: “But who was the enemy? Who were the allies on this place .... All of Europe were fighting their wars in North Africa” (*Patient* 19) -as well as in Kip’s statement to his brother that “Japan is a part of Asia ... and the Sikhs have been brutalized by the Japanese in Malaya” (*Patient* 217). Such clashes -spurred by nationalist’s and racist’s claims to superiority- are taking place across cultural and racial boundaries. Even the efforts of multicultural individuals like Kip -or the patient or the international desert researchers- do not seem to be able to ultimately and permanently bridge the gaps across cultural divides. There does not seem to be a simple solution -and the book does not try to gloss over this fact in a happy ending (see Pesch 1995, 8). Kip has a tradition he can return to: in his family the second son becomes a doctor (*Patient* 182), and in the postscript to the story, “he is a doctor, has two children and a laughing wife” (*Patient* 299). Hana does not have such a tradition to fall back on: in her culture, traditions and traditionalists have become contaminated during the war. She remains single, “a woman of honour and smartness” (*Patient* 301). Wisely she has also summed up the post-nuclear, post-apocalyptic situation at the end of the book in a letter to her step-mother Clara: “*From now on the personal will forever be at war with the public. If we can rationalize this we can rationalize anything*” (*Patient* 292).

As Ondaatje’s novel shows, the war was not over when the fighting ended in 1945: the apocalyptic trauma of World War II remains unresolved. Even many decades after the end of the war, the conflict between the personal and the public is still continuing. It is hardly surprising that the book was most harshly criticized in the U.S. for a mental comment by Caravaggio: “He knows the young soldier is right. They

could never have dropped it on a white nation” (*Patient* 287). Ondaatje was attacked for not putting the record straight, for not intervening (see Mantel 1993; Seligman 1993) even for racial self-hatred (see Kaplan 1993, 16-17). To bring cultural clashes in the open, into literature even, already seems too much for some. Yet, such clashes take on a potentially terminal quality in the Nuclear Age, where in a very real sense the destruction of ‘other’ means the destruction of self. Thus, understanding these clashes, their origins, theories and dynamics -and serious efforts to defuse their explosive potential- have taken on a new urgency. Writers like Michael Ondaatje, Timothy Findley and Joy Kogawa have developed these strategies in their historiographic metafiction, which allow them to highlight and re-inscribe the explosive and ruinous effects of cultural clashes as well as the cultural landmines which are part of our postcolonial, post-war, post-apocalyptic landscapes (see Pesch 1995, 9-10).

The representation of such clashes, not in simple didactic, but in complex seductive prose, though, maps such landscapes for those who may not be willing or able to explore them unguided. It restructures their perception of landscapes -be they exotic, as in *Running*, urban, as in *Lion*, or ruined, as in *Patient* -and invests them with new or additional meanings which readers may further explore beyond the realm of the fictional.

## 11.2 Narrative and Poetic Wounds: *The English Patient*

*(It feels like the end of the world. From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public. If we can rationalize this we can rationalize anything. (Patient 292)*

The one archetype of all postcolonial writing is, ironically, one of the great literary monuments of colonialism, written a century ago, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901). A double figure of his creator, Kim is also a double agent, an Irish orphan who thinks in Hindi and can pass for any kind of local. His mentors, or spiritual fathers, are a Briton, a Muslim, and a Tibetan Buddhist. And the questions that keep tolling through the novel are all about identity, the ones that haunt all transnational fictions which are Kims in disguise. In *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje uses Kipling's work as a most evident intertext.

*The English Patient* is "a hauntingly beautiful tale that waves myths and metaphors around the end of the empire" (Iyer 1992, 75). The book is about four figures who move like shadows through an abandoned villa without lives or real identities, at the end of war. One of them is a supposedly English patient tarred black by burns and lost now in his memories of map-making explorations in the deserts of North Africa. One is a thief named Caravaggio, and the third is an Indian Sikh, Kirpal Singh, called Kip, working for the British as a bomb defuser. All live around a twenty year-old female nurse from Canada, Hana. Around the whole novel there is a historical mystery: richly researched evocations of the desert Englishmen of the 1930s, lilting allusions to Herodotus and Kipling, catalogues of the winds that blow across the sands. Gradually, it begins to come clear that the bandaged European, on his sickbed in 1945, stands for many things that are lost and wounded. And in the dying light of

Empire, Ondaatje shows us the end of the world and the birth of another, where people must be map-makers in a different kind of desert.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said also uses Kipling's work to illustrate connections among culture, imperialism and literature. Discussing Kim specifically, Said describes the narration of an overwhelmingly male world dominated by travel, trade and adventure. In the "imperialist polemic," Said tells us, "the native is naturally a delinquent, the white man a stern but moral parent and judge" (1993, 148). Because imperialism of this kind so dominated nineteenth-century Europe, it was accepted unremarkably as simply part of the culture. Struggling to place the colonies on the map, the imperial powers, particularly England, were aided by the Royal Geographic Society, and it is from the minutes of this society that Ondaatje takes the epigraph for his novel as an *exergue*. Both Ondaatje and Said "attempt to demonstrate some of the ways in which literature absorbed and disseminated a colonising perspective, most particularly during the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth" (Irvine 1995, 139).<sup>1</sup> A close reading reveals Ondaatje's novel to be an aesthetic work that employs humanist ideas and images. Various critics have pointed to Ondaatje's use of the light-dark opposition: Lorraine York (1988), where she emphasizes Ondaatje's photographic images; Douglas Barbour (1993); Fotios Sarris (1991) and Raphaël Ingelbien (1995) in their essays on *Lion*. Expanding on such literary allusions, we can also trace the many references to religion, observing as spiritual struggles those between the light of salvation and the darkness of damnation. Throughout the novel, darkness often implies intellectual and moral blindness, light intellectual insight and spiritual salvation, while both emphasize the tension between order and chaos and between life and death, all illustrating aspects of the human condition and what we interpret as humanist themes. We could also read the novel as a postmodern work

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<sup>1</sup> Lorna Irvine (1995) proposes different readings of this text. One way would be to treat it as a modernist investigation of the text of imperialism. We would then pay particular attention to works such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), and also to the imagery of oppositions such as that between light and dark, blindness and insight.

where the characters seem fragmented, often caught at moments of change, and separated from territorial connections. Issues of personal or even national identity are perplexing because of Ondaatje's postmodern approach to characterization. Finally, the novel can be read as a postcolonial work, the reading we ultimately choose as the most adequate in this study. Such reading insists on the profoundly political nature of the text. Ondaatje, in spite of what seems to be his interests in modernism, particularly in his use of imagery, and his early postmodern attention to language and structure, has finally become deeply implicated in the politics of race (see Irvine 1995, pp. 139-45).

The English patient is himself a condensation of western history, always carrying a copy of Herodotus with him. He is referred to at various times as a prehistoric bogman, as Odysseus, Icarus, John the Baptist, a knight, a Renaissance king, a survivor of Milton's heavenly war (Lucifer) and so on, while the villa quite possibly contains a Medici past, the circle around Angelo Poliziano, a Florentine poet who translated Homer, of Michelangelo, engaged in drawing maps of the world, and of the Dominican monk, Savonarola, whose cry "the deluge comes" is repeated in the present time of the novel with the apocalyptic dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

A postcolonial reading of this novel encourages us to interpret the many images of light and dark racially, bringing us back to Kipling, although with a difference. Ondaatje also "investigates the politics of race, displaces the white man's burden by illustrating imperialism's malevolence towards coloured skin" (Irvine 1995, 143). The patient has been burned, and his blackness has to do with burned skin rather than heritage, linking him to Milton's heavenly war, as well as to the concluding image of Hiroshima. The landscapes of the novel frequently bring into play questions about nations; the anonymous narrator connects Africa and England arbitrarily by insisting that a part of every Englishman's brain contains visions of Africa. Provocatively, the

English patient also refers to connections between areas mapped by nations and various unmapped spaces that raise questions about the importance of nationality.

The setting of the book is the villa San Girolamo, twenty miles from Florence, in the closing days of World War II. Once a nunnery, the villa has been occupied by German troops, and more recently a field hospital for the Allies. It has been bombed, and the whole area around it has been mined by the retreating Germans. The villa's walls are shaky, but strong enough to bear the weight of symbolism Ondaatje will place upon them. They are painted with scenes of nature and garden vistas; there are rooms full of rubble that one cannot enter. In this sacred geography, light falls across rooms so the characters move in darkness and are caught by the candlelight that emphasizes this sacredness:

In the Pisa hospital she had seen the English patient for the first time. A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet. There was nothing to recognize in him. (*Patient* 49)

Aspects of the history of the Italian campaign are subtly rendered in Hana's and Kip's stories; Kip is part of the push north at the front, whereas nurses like Hana receive the casualties. She is the one, however, who criticizes the way the war has been conducted: "Every damn general should have had my job. Every damn general. It should have been a prerequisite for any river crossing" (*Patient* 84).<sup>2</sup> Caravaggio, the professional thief turned government and spy, has experienced a different, stranger war, working without uniform behind the lines. However, the English patient's war seems to have been even more bizarre. It ended apocalyptically when he crashed into the desert in his burning plane and was severely burnt. He lost his world in more ways than one, and yet survived to tell his story, or rather stories, for he has not just lost the

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<sup>2</sup> Hana's explicit criticism of how the war has been run somehow matches Kip's later outburst. Otherwise both are examples of the "inward withdrawal into silence as the ultimate violence against society," which Bök has diagnosed in Ondaatje's works (1992, p. 112).

world, but also himself. We do not know who he really is -and he does not seem too sure, either. What remains of him are his stories.

Caravaggio, the man with bandaged hands, was used as a spy by the Allies, an anti-hero who stands for the sins of both sides of the war: “Really I was still a thief. Not great patriot. Not great hero. They had just made my skills official” (*Patient* 35). As his name pictorially suggests,<sup>3</sup> Caravaggio is surrounded by darkness, an evasive man, who uses irony as a tool: “A celebrity, after all, wanting silence. A war hero” (*Patient* 27). Increasingly interested in the patient’s identity, he continually understates the nationality of the colonizer: “Some of the English love Africa. A part of their brain reflects the desert precisely. So they are no foreigners there” (*Patient* 33). The Allies also used thieves as spies as they had useful skills: “Really I was still a thief. Not great patriot. Not great hero. They had just made my skills official” (*Patient* 35). War has also transformed Hana deeply, she is also surrounded by darkness.<sup>4</sup> “You have to protect yourself from sadness,” Caravaggio tells Hana, “Sadness is very close to hate .... If you take in someone else’s poison -thinking you can cure them by sharing it- you will instead store it within you” (45).<sup>5</sup>

The Sikh that appears besides the piano remains in the villa to dismantle the mines; he is another character deprived of identity, “a survivor of his fears” (*Patient* 73), who gradually modifies his perception through his dangerous training which, ironically, leads him to protect the others, when he is the most vulnerable of all:

He followed the noise of the piano, rushing up the hill with Hardy, climbed over the stone wall and entered the villa. As long as there was no pause it meant the player

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<sup>3</sup> Ondaatje dreamed up the name Caravaggio while working on *Lion* after he went to see a Caravaggio show in New York. “It was the greatest art show I’ve seen in my life. Not just his sense of light and dark, it was the *precariousness*” (Ondaatje in Ross 1992, C1)

<sup>4</sup> The author has recreated Hana as a nurse with the help of several sources such as Nicholson’s *The Canadians in Italy 1943-45* and *Canada’s Nursing Sisters*: “Nurses too became shell-shocked from the dying around them ... and they began to believe in nothing trusted nothing” (*Patient* 41)

<sup>5</sup> Caravaggio’s paternal tone implicitly reflects an authorial, we think intentional, connection to Ondaatje’s poem “To a Sad Daughter”: “If you break / break going out not in. / How you live your life I don’t care / But I’ll sell my arms for you, / hold your secrets forever (*Secular Love* 97).

would not lean forward and pull out the thin metal band to set the metronome going. Most pencil bombs were hidden in these -the easiest place to solder the thin layer of wire upright. Bombs were attached to taps, to the spines of books, they were drilled into fruit trees so an apple falling onto a lower branch would detonate the tree, just as a hand gripping that branch would. He was unable to look at a room or field without seeing the possibilities of weapons there. (*Patient 75*)

His scientific mind has been betrayed by religion and belief in this war. He witnesses a Marine Festival and how important it is for other people words such as faith and protection<sup>6</sup>: “The sapper could see the cream-coloured face and the halo of small battery lights .... He raised his rifle and picked up her face in the gun sight - ageless, without sexuality, the foreground of the men’s dark hands reaching into her light, the gracious nod of the twenty small light bulbs” (*Patient 79*). But he can see and feel how religion is reflected in art : “the statues he came across during the fighting, how he has slept beside one who was a grieving angel, half male, half female, that he had found beautiful ... and for the first time during the war felt at peace” (*Patient 90*).

Caravaggio, on the other hand, thinks the English patient is Almásy (*Patient 164*), but the English patient neither confirms nor denies this. Under morphine and alcohol his narration of Almásy’s story even slips into the third person, and Caravaggio wonders, “*Who is speaking as now?*” (*Patient 244*). He is “amazed at the clarity of discipline in the man, who speaks sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person, who still does not admit that he is Almásy” (*Patient 247*). Perhaps also because the “Almásy” identity has been erased in the flames -or because “a man in the desert can slip into a name ... (and) be tempted never to leave such containment” (*Patient 141*). The depth of his being “seems unfathomable and ‘each swallow of morphine by the body opens a further door’ to the point of *mise-en-abîme* and obliteration of identity” (Pesch 1997c, 121): “this is the world of nomads in any case,

an apocryphal story. A mind travelling east and west in the disguise of a sandstorm” (248).

Self-reflexive, anguished, the English patient wonders: “Am I just a book? Something to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies, loose vegetation, pockets of stones” (*Patient* 253). Perhaps his words: “So you have run me to earth” (*Patient* 252) can be read as an admission to the narrator who uses the name “Almásy” (*Patient* 252-61). Anyhow, the English patient’s story seems to be confirmed by Caravaggio’s information. Yet, both are “citizens of morphia” (*Patient* 243), addicts, dependent on each other and morphine for stories, for making sense of their “apocalyptic war experiences” (Pesch 1997c, 122).<sup>7</sup>

As the complexly ordered fragments of the novel accumulate, their pasts, their present, and their possible futures intertwine in a collage. For the first time Ondaatje has brought characters forward from his last novel into this one: Hana, the nurse, is the adopted daughter of Patrick Lewis, a major viewpoint figure in *Lion*, while Caravaggio, the thief who has been turned into a spy by the war, was one of Patrick’s and Hana’s friend, and the eponymous subject of a major section of that book. It is wonderful to meet them again five years later (in both writer’s and character’s time) which raise intriguing questions about the novelty of the novel and its characterizations.

*The English Patient* began with a vision: a burning man in the desert. Then the author spent months researching the context and pored over the private letters of Elizabeth and Rodney Dennys (parents of his friend, the publisher Louise Dennys),

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<sup>6</sup> Note a similar celebration in Spain where sailors take the Virgin in a ship as a homage and worship its figure as they follow her in boats while praying for protection for the seamen. Normally in mid-July.

<sup>7</sup> Scobie’s observation seems to support Pesch’s: “The patient’s anonymity, and his (un)readability, make him the perfect blank screen onto which the other characters can project their own devious passions. Patient, passive, he receives the identities they desire him to have” (1994, pp. 97-8). While he is a brother in arms to Caravaggio, Hana and Kip treat him as a substitute father.

who were stationed in Egypt during the war. He studied bomb defusers' journals. He spent weeks in London at the Royal Geographical Society and read up on desert explorers -in particular a certain Count Almásy, a Hungarian who roamed the Lybian wilds in the 1930s and may have been a nazi spy.<sup>8</sup> "Technically it's the most difficult thing I've ever done. I was sweating blood," Ondaatje confesses. "I was always scared I couldn't get back" (in Ross 1992, C1). Just as *Lion* can be read as a political book, so can *Patient*. The former is about class war, the rich using the workers to turn their visions into reality. *Patient*, however, is much darker. The patient might be a metaphor for the British empire, dying slowly, haunted by memory: "That's one of the reasons I picked the title," says Ondaatje (in Ross 1992, C1). The novel ends with news that atomic bombs have been dropped on Japan. The young Asian Kirpal Singh flees from the white people in the villa in horror. This bomb is the irony, says the author, "Kip knowing where all the little bombs are buried and then -this monster above. In the years of writing it, I felt the political world had become so out of reach. When the Gulf war broke out, I was horrified; it was a nightmare I'd turn on the TV and see these guys getting mines out of the sand" says the author (in Ross 1992, C1).

Flying across the North African desert, a man falls, burning, from the sky. This image -violent and beautiful- literally begins the novel. As Scobie asserts (1994, 92), Ondaatje's sensibility as a writer is grounded in poetry, and all his novels may be described as poetic novels even if the author rejects the definition. Our critical response to Ondaatje's novels then will have to adopt the technique of talking about poetry as much as the technique of talking about fiction. An examination of patterns of

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<sup>8</sup> Almásy claims to be English in the first pages of the book, and nothing about him makes Hana suspect otherwise. His memories range from English country gardens to brutal experiences in the desert. There are no clues to the English patient's background. He refuses to give his name, but he does offer a serial number that proves he worked for the Allies. He speaks English without an accent, knows British poetry, appears to love his country. Hana notices that he also speaks German, but that fact means little to her. More than a third of the way through the novel, Caravaggio suggests that the patient may not be what he seems: "We don't even know if he is English. He's probably not." Eventually Caravaggio exposes him, and recounts Almásy's history as an aristocratic adventurer

image, symbol, and metaphor will lead the reader into the book as readily as a more conventional investigation of characterization or plot (see also Barbour 1993).

This poetic design that permeates all of Ondaatje's books is most explicitly specified here by the image of fire. Not only the English patient is haunted by fire: The nurse Hana is devoted to caring for him at least in part because, as we learn only late in the novel, her own father died of burns: "So burned the buttons of his shirt were part of his skin, part of his dear chest" (*Patient* 295). Hana sees him as the image of everyman who has died under her care in the course of the war; and, most obviously, she sees him as Patrick.<sup>9</sup> Kip, who insists that the patient is English, also sees him as a dead father. For Kip, the patient represents Lord Suffolk, his patron in the bomb disposal squad, who also died in a moment of fire. And, at a wider level of political allegory, the English patient and Lord Suffolk both stand for the paternal relation of England and India, the imperialist power celebrated in Kipling's *Kim* and rejected here by Kip (see Scobie 1994, 98).

The thief Caravaggio, escaping his torturers, rests for a moment on a bridge, but the bridge explodes: "Light was pouring into the river. He swam up to the surface, parts of it were on fire" (*Patient* 60); Caravaggio's ascent through burning water thus

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whose love of the desert led him to help the Germans by guiding one of their spies to Cairo under Rommel's orders.

<sup>9</sup> For Hana the patient is a kind of substitute father, a stepfather. *In the Skin of a Lion* makes it clear that Patrick is, in fact, her stepfather, not her real father. While the revised version makes the relationship more immediate, it loses the possibility of extending the image pattern of substitution, the way each character in this novel stands in for another. This is one of several minor inconsistencies between the two novels. In *Patient*, very little attention is given to Hana's mother, Alice -her stepmother is Clara to whom she writes- despite the fact that the manner of Alice's death (in an accidental bomb explosion) is overwhelmingly relevant to the relation between Hana and Kip. In *Lion*, Hana's mother Alice was formerly a nun, and here the villa is a former convent. In acting as a nun Hana also follows the lead of Guinevere, whose last days were as a nun. Hana admits her devotion to the patient can be seen as both that of a daughter to her father and that of a wife to her husband (*Patient* 84). The daughter-father aspect first brings to mind the idea that the patient is a replacement for her stepfather (pp. 84, 90, 296). But a father-daughter relationship is also in harmony with the nun-devotee idea, since nuns not only consider themselves married to God but also to be, like all Christians, his adopted children.

parallels and inverts the English patient's fall through burning air<sup>10</sup>; also the mined bridge links Caravaggio to the fourth character, Kip, whose whole element is fire: he works as a sapper, defusing bombs, in daily and imminent danger of going up in flames. Accordingly, the imagery of fire culminates in Kip's horrific vision: "he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom" (*Patient* 284). This image echoes all the way back to the first sentences of the novel, where Hana senses "a buckle of noise in the air" (*Patient* 3).<sup>11</sup>

Scobie's reaction to the charge made by some critics and readers that the Hiroshima theme is introduced clumsily or abruptly is twofold: first, the reader is prepared for this, if only subliminally, both by the progression of the dates and by the pervasive imagery of fire; and second, it has to be abrupt, to have the quality of intrusion, to shatter the sanctuary the novel has provided for its readers. If the English patient is indeed, in one symbolic association, Lucifer, the falling angel expelled from Heaven, then the brightness that falls from the air has always been the hanging fire of nuclear apocalypse (see Scobie 1994, 96).

The inscription of Almásy's burned body as a desert landscape is a figurative extension of the text's structural treatment of its story. With the desert burning that transforms Almásy into "the English patient," the text reveals itself as a tale in which Almásy is both Gilgamesh and Enkidu within one body. The movement between narrative time-lines in Almásy's body further dramatizes travel's alteration of identity

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<sup>10</sup> Ondaatje's novel contains several allusions, more or less explicit, to other Canadian writers. The phrase "burning water" comes from George Bowering's novel (1980) who, in turn, took it from Coleridge. More directly, the phrase "hanging fire," used by Ondaatje on page 105, is the title of a book by Phyllis Webb - a book that Ondaatje helped to edit, and for which he provided a fine cover photograph of hanging fire. The name Kip, besides deriving from Kipling and Kim, is also the name of a character of Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*; and in that novel, too, Kip is associated with fire.

<sup>11</sup> The picture of Hana's dead father, with the buttons of his shirt burned into his chest, is reminiscent of photographs of the victims of Hiroshima.

through poignant comparisons. As “the English patient,” Almásy happily shares tins of condensed milk with Kip the sapper and appeases his concerned nurse with the following cry: “Kip and I are both international bastards -born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives. Though Kip doesn’t recognize that yet. That’s why we get on so well together” (*Patient* 176-77).<sup>12</sup> The very incapacitation from the desert that makes Almásy’s and Kip’s acquaintance and camaraderie possible is in poignant contrast with the close of Almásy’s description of the desert incarceration while his lover is dying in the cave: “They hauled me up into the truck again. I was just another possible second-rate spy. Just another international bastard” (*Patient* 251).

Furthermore, the novel involves several travels worthy of examination. Ondaatje’s well-documented situation of these fictional travels are accurate in terms of geography and history and they are overtly affiliated with the project of storytelling. The text, therefore, is an ideal work for an examination of relations among story, travel and fact. In its interactive uses of tropes of landscape as body and landscape as text, *Patient* suggests that travelling is itself a narrative act. Through the different aspects of the traveller’s tale (anticipation, communion with the reader and perpetual incompleteness), the author suggests that the nostalgia that frequently characterizes travel writing is partially a longing for a return to the oral story and the promise of the betterment of the individual self and collective self it offers (see Whetter 1997, 444). At its best, travel literature, such as *Patient* or *Running*, suggests then that this authority is a communal one, which consists specifically of the triumvirate of traveller, land and reader.

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<sup>12</sup> Two interview comments of Ondaatje’s, while lengthy, prove invaluable: “The characters in *The English Patient*, especially the Patient and Kirpal Singh, are displaced, or, as one of them says, ‘international bastards.’ There are a lot of international bastards roaming around the world today. That’s one of the book’s main stories. Those migrants don’t belong here but want to belong here and find a new home.” (Wachtel 1993, p. 62). And, more personally, “I think my generation was the first of the real migrant tradition that you see in a number of writers of our time -Rushdie, Ishiguro, Ben

*The English Patient* is a postmodern text that succeeds in representing life - with its fragmentation, and subtextual richness- which cannot be represented by either traditional uses or a linear (fictional) narrative of historical facts. Accordingly, an interpretation of the interrelation between the historical and the perception of the other is crucial if the reader is going to capture the author's notions of historicity -the historical data behind the fiction- and of the other in the parameters of history and fiction. Almásy, the Hungarian aristocrat and officer-spy is depicted as the other, an alterity that is in no way diminished when we discover who the patient is. For instance, as Zepetnek suggests, Ondaatje's metaphor *felhomaly* (*Patient* 170) provides us with yet another version of Almásy's otherness, of his poetic and historical marginality (1994, 142).<sup>13</sup>

Most importantly, the historical data about the "English" patient are oblique and analogous to the fictional Almásy of the novel. He has a slippery identity, an analogue to the "English" patient in the novel. Along with questions about his origin and secrets about his intelligence activities, Almásy's historical life involved curious incidents that point to a marginality strikingly similar to that of his fictional life in *Patient*. Almásy's "Hérodote et les récentes explorations du Désert," the fifth chapter of his *Récentes explorations dans le Désert Libyque* (1932-1936), and his discovery of Hungarians on an island in the Nile, are good examples. And Almásy's chapter on Herodotus is, of course, an important element of Ondaatje's novel itself.

Ondaatje's treatment of the other could also be explored in terms of ethnicity. Siemerling's important study on this matter (1994), also deals with the question of ethnicity and its position in English-Canadian historical discourse. His argument is that Ondaatje subverts the English-Canadian mainstream in his novel by drawing attention

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Okri, Rohinton Mistry- writers leaving and not going back, but taking their country with them to a new place" (Bush 1990, p. 89).

<sup>13</sup> *felhomály* means 'semidarkness, dusk, twilight.' Ondaatje's sensitivity -in the context of the notion of the other- was manifested in his concern that the Hungarian word, as spelled in the novel,

to the other. The immigrant, then, would not infiltrate the public perception of the host culture with the acquisition of the foreign tongue: “Almásy’s fictional position, that is, his indeterminacy, overlaps his ‘real’ position of historical marginality and otherness” (Zepetnek 1994, 148).

Among the off-centre narratives much of the most interesting concerns the sapper’s career. Ondaatje sketches Kip’s earlier life in India. Kip’s elder brother is anti-British, and during the war he is in jail. Kip assumes the responsibilities both of fighting and of healing, of making safe. The British are hanging Sikhs who are fighting for their independent state. In the end, when Kip hears the news of the bombing of Hiroshima, he erupts into the room where the patient lies saying: “My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans” (*Patient* 284).<sup>14</sup> It is a crude polemic which explodes in the final pages of the book. Ondaatje disguises the narrator’s voice as though he did not distinguish his views from those of his characters while we wonder whether he is speaking for himself behind Kip’s voice. For this reason, American critics such as Seligman, Marchand or Mantel have attacked him for not being “responsible” in his political views either as a storyteller or as a thinker, hiding into the private and the ambiguous.<sup>15</sup> Seligman’s political accusations, moreover, focus on the issue of the nuclear bomb and its racial implications:

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was incorrect; He asked for the correct spelling for the paperback issue of *The English Patient* (see Zepetnek 1994, p. 149).

<sup>14</sup> Kipling has been eclipsed by Kip. Occasionally, the author’s design becomes almost too insistent, finding in Hiroshima and Nagasaki not only the explosion of the whole world of nation-states, but also the final cruelty of the West upon the East.

<sup>15</sup> “Ondaatje’s narrative becomes uneven, unresolved, unsatisfactory. It is as if parts of the story have fallen through a whole in the world: as if the power that should properly belong to the novel has drained away, as if a torrent has become a trickle .... As Ondaatje has neglected or disdained or is disinclined to set up a mechanism to distinguish his views from those of his characters, we wonder whether he is speaking for himself. It is fashionable to pretend not to know why certain wars were fought: Does this incomprehension now stretch to World War II? Is there no truth that jumps out of its skin -white, brown, burnt- to embrace the postwar generation? .... he sneaks from responsibility - as a storyteller, as a thinker, one who cleaves always to what is private, hidden, ambiguous; who slips away from statement .... Sometimes ambivalence is immoral” (Mantel 1993, p. 23). Both Mantel and

beyond the blandness and the psychological thinness, there's also a serious political confusion .... Kip ... goes to pieces at the news of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ....when the bomb - 'this tremor of western wisdom' - drops on Japan, he freaks out .... Caravaggio agrees: 'They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation'; and no doubt he is right. ... Ondaatje ... here proudly allies himself with the Asians .... And though there's no dismissing the elements of racism in the bombing, only a sentimentalist would feel comfortable lumping Japan with 'the brown races of the world.' (*Patient* 1993, 41)

Having blandly accepted the racist implications of the bomb without further comment, Seligman totally confuses the positions of author and his characters here<sup>16</sup>: does Ondaatje really ally himself with the Asians? After all, Kip's outburst may be emotional, even hysterical, but the author has made the contradiction clear. What is more, Seligman entirely ignores the fact that Kip is clearly not identifying with the Japanese empire, but sees the effects of the bomb from the point of view of the victims. As a sapper and defuser of explosives, he is concerned with the devastating effects of the bombs: "the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadows of humans suddenly in the air ... heat that within seconds burns everything, whatever they hold, their own skin and hair" (*Patient* 284, 286). Kip has spent his war "cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil." He is enraged about "the smell of celebration" (*Patient* 285). There are lots of things that Ondaatje does not speak of, but, then, *The*

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Seligman say that the book is a failure because it is morally and politically unacceptable. The moral elevation becomes unbearable when Seligman first points out that Ondaatje's great uncle was a thief and that the fictional "thief is a problematic character anyway, not only here but also in the previous novel ... Ondaatje even lirts about 'the art of robbery'" (Seligman 1993, p. 39). This entirely ignores the truth of the literary facts of the novel. The position of moral and political correctness Mantel and Seligman seem to be taking turns into an exercise of imposing an imperial reading of History onto the *Patient*, and fortunately by *these* standards it is a failure.

<sup>16</sup> And so does Mantel when she states that Kip's outburst "is a crude polemic ... exploding into the final pages of the book. As Ondaatje has neglected or disdained or is disinclined to set up a mechanism to distinguish his view from those of his characters, we wonder whether he is speaking for himself" (1993, p. 23). However, reactions in Canada (Draper, Scobie) and Europe (Lernout, Pesch), and Britain (where he was awarded the Booker Prize in 1992) were generally favourable. Many reactions have been directed against Ondaatje's lack of political position or, rather, against his characters's political views, which is even more surprising. The controversies in the U.S. about the fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki reveal the anxiety -and the unresolved national trauma- that still resists nationalization, despite 50 years of justifications.

*English Patient* is a storybook that does not even attempt to present the totality or balance of atrocities in this war. It is “not even pretending to be a History, even though it is concerned with highlighting the multitudinous problems and obstacles involved in the writing of Histories” (Pesch 1997d, 104).

For Barbour the book is as much about the power of written narratives (the patient’s notebook) as it is about the power of passion. Early on, the text calls attention to the obsessive strength books can exert:

This was the time of her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became her world. She sat at the night table, hunched over, reading of the young boy in India who learned to memorize diverse jewels and objects on a tray, tossed from teacher to teacher, those who taught him dialect those who taught him memory those who taught him to escape the hypnotic. (*Patient 7*)

Ondaatje tends to resist overt politicization yet, because of his choice of subjects, they also refuse to become truly apolitical. A Ceylonese-born Canadian, he is necessarily in one way or another a postcolonial writer, and seemingly off-hand allusions, like that of *Kim*, the most famous novel in praise of colonization, or the various references in the chapter of Kip’s training in Britain when he falls under the spell of an eccentric paragon of the best British values, create a climate in which the sudden final break Kip makes with his three friends seems sadly inevitable, and for precisely the political reasons the novel seems to ignore. He seeks to place the political in a human, fallible context, complicated by the force of powerful and contradictory emotions. A novel of international scope, set at a time of terrible change in the world, *The English Patient* focuses on the ways of the human heart among a small number of people. Even its ending, which invokes one of our time’s most terrifying images of slaughter of innocents to break its tentative community apart, manages to avoid melodrama.

Historical and literary intertexts abound.<sup>17</sup> Interpolating lines of others, we are given lines and thoughts of canonical books or first historical records to explain or subvert a philosophy of a fictional life, that of the patient, in order to create a new piece of art. Through different histories, the patient travels in first person in a continuous analepsis, like a prophet going back to his past, an explorer of history:

I am a man who can recognize an unnamed town by its skeletal shape on a map. I have always had information like a sea in me. I am a person who is left alone in someone's home walks to the bookcase, pulls down a volume and inhales it. So history enters us. I knew maps of the sea floor, maps that depict weaknesses in the shield of the earth, charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades. (*Patient* 18)

As Whetter comments: "In emphasizing the impact of the historical characteristics of not only the desert but also the novel's own narration of that desert, *The English Patient* begs its own deconstruction" (1997, 450). The text's self-consciousness toward its own reading is nowhere more explicit than in its graphic use of Herodotus's *Histories* as an intertext. Ondaatje's dramatic use of Herodotus's *Histories* provides an illustration of storytelling as travel's companion and of travel literature as nostalgia for the oral tale. Like the disfiguring of Almásy's body or the morphine injected into it, Herodotus's *Histories* is a vehicle for both the travels of Almásy and the narration of them. The habit of both Almásy and the novel's

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<sup>17</sup> With A.M. Hassanein's "Through Kufra to Darfur," from 1924, the author has fictionalized the desert sandstorms of the time. An absolute feast of intertextuality and historical reference is offered with *The English Patient*'s use of Ahmet Hassanein Bey as a character living in Cairo. Hassanein, "the grand old man of the 1923 expedition," hosts the party at which Katharine makes her successful advance toward Almásy (*Patient* 236). Katharine's presence here nicely parallels that of desert explorer Lady Clayton East Clayton, the woman who too much evidence to chronicle here suggests is a likely basis for Katharine Clifton. In a "posthumous narrative" published in *The Times* (London) in 1933, Clayton, who actually died in a plane crash, recounts, "While in Cairo I had the good fortune to be put in touch with Sir Ahmet Hassanein, without whose assistance it is very doubtful if my expedition would have materialized at all" (11). He also enriches his descriptions of desert exploration after reading Richard A. Bermann's article "Historical Problems of the Lybian Desert," published in 1934, and also from Bagnold's reviews. Ondaatje also recreates the construction of bombs and the British system of bomb disposal in World War II while quoting in italics from Major A.B. Hartley's *Unexploded Bomb: A History of Bomb Disposal*, published in 1958, in the section 'In Situ.' This book was very important to describe Kip's methods of defusing and is based on actual techniques that Hartley records.

omniscient narrator of metonymically referring to Herodotus's work as simply "Herodotus," begins the fusion of identity and text that is so elaborately dramatized through Almásy's uses of "Herodotus" as map, companion and journal:

She picks up the notebook that lies on the small table beside his bed. It is the book he brought with him through the fire -a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations- so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus. (*Patient* 16)

This cradling within Herodotus is, Ondaatje's drama will remind us, comparable to the cradling of stories encountered by any invitation to story including travel. The first location of that reminder is, of course, *The English Patient* itself. In addition to the further suggestions of the communal ownership and authorship of stories indicated by the book's anonymity and bricolage structure, "Herodotus" provides a dramatic suggestion of the process of story collecting: "His only connection with the world of cities was Herodotus, his guidebook, ancient and modern, of supposed lies. When he discovered the truth to what had seemed a lie, he brought out his glue pot and pasted in a map or news clipping" (*Patient* 246). The structuring of much of *The English Patient's* narrative through the frame of a book that is being annotated, as *The English Patient* is being read, provides the reader with the same company Almásy finds in Herodotus. That such company is "The Father of History" reminds us of *The English Patient's* concern with history, narration, and their roles in identity, self-discovery and communion.

For the patient, Herodotus's *The Histories* is both complete -the act of cutting and pasting in pages from other books foregrounds itself as the addition of something extraneous, and incomplete. What he writes into the text responds to a lack, and a demand, that the text already exhibits. In thus supplementing the text of Herodotus, the English patient is duplicating the supplementary nature of the original; he quotes Herodotus as saying: "This history of mine ... has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument" (*Patient* 119). Far more than merely influence or

allusion, intertextuality is both an active interaction between texts and the sense that the possibility of such interaction is the precondition for the very existence of a text. In *Patient*, Ondaatje translates this theoretical concept into literal images. The English patient writes his own observations into the blank spaces of Herodotus's pages. Hana does the same, for books are "half her world" (*Patient* 7). Cradled within the text of Herodotus, then, the patient falls in love with Katharine Clifton, and, also, we find *Kim*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, John Milton, Christopher Smart, and Anne Wilkinson.

Herodotus's anti-canonical example of multitude of stories is perfect for Ondaatje's fictional purpose. "This history of mine,' Herodotus says, 'has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument.' What you find in him are the cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history -how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love" (*Patient* 119). Either for the patient or for the author, Herodotus's *Histories* exemplify the notion of multiple histories made up of legends and rumour. Through this Greek historian, the acknowledged father of history, Ondaatje researches the inner mysteries of history and exposes his own concept of the past. Accordingly, through the patient's notebook, full of narrative flashbacks and analepses, we encounter the scattered histories he has learned in the desert, together with the scientific and factual documentation which are based on the material researched in "the Geographical Society," thus transformed into his-story: "In the emptiness of deserts, the patient says, you are always surrounded by lost history" (*Patient* 135).

Ondaatje gives an account of the geographers of the 1930s, but by 1939 the exploration is replaced by the desert war. We learn that by the mid-1930s the lost oasis of Zerzura was found by Ladislaus de Almásy and his companions:

There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've ever met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African -all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations.

The desert could not be claimed or owned -it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East. Its caravans, those strange rambling feasts and cultures, left nothing behind, not an ember. All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand. We left the harbours of oasis. The places the water came to and touched ... Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf. I didn't want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert .... I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. (*Patient* 138-39)

The patient relates how he was a member of explorers that were set in Gilf Kebir during the war: Prince Kemal el Din, Bell, Almásy and Madox when Geoffrey Clifton and his wife Katharine joined them.<sup>18</sup> It is Caravaggio who is able to identify the English patient as a Hungarian count, an explorer and cartographer who helped the German army understand the desert.<sup>19</sup> Before the war, his group of desert explorers

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<sup>18</sup> Beyond the sources he cites in his acknowledgements (*Patient* 304-306), Ondaatje seemed not to be aware of the history of any of the characters in his novel. He was unfamiliar with the questions concerning Almásy in Hungarian and German sources, and he did not know that Lady Clayton East Clayton died in a plane crash one year after her husband's death. Almásy's travels in, and explorations of, Africa with Sir Robert Clayton East Clayton began after 1931. Clayton was the a British aristocrat who was keenly interested in geographical discovery and travel. Immediately after his marriage in 1932, the young aristocrat set out with Count L.E. de Almásy to explore the unknown area of the Lybian desert north of the Gilf Kebir, and to find the legendary lost oasis called Zerzura. But the expedition returned without achieving its object. After that summer of 1932, Sir Robert was dead at the age of 24. In 1933, Almásy and his expeditionary group discovered the oasis of Zerzura; in 1934, the discovery was presented at a meeting in the British Geographical Society in London. Lady Clayton East Clayton (née Dorothy Mary Durrant) was an experienced pilot and she accompanied her husband on several desert expeditions after Sir Robert's death carried on her husband's work. That Lady Clayton (Katherine Clifton in Ondaatje's fictional account) and Almásy knew each other is obvious. Ondaatje did not create the female character on her historical persona though some similarities are inescapable (see Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek 1994).

<sup>19</sup> László Ede Almásy (1895-1951), discovered the lost oasis of Zerzura in the Lybian desert, and also the prehistorical paintings in the caves of the Uweinat Mountains, and his merits include the cartography of the Lybian desert, the development of civil aviation in Egypt and the building of the airport at Al-Maza, and several works published in Hungarian, French and German about his travels, discoveries, and experiences in the Second World War. In his youth, he studied engineering at the University of London and was employed by the Austrian car manufacturer Steyr. Almásy seems to dream with water in his book *Az ismeretlen Szahara* (translated into Spanish as *Nadadores en el desierto*, trans. Jose Luis Gil. 1999). The title alludes the beauty of the pictures found by the author in *Uadi Sura*, the valley of Images, a remote corner of the Sahara. A travel narrative of his experiences

had been joined by Geoffrey Clifton, a quixotic young Englishman with a private plane, whom will later be discovered as a British intelligence agent who is searching for the German spy. Whether spy or not in the real life, Almásy is the ideal orientalist, the cartographer and archaeologist who explores a different kind of desert in the book: “I am a man whose life in many ways, even as an explorer, has been governed by words. By rumours and legends. Charted things. Shards written down. The tact of words” (*Patient* 231). History and language are thoroughly and beautifully recreated in the book, so the historical mind of the author is parallel to the patient’s memory in a narrative collage of pain and loss: “When he discovered the truth of what had seemed a lie, he brought out his glue and pasted in a map or news clipping .... He is still amazed at the clarity of discipline in the man who speaks in the first person, sometimes in the third person, who still does not admit that he is Almásy” (*Patient* 246-47).

The patient, while telling Hana his love affair with Katharine, wakes up forgetting everything until he is injected morphine once more: “He rides the boat of morphine. It races in him, imploding time and geography the way maps compress the world onto a two dimensional sheet of paper” (*Patient* 161). Then he is prepared to wander through his memory. Lucidity only comes with morphine, an hallucination which also gives clarity to Caravaggio, who is the only one that reads behind morphines as he is another addict to it:

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published for the first time in Budapest in 1934. Almásy belongs to this group of writers-adventurers such as Saint-Exupéry y T.E. Lawrence. His automobile contract was the beginning of a numerous and dangerous explorations -by car and plane on the west of the river Nile. Based on Herodotus’s stories, and in oriental tales such as *Kitab al Durr al Makmuz*, Almásy organized an expedition to the oasis of Zarzura, to the legendary city of Copper and the search for the army of the Persian King Cambyses. Considered “the Father of Sand” by the Bedouins, he encountered a sand storm when he tried to conquer the Egyptian oasis of Siwa. He spoke six languages: Hungarian, German, English, French, Italian and Arabic, but contrary to his fictional other in the Minghella movie, Ralph Fiennes, a consummate seducer, László de Almásy only seemed to have three passions: the desert, cars and planes. In 1939, after the publication of *Az ismeretlen Szahara*, a rather descriptive book without any poetic commitment but with a rather colonialist tone, Almásy went back to the North of Africa as a German agent (he was an official of the Hungarian army, allied to Germany). The last chapter of his book is dedicated to the darkest episode of his activities in the desert: the Salam operation, when in

‘Let me tell you a story,’ Caravaggio said to Hana. ‘There was a Hungarian named Almásy, who worked for the Germans during the war .... In the 1930s he had been one of the great explorers .... He knew all about the desert. He knew all about dialects. Does this sound familiar? Between the two wars he was always on expeditions out of Cairo. One was to search for Zerzura -the lost oasis. Then when war broke out he joined the Germans. In 1941 he became a guide for spies, taking them across the desert into Cairo. What I want to tell you is, I think the English patient is not English.’ (*Patient* 163)

Caravaggio is convinced that Hana has the spy-helper Almásy as a patient, the real count Ladislaus de Almásy, “burned beyond recognition, who somehow ends up in the arms of the English at Pisa. Also, he can get away with sounding English. Almásy went to school in England. In Cairo he was referred to as the English spy” (*Patient* 165). His lover Katharine clearly represents English tradition and is an exponent of the British signature Almásy seems to have erased: “She would have hated to die without a name. For her there was a line back to her ancestors that was tactile, whereas he had erased the path he had emerged from. He was amazed she had loved him in spite of such qualities of anonymity in himself” (*Patient* 170). The patient knows the walls that rise between Hana and Kip’s relation are of the same nature as the ones that he encountered in his relation with Katharine.<sup>20</sup>

Kip gradually modifies his vision of life and war through his profession. His culture dictates his deeds and behaviour and life will take him away from the European other:

He was accustomed to his invisibility. In England he was ignored in the various barracks, and he came to prefer that. The self-sufficiency and privacy Hana saw in

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April and June 1942, taking advantage of his knowledge of the desert, he helped to German officers behind the British lines (see Inés Elexpuru and Isidoro Merino, 1999, pp. 4-5).

<sup>20</sup> It is surprising that Ondaatje’s portrayals of women such as Hana have not been the object of more feminist criticism, since at its most basic level Ondaatje’s female character palette seems limited to either madonna or whore, nurturing saint or temptress. Such a reductionist view of women is no more realistic than the roles allotted for women in ancient fertility and rituals or for the queens of romance. The love and pity that Hana evokes from the patient seem to heal him in a psychological way, and perhaps in this action her role is analogous to that of the beloved goddess. In the patient’s eyes, she seems at times a stand-in for Katharine (who would be Guinevere to the adulterous Arthur-Almásy). In this sense her switch of attachment from the patient to Kip follows the archetypal pattern.

him later were caused not just by his being a sapper in the Italian campaign. It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world. He had built up defences of character against all that, trusting only those who befriended him .... Revealing his past or qualities of his character would have been too loud a gesture. Just as he could never turn and inquire of her what deepest motive caused this relationship. (*Patient* 196-97)

Caravaggio's mind plays the function of narrating in the third person as a narrating other who deploys the most authoritative voice in the book:

His only connection with the world of cities was Herodotus, his guidebook, ancient and modern, of supposed lies. When he discovered the truth to what had seemed a lie, he brought out his glue and pasted in a map or news clipping or used a blank space in the book to sketch men in skirts with faded unknown animals alongside them .... There is more to discover, to divine out of this body on the bed, nonexistent except for a mouth, a vein in the arm, wolf-grey eyes. (*Patient* 246-47)

Ondaatje locates Kip's culture as the centre to voice a counterdiscourse of decolonization. As a "fate's fugitive" (*Patient* 273), the sapper exposes and voices the postcolonial mind of an Indian who has been used by the British government to be in danger in a war that is not his. Indian background is crucial in this novel that marks a "return-to-roots" discourse in some way, and thus reflects the author further directions in writing. Apart from that, the radical statement represents the face and mind of thousand of displaced people today:

I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from *your* country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished...Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and printing presses?

You and then Americans converted us. With your missionary rules. And Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be *pukkah*. You had wars like cricket. How did you fool us into this? Here ... listen to what you people have done. (*Patient* 283)

This is one climactic scene where Kip accuses the English patient of imperialism.<sup>21</sup> There are several ironies at play here. Kip does not yet know the English patient's identity, so he can't realize that his accusation is unjust, at least on a literal level. The reader knows, but it makes little difference because we know nothing of Almásy's Hungarian origins -only that he appears to be an Anglophile. Yet a few pages later, after bombs have been dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (we hear nothing of Dresden), and Kip finds out that the English patient is not English, he exclaims: "American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman." Since Kip becomes the novel conscience, it would seem that Ondaatje supports his refusal to make distinctions along the lines of nationality. Almásy's ethnicity does not matter, if one accepts the logic of the English patient, because he is a white man, and all white men are the same. This may explain why Ondaatje conceals the identity of his English patient for much of his novel. For the most part his Hungarian background is meaningless, making him a cipher that can be used to present or examine notions of foreignness. In this sense Almásy is the typical Hungarian of North American fiction -absent when present (see Teleky 1997).

All of the characters in the book are bound together by love and loss, by absence and desire. At the centre of the pattern, controlling it by her terrible absence, is Katharine Clifton, whose death constitutes the awful secret of the English patient's

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<sup>21</sup> Kip calls the patient "Uncle" during the confrontation episode (*Patient* 283), and more than anything else it is his questioning of his colonized status that serves as the novel's parallel for the quester's search to understand his identity. Kip's search for self-identity more than parallels the search for the patient's identity -the two have much in common and on the psycho-mythic or archetypal level seek the same truth. Although his brother has reportedly pushed Kip towards questioning (*Patient* 201, 217), and Caravaggio asks him why he is risking his life defusing bombs in Italy (*Patient* 122), Kip fails at first to question his own status as a colonized subject of the British empire. The patient is also aware of his immaturity, "Kip and I are international bastards -born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back and or to get away from our homelands all our lives. Though Kip doesn't recognize that yet" (*Patient* 176). Kip has bought into English/Western prerogatives and culture without much thought, and it takes the dropping of the atomic bomb before he truly asks and begins to answer the question (*Patient* 287). Before the bomb Kip's complicity with the English empire is near total, as evident in his change of name, an

memory, and of the novel's plot. But her death becomes a literal fire, which burns away every trace of her lover's identity, leaving him as an anonymous patient in an English hospital. This anonymity fulfils what had already been his conscious desire of erasing his name and the place he came from (*Patient* 139). The "mark" of the name is like an inscription on the blank page of the desert.<sup>22</sup> So the English patient's desire to erase his name leaves him indeed nameless, professing ignorance of his own identity, and with his body reduced by fire to one all-encompassing scar.

The English patient may represent the centre of Empire, but as a patient he is no longer an active force, and as Almásy he is no longer even English. Englishness is thus written out of the novel; always already, the centre is empty. Kip's rejection of Western power is different from Almásy's betrayal of the Allies, and more radical. At first reading it may seem that Kip chooses to fail the quest, that he quits it and goes home. The idea seems to be ruled out that he may somehow have achieved his quest goal and reached enlightenment. Whereas the patient has, despite his rejection and withdrawal, continued as a lover and carrier of western history and culture, Kip tries to reject this role and chooses to return to his birth culture. Though rejecting the patient's role as keeper of high western culture: the patient even knows the whereabouts of all Giotto's (*Patient* 96). Kip carries in his head at least the "low" Western culture of popular song.

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Anglicization associated with kipper grease in many respects forced on him by the colonizing power (*Patient* 87).

<sup>22</sup> Compare the earlier passage on the naming of the desert winds (one of Ondaatje's finest pieces of found poetry). Note that at the centre of that passage "There is also the \_\_\_\_\_, the secret wind of the desert, whose name was erased by a king whose son dies within it" (*Patient* 16). The erasure of the name under a "\_\_\_\_\_" is repeated on pages 95 and 109. On the topic of the erasure of names, note also the novel's initial reluctance to name Hana. In the whole first section, she is referred to only as "she." Her name enters only in part 2, with the advent of Caravaggio (who knows her from Toronto, and who thus reclaims her to her previous life by naming her). Even there, we are told several times that he "heard her name" (*Patient* 27,28) before "Hana" finally appears on page 32. In the same section, Caravaggio himself refuses to give his name, only his serial number (*Patient* 27). The name of the villa is also in dispute (*Patient* 56-7). Finally, note the spy network that uses as the key text for its codes Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, a novel that is famous for the namelessness of its heroine (see Scobie 1994, pp. 104-105).

In the text, therefore, Ondaatje links issues of ownership, a concept which arguably lies at the root of trade and power, money and war, with the power of naming. Katharine accuses Almásy of being inhuman when she says, “You slide past everything with your fear and hate of ownership, of owning, of being owned, of being named” (*Patient* 238). If the power to name and be named invokes ownership (but also relationship) through the “claiming of the powers of the linguistic sword” (York 1994, 89), a power always exerted by the poet and writer, Ondaatje appears to have introduced a curious reluctance, a hesitation, to wield that sword in *The English Patient*, as if the recognition of that power for the first time has instilled a need for caution. There is a nameless, secret wind (*Patient* 16), a nameless desert tribe (*Patient* 5, 95), a nameless songwriter (*Patient* 109), and a dog at the villa that is never named.

The vanity of the power of naming disturbs Almásy, too, as one of a group of desert explorers who are tempted by that vanity. His colleagues, Fenelon-Barnes and Bauchan, enter a contest, naming fossil trees, tribes, and sand dunes after themselves, but Almásy wants only to “erase my name and the place I had come from” (*Patient* 139). When he is burned, Almásy does just that and more, erasing all features and means of identifying him. Without a name, he achieves his ambition to “not belong to anyone, to any nation” (*Patient* 139). His rejection of names links problematic ownership with the issues of nationalism and colonialism in the text. The novel finally allows Almásy his nameless, nationless state, as his identity is never conclusively determined but rather resolved as irrelevant (see Ellis 1996, 27). Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio ultimately decide within the terms of each of their relationships with him, as orphaned child, postcolonial subject, and spy, respectively, that it doesn’t matter who he is (*Patient* 166, 251, 287).

Hana, in her shell-shocked state from watching too many soldiers she has nursed die, abandons the intimacy of names as she begins to call everyone “Buddy,” acknowledging the relational imperative created by names. As Stephen Scobie has already observed, Hana herself remains nameless, although a main protagonist, into

Part II as the novel recognizes her name only when Caravaggio, who has a previous relationship with her from the past, appears to fix her identity (104). In her new life in the Tuscany villa that is the setting of the novel, she has abandoned other aspects of her identity as well, by removing her nurse's uniform, leaving her nursing unit, cutting her hair, wearing the shoes of a dead soldier, removing all mirrors, and refusing to reply to letters from her stepmother Clara. She lives like a nomad within the ruined rooms that she shares with the anonymous English patient.

Caravaggio, too, is unnamed, referred to only as "the man with bandaged hands" (*Patient* 27) until he encounters Hana. Their connection to each other, Caravaggio as a friend of Hana's stepfather Patrick, defines who they are, and names them. In a similar fashion, Kip and his fellow sapper, Hardy, appear anonymously in the villa as "two men" (*Patient* 63) who slip into the room, place their guns on the end of the piano as Hana plays it, and stand facing her. Within the relational logic of the novel, since he is not known to anyone, Kip is referred to as "the young sapper" (*Patient* 70-79) or "the Sikh" (*Patient* 71-78). His name is revealed only after Caravaggio has disclosed to Kip that he and Hana had known each other before the war, in Canada.<sup>23</sup> Once again, for the novel, relationship is the key to identity through names (see Ellis 1996).

However, the power of naming is complex: both Kip and the English patient have two identities, two names (Kip/Kirpal Singh, and the "English patient"/Almásy, respectively). Kip's true name may be known to the other three main protagonists, but it is used in the novel to address him only after Kip's violent rejection of all things English in reaction to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ondaatje thereby

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<sup>23</sup> The three male characters resemble the protagonists of Ondaatje's other novels: they have one great gift. David Caravaggio is a master-thief: he can get into and out of buildings nobody else would even be able to approach. As a spy he does not need disguises; he manages to get into the villa of the German officers because he does not wear a disguise. He is naked. When he is caught, his thumbs are cut off by a fascist police officer called Ranuccio Tommasoni. Neither the name of the officer, nor David's last name is accidental: as part of a subtext about Italian renaissance painting, Tommasoni

suggests that allowing oneself to be named, and the creation of a sense of self that goes with it, can be a political act of empowerment.<sup>24</sup> “Words ... They have power,” as the English patient tells Caravaggio (*Patient* 234). “Kiss me and call me by my name,” Katharine says to Almásy in the Cave of Swimmers, invoking the power of naming to reclaim their love (*Patient* 173). The power of names is real and has consequences for the characters in the novel, as Almásy’s failure to call Katharine by the “right name,” that is, her husband’s powerful name rather than his own anonymous one, results in his capture and incarceration, and her death alone in the cave when he does not return as promised (*Patient* 250).

Ondaatje has narratively linked erotic triangles in *The English Patient* to the story of Candaules, a king of ancient Lydia. The story, read by Katharine from Herodotus’s *The Histories* to Geoffrey and Almásy, is told within Almásy’s story of his affair with Katharine, as told to Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio. In this way, the story touches all of their relationships, Almásy’s telling is prompted by his awareness of the affair between Hana and Kip, and acts as a cautionary tale about the possible consequences of male love triangles.<sup>25</sup> The story is read by Katharine to her husband

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was the man whom the seventeenth-century painter Caravaggio was accused of having murdered (see Lernout 1992).

<sup>24</sup> Kirpal Singh survives the minefields, he survives the war in a job where life expectancy is measured in weeks. As Kip, the young Indian has a charmed life, and all the luck in the world. And still he discovers the unbearable truth, that luck and skill are not enough. You can correctly defuse all the bombs you encounter, but there is always a bigger one. The book may not end happily, none of the author’s does without a but. Kirpal Singh is becalmed back in India.

<sup>25</sup> Candaules’s boastful ownership of his beautiful wife leads him, through excess vanity about her beauty, to demand that one of his spearmen, Gyges, hide in their bedchamber and look at her naked. Candaules’s enjoyment of his wife’s beauty does not satisfy him, and his desire is to be envied by other men. When his wife, who remains nameless in the story, sees Gyges leave the bedchamber, she realizes what her husband has done. She gives Gyges two choices: either he must slay Candaules and take his place as king and as her husband, or he will be slain himself. Gyges kills Candaules and reigns as king for twenty-eight years. Certainly the inclusions of the Candaules-Gyges-wife narrative is an explicit example, whereas the grail-quest elements are implicit, of the use of mythic structures vaguely familiar to the populace to make the difficult cut-and-paste style of the novel more readable. The Candaules-Gyges-wife triangle is also an archetype for other love triangles. Anthony Minghella’s film adaptation, released November 1996, followed and emphasized these grand motifs, and reduced the cut and paste in its structure, a simplifying move which has perhaps led to the movie’s broad popular success beyond critical circles.

Geoffrey in an effort to temper his boasting possession of her beauty: “Are you listening, Geoffrey?” (*Patient* 232), but the English patient claims that its telling sets in motion their affair. He tells Hana and Caravaggio that through the story, “a path suddenly revealed itself in real life” (*Patient* 234) as he fell in love with Katharine, seeking her out at social events that normally he would not be interested in. The Katharine/Almásy/Geoffrey erotic triangle created cannot as easily fit the Oedipal prototype, nor can it be seen as an example of the trade in women. Almásy is not the young interloper but the older father figure, inserting himself between two young lovers. The affair leads to tragedy and betrayal for them all. Geoffrey’s attempt to kill all three of them fails, killing only himself, and wounding Katharine. However, Almásy admits that he felt like a deceiver of his friend Madox, by lying about Katharine (*Patient* 240). This mythic aspect of Ondaatje’s writing seems modernist in not questioning the applicability of these psychological universals to all his main characters: “It exhibits a flight from the local territoriality/labelling that cause wars, into a vision of a universally similar, mutually sympathetic humanity” (Fledderus 1997, 43).

In a similar fashion, the love story of Hana and Kip is an erotic love triangle, in which the English patient is a father figure to Hana, but it confounds the pattern of commodification of women for the purpose of bonding between men. The triangular possibilities are severed from the beginning, as Kip cuts the English patient’s hearing aid wire in order to cut off his ability to hear, as well as his corner of the erotic triangle. As lovers, Hana and Kip expand the usual notions of what counts as sexuality, spending a month of “formal celibacy” sleeping beside each other (*Patient* 225).

In terms of the novel’s masculinity, it is noteworthy that the English patient recognizes Kip as his successor, as he says to Caravaggio when discussing a painting of David and Goliath, “I think when I see him at the foot of my bed that Kip is my David” (*Patient* 116). Ondaatje creates a rightful sense of power changing hands as a

“New Age” (*Patient* 234) begins, by filling the novel with stories of the new man replacing the old: Gyges and Candaules, David and Goliath, Solomon and son of King David, Maxentius son of Maximum and emperor of Rome, Poliziano and Savonarola, Herodotus “the father of history” supplemented by Almásy, Kip taking up the work of Lord Suffolk. Kip has his opportunity to Oedipally destroy the father figure of the English patient. Kip’s explosion from his silent self-sufficiency on hearing of the dropping of atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki is therefore a political awakening. He turns his rifle on Almásy in his rage at the racism implicit in the act, which he attributes to all English, Europeans, and Americans.

However, Kip does not embrace violence. He puts the gun down undischarged. Instead, he takes back his identity as an Indian and as a Sikh, resumes his correct name, Singh, rather than the Anglicized “Kip,” and leaves the service of the English army to take up service as a doctor in his own community in India.<sup>26</sup> Kip’s attempts at stabilizing reality have therefore failed. He can no longer trust his own judgement or himself -and takes flight on a Triumph (*Patient* 290), and English motorbike, into a new life, his new (old) world. His revelation, his apocalypse has reached him from far away. Now that he is past all that, he falls into water to be born again -and saved (*Patient* 295-96). This may be the end of the story, but it is not the end of the novel. Another “Now ... These years later” introduces a coda (*Patient* 299). Kip has become a doctor, thus taking up the profession that he was destined for as second son according to the old tradition in his family (*Patient* 182). His “moments of revelation” (*Patient* 300) have become part of the past, of a different world. He remembers Hana and recalls the time they shared (*Patient* 301). The apocalypse has

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<sup>26</sup> The final vision of Kip, or Kirpal as the novel now acknowledges him, is of a man involved in his community’s welfare as a doctor, riding his bicycle for the four-mile journey home, in his garden and with his laughing wife and children for their evening meal. Magically, the novel’s optimism allows the power of his newfound relational masculinity to transgress both time and space to include Hana. Though not unproblematic in its treatment of gender, the text closes with an emphasis on masculinity achieved in relationship to other.

literally blown him into the past, back into the tradition he came from, but it has not turned him into a hater or fanatic. He has become a professional healer.

*The English Patient* is also rooted in a body of literature with which the term “romance” was originally used, that is, twelfth and thirteenth-century retellings of Arthurian legends and myths such as the quest for the Holy Grail or the Fisher King (see Fledderus 1997, 19). All of Ondaatje’s writings have incorporated myth of one sort or another.<sup>27</sup> Ondaatje, a writer known for tricky documentation, has intentionally subverted the importance of grail romance in the novel by not explicitly alluding to it. For the active reader, however, certain reference to light romance cannot be ignored such as the ephemeral appearance of self-consciousness on the part of the narrator at the novel’s end: “She is a woman I don’t know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life” (*Patient* 301). This brief foregrounding of the narrator is common in Ondaatje’s endings and it repeatedly underlines the recurrent alterity we have commented above.

The title character offers the clearest connection with Arthurian legend, and he shares attributes with the bed-ridden fisher king figure of Arthurian romances, including the fact that both are identified by a mysterious wound.. Similarly, the burned patient is unable to leave his bed, where he “reposes grandly” (*Patient* 90), and even “like a king” (*Patient* 14). In the *Patient*, moreover, the author draws explicit parallels between medieval warfare and the Allied campaign in Italy (69). Herodotus’s *Histories* deals extensively with wars, with questions of national boundaries and

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<sup>27</sup> Some of Ondaatje’s earliest poems, published in *The Dainty Mosters*, retell stories from the Trojan War, and other were part of a more general project of constructing a Canadian mythology. Ondaatje’s masters of Arts thesis, moreover, “Mythology in the Poetry of Edwin Muir,” was a significant example of his early preoccupation with myth. His writings have in fact continued to resonate with the Modernists’ interest in myth, even in his use of pop-myth figures such as Billy the Kid and jazzman Buddy Bolden. Ondaatje also takes his title of his 1987 novel *In the Skin of a Lion* from the *Gilgamesh Epic*, in which there is a relationship of myth within the novel’s structure and pattern discussed at length by Gamlin (1992) and Bevan (1993). The author explores different kinds of oriental myths in his retelling of the Sri Lankan stories “The Vulture” and “Angulimala” in *The Monkey King and Other Stories* (1995) and in the recently published *Handwriting*. Myth is, therefore, the imagistic background of Ondaatje’s poetic design to date.

citizenship, and with nomadic people. War runs throughout the patient's favourite book as it runs through the most crucial events of his life. His entire identity, as it is uncovered or perhaps imagined in the novel, is reshaped by war. Another parallel between the burned patient and the Arthurian romance is the sinful love; Almásy even describes Katharine and himself as "sinners in a holy city" (*Patient* 144).

Finally, we cannot forget the uncertainty of their identities. In all of Ondaatje's texts there is a quest motif behind, but here that quest is unveiled through individual romances. The patient's identity is at first as mysterious as that of a preserved "bogman" from the Celtic age, to use one of the novel's expressions (*Patient* 96). The patient is said to have been made "inhuman by desert" (*Patient* 238), compared to Christ or the devil, since he is called a "despairing saint", attended by a figure that is both an archangel (*Patient* 6) and John de Baptist (*Patient* 9).

Nonetheless, Ondaatje refuses a clear uni-dimensional use of these Christian elements (whether traditional or romantic) in favour of a characteristically postmodern, ambiguous balancing act, to the end that the patient's identity raises questions and suspense without definitely answering them.<sup>28</sup> These identity questions have so far ignored the existence of a "real-life" historical Count Almásy in favour of a mythological approach, the reason being that historical elements in Ondaatje's writing have always been chosen for their indeterminacy. Since many of the details are unknown about such characters -Buddy Bolden or Almásy- Ondaatje can endow his works some of the prestige of historical scholarship while feeling free to be creative. As Ondaatje has described, "Why should I hold facts sacred when they can be more valuable as clues, beginnings to truth?" (1977, 10). The technique is postmodern in the way it simultaneously validates historical texts while suggesting their unreliability (see Fledderus 1997, 30).

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<sup>28</sup> While Scobie's idea of complicity makes the uncertainty of the patient's identity more acceptable, an appeal to the fisher king's uncertain identity as a precedent strengthens Fledderus's argument and grounds it in an intertextual reference.

Relations to the past in “post-apocalyptic literature” (Pesch 1997c, 119) are highly ambiguous: on the one hand, there is a melancholic or nostalgic longing for pre-apocalyptic stability, and an intense interest in history; while on the other, the apocalyptic experiences are so horrific and painful that it is tempting, if not necessary for survival, to repress and forget what happened. Yet, as Simpson pointed out in his essay on *Patient*, “the advent of the nuclear age, blasting nations and people on all points of the imperial map past time and space, past a limit in the historical imaginary, renders such forgetting impossible precisely because its apocalypse enflames a rage for mourning” (1994, 229). This rage for mourning permeates Ondaatje’s text. It presents a handful of people who suddenly find themselves in a world after the Fall in which both physical and psychological reality have become highly volatile. It records the paradoxical attempt of the characters to forget and remember their apocalyptic experiences as they try to restabilize their lives in order to find a *modus vivendi* in a post-war *after-world* (see Pesch 1997c, 120).

Perhaps the end of *The English Patient* fails because it cannot account for Hana: “She is a woman I don’t know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life” (*Patient* 301). Survivors try to restore stability as fast as they can: it is a matter of survival, after all. Nevertheless, the apocalypse has inscribed itself into their memories just as effectively as it inscribed itself on the English patient’s body. Pesch locates Ondaatje’s novel in the tradition of apocalyptic literature as it ends in the destructive climax of the atom bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ondaatje nevertheless presents the climax via Kip’s reactions seen from Hana’s future perspective. He thus supplements the spatial distance of the events which happen far away in Japan by mediating them through the temporal distance of Hana’s memory. Just as the apocalyptic losses of world experienced by the English patient, Caravaggio, and Hana, are situated in a past before the narrated time of the novel, the apocalyptic climax is displaced into a future, which also is outside the temporal frame of the novel. *The English Patient* thus resists apocalyptic thinking and

the “temptation to forget” (Simpson 1994, 230). In its recording of the horrors of apocalypses and the failure of apocalyptic promises. In providing counter-narratives, it undermines History as master-narrative and reveals the constructedness of “facts,” “reality,” and “identity.” It generates narrative structures and invents a language for the “unspeakable,” giving voice to those survivors, who do not proclaim themselves “winners” of war (see Pesch 1997c, 132).

What Ondaatje’s novel does show is that although people are on the ‘winning’ side in this war, they do not feel like winners, for they have been scarred and maimed and traumatized, too. It records the apocalyptic ‘ends of the world’ the war marked for all its characters and for humanity collectively. This book embodies its post-apocalyptic character in its burned title character. It is a book of great sadness that faces and mourns the landscapes, buildings, bodies, and minds ruined in this victory, even on the side of the victors (see Pesch 1997d, 105)

We have, then, a novel that illustrates, by its very imagery and content, the breakdown of empires -after the Second World War both the British and the Austro-Hungarian empires were dismantled- and the abrupt appearance of postcolonial perspectives that are physical, angry, and, finally, political. While Ondaatje uses postmodern devices to tell the story he also raises questions about the apolitical nature of postmodern rhetoric, just as he has questioned the continued use of humanist themes and images. By approaching the novel variously, we are more likely to experience viscerally the effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (in fact, the whole of the Second World War) on western literary culture, the necessarily abrupt altering of the love story between Hana and Kip (or the earlier one between Almásy and Katharine), situating it within the history of the late 20th century where “the personal will forever be at war with the public” (292).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In 1996 Ondaatje himself was viviously criticized by Elizabeth Pathy Salett, president of the National Multicultural Institute in the U.S. She wrote in the *Washington Post* that her father knew the real Count Lázló de Almásy, the man who was a model for the principal character in the film version of the *Patient*. According to Salett, the Count was a “committed nazi collaborator,” instead of

If the novel is any one character's story, then, it is Singh's and certainly the subversive power of the novel is spoken through his voice. The movie, however, tells a safer and less interesting story in which Singh does not criticize Western powerholders, but rather plays a minor role and then leaves quietly. His primary function seems to be as a love-interest for the Canadian nurse. The story the film chooses to tell is that of the English patient, who is actually a Hungarian Count, and his all-consuming love affair with an English woman. It is a love story nestled comfortably in the theme that national boundaries should be meaningless. It was Singh's story which added depth and balance to this theme in the novel by complicating it with the realities of imperialism. The film has left only remnants of this message and replaced it with a much louder if implicit one -Western audiences aren't interested in the voices of colonized people, or, at least, movie-makers don't believe subversive voices are marketable. The film reviews say nothing of the erasure, but rather confirm that it is no longer the sapper's story. He is not even considered a main character, having been replaced by the English woman.

In the novel Singh's experiences of racism are important. We are told "he remained the foreigner, the Sikh" as he compares himself to the "wise white fatherly men" who defuse bombs. Even the way he is called by the nickname Kip rather than Kirpal is a sign his identity is not fully accepted. Reclaiming his name at the end becomes a powerful act - "His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here." It is important to note that in the film his full name is never given -he

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a "reluctant accidental spy" as Ondaatje had portrayed him. Ondaatje replied in the *Washington Post* that Almásy's role in the war was still under debate by all sides and that the story is not historical truth but "an interpretation of human emotions -love, desire, betrayals, in war and betrayals in peace." He went on to liken his character to historical figures like Richard III, who are constantly reinvented and reinterpreted in literature and are not necessarily historically accurate portrayals of the real people who inspired them. Ondaatje concluded, "if a novelist or dramatist or filmmaker is to be censored or factually tested every time he or she writes from historical event, then this will result in the most uninspired works, it just might be safer for those writers to resort in cartoons and fantasy." Ondaatje, who does extensive research for his books, was prepared for such accusations. He had spent months in the dusty archives of the Royal Geographical Society in London absorbing mountains of information about geographical explorers of the time, including the controversial Count Almásy.

remains Kip throughout. This sense that Singh can see the potential danger, even before the horrible event that forces him to face imperial racism head on, is conveyed through the symbolic meaning of the bombs he works to defuse. The bombs signify, at least on one level, the violence of European “ideologies of superiority” (Rundle 1997, 11). Singh, when he still sees the good of Europe, risks his life to defuse them, acting as a sort of kamikaze diplomat. But the massive destruction of the nuclear bombs overwhelm any such efforts—the colonizers no longer merit such efforts in good faith. The nuclear bombs must be understood as an extreme manifestation of colonial racism in order for the book to be understood. Singh’s experience of despair as well as his words explains this: “If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them.” The bombs have erased the complexities for him —that there is good and bad in the English, that there are different nationalities on the side of colonized and colonizer.

One can see, then, that to replace such an ending with this scene: “Hana: ‘I’ll always go back to that church. Look at my painting.’ Kip: ‘I’ll always go back to that church.’ Hana: “So one day we’ll meet” is appalling. Not only is Singh’s outrage at the dropping of the nuclear bombs, and the critical outlook that comes with it, never registered, but the character instead becomes the passive voice of colonial admiration. We know nothing about his brother or Lord Suffolk. But again, with his voice absent in the film, we are left with an extraordinarily beautiful rendering of a story which holds the same tired assumptions about European superiority. The careful tension maintained by Ondaatje in the novel is destroyed when one story is lifted from the rest and focused upon.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> While on location in Tuscany, Fall 1996, however, Ondaatje told a reporter, “The novel was *my* version of the story, the script has to be something new. Film isn’t a reflective medium. You can’t throw in someone dreaming in his bed about a love affair he had five years earlier in Cairo. Something like that obviously has to be recreated. So, it’s not my story any more. It’s Anthony’s version on a grand scale.” The screenplay has a much stronger narrative drive than the novel, which, at one point, spends two entire pages naming and describing desert winds. Minghella focuses on the book’s two main love stories and presents them in a more straightforward chronology.

It would be unfair and inaccurate to say that there is no type of anti-colonial critique in the movie, but the critique seems to exist in a coded form.<sup>31</sup> The various views stemming from identity politics seem to be thrown out together so that they become a mere exercise in political correctness -they seem empty because they are not pursued.

It is clear that Minghella had some sense of Singh's character or the elements of critique would never have made it into the screenplay. In his Foreword to the film script, Minghella notes that the film is continually being shaped as it is filmed and edited -explaining the discrepancies between the text and the film.<sup>32</sup> What also complicates the analysis of Singh's erasure is the intense collaboration of Minghella and Ondaatje on the film and their mutual admiration for each other. Looking at their comments adds more to our understanding of what went on in the making of the film. In Ondaatje's Introduction to the screenplay he discusses why aspects of Singh's story

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, after the death of one member of Singh's bomb-disposal unit, a man named Hardy, Singh tells Hana: "the Patient and Hardy: they're everything that's good about England. I couldn't even say what that was. We didn't exchange two personal words .... I don't even know what I am talking about." Hana responds: "You loved him." Only if the viewers have already filled in the blanks themselves so as to what Singh experienced as an Indian man in the British army could they understand what he is getting at. More likely, however, since audiences have not been given any insight into Singh's experience, they will accept Hana's understanding of his feelings, missing their racialized aspects. In addition, Singh undermines even the direct postcolonial critique he makes by immediately insisting afterward upon its unimportance. As he is reading a passage of Kipling's *Kim* aloud to the patient he notes: "It's still there, the cannon, outside the museum. It was made of metal cups and bowls taken from every household in the city as tax, then melted down. Then later they fired the cannon at my people the natives" This is a powerful moment but, when pressed, Singh insists: "What I really object to, Uncle, is your finishing all my condensed milk," undermining his criticism of the idea "that the best destiny for India is to be ruled by the British." A look at the way this scene continues reveals another way in which Singh's voice becomes overwhelmed and lost within the movie.

<sup>32</sup> In his Foreword to the screen play, Minghella acknowledges, at least partially, his eurocentric bias: "I hope the army of admirers of Michael Ondaatje's novel forgive my sins of omission and commission, my misjudgements and betrayals; they were all made in the spirit of translating his beautiful novel to the screen. I was determined and encouraged to have my say about the people and events described in the book, and was obliged to make transparent what was delicately oblique in the prose .... Any number of versions were possible and I'm certain that he stories I chose to elaborate say as much about my own interests and reading as they do about the book. And I can't apologize for this. It's a testimony to Michael's enormous modesty and he presided over the process with neither

could not be implemented in the film. He comments: “There were other losses in the translation to film but in each case they were understandable choices.” Ondaatje is neither outraged nor particularly disappointed at the loss of Singh’s voice, which in some ways is surprising.<sup>33</sup>

The novel, on the other hand, is pure Ondaatje, a vast market-place of the most unexpected and evocative word combinations. Impressionistic gives the wrong idea. Rather, the novel has as much to do with cadence as with any lineal method of construction, even though the plot could be parsed as easily as that of any traditional novel in the old conventions of realism. Minghella could only employ cinematography the same way Ondaatje deploys language. His film is not so much a faithful adaptation of parts of Ondaatje’s book as it is one work of art paying homage to another. That a paperback of Minghella’s screenplay has been published simultaneously with the standard movie-tie-in edition of the text is revealing with Minghella’s foreword and Ondaatje’s introduction. Minghella resists simply alternating between the flashbacks

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indifference nor contempt, and continues to lend his wit and intelligence to us as the film nears the moment of what we call completion but which is only abandonment” (1996, pp. xi-xii).

<sup>33</sup> “When I was a child films felt like wondrous news and emotion from another planet and I had to be dragged from the Regal Cinema in Colombo at the end of *The Four Feathers*. When I became a writer I continued to love films because they *were* completely different from books.... A film was closer to the stimulated excitement of a soccer stadium while books were a meditative and private act .... I knew this before getting involved with Saul Zaentz and Anthony Minghella .... all three of us never wanted the film of *The English Patient* to be a dutiful version of the book .... I knew my story’s shape and various swerves and plots would not go unscathed .... If one writes a great chapter in a novel, it will seldom be taken out of a book for reasons of time or rhythm. A novel allows you longer arms, a deeper breath .... Time spent on a flashback would have diverted the audience from the main point for too long, and seeing Kip’s bomb defusing work would have held no tension because we would know he had survived it.... For me, the long roots of Hana’s and Caravaggio’s psyches, Kip’s training in England, his reaction to the atomic bomb, and his eventual fate, will always remain in the original country of the novel. What we have now are two stories .... Each has its own organic structure. There are obvious differences and values but somehow each version deepens the other .... And what is more interesting to me about the film now is how scenes and emotions and values from the book emerged in new ways, were reinvented, were invented with totally new moments, and fit within a dramatic arc that was different from the arc of the book .... You have a communal story made by many hands .... It is as if people I knew when I was writing a book at midnight, full of dreams, now appear in a new country in daylight and the wonder is not so much of how they made that magical journey but that I recognize them so well and that I am once again enthralled by them. That was the gift I never expected” (Ondaatje, Introduction to the screen play, 1996, pp. xvi-xviii)

and flash forwards to juggle the pre-war past and the war's-end present. Instead, he winds the two strands together through the medium of the patient's morphine dreams and conscious recollections.<sup>34</sup>

Sam Solecki, one of the academia's biggest Ondaatje's supporters, cites the "baroque effect" of Ondaatje's writing in both *Lion* and *Patient* as a real problem. "You'll often find an entire passage that's two or three pages long where nearly every sentence will have a metaphor or a simile or some kind of trope in it," says Solecki. "The sentences read almost as if they're written under the sign of aestheticism.... Those two books contain passages of really gorgeous overwriting, but what's missing is a kind of narrative engine. There's so much beauty there, you often don't notice, for a while, that something should be troubling you" (in Finkle 1996, 98).

Although he has not abandoned lyric poetry, his first and foremost drive as a writer as is shown in *Handwriting*, he has taken something that was one of his greatest strengths and devoted all of that energy to combining it with prose narrative in an attempt to forge something new. Ondaatje's style in this text suggests a rethinking of his earlier clinically detached approach to violence. His writing now implies an emotional empathy for the victims of that violence rather than a glorification of its practitioners (see Bök 1992), as well as an accounting of the sociopolitical implications of both violence and the former detached attitude to it. This new style reflects the beginning of an appreciation of the importance of relationship, both of individuals to each other and of individuals to the political events in their environment which we already saw in *Lion* and will encounter in poetic form in *Handwriting*.

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<sup>34</sup> A French nurse (wonderfully played by Juliette Binoche) tends to his needs in a bomb-ravaged monastery. Hanging around is a Canadian soldier who has lost both thumbs to a Nazi investigator. This man is played rather poorly by Willem Dafoe. The true star of the film is Kristin Scott Thomas, the married lover of the patient's past.

## 12.1 Postscript: Other Alterities in *Handwriting*

Perhaps there is a balance and security in these precarious works because of the very fact that they seem to have been torn out of the heart and earth, that they were made with great difficulty as something to hold on to. These are the only safe things. *They often are the only things we can have faith in.* (Ondaatje 1996, 4, italics mine)

While there are obvious continuities among Ondaatje's books, he is a writer who has refused to repeat himself. Each decade has at least one volume of poetry or prose that shows him going in a new direction, a direction that with hindsight we see as inevitable but that at the time none of us could have anticipated.

For Ondaatje poetry is closely linked to myth which must be "biblical, surreal, brief, imagistic" (Ondaatje 1974, 25). In his early years as a poet, his poetic voice was tied to Yeats and Stevens and to the symbolist poets Lowell and Berryman. These and other influences made Ondaatje believe the poem was an artefact, something well-made, tight as a stone, and thus rescued from the chaos of contemporary world and mind. In contrast to the animalistic and epiphanic *The Dainty Monsters*, too dependent on a dictionary of mythology, the poet matures in his collection *Rat Jelly*, where family and ordinary life appears as being a possible arena for poetic constructs. There is a thematic shift in *Trick with a Knife*, as the result of the poet's visit to his native Sri Lanka. This makes the author be implicated with communal issues and be directed towards a greater openness and exploration in his future poetics.

The exotic imagery in *The Dainty Monsters* and subsequent books, however, stem from his childhood memories of Ceylon. The jungle confronts the cultivated and controlled present of Canada. The immense visual power of his early poetry creates minute and visually powerful images which are combined with the almost excessive use of adjectives and alliterations. If in his poetic beginnings Ondaatje reinvented the heron, in *Handwriting* he has done the same with buddha.

If the heron drowned the buddhas are buried in the jungle, as the ibis in *Slaughter*. The symbolic qualities of these early figures are no longer undercut or ignored in *Handwriting* though.

*Handwriting* looks back at *Running* with the corner of the eye inasmuch as the speaker is still sitting “on the uncomfortable sofa” to travel to the jungle again (*Running* 21). These occasional intrusions into imagistic or mythic analogues in Ondaatje’s world can be better understood if we think of them as poetically emphatic moments that enhance and remove his works from an ordinary plane. *Handwriting*, however, has gone a step further of his previous poetic works. It returns the material so rigidly excluded -political, ethical, historical, philosophical- to the domain of poetry and the act of writing is brought to the foreground. Ondaatje has thus turned inward, away from the occasional poem, to explore, to take a longer look at himself and his landscape, to hold onto something frail - whether the memory or discovery of a place, or the way of speaking and feeling (see Ondaatje 1979). This view has also attenuated his lyric subjectivity in the last decade while retaining a lyric tone. The use of recurrent images, the juxtaposition of contrasting moods and attitudes from poem to poem is what make him deploy immediate experiences and concrete objects in order to design new personalities that always have something of his own.

*Billy the Kid*, as explosive today as when published, seems the work of a different writer than *The Dainty Monsters*. *Slaughter* is grounded up to a point in the poetics of the final section of *Rat Jelly*, but shows Ondaatje struggling, however indirectly, with the full implications of a nakedly self-expressive, even confessional art that might lead to what, in a grimly humorous image, *Secular Love* describes as ““doing the Berryman walk”” (*SL* 36) -that is, suicide. In this last book writing has in fact reached an emotional suicide. And its architecture - “the undercurrents of shape and tone as opposed to just the meaning” (Ondaatje 1984, 324)- is built up with images that recur: moon, islands, maps, horizons, rivers, oceans, darkness, drowning, drunkenness, dissolution, suicide, friendship, family and community.

Process and perspective are now more important than traditional poetics, and both suggest an ongoing change, that “sense of shift” that Ondaatje referred to in his best poem “The gate in his head” (*RJ* 62), as the essence of experienced poetry attempts to convey. As the reader saw in “Women like You” (*SL* 90-92), in several poems of *Handwriting*, the speaker in his myth-making abstracts music from indigenous life, the ethereal from raw, physical realities. By making his adaptation of that ancient communal poem from the fifth-century Sigiri graffiti, he makes it universal and available while conjoining native and western cultures and making them both live together and share their deep experiences of love.

Other poems in *Secular Love* constitute the psychic epigraphs in the poet’s mind. In “Pacific Letter” (*SL* 100-102), “we both know the pleasures art and making bring,” while “(we) spoke out desires without regret”; or, in “The River Neighbour” (*SL* 93-4), where “this letter paints me / transparent as I am.” In *Handwriting*, and for the second time, the poet discovers how “(t)hose things we don’t know we love / we love harder” (*SL* 99). This recovered sense of connection and continuity opens a new journey for the poet, either by water or by land. A journey that is now, more than ever, an expression of a sense of forward movement in life, not merely a chance to break with the past, for now the poet knows “the arguments of imperialism” (*SL* 126). Another key poem in Ondaatje’s poetics, “Breeze,” evokes the vitality and sadness that pervades *Handwriting*, when “(w)e sit down and sharpen / the other’s most personal lines” (*CP* 193). The same sense of friendship appears in “The Great Tree” (*H* 58-9), an elegy mourned by the 14th century poet-calligrapher Yang Weizhen for the death of his friend, the poet Zou Fulei, who “died like a dragon breaking down a wall” (*H* 58). Both friends are here also described as “echoing the other’s art” (*H* 58) and sharing his “leaps and darkneses” (*H* 59). The parallelism to the speaker of “Breeze” who proclaims “I tie you to me” (*CP* 194) is alarming when, without “flamboyant movement” asserts “So I have always held you in my heart” (*H* 59).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Handwriting* will appear as *H* when quoted inside the text.

All this intimacy seems to have had its origin in Ondaatje's writing of *Slaughter*, which appears to have given him the confidence to write more directly, more intimately, about his parents in "Light" (TK 105-107) his elegy for his mother, in "Letters & Other Worlds" (RJ 24-6), about his Sri Lankan past in *Running in the Family* and about his relationships in *Secular Love*.

Two decades later, it is obvious that on some deep level these works constitute a watershed in Ondaatje's development and demand to be read together as a "formalization of the vernacular" (H 4) in Ondaatje's poetic design. Like *Slaughter* each explores the geographies of survival, and each could have an epigraph by Wallace Stevens such as "there / swaying in the darkness above us" (H 5). Another relevant epigraph could be drawn from Czeslaw Milosz's Nobel lecture which suggests that "(i)t is possible that there is no other memory than the memory of wounds" (see Solecki 1998, 7), an idea particularly relevant to a body of work like Ondaatje's populated as it is with emotionally and physically wounded characters and animals and among whose signature words are "wounds," "scars," and other kinds of traces marking an absence -and a searching.

If *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*, though relatively conventional novels, show an interest in social history and in the Second World War and nationalism respectively, *Handwriting*, Ondaatje's new sequence of poems written between 1993 and 1998 in Sri Lanka and Canada, looks back to its predecessors, and especially to *Running*. Like the memoir, it is set in Sri Lanka, and the narrative voice is often similarly subdued, nearly monotoned, a "we" that "began with myths and later included actual events" (H 3). But *Handwriting* swerves away for the most part from that could be called autobiographical concerns to a lyrical and multi-layered mosaic of a place and its complex (hi)stories. The most obvious exception to this is the three part lyric "Wells" (H 48-51), the second part of which is an elegy for Ondaatje's childhood *ayah*, Rosalin Perera:

More water for her than any other

that fled my eyes again  
this year, remembering her,  
a lost almost-mother in those years  
of thirsty love.

No photograph of her, no meeting  
since the age of eleven,  
not even knowledge of her grave.

Who abandoned who, I wonder now. (H 50)

For the first time, this woman is located both as a presence and as an absence in Ondaatje's memory:

*'For the long nights you lay awake  
And watched for my unworthy sake:  
For your most comfortable hand  
That led me through the uneven land ...'* (H n.p.)<sup>2</sup>

Even here, however, the personal aspect is flanked in a stunning triptych by poems about soldiers digging a well and "pulling what was lost / out of the depth" (H 51). Their act mirrors what the narrator is doing in trying to resurrect a dead woman last seen half a century ago, which "mark(s) the place / where your soul is / - always, they say, / near to a wound" (H 51).

In *Running* it was the lost and buried father who was pulled out of the depths of memory and history. Here, however, it is the entire history of a people that is at stake as the allusions to various eras written in "wild cursive scripts" (H 4, 58) are reflected in the several references to flight, soldiers, assassination and war:

There were goon squads from all sides

Our archaeologists dug down to the disappeared  
bodies of schoolchildren. (H 27)

In contrast to *Running*, the recent violent history of Sri Lanka is part of the book's more comprehensive tapestry, with this new handwriting other fathers and

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<sup>2</sup> This epigraph on the dedication page is by Robert Louis Stevenson, from *A Child's Garden of Verse*.

other children appear: “Those whose bodies / could not be found” (H 28). With astonishing economy and a formal and stylistic minimalism hinted at in some of the memoir’s lyrics, Ondaatje sketches two millenia of a culture in nineteen poems each of which offers a different aspect and slightly different perspective on it, as in ““All those poets as famous as kings””:

<i>Hora gamanak yana ganiyak</i>	A woman who journeys to a tryst
<i>kanakara nathuva</i>	having no jewels,
<i>kaluwan kes kalamba</i>	darkness in her hair,
<i>tharu piri ahasa</i>	the sky lovely with its stars (H 29)

*Handwriting* is deft and intellectual. There are pure images and Ondaatje’s trademark rhythms and diction - “Cormorant Girls / who screamed on prawn farms to scare birds” (H 3); there are lines that stun with emotional immediacy and compression of life’s facets - “a night without a staircase” (H 59); there are trysts and longings that suggest an aesthetic pressed forward by crisis - “My path to this meeting / was lit by lightning” (H 36). The path to *Handwriting* began in 1982 with “The Cinnamon Peeler”(Running 95-7) which started to address Ondaatje’s curiosity and respect for the culture of Sri Lanka. These poems allude to sensuality, desire and the form these take in language. There is an alphabet carved high in mountain rock in “Women Like You,” “whose motive was perfect desire” (Running 93). At that stage, though, as Chamberlin had already suggested in 1985, “Sri Lanka offers him a family history, but no tradition, no way of passing things on” (1985, 31-41). *Handwriting*, however, his first book of new poems since *Secular Love* captures Sri Lanka’s violence, and its oral tradition, but the turmoils that erased an alphabet and its poets threatened to silence an ancient culture and bury desire and faith in mud and rubble. These poems, then, bear witness to Sri Lanka’s history and enact Ondaatje’s inheritance.

At first reading, its poems seem to be less demonstrative, more understated, than his earlier poetry, but this apparent minimalism is rather devious -to use a favourite Ondaatje word. These poems render up their secrets very slowly after several readings. The result of return trips to Sri Lanka between 1993 and 1998, they deliberately take up the matter of Ceylon Ondaatje so carefully refused in his

stunning memoir, *Running in the Family*. In *Handwriting*, he has chosen, with great deliberateness and passionate intelligence, to explore the poetic history of his birthplace, a history, as he acknowledged in *Running*, of continual colonization, yet what is more interesting is “how the poet remains absent as a speaker almost throughout” (Barbour 1998, 26).

In the first part (*H* 3-29), history itself seems to speak, and the text seems willing to appropriate the indigenous voices of Ceylon. It poses as an historical document, an elliptical journey to Sri Lanka’s past. The poems exhume a history buried by conflict. In “Buried 2,” Ondaatje reveals how “(t)he poets wrote their stories on rock and leaf” and “slept, famous, in palace courtyards / then hid within forests when they were hunted / for composing the arts of love and science / while there was war to celebrate” (*H* 23). Poetry, too, dies in wartime, as these artists “were killed and made more famous” (*H* 23). The next poem begins with “What we lost” and lists in a sort of “elimination dance,” the amputations borne by a contemplative culture:

The interior love poem  
the deeper levels of the self  
landscapes of daily life

dates when the abandonment  
of certain principles occurred.

The rule of courtesy - how to enter  
a temple or forest, how to touch  
a master’s feet before lesson or performance.

The art of the drum. The art of eye-painting.  
How to cut an arrow. Gestures between lovers.  
The pattern of her teeth marks on his skin  
drawn by a monk from memory.

The limits of betrayal. The five ways  
a lover could mock an ex-lover.

Nine finger and eye gestures  
to signal key emotions.

The small boats of solitude. (*H* 24)

In *Handwriting* Ondaatje visits the possibility of another life, other times. For much of the collection the poet is invisible, cameo appearances hint at autobiography or confession. In general, though, there are other alterities and cultures approached to and caressed.

In the second section, “The Nine Sentiments” (*H* 33-43) desire speaks through the centuries, and love is wonderfully evoked, but without the disturbances of the writer’s personal life.<sup>3</sup> The nine sentiments connects the body with politics. The poems turn to women, the way their livelihood -the work they do- is sensual, the desire present in their domestic or economic roles. The speaker is voyeuristic and hears the village women’s “laughter when husbands are away” (*H* 39), observes how “All day desire / enters the hearts of men” (*H* 33) because they hear the “calling bells” (*H* 40) around the women’s hips, and captures the public sexuality of work on the river. The speaker thus translates Sinhalese words, tropes and cultural gestures, underlining his role as outsider in the first person:

An old book on the poisons  
of madness, a map  
of forest monasteries,  
a chronicle brought across  
the sea in Sanskrit slokas.  
I hold all these  
but you have become a ghost for me.

I hold only your shadow  
since those days I drove  
your nature away.

A falcon who became a coward. (*H* 41)

Section three (*H* 47-75), cuts to quasi-autobiography -a travel journal- as Ondaatje rides Air Sri Lanka Flight 5 and notices another passenger with hair like his mother’s. We hear about Rosalin, Ondaatje’s ayah from childhood in Sri Lanka. The tone turns anxious as Ondaatje experiences his ancient terrors: loss of

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the traditions and marginalia of classical Sanskrit poetry and Tamil love poetry exist in the poem sequence “The Nine Sentiments.” In Indian love poetry, the nine sentiments are romantic/erotic, humorous, pathetic, angry, heroic, fearful, disgustful, amazed, and peaceful.

language, death of the poem, fear that words will lose force and no longer express. He resorts to blocks of prose in “Death at Kataragama” that resemble the poetic identification at the end of his previous books, especially in *Running*, but now resumes his line of thinking about poetry:

You hear sounds of a pencil being felt for in a drawer in the dark and then see its thick shadow in candlelight, writing the remaining words. Paragraphs reduced to one word. A punctuation mark. Then another word, complete as a thought. The way someone’s name holds terraces of character, contains all of our adventures together. I walk the corridors which might perhaps, I’m not sure, be cooler than the rest of the house. Heat at noon. Heat in the darkness of night .... I no longer see words in focus. As if my soul is a blunt tooth. I bend too close to the page to get nearer to what is being understood. What I write will drift away. I will be able to understand the world only at arm’s length .... We depart into worlds that have nothing to do with those we love. This woman whose arm I would hold and comfort, that book I wanted to make and shape tight as a stone - I would give everything away for this sound of mud and water, hooves, great wings. (*H* 55, 57)

Previously, the writer had entered a few poems only to fade behind the areas of writing once again, letting story itself tell all it will:

standing in sunlight  
wanting more,  
another poem please

and each time  
recognition and caress,  
the repeated pleasure

of finite things.  
Hypnotized by lyric.  
This year’s kisses

like diving a hundred times  
from a moving train  
into the harbour (*H* 48-9)

Politics enters such poems, but that too is understated, a matter of allusive implication. “The Distance of a Shout” (*H* 6), provides an early example, as an historical “we” speaks of living “on the medieval coast / south of warrior kingdoms / during the ancient age of the winds / as they drove all things before them” (*H* 6).

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Corresponding to these are the aesthetic emotional experiences, which are called *rasas*, or

This voice insists there were no books of either forest or sea, then adds, “but these / are the places people died” (H 6). The quiet finality of that sets a tone for the whole book. The poems keep making these unqualified statements that shouldn’t belong in poems, but do, for, “Handwriting occurred on waves, / on leaves, the scripts of smoke, / a sign on a bridge along the Mahaweli River” (H 6). And throughout these poems, it will occur just as ephemerally, just as permanently, for that is the nature of poetry.

Although the writer has hidden himself, the deliberate fragments -sentences unfinished, images abruptly altered or lost, a syntactical refusal of predicates- force us to make connections and to create narratives out of the small details the text allows. Ondaatje hasn’t lost his touch for the telling detail, whether it be a historical remark or a quick and laconic perception like the following:

That tightrope-walker from Kurunegala  
the generator shut down by insurgents

stood there  
swaying in the darkness above us. (H 5)

Many of the poems range through history, especially a group about how people preserved stone Buddhas by burying them in the jungle: “Covered with soft earth / then the corpse of an animal, // planting a seed there. // So roots / like the fingers of a blind monk / spread for two hundred years over his face” (H 12). “The Nine Sentiments” -*Historical Illustrations on Rock and Book and Leaf*- is based on Indian love poetry, and it both creates conditions of desire and maintains a strict propriety in its refusal of Western lyric practice. Possibly one of Ondaatje’s finest artifices, it’s a beautiful demonstration of the emotional authenticity of pure art. Many different moods are juxtaposed, collating various images and conventional romantic phrases to make a palimpsest of desire through time:

Life before desire,  
without conscience.  
Cities without rivers or bells.

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flavours (*Handwriting* 1998, p. 78).

Where is the forest  
not cut down  
for profit or literature

whose blossoms instead  
will close the heart

Where is the suitor  
undistressed  
one can talk with

Where is there a room  
without the damn god of love? (*H* 43)

The final section brings history and desire together under the rubric of story in a series of complexly self-reflexive poems. Especially moving is “The Story” (*H* 60-66), which alludes to tales within tales and still leaves it up to us to complete the various possible endings:

A last chance for the clear history of the self.  
All our mothers and grandparents here,  
our dismantled childhoods  
in the buildings of the past.

Some great forty-daydream  
before we bury the maps. (*H* 60)

The wonderfully titled “Last Ink” (*H* 72-5) tells of an image that echoes moments from other Ondaatje’s poems, such as “Women Like You,” where the male lover scorns the confines of domesticity because desire, and the art it incites, cannot abide here:

Life on an ancient leave  
or a crowded 5th-century seal

this mirror-world of art  
-lying on it as if a bed

When you first saw her,  
the night of moon and plum,  
you could speak of this to no one.  
You cut your desire  
against a river stone.  
You caught yourself

in a cicada-wing rubbing,  
lightly inked.  
The indelible darker self.

...  
Yellow, drunk with ink,  
the scroll unrolls to the west  
a river journey, each story  
an owl in the dark, its child-howl  
unreachable now  
- that father and daughter,  
that lover walking naked down blue stairs  
each step jarring the humming from her mouth.

...

Our altering love, our moonless faith.

Last ink in the pen.

My body on this hard bed.

The moment in the heart  
where I roam restless, searching

for the thin border of the fence  
to break through or leap.

Leaping and bowing. (*H* 73-5)

Here we discover that erotic desire is as much for the story as for the other, or, rather, that the other is always part of the story (see Barbour 1998, 28). At one end are poems like “All day desire” that could be translations of the *Akam* or love poems of the classic Tamil anthologies:

All day desire  
enters the hearts of men

Women from the village of \_\_\_\_\_  
move among porches  
wearing calling bells

Breath from the mouth  
of that moon

Arrows of flint  
in their hair (*H* 33)

This is the first poem of “The Nine Sentiments,” an eleven lyric sequence whose concerns and images will be recalled before the sequence ends with “Where is there a room / without the damn god of love?” (*H* 43). The diction and syntax are simple and direct. The work of poetry is done by the enjambment in the stanzas, by the lack of connectives between them, and by the way the lack of punctuation creates a space for silence to seep in and expose the individual image, the silent white acting as a setting rather than a frame. This is more obvious in a poem later in the sequence:

One sees these fires  
from a higher place  
on the cadju terrace

they wander like gold  
ragas of longing

like lit sequin  
on her shifting green dress (*H* 35)

“Cadju” and “ragas” (the sound evokes the sense in “like gold / ragas of longing”) remind us that we are on foreign ground, strangers in a strange land. Very few contemporary Canadian poets are capable of risking the shift from the strong and musically evoked simile of the second verse to the equally striking simile in the third. Like most of the book, the poem offers the reader none of the familiar signposts either of the canon or of contemporary poetry in English. The closest it comes is in the identical metric of the last two couplets of the first quotation, each of which is a trochee followed by an iamb and an anapest, a small trick of the metrical knife that Ondaatje occasionally uses to tighten up an ending, to bring a poem to a point. “Step” is another example:

The ending disappears,  
replacing itself

with something abstract  
as air, a view.

All we’ll remember in the last hours  
is an afternoon - a lazy lunch  
then sleeping together.

Then the disarray of grief.  
...  
How physical yearning  
became permanent.  
How desire became devotional  
so it held up your house,  
your lover's house, the house of your god.

And though it is no longer there,  
the pillars once let you step  
to a higher room  
where there was worship, lighter air. (*H* 69-71)

It is arguable that most of our assumptions about genre, poetic kinds and symbolism are simply irrelevant here. Since the poems are written in English, it is obvious that we are not completely at sea, but it is also obvious as early as the Sinhalese words in the table of contents -Anuradhapura, Siyabaslakara- that some of our old maps, guides and so-called theories about poetry and reading will be useless. With the exception of three accidental echoes of Hesiod ("works and days"), Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" ("The Story") and Milosz's "Ode to a Bird" ("Death at Kataragama"), the sequence successfully evades European literature.

The pleasures of these poetic sequences whose unity depends on a common setting and a subtle structure based on recurring images, sound-patterns and concerns do not make this book difficult but enigmatic. "A Gentleman Compares His Virtue to a Piece of Jade" (*H* 3-5) for instance, links the first and last poems; images of digging, burial and depth recur; and several poems deal with the relationship between art/poetry and life. In a manner of speaking, *Handwriting*, like all original works, teaches us how to read it. It suggests that the reader pay attention to the words on the page; to the way the book as a whole provides a context for each poem; and to the repeated echoes of images, scenes and characters among the poems. It asks for a surrender to its otherness, its strangeness. "The Medieval Coast" is short enough to serve as an example:

A village of stone-cutters. A village of soothsayers.

Men who burrow into the earth in search of gems.

Circus in-laws who pyramid themselves into trees.

Home life. A fear of distance along the southern coast.

Every stone-cutter has his secret mark, angle of his chisel.

In the village of soothsayers  
bones of a familiar animal  
guide interpretations.

This wisdom extends no more than thirty miles. (*H* 20)

The general location of the village is indicated by the two poems that surround it; the historical period is announced by the title. The stone-cutters, soothsayers and circus in-laws are part of the book's gallery of artists -each with his version of a "secret mark" or signature- who give expression to a particular place, be it a coast, an island called Sri Lanka or even a country called Canada. The poem is a tessera in the book's overall mosaic.

Thinking of the book as a whole, it may be useful to keep in mind Frank Lewis's comment in *Slaughter* about Buddy Bolden's playing: "But there was a discipline, it was just that we didn't understand. We thought he was formless, but I think he was tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot" (*Slaughter* 37). Part of the discipline in *Handwriting* is in the restraint evident in the careful selection of representative materials; part is in the refusal to offer a portrait of Sri Lanka (named only once) with a narrative inflected by one side or the other in the current civil war; and a not insignificant part may have been Ondaatje's wrestle with his own metaphorically-laden style -think of "the gate in his head" (*RJ* 62) or *The English Patient*- to produce the spare, short and often almost lapidary lines of these lyrics. Incidentally, there is a fascinating anticipation of this in *Running* in the scene in which it is discovered that the mother's handwriting had changed drastically over the years:

If you look at my mother's handwriting from the thirties on, it has changed a good deal from her youth. It looks wild, drunk .... As if that scrawl was the result of a great discipline, as if at the age of thirty or so she had been blasted, forgotten how

to write, lost the use of a habitual style and forced herself to cope with a new dark unknown alphabet. (*Running* 150)

In a sense, Ondaatje had to reinvent his style -his “handwriting”- and himself as a poet in order to deal adequately with the themes and concerns of this new book.

Those who have followed Ondaatje over the past three decades will also take pleasure in noting some of the subtle and subterranean continuities between *Handwriting* and its predecessors. Every writer has his signature words; in Ondaatje’s case, these include chaos, fence, wound, scar, bone, sickle, tightrope walker and mirror. There is also what Solecki calls “his Francis Bacon moment” when, in several works, he describes himself alone in a dark or darkening room writing the manuscript we are reading (*H* 55-7). Here he offers three variants of this including “Last Ink,” the book’s closing movement. A particularly fascinating recapitulation and recasting of past material occurs in the haunting long poem “The Story” in which a dead king’s heritage to his son (think of Mervyn and Michael Ondaatje, think of *Lion*) is a dangerous journey through a dark tunnel without any assurance that the son will survive. Finally, there is the career long concern with the complicated relationship between life and writing. This includes both moments of doubt about the value and permanence of “this mirror-world of art” and of confidence that without the poem “the repeated pleasure // of finite things” (*H* 48) and historical events will be forgotten -see “The Great Tree”:

It was Zou Fulei, almost unknown,  
who made the best plum flower painting  
of any period

One branch lifted into the wind

and his friend’s vertical line of character

their tones of ink  
- wet to opaque  
dark to pale

each sweep and gesture  
trained and various  
echoing the other’s art

...

The great 14th-century poet calligrapher  
mourns the death of his friend

Language attacks the paper from the air

There is only a path of blossoms

no flamboyant movement

A night of smoky ink in 1361  
a night without a staircase (*H* 58-9)

The book is haunted by a desire for a ultimate language or art that will be radically coextensive with the landscape and life of the place and, therefore, not only inseparable from it but, by implication, indestructible. Otherwise all poetry is written in the shadow of elegy. In the end, and despite its sensuous love poems and affirmative celebration of “finite things,” *Handwriting* answers Hölderlin’s question, “what are poets for in a destitute time?” by pointing to elegy, a genre that both mourns wounds and preserves their memory (Solecki 1998, 8).

During the writing of *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* Ondaatje had to stop writing poetry, but as soon as the author finished that book he found he needed to come back to poetry. The large canvas of a novel -the time spent shaping and structuring it- is in some ways very far from composing lyrics, and the author felt the need to return. *Handwriting* is the result of several years of work, though the author has been writing and editing other things as the translation or rewriting of Sri Lankan stories he helped his son doing in *The Monkey King* and the novel *Anil’s Ghost* published in April 2000.

For Ondaatje, a poem is closer to what it feels like talking to one person; something overheard; a novel, even though it might seem private and personal, means you are speaking in some ways from a stage, as a context for the soliloquy. In fact, the author does not feel the novels are poetic in terms of language but in form. That is what the writer brings to the novel from poetry. A poem is much quicker and more subterranean though he likes to bring that aspect to the novels he has worked on. Ondaatje has been visiting Sri Lanka regularly since *Running*. He is interested in the history of Sri Lanka in a larger sense, not just immediate history as

seen by politicians and journalists. One of the extraordinary things in these poems is the juxtaposition of a culture's loss of civilization and art with an individual's personal sense of grief and loss. That is very central to the book in retrospect. The author wishes to give history a sense of renewal, a sense of designing new literary maps on its land.

Moreover, the first mapping in *Handwriting* is the category of the poet's other which appears to be derived from a notion of the self and of identity. This journey or discovery of his poetic and native roots do not necessarily imply an identification of the other but a transcultural strategy of understanding and complicity. This opening or gap of knowledge is what sets Ondaatje's work in motion, a system of incorporation of the possible disparities within his poetic self. His is an heterological movement which goes farther than the possible alterity reflected in a mirror, and it thus helps to construct an imagistic comparison. Ondaatje's quest for knowledge also reveals its very nature as quest in order to bring the other into the horizon of the known. It is not, however, a metaphor of the self but of other selves he contemplates from the distance.

From the 1980s on, then, Ondaatje's works have turned into a less egocentric and less individualistic narrative and poetics, more concerned with communal and social problems. *Running*, *Secular Love* and *Handwriting* are thus the reflections of a poet that needs a wider poetic space and feels concerned with other communal and postcolonial matters. His work has distanced itself from universal values and has focused on issues such as creativity, art and apocryphal history and genealogy, a preoccupation which is shared with the best of contemporary Canadian literature. And in his poetic search there appears Ondaatje's ambivalent relationship with Sri Lanka as a dialogue between displacement and the possibilities of solidarity. What has disappeared is the author's ironic and parodic stance so obvious in *Running*, and he returns to his roots with a more mature eye towards the bloodshed history of his native land, feeling secure at last when he contemplates his past without remorse. First, he is not a muted subject of colonization anymore but a speaking part that subverts the

received colonialist version; second, he has retrieved the value and dignity of a past insulted by European representation without the guilt of being part of the ruling language. Third, he does this by restoring community history and language and by voicing a “voyage in” that integrates his ancestors’ human community and liberation.

*Handwriting* is, for all this, a typical Canadian text inasmuch as it connects the immigrant’s perspective from within a western eye and place. The author has thus accommodated diversity into a common Canadian centre: the double perspective. This heterogeneity involves a positive cultural and linguistic exchange that can provide a transcultural focus to specific instances of writing as an alternative to the somehow abstract multicultural model of Canadian identity. Ondaatje has thus undermined traditional concepts of identity as something unitary and fixed and posits instead different and multiple ways of constructing the subject in relation to another social and cultural construct.

Ondaatje has bridged his cultural origins through the confession of other historical voices, and that reflects his emotional attachment with the beings who inhabit that place. Colonial past does not hang over him as a heavy mist any longer but has made his life real and palpable. Sri Lanka is, however, a “familiar but a foreign place” still, but he is not “un-conscious of his ancestry” (*Patient* 246) as he has moved towards the silences, and the oral history, of others.

## CONCLUSIONS

Northrop Frye had already announced a thematic and formalist dispersion in English Canadian literature due to the lack of a strong and unified national character. A national conceptualization of Canadian literature has no space in such a society, where diversification and local character define each of its artistic corners, and whose interest has developed from different sources such as epistolary and realistic fiction, colonial poetry and pioneer prairie fiction and towards confessional themes, historiographic experimentation and documentary recreation. The ultimate reason of artistic ambition in English Canada has thus been a continuous search for a literary nationalism, in its rejection of a unique British inheritance, which results in both its cultural fragmentation and diversification in order to conform to Canadian pluralistic realities.

The powers of nature and landscape have been the most recurrent motifs in English Canadian literature during the twentieth century, and these feelings of vulnerability in a hostile landscape are intertwined with the weak identity the colonial feeling tends to transmit. Two critical books have dominated Canadian intellectual minds during two decades: Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* (1971) and Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972), with their thematic and traumatic analyses of Canadian narratives and the garrison mentality that have dominated Canadian psyche. This mentality has been the perfect arena to shelter an almost overlapping phenomenon in English Canadian culture: postmodernism. No country has experienced such an "ontological uncertainty" in terms of how to cope with both the so-called crisis of identity and Canadian pluralist perspectives, cultural and sociological concepts that transcend the literary scope of any intellectual who tries to analyse the birth of a new society.

We have tried to expose how postmodernism is not a radical, irreverent and tragic rupture with the arts, or with history, but a questioning of cultural binaries. This questioning is historical inasmuch as it values modernism with contemporary eyes, that is, a reconsideration of High Art to which postmodernism is historically and culturally indebted to and, in its contradictions, a logical cultural consequence. To mistrust an old cultural construct is, on the other hand, a healthy tool for any critic if he is to direct his scepticism towards logocentric concepts that no longer hold in our pluralistic and borderless society. We live in a system that is global and borderless and that mistrusts both absolute values and metaphysical foundations, but which aims to gather and discuss different representative strategies. This world moves, then, towards cultural relativism and plural diversity.

As we have already seen, a great number of English Canadian writers does not belong to either the anglophone or the francophone ethnic groups, therefore, their use of English has an implicit doubleness, a consciousness of being used as counterdiscourse, and, ultimately, as a self-reflexive and metaphoric tool. This necessary counterdiscourse has been based on the intertextual parody or quotation of colonial myths, perhaps unnamng the imposed British or American tradition with whom the immigrant or postcolonial writer does not identify himself. Strategies such as silence or aphasia, and self-reflection, lead to the destroying of old forms, perhaps rewriting them with a new language which deploys a determinist aesthetic which can better reflect a Canadian vision. Accordingly, new discursive strategies such as dialogism and polyphony have been deployed in order to blur the authorial control. These new narratives, which desperately try to distance themselves from the British canon, are nonetheless closer to Latin American new ways of writing, to historicism, to allegory and irony, which together make of postcolonialism a singular discourse that runs parallel and keeps a healthy distance from the Western creation of postmodernism to which American scholars are so fond of.

We have thus considered postmodernism a necessary historical and cultural period worthy of a thorough study, for it has represented the cultural plurality and the scepticism necessary to challenge modernist thought. Linda Hutcheon has been crucial

in our immersion in these fragmented and contradictory postmodernist discourses. She has grouped together the various cultural and historical biases of our era, without rejecting the influence of traditional narratives which we have critically assimilated from modernist discourse. We have therefore considered postmodernism to be an eclectic and contradictory phenomenon, which uses an intertext as a tool of parody, and which recalls the big narratives in order to reflect and challenge their own discourse. Postmodern culture is the culture of reification and simulacra, where we play with truth and lie, perhaps creating a hyper-reality to reflect the real. This play of both historical deconstruction and stylistic pastiche fascinates the postmodern self who uses language as a tool of resistance.

Ondaatje's images and metaphors in the 1960s signal a place on the boundary between modernism and postmodernism as if he were reminiscent of one and conscious of the other. He often maintains a conscious and modernist stance in his epigraphs, introductions to each section which are explicitly directed to the active reader to elucidate its meanings and connections with the text. The first section of *The Dainty Monsters* is thus introduced by W.H. Auden in a movement that transcends Auden's mind in the 1930s to the poet's mind in the 1960s and which nonetheless keeps an allegiance to the symbolic tradition. This symbolic tradition is sustained in strange and bizarre imagery of gifted creatures that are immersed in the contemporary world. Other poems attempt to domesticate mythology where the poet admits exaggeration to be a key component for the writer.

It is in *Rat Jelly* where the poet leaves the dictionary of mythology behind to explore other biographical and communal experiences. The beginnings of his voice, however, enacts a tension between mind and chaos and makes his imagery have a dual character that lacks any resolution. That voice shares Auden's and Stevens's sense of understatement, placing everything in a photographic frame as the essence for imagination and feeling. Abstract comparisons are present in Ondaatje's early years which, at a first glance, aligns him to the symbolist tradition but which try to refuse a symbolic reading of its figures in its impossibility to decide which associations are relevant and which are not. In *Rat Jelly* the poet has then eliminated a number of

mythical poems and only keeps the mythical ones that emerge out of the perceived events of real life. The new poems of the collection are more relaxed and less symbolic and point the way towards the personal poems sequences of *Secular Love*. Even if these poems explore a psychological reality, they do not have a deep social, historical or metaphysical scope and range but they deploy brilliant effects that reflect an emotional depth of a poet that has started to move away from shock tactics.

In the 1970s Ondaatje, working at Coach House Press, is strongly influenced by poets like Phyllis Webb and by the long sequences of poets such as Dennis Lee. He has also inherited the tradition established by E.J. Pratt and Dorothy Livesay. Ondaatje thus finds his contemporary poetic voice in the serial poem in which the poet's aim is to give the old material new focus, maybe to write a countertext inasmuch as the long poem is in itself an ideology and a form that questions writing itself. The long poem tries to be unconventional in its definitions of locality, the self, and the idea of discourse, characteristics which define Canadian aesthetics and its cultural psyche in the 1970s. Two important examples of this sort of poetic discourse demonstrate the narrative potentials of lyric verse: *the man with seven toes* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. These are dream-like accounts of history, and both depict characters who existed on the edge of history and about whose existence the accounts are contradictory. Moreover, Ondaatje's long poems have several ambiguous endings and this deliberate irresolution leaves the sequence with a kind of open-endedness which points towards another direction in the future.

*Secular Love* is the lyric voice that was too personal to be inserted in the family portrait but that, at the same time, must be related to all the past and future poetic echoes that appear in Ondaatje's poetic voice until today. The text marks the limit of Ondaatje's voice from past to present, from loss and despair to the quest for a new equilibrium as a mature artist. Four epigraphs introduce its four parts which mark the poet's evolution from *Rat Jelly* to *Running in the Family*. The poet's lyric voice is here located in a secular reality which is full of irony and is consciously distanced from the overwhelming presences of other characters like Billy or Bolden. American pop-culture is ever present as a hallmark in Ondaatje's aesthetics with continual intertextual echoes

and references. His coming to terms with his own past is reflected in the poet's acceptance of his exile as a part of the poetic process rather than as a tragic fate. The poem's unity depends upon an implicit narrative, an architecture of tone and shape that depicts a personal change but which shifts in focalization and points of view. The images of drowning in the third person at the beginning of *Secular Love* move towards the end to images of victory and home in the first person. This is the poetic arrival of the prodigal son in its weaving together pieces of reality and memory.

Moreover, *Secular Love* establishes a link from *Running in the Family* to *Handwriting*, where the ancient native culture of Ceylon is at last placed *vis-à-vis* his present Canadianness as an immigrant. Here is where Ondaatje starts his own poetic line of communal writing, in his conscious merging of ancient and modern cultures in his own voice and which culminates with his next book *Nain's Ghost*, published in the spring 2000.

Part of this newly recovered sense of connection and continuity is a new openness to a journey, whether by water or land. A journey that is now an expression of a sense of forward movement in life, not merely a chance to break with the past. *Secular Love* best exemplifies Ondaatje's explicitly emotive or referentially emotional poetry, an elegiac consolation which he develops in his collection *The Cinnamon Peeler* and *Handwriting*. Ondaatje's concern with the emotional potential and tactile quality of language aligns his perspective with both an aesthetics of pleasure and an erotics of reading which have their origin in his poetry. We have tried to show how he designs an architecture of emotions and sensual images which play a role in the modern community of readers as the communal poems of mythical figures did in ancient cultures.

"If I were nineteenth now," Ondaatje once told the *Globe and Mail* (1990), "I'd maybe want to be a film-maker." His obsessions with Westerns began at the age of eight, while he was a student at St. Thomas College in Colombo, Ceylon, when he dragged himself to every movie ever made about Billy the Kid. His poems are rife with film icons from Montgomery Clift to King Kong. In addition to his documentaries of the 1970s, Ondaatje wrote and adapted a screenplay of Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands*

and another based on his own book *Coming Through Slaughter*, neither of which ever made it to the screen. Any critic, however, assumes the enormous influence that the cinema and the theatre have exerted upon his literary works. The last example of his passion for the cinema is his cooperation with Anthony Minghella in the script of *The English Patient*.

Together with the cinema, photography has become the metaphor of perception in Ondaatje's work. Photographer and writer go hand in hand in this freezing of time in order to capture meaning and word. In addition to Ondaatje's opening of *Billy the Kid* with a blank photograph and his friends' photos that play the role of characters of the book, he ends the book with the most ostensible device of alterity he has ever used, a photograph of himself at seven dressed as a cowboy. In a similar way, *Coming Through Slaughter* starts with the need of a picture of the protagonist, who only appears in a blurred photograph on the cover, and locates a suicidal photographer as one of its main characters. Photography also becomes a clear testimony of memory in *Running in the Family*, where the image and the plot merge to create a fictional history. Here photographs are enigmatic and symbolic; far from being objective records, the visual information recorded is shown to be crucially dependent on story and interpretation. Linguistic and photographic distortions in the text thus reveal an important device to manipulate both media at the same time, and the image takes the function both of the text and its documental recount. Ondaatje thus uses photography as a tool of comparison with fictional language as he uses the pen to defy explanation or to deploy plural meanings.

Literature can no longer be considered universal and objective. We have approached several movements to analyse other ways of seeing art and literariness. The blurring of genres and experimentation we experience in these texts depict different extra-textual realities which demand another set of answers. Self-reflection and parody form part of this generic experimentation and are deployed in order to analyse different discourses such as the feminist, female, lesbian, homosocial, immigrant or marginal. These are decentered discourses that need to be voiced in our society and which need to be articulated through the blurring of boundaries between traditional and popular

culture, through pastiche and parody. Irony then becomes the commodity to challenge traditional values and, together with irony, historical discourses become metafiction that question any kind of truth with capital letter. Truth merges in fictional discourse and information becomes simulacra, in a world where images are consumed with indifference.

Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault are key figures in the study of the authorial figure in the literary text. To the “Death of the Author” we reclaim, with Foucault, the peculiar and personal features of a singular author. We admit, however, that intertextuality and experimentation have decentered this authorial figure into a written text the reader has to unravel in his or her personal and cultural background. Foucault’s ideologic and authorial position also challenges Bakhtinian polyphony which blurs the authorial voice as the neuralgic centre of discourse. Bakhtin’s major influence on our concept of alterity, however, is evident in the attempt to define the novel’s style through the combination of its different languages and codes, which constitute an open discourse. Heterology, on the other hand, is a wider term than alterity inasmuch as it deals with an external object which is revealed unknown in order to exert an imagistic comparison.

Self and other thus overlap in an implicit way; in *Billy the Kid* with the photograph of the author at seven dressed as a cowboy, or in *Slaughter* when the narrator identifies with the musician; in *Running* it works as a confrontation with the author’s family ancestors. This linguistic subjectivity, however, will typically begin as a lack of knowledge, as the itinerary of a voice that mediates its self in what is unknown and fascinating, and therefore, holds the promise of unrevealed meaning. The questions thus remain to what extent the other is admitted, and what the implications of this process are. The relation between language and the representation of reality is one of the main characteristics of these texts; the referent has become a fictitious universe continuously evoked by the author of the historiographic metafiction, and this is achieved through self-reflection, through discursive strategies and through the obvious historical implications that underlie the fictional process.

*Coming Through Slaughter*, not defined as a novel by the author until much later, appears as a great advance for the author in artistic terms, an experimental fiction based on the life of the jazz musician Charles (Buddy) Bolden. The choice of the jazz musician has a deep imagistic importance when silence is still today Ondaatje's most important discursive strategy. We have had the need to focus on the authorial position behind the character, despite his own criticism on the artist's self-destructive nature. The irony lies, then, in the peace that madness brings to the artist as if it were the only to survive the chaotic tumble of events life is. This is the first work with a stable narrative structure of an author who had already experimented with the same themes and imagery in his poetry.

Ondaatje has always shown an artistic interest in a certain type of violence exerted by masculine protagonists who also possess a special sensibility. Such characters as William Bonney, Buddy Bolden or Mervyn Ondaatje are violent and tormented selves who try to use physical violence in order to escape from both a creative and self-destructive sensibility. Ondaatje's purpose is not to capture a legend to give some meaning to an unknown story, but rather to recreate a myth out of an enigmatic character and, hence, arbitrarily select the historic or legendary fragments that his personal narrative allows to be developed into a plot. His version of the myth is, ultimately, its potential of interpretation. And this potential is the permanent risk for an artist who is at the edge of his emotions and fantasies and who has objectified his aesthetic obsessions behind conflictive historical characters.

Moreover, Ondaatje's aesthetic "masculinism" gives way to a recognition of the politics of power, both in an analysis of colonialism and in gender relations. Feminine and postcolonial critics have not studied Ondaatje's gender relations in a serious way. Only Arun Mukherjee, Smaro Kamboureli and Lorraine York have approached to some extent his portrait of a passive female sensibility in front of the violence exerted by male protagonists in his early stage as a writer. In later volumes, though, there is no place for the woman as the target of male jokes, which indicates that the gender issue has turned to be more complex and conscious for the author. At any stage, however, the imagistic tools that work on gender relations are sustained by

the love triangle, a recurrent obsession that pervades Ondaatje's poetic design, a situation where deceit and betrayal always lurk upon a stable couple. Here, women feel trapped between two men or vice versa, generally making the choice of passion and violence instead of the one of security and equilibrium. The male self represents, in the end, the anarchy of the romantic artist while the female role lies in the responsibility and burden of endowing the protagonists with personal or professional stability.

It is in the 1980s when Ondaatje's work turns into a less egocentric and anti-individualistic narrative, more concerned with the social problems of his generation. Gradually, the reader finds a clear evolution that starts in *Running* and begins to transform the experimental years of *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter* into a more sincere poetic construct in *Secular Love* and *Handwriting*, where the poet needs a wider poetic space and feels concerned with other cultural constructs. This progression and amplitude enact, in the mature artist, a commitment towards new areas characterized by an artistic internationalism in the treatment of new issues such as immigration and postcoloniality.

Ondaatje creates homonyms out of legendary characters, but they cannot be considered transworld identities inasmuch as they differ from their historical counterparts. The author transforms slightly known personages into mythic figures, deconstructing their environment into a new and fictive one creating an ontological dislocation which, frequently, disorients the critic who immediately starts comparing historical figures with Ondaatje's fictional characters. Ondaatjean figures belong to apocryphal or alternative worlds, which are fictionalized to challenge documentary access. We have to keep in mind that the real referent must be kept in shadow in order to analyse the fictional character without a journalistic mind, we are not committed to truth here but to fiction.

Historiography is, for Ondaatje, both a type of discourse and a palimpsest of different contents and shades of clarity which must be ordered and interpreted. The historian has to document, research and, finally, choose his or her version of the events among a multitude of different interpretations, getting as many versions as historians are. We then have to admit the suppression of certain elements in favour of other in the

recreation of the narrative. The writer does not argue on the potential objectivity on the side of the historian but underlines both the textuality and necessary emplotment of all written narratives. Fiction does not always oppose reality but is an image of that reality, another text as plausible as any other.

Ondaatje creates a dialogic text in *Running* through a communal and familiar effort to elucidate those voices he could not hear by himself. When the author left Sri Lanka when he was eleven, his memory was indeed too vague to reconstruct a complete picture of his childhood. His is a version of his past, half historical account and gossip and half fiction. His version thus belongs as much to his family as to the author's feelings and is, eventually, his less personal piece of fiction as a writer. This travel memoir is the least personal of his books because it mostly lacks the protective cloak of fiction and the intimate privacy he is so fond of recreating in his other books.

Ondaatje had already created the conflict between time and experience in poetry, foregrounding and delineating his imaginative obsessions to capture and fix concrete moments. *Dainty Monsters* gave the impression of domestic photographs which become obsessive and recurrent in *Rat Jelly*. In *Trick with a Knife*, the poet reaches a certain poetic maturity in his capturing of his past and the confrontation with his father as an adult. But lyricism is too tight to capture memory so the author has to widen aesthetic horizons in *Running*. From now on, past, memory and photographs will go hand in hand as a familiar album. For that reason, we have defined Ondaatje's language as a tool for the discovery of new voices which mix with his own. This authorial freedom of rejecting any fixed discourse thus eliminates the possible rigidity or frustration of having to reveal himself, of being confessionally translated by his work. His narrative other, then, is a historical character who suddenly reveals himself as a historiographic metafiction, a character which is not historical anymore but fictional and which frequently reveals the same anxieties and interests of another artist, Michael Ondaatje. We thus encounter a heteroglossia between author and narrator, between artist and historical self who speaks with the purpose of recontextualizing a fictional portrait which will reveal the mind of the poet.

In this way we have approached the concept of historiographic metafiction in its attempt to demarginalize the literary through the confrontation with the historical, and it does so both thematically and formally. History and fiction, however, are not parts of the same order of discourse. They are different, but they share social, cultural and ideological contexts, as well as formal techniques. The purpose is the play upon the truth and lies of the historical record and thus historical details are falsified in order to foreground the possible failures of recorded history. Either through multiple points of view or through an overtly controlling narrator, the use of intertextual parody is the formal manifestation to close the gap between past and present. Since the contemporary scene reveals a high degree of internal alterity and dialogization, different cultural perspectives convert the plot into different stories. The novel is thus pertinent to historical research to the extent that it may be converted into useful knowledge or information.

Ondaatje's works, however, are not historical or autobiographical texts, but do extensive research and make up a possible version among the possible and multiple interpretations of the story. The best way in which the writer deploys his vision is through historical or legendary events that touch his imagination, mostly through those marginal characters who have been neglected by History. Fiction is, ultimately, the only reality Ondaatje depicts, always through his personal poetic design: a recurrent and multilayered play of images and voices which are sensual and frequently symbolic.

In *Running* we unveil the overlapping of Sri Lanka and Canada: the mythic past, either personal or historical, yields temporarily to the mundane present of Canada. This concept of historical and psychological layering can also be transformed into the violent and aggressive transgression of generic boundaries, and even into poet's inner struggle with his childhood. This embedding of both literary and historical texts in fiction, however, is problematic by the assertion that both history and fiction are human constructs. The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction, therefore, offers a sense of the present in the past but only through its traces, either literary or historical.

This fictional process which is designed in the form of quest or discovery is even more clear in *Running*. The search of his father through a communal oral tradition

is deployed in fragments. This makes it less personal and, at the same time, the distance between narrator and author is blurred as the self is connected to the other in an explicit way. We nonetheless consider these historical figures fictional constructions which become part of the artistic process of discovering. Ondaatje is always writing to discover, lighting matches to enter dark rooms for a few seconds, but he cannot understand or even accept everything that concerns his personal story in fictional terms.

It is characteristic of Ondaatje that he should thus celebrate the power of words (the lover's power, the poet's power) in images that simultaneously suggest their destructive potential. In previous novels and poems, he has shown his fascination for the fine and uneasy balance between creation and destruction, between the book as revelation and the book as minefield. *Billy the Kid* explores the parallel between the artist and the outlaw, and the "works" are both poems and killings. *Slaughter* portrays a musician who goes mad at the height of a parade, and collapses into silence. Ondaatje is fascinated by these figures, though in his texts he also distinguishes himself from them. As a writer, Ondaatje is drawn to the moment when balance collapses, the moment when his characters lose their fine control. As in *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*, the author closes *Running* with acknowledgements which constitute an integral part of the novel and which clarify, and elude, the importance of the documentary process. In *Running* he does so with the addition of his family and friends and the dissolution of the biographical genre when he affirms that the book is a communal book. We thus support Hutcheon's thesis that the work implies the author's biggest generic challenge. For this same reason, then, the work cannot be considered autobiography for, following the author's subversive narrative, the overlapping of author/writer, and his use of genres, there is a clear deconstruction of referentiality that autobiography assumes. The final success lies in the way Ondaatje projects both national and private identities in order to express the personal quest in a problematic country. He finally closes the vital quest after the conscious decision of imposing the private upon the public. Like other exiled and immigrant writers, the author has deeply felt the urge to create an experimental and metafictional structure, drifting between reality and fiction, memory and imagination, individual and collective consciousness.

*Running* is a fictional memoir in that it goes beyond the confessional mode of biographical writing: the past we perceive as readers is thus preserved in the form of diary, letters and journals. Memoirs, then, can be a private recording of public life where individual and collective memories are recalled. Ceylon grows to mythic shape but never reaches an eventual accuracy as postmodernist travel memoirs are subversive and oppose the objectivity of documents and final truths.

Critics such as Mukherjee and Sugunasiri have attacked what they consider to be a book which lacks any social or political commitment and they see the book as an orientalist travelogue which is irresponsibly apolitical. What they have ignored, though, is Ondaatje's ironic stance which is born from the impossibility of the autobiographical task. The book is, then, both a satire on the search for ethnic roots and a mockery of the attempt to recover a fabricated history.

His double vision of being part of, and, at the same time, looking from the outside, makes the text an elegiac piece that runs towards and away from (hi)story. Postcolonial knowledge then dissolves into humour, and family chronicle into fable. The truth claims of travel memoir are always open to suspicion. The book insists that it has witnessed places and events it may just have invented; instead of recording facts, the travel memoir may as well be spreading rumours. *Running*, however, can be considered a watershed text, retaining vestiges of Ondaatje's earlier sociopolitical indifference but moving in the direction of a more engaged view of society. We can, therefore, read Ondaatje's ambivalent relationship with Sri Lanka as a dialogue between displacement and the possibilities of solidarity. By mediating his experiences of Sri Lanka through an exoticist discourse of the other, Ondaatje disengages himself from the very culture that he claims to be approaching. Ondaatje explores his own ethnicity in an ironic way: through myth, rumour and emphasis on strangeness, and he thus confronts his own alienation through a new insight into his divided cultural allegiances.

Despite Mukherjee's belief, Ondaatje's text unsettles notions of colonial control and constructs a cultural identity through the act of remembering and forgetting, listening and writing. Thus is the narrator placed in the double position of foreigner or prodigal son that hates the invader. Moreover, Ondaatje's use of opposing

metaphors establishes contrasts between cultures and geographical locations; at the same time, the construction of an identity through the acts of travelling, dreaming, listening and writing, reanimates his static memory and the denial of a fixed identity. As a result, the fragmented form of this narrative functions less as a postmodern experiment than as a postcolonial reflection of the material conditions of moving between cultures, nations and generations. Ondaatje's juxtaposition of Canada's frozen landscape with the tropical heat of Sri Lanka not only locates him geographically but also locates the significance of a shifting cultural imaginary. Geographically, he is the foreigner, a Canadian, but, generationally, he is the native son connected to his homeland by his family lineage. The novel's approach must be postcolonial, then, to decipher a resistance that should be analysed as a metaphor, never under an exclusive sociological or political perspective.

The choice of legendary or historical characters who become artists secretly reveals some personal impulses which the author confronts as a creator. Similarly, the lack of communication with a father or an ancestor is a recurrent image in his work, as though it were a personal obsession, and this opens in the active reader new symbolic clues to approach his texts. In this respect, *Running* becomes an erasure of the symbolic mask ever present in the previous works and it signals the beginning of a new and more personal facet in the writer, where the familial and identity questions are approached. These are also ideal occasions to confront his own artistic otherness. On the other hand, his longer works are good representatives of the new literatures in English which indicate both the need to situate the self in discoveries of the other, and a refusal of definition in this respect. This multiplicity of languages as a crossroads for the encounter with the other is evident in the recurrence of polyglossia in the texts.

Reflecting his own position in history, Ondaatje writes himself into the history he writes. He renounces the perspective of the objective outsider and blurs the object of his writing into a subject and vice versa. In this way he manages to mediate himself into the memories his book is recording, and acknowledges his position inside and outside of his (hi)story. Only through the use of imagination can we address other cultures and histories in a critical and sensitive manner. *Running* would thus negotiate the difficult

and ambivalent terrain between postcolonial and postmodern strategies of resistance of the settler colony or of a Second-World text. Ondaatje's ethnic richness advertises his own perceived ambivalence but it also concerns itself with alternative ways of inventing himself, thus challenging the distinction between mainstream and ethnic. In that resistance lies the value of his difference and his diversity.

During the period of assertive nationalism in English-speaking Canada -the 1960s- literature was widely regarded as a site where the remnants of the old colonial relationship with Britain and the new colonial relationship with the United States could be resisted and subverted. Many Canadians are still today concerned about national unity, regarding Québec nationalism and the official policy of multiculturalism. The idea that either Canada's two major literatures might be regarded as constituting a single voice is virtually dead. Canadian literature cannot express a single national character despite the analysts' assertion that a national literature is the best site for the settler colony's effort at decolonization. But this project of decolonization is at odds when we approach the same effort from the Aboriginal cultures against the settler position. Settler cultures are sites of rehearsal and negotiation between the contending authorities of Empire and Native.

A considerable group of Canadian artists is formed by writers who have not been born in Canada. There is therefore an individual tradition that does not respond to the collective sequence that we see in other countries. Many authors such as Michael Ondaatje, Nino Ricci, Rohinton Mistry, Josef Skvorecky or Neil Bissoondath neither belong to the anglophone nor the francophone cultures, they do not reflect any cultural or artistic homogeneity. What is persistent is a respected multiculturalism without assimilation, in which being Canadian means to be a global immigrant. Language then becomes a major tool in these writers' works whose narrative and poetic structures are densely self-reflexive and full of metaphors and tropes that define a new sense of place. The figure of the immigrant has, definitely, a privileged position in Canadian literature.

Hence, postcolonial narratives aim to liberate themselves from the imposed otherness that history has laid upon them and thus regain the real essence of the self. It is not a question of destroying authority but of restoring a creative process that has

been erased by history. In sum, there is no homogeneization but negotiation and it is an imperative that these theories of hybridity address the question of solidarity and alliance between, first, different kinds of postcolonial cultural histories and social formations and, second, between these and those of other kinds of marginalized constituencies whose disadvantages do not stem from the same histories and hierarchies of discrimination.

Together with this cultural malaise of modernity, Canadian society starts to awake socially and faces the problem of multiculturalism in official terms: the Federal Government starts designing a new project to save and officially protect cultural plurality. This policy, however, seems to imply an adaptation or acculturation of both the diverse ethnicities and their imposed conscience of linguistic duality. Cultural decentralization becomes, therefore, an official theory which is considered appropriate and possible to be put into practice. The cultural mosaic, however, can be real but is hardly equitable. Having this political map at the beginning of the 1970s, the peripheral groups -wrongly called visible minorities- the Inuit, immigrants, First Nations and others are granted with both a dual linguistic and cultural background that will be deployed as an ironic weapon by those communities which cannot identify with foreign traditions. These groups, then, feel obliged to resist an imposed otherness and will demand a subversion of the imperialist vision using the English language as a weapon. Thus the cartography these communities inherit, on the other hand, are also part of this new discourse, coined as counterdiscourse, which now reveals its gaps and misreadings and contradicts its foreign exactitude with a new plurality of perspectives: the palimpsest and a new design of geographical spaces.

The fact is that we are all ethnics; both the decentralization in all levels of culture and the ethnic mosaic as a symbol of the Canadian multicultural policy do not work. Although most political leaders in English-speaking Canada have accepted and proclaimed the desirability of Canada's ethnic diversity, the Canadian public has not given unanimous support to pluralism. The discussion about the role of immigration and ethnic groups in Canadian life is still an important, an unfinished, debate which has its roots in our concept of identity and nation. The knowledge of our identity comes

from a knowledge of history, from self-examination and from an open and vigorous debate. It seems, though, that the Canadian government prefers regulations and the imposition of legal barriers which are perhaps necessary but which dismiss uncomfortable truths. As a result, Canada cannot avoid to install a double cultural identity in its immigrant members who have, as a result, a feeling of otherness that resists definition.

If Canada survives its current crisis, Taylor tells us, it will be dual in one respect. There would be two major societies, each defined by its own dominant language. But each of these societies within itself would be more and more diverse. The cultural and economic structures and attitudes have then to be open to permit entry without assimilation or segregation. First, pluralism coupled with equal opportunities implies the abolishment of a vertical mosaic that keeps certain groups in the lower echelons of society. Second, the governmental policy has to become a state of mind for the resident population whether charter groups or recent immigrants of a different ethnicity. Third, the citizens need to be given a chance to declare themselves “Canadian” in census.

It seems that a central theme in our literature today is one that expresses a lack of integration, which reveals an inability to achieve a whole identity. Our very insistence on the quest for identity is itself an indication of our unease or of our need for assurance. This is perhaps not only a Canadian phenomenon, but characteristic of western man generally. Until recently, the ethnic has had a silent voice in Canadian literature. It would be interesting, then, to see Canadian and Québec literatures as minority literatures within major languages, that is, as a site of counterdiscourse. Language is the mark of nationality in literature and Canadian and Québec writers may find themselves in a double bind with respect to the writing in France and England or the United States. Even greater is the disjunction of writing by someone else whose language is other than French or English. That inscribes a difference in that they can confront with a choice of languages in which to write, a choice that has ideological as well as aesthetic implications.

The writing produced in contemporary Canada often rejects oppositional representations and posits, instead, a concept of literature as a site of contamination and hybridization. It is precisely these elements of heterogeneity in Canadian writing, involving a positive cultural and linguistic exchange, that can provide a transcultural focus to specific instances of writing as an alternative to the somehow abstract multicultural model of Canadian identity. Some studies of Canadian literary production have appropriated the term transculturalism, wider than crossculturalism, because, in contrast to the multicultural model of identity, it makes room for the constant and changing interactions among the different Canadian ethno-cultural groups. Transcultural representations seem most evident in the production of Canadian writers of origin other than the dominant ones, and are further complicated in the texts which are explicitly situated on the border between heritage and dominant cultures.

The growing corpus of minority writing has not yet had a corresponding impact on the critical conceptualization of Canadian and Québec literatures. Some changes, though, are apparent in English Canada; writers such as Skvorecky, Ricci, Mistry and Ondaatje have won the Governor General's Awards, and journals like *Canadian Literature* have accommodated to a certain degree of cultural diversity. This growing diversity of Canadian and Québec literatures, then, makes traditional approaches less and less adequate in providing a general literary critical framework.

Accordingly, we have chosen a pluralistic or cross-cultural approach in our study, in which the first task is to replace the current terminology of mainstream and ethnic by the terms ethnic majority and ethnic minority. This distinction tends to represent a more objective cross-cultural frame of reference which the binary mainstream-ethnic lacks. A pluralistic perspective brings minority writing out of an ethnic periphery and into a common Canadian centre, so it can be studied not just for its characteristics per se, but also for how it manifests this ethnicity in minority Canadian situations. A diverse perspective is what counts as we have seen how an assimilative critical approach ignores the special value that a diverse perspective offers in the wide Canadian context. The issue would be what the differences and similarities

are in different groups of writers, and what significance we can give to the difference between majority and minority perspectives on ideological and social issues.

Although a grammar of ethnic writing has yet to find its contours, approaches that de-emphasize static patterns of difference and identity promise to continue to be productive fields of research. In many areas, such as the study of double consciousness, irony, dialogism, the construction of literary categories in the context of ethnicity, and in research that pays special attention to language and discursive subjectivity, can clearly play an innovative role for literary studies in general. Hence, we do not need a special treatment for “other literatures” in Canada, but a more adequate pluralistic approach to its heterogeneous culture.

Contemporary native culture and settler-invader imaginations are implicitly in dialogue with postcolonial theories even if some critics argue that postcolonial theory has become primarily the territory of settler-invader imaginations wishing to claim an oppression that belongs to others. In recent interviews, Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak disown the label, although they are often credited with having founded the field. The problem, we think, lies in how critics position themselves in relation to compromise. Postcolonial narratives of cultural difference that once seemed progressive may be re-mobilised to reinforce colonialist notions of cultural superiority, elitist privilege, and racist practices. Together with Diana Brydon (1999), we think that there is a need to develop forms of literary criticism attuned to the operation of economic and political forces that may still concentrate attention on the literary and the ludic, not simply to dismiss them as complicit constructions but to consider the full range of their effects. To exclude the settler colony may be to kill reminders of complicity. To deny full scope to the literary, with its ambiguities, equivocations, complications and contradictions, may be to deceive oneself into believing that solutions can be reached without compromise. The reading of literary texts, therefore, may prove helpful in re-framing understandings of colonialism’s legacy in Canada.

We think that the authentic subject debate may have its parallel in the authentic mode of resistance debate. Each relies on constricting binaries that reproduce the problems they seek to address and each seeks a universal answer to problems that are

locally specific. Furthermore, the status of the literary needs as much attention as the status of the subject. It is necessary to try to understand why so many people continue to essentialize methods and cultural forms, through considering the kinds of cultural works such essentializing narratives can perform in various institutional contexts.

Having these thoughts in mind, Ondaatje turns his focus as a writer away from the personal, internal struggles of the masculine artists of his earlier novels and poems toward an examination of the sociopolitical implications of colonialism, history, literature, and, to some extent, gender relationships. Ondaatje has further developed a trend that begins tentatively as an ambivalence in *Running in the Family*, and is already apparent in his next novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*. Christian Bök refers to it as aphasia - manifested as either the silence of death or the silence of madness- a refusal of individualism itself and the artistic retreat to privacy, in favour of an embracing of relationship. This trend arguably demonstrates a self-conscious rethinking of the volatile, individualistic masculinity so apparent in Ondaatje's earlier works. Not only does Ondaatje refuse to make explicit judgements about the underlying cultural values inherent in the individualism or the violence of these protagonists, but his work also avoids any implicit critique of it. In *Running*, Ondaatje's portrait of Mervyn Ondaatje contains strong elements of the irresponsible and agonized solitary artist figure, but for the first time the writer begins to express, as a son looking for a point of contact with his long-dead father, the beginnings of a dissatisfaction with the isolation of such figures.

Ondaatje's next prose works, *Lion* and *Patient*, begin to demonstrate models of individuality that emphasize the connectedness of central characters with other people. This development represents an important shift in the world view of Ondaatje's work away from the culturally determined individualistic masculinity of the cowboy figure or the tortured, isolated artist. The shockingly violent antisocial behaviour in the earlier works gives way to a subdued revolutionary and socially committed form of violence in *Lion*. This violence works to reclaim, rather than refuse, a social order, as Patrick breaks the pattern of individualistic heroes to join the Macedonian immigrants. In giving his protagonist a social context in which silence is imposed from the outside by

an oppressive ideology, Ondaatje's work abandons his fascination with aphasia, the impulse to "implode into silence" (*RJ* 71). Patrick's initial individualism is simply inadequate in this social and political circumstance. Within Ondaatje's emerging postcolonial world view, individualistic silence can no longer be seen as an act of sociopolitical rebellion, but an act of sociopolitical surrender.

In *Lion*, Ondaatje's characters respond to the traumas of dislocation with affirmative and communal action, enabling them to expose the power relations which frame them, and to effect metamorphoses of the political and social structures and of the geographic spaces and the subjectivities which they inhabit. This strategy of staging the migrant experience enables Ondaatje to bridge the gap between the textual inscription and the lived experience of migrant subjectivity in a crosscultural context, moving a step beyond the oppositions set up in *Running*. In *Lion*, immigrants from Eastern Europe swell the ranks of the working class, they never find public voices. Their stories have to be told by a fictional protagonist and even their class struggle has to be fought on their behalf by English activists.

This novel constitutes a big change in Ondaatje's professional career. A personal research that had begun years before, culminates in a project which deals with the particular vision of the immigrants that built the city of Toronto at the beginning of the twentieth century. It maps high society and the subculture of the underprivileged in Toronto in the 1920s and 1930s; it also concerns communication about men utterly alone, who are waiting to break through all those emotional constraints. For the first time in the form of a novel, the author depicts an authorial perspective of the displaced immigrant, so obvious in his personal experience but never deployed so explicitly in this narrative form. All this makes *In the Skin of a Lion* a postcolonial book and an immigrant novel.

The characters in *Lion* emerge from the inevitable room with which Ondaatje's previous works have closed, and the final call for "Lights" is not the warning for explosion but rather the daring exposure, the naming of the country. This open exposure would also answer, in aesthetic terms, the modernist criteria and both its opposition and merging with postmodernist criteria. The bridge becomes in *Lion* the

modernist presence and functions as the source of living for invisible immigrants like Nicholas Temelcoff. The book's subtitle "A Novel," calls attention to genre as none of Ondaatje's other books has done; all his longer works, at least occasionally, traverse its generic geography but *Lion* sets itself up as a novel in the larger sense of historical reclamation, multiple characters, interwoven narratives, and political reflection, the latter of which some critics find lacking in Ondaatje's earlier work. This novel does not so much plot a single trajectory of narrative - none of his books does- as offer moments of illumination and action in a number of lives, creating a larger, more complex collage than any of his previous books.

Ondaatje has continued to base his fictions on characters and records retrieved from the archives, and on stories which these findings have brought to life. A list of such media would include archival records, personal photographs, dramatic scripts, lyrics of popular songs, films, newspaper clippings, letters, tall tales and even dreams. For the first time, however, the majority of the primary documents upon which he draws are not presented directly to the reader. These are either referred to or described within the text by one of the characters or by the narrator. Accordingly, narration and narrative are instruments of social and historical integration as well as a link between the individual and society, as the thread that sews Nicholas to history and binds Hana to her dead father. If one of the novel's functions is to humanize history, at the same time, however, the novel suggests that such a history militates against radical, revolutionary action which instead stands in sharp contrast to the humanization the novel extols. Even when he presents the official version Ondaatje challenges traditional historical accounts which places *Lion* in the tradition of postmodernism. This is the reason why *Lion* is a novel about the discovering of language and about the nature of silence and naming. Again, the dark side of this novel is the artist, but now it is represented through an alien voyeur who is invisible even if he is born in the country.

Although *Lion* sometimes betrays a confused ideology, its power lies in its ability to express the variety of stances to be found in any society, to makes us see the lives of all these figures more feelingly. In a completely different generic stance from the detective story quest for answers, it is possible to read *Lion* as a vast physiodrama

peopled by an allegory of types. Caravaggio, Temelcoff, Alice, Clara, Cato, Harris: all become wild figures stamping and dancing on the periphery of Patrick's vision; all these possibilities for personal action are in effect refractions of Patrick, rather than he the prism refracting them and each of them acquires at times the extraordinary metaphoric density that Ondaatje's poetics confer. Ondaatje's writing has a deep trust in the literal base for language, as his thematics have a deep trust in the possibility for communication in love. Yet this physical body of the text is refocused quite clearly on the necessary interaction with history.

Magic, together with history, is something the novel regards quite seriously. *Lion* demands the exercise of both the intuition and the imagination of the reader who plays a central role in the narration itself. There are a number of scenes which the protagonist could have no knowledge and whose details are provided by the storyteller's imagination. Thus the author has tried to capture the essence of the historical subject whose vagueness forces him to guess. There are also other ways to engage the reader's memory and sometimes this is articulated through silence. Yet silence about the personal, a peculiarly male trait in western culture, also leads to explosion and destruction. For that reason, political correctness may appear less postcolonial in the criticism levelled at *Lion*. Julie Beddoes accuses the novel of silencing the working-class lives and of neutralizing class politics. It is true that throughout the text we see very little of the Torontonians ruling class. If anything the book is concerned with working class people, but perhaps not in the way in which socialist realism would want to see them or their reality portrayed. Ondaatje's strategy consists in presenting the protagonist, a member of the dominant group, as an outsider. Patrick is metaphorically depicted as an immigrant to the city, or as an immigrant in the ghetto of Macedonians and Bulgarians, erasing any binary dichotomy between the English Canadian and the ethnic minority. So the result is evident: the majority language becomes a minority language and the vertical scale of socio-cultural dominance in society is subverted. In this way, the author and the protagonist articulate a silent voice in order to confront the figure of the immigrant and the new world.

*Lion* has inscribed the immigrant workers into the cityscape. This inscription is further complicated by the facts that most of the workers portrayed in the novel are immigrants. Accordingly, there is a Canadian role as a colonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial power in this novel, and the only way the immigrant writer has found is to recover the lost histories through the storytelling and through literature. The question thus becomes not a matter of sides, but to discover a suspicion of history, a fictional ability to negotiate a territory full of complex predicaments and tensions. In sum, Ondaatje has taken on official history as a unified concept in *Lion* and, by supplementing it with his stories, he has revealed its incompleteness, complex constructedness and ultimate subjectivity.

To build this historiographic and fictional architecture, Ondaatje has researched different accounts of historical and fictional migration in the novel. These include Nicholas Temelcoff's harrowing passage from Macedonia to Canadian shores; Patrick's voyage from hinterland to metropolis, followed by his repeated journeys between various peripheries and centres; Ambrose Small's mysterious disappearance underground; the equally strategic manoeuvres of Cato in his efforts to fortify union organization while avoiding the threats of company authorities; and Caravaggio's numerous and clandestine odysseys. By alluding to and reappropriating received stories, traditions and generic conventions, Ondaatje stakes his claim to a crosscultural and transnational inheritance, and pieces together an alternative literary tradition that answers to his most pressing concerns as a migrant writer. Similarly, he shapes connections with old worlds and new, situating himself in relation to their various geographies and histories.

The novel is, finally, a political act to betray official history by humanizing it, by making it private. *Lion* is, therefore, a typically Canadian text for subversion and revolution are rejected in order to give preeminence to the community over individual pursuits. Ondaatje's choices of marginalized people and events and the relatively unfamiliar Babylonian epic as intertext validate the term excentric to describe *Lion*; however, Ondaatje's excentric novel upholds Canadian values as the novel ends with the characters moving to reunite fractured families, and point towards the

reestablishment of order and balance in their personal lives. Ondaatje's text constantly reminds us who we are, who we were and who we might become.

We certainly need to move beyond nationalist frameworks and into a cross-cultural work, to be able to listen to multiple voices and to read Canada with an awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which the dominating discourse acts. Canadian criticism has focused on Canada's political and cultural wholeness and homogeneity for too long. An alternative vision must be sought to accommodate all the different levels of diversity. There is a distinct difference, however, between the postmodern moves toward ideology of a nation-state such as Canada, empowered but working under the pressure of an awareness of external economic control, and the postmodern moves of colonizing, imperial nation-states. More generally, there are many differences among the ideological moves of postcolonial nations, differences that depend upon the coincidence with or separation from the ideological moves of the specific nations involved with their colonization. In common with Latin American postmodernism, Canadian postmodernism since the 1950s and 1960s has used the artificializing of national ideology to warn about the growing strength of multinational power predominantly from the United States.

The appropriate location for the individual and how it may be determined by memory is an issue taken up throughout the works of Michael Ondaatje. His writings are concerned with the historical framework for the individual that emerges in the generic definition of his texts, and the writings run between the positions of a liberal humanist identity and the ideologically defined subject called into being by social pressures. The seductions of fame offered by the grand narratives of history are a dominant element in his work. He is an acute observer of cliché, classical allusion, contemporary intertextual reference, into all of which he explodes rapidly flowering images taken from the central cultural metaphors of North American obsession: cowboys, jazz, sex and so on. All of these narratives, whether prose or poetry, tell about the destructive search for a fixed personal identity that will challenge the way that the state/public history forgets and erases individuals. Yet, at the same time as the

search for a reconstruction of history that will validate the image of self-identity, there is hovering around all the narratives which carry a history that responds only to the immediate.

From *Billy the Kid* to *Slaughter* to *Running* and *Lion*, the writer concerns himself with the negotiations between personal memory and historical memory, and with the commodification of self necessary to fame and to all public heroes. Billy the Kid is a public icon, a cultural cliché with so fixed an image that it can proliferate wildly through non-American media. This is also the cultural icon as outlaw, and links directly to the idea of the artist as hero: both maintaining and destroying the representations necessary to society. *Slaughter* shifts the focus onto the personal and the interactions that the artist as person has with the artist as historical figure. The concern with the artist is also a concern with how we make figurations, not only how we enter history but how we can make history part of ourselves.

Ondaatje's figures are classic neo-Romantic figures whose image of the lone artist against the system is part of the economy of the vicious circle inscribed by nation-state and private individual. In conventional romantic style they hover on the borders of madness and criminality, and end either as insane or dead in his first works. But Ondaatje controls the myth in order to examine it. Most of the narratives have the structure of a detective story foregrounded as a conscious device. Answers are only posited to indicate their inadequacy. And, increasingly, these narratives turn from questions about truth to pursuing the tensions between the historical fixity of identity and personal ambivalence.

One of the conditions of an individual within a nation-state is the need to simultaneously acknowledge and deny the constructed status of history. At the same time, the writer/narrator is writing a history, yet trying to create it not from national memory but from personal memory. The ambivalence of works such as *Running* or *Lion* lies in our knowledge that these personal memories are of people who mediated the rule of the colonizing nation-state. *Lion* may be read as an elaborated account of the detective story. The elusive centre of the book is the construction of the self of the teller, which we can only read by way of the series of his stories: a series of contexts

where the personal and public memories meet. For many Canadians, the history in which Ondaatje places Patrick is as unknown to them as it was to him. Ondaatje makes Patrick the alien insider who, when attached to a community, can assume responsibility for the story. Personal memory thus enter the public arena by negotiating with the facts of history. Ondaatje is conscious that storytelling becomes not a way of commodifying self into heroism, but of inserting oneself into a dialogue with a larger community.

At the end of the twentieth century, when ideological stability is found more and more only in multinational, global power structures constructed by contemporary economics, national ideologies are more and more apparent as cultures, as artificial modes of representing grounds upon which we form our current agreements about society. Indeed nationalism today, with the severance of nation from state structures of power controlled by economic forces may now be a way of legitimating multinational ideology by obscuring its activities. But national culture may also move toward a destabilizing and foregrounding of multinational ideology, just as mixed ethnic and racial cultures have questioned the nation-state.

For these writers foregrounding culture as artificial public memory is not only a way of insisting on personal memory but also a way of dealing with national power, indicating its limits, insisting on its contingent legitimacy. Ondaatje's writing works as if ideological narratives exist separately from the personal; you can participate in them but you cannot change them. If you participate in them you commodify yourself, just as other cultural artefacts are commodified: you enter the processes of fame. However, personal memory both permits and enables change: constructing it allows you to construct a self. The way that individuals remember differently and make ambivalent their identities is here specifically deployed through the body memory of sexuality and dream, released and potentially stabilized by the experience of love which Ondaatje does not analyse consciously. The individual is perceived through the characters of these texts as unable to destabilize national ideology, and Ondaatje offers it as a failure. The answer is to move constantly toward a position of unfixing/ambivalence/moral decision responding to need.

In *Patient* it becomes less and less clear which cultures are clashing and why. Even the efforts of multicultural individuals like Kip -or the patient or the desert explorers- do not seem to be able to ultimately bridge the gaps across cultural divides. There does not seem to be a simple solution -and the book does not try to gloss over this fact in a happy ending. Kip has a tradition he can return to but Hana has not such a tradition to fall back on: in her culture, traditions and traditionalists have become contaminated during the war. Even many years after the end of the war, the conflict between the personal and the public is still continuing so is hardly surprising that the book was harshly criticized in the United States. Ondaatje has been attacked for not putting the record straight, for being ideologically ambivalent, and, even for racial hatred. It seems, then, that to bring cultural clashes in the open, even to literature, already seems too much for some.

The representation of such clashes in a complex seductive prose, though, maps our landscapes for those who may not be willing or able to explore them unguided. It restructures their perception of landscapes -be they exotic, urban or ruined- and invests them with new or additional meanings which readers may further explore beyond the realm of the fictional. Yet, such memories are part of our cultures, too, and should not be glossed over with polished monuments and official phrases of remembrance.

In *Patient*, Ondaatje takes the evolution toward relational values a step further, with the elimination of the hero, a single romanticized protagonist, in favour of a quartet of balanced and strongly interrelated characters. The four main characters' "way of being connected" to each other forms the basis of the novel, demonstrating an emotional shift in Ondaatje's work that completely refuses the masculinist insistence on separateness. The figure closest to Ondaatje's early model of the romantic, socially irresponsible, isolated male artist in the book is the English patient himself, Almásy, the desert wanderer, map-maker, secretive and unsocial. Almásy is dying, and on his death-bed he comes to recognize not only the sociopolitical context of the "trade and power, money and war" in which he has lived, but also his own complicity in it: through his map-making he has helped turn even the desert into a place of war.

If the English patient can represent the formerly valorized, insistently individualistic Ondaatje hero, then perhaps his charred and blackened body as he lies drugged and sinking into death, without identity, can be seen as Ondaatje's recognition of the failure of that particular form of literary hero and the version of masculinity that he embodies. Violent, individualistic masculinity based on isolation and separation has, quite literally, burned itself out for Ondaatje, to be replaced by a new masculinity that is hinted at the novel's ending. None of the characters in *The English Patient* is explicitly an artist even though they all share the same fascination with esoteric knowledge and detailed manual skills. Nonetheless, the same imagery recurs. The thief Caravaggio, dependent on his hands for his breaking-and-entering skills, loses both thumbs, and the mutilation reduces him to a state of helplessness akin to Bolden's silence. The injuries from which Katharine dies include a broken wrist. As his plane crashes, the English patient breaks the glass with his hands and falls, burning, from the sky. But there is also a healing. While Caravaggio and the patient remain lost in their world of morphine and pain, Hana and Kip slowly fall in love.

The dying English patient is not permitted to retreat into silence and isolation. The novel insists on relationship, even for Almásy as he lies semi-conscious in a morphine haze in his bed. Hana loves him as a father. He finds a friend in Kip through their mutual knowledge of weapons and bombs. He is pursued by Caravaggio who shares a morphine addiction with him. He sings, recites poetry, attends parties and dinners with the other three protagonists, shares his knowledge of literature and history, and tells stories from Herodotus's *Histories* and from his life. Almásy exists literally because of his connections to others but as a literary character he also has no identity except through his relationships with Kip, Hana and Caravaggio. Through them his story, his life, and his identity are developed. The English patient, and *The English Patient*, represent an attempt by Ondaatje to depict the possibility of the truly differentiated self defined through particular relationships to others, rather than in isolation from them.

Ondaatje tries to make the novel polymorphous, stretching a bit further Bakhtin's conception of the novel as polyphonic. For he has the extraordinary talent to

combine the prose with the power of poetry, the stillness of painting with the travelling eye of the verbal camera, dream's visionary pitch with the mundaneness of day-to-day reality, collective history with private philosophy, medieval iconography with modern choreography, the chaos of life with the clarity of life. For him, the formal shifts -the flashes back and forward, the poetic figures, the alternating burst of comedy- all these are the tools of writing as discovery, of asking rather than telling. Ondaatje holds that history is "the chaotic tumble of events" and that the first sentence of every novel should be: "Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human" (*Lion* 146).

Some of Ondaatje's earlier poems retell mythical stories and other were part of a more general project of constructing a Canadian mythology. Ondaatje's M.A. thesis, moreover, "Mythology on the Poetry of Edwin Muir," was a significant example of his early preoccupation with myth. His writings have in fact continued to resonate with the modernists' interest in myth, even in his use of pop-myth figures such as Billy the Kid and the jazzman Charles Bolden. Ondaatje also takes his title *In the Skin of a Lion* from the *Gilgamesh Epic*, in which there is a relationship of myth within the novel structure and pattern. The author explores different kinds of oriental myths in his retelling of the Sri Lankan stories "The Vulture" and "Angulimala" in *The Monkey King and Other Stories* (1995) and in his book of poems *Handwriting* (1998). Myth is, therefore, the imagistic background of Ondaatje's poetic design to date.

He has not abandoned myth in fiction, though. The title character of *Patient* offers the clearest connection with the Arthurian legend, and he shares attributes with the bed-ridden fisher king figure of Arthurian romances, including the fact that both are identified by a mysterious wound. His entire identity, as it is uncovered or imagined in the novel, is reshaped by war. In all of Ondaatje's texts there is a quest motif behind, but here that quest is unveiled through individual romance. Nonetheless, Ondaatje refuses a clear uni-dimensional use of these Christian elements in favour of a characteristically postmodern act to the end that the patient's identity raises questions and suspense without definitely answering them. These identity questions have so far ignored the existence of a real life historical Count Almásy in favour of a mythological

approach, the reason being that historical elements in Ondaatje's writing have always been chosen for their indeterminacy. Since many of the details are unknown about such characters Ondaatje can endow his works some of the prestige of historical scholarship while feeling free to be creative. The technique is ultimately postmodern in the way it simultaneously validates historical texts while suggesting their unreadability.

Ondaatje's *Patient* has been located in the tradition of apocalyptic literature as it ends in the destructive climax of the atom bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These nuclear bombs must be understood as an extreme manifestation of colonial racism in order for the book to be understood. But the novel resists apocalyptic thinking and encourages us to remember not to forget in its recording of the horrors of apocalypses and the failure of apocalyptic promises. In providing counter-narratives, *Patient* undermines History as master-narrative and reveals the constructedness of facts, reality and identity. It generates narrative structures and invents a language for the unspeakable, giving voice to those survivors, who do not proclaim themselves winners of any war. What Ondaatje's novel does show is that although people are on the winning side in this war, they do not feel like winners, for they have been scarred and traumatized too.

We have, therefore, a novel that illustrates, by its very imagery and content, the breakdown of empires and the abrupt appearance of postcolonial perspectives that are physical, angry, and, finally, political. While Ondaatje uses postmodern devices to tell the story he also raises questions about the apolitical nature of postmodern rhetoric, just as he has questioned the continued use of humanist themes and images. By approaching the novel variously, we are more likely to experience viscerally the effects of war on western literary culture, the necessary abrupt altering of the love story between Hana and Kip, or the earlier one between Almásy and Katharine, situating it within the history of the twentieth century, where *the personal will forever be at war with the public*.

Although he has not abandoned lyric poetry, Ondaatje's style in *Patient* suggests a rethinking of his earlier clinically detached approach to violence. His writing now implies an emotional empathy for the victims of that violence rather than a

glorification of its practitioners, as well as an accounting of the sociopolitical implications of both violence and the former detached attitude to it. This new style reflects the beginning of an appreciation of the importance of relationship, both of individuals to each other and of individuals to the political events in their environment which we already saw in *Lion* and will encounter in poetic form in *Handwriting*.

*The English Patient* is a wonderful tribute to human imagination and its capacity for symbolic expression. In this context, it seems appropriate to mention the various artists who have left a mark on Ondaatje's art: his first wife and painter Kim Ondaatje; poets like Yeats, Auden, Wallace Stevens, D.G. Jones, Leonard Cohen; directors like Alfred Hitchcock, Sergio Leone and Louis Malle; the Théâtre Passe Muraille counter-culture group; Canadian writers like Kroetsch and O'Hagan, Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee, Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino. Ondaatje's language thus accommodates an integrated vision of both the Western and other modes of representation and becomes a *trompe l'oeil* form of expression. The ambivalence of the white man with a black skin and the black man with a white sensibility depicted in *The English Patient* bears witness to this. Ondaatje's own magical idiom is the outcome of the hybridization of the English language with glimmering metaphors from Arab poetry through the rhythm of blues. He is able to achieve a hint of slowness and silence through a careful arrangement of phonemic patterns, studied repetition of sentences and smooth transition between paragraphs and welcome pauses in narrative time. This writing technique which he borrows from the jazz music is Ondaatje's remedy for the "strange disease of modern life, with its sick hurry and divided aims." The secret and success of Ondaatje's style lies in the tension ever present in his prose. He is at his inspired best when he depicts the giddy frontier between imminence and permanence in a surrealistic fashion.

Ondaatje's work bows gleefully to a world where nothing (and no one) remains in place anymore, where bits of culture detach from their moorings and float freely, changing shape and meaning as they go. For that very reason he is terrified of guns and of heights so he writes about bridge builders and gun-fighters. The process is more

transparent in his earlier writing, which works up a lather from what's known about public figures and shoots off sideways into new territory. Though he balks at the notion that he writes poetic novels poetry remains the major influence on his prose structure and style. Emotionally he feels much closer to poetry than to the novel though, more comfortable with something that is small and tight and without any unnecessary parts, but it can also be completely suggestive as opposed to something with an idea or plot.

The manifestation of (post)colonial correctness in the criticism considered is different for each of the books: for *Running* it is straight forward postcolonial nationalism, whereas for *Lion* a class motive overlays the complex entanglement of Canada as a colonized, colonial, and postcolonial society. In *Patient*, the readings seem to be driven by a critical regression into Victorian values with the aim of imposing the correct reading of the History of a new Empire which itself was a colony once. To facilitate such reading, the balanced complexities of positions of the three works have to be simplified to the point at which the literary facts of the books are willfully ignored. Works like Ondaatje's are excellent examples of a writing which facilitates a reflection of the complexities involved in presenting and negotiating between conflicting positions of cultures.

Accordingly, in *Handwriting* history itself speaks to appropriate the indigenous voices of Ceylon. It poses as an historical document, an elliptical journey to Sri Lankan's past. These poems, therefore, exhume history buried in conflict so the same postcolonial experiment conveyed in fiction is resumed in a lyrical project that no one could have anticipated. In *Handwriting* the poet visits the possibilities of another life and other times. For much of the collection the poet is invisible, cameo appearances hint at autobiography or confession. In general, though, there are other alterities and cultures approached to and caressed. Now he holds all this ancestors even if they are ghostlike to him, lyrically he admits he had fear of words but now he has become the falcon to witness with a wider perspective.

In the last section of the book of poems the poet moves towards a confessional tone, as it happened in *Running*, after exposing the other's histories, the poet needs to come back to express his own terrors: loss of language, death of the poem, fear that

words will lose force and no longer express. In an astonishing piece, “Death at Kataragama,” the poet resumes all his previous line of thinking about poetry: the pencil appears again while the hand writes the remaining words of poetry, he walks new corridors in the house of poetry trying to be closer to the perfect poetic architecture, his perfect design which he cannot reach or tight as a stone.

In the last decade, Ondaatje’s work has moved towards a communal and historical narrative and poetics where he can finally incorporate the immigrant perspective from a wider scope and not only from the point of view of the prodigal son. *Handwriting* is different and, at the same time, very Canadian as it has incorporated not only a first level of diversity but a deep diversity which installs social and historical respect towards other cultures which are also our own. Ondaatje’s ancestors are at last, incorporated into his imagistic design reaching a wide horizon where poetry and history are intertwined and reconciled.

Connecting directly with *Handwriting*, *Anil’s Ghost* speaks of a journey to the ancient civilization of Sri Lanka –forced into the late twentieth century by the ravages of the civil war and the consequences of a country divided against itself. For the first time in Ondaatje’s writing a young woman, Anil Tissera, is the protagonist, born in Sri Lanka, and educated in the west, a forensic anthropologist sent by an international human-rights group to work with local officials to discover the source of the organized campaigns of murder engulfing the island. As in the poetic *Handwriting*, bodies are discovered in a novel vivid with character and event where the Ondaatjean poetic imagery repeats itself in the poetic arguments around love, family, loss, the unknown enemy and the quest to unlock the hidden past –all propelled by a riveting mystery.

Ondaatje has a deep fear of over-exposure, especially in Canada, and his efforts to maintain a low profile were once based largely on the literary principle that a writer is merely a conduit for his work, which should stand and be judged on its own merits, unencumbered by the personal baggage of its creator. However, the care with which Ondaatje now avoids public excess may have less to do with the author’s shyness than it does with his literary ambitions. Behind this anxiety is something larger and much more important: he really doesn’t want to get trapped into being a Canadian writer,

now he forms part of a whole generation of international writers that can make it anywhere. There's something large here at stake for him in terms of becoming a world-class writer.



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