

MEMORY AND PLACE IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S RUNNING IN THE FAMILY

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Abstract. *More concerned with the nature of meaning than with the definitional literary function of finding meaning, postmodern criticism usually does not reward the reader with new and fresh insights or perspectives into the ways of questioning and repudiation of dogmatic thought which it proclaims as its highest goal. Instead, critical interpretations seem to reiterate the well known premises on which postmodern theory rests: there can be no true or fixed identity, there is no origin or original, no singular author, no ultimate knowledge, and representation is no longer a matter of veracity or accuracy. Notions of truth and authenticity are outdated. And yet, within certain discourses (multicultural writing is one of them) there is a need for affirmation of self and origin, there is an integrity in authenticity. There is a desire to strengthen one's identity through the act of writing and reading, and lived experience plays an integral role in this. This essay is about this kind of literature whose theme is not the process of dispersal of the self into a number of subject positions but the transformation of the subject back into the individual. The emphasis that Ondaatje places on the importance of particularity, individual life and imagination as moral force shows that he has no interest in dismantling his identity but instead wants to confirm it, albeit in its hyphenated form.*

[W]HEREVER A KNOWLEDGE SPEAKS, AN "I" IS SPOKEN¹

Observing the changes taking place in literature as we know it, and in the expected reflection of it in literary discourses, one can hardly help but be struck by the power of agenda-writers and gatekeepers. They are by their own declaration far from wishing to impose any concept or thought on their readers and interlocutors, and willingly admit how partial their perceptions are. Despite this, it may be argued that their less erudite pupils will be guided in their choice of further reading and study only within the conceptual realms in which the discourses are conducted. Literary criticism is being stretched by the

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¹Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject*, Theory and History of Literature 55, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988), p. 100

density of reference accorded to concepts, topics, and their contexts, leaving potential "others" beyond the ken of socially-informed participants. Put briefly, the academy, while not specifically excluding other readings, yet concentrates attention on favoured discourses leaving the others at best in penumbral disregard. The dominant tendencies in literary and social theory are attenuating scholarly communication with those of other traditions by overlooking themes and voices potentially within the purview of these fields. On the one hand, this essay is an expression of the sad feeling of déjà vu that comes upon one after seeing things known represented as things new and of frustration that the main stream of literary theory and criticism is so sufficient unto itself in reference that it reduces potentially fruitful avenues for imagination to dead ends. I want to suggest that postmodern discourses in literary studies, if not completely invalidated by their selectiveness in reading, are certainly politically suspect and worth of critical examination. On the other hand, the essay is guided by a determination to listen to what writers have to say about theory rather than what theory has to say about art.² Finally, it relies on the old definition of the function of art so succinctly expressed by Northrop Fry but now discarded as one among many outdated notions: "the arts, including literature, might just conceivably be...possible techniques for meditation, ways of cultivating, focusing, and ordering one's mental processes, on a basis of a symbol rather than a concept."³ Art's true significance, then, lies in our discovery of its unfolding meaning - it is precisely man's capacity to recognize and choose that art is trying to articulate, to preserve, refine, and keep in service of life.

More concerned with the nature of meaning than with the definitional literary function of finding meaning, postmodern criticism usually does not reward the reader with new and fresh insights and perspectives into the ways of creative questioning and repudiation of institutionalised, dogmatic thought which it proclaims as its highest goal. Instead, critical interpretations seem to reiterate the premise on which postmodern theory rests: they seek and analyse various literary devices singled out to distinguish the specifically postmodernist outlook and presumably used by the postmodern writer to induce ontological or epistemological uncertainty in the reader. As an example of a criterion of what constitutes postmodern writing we can take Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism. Discussing the changes in Canadian literature in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of postmodernism she identified Michael Ondaatje as one of its prominent practitioners and defined postmodernism as art that self-consciously reflects its status as art (the stress is on self-reflexive texts), with a focus not on history's truth but on the idea that history is produced or created in telling (social and historical awareness), and a re-

² Ondaatje refuses to explicitly align himself not only with postmodernism but also with other literary traditions: "For writers in Canada today, there's so much stuff being written around them that it's like being surrounded and locked up. There is a tendency for critics to try to nail writers down within a literary tradition. But really who cares? A true literary tradition has nothing to do with 1850 to 1980. It's not a line like that." Had Ondaatje bothered to theorize the assumption of literary tradition, it would amount, I believe, to a contemporary re-statement of T.S.Eliot's famous formulation of tradition as something which has both weight and permanence, but which can and must be open to modification through every contribution from a creative newcomer. Contrary to postmodern intents, Ondaatje's laconic comment implies an idea of a continuity rather than a break with earlier traditions (in the current campaign it is modernism and romanticism that should be discredited, especially, their aspirations to formal unity and spiritual wholeness). Sam Solecki, "An interview with Michael Ondaatje", in Sam Solecki, ed., *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985), p. 323-324

³ Northrop Fry, "The Expanding Eyes", *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, Society*, (Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 117

jection of fixed and stable meanings.⁴ We read again and again that Ondaatje exhibits a "fear of certainties" and explores new territory in the attempt to avoid the final, the conclusive, the absolute. It is his privileging of the fluid, unfinished work which cannot be labelled that situates him within the context of the postmodern as another contemporary critic claims. He goes on to suggest that from Ondaatje's angle of vision, reality appears absurd, surreal and "most importantly ambiguous; his poetic world is filled with mad and suicidal herons, one-eyed mythic dogs, tortured people, oneiric scenes, gorillas, dragons, creative spiders, and imploding stars. These extraordinary images function as a kind of metaphoric shorthand to disorient reader, to make him enter a psychological or material reality which has been revealed as almost overwhelmingly anarchic and chaotic."⁵ We are also being persuaded that, as this critical observation shows, art's proper function is not to coordinate and give a direction but confuse and disorient.

Appearing to serve progressive goals – Raman Selden suggests that contemporary theories "seek to engage in a major critique of human culture. These theories share a commitment to unravelling the entire project of Western bourgeois humanism and to questioning notions such as the autonomy of the individual, the unity and stability of the normal self and the universality of essential human values" – postmodern theories employ all sorts of usually confusing argumentative procedures to persuade us that old humanist notions of truth, self, the world and meaning must be discarded as falsehoods and illusions of imperialist, capitalist culture.⁶ They tell us there can be no fixed or true identity, no origin or original, no singular author (he or she died long ago). There is no ultimate knowledge, representation is no longer a matter of veracity or accuracy but merely of competing discourses. Notions of authenticity or truth are outdated and the most basic factor in human motivation is power. In this grim view of humanity which must astonish anyone who remembers the way humanists used to talk power displaces and undermines the multiplicity of other motivations that we used to think so important - love, loyalty, fulfillment, ambition, intellectual curiosity, and most significantly, it denies man's own particular essence - his most completely humanity - his freedom to create his own self. It is the fervour with which postmodern cultural analysts and critics attack the notion of free creating self that is particularly suspect and astonishing and raises a number of questions. What is one to think of the literary and cultural criticism based on such deterministic propositions that deny the individual any power to be an active participant in historical processes? What to make of criticism which shows only the ways culture entraps the self, translating the individual into multiplicity of subject positions, none of which can claim to truth, yet, declares its purpose to be social and political liberation?

But despite their efforts to persuade us that we have done away with integrity, identity and the self for good, there is the kind of literature - though silenced by postmodern readings - whose theme is the process of the transformation of the subject back into the individual; there are writers whose interest lies in the formation of personal and cultural identity and not in an erasure of the self. And there is a contradiction between theory and lived experience. On the one hand, the destruction of the self became a universally accepted axiom: every school of contemporary thought is hacking away at the self, under-

⁴ See Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1988)

⁵ Sam Solecki, "Nets and Chaos: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje", in Sam Solecki, "An interview with Michael Ondaatje", in Sam Solecki, ed., *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, (Montreal, Vehicule Press, 1985), p. 93

⁶ Raman Selden, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction*, (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 6

mining its foundations, waiting for it to topple, foreshadowing its collapse. Feminist theorists accused identity of being a "phallogocentric" construct of paternal law that suppressed a pre-existent feminine. Post-structuralists announced identity to be endlessly deferred and deferring, much like the poor signifier, fated never to be satisfied. Psychoanalysis found identity to be a construction of the ego, balancing precariously upon the incessant demands of an unconscious, tightly restrained but champing at the bit to be free. Postmodernists saw it all as a simulation, a continual reproduction, the image of an image, a pastiche. And yet, within certain discourses (and I include multicultural writing as one of them) there is a need for affirmation of self and origin, there is an integrity in authenticity. There is a desire to strengthen one's identity through the act of writing and reading, and lived experience plays an integral role in this.

The textual practices the writer uses - whether he writes like a true Cartesian subject or in multiple voices from a number of speaking positions - are usually not decisive and cannot change the essential purpose of writing - to create a consciousness equal to the perplexities and experiences of the day. Changes in formal devices and techniques go along changes in our world and our perception of it. But their ultimate purpose is and has always been, even in a today's "extensively homogenized, yet intensely fragmented" world, not to induce epistemological or ontological uncertainty but to render the truth visible and credible and offer fresh insights and "new knowledge". At the end of *Democracy's Discontent*, M. Sandel from the world of political science, invites us to tell stories because "there is a growing danger that, individually and collectively, we will find our selves slipping into a fragmented, storyless condition. The loss of the capacity for narrative would amount to the ultimate disempowering of the human subject," and then writes, "the global media and markets that shape our lives beckon us to a world beyond boundaries and belonging. But the civic resources we need to master these forces, or at least to contend with them, are still to be found in the places and stories, memories and meanings, incidents and identities, that situate us in the world and give our lives their moral particularity."⁷ Salman Rushdie, from the world of literature, would heartily concur. Kill the novel, he says, and you kill society. Murder the story, and you annihilate the soul. The novel, says Rushdie, is "the stage upon which the great debates of society can be conducted."⁸ The writer writes to provoke and to question "everything in every possible way."⁹ "I elevate the novel", he says, "above other forms...it is the only (form) that takes the privileged arena of conflicting discourse right inside our heads. The interior space of our imagination is a theatre that can never be closed down; the images created there make up a movie that can never be destroyed."¹⁰ Or, as one of his characters in *The Satanic Verses* says, "the poet's work is to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep..."¹¹ This sounds like a good account of Ondaatje's task in *Running in the Family*. Whether he initiates the reader into the reality or realness of phenomena viewed metaphorically, or in the reality of recorded sensuous experience, his idea is never to evade reality or erase the self. Quite the opposite. The emphasis that he places on the importance of particularity, individual life,

⁷ Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 349-351

⁸ Salman Rushdie, (*Is Nothing Sacred?*, London: Granta Books, 1990), p.7

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13

¹¹ S. Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, (London: Vintage, 1988), 97

feelings and imagination as moral force shows that he has no interest in dismantling his identity but instead he wants to confirm it, albeit in its hyphenated form.

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Notice, incidentally, the bizarre consequences of our tendency to seek an artist whose life can explain a text, in the case of a modern "art" that is at least semicomunal; a series of movies written to star a particular actor, say, Clint Eastwood.¹²

Having left Ceylon for England and then Canada at the age of 11, after his parents' divorce, Ondaatje chronicles in *Running in the Family* his return twenty-five years later, accompanied by his own family trying to recapture the world of his parents, Ceylon in the early decades of the century, which he knew mainly from fragments of stories he had heard as a child. It may be tempting to call this work autobiographical but it is far from a straightforward life story. Composed of apparently unstructured and randomly placed vignettes of varied lengths, interspersed with poetry, pictures of life in Ceylon and snapshots rescued from the family album, the work is replete with the stories and first-person voices of people other than the narrator. There are also sudden shifts from the narrator's first to third person narration which can create an impression of the book written by a community rather than a single author. It first becomes evident in the narrator's paradoxical introduction of himself. In the beginning lines of the book Ondaatje calls himself into existence, putting himself as the writer at the centre when concluding: "Half a page – and the morning is already ancient."¹³ The reader then learns in the first chapter that the subject of Ondaatje's/the narrator's story is actually Ondaatje's father, that it is about his father's land – about the history of Ceylon as part of his identity. With his introductory gesture, Ondaatje now makes himself the absent protagonist of his narrative. When he writes at the end of the novel that 'a literary work is a communal act' and warns the reader against reading the narrative as a standard autobiography ("I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or 'gesture'...in Sri Lanka a well told lie is worth a thousand facts"), he seems to justify postmodern interpretations of his textual practices: multiple narrative voices provide the reader with different perspectives, none of which can claim to superior truth, while the absence of singular narrative authority can be read as an effort to diminish or erase the self.¹⁴

If we take these remarks only at their face value, as postmodern critics often do, we will not have understood their full and, actually, only true meaning. We will have ended up with the novel's meaning consisting in its being a sum of formal devices, whose purpose is to subvert referentiality, and precipitate the reader in the indeterminacy of unresolved aporias, to use the current idiom. In other words, the reader will be left with a reading which refuses to perpetrate the sin of 'closure' by attributing any definite ethical meaning to the text. But if only we attempted a different reading we might arrive at a recognition that Michael Ondaatje's words strongly resemble the brave, though now proscribed, romantic teleology and the belief in the independent, creative and questing mind.

¹² Carter Revard, "Traditional Osage naming Ceremonies: Entering the Circle of Being", in Swann and Krupat, eds. *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987), p. 462

¹³ Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, (London: Picador, 1982), p. 11

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205-6

Firstly, the idea of the book being written by community and not a singular author is not an original, postmodern discovery. Once the writer develops a sympathetic relation to its surrounding allowing different perspectives to be heard, his work really becomes a product of a communal act. Far from being a champion of epistemological and ethical relativism, Ondaatje possesses negative capabilities as the purest creative temperament do, to borrow Keats's words. Compared with the decisive man – the man of action, the one who exhibits a strong personality, drives his will aggressively toward a visible goals, makes up his mind and knows where he is going - the writer has no identity. His mind is not a fortress: he does not exclude other angles of looking at reality. His aim is less to do things than to let things happen. Or as one contemporary critic writes: "Artistic expression is never perfectly self-contained and abstract, nor can it be derived satisfactorily from the subjective consciousness of an isolated creator. Collective actions, ritual gestures, paradigms of relationship, and shared images of authority penetrate the work of art and shape it from within, while conversely the socially overdetermined work of art, along with a multitude of other institutions and utterances, contributes to the formation, re-alignment, and transmission of social practices."¹⁵ It is the communal aspect of the work of art that makes it possible for it to survive the disappearance of its enabling social conditions and even be delightedly received by some future audiences.

Secondly, by making a clear distinction between his book and history Ondaatje reminds us of the extent to which the rational, empirical and pragmatic view has obliterated all other modes of experiencing reality; the imaginative – that is, the visionary and creative – has been reduced to the imaginary – that is, the false and the unreal. Unlike the historian who forces one to believe literally in what he says, yet ironically depending on fiction in his historiographic practices, the writer never circumscribes the reader's imagination; he is not saying what is or is not, but is offering, as Romantics were trying to do, a larger vision based not exclusively on what we see and understand, but also on what we want and do not want, should or should not be, thus sharpening moral awareness and discrimination. When Ondaatje writes that "in Sri Lanka a well told lie is worth a thousand facts," he describes not only the Sri Lankan propensity for invention but his own task as a story-teller. He is not going to reproduce reality as it appears to the objective eye; instead, he is the creator whose preference for images, rumours, unverifiable stories, or lies over facts in his account of his family, himself and a historical period naturally springs from his commitment to literature but will eventually lend to his work a sense of surprise, alarm and, unexpectedly, a heightened sense of authenticity. The authenticity of his narrative springs from a genuine realism of his imagination, a sufficient degree of reality or truth in the novel, which has nothing to do with the discursive techniques used. More specifically, the authenticity of Ondaatje's narrative springs from the validity of his voice, that of the expatriate, the voice that is both marginal and central, but clear and unequivocal in his endeavours to come to terms with the past and his own identity.

Ondaatje writes from the angle of a lived duality – from the situation of those writers who are, in the words of Ondaatje's *English Patient*: "born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives," and thus, he perfectly suits contemporary theoretical frames in terms of the subject matter and theme of his fictionalized memoir.¹⁶ Although the past is a foreign country for all of us,

¹⁵ Stephen. J. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, Routledge, (London, 1990), p. 89

¹⁶ Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, (London:Picador, 1995), p. 176

the pastness of the past - the experience of the loss - is especially intensified in the immigrant, who is distant in space as well as time, out of country and out of language. To recreate fictionally the land and the family one had left decades ago is inevitably coupled with the failure to arrive at any objective truth because the distances of time and space distort facts and memories contain only incomplete truths, the only material the between-world writer can record. Ondaatje is aware of his duality, of being both "native" and "foreign": "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner."¹⁷ His narrative will, therefore, spring from his consciousness of his at once plural and partial identity. But, despite the initial sense of discontinuity and fragmentation, Ondaatje makes clear from the start that the past is his home and that occupying this between-world position does not prevent him from an imaginative understanding of the past, from an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show, to paraphrase T.S.Eliot's words.¹⁸ In order to avoid falling in the trap of having to validate his remembered experiences with objective realities and yet remaining faithful to his belief in the contrived nature of cultural meanings, Ondaatje uses a very simple method - the one that serves to demonstrate the way reality is constructed - the method of fictionalizing of biography and historicizing of fiction.¹⁹ Not like any writer, but more specifically like an migrant writer, Ondaatje must be a fantasist. He builds "imaginary country" and tries to impose it on the one that exists.²⁰ Of course, in the process of the fictional recreation of the land he inevitably faces the problem of history: what to retain, what to discard, how to hold on to what memory insists on giving up, how to negotiate his divided subjectivity - how to reconcile the "then" and "now" of the migrant. A fictionalized autobiography - an apparent oxymoron - which brings together "fiction", writing that is conventionally understood to be fabricated, and "memoir", writing that is ostensibly based on the real life experiences of an individual is not only an appropriate term but also the main location of the authenticity of the narrative.

Ondaatje's commitment in writing the work which straddles fiction and autobiography is clearly to come to terms with a past that is both personal and cultural. Return to Sri Lanka, to his birthplace is not only an irresistible challenge for the writer to build a novel about his homeland on the basis of memory but a compelling necessity for him who realised that "during certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. So our jobs becomes(...)to write histories."²¹ Not to know or belong to a family or having a role in history is to be denied the very basis of identity; hence Ondaatje's yearning to establish a niche for himself in Sri Lanka and to recreate his family story. Once set down, the narrative may serve as a

¹⁷ Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, p. 79

¹⁸ See T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", *Selected Essays*, London, Faber and Faber, 1951

¹⁹ Ondaatje seems to be sharing the contention that "there is no use pretending that all we know about time and space, or rather history or geography, is more than anything else imaginative," as Edward Said states in *Orientalism*, insisting that "this kind of imaginative knowledge infuses history and geography", endowing them with 'something more than what appears to be merely positive knowledge.' Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p.55

²⁰ Salman Rushdie's 1982 essay, "Imaginary Homelands", may be read as a paradigm of the discourse of writers in the between-world condition. Analyzing the theme of the homeland in the works of his type of writer, he points out that the portrayal of one's land of origin cannot be objective, and that he centered his efforts on making the novel "as imaginatively true as I could." Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1992), p. 10

²¹ Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, p. 179

touchstone, that needed point of reference for identity and meaning. But, for this author, constituting identity does not require an adherence to cultural expectations and norms; instead it calls for a virtually moment-by-moment revoking of individual identity added by a personal search for a "usable past". This process involves looking back both at a history that began its process of formation three centuries ago and at the individuals who lived that history and composed his family.²²

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[A]n idea of one's ancestry and posterity is really an idea of the self²³

The place to which Ondaatje "runs" is built up in sedimentary layers of memories, piled upon memories which do not seem to solidify.²⁴ In literary terms, the governing metaphor is that of the palimpsest, a figure for the hidden layeredness of historical experience within a singular place or text – a favourite Romantic trope and a metaphor for the human mind.²⁵ It suggests that places are structured by (and reveal to us) the cross-section of buried experience, of historical subjectivity. As with the palimpsest – most delicate of documents – nothing, potentially, is lost; all may be brought to light.²⁶ However, when Ondaatje tries to define the boundaries of his search by prefacing his words with the curvy contours of a map of Sri Lanka, even before we turn the page, we are confronted by a contradiction, two reports about the heart of darkness – one by a medieval precursor of Marco Polo who claimed to have travelled to the island, the other by a contemporary journalist enraptured by foreign wonders. Taken together, the statements defy any attempts to pin realities on that map. "I saw in this island fowls as big as our country geese having two heads," notes Oderic of Pordenone in his journal, while the columnist of the

²² Chelva Kanaganayakam has claimed that, as such, the novel's principal achievement lies in the manner in which it projects the claims of both 'History' in the national sense and 'history' in the private sense to express what is at once a profound personal quest and a statement about the country that has chosen to remain, in many ways, oblivious of the realities that edge its complaisant vision of itself. Kanaganayakam, Chelva, "A Trick with a Glass: Michael Ondaatje's South Asian Connection", *Canadian Literature*, 132 (Spring, 1992), p. 33-41

²³ Scott N. Momaday, *The Names: A Memoir*, (New York: Harper, 1976), p. 97

²⁴ Apart from the third-person point of view in the preface, the "I" of the text is the one who is "running". "...I was running to Asia and everything would change...I would be travelling back to the family I had grown from." Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, p. 22

²⁵ However, it was it was Freud who made an analogical link between the archaeology of Rome and the structure of the psyche, materializing, as it were, the sense of memory-in-place. The mind, which is like a palimpsest text, is also like a layered place, an archeological treasure-trove. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930[1929]), vol.12 of *The Penguin Freud Library* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 256-9. Freud's famous essay on 'The Uncanny' argues that love of 'place' is in fact a kind of homesickness for the lost world of the mother's womb, and that this place-attachment is an urge prior to love for human beings.

²⁶ Recent philosophical thought argues, for example, that 'the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place', rather than vice versa. 'Place is...that within and with respect to which subjectivity is itself established – place is not founded on subjectivity, but is rather that on which subjectivity is founded. Thus one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; instead, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place.' J.E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 35. Predicating the structure of the subject upon its temporal and spatial situatedness has significant implications for the study of literary texts which are themselves about, and produced by, individuals in specific places. This re-emphasis inscribes the human subject with the reality of their physical environment, as it conversely marks that environment with human experience and culture at a deep level. So geography is both 'over-written' and 'written-through' with lived experience, with memory and inscription: in short, with history.

Ceylon Sunday Times insists that Americans could put men on the moon because they knew English, while the Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor "thought the earth was flat".²⁷ Once again we can see that memories can be sustained as well as eroded by language; and sometimes both at once. Later we learn with the writer that the interrelationships between the different national and cultural identities that formed and are present in Sri Lanka have created a complex social network; the interaction between the Tamils, Sinhalese, Burghers, Dutch and colonial English forged a Sri Lankan identity almost impossible to categorize, much less objectify. It was a society in which intermarriage had caused everyone to be vaguely related, where cultural and ethnic differences were undefinable. It is both this intricate maze of social affiliations charged with the colonial mythos and his family history which is equally laden with the fictions and mythical elaborations of memory that Ondaatje tries to disentangle.

Faced with the danger of presenting inaccurate memories as facts and idealized recollections as evidence and yet determined to see beyond what may be merely the appearance of truth, Ondaatje decides to create mythical truths that may even record the more intense realities of the time and of his people. The truth value of Ondaatje's narrative is premised in oral history, perceptions (observation language) and imaginary experience – the last of these suggesting a kind of magical realism. The author's principal discursive technique in creating his history is the gathering of data on both Sri Lankan history and that of his family and, when the facts fail to speak, turning to myth to give explanations and fill in the gaps. For the author the deeper understanding of the island is possible first through relating to it by experiencing it directly and intensely: "My body must remember everything, the brief insect bite, smell of wet fruit, the slow snail light, rain, and underneath the hint of colours..."²⁸ The sounds, smells and colours are the same sounds, colours and smells of his childhood and by establishing this kind of link, he internalizes the sensuous experience and the past becomes his. But he does not limit himself only to sensuous experience; he listens and retells stories. Through the very act of retelling tales, about his family or his country, the narrator becomes a protagonist who participates in the cultural memory of the community. In so doing, he reenacts Vico's "recollective fantasia" which passes through three stages: memory, imagination, which implies imitation and alteration, and invention or new creation from the old. Finally, the Sri Lanka of *Running in the Family* is at times a world thoroughly pervaded by miracles – so thoroughly, indeed, that the miraculous comes to appear routine. In this world, the characters, especially Ondaatje himself, have become accustomed to the fantastic so much that fantasy has become banal and the ordinary has achieved almost a mythic status. What can the possible meaning of this conscious blurring of the difference between fiction and fact be? It may suggest Ondaatje's critique of the dominant Western understanding of history either as a search for the facts, i.e., for truth or as the attempt to justify the suffering in human history by the Christian faith in providence. But it may also suggest Ondaatje's departure from postmodernist conceptions of writing and language – the act of retelling tales and inventing new ones has as its only task the disclosing of some truths to the narrator and the reader. What the reader ultimately arrives at is not a typical postmodernist *product* – an "open, discontinuous, improvisational, indeterminate or aleatory structure"²⁹ –

²⁷ Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, p. 9

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁹ Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall, 1997); p 202

but, rather unexpectedly, a solidified, unified, organic story that discloses human realities – thus attaining an almost mythic quality. Thus, in the same way in which Ondaatje rejects criticism in favour of creativity he deploys postmodernism against itself. He wants to enjoy the sophistication of postmodern superiority, its distance, ironic parody, and so forth, but his final goal appears to be so *anti*-postmodern: to recreate the past, recuperating it and giving it a voice of itself, not just a knowing voice from the distant past.

The journey to Sri Lanka is mainly a quest for that which has been running in the family and his country for generations. Pieces from the past that Ondaatje carefully collects, retells and then records are those that speak of his parents' relationship, their mutual interests, desires, love and estrangement. In a matter-of-fact discussion of "the reality" of Lalla's "last perfect journey" as she is carried by a flood to her death, Ondaatje draws us into his fantasy world, but reveals a valuable truth: Lalla's death is a natural outcome of Lalla's life who had lived it in complete harmony with herself and her surrounding. The legacy that Lalla left to him is the knowledge of how to be true to your own feelings and intuition, how to remain loyal to your own self, your uniqueness and individuality. It is as important as other familial traits which he discovers and which will establish family linkage: drinking, tendency to excess, love of stories and extravagant imagination. Once he recognizes them as "running in the family", the narrator is able to "touch in words" the essence of his identity and to acknowledge his personal importance. What Ondaatje actually writes, therefore, is not objective history as he uncovers it. It is the awakening of his consciousness to the implications of the realities that he discovers, of the connections that he perceives as he contemplates the evidence before him. And it is this awakening that strengthens and confirms his identity.

In a similar way, the narrator establishes a relationship with the Sri Lankan culture and landscape. The reader witnesses how Ondaatje transforms unmarked space into place, a non-specific site to a culturally resonant palimpsestic locale, a place overwritten with stories and histories. Most importantly this transformation is coupled with a distinct and clear moral positioning of the narrator. Aware that he cannot separate himself from his western heritage, yet he revises his cultural outlook – he safely distances himself from two stereotypical views of Sri Lanka – the Orientalist that suggests idealization and fable and the neocolonial one conditioned by centuries of colonial domination. Moreover, the narrator implicitly criticizes imperialist tradition and the devastating effect of colonial missions when quoting the poem of the Ceylonese poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha:

Talk to me instead of the culture generally-
How the murderers were sustained
By the beauty robbed of savages, to our remote
Villages the painters came, and our white washed
Mud huts were splattered with gunfire.³⁰

His criticism is directed at the colonisers' false feeling of superiority, their lack of understanding and respect for what is different, their false and hypocritical values but above all, their destructive, murderous policy.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 86

* * *

"The individual" will be understood here as simply the illusion of whole and coherent personal organization, or as the misleading description of the imaginary ground on which different subject-positions are colligated.³¹

Is there Michael Ondaatje in this text? Yes. He is located in resolutely impersonal passages and in these other people's stories and in his own vague memories – embedded in them. He is there, certainly, as one whose father's father pretended to be "English" sticking to various customs and ceremonies in his daily activities and yet remaining a loving *pater familias*. He is also there as one whose mother's mother hid a murderer following her inner sense of righteousness, and whose mother performed in public dancing like Isadora Duncan, and whose father almost killed his children driving them in a car in one of his dyspomanic fits. There is more than just a genealogical positioning here, though, however self-defining this cumulative layering of relational mappings may be. Because the text documents the practices of his grandparents and parents, Ondaatje's selection and arrangement provide self-representation (though not perhaps in the highly individualized manner valued in Euro-American culture) in ways that a historical document would not. Aspects of a textual self are conveyed through Ondaatje's decisions (random examples) to include the story of David Granier's drowning, the death of Fred Astaire's sister, the decrease of pythons in Africa to Charlie Chaplin's visit to Ceylon and the fighting in Manchuria.³² More substantively, Ondaatje is implicated in the narrative as a whole, because it lays out some of the materials from which his self is cut.

Without being the text's focus Ondaatje/the narrator of the story pervades the narrative. When reproducing stories that he does not originate, Ondaatje enacts and validates a self given little standing in cultures familiar to us – the self who listens rather than the self who speaks. Instead of positing a self through his own story, he locates himself primarily as the repository of what others have to tell. Even when he takes up augmenting the stories and creating them the sense we get is one of a narrative of self apparently untroubled to make his own mark, to distinguish itself from the larger community. *Running in the Family* conveys a subjectivity constituted and sustained more by its receptivity than productivity, or more accurately, it is constituted and sustained by its productive receptivity. He is the one who gives renewed meaning and purpose to accumulated facts, rumours, gossips, impressions of others rather than begetting meaning in his own voice. The self he constitutes in the text is one in whom a discourse lodges, through whom it finds expression.

* * *

One of the photographs in *Running in the Family*, the only one in which Ondaatje's mother and father are together, shows them standing in front of the camera making funny faces. The photograph introduces the chapter of the book called "What We Think of Married Life" and Ondaatje gives a brief and laconic comment which I find to be the expression of supreme morality: "Everything is there of course. Their good looks behind their tortured faces, their mutual sense of humour and wit, which they understood in each other

³¹ Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject*, xxxv

³² Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, p. 37-38

and enjoyed immensely." Ondaatje's running "in", "to", "from", "against", all these shifts in perspectives, the foregrounding of textuality, the anxiety to belong and the need for distance, the awareness of history and historiography – all combine to create the effect of complex quest in which the notion of identity needs to be explored in its multiplicity. And yet, the truth revealed after all that running sounds so deceptively simple – it is love between two people that perpetuates and sustains life. Far from being vague, this pronunciation in all its simplicity becomes the expression of supreme morality – it is the most valuable truth about the past. But it is the truth accessible only when you "see feelingly", when emotions participate in your thinking processes. Ondaatje's memoir will necessarily remain "incomplete" as history. But it does not matter much. The ultimate goal of the narrator's quest, the sense of identity with his land and his family has been achieved. And this is the truth we arrive at only when we take a few steps away from this communal book; the narrative simultaneously transcends and unifies extremely diverse subjective/objective, transnational/ethnic, Historic/historic stories claiming to a superior truth at a higher human level.

How am I then to read the "imaginary" family and homeland that Ondaatje portrayed for us: as a nostalgic reconstruction of Sri Lanka in the early 1920s? As someone's idealist dream of exotic mystery and power? As one moment in an unstable succession of subject positions? As the self-construction of a craftsperson constituting a world with his pen? How can I read the novel when the narrative self is studiously absent, dispersed across multiple narrators and histories, refusing the self-aggrandizement of autobiography? How can I **not** read the way I did, when the narrative self is defiantly present, writing himself back into history, refusing the voyeuristic distance and impersonality of history? Or when he affects the reader's moral perception reminding her of the importance of particularity, emotion and imagination? If we really want new insights into the ways of creative questioning of dogmatic thought and revolutionary changes of our culture we had better be receptive to what the writer really says.

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SEĆANJE I MESTO - MAJKL ANDAČI "TO NAM JE U PORODICI"

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Rad polazi od činjenice da postmoderna teorija i kritika nameću danas dominantne konceptualne okvire. Drugačije interpretacije književnog dela, one koje se ne kreću u okvirima poznatih postmodernih diskursa ili izražavaju ideje suprotne proklamovanim postmodernim postavkama se uglavnom diskvalifikuju kao teorijski neutemeljena i nedovoljno sofisticirana tumačenja. S druge strane, postmoderna tumačenja, podvrgnuta pažljivoj analizi, ne pručaju vredne uvide i nova saznanja, već se uglavnom bave formalističkim analizama teksta svodeći ga na zbir tehnika i književnih sredstava koja, tobože, izražavaju specifičan postmoderni pogled na svet. Ključne ideje postmodernizma, opšte prihvaćen aksiom o "smrti autora" i sa njim blisko povezana ideja o "ukidanju" identiteta, to jest, nepostojanju koherentne ličnosti, je suprotna samoj ideji književnosti i njenoj osnovnoj funkciji ali je, kao što ovaj rad želi da pokaže, suprotna i onoj književnosti (etničkoj i multikulturološkoj) koja za svoju temu uzima upravo suprotan proces - proces transformacije subjekta u ličnost.