

**DISTANCE AND CLARITY IN SELECTED WORKS
OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE**

by

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This is where I learned that sometimes we enter art to hide within it. It is where we can go to save ourselves, where a third-person voice protects us. Just as there is, in the real landscape of Paris in *Les Misérables*, that small fictional street Victor Hugo provides for Jean Valjean to slip into, in which to hide from his pursuers. What was that fictional street's name? I no longer remember. I come from Divisadero Street. Divisadero, from the Spanish word for 'division,' the street that at one time was the dividing line between San Francisco and the fields of the Presidio. Or it might derive from the word *divisar*, meaning 'to gaze at something from a distance.' (There is a 'height' nearby called El Divisadero.) Thus a point from which you can look far into the distance.

It is what I do with my work, I suppose. I look into the distance for those I have lost, so that I see them everywhere. Even here, in Dému, where Lucien Segura existed, where I 'transcribe a substitution / like the accidental folds of a scarf' (*Divisadero*, 2007:143).

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INTRODUCTION

There are so many aspects of the writings of Michael Ondaatje that it was hard to settle on only one, to focus on a single feature of his work that fully exemplifies the unique and challenging qualities that define this author, embodying his superb sense of gesture, his subtle humour and his depth of understanding. He is an author who likes to test the boundaries of the text in his poetry as well as in his fiction. In this dissertation, I have chosen excerpts from his poetry and from the novel *Anil's Ghost* (2001). Differences in style and narrative structure, the fragmentation of the texts, and distinctive generic characteristics, force the reader to piece together and interpret events through multiple dislocations of perception and representation:

As Cielo G. Festino suggests,

Ondaatje, like Derrida, asks the reader to decipher and identify isolated traces in an 'iterable' move of repetition and creation of *différance*, which reveals the reader's own difference and *locus* of enunciation and, at the same time, requires the reader to attempt to bridge the gaps of this difference. In this move, Ondaatje's own process of composition and his view of culture as an interlocking heterogeneous network of differences become visible' (Festino, 2006:139).

The concepts of 'distance' and 'clarity' are not difficult to define, but when applied to the philosophical underpinnings of the author himself I hope to demonstrate that there is a significant 'play' of distance and clarity in the texts. This structuring is elaborately and purposefully set in place for specific reasons, such as to detach and yet encourage the reader to engage more fully in the process of assimilating the contents of the text, and to provide different viewpoints. The reader is distanced and then allowed glimpses of clarity in Haiku-like instances which focus on a particular moment in time with startling

cinematographic effect. I intend to explore this process of distancing, and to investigate instances in which Ondaatje reveals and clarifies significant events.

In an interview with Brian D. Johnson, entitled ““A sort of Improvisation Happens””, Ondaatje says that ‘with all writers, there’s an element of self-investigation and self-portrait, even in their fiction that’s supposedly not about them at all’ (Johnson, 2002:40). I feel that much of Ondaatje’s writing is semi-autobiographical and paradoxical in nature. Aware of the contradictory aspects of his own psyche, he explores this in his novels with self-reflexivity and a subtle humour that is mirrored in his characters, sometimes resulting in wonderfully strange imagery. In the same interview he also reveals an aspect of his writing processes:

I’m very loose when I’m writing. I allow bad jokes into the manuscript, but then I go back and chop it down. Then a sort of improvisation happens. One can discover lines and connections which can startle you and the reader, eventually (Johnson, 2002:41).

Although Ondaatje has received notable acclaim in Canada where he lives, it is only since the success of *The English Patient* (1993) and the subsequent filming of that novel that he has achieved worldwide fame. Much of what has been said of Ondaatje tends to undervalue his meticulous writing, with not enough stress on the philosophical ironies that underlie his work. Critics have not paid sufficient attention to the considered neutrality, ambiguities, paradoxes, interruptive intrusive comments, the equivocation of his language, his studied use of ‘gesture’ and the ways in which he positions his writing between Eastern and Western ideals. Moreover, adverse critical comments have been made about his writing. These are ‘his seemingly disinterested approach to civil strife’, ‘his apolitical gaze seems irresponsible’, ‘his silence on class and religion and ethnic prejudice’, the ‘neutrality of Ondaatje’s language’ with ‘no clear demarcations between opposing forces, allies and enemies’, as well as there being ‘a certain coldness about the book [*Anil’s Ghost*] altogether’ (Derrickson, 2004:131). Derrickson argues that, on the contrary, ‘Anil’s Ghost does in fact promote a political stance, and a sophisticated one at

that' (Derrickson, 2004:131), and suggests that these comments possibly arise from a lack of contextual understanding and failure to uncover the subtlety of his fiction.

Anil's Ghost (2001) is a particularly restrained work of fiction, and a sense of grief, alienation and detachment sets the tone of the novel. This tone becomes a method of defining important situations, affecting the insights and vision of the text as a whole. For instance, the 'Ghost' in the title *Anil's Ghost* lurks in the shadows of the narrative and could refer to any number of ghosts, only one of which could be the hungry ghost of Buddhist origin mentioned by Kyser in the following extract:

A hungry ghost is an individual who occupies one of the six realms of samsara. The ghost is preoccupied with capturing and 'consuming' the objects of experience whether it be, for example, through photography, painting or writing (Trungpa, 36). By referring to Patrick as a hungry ghost, Ondaatje alludes to the concern, in *In the Skin of a Lion*, that artistically representing others may be 'false celebration' and suggests that storytellers must be aware of this danger (Kyser, 2001:896).

Thus, the title *Anil's Ghost* takes on a new level of meaning, hinting at a postmodern consciousness in which the storyteller becomes aware of his own participation in the act of 'capturing' and 'consuming' the experiences he creates. The implication is that the necessity to detach or distance oneself becomes a prerequisite in the art of enactment. Like the eye painter Ananda in *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje is in the almost godly position of creating life where there was none, and this act of creation is a spiritual one. We are told that 'The boy held up the metal mirror so that it reflected the blank stare of the statue' (305), this was necessary for Ananda to begin his painting. Like Ananda, Ondaatje cannot look at his work directly but must work from a metaphorical mirror, that of seeing himself in his characters, providing a neat paradox surrounding the art of creating.

Ondaatje has expressed interest in eastern religions (Kyser, 2001:896), and critics should take this into consideration. This can affect the clarity of his prose, as 'The difficulty is

that for many North American readers such references remain as invisible as ‘the war in heaven’ would be to someone unaware of biblical mythology’ (Kyser, 2001:896). For instance, the ‘ten thousand things’ in *The English Patient* (1993) refers to the realm of opposites as described by Suzuki, in which the world is seen by the unenlightened mind (Kyser, 2001:896). For another critic, Goldman, ‘the narrative calls into question the long standing ties between Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism’ providing a different, more politically motivated viewpoint but also acknowledging Buddhist ties (Goldman, 2005:28).

Ondaatje perfects the art of distancing in order to explore the problematical interfusion of allegiance and religiosity in the Sri Lankan civil war. He writes about Sri Lanka because he was born there and still has ties with the country of his birth. Its problems continue to disturb him, and the problems in Sri Lanka are ongoing. The Sri Lankan foreign minister Kamil was shot and killed on the 14th August 2005, and since then many more incidents of political insurrection, death and displacement have occurred and continue to occur. After many years of violence, nothing has been resolved.

Anil's Ghost (2001) demonstrates a significant shift in Ondaatje's attitude to war. In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje ‘asks readers to be suspicious of all identities because they can divide us’ (Krantz, 2003:105). In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje asserts that ‘the point of war is war.’ *Anil's Ghost* is a novel about war, yet there is a curious antithetical spirituality that diffuses the elements of terror, blurring the boundaries of conflict. It is a novel that attempts to understand the nature of war itself. Kyser suggests that this attempt follows from a desire to challenge accepted narratives without ‘reinscribing the dualism that made these narratives problematic to begin with.’ This is done subtly without ‘simply reversing the ‘good’ and ‘evil’, the light and the dark (Kyser, 2001:892).

For Ondaatje, modern Western society ‘leaps’ ahead with modern technology and rapid advances in science but neglects introspection, while Eastern society ‘bows’ its head in contemplation and prays with Zen-like acceptance of adversity. The eastern yin and yang, the embryonic symbol of opposites caught in the wheel of life, suggests there is no

resolution of universal conflicts and neither was there meant to be. Ondaatje hovers between these opposite viewpoints, and seeks to find ‘the moment in the heart / where [he] roam[s] restless, searching / for the thin border of the fence / to break through or leap / Leaping and bowing’ (*Handwriting*, 2000:74). His wish is to cross borders, to explore and breach boundaries, and he does so with his own sense of parody, both leaping and bowing.

In the following chapters, I attempt to define the concepts of ‘distance’ and ‘clarity’, and explain the aspects of authorial and reader distance that lead one to feel the author is disengaged or make the reader feel disengaged, with the resulting ‘detachment’. This is a detachment where mentally, morally and aesthetically, the author stands back from his subject and the reader is given a clear steer through the tangle of detail. Clarity, as an opposing concept, draws the reader back into the full participation of unfolding events.

In the first chapter, I intend to make a brief attempt to put these two concepts into practice, showing how they interact. Chapter Two shows how the Buddhist notion of detachment flows like a current throughout *Anil’s Ghost* (2001) and that this thematic perspective persists across genres and is especially evident in *Handwriting* (2000). Chapter Three explores the Buddhist notion of ‘hungry ghosts’ in relation to authorial involvement and the idea of detachment, as well as ghosts that may haunt the characters. In Chapters Four and Five, the principles of ‘truth’ and ‘ideas’ are explored, introducing the more oppositional, pragmatic approach of the Western world. Chapters Six and Seven demonstrate how Ondaatje blurs the boundaries of conflict and how his manipulation of distance and clarity culminates in the expert fusion of various viewpoints. The last chapter attempts to clarify Ondaatje’s philosophical stance and to summarize the central preoccupations of the texts.

CHAPTER ONE

The concepts of distance and clarity

A river journey, each story
An owl in the dark.

(Handwriting, 2000:73)

‘Distance’ is the way in which an author places events at an aesthetic remove, separating them from the reader and keeping his own distance from them. It is the condition of being removed, remote from variance, or detached from dispute or squabble. Distance in the context of remoteness implies a sense of inaccessibility that can be expressed by vagueness, detachment, aloofness, reserve or holding back, ambiguity or allusiveness, lack of transparency, pensiveness or abstraction, haziness or indistinctiveness, resulting in a separation of the author or reader from the discourse under question. ‘Removal’ suggests that the author wishes to remain faceless with his intentions undisclosed, with the implication that the reader is to be kept disconnected from the text. Clarity, on the other hand, implies lucidity and the reversal of all the above adjectives describing distance. To obtain clarity is to have reached a full understanding of an event or discourse, to have obtained an awareness of something that was originally diffuse and ambiguous, and to have reached a stage of enlightenment in which intelligibility is realized. It is a revelation of a formerly nebulous communication, a brilliance or luminosity of knowledge, and a sudden comprehension or appreciation.

The terms ‘distance’ and ‘clarity’ are, obviously, in direct opposition to each other. Yet the paradox for the writer is that often a subject viewed from a distance is observed from a position of greater clarity simply because it is seen from a wider angle or with greater perspective than can be obtained from a closer inspection. It is a case of the bird’s-eye view as opposed to that of a magnifying glass scrutinizing or examining the details.

It seems patent from the above definition that insight could be achieved with the use of distance alone. However, a more experiential exposition would be for the reader to remain uncertain of unfolding events, as in real life, with only moments of illumination as everyone experiences from time to time. Hence, the interplay of distance and clarity heightens sensitivity towards unfolding events, and when the reader does unexpectedly receive a flash of illumination, the experience of that represented event should be more profound.

The distinct but complementary qualities of distance and clarity are readily discernible in the following excerpt from Ondaatje's poem 'Tin Roof'.

The geography of this room I know so well
tonight I could rise in the dark
sit at the table and write without light.
I am here in the country of warm rains.
A small cabin – a glass, wood,
tin bucket on the Pacific Rim.

Geckoes climb
the window to peer in,
and all day the tirade pale blue waves
touch the black shore of volcanic rock

and fall to pieces here

(The Cinnamon Peeler, 2000:102).

The term 'geography' implies a bird's-eye view, so the movement is from the abstract to the tangible enclosure of a room. The fact that he knows the room 'so well', its spatial dimensions and geography, could suggest habitual isolation or solitary confinement. 'Geography' and 'room' immediately add a dissonant note to the tone of the poem because of the opposing concepts of far and near. 'Tonight I could rise in the dark, / sit at

the table and write without light' further establishes the sense of isolation or even alienation. It implies he is well used to the dark, physically and metaphorically, that he experiences darkness as a state of being, while writing without light conveys an impression of groping in an unintelligible universe, without clarity or illumination. This implies that he is groping in the darkness of his material world. The reader, however, is not yet being allowed full insight into the dominant concerns of the poem. The dissociation of dark and light in his material world is a possible reflection of his emotions, but we cannot be sure of this yet.

The term 'country', like 'geography', implies vastness and a sense of distance. 'Warm rains' introduces new, contradictory, sensory elements, 'warm' implying comfort, while 'rain' is usually cold and uncomfortable. The juxtaposition of comfort and discomfort implies that his physical state of well-being is being challenged. 'Warm rains' could also suggest tears, but it is only later that this association becomes viable.

As the poem develops, it becomes even more equivocal. Increasingly forced to speculate on the figurative potential of the words, our perceptions become progressively more mixed in an attempt to empathize with the speaker.

Ondaatje then allows the reader a clearer picture of a particular space and time, 'a small cabin – a glass, wood, tin bucket', giving substance to the vision. With 'on the Pacific Rim', after briefly edifying the reader with a picture and a kinesthetic sense of placement, the ricocheting effect continues. Again, he, distances us with a vast panoramic vision of the Pacific Rim.

This places the reader firmly on the map but with a view that can only be seen from a vantage point above the earth. This view is an indication of the expanse of his emotions, before he plummets back to earth with 'Geckoes climb / the windows to peer in.'

The clarity of the image of a gecko on a window brings us once again to the little tin hut the speaker occupies and, like the gecko, the reader hopes to be allowed another

tantalizing glimpse inside with the promise of further intimacy. This promise is not to be fulfilled, however, as he shifts us out again with 'and all day the tirade pale blue waves', distancing us once again from the tin hut, bringing us once more out into the open. By doing this, however, the speaker expands the perception of his audience. The word 'tirade' allows some insight into his feelings, affecting the mood and tone of the poem in collusion with the distancing and intimacy shifts, leaving the reader alternating between vagueness and clarity, providing a seesaw effect as well as a sense of uncertainty. This movement evolves into a 'black shore of volcanic rock', completely breaching any peaceful notions of a calm blue sea with white beaches.

The essence of the poem now focuses on the word 'touch'. 'Touch the black shore' lets us know that the speaker is no longer just talking of any shore. The word 'black' implies negativity. The sensory 'touch the black' brings the reader up close now so that one cannot mistake the discomfort that is as unending as the shore. He is experiencing a tirade of pure emotion, as soft and hard as volcanic rock. The contrasting images of a fiery volcano and black rock allow sufficient insight as to how tumultuous and explosive his feelings really are. The reader is made fully aware of how difficult it is for the speaker to control these feelings. He ends with 'and fall to pieces here', expressing with intense clarity his complete inability to continue – his anguish.

The cadence of the poem invites notions of an Indian love song where the conflict lies within, reason and judgment waging war with passion, ending in despair. One moment the reader's thoughts are allowed to soar to the heights of oceanic splendour, then pulled back to earth with volcanic force to 'touch the black shore' when the heart does not listen.

The alternating emphasis on distance and clarity conveys an impression of kinesthetic movement, encouraging the swinging rhythm of the poem. The opposing concepts of distance and clarity, with the structure continually fluctuating, provide us with experiential participation in the poem, forcing our involvement in the speaker's emotions.

With this process of manipulating the reader's 'gaze', Ondaatje achieves, across genres, the transcendental level of interaction that Hsuan Hsu describes below. In a critical analysis of *The English Patient*, entitled *Post Nationalism and the Cinematic Apparatus in Minghella's Adaption*, Hsu writes

Aerial cartography involves a distanced, panoramic gaze that levels off the landscape in order to quantify and plot its features. This process of quantifying requires a grid or screen that mediates between the eye and the terrain. This model – omniscient eye, mediating screen, and object of vision – incorporates the structure of the disembodied, transcendental "gaze" which Jacques Lacan distinguishes from the "look" (81-185). ...He or she seemingly surveys the world from an invisible, and hence transcendental position (Hsu, 2005:51).

In *The English Patient* (1993) these 'cartographic grids' are transferred to the body itself, (Hsu, 2005) thus manipulating the focus as one would through a lens. 'The metaphorical violence of both the cartographic gaze, with its aerial partitioning of space, and the cinematic gaze,' is 'literalized', as in the example given by Hsu of the cutting off of Caravaggio's thumb (Hsu, 2005:52). Similar effects are evident in *Anil's Ghost* (2001) and these will be examined in greater depth in the course of this dissertation.

Another method of 'manipulating the focus' and mediating the 'gaze' is with the use of restrained repetition. Too much may become boring or make us, the reader, think the writer underestimates our ability to retain information. Yet, with too few reminders, we may miss the point entirely. One such repetition, and a striking feature of Ondaatje's texts in its subtlety, is evident in his use of the word 'gesture'. Instinctively or perhaps inadvertently, it is a word he uses or infers cleverly in his novels and poems imparting a hidden purpose that has the dual objective of incurring removal and delineating transience in a subtle manner, as will be shown below.

It is this notion of transience that distances the reader. The impression of a fleeting moment in time becomes a mere gesture. Characters posture in a vast human wave of

endeavour, swimming with the tide – or, as in the poem ‘To Anuradhapura’, circling the *dagoba*.¹ The ritual of circling the relic is a gesture of devotion.

Circling the dagoba
in a clockwise hum and chant,
bowls of lit coal above their heads

whispering bare feet

Our flutter and drift
in the tow of this river

(*Handwriting*. 2000:17)

The archaic representation of the river as symbol of life is given new meaning as being in its ‘tow’ life becomes mere ‘gesture’ as we ‘flutter and drift along it. The word ‘tow’ implies being dragged along it helplessly. The ritual is posturing (or circling as in the *dagoba*) in the face of transience.

The definition of ‘gesture’ is to make a movement of the body or limbs as an expression of thought or feeling, or a (friendly) move or course of action. The verb ‘gesture’ is to make gestures, to gesticulate or to express by gesture. The use of the word ‘gestures’ as a rhetorical device changes the meaning subtly and implies speechifying or posturing. Posturing is to take up a pose for effect and indicates affectation or pretentiousness. A rhetorical gesture therefore could become tongue in cheek, whimsical or ironic, and the saying ‘empty gesture’ comes to mind. The word ‘gesture’ manifests, therefore, as a body movement and as a rhetorical or figurative method of expression that could be either shallow or profound. When used as a method of distancing it becomes complicated. For instance, when one character in a novel gesticulates there is no evidence of irony, but if they all gesticulate there is a subtle move towards parody. When the author remains in the

¹ Circling the *dagoba* is a Theravada Buddhist ritual in Sri Lanka whereby followers circumnavigate a burial mound or ‘mound containing a relic.’ A *stūpa* is the architectural term for the relic mound, whereas the *dagoba* is generally part of the *stūpa* containing the relic (Dabral, 2000:24-25).

background but occasionally comes forward in the text to remind the reader that it is only a story, his characters become role players ‘gesticulating’ their parts, and so an underlying sense of ironic detachment or parody is achieved, depending on the subtlety of author intervention.

The use of the word ‘gesture’ then, at times, suggests ironic detachment. For example, Palipana’s gesture in *Anil’s Ghost*, ‘The gesture, Palipana’s gesture, was seen as a betrayal of the principles on which he had built his reputation’ (82). Yet, Ondaatje explains that ‘perhaps for him it was not a false step but the step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance’ (81) indicating a multiplicity of separate realities, none of which are of any real consequence in the end.

In Ondaatje’s texts there is an underlying warning *not* to become attached to an idea. Because life is so fleeting, it simply becomes a pose or a gesture. This is expressed in ‘House on a Red Cliff’:

where the night concentrates
on a breath
 on a step
a thing or gesture
we cannot be attached to
 (*Handwriting*, 2000:67)

Ondaatje reminds himself and his reader not to become attached but to keep a distance. He warns us that all action is merely a gesture, the pretence of permanence. In other words, he is suggesting that it is wiser not to take life, or in his own case, his characters, too earnestly.

This is a reminder that characters can also take on a life of their own, a life that can consume their creator. *Anil’s Ghost* uses symbolism of Buddhist origin to capture the dangerous fragility of aesthetic creation. The ‘*hungry ghost*’, for example, attempts to live vicariously through art or writing, trying to capture and consume the objects of

experience. The implication is that one must be aware of the danger of artistically representing life and of letting the celebration of this endeavour become a 'false celebration' (Kyser, 2001:896). The act of living through one's characters can consume one to an unhealthy extent. In an extreme case, Ondaatje humorously tells the story of a writer who believed so strongly in his characters that they became real for him.

The great writer, dying, called out
for the fictional doctor of his novels.
(‘A Gentleman Compares His Virtue to a Piece of Jade’. *Handwriting*, 2000:3)

Ondaatje uses 'gesture' as a defence mechanism, to distance himself and his readers. To remove his readers from the text is to disallow full participation in unfolding events. Paradoxically, this clarifies those events best seen from a distance by way of objectivity. This sense of remaining objective or impartial is demonstrated by mixing science and Buddhist philosophy in *Anil's Ghost*.

Anil's Ghost (2001) features ancient skeletons dug up at the cave-temple of Sri Lanka that could untangle old archaeological mysteries. An interest in the past reaffirms the cycle of existence but it also reminds us of our transience. While scientists try to remain impassive, for people have died in cruel and mysterious ways since the beginning of time, Buddhists advise that one must remain unattached to everyday events for it is only the idea that survives. Armed with this knowledge, by distancing oneself like a scientist, by seeing life as gesture, they advise one not to become enmeshed in the daily horrors life may hold. The 'idea' in this case is the perpetuity of the lifecycle. This was as apparent thousands of years ago as it is today.

That Palipana sees life from this scientific and Buddhist point of view is suggested by the following passage.

‘Nothing lasts,’ Palipana told them. ‘It is an old dream. Art burns, dissolves. And to be loved with the irony of history-that isn't much.’ He said this in his first class to his archaeology students. He had been talking about books and art, about the ‘ascendancy of the idea’ being often the only survivor (*Anil's Ghost*, 2001:12).

'The irony of history' informs the reader that permanence is a gift yet to be granted to humanity. There is an underlying current of timelessness that intrigues us, the minutiae of nature. Ondaatje reminds us of this with the type of explorations Anil and Sareth are about to undertake:

During their first few days there, Sareth and Anil recorded and removed ancient debris-freshwater and arboreal gastropods, bone fragments of birds and mammals, even fish bones from distant eras of the sea. The region felt timeless. They found charred epicarps of wild breadfruit that still grew in the region, even now, twenty thousand years later (51).

From a distance of twenty thousand years the minutiae of charred epicarps confirms our existence in some indefinable way. These finds seem to confirm that there will always be nature and beauty and though human life is transitory, humans are part of a timeless nature. Ananda at one point experiences this sense of timelessness, as seen from this extract:

Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. There was a seduction for him here. The eyes he had cut and focused with his father's chisel showed him this. The birds dove towards gaps within the trees! They flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she loved and in the dark she feared (307).

Ananda briefly sees an angle of the world from a different perspective, through the eyes of the Bodhisattva (the eyes he had cut to create the Buddha), the one who understands, one who with the clarity of distance can see the greater picture. Like the birds that 'dove' through gaps and 'flew through the shelves of heat currents', the 'trees' and 'heat currents' are aspects of the material world that exhausted them. The 'small brave heart' of the birds and that of Sirissa encase the souls, which remain immortal. Their souls are

able to rise to great heights. By viewing something from a different perspective or distance, the degree of clarity achieved could provide a window to spiritual enlightenment. Perhaps what Ondaatje is suggesting is that it is moments like these that make a lifetime of ‘gesturing’ worthwhile.

Ondaatje opens this window again in *Divisadero* (2007) with the following passage:

He has never desired to be a pigeon, but many times has wished to be a bird in flight over the landscape, moving in a long slide towards a copse, where its high secret entrance, invisible to humans, reveals at the last moment a path into the forest. What you experience in the high air is the petite life on earth, a drifting of voices, the creak of a wagon, the retort and smoke from a gun among the almond trees, somewhat like the music Anna has played for him in the kitchen, with only the essential notes of life reaching you through that distance of air. (*Divisadero*, 2007:86)

Another method Ondaatje uses to manipulate perceptions of distance and clarity is the technique of flashback, flash-forward and fragmentation. A demonstration of this is when he describes the government official’s death on the train in *Anil’s Ghost* (2001). It is early on in the story and the reader is not aware of who the official could be, the victim is unnamed (31). The government official, as the reader later discovers, could represent someone as innocent as Sareth. Wearing the *Galle Road* T-shirt humanizes the victim murdered on the train and describing his shirt makes his presence more authentic. It is only at the end of the story that the reader realizes he may have already been given a description of the events that brought about Sareth’s death, or at least a similar enactment. Although Sareth’s death appears to have been decidedly more violent, with ‘acid burns’, ‘twisted leg’ (287) and ‘a mark like that made with a spear (289), the deaths are linked by a T-shirt. An ambiguous connection to shirts is when Ananda is discovered to be wearing Sareth’s cotton shirt underneath his brocade costume, ‘the one he [Ananda] had promised himself he would wear for this [] ceremony’ (305). When Sareth lies dead ‘the shirt they had dressed him in had giant sleeves’ to cover his broken limbs (290), thus the reader is not told what he was wearing when he was actually murdered.

This disconnected incident highlights and personalizes that which was happening almost on a daily basis in this type of war. However, *Anil's Ghost* is not, as Knepper suggests, merely a 'postcolonial crime novel' (Knepper, 2006). The fragmentation, the detective work, and here the reference is to Sareth's murder, is almost incidental to the variety of levels the text actually contains. Further along in her argument, Knepper possibly refutes her own claim regarding the 'postcolonial postmortem' when she states 'Truth itself is suspect from Ondaatje's perspective', indicating her awareness of underlying levels of complexity:

Ondaatje himself has eloquently described the mystery of the novel as being the subject of truth itself:

The truth! One of the things I wanted to get at was that we in the West have a tradition of believing that there are always answers, always solutions. American foreign policy is based on that belief. You can bomb your way to victory if you want, or you can bomb your way to having your truth accepted in another country. I think that one of the most important things that comes up in Asian writing is that sometimes you can have tragedy and light simultaneously. There's an odd kind of balance. It's a terrible thing to admit to or accept, but there is an acceptance of it. Truth can be, you know, as dangerous as falseness.

Truth itself is suspect from Ondaatje's perspective. (Knepper, 2006:54)

In a 'postcolonial crime novel', the aim would be to argue on the behalf of 'survivors' of colonialism, not engage in a debate over truth. Moreover, none of the crimes that occur in the text are actually solved. An incident such as the murder on the train is only a fragment that does not initially connect the reader to the main characters in the plot, so there is no apparent significance to the incident. This method of fragmentation distances us at first, as the victim is unknown to us, the reader. He is only one of many who have died an unnatural death during the war. There is anonymity in the crimes committed.

Thus the manipulation of distance and clarity by fragmentation simultaneously allows the reader different viewpoints, both detaching and empathizing with the characters. This fragmentation leaves the actual scenes of the crimes unaddressed, as so many are in reality. An awareness of this is attributable to the sum total of accumulated facts that we have to be pieced together. Linking the death, and knowing how innocent the victim could be, increases the horror but simultaneously leaves the victim and his assailant nameless. It also ensures that the text cannot be labelled either a crime or detective story, or even a 'postcolonial postmortem', as nothing is solved (this would also reduce the text to less than the complexities Ondaatje is actually conveying). Other than that a crime has been committed, he leaves the postulating up to us and does not provide an answer. Nor is there any suggestion of postcolonial angst regarding a 'postcolonial postmortem', or, as Pesch puts it so pithily, 'If, like Ondaatje, you are on all sides at once, the cultural clashes you experience are both internal and external, and not easily resolved' (Pesch, 1998:67). The long-distance gaze is one in which the reader may have all the facts but remains uninvolved. This crime, as so graphically conveyed, is the 'short gaze'; a moment in time, left up to the reader to digest.

It is with the short gaze that the reader becomes drawn in to situations that involve the emotions, as Anil is to discover for herself:

Anil had read documents and news reports, full of tragedy, and she now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze. But here it was a more complicated world morally (13).

As with Anil, one is reeled in to the problematical moral world of Sri Lanka, but the long-distance gaze and short gaze are intricately woven into a pattern of gradual *unfolding* where the narrative structure encourages both detachment and participation in events. Vetter suggests that Ondaatje 'revisits the ability of those with a "three-dimensional gaze" to reconcile themselves with increasingly political worlds' (Vetter, 2006:33), indicating that he feels Ondaatje is questioning the limited viewpoints of those who increasingly resign themselves to political manoeuvrings.

This pattern of *unfoldment*, orchestrating the ‘gazes’, becomes the underlying structure of the novel, alternating the distant and the clear gaze, while the fragmented aspects of the text are enhanced with the long passages in italics indicating displacement.

A ‘gaze’ does not automatically become a judgement. In her essay ‘Trade and Power, Money and War: Rethinking Masculinity in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*’, Susan Ellis draws attention to Ondaatje’s reluctance to engage in cultural critique.

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 explicit critique of it (Ellis, 1996:1).

In other words, Ondaatje distances himself in an attempt to remain neutral. However, the fact that he does choose to involve his protagonists in situations which test underlying cultural values suggests conflicting interest and different gazes. Ellis goes on to say,

If the power to name and be named invokes ownership (but also relationship) through the “claiming of the powers of the linguistic sword”, a power always exerted by the poet and writer, Ondaatje appears to have introduced a curious reluctance, a hesitation, to wield the sword in *The English Patient*, as if in recognition of that power for the first time has instilled a need for caution (Ellis, 1996:4).

The evolution from not wanting to ‘wield the sword’ in the *The English Patient* (1993) has translated into the fruitlessness of even attempting to wield the sword in *Anil’s Ghost* (2001), given the complexity of values involved in the ongoing war. Whereas Almásy ‘without a name, achieves his ambition to “not to belong to anyone, to any nation”’ (Ellis, 1996:4), Anil has emigrated from the problem by leaving the country and by leaving her childhood behind.

That Anil is no longer 'a swimmer' could be an indication that she wishes to disengage herself from her former life in Sri Lanka. Sareth, too, attempts to remain impartial although he works for the government and therefore should be allied to its principles. He attempts to justify his position by reasoning that will be explored further in chapter two when he says 'I don't join one side or the other' (27). What this amounts to is that each character provides a different outlook on the matter.

Ondaatje's approach to the violence incurred by war in both *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* is reflected in his characters, particularly Almasy, Anil and Sareth, but changes over time with a maturation of viewpoint. Ellis points this out when she states:

Ondaatje's style in *The English Patient* suggests a rethinking of his earlier clinically detached approach to this violence. His writing now implies an emotional empathy for the victims of that violence rather than the glorification of its practitioners, as well as an accounting of the sociopolitical of both the violence and the former detached attitude to it. This newer style reflects the beginnings of an appreciation of the importance of relationship, both of individuals to each other and of individuals to the political events in their environment (Ellis, 1996:5).

In *Anil's Ghost* (2001) Ondaatje takes this one step further, where the practitioners of violence are also victims. They, too, are simply individuals caught up in the political events of their environment. It is with the subsequent death of the President (295) that we are able to comprehend the underlying fear that motivated the use of government force to execute many people, including Sareth. Possibly, he may have felt that if he did not retaliate, the enemy would take over the country. The intimation is that the next President will be no different from the last and that killing people is no way to solve a problem but simply continues the cycle of violence.

Ondaatje, therefore, does not appear to align himself with any one political party but one cannot say he is detached from the circumstances surrounding political events. He has, however, distanced himself from taking any one particular stance other than the

pointlessness of war. Attempting to remain neutral does not make him indifferent, as he investigates the moral dilemma, using the conflicting allegiances of the characters in *Anil's Ghost* to demonstrate his concern.²

Providing different viewpoints involves a manipulation of distance and clarity. The abstract, rather distant reasoning, for instance '*the reason for war was war*' (43) is juxtaposed with grizzly evidence of war. This can be particularly graphic in Ondaatje's poetry, providing the reader with clear imagery and clarity of expression. He achieves this clarity by zooming in on his subject. This is evident in 'The Distance of a Shout' with the black humour of the following haiku-like stanza:

Monks from the north came
down our streams floating-that was
the year no one ate river fish
(*Handwriting*, 2000:6).

The text entertains a graphic description of floating monk-bodies and inedible fish, both equally disgusting, disturbing our visual and olfactory senses. The meticulous insertion of the word 'river' to describe the fish changes the image to a stagnant river as opposed to the former 'streams'. Streams are seen as clear and beautiful, as would the monks have been before their bodies had been desecrated. The movement in the poem follows the movement of the bodies from light 'streams' and 'floating' to the 'river' where bodies become heavy and bloated.

² Jollimore and Barrios ask 'Can literature teach us about morality?' (2004:23) In an article titled *Beauty, Evil, and The English Patient*, they say:

What is really happening, it seems, is that the readers are being presented with a reality that is too complex (that is, too much like the real world) to accommodate all of the moral presuppositions that they bring to the work, with the result that they must pick and choose between them... By showing how characters with whom a reader identifies can be capable of actions that the reader finds herself morally condemning, a literary work can allow the reader to engage in self-criticism in a much more effective manner than is normally possible. It is in allowing for this type of deep self-examination and criticism, we believe, that literature can most effectively display its moral dimension' (Jollimore and Barrios, 2004:38).

Clarity presupposes an experiential knowledge of the world. All that is required is an expansion of that memory using any of the senses. Using imagery common to everyone ensures full participation in events. Clarity of image is often the most difficult thing to achieve. Japanese poets made it into a national pastime with the invention of the Haiku, an art form of short lyric poems perfected by the famous poet from Otsu, Matsuo Basho.

Strictly, the poem should consist of three lines, the centre line containing five syllables, the first and last line seven syllables each. The aim is to achieve a concise sensory image within this tight structure. Ondaatje adapts this to suit his own imagery, for instance

your rain-swollen gate, a summer
scarce with human meeting.
Just bells from another village.

(‘Last Ink’. *Handwriting*, 2000:72)

These three short lines contain a wealth of visual and sensory images. The ‘rain-swollen’ gate stirs visual and tactile memories of a weathered wooden gate, perhaps one that does not close properly because it has swelled in size and become creaky. The word ‘scarce’ suggests a sense of isolation furthered by the auditory image of ‘bells’ from another village, made faint by the implication of distance. It implies a sense of solitude.

The construction of the excerpt is deceptively simple for there are no extraneous words, although one can visualize the scene clearly. It is brief and concise.

Clarity in writing is achieved using plain, carefully chosen words, words that deftly describe a situation without extraneous epithets or loose words that can be eliminated. One might assume that paring down sentences to construct an almost skeletal frame would generate a less distinct picture, but in fact it is elaboration and unnecessary detail that cloud the imagination. A sense of diffusion occurs in overly elaborate writing. This is not to say, however, that Ondaatje’s text is simple.

Interwoven in the text is a deliberately generated sense of diffusion. Ondaatje creates difficulty, and in *Anil's Ghost* this results in confusion at times, when one may be unaware of the reason for incidents taking place or unaware of who is speaking. In his poems, the elaboration is generally at the beginning to confuse us and encourage us to clarify questions that Ondaatje raises within the lines. In the following poem, he moves from the elaborate to the more cutback stanza.

In certain countries aromas pierce the heart and one dies
half waking in the night as an owl and a murderer's cart go by
(‘Last Ink’. *Handwriting*, 2000:72).

Here, he introduces seemingly unnecessary words such as ‘certain’ in ‘certain countries’. This is the first question he poses; to what countries is he referring? Then ‘aromas’ pierce the heart. One is left wondering how aromas can do this. The word ‘pierce’ suggests being stabbed. The ambiguities continue with ‘half waking in the night as an owl and a murderer’s cart go by’. How can one be ‘half waking’ if one has died in the previous line? The confusion persists with the introduction of the owl and the murderer’s cart but gradually we become oriented towards a still unknown country with each additional detail. The length of the line decreases to

Years later you shared it
on a scroll or nudged
the ink onto stone
to hold the vista of a life.
(‘Last Ink’. *Handwriting*, 2000:72)

Then it fluctuates but never to the same uniform length of the first stanza. Thus, Ondaatje’s manipulation of clarity is carefully constructed and leaves us always wanting to know more.

The deliberate alternation between distance and clarity is not a new or ‘postmodern’ method of manipulating reader participation. Writers have been distancing their readers

and then clarifying matters for them from the first time they took the reed to papyrus, but perhaps with not quite the same degree of awareness. In the quest for self-awareness or self-reflexivity, while distancing himself from the text, Ondaatje seems to retain an almost capricious sense of humor. Ostensibly, he removes this initial proclivity towards jest from his text, but his natural aptitude for *jouissance* or play is verified when he says 'I allow bad jokes into the manuscript, but then I go back and chop it down' (Derrickson, 2004:131). It is this tongue-in-cheek attitude that sometimes arouses adverse criticism; for example, critics say 'his apolitical gaze seems irresponsible' (Derrickson, 2004:131).

The processes of distancing and achieving clarity serve to detach and enlighten the reader. The events are either made inaccessible or put under a magnifying glass for the reader to scrutinize. Ondaatje manipulates reader response as he alternates ambiguity with moments of luminosity where the reader is allowed a sudden comprehension of a previously nebulous communication. The fluctuation of perspective within the text allows greater reader participation but Ondaatje warns us (and himself) that like the 'hungry ghost' it is dangerous to become too involved in what is after all only fiction. It is a philosophy of impermanence. The Haiku-like effects in the text maximize reader participation, providing in-the-moment experiential knowledge, using gesture or posturing and ambiguity as a technical device. It enables a 'long-distance gaze' of events that allows the reader to become removed from the text in order to keep matters in perspective, a removal that will be discussed further under the label 'detachment'.

Chapter two

Detachment

Love arrives and dies in all disguises
and we fear to move
because of old darkneses
(*Handwriting*, 2000:42).

Distance and clarity are linked to the Buddhist notion of detachment. With experiential knowledge (clarity) and distance, one learns to detach oneself from the daily realities of living in order to obtain a clearer understanding of life. Ondaatje writes, 'I will be able to understand the world only at arms length' (*Handwriting*, 2000: 56), suggesting a concurrence with the Buddhist principles of detachment. This is particularly relevant in *Anil's Ghost*.

Anil's Ghost begins with a Sri Lankan miner's folk song made up of two poems taken from an essay by Rex A. Cassinada (310). The poems appear to represent the individual's struggle for survival within the life wheel. The first stanza describes all the dangers a miner faces, with '*only when I return to the surface / is my life safe*'. The second stanza is a blessing on everything that contains inherent dangers: the scaffolding, the wheel on the pit head and the chains attached to the wheel. At the outset, therefore, Ondaatje makes it clear this is not going to be a novel written from what Pesch calls 'the ironical culmination of Western rationality and wisdom' (Pesch, in Kyser, 2001:890). With this introduction he demonstrates an Eastern rationality.

Here he shows (given his Western background) that he is trying to understand all points of view. There is much debate regarding Ondaatje's allegiances (Goldman, 2005) but, as Sareth elucidates when he says to Anil, 'I want you to understand the archaeological surround of the fact' (44), Ondaatje wishes to examine the 'surround', without

condemning Eastern, Western, Singhalese or, for that matter, the Tamil insurgents' opinion.

Neither does he make any overt statements regarding Western technology. Campbell-Hall, however, argues that Ondaatje is 'disgusted' with western 'international trends':

In a postmodern world [here he is writing about Ondaatje and Arundhati Roy] increasingly fascinated by yet disgusted with mass production and mechanical substitutes for laborious, traditional craftsmanship, the figures of the highly skilled artisan symbolizes rejection of international trends towards globalization and the elevation of the consumer over the producer of goods' (Campbell-Hall, 2003:42).

Campbell-Hall goes on to say that

The English Patient, Anil's Ghost and *The God of Small Things* all contain critiques of the assumption that skilled artisan labour of the developing world exists primarily to provide the first world with inexpensive, 'othered' cultural products (Campbell-Hall, 2003:43).

What Ondaatje does imply is that there is something akin to spirituality in the act of labour itself shown by his portrayal of Anil's forensic work, Sareth's archaeological quest to retrieve the past, Gamini's dedication as a doctor and Ananda's artistry.

Returning to the miners' song, the miners represent backbreaking effort in their quest to ferret a living from the earth. The wheel in a mine is the actual wheel which is supported by the scaffolding with the chains attached, but it also represents, one could suppose, considering the religious backdrop of Sri Lanka, the karmic wheel of life to which mankind is said to be attached. The wheel of life symbolizes the underlying cyclic tenet of Buddhist philosophy where chains of karma bind humans to a certain path in life, and what remains unresolved in one life is carried over to another incarnation. In order to

avoid the pitfalls of negative karma it is better to maintain a spiritual detachment from this wheel. This spiritual detachment, at times, is hotly debated, as shown by Goldman:

As scholars explain, a central tension exists in Therada ¹ Buddhism between the wheel of power and the wheel of righteousness. At its worst, ‘the tension collapses either into a usurping power by temporal authorities, normally by the state though sometimes even by elements within the Sanga [the monkhood] or into an indifference towards matters temporal through a misconceived notion of *Nibbana*’ (Goldman, 2005:29).

The Bikkhus are expected to remain aloof from politics but as David Little suggests, ‘it would be impossible to provide a complete description of Sri Lankan political history... without highlighting the impact of the Bikkhus’ ² (Goldman, 2005:30). Religion plays an integral part in Sri Lankan politics, and, as Goldman concurs, ‘Ondaatje addresses in his novel the complex relationship between religion, politics, and violence in Sri Lanka’ (Goldman, 2005:30). Eastern religion and spirituality differ from that of the West and each have their own inherent mythologies.

Kyser advises that ‘‘*Anil’s Ghost*, like *The English Patient*, should not be read alongside the established myth of Western civilization’ (Roxborough, 253),’ but rather that one should ‘recognize this novel is about the dangers inherent in such myths’ (Kyser, 2001:891), indicating another level of interpretation is required other than the Western viewpoint and this would be from the, arguably more romantic, idealistic and less journalistic, in the sense of reading between the lines, Eastern viewpoint. It is a viewpoint that enables Ondaatje to adroitly sidestep politics. Ondaatje states:

¹ Sri Lanka's population worships a variety of religions. 70% of Sri Lankans are [Theravada Buddhists](#), 15% are [Hindus](#), and 7.5% are [Muslims](#) and [Christians](#). [1] (Wikipedia)

² Bhikkhu: A male monk under the Buddha and who up to the present day keeps Vinaya, the 227 rules; shaves his head, wears ochre-coloured robes (or related colours from orange, to dark brown, to maroon), and lives dependent on alms food. Also a word for any person who strives to develop wholesomeness and abandon unwholesomeness in order to gain true liberation and true happiness (Pandita, 1993:281)

I'm not interested in politics on that public level. The recent fashion of drawing journalistic morals out of literature is I think done by people who don't love literature or who are not capable of allowing its full scope to be seen (Bök, 1992:111).

Ondaatje describes himself as an 'arch romantic' (Bök, 1992). The Eastern perspective could be seen from a Western point of view as being romantic, particularly the more unequivocal wisdom of the wheel of life and karma.

According to Sayadaw U Pandita, a venerable Buddhist teacher, karma is the only possession individuals truly possess and can take with them when they die. He explains this in his text *In This Very Life*:

Our only true possession

... there are certain things that follow human beings through the doors of death. This is *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*), the results of our actions. Our good and bad karmas follow us wherever we are; we cannot get away from them even if we want to (Pandita, 1993:49).

This cycle of karma could be the enigmatic subject of investigation in *Anil's Ghost*. It is an alternative paradigm to Western thought, and *Anil's Ghost*, like *The English Patient*, 'calls for this new vision, [or a] different way of seeing (Kyser, 2001:892).

Buddha-detachment from karmic chains is the quest of the disciple. In order to turn the excelled wheel of duty, one must practice *dhamma*, that is 'Dhamma, or way of truth, taught by the Buddha' (Pandita, 1993:9). According to Buddhist philosophy, every person has certain duties to fulfil. These duties require introspection and recognition of challenges that test the soul, thus the miner learns to overcome adversity and become detached from his daily problems of survival. It becomes the disciple's spiritual path. Unlike Western ideology, spirituality in the East tends to pervade all aspects of living (so the word disciple can also be generalized to the ordinary person). This is why the disciple

or the miner in this instance blesses adverse conditions. Each challenge overcome advances him further along his path towards enlightenment. The second stanza of the miners' song reflects this philosophy:

*Blessed be the scaffolding deep down in the shaft
Blessed be the life wheel on the mine's pit head
Blessed be the chain attached to the life wheel...*

(‘Miner’s folk song’. *Anil’s Ghost*, 2001:3)

The karmic lesson appears to be a lesson best learned by detaching oneself from the emotional aspects of challenges, by looking at a problem from a different perspective, in other words by ‘distancing’ oneself from the problem. It seems, then, that the Buddhist philosophy shifts the perspective by viewing *each* problem more along the lines of a cosmic reward. This would make hardship more commendable. Kyser explains that Ondaatje’s characters (like the miners) ‘struggle to experience, articulate, and insert the manifold individual stories that have been eclipsed by the ‘plot’ of history. It is not a painless process’ (Kyser, 2001:892).

In *Anil’s Ghost*, each character’s life, like the miners’ lives, is examined within the context of a country at war, where, on a daily basis, lives are under threat. The text ‘eclipsed by the ‘plot’ of history’ is woven with possible codes.

Festino writes that Ondaatje ‘codifies all those various texts and historical and cultural references that make up the chain of images that gives unity to the [text]’ (Festino, 2006:143). This unity may not always be evident. For instance, the division of the novel into eight parts may not be an arbitrary number for there are eight steps towards enlightenment (see p.32).

Anil’s Ghost consists of *eight* parts under the headings ‘Sareth’, ‘The Grove of Ascetics’, ‘A Brother’, ‘Ananda’, ‘The Mouse’, ‘Between Heartbeats’, ‘The Life Wheel’ and ‘Distance’. The characters are challenged by events and either come to terms, or

conversely, fail to come to terms, with the adverse conditions that threaten their lives. Either way they have taken one more step along their path of destiny.

The eight parts of the text present the characters with obstacles whilst the Buddhist philosophy provides a method of overcoming them. According to Pandita, the right way to overcome obstacles is to follow an *eightfold* path of living. As Pandita explains, these are 'the eightfold path of right understanding, right thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration' (Pandita, 1993:19). In *Anil's Ghost* the main characters' lives are altered by their meeting, as together they examine a skeleton that is to challenge their *right-paths* and change the course of their journeys.

Anil's and Sareth's challenge appears to be to discover the truth concerning crimes against humanity while maintaining some degree of emotional detachment. The narrative hinges around the degree of involvement at the risk of personal safety. Of the two characters, Anil mostly represents the generalized western characteristics of society, and Sareth the eastern characteristics. Although neither appears to be overtly spiritual, both seem challenged to play a moral role in society armed with a combination of passion and detachment.

It is evident from the beginning of the text that Sareth wishes to distance himself from events taking place around him. He tells Anil, 'I don't join one side or the other' (27). From the early stages of their friendship, it appears Anil cannot be sure whether he is a neutral onlooker in her quest for truth or whether he is on the side of the government, for, as a government official, it seems unlikely he is impartial: 'was he it's [the government's] ear and eye while assigned to aid her in the Human Rights investigation and Report?' (28)

In a country in which 'everyone has an army' (27), it seems to be difficult for anyone to remain uninvolved or refuse to take sides in the ongoing war. However, as an archaeologist, Sareth 'was high up in the state sponsored archaeological department' (28)

and as a scientist, the very nature of his work involved recovering the truth and remaining unbiased. So the question is which side he will take if pressed.

Anil, from a professional standpoint, would wish to believe that Sareth has the ability to remain detached from any intrigue that may interfere with her research.

Throughout the text, Sareth's investment in their research comes into question and remains a concern for Anil. For instance, 'She had been working with him for several days and she still had no handle on him' (28). She has learnt from past experience that her work could be jeopardized if a government official decided the truth was too damning. The following passage explains why she feels this way.

Forensic work during a political crisis was notorious, she knew, for its three-dimensional chess moves and back-room deals and muted statements for the 'good of the nation.' In the Congo, one Human Rights group had gone too far and their collection of data had disappeared overnight, their paperwork burned. As if a city from the past had been reburied. The investigative team, which included Anil in a lowly role as a programme assistant, had nothing left to do but get on a plane and go home. So much for the international authority of Geneva (29).

The main challenge for Anil in Sri Lanka is to prevent her work from being sabotaged. Ondaatje emphasizes the huge amount of facts that can be hidden by governments 'as if a city from the past had been reburied'. His dry statement, when he says 'so much for the international authority of Geneva', implies that even the United Nations is ineffectual in trying to uncover crimes against humanity.

It is no wonder then that Anil is cautious of government officials but as she gets to know Sareth she discovers he is an archaeologist who loves his work. For instance, she sees that while 'passing some of his students working in a historic area, [he] had joyfully joined them' (29). She is impressed with his enthusiasm for his work, 'his desire: he had told her, was to write a book someday about a city in the south of the island that no longer existed' (29). As she begins to understand him, she begins to trust him a little

more. One could say it was her challenge or ‘journey’ to learn to trust Sareth. The following passage reveals this increasing intimacy.

At his most expressive, almost enthusiastic, one evening after a crab dinner in Mount Lavinia. He stood by the surf drawing the shape of the city with his hands, sketching it in the dark air. Through the imaginary lines she could see the waves, their curl and roll, like his sudden excitement moving towards her (30).

The erotic ‘sudden excitement moving’ suggests the stirrings of attraction between Anil and Sareth. This paragraph manages to express in only a few words the movement from distance to clarity as the text describes Anil and Sareth’s growing friendship. The kinesthetic movement from the ‘imaginary city’ of the past to the present waves which ‘curl and roll’ towards Anil uses imagery which hints at romance.

When Anil first met Sareth, he exclaimed ‘*So - you are the swimmer!*’ which immediately antagonizes her. ‘The swimming was a long time ago’ she replies, but she smiles, ‘wanting to get over the fact that they had managed to clash in their first few sentences’ (17). When she was a girl Anil had been famous for her swimming achievements so she is remembered as ‘the swimmer’, indicating that she was very much immersed in her milieu at that time.

In *The English Patient*, where there was only desert, rock paintings in a cave reveal images of people swimming thousands of years ago. As in the ‘cave of the swimmers’ that Almásy discovers, Ondaatje uses swimming as a metaphor for man’s efforts to overcome challenges as he faces the inevitability of death. Swimming in an effort to circumnavigate death and the transient nature of life remains a theme that underlies much of Ondaatje’s texts.

In *The English Patient*, the interconnecting relationship between the group, the desert, and that of Italy, as encapsulated by the swimmer *motif* in the cave, provides a sense of eternal effort between man and his environment. The swimming motif in *Anil’s Ghost*

occurs when Anil resists being labelled the 'swimmer' but her effort remains the same and in the same way captures a fleeting moment of existence in the struggle to survive. In both novels survival is made more difficult with the harsh reality of war.

In much the same way as in *The English Patient* with its images of World War II, Sri Lanka provides a backdrop for the interminable nature of man's struggle for existence against all odds. Sareth, like Almasy, falls by the wayside in this eternal struggle and in a blend of stark reality (for people die in wars), and romantic myth, he heroically 'gives up the ghost'. According to Goldman, the 'blending of fact and fiction in the novel as a whole highlights the predicament in Sri Lanka, where "myth has become historical reality and history myth"' (Goldman, 2005:32). The image of swimming through history encompasses reality and myth by way of arduous and romantic endeavour.

Another instance of the swimming motif is when the kidnapped doctor, Linus Corea, in *Anil's ghost*, settles in the enemy camp. The text reads 'from then on, a swim became a part of the day's schedule, if there was time. He always thought of it before he fell asleep. It heightened his excitement about the oncoming day. The swim.' (124). When Corea practiced as a specialist, he appears to have had an easy life. Captured by the insurgents, he had begun enjoying his new, more exciting, more challenging role in life, that of a casualty doctor. Metaphorically and physically, he had begun swimming in the mainstream of life once again.

As a 'champion' swimmer, Ondaatje has cast Anil as a strong character that faces up to challenges and enjoys the clarity of involvement. Put metaphorically, this suggests that she is used to swimming against the tide. The idea that she wishes to distance or even detach herself from her celebratory past is an interesting one, suggesting that her physical struggle with the elements has become an internalized mental struggle with less obvious unseen elements. On her arrival in Sri Lanka, she appears to want to put the past behind her. She had emigrated from the country, its problems and her childhood experiences. That she is no longer 'a swimmer' could be viewed as a wish to disengage herself from her former life.

Sareth, conversely, seems to have a need to bring the distant past closer and impose it on the present. This appears evident from his desire to inspect ‘that place’ (the ancient city) and to ‘find what would emerge out of this dark trade with earth’ (29). The metaphorical use of ‘dark trade’ suggests something unwholesome. He seems to feel this ‘dark trade’ is something that can be scrutinized and cleansed in the process. Like Marlow in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, he wishes to explore the so-called civilized nature of man without becoming embroiled in its ‘darknesses’. Surrounded by characters like Kurtz, or the ‘pilgrims’ who degenerate into savages when confronted by violence, embracing brutality instead of repudiating it, it is, like Marlow, perhaps a way for Sareth to come to terms with his own hidden darkness by examining that of others.

The lost city’s dealings become subject to analysis, he wants to lend clarity to what was formerly ‘dark’, to bring it back to the present ‘to find what would emerge’ (29). This implies that because it is a city from the past he can attach himself to the intricacies of its trade and yet, simultaneously, like Marlow, maintain a sense of detachment. In his present environment, it is perhaps too difficult to maintain the same level of detachment. He may wish, like Marlow, taking the advice of the doctor he visits, to remain an observer on his journey down the Congo River. The doctor tells Marlow: ‘In the tropics one must before everything keep calm... *Du calme, du calme, Adieu*’ (Conrad, 1981:18). Like Marlow, Sareth may be uncomfortably aware of the darkness within all men, past and present. Marlow demonstrates this when he was unable to tell Kurtz’s fiancée what Kurtz was really like: ‘I could not tell her’ he says ‘it would have been too dark-too dark altogether (Conrad, 1981:131). That Ondaatje admires Conrad’s work and is influenced by the writer is evident from the following quotation:

At a presentation in Miami in 2002 Ondaatje responded to a question about the extent to which movies influenced his writing by suggesting that his “visual focus” might well have been “picked up from [Joseph] Conrad as much as movies” (Galenet. 2006)

Not only has Ondaatje 'picked up' Conrad's 'visual focus', but the Marlovian quest for detachment, with Marlow hovering between contempt and understanding as he examines the 'darkness' of his fellow colonizers; namely Kurtz who has people's heads decorating the fence of his adopted home. He says of the young man who admired Kurtz, 'I suppose it did not occur to him that Mr. Kurtz was no idol of mine' (Conrad, 1981:99):

I had no idea of the conditions, [the young man] said: these heads were the heads of rebels. I [Marlow] shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers – and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks (Conrad, 1981:99).

That Sareth, like Marlow, is no lover of violence is evident when he muses that

The country existed in a rocking, self-burying motion. The disappearance of schoolboys, the death of lawyers by torture, the abduction of bodies from the Hokandra mass grave. Murders in the Muthurajawela marsh (157).

However, Sareth is not an easy man to understand.

Ondaatje follows the passage (30) of Anil's first tentative steps towards understanding Sareth with the passage describing an official's death on a train. This passage may represent Sareth as the fateful victim of his own integrity. In doing this Ondaatje does two things. First, he distances the reader from the incident more dramatically, having just signalled the more personal aspect of Anil's budding friendship with Sareth. Secondly, he heightens the impact of transition. Ironically, the overall effect is one of detachment in spite of the clarity of the event because we do not know the victim. The victim remains nameless. The event is similar to how audiences watch cruelty dispassionately on television every night, having become immune to the violence.

The description of the official's death on the train enables a swift movement from the subtly erotic 'like his sudden excitement moving towards her' (30), to violence and death that is cinematographic in effect. The sudden change corresponds to the use of the train as the scene of the crime. The train connotes an image of movement or of that which moves one on quickly in life, suggesting rapid transitions. Things begin to move quickly and life speeds up, analogous to someone drowning. The drowning person's life is supposed to flash by in an instant. This again reflects Ondaatje's theme regarding the transitory nature of life. Although the reader does not realize it, if we assume a direct association in linking the two deaths (the train official's with Sareth's), Ondaatje has signalled both the beginning and the end of Anil and Sareth's friendship. The text states, in italics, that

There were police officers all over the train. The man got on carrying a bird cage with a mynah in it. He walked through carriages, glancing at other passengers. There were no seats left and he sat on the floor. He was wearing a sarong, sandals, a Galle Road T-shirt. It was a slow train, travelling through rock passes, then emerging into sudden vistas (31).

The scene that may link the reader to this incident occurs towards the end of the novel when Gamini and Sareth meet at Galle Face Green. The text reads 'On Galle Face Green the brothers had talked comfortably only because of her [Anil's] presence' (285). This naming of a meeting place links Sareth with the nameless murdered official because the victim was wearing a 'Galle Road T-shirt'. Another link is that Ondaatje uses italics to signify shifts in subject matter or to indicate fragmentations in time sequence – as he does in the passage containing the description of the murder, or that of the death of Sirissa (175). That the victim is not Sareth is made clear later on in the text, but the sense of clarity has already been put into effect, despite the 'namelessness' of the victim.

The image of a man carrying a birdcage with a mynah in the train scene also differentiates the victim from the rest of the passengers. Mynahs, often kept as pets, sing throughout the year and are adaptable birds that live near humans, roosting communally in large trees, sometimes in flocks of thousands, making tremendous noise even during

the night. They skip or leap on the ground and bow and nod their heads when they sing (Maclean, 1993: 665). In the text, this bird is kept in a cage. In the final passage of the novel, the use of bird imagery suggests an iconic representation of nature and loss of freedom. This is reiterated in the way Ananda remembers Sirissa.

The birds dove towards gaps within the trees! They flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she had loved and in the dark she had feared (307).

Ondaatje has 'invented' a small caged bird to accompany the official to his death. With the death of the official, his soul, no longer caged or trapped in the wheel of life, is freed. The imagery of 'travelling through rock passes, then emerging into sudden vistas' on the 'slow' train, is a vivid one. The metaphorical use of the train as a vehicle of change could suggest obstacles and moments of 'plain sailing' in the journey through life. The alternating moments of pain and pleasure flash past like a speeded-up impression of a life as it reaches its conclusion.

There are rapid images of far-off vistas and close rocks juxtaposed with a life seen in retrospect in a quick turn of the 'life wheel'. The fluctuation of distance, nature's passing vistas and a soul being freed, and clarity, where moments of pure insight in which the 'rocks' of life are recognized for what they are, merely obstacles to be overcome in the path of enlightenment, engender a degree of detachment. Detachment requires the ability to recognize and integrate moments of both distance and clarity.

An inability to sustain detachment, on the other hand, results in confusion and the creation of 'unhappy ghosts', as will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

Chapter Three

The 'hungry ghost'.

but you have become
a ghost for me.
I hold only your shadow
since those days I drove
your nature away.

(*Handwriting*, 2000:41)

In the Buddhist philosophy, a *peta* is an unhappy ghost that lives in another realm, and who, at times, is unable to detach himself from earthly matters. There is, however, another, more insidious ghost: the hungry ghost, a ghost who takes over the imagination and eats away at its creator. In this way, the hungry ghost can live again, vicariously, in the mind of the creator. The creator could be, for instance, either an artist or a writer. According to Kristina Kyser, Trungpa defines a hungry ghost as follows:

A hungry ghost is an individual who occupies one of the six realms of samsara. The ghost is preoccupied with capturing and 'consuming' the objects of experience whether it be, for example, through photography, painting or writing (Trungpa, 36). By referring to Patrick as a hungry ghost, Ondaatje alludes to the concern, in *In the Skin of a Lion*, that artistically representing others may be 'false celebration' and suggests that storytellers must be aware of this danger (Kyser, 2001:896).

The ghost lives and feeds off the present. This *re-creation* keeps him alive. Thus, a creator is the classic vessel for a hungry ghost. A creator is an inventor, an artist, sculptor, author, musician, or anyone who designs or can generate something out of nothing. An individual who can fashion words, art, music or even the head of a skeleton into something new is a creator or artificer.

The artist or the author, the *artificer*, is the arch manipulator. As Ondaatje explains, ‘a sort of improvisation happens. One can discover lines and connections which can startle you and the reader, eventually’ (Johnson, 2002:41). This is when the characters take on the role of *hungry* ghosts, waiting in turn to consume their maker. An example of this is when, under Ananda’s grieving hands, Sailor’s head becomes the head of Sirissa. This correlation is the link between Ondaatje the author, Ananda the artificer, and the role of the *hungry ghost*. Similarly, this transformation is evident when Ananda, in true Buddhist tradition, infuses the Buddha statue with life as he paints in its eyes. When he does this, he provides the statue with a soul. For Buddhists, the eyes are the windows to the soul, so in painting the eyes the statue becomes alive. Thus, in a related manner, when Ondaatje’s characters become real to him, they take on a life of their own.

This also provides the creator with some god-like powers, given the ability to invest inanimate objects with life, but not always to their advantage. Ondaatje expresses the idea of gods as creators who burn themselves in the process of creation in the following extract from his poem ‘The Hour of Cowdust’:

Or stories of Gods
creating such beautiful women
they themselves burned a passion
and were reduced to ash.

(*The Cinnamon Peeler*, 1989:67)

In *Anil’s Ghost* there is the implication that Ananda was involved in Sareth’s ill-fortune when he says ‘he and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sareth Diyasena’ (305). The question is why would Ananda ‘carry’ Sareth’s ghost? The ghost of Sareth that haunts Ananda could be the most chilling ghost of all, and hints at betrayal. The possibility is that Ananda could have been in some way implicated in Sareth’s murder.

Either way, Ananda and Ondaatje conjoin, on account of the paradoxical nature of the artificer. Ondaatje himself says, 'with all writers, there's an element of self-investigation and self-portrait, even in their fiction that's supposedly not about them at all' (Johnson, 2002:40). Sareth, particularly, as the main protagonist along with Anil, would be especially close to Ondaatje's heart. With the death of Sareth in the novel, Ondaatje has disposed of his own creation. Perhaps Sareth, as Anil's ghost, continues, becoming his (the author's) ghost as well. The ghost feeds off the imagination, so, inevitably, not only Sareth, but each character, contains an aspect of the author (as all derive from his imagination), creating more food for the hungry ghost.

Ananda appears in the text in the seemingly innocuous role of an artist who can reconstruct faces from skeletal remains. He works in the pits, mining for gems on the days when he is not drunk. The woman he loved, Sirissa, was murdered and he still mourns her loss. Yet, there is something more complex about him. Throughout the text, Ananda is seen as an enigmatic character. Ondaatje's portrayal of Ananda as an artist and inventor is so well defined that it appears to be the result of the writer himself mirroring his own efforts as a creator. The role of the artist becomes an interlinear authorial intervention and *Anil's Ghost* becomes a self-reflexive text drawing itself into the process of writing.

Ondaatje describes through Ananda what it is like to be an artist, to be able to create, to recreate, or even to destroy one's own creation in an act of betrayal. Through Ananda, it is possible to assume that the author, in a superb *coup de grace*, is expressing the similarities between himself and this character. When Ondaatje hints at Ananda's betrayals (shown when Ananda tells Anil that Sareth would become his and Anil's ghost), consumed by his own betrayals (for instance, having Sareth die in the story is a form of betrayal) he suggests Sareth will become his own (Ondaatje's) hungry ghost. Therefore, devoured by the elements of his construction, he leaves the reader to ponder over his characters' taking over his soul in the form of hungry ghosts.

In the following passage Ondaatje describes through Ananda what it is like to be an artist, to be able to experience the act of creation, or perhaps, more accurately, to recreate something.

He stood over what they had been able to re-create of the face. It was a long time since he had believed in the originality of artists. He had known some of them in his youth. You slipped into the old bed of the art, where they had slept. There was comfort there. You saw their days of glory, then their days of banishment. He himself did not create or invent faces anymore. Invention was a sliver. Still, all the work he had done in organizing the rebuilding of the statue was for this. The face. Its one hundred chips and splinters of stone brought together, merged with the shadow of bamboo lying across its cheek. All its life until now the statue had never felt a human shadow. It had looked over these hot fields towards green terraces in the distant north. It had seen the wars and had offered peace or irony to those dying under it. Now sunlight hit the seams of its face, as if it were sewn roughly together. He wouldn't hide that. He saw the lidded grey eyes that someone else had cut in another century, that torn look in its great acceptance; he was close against the eyes now, with no distance like an animal in a stone garden, some old man in the future. In a few days the face would be in the sky, no longer below him as he walked on this trestle, his shadow moving across the face, the hollow holding rain so he could lean down and drink from it, as if a food, a wealth. He looked at the eyes that had once belonged to a god. This is what he felt. As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation (303-4).

Ondaatje's use of the word 'artificer' conjures up an image of constructive workmanship and skill rather than raw talent, something acquired rather than an effortless gift bestowed on the artist. The word 'artifice' also has connotations of trickery, of artificiality, tying in with the element of betrayal. An artifact is simply an object that may or may not have an inherent capacity to rouse one's senses, as opposed to a work of art.

From the above passage, one senses that Ananda has relinquished his ability to create. He has become cynical, 'he did not celebrate the greatness of faith', yet at the same time clings to his role of creator. It is as though he has distanced himself from the act of creation but acknowledges that without it he would not be human, he would become a 'demon', or a 'spectre of retaliation'. The phrase 'spectre of retaliation' suggests that he would become prey to a hungry ghost. The artist becoming 'consumed' by the hungry ghost conveys the impression that the ghost is attempting to take over the artificer's heart and soul, whereas a gifted artist has faith in his construction: 'an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith' (304).

This new aspect of Ananda as 'an artificer' adds another dimension to his character. From his portrayal as a simple drunk who also happened to be a good artist, towards the end of the novel he has become an artificer chosen once more by the government to organize the reconstruction of the Buddhist statue; to once again enjoy the eminent position of eye-painter.

A questionable incident that points to Ananda's association with government forces occurs when soldiers stop Sareth and Anil. One of them rummages through Anil's bag and confiscates her batteries, which, Sareth tells her later, are used to make bombs; both Anil and Sareth were shaken by this incident but as 'they drove away she turned to see Ananda, unconcerned, twirling a pencil' (163). This suggests he had no fear of the government soldiers, unlike Anil and Sareth. The image of 'twirling a pencil' is like that of an author poised in thought. In a moment in time Ananda becomes his creator, returning us to the premise of the combined role of the author and his creation.

To some extent, Ananda has learned to live in the present, to control his demons. One wonders whether it was the kindness of Anil and Sareth, the therapeutic effect of transforming Sailor's skull, or simply that he has managed to distance himself from the events that caused him so much grief. In the following passage one feels that his aesthetic sensibility has allowed him to terms with his role:

In the coldness of the world, halfway up, it seemed that only the fires below connected him to the earth. Then, looking into the dark, he could see the dawn prizing itself up out of the horizon, emerging above the forest. The sun lit the green bamboo of the ladder. He could feel its partial warmth on his arms, saw it light the brocade costume he wore over Sareth's cotton shirt-the one he had promised himself he would wear for this morning's ceremony. He and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sareth Diyasena (305).

When Ananda ascends the ladder 'looking into the dark', he essentially encapsulates the conflict between darkness and light, matter and spirit, order and chaos with the eternal struggle upon which survival depends. Once 'the dawn' rises it signals a new day and a reason to celebrate, hence, the 'morning's ceremony' where one learns how to open the heart to the light of the sun and the clarity of a new day.

The characters are on a journey, carrying with them ghosts of the past, ghosts interfering with the present and colouring the future, but as one life cycle ends, a new one commences and the past becomes more distant. As Ananda works on the eyes of the statue, he pours his soul into his craft. He becomes an artist once more in the true sense of the word.

Ananda was very tired. As if all his blood had magically entered into his body. Soon, though, there would be the evolving moment when the eyes, reflected in the mirror, would see him, fall into him. The first and last look given to someone so close. After this hour the statue would be able to witness figures only from a great distance (306).

This distance implies a spiritual detachment, a detachment that removes one from the life wheel, from war, grief and hungry ghosts as well as 'the first and last look given to someone so close' (306).

All the characters in Ondaatje's text convey a sense of seeing events from a distance as, although living in the present, some distant association from the past clings to them. This sense of distance affects who they are in the present, as though there is a ghost hovering in the background, affecting their actions, affecting the clarity of the present.

The sense of a distant ghost affects the mood of the novel. However much we need to see the characters clearly, even when Ondaatje presents us with in-the-moment clarity, we are always aware that they all have a past that colours them. Anil thinks about Cullis; both Sareth and Gamini loved Sareth's dead wife Ravina; Ananda, his young bride, Sirissa; and whilst Palipana has lost his brother (and his career is a thing of the past), his young niece suffers from the almost complete loss of her family to the ongoing war.

Thus, all the characters in this text have lost someone or something dear to them. This infuses them with a sense of distance. Half-listening to past ghosts, they strive to create new loves for the future while the ghosts hungrily steal from the present. This provides the text with another dimension, the sense of loss that draws all the characters towards each other in grief.

An interesting viewpoint concerning ghosts is Goldman's more allegorical slant, stating that

the fall into sin constitutes an ongoing phenomenon; death itself is not final. On several occasions, characters insist that the [English] patient is not simply wounded but is, in fact, dead, referring to him as a 'corpse' and a 'ghost' (28,45). The emphasis on the wounded bodies and corpses [] reveals the text's connection with Benjamin's version of allegory, where the fragmented, tortured body and the corpse, in particular, play a crucial role. As Benjamin argues, in contrast to representations of the bodies wholeness and perfection, the destruction of the body in allegorical narratives 'prepares the body of the living person for emblematic purposes' (Origin, 216). In *The English Patient* [and possibly *Anil's*

Ghost], the patient's body [or the skeleton in *Anil's Ghost*] functions as an allegorical fragment – a living emblem of catastrophe' (Goldman, 2001:905)

The Buddhist principle that life is struggle for the 'living person' is evident throughout the novel. To complicate matters, life is also plagued with hungry ghosts. In order to understand the nature of ghosts one must first understand the concept of temporality. Whether an individual is rich or poor is unimportant in Buddhist philosophy. As humans, life is temporal, transient and one takes on all roles as, according to this philosophy, in each lifetime a different role is assumed in order to learn some lesson. The role itself is unimportant. This is explained in the following passage:

A preliminary acceptance that things are impermanent and transitory prevents the reactions that might occur when you discover these facts – sometimes painfully through your own experience. Without this acceptance, moreover, a student might spend considerable time with the contrary assumption, that the objects of this world might be permanent, an assumption that can block the development of insight (Pandita, 1993:32).

As with the four skeletons discovered in the Bandarawela caves, an individual life is transitory in nature. Impermanence is a fact of nature and twists of fate are a necessary aspect of destiny. This also ties in with the hungry ghost. The hungry ghost clings to permanence and remains tied to matters of the earth because he cannot let go of emotional ties. Although he has died, he still remains tied to earthly matters and cannot move on to a 'more enlightened plane' (Pandita, 1993:213-215). He cannot put a distance between the present and the past. As Anil says to Sareth, 'some people let their ghosts die, some don't' (53).

As an example, Pandita describes a *deva* monk (a ghost) appearing in front of Buddha 'visibly distraught' because he sees the realm is full of *devas* enjoying themselves.

‘O lord Buddha’ he cried, ‘*deva*-land is so noisy! It’s full of racket from all these *devas*. They look like *petas* (unhappy ghosts) to me, frolicking in their own land. Confusing it is to be in such a place. Please show me a way out!’ (Pandita, 1993:213)

This particular ‘*deva* monk’ is a pious ghost but still a hungry one because he is so attached to praying. He cannot live amongst all those happy ghosts enjoying the afterlife. In his view, they are bad ghosts, *petas*, because they are enjoying themselves in heaven instead of praying (Pandita, 1993:213-215). He is being judgmental by clinging to his own beliefs and not detaching from them. The unhappy ghosts are the *petas* of the other realm (and perhaps should not be confused with the hungry ghost of creative endeavor). A normal ‘good’ spirit is able to distance himself from the past, from his life on earth, and adapt happily to another realm.

It seems the *deva*-monk’s problem was that he had become too passionate about continuing to live his austere way of life. According to Buddhist philosophy, one cannot be happy if one is passionate because passion entails craving. This monk was passionate about praying. So it seems distance is a truly difficult thing to achieve and *detachment* is the key to Nirvana, or in Pandita, ‘*nibbāna*’, the unconditioned, perfectly undefiled state that is neither mind nor matter’ (Pandita, 1993:286).

Therefore, according to Buddhist philosophy one should remain detached. Yet war is about passion, the inability to distance oneself, and the outcome is ‘slaughter’. Palipani explains its paradoxical nature to Anil:

‘There has always been slaughter in passion ... Even if you are a monk, like my brother, passion or slaughter will meet you someday. For you cannot survive as a monk if society does not exist. You renounce society, but to do so you must first be part of it. This is the paradox of retreat’ (103).

Palipana's brother, the monk, was murdered although he was a seemingly innocent person in a world full of violence, but there appears to be no refuge for those who may wish to renounce violence or attempt to retreat.¹ There appears to be no help for those who wish to become enlightened, and it even seems 'that monks have never been able to transcend politics' (Goldman, 2005:30). In a higher realm, once violence is removed from the cognitive state (one assumes there is no violence because in a non-physical world there are no possessions or issues of land rights to fight over), there is a further challenge to adapt to a non-violent realm or else remain an unhappy ghost or *peta*.

What is apparent is that it is exceedingly difficult for an individual to become a *bhikkhu*, who is, as described in Pandita, 'any person who strives to develop wholesomeness and abandon unwholesomeness in order to gain liberation and true happiness' (Pandita, 1993:281). It also appears to be equally difficult to make the transition from the material world to the spiritual one without attachments, so there seems to be a considerable chance of becoming an unhappy ghost.

Anil's attachments give the novel its title, *Anil's Ghost*. As the main protagonist, Anil's suffering begins before the duration of her stay in Colombo, centering on her past, and stretches to the future, after she has left Sri Lanka.

In the first passage of the novel, the text is italicised, suggesting a time lapse. Anil is grieving for someone. In this passage, the italics warn the reader that this may not be the actual beginning of the story itself, but could be Anil grieving after the period of stay in Sri Lanka. One feels Ondaatje has removed Anil retrospectively from the events that are about to unfold in the text. She can look back on these events now with a 'long-distance

¹As Goldman points out,

Narada's assassination [Palipana's brother] recalls the historical connection in the late 1980's between young Buddhist monks and the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP or People's Liberation front, termed "the antigovernment insurgents" in the novel). In the 1980s, as S. Tambiah explains, the JVP recruited the monk "as another foot soldier in the revolutionary struggle" (1992, 88). Tambiah goes on to assert that many of the JVP monks, "faced with what they construed as abandonment and even betrayal by their senior monks... became condoners of, even collaborators in, acts of violence against senior monks" (Goldman, 2005:30).

gaze'. The past is behind her, she is now in another country, Guatemala, but the heartache continues to haunt her. She has brought with her a ghost. This ghost could be Sareth. Alternatively, this could be an instance from her past (before she arrives in Sri Lanka) where she is grieving over the loss of Cullis, since the text states 'while Anil was working with the forensic team in Guatemala, she'd flown into Miami to meet Cullis' (33).

Either way, there is sadness in Anil's thoughts in Guatemala, as though she will always be haunted by ghosts of the past: '*the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, [she] still remembers*' (6). It may well be the memory of Sareth that haunts her. Throughout the text, Sareth is in her present, but now, in this passage, he could be her past. He may be the ghost of the novel's title, *Anil's Ghost*. This is indicated towards the end of the novel when Ananda says, 'he and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sareth Diyasena' (305).

We assume that the reason why Ananda feels Sareth has become Anil's ghost is because Anil is a character of deep compassion and the bond she forged with Sareth is one she will never forget (6), so emotionally he will always remain with her, as her ghost. Not only this, but she is also largely responsible for his death in her determination to get to the truth. She is the one who involves him in the political intrigue from which he was attempting to distance himself.

From the outset, Ondaatje describes Anil's nature as intensely empathetic. For instance while she is with a forensic team working on a site in Guatemala she experiences the vigilance of family members and the '*double-edged*' (6) fear that the bodies may or may not be a son or husband or brother. Anil feels a special empathy for the woman who has lost her husband and brother. She understands her '*grief of love*' (6), for she too has lost those she has loved.

With her *imaginings* Anil takes on the role of an artificer. The story she constructs, scientific or not, could play a role in the creation of a hungry ghost.

Anil has her own ghosts from the past even before she arrives in Sri Lanka. She has ended the affair with her lover Cullis and her friend Leaf is dying. Thus, her mood is already sombre as she faces the problems of Sri Lanka's civil war. On her arrival, she realizes that 'the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared to what was happening here' (11). She considers the irony of lines she had once translated from Archilochus, that here '*in the hospitality of war we left them dead to remember us by*' (11). She reflects that 'here [in Sri Lanka] there was no such gesture to the families of the dead, not even the information of who the enemy was' (11). Where there is a body or skeleton, even though dead, the distance is lessened for the loved ones than not knowing if they are alive or dead.

In reality a family member would not be able to tell the difference between one set of bones from another, so perhaps it is more the idea of those bones, that eases their grief, allowing memories or ghosts of the dead to return, rather than the actual remains. The families need tangible proof as provided by the bones that their loved ones have been returned. Anil has made a career of exhuming these in order to help them find closure.

In her quest, Anil is a warrior concerning human rights. Her work helps to rectify the past in order to transform the future. In her pursuit of restitution, she is determined to do everything she can to unearth homeless ghosts and return them to their families. For her, there is a very definite line between the truth and lies covering the murders, burial sites and the destruction of evidence. What she wants to do is help restore the balance of a country in turmoil by collecting evidence and discovering the stories as yet untold.

Anil's imagination is such that she can examine a skeleton and find a 'story somewhere' (180). For instance, regarding Sailor, she says excitedly to Sareth, 'So we have a story about him, you see. A man who was active, an acrobat almost, then he was injured and had to work in a mine' (180).

As a member of the Human Rights group, Anil is in Sri Lanka to 'lay the ghosts' but from the beginning it is evident it is not going to be easy. When she challenges Sareth

concerning his political opinions, he tells her: 'Look, I don't join one side or the other... As you said, everyone has an army' (27). Anil resists this line of thought and she wonders whether 'the partner assigned to her is neutral in this war?' (29) Throughout the novel, Sareth, unlike Anil, is seen as an enigmatic character. He is reserved and not inclined towards involving himself in the politics of war. 'She was already used to him in the role of a widower, with a silent presence around him' (58), and 'He, [Anil suspects] is a shy man, in that sense of lacking the confidence to approach and proposition' (138). Sareth tells Anil, 'sometimes law is on the side of power not truth' (44). Yet, in spite of his equivocations, a connection develops between them as each begins to uncover the restless ghosts of the past, culminating in her confusion after dreaming of him, when 'Sareth had taken off her clothes and traced her outline' (62).

Anil discovers Sareth had a mentor named Palipana, a Professor of Archaeology, whose brother, a monk, was murdered in the war. She asks him about this brother's murder and he answers, 'those days you didn't know who was killing who.' Anil asks, 'but you do now don't you?' and he replies ambiguously, 'Now we all have blood on our clothes' (48). This implies that he too has done things he should not have; he has not been able to distance himself from the war. This information makes her uncertain as to whether he will sabotage the work she has come to do.

With Sareth's admission that they all have blood on their clothes, together with 'sometimes law is on the side of power not truth' (44), the intimation is also that the government is behind many of the political killings. Anil cannot be sure of Sareth's part in the war and is aware that he could be hovering between the need for truth and justice versus a natural inclination to detach himself from political intrigue. However, she has no option but to trust him. In her efforts to unravel the past, the first significant event in the novel is the discovery of the skeletons.

In the Bandarawela caves, three ancient skeletons are found, but Anil discovers a fourth, more recent skeleton. She deduces they are the bones of a murder victim because of the

twisting of the bones, and that the body had only recently died before being burnt, or was even burned alive, a horrific way to die. She nicknames the skeleton 'Sailor'. This name is ironic in itself, as 'Sailor' certainly did not sail through life, coming to a very inauspicious end. The act of naming the skeletons exposes Anil's fertile and vivid imagination, leaving her open to hungry ghosts.

The three older skeletons are nicknamed Tinker, Tailor and Soldier, taken from an English nursery rhyming game, *tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich-man, poor-man, beggar-man, thief*, a game that chooses by chance which role a player is to assume. Sailor has been chosen to play the lead role. The mystery of Sailor's bones acts as a ghostly impetus and he begins to take on a persona of his own, claiming Anil's full attention, and, as Cook demonstrates, 'the naming of "Sailor" is representative of all who cannot name themselves and who rely on others to locate them, or call them into being' (Cook, 2005:9). His presence manipulates them into bringing his murderers to justice as Anil tries to close the distance between past and future. His ghost appears to watch over her as she scrutinizes his bones. She becomes fond of him, her imagination taking over her consciousness in her efforts to unravel his life. For instance, when Ananda carries the bones in his arms, Anil is not surprised:

She was in no way appalled by what he was doing. There had been hours when, locked in her investigations and too focused by hours of intricacy, she too would need to reach forward and lift Sailor into her arms, to remind herself he was like her (170).

Her imagination springs into action as to his vulnerability, and there is a shared sense of humanity. She sees in him the fragile nature of a fellow sufferer attempting to sail through the obscurities of existence with all its attending pitfalls. He, in turn, preys on her imagination, feeding off it, like a hungry ghost. Anil, as the artificer, becomes the victim with the hungry ghost of her own making, forever lurking in her thoughts wanting to be appeased.

With the discovery of Sailor, Anil and Sareth attempt to *recreate* his life by searching for evidence of a political murder perhaps involving the government. Anil becomes fearful for sailor as though he were still a real person. Sareth on the other hand has no such sentiments, which creates at times a feeling of distrust in Anil.

Trust is an important component when feeding hungry ghosts. The initial distrust Anil feels for Sareth is evident when she confronts him about being truthful. She says to him 'I don't really know, you see, what side you are on – if I can trust you.... I don't know where you stand. I know you feel the purpose of truth is more complicated, that it's sometimes more dangerous here if you tell the truth' (53). He replies quite reasonably, saying that 'Everyone is scared, Anil. It is a national disease... You're six hours away from Colombo and your whispering – think about that (53). This intimates that one cannot put a distance on fear. It is also evident that Sareth is not as concerned at finding Sailor's murderer as Anil. He is more concerned for their welfare at this moment than in pandering to hungry ghosts.

In this case, during times of war, the truth is dangerous and Sareth does not deny his fear. He is quite pragmatic about it. He does not appear to be offended by Anil's mistrust but is rather more concerned with their safety. But perhaps it is Anil's ideals, her search for the truth that helps to create the hungry ghost of Sailor, spurring her on to find his murderer; urging her to shorten the distance between past and present.

Anil's ideals demonstrate the difference between her and Sareth's perspectives. She cannot compromise with the truth whereas Sareth appears to find the truth more malleable depending on who is in power. Because he has had to live with fear Sareth's more practical and realistic outlook may threaten his integrity but it *distances* him from the risk of involvement, whereas Anil because of her imaginings, follows her heart at the risk of personal endangerment. She had 'come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries... but here, on this island, she realized she was moving among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere' (54).

Anil simply cannot understand the reasoning behind human violence. She reflects that 'there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time' (55). Here, Ondaatje stresses, through Anil, the importance of the long-distance gaze. In order to assuage her grief she needed to understand it and perhaps to find some form of retribution as well. The following passage reveals just how cynical Anil had become about matters of retribution.

She used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was a way to abandon emotion, a last protection of the self.... The only chance was that the creatures who fought would consume themselves. All that was left was a belief in an eventual revenge towards those who had power (56).

For Anil, the skeleton of Sailor takes on a role of major significance. She thinks that 'to give him a name would name the rest' (56). He is her 'cause' and she is a character who will stubbornly stick to a cause and put all her efforts into it. Anil 'knew herself to be, and was known to others, as a determined creature' (67). It is with this connection in mind that Sailor too, could have become Anil's ghost. In an effort to confirm the ideal of a just world, determined as she is, the unredeemed death of Sailor would haunt her.

This kind of passion and fortitude is admirable in western society. To be 'passionate' about what one does is a motivating force towards getting anything done in a hugely materialistic world. However, Buddhist philosophy suggests 'craving is the root of suffering, and when craving is absent, suffering, too, disappears' (Pandita, 1993:101). Anil's passionate nature leads to the inevitability of her suffering. The retrospective imaginings of her past quicken the impulse of her hunger, creating a ghost in the conscious mind, one that feeds off imagination, filled with longing, need and desire.

As noted earlier, Anil's notions reflect the ongoing torment in her life. Her reflections of her past affair with Cullis stir her imaginative impulse. She remembers when she says to

him in a rage ‘Why carry on? After two years I still feel like your afternoon date.’ An ‘afternoon date’ implies lightness, a light meal as opposed to a five-course meal. It also implies under-nourishment or half-heartedness, something alien to Anil’s nature. This affair could not appease her longings and desires. It was evident to her that the affair had no future, although ‘they had both hoped for a seven banded night’ (102).

Anil’s relationship with Cullis as ‘Biggles’, the ‘stereotypical representation of an English pilot and hero who fights for his country in the First World War’ (Cook, 2005:14), could also represent ‘her ambivalent relationship with the West’, where, as Cook argues, she ‘appreciates some of his qualities, but at the same time she refuses to be controlled or contained by him’ (Cook, 2005:14).² However, the hungry ghost of her imagination will not let go of the affair, not let her forget. Cullis becomes a living ghostly presence in her conscious mind. This affair also rekindles in Anil memories of her former, ‘claustrophobic’, marriage where

...she would return from the lab and be met by his jealousy. At first this presented itself as sexual jealousy, then she saw it as an attempt to limit her research and studies. It was the first handcuff of marriage, and it almost buried her... (144).

Anil manages to ‘erase [] him from the cartography of her life in an action reminiscent of the imperial map-makers Ondaatje refers to’ (Cook, 2005:13), and work becomes her way of distancing herself from forms of entanglement. It was a way of appeasing her inner needs by helping her to forget broken relationships and the ghosts of her past. However, these ghosts have a tendency to keep interfering with her present thoughts.

2 Cook goes on to demonstrate that

Ondaatje empowers Anil through a transnational identity that encompasses both Western order and Eastern disorder; her Western proclivity towards naming and appropriation, and Eastern passion and impulsiveness leave her free to plunder Cullis both physically and emotionally. Cullis’s lack of freedom is implied in the “carefulness” and worry that he wears as protective clothing which Anil attempts to “strip off” and “unbuckle (263-64). The car in which he sits and his marriage, stand as metaphors for the constraints imposed by Cullis by a fixed cultural identity, boundaries that Anil’s transnationalism has no difficulties in transgressing (Cook, 2005:12-13).

Anil could distance herself physically from Cullis, but in retrospect, relating back to the ghost in the title, the ‘connection’ (100) She still feels towards Cullis, her emotional ties not quite played out, remain unresolved. Now, with the distance between herself and Cullis, she has only a memory. This being so, it is possible that Cullis, too, has become her ‘ghost’. The impermanence of their affair, the sense of a ‘connection’ that faded into unhappy memories, is a connection that haunts her as much as the death of Sareth.

However, the love she has for her work remains constant and in the present. As Cullis notes: ‘He could see she had fallen even more in love with her work’ (33), and, ‘her skill signified her existence’ (141). It is in her detective work that Anil finds clarity, yet, ironically, her forensic work encourages the revival of ghosts and sparks her imagination as she examines the bones of the past.

Siddiqi sees this detective work in the novel as an example of ‘Police and Postcolonial rationality’:

There has been a recent spate of postcolonial novels that use the format of the mystery or detective story but tweak it or turn it inside out in what becomes a narrative of “social detection,” to borrow a phrase from Frederic Jameson, a “vehicle for judgments on society and revelations of its hidden nature.” These novels identify social and state practices as invidious, even vicious... These novels cast suspicion on the repressive apparatuses of the state’ (Siddiqi, 2002:176-177)

The ‘social detection’ of what is truth and what is not truth is not as simple as it appears to be. Ondaatje examines this ‘truth’ from a multitude of angles, not only through Anil’s ‘detective’ eyes, but also through the eyes of Sareth and Palipana. This search for the truth becomes a narrative of ‘social detection’, but an unyielding one in that truth is indeterminate through both Western and Eastern eyes, as intimated by the terminology of Ondaatje’s ‘unprovable truth’ (83).

Chapter Four

The 'unprovable truth'

We drove cylinders into the earth
to discover previous horizons
(*Handwriting*, 2000:22)

To get to the truth and in order to understand the nature of a country at war, Ondaatje investigates the way individuals perceive their environments. He does this with a 'long distance gaze' (11), examining Eastern and Western cultures, and with a close-up, 'microscopic' inspection of individual perspectives. It is an adjustment of focal lengths, and in *Anil's Ghost*, mainly from Anil and Sareth's perspective. For instance, Ondaatje tells us that 'Anil had read documents and news reports, full of tragedy, and she had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long distance gaze' (11). This leads into the novel where she undergoes changes in perspective resulting from her own intimate involvement in Sri Lanka.

There is a marked difference between Eastern and Western perspectives, and Anil reflects a fusion of these, coming from both an Eastern and Western background. She exists between two worlds. These two worlds are encapsulated in two biographies she picks up to read. *In Search of Gandhi*, by Attenborough, mirrors the spiritual iconography of the East, whilst the life of Frank Sinatra, that of Western sophistication. Anil, caught between these two representational states, is simply 'carrying a larger and larger cast of characters in her head' (61). In other words, she encompasses both into her frame of reference.

By naming the two biographies, Ondaatje presents the reader with East and West alternatives, the more spiritual lifestyle of Gandhi compared to the materialistic lifestyle of Sinatra. In Sri Lanka, once a colony, there was an imposed Western societal influence,

but now with its Eastern theology, it simply belongs to a greater picture, a larger 'cast of characters', but still with major problems.

Western intervention in the civil war is complex and not always with a humanitarian agenda in mind. Derrickson argues that there is a 'distorted reality' in general, regarding what she calls an 'un-truth' relating to Western perspectives concerning a human rights debate. In her article '*Will the 'Un-truth' set you free?' A critical Look at Global Human Rights Discourse in Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost*, Derrickson says

By invoking the Greek tradition from which Western law and politics takes its cue, and by asserting that Sri Lanka's case is 'more complicated morally' than that tradition, Ondaatje frames his text with the suggestion that justice for the Sri Lankan people may not be obtainable through a human rights mandate that is governed by cultural outsiders (Derrickson, 2004:137).

This is debatable. What Ondaatje does do is contrast the East-West polarities, delineating the differences between the two cultures. He does this with Anil, for example, when she is with her friend Chitra.

Anil tells Chitra what she likes best about the west when she says 'most of all I think I like that I can do things on my own terms. Nothing is anonymous here, [Sri Lanka] is it. I miss my privacy' (72). The reader supposes Anil misses the greater sense of individualism. Sinatra's way of life, for instance, is, in individualistic terms, the humanistic conclusion of Western philosophy. Idealistically, it seems, Anil is more orientated towards Western ideals of individuality than towards the more communally orientated Sri Lankan ideal. Yet, each lifestyle has its own inherent truth for her although they may seem disconnected. That she relates to the country of her birth is shown when in the auditorium she says to the officials, 'I think you murdered hundreds of us.' *Hundreds of us*. Sareth thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*' (272).

Though it may appear that Anil represents the West more than the East, this seems to be the case only when she is in Sri Lanka, for when she is in America she exhibits the characteristics of a Sri Lankan. She says:

We are full of anarchy. We take our clothes off because we shouldn't take our clothes off. And we behave worse in other countries. In Sri Lanka one is surrounded by family order, most people know every meeting you have during the day, there is nothing anonymous. But if I meet a Sri Lankan elsewhere in the world and we have a free afternoon, it doesn't necessarily happen, but each of us knows all hell could break loose. What is that quality in us? Do you think? That makes us cause our own rain and smoke? (138)

This form of Sri Lankan rebelliousness, which produces 'Anil-anarchy', reveals a more individualistic difference in east versus west principles. This 'rain and smoke' could be a reaction coming from a place of 'family order' where 'there is nothing anonymous'. Buried beneath the compliance of 'family order' could lurk a defiance resulting in radical behavior when given the anonymity to do so.

In a very clear delineation of East and West, and one wonders which is the right or wrong approach; Anil contrasts English and Sri Lankan classrooms. What surprised her was

[T]he quietness of the English classroom. In Colombo there was always a racket. Birds, lorries, fighting dogs, a kindergarten's lessons of rote, street salesmen – all their sounds entered through open windows. There was no chance of an ivory tower existing in the tropics (140).

The suggestion that an English classroom is like 'an ivory tower' removes education from everyday life. An attempt is made to isolate the student, not only physically from the environment, but mentally, as each subject is compartmentalized. Like a scientific experiment, one branch of knowledge is cut off from the other and individually analysed.

It becomes a more sedate, private operation, with the insidious elimination of anything unknowable or that defies surgical analysis.

The compartmentalization of various aspects of life, so apparent in the English educational system, could at times seem strange to Sri Lankans brought up on the Eastern, interrelated understanding, that there is multiplicity or ‘variousness of things’ (Kyser, 2001:899).

Archaeological knowledge, especially, is reliant on rigorous scientific evidence. So much so that the archaeological community rejected Palipana when it was discovered he had forged his own research findings. As Ondaatje describes it:

Archaeology lives under the same rules as the Napoleonic Code. The point was not that he [Palipana] would ever be proved wrong in his theories, but that he could not be proved right. Still, the patterns that had emerged for Palipana had begun to coalesce. They linked hands. They allowed walking across water, they allowed a leap from treetop to treetop. The water filled a cut alphabet and linked this shore and that. And so the unprovable truth emerged (83).

The concept ‘unprovable truth’ requires explanation and elaboration. Palipana presents a first-hand example of how truth can be circuitous, and in his case circumvented. But what is the truth? It seems Palipana ‘began to see as truth things that could only be guessed at. In no way did this feel to him like forgery or falsification’ (83).¹ Sareth understands his teacher’s frustrated reasoning about the truth, although he may not have agreed with it.

1 In *Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost*, Goldman sees a parallel between Palipana and Senerat Paranavitana, the first Sinhala commissioner of archaeology: ‘The real-life eminent Sri Lankan epigraphist’ who published an interpretation of inscriptional evidence that was used to legitimate the claim that the first Sinhalese king Vijaya, celebrated in the Mahavamsa for repeating the unification of the island first enacted by the Buddha, was not simply a hero, but a member of the Aryan race (Goldman, 2005:32). And his ‘research’ raised much controversy and one group saw this as ‘justification for Sinhalese domination’ (Goldman, 2005:33)

Palipana's fiction could well be the truth, but he was taking a leap of faith 'from treetop to treetop', performing his own miracles, 'walking on water':

The gesture, 'Palipana's gesture', was seen as a betrayal of the principles on which he had built his reputation. A forgery by a master always meant much more than mischief, it meant scorn (82).

In this instance, Palipana mocks scientific principles as well as the tendency to impose impregnable rules, the rules of the archaeology fraternity to which he himself had once belonged. Palipana had reverted to an Eastern way of thinking. He had cast aside rules in favour of the *idea*, simultaneously ridiculing the establishment. The *idea* in this instance is his representation of truth, stemming from an intricate network of suppositions. Palipana concludes that only the *idea* was permanent, evidence is not.

After his rejection by the archeological community (his betrayal of the scientific principle was so unacceptable that he was exposed and disgraced), Palipana retires to an ancient grove, favoured home of ascetics:

The rumour was that he was surviving in the remnants of a 'leaf hall'. With little that was permanent around him. This was in keeping with the sixth century sect of monks who lived under such strict principles that they rejected any religious decoration. They would adorn only one slab with carvings, then use it as a urinal stone. This was what they thought of graven images (84).

In this haven, Palipana weaves his own 'Eastern' truth. This is a truth where science is an unnecessary appendix and even the result of faulty thinking. The monks rejected anything less than what they felt was an instance of the truth, and their truth was only that which was reached by way of spiritual knowledge. The kind of knowledge that is considered by the West as scientific (science would have opted for the graven image) would not be considered valid or even remotely approaching the truth if it could not be proven spiritually. So, for the monks, truth is a spiritual quest.

Derrickson affirms that ‘The question of whether or not the truth is discoverable is asked and re-asked throughout the novel’ (Derrickson, 2004:140). Palipana explains his version of truth when he tells Anil that ‘most of the time in our world, truth is just an opinion’ (102). This is not so different from Sareth’s idea that truth ‘belongs as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for truth if truth were of any use’ (157). He thinks that ‘half the world, [] was being buried, the truth hidden by fear, while the past revealed itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush’ (156). Here, Ondaatje uses ‘a burning rhododendron bush’ to light the cave painting of a woman and child Sareth discovered with Palipana as an image of truth and beauty in contrast to war and violence.

Years ago he and Palipana entered unknown rock darknesses, lit a match and saw hints of colour. They went outside and cut branches off a rhododendron, and returned and set them on fire to illuminate the cave, smoke from the green wood acrid and filling the burning light (156).

The light of a burning branch serves to ‘illuminate the cave’ (156), perhaps also ‘illuminate’ it in a mystical manner as well as in a material sense. The synthesis of ‘acrid’ smell and visual ‘burning light’ in the cave stimulates sensory perceptions, adding to experiential awareness of the event. The truth, too, requires illumination, for it is an essentially ambiguous concept which resists definitive explication. In a Buddhist sense, when something is illuminated it means it is understood, if only for a brief moment, a ‘*dukkha-nupassana-nana*, [] the intuitive realization of suffering’ (Pandita, 1993:283). The suffering here is of the seemingly tranquil portrait of a woman and child. The burning branches of the rhododendron also remind one of Buddhist fire imagery, for the woman has, we are told later, ‘a muffled scream in her posture’ (156). As Kyser explains:

Fire, omnipresent in *The English Patient*, is one of Buddhism’s central images, as can be seen, for example, in the Pali Buddhist text Samyutta Nikaya (*Bikkhu*, 9).
...just as passion and aversion are linked for Buddhists as fires out of which suffering grows, so love and war – connected by the central concept of betrayal – are joined in Ondaatje’s novel. In the English patient’s jottings in his copy of

Herodotus these images come together: *'There are betrayals in war that are childlike compared with our human betrayals during peace... the heart is an organ of fire'* (Kyser, 2001:897).

It is evident that the imagery Ondaatje uses in *The English Patient* is carried through to *Anil's Ghost*, as shown by the burning rhododendron branches used to 'illuminate the cave' (156). Kyser goes on to say:

While a candle burning may be a conventional Western symbol for life consuming itself, these images take on a greater significance when we know that nirvana, the ultimate goal of Buddhism, literally means *the extinction of fire* and that 'the standard image is not of wind or some agent actively putting out a fire, but of a fire's going out through lack of fuel (Collins, 191)' (Kyser, 2001:898).

While Sareth is in the cave, he is aware of the many injustices taking place in the country, so 'passion and aversion are linked' as the truth and beauty of the mother and child are linked to the terror outside the cave. Heinous crimes were taking place all around him, as Ondaatje describes in the following passage.

The night interrogations, the vans in daylight picking up citizens at random. That man he had seen taken away on a bicycle. Mass disappearances at Surikanda, reports of mass graves at Ankumbura, mass graves at Akmeemana (156).

However much the burning branches of the 'rhododendron bush' light up the woman and child in the cave, allowing Sareth to see love and beauty in life, he is also aware of the hidden aspects of nature, the darkness that threatens this image. He wants to avoid this darkness, as to uncover it would be dangerous for himself and Anil. He muses:

But what would truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. Sareth had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign

press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter (156-7).

Sareth is afraid of discovering the truth. He is aware of the political repercussions. Derrickson seems to feel that the text's 'ongoing conversation with the possibility of discovering "the truth" is merely meant to invite questions about the seemingly apolitical nature of international-sponsored human rights investigations' (Derrickson, 2004:141). This may be true but in *Anil's Ghost* Ondaatje's 'voice' is not just aimed at human rights investigations but towards the individual quest for truth, considering the many references, not only to Buddhist thought, but also to Ondaatje's preoccupation with the nature of truth in relation to art and beauty.

Unlike Anil, Sareth is skeptical that truth solves problems, and thinks that it even has the reverse effect. He seems to wish, like the Buddhists, that the flame should be extinguished only 'through lack of fuel'. This suggests that if left alone the war will burn itself out and that intervention only adds fuel to the flame.

Returning to the woman and child in the cave painting, they appear to be representational of a love symbolized by the Christian mythology of the Madonna and child as well as being lit up by 'Buddhist fires out of which suffering grows'. By contrasting the woman and child painting with fire and war, Ondaatje balances love and war with 'the past reveal[ing] itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush' (p.156). This image fuses art and beauty with love and truth and juxtaposes it with horror and war. It also introduces the element of time with 'the past revealing itself' suggesting an eternal truth.

The cave painting also reminds one of the cave of swimmers in *The English Patient*, which is where Katherine, the love of Almasy's life, dies. It is a holy place. Almasy says, 'It is important to die in holy places. That was one of the secrets of the desert' (*The English Patient*, 1993:260). According to Emery, in her article 'Call Me by My name': Personal Identity and Possession in *The English Patient*, 'It was the only place Almasy believed God existed' and where he 'tried to make Katherine his holy place, by naming

her for his own'. Emery also calls it a 'moist' place, and feminine, 'a sort of hybrid between her moisture and Almas's dry heat' (Emery, 2000:210-213). The cave, therefore, represents warmth, protection from the outside world and being embraced by 'mother' earth in antithesis to the outside world of men and war.

In *Anil's Ghost*, Palipana's belief is that truth is malleable and impermanent, which is why he speaks of the 'ascendancy of the idea'. The *idea* stems from beginnings, it reaches far back into history, to the beginning of time, perhaps creation itself, whereas truth is more fractious and tends to depend on who is doing the interpreting and how consistent one wants to be. The concept of truth is irretrievably entwined with an *idea*, and the idea with the core of ideals that change over time.

Whether Western or Eastern, the debate with respect to truth is universal. Gandhi himself scorned consistency. When Anil reads both Gandhi and Sinatra's biographies, Ondaatje contrasts the two men as Western and Eastern icons. In relation to truth, Gandhi says, as quoted in Fischer's biography, 'consistency is hobgoblin' (Fischer, 1928:56), reflecting, although he may not have been aware of it, an Eastern paradox. Fischer goes on to say:

He had the rebel's courage to be true to himself today and different tomorrow. "My aim," [Gandhi] once wrote, is not to be consistent with my previous statement on a given question, but to be consistent with the truth as it may present itself to me at any given moment. The result is that I have grown from truth to truth..." (Fischer, 1928:56).

What is truth if there is more than one truth and truth changes? The accuracy of representation, then, must be transitory. Gandhi, however, also said, 'Truth is God':

After a while Gandhi began to write down his thoughts of God and the ideal conduct of man; these were later published in a little book called *Yeravda Mandir*. Mandir means temple. A jail where God is discussed and worshipped becomes a temple. "God is," Gandhi wrote. The word *satya* means "truth," and it derives

from *sat* which means “to be.” *Sat* also denoted God. Therefore, “Truth is God” and God is that which is. “He alone is,” Gandhi noted, for “nothing else I see merely through the sense can or will persist” (Fischer, 1928:108).

If truth simply *is*, then what *is not*? In the Buddhist religion there is no monotheistic god but there is a sense of a pervading truth. Both positive and negative truth ‘*is*’, hence truth, *satya*, is everywhere. Gandhi states, (*my italics*) that

There is an orderliness in the universe, there is an unalterable law governing everything and every being that exists or lives. It is not a blind law, for no blind law can govern the conduct of human beings... That law then which governs all life is God... I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around me is ever changing, ever dying, there is underlying all that change a living Power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates. That informing power or spirit is God... In the midst of death life persists, *in the midst of untruth truth persists*, in the midst of darkness light persists. Hence I gather that God is Life, Truth and Love. He is Love. He is the supreme God (Fischer, 1928:108).

The idea of truth becomes even more elusive and increasingly unknowable with the following statement:

“The safest course,” the Mahatma advised, is to believe in the moral government of the world and therefore in the supremacy of the moral law, the law of truth and love” (Fischer, 1928:108).

Only in an unreal world would there be no equivocation of what is truth. One government differs from the next and, as Gandhi previously ascertained, life is ever changing. Gandhi also said “The ideal of humanity in the West... is perhaps lower, but their practice of it is very much more thorough than ours. We rest content with a lofty ideal and are slow and lazy in its practice” (Fischer, 1928:125). This is particularly relevant when considering

the religious warfare in Sri Lanka where brothers could become enemies, faith is found in a homemade bomb and truth so skewed that it becomes irrelevant.

If, as Gandhi states, 'in the untruth of war truth persists' where in practical terms is it? Ondaatje has Sareth reflecting on this same issue:

Half the world, it felt, was being buried, the truth hidden by fear, while the past revealed itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush.

Anil would not understand this *old and accepted balance*. Sareth knew that for her the journey was getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. Sareth had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. There were dangers in handling truth to an unsafe city around you. As an archaeologist Sareth believed in truth as a principle. That is he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use (156-7) (*my italics*).

This '*old and accepted balance*' alludes to the faith that there is an underlying karmic law, inherent in eastern thought, that, ultimately, truth will prevail - if not in this lifetime then in another. Sareth sees truth differently from Anil, with more insight. He believes in 'truth as a principal' (157) but he also sees the combustible effects of uncovering truths. He sees, as well, an aspect of truth in something beautiful. For instance, he sees beauty in 'the rock carving of another century of a woman bending over her child' (157), suggesting the awareness of an ideal - a faith in life itself, however transient.

Palipana promotes the idea of the transience of physical creation but the '*ascendancy of the idea*', he suggests, is not as transient, so he values the idea more. He values the idea that the idea alone lasts and can transcend mortality, thus the ends of creativity are inferior to the thought that produced it. In other words, it is possible to create a sculpture, a work of art or a philosophy that will last for a long time but it is the reusable idea of

that creation that will last an eternity. This is regardless of whether the idea stems from fact or fiction, truth or untruth. With the re-usable idea in art, truth pervades by way of love and beauty. So even in times of war, love and beauty are evident. ‘A rock carving from another century of the woman bending over her child’ suggests motherly love. But this image becomes tinted with fear, as in ‘All the gestures with motherhood harnessed. A muffled scream in her posture’ (157). Ondaatje continues to highlight this contrast with:

The country existed in a rocking, self-burying motion. The disappearance of schoolboys, the death of lawyers by torture, the abduction of bodies from the Hokandramass grave. Murders in the Muthurawela marsh (157).

Ondaatje’s use of the word ‘rocking’ not only relates back to the mother with her child, to gesturing in grief, but to the movement between love and war and the ricocheting effect of contrasting emotions.

The *idea* can also be very different and result in different truths, as can be seen in the difference between Western and Eastern ideology. More specifically, this is evident in the differences of opinion regarding truth according to Anil and Sareth, or even Gamini. As Derrickson explains:

Anil’s scientific probing of these bones is said to reveal “permanent truths,” that hold no political bias because of their overarching applicability to both Western and Eastern culture: “same as for Colombo as for Troy.”

The problem with these “permanent truths,” however, is that they necessarily become conflated with the “truths” about the situation of Sri Lanka as a whole. Recorded in the formal papers of a UN enquiry, they become part of the metaphoric “American movie” or “British book” that Gamini speaks so vehemently against, a text that uses only part of the story to speak for history in full. In other words the move from scientific objectivity to rationales for political neutrality is undercut and revealed as ideologically charged (Derrickson, 2004:142).

This is not to say that Ondaatje sees no value in scientific principles. What he is saying is that it is necessary to think more holistically considering other cultures' principles. Not only this: he is saying that each individual is as important as the other but not necessarily in the way Derrickson postulates in the following observation:

The solution to the [Sri Lankan] crisis Ondaatje suggests, is to be found not in the ideals of liberal humanitarianism and not in the politically charged motives of a Western-based human rights discourse, but in the material world itself, in the simple show of compassion that travels from person to person, in the concrete manner in which the apprentice boy shows his care for Ananda, a hand of concern from the physical world, not a hand from the ideological world of global humanitarianism (Derrickson, 2004:149).

The 'concrete' behaviour, particularity of events, the values of quotidian experiences or 'being-in-the-world' evident in the novel does reveal the author's sense of compassion. However, Ondaatje does not condemn the 'ideals of liberal humanitarianism' although he may be a little cynical of them coming from 'politically charged motives'. Also, the word 'compassion' has connotations of empathy requiring a degree of 'sanity'. In war (and love) there does not appear to be much 'sanity'. His view is not a simplistic and impossible view in which everyone should hold hands, pray and be compassionate. What he is conveying is that even in times of war there are moments of compassion and understanding. What he is intimating is that even in war there is love, and the beauty of art and nature. He offers a variety of perspectives and contrasting beliefs.

Concerning love and beauty, Ondaatje writes that

Lovers who read stories or look at paintings about love do so supposedly for clarity. But the more confusing and anarchic the story, the more those caught in love will believe it. There are only a few great and trustworthy love drawings and in these works is an aspect that continues to remain unordered and private, no

matter how famous they become. They bring no sanity; give just a blue tormented light (150).

This passage describes the uncertainty of love and, at the same time, conveys every bit as much 'tormented light' as conflicts in war. Ondaatje presents alternative views such as passionate love fused with art, beauty and romantic ideals that are not neutral but emotional and fervent. War draws out the same fervency but with the opposite emotions of anger, fear and hatred, with the suggestion of heroism amidst the carnage. Sareth is a reluctant hero as he attempts to maintain a level of neutrality. He is not inclined towards piercing the veils of truth, whilst Anil and Gamini actively strive to combat the effects of war.

Gamini is the rational hero in the civil war; he cannot ignore it, which is what Sareth attempts to do, because he saw the worst aspects of it as a doctor.

Fifty yards away in emergency he (Gamini) had heard grown men scream for their mothers as they were dying. *'Wait for me!' 'I know you are here!'* This was when he stopped believing in man's role on earth' (119).

The devastation of war changes Gamini. He is no longer certain about the distinction between one person's truth and another's, and his conception of truth begins to falter: he 'turned away from every person who stood up for a war' (119). He distrusted those who stood up for 'the principle of one's land, or pride of ownership, or even personal rights. All those motives somehow ended up in the arms of careless power' (119). He decided that 'One was no worse and no better than the enemy' (119).² Caught up in the realism of war, his proximity paradoxically allows him the clarity of distance but not with the same far sightedness of Sareth.

² The concluding remark of a Human Rights report was that 'The Sri Lankan people have shown great popular support for an end to fighting, but it will take a lot to repair their faith in political forces' (*Human Rights Watch*, 1995:100).

The difference between Sareth and Gamini's attitudes towards war appears to be that Sareth avoids violence and distances himself from events altogether. Although he is aware of the events taking place, he feels there is a greater truth unfolding amidst the ignorance,³ whilst Gamini simply throws himself into trying to correct the resulting chaos. As a doctor, he immerses himself in the grief of his patients, deciding 'One was no worse and no better than the enemy' (119). This is his truth, but ultimately it is as 'distancing' as Sareth's approach to the violence surrounding them. The brothers, each in their own way, are heroic in sacrificing themselves for the greater good of their country.

Both brothers resist taking sides in the war because intuitively they recognize that to take sides would be applying one truth to the exclusion of another. They are equally against violence, but neither are they simplistically making a 'show of compassion that travels from person to person' (Derrickson, 2004:149). They distance themselves, Sareth by avoidance and Gamini by immersing himself in his work.

Concerning war, Buddhism is essentially a pacifist philosophy. From an ideological point of view it is a contradiction to fight for a cause, even for peace. The understanding is that one can practice peace only within oneself, each individual maintaining their own, inner peace. Both brothers find it difficult to live in the midst of war and find peace. They recognize that if every individual could maintain this peace, society would benefit as a whole, that the division of people into groups of differing character/traits causes friction and resentment. War incites 'passion', therefore, one cannot end war by warring, for, whoever is the loser will harbour resentment. In eastern philosophy, it then becomes inevitable that a war cannot be won. Yet war persists like a turning wheel. Each turn keeps the passion burning. Men's passions fuel war and it is the nature of men to be passionate. This is the reason why Buddhists encourage detachment and why the brothers instinctively struggle to remain detached.

³ Pandita lists two Kinds of Ignorance – Not seeing what is true, that is, universal impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and absence of inherent essence or self; and seeing what is not true, namely that objects and experiences possess permanence, happiness and inherent self-essence. (Pandita, 1993:274).

In *Anil's Ghost*, it is not that Ondaatje makes no clear demarcations between opposing forces. One senses that neither side knows the truth, yet the paradox is that both sides do know it but are incapable of putting it into practice. The truth is all around them. Ondaatje's neutrality is a considered neutrality. He is fully aware of the apparent equivocation of his characters, especially Sareth, but he is not silent. With great subtlety, he puts war into perspective using episodes from past civilizations, love, art and beauty to contrast it with present horrors to reach a greater, more encompassing truth. Unfortunately, as he sees it, 'most of the time in our world, truth is just an opinion' (102). He also sees individual truths as misconstructions or as blindness. There is a paradoxical side to the nature of this blindness, as will be shown later. Here, he says

Without the eyes there is not just blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence (99).

Perhaps as an artificer,⁴ Ondaatje attempts to paint the eyes in for his readers in a way in which they can discover a more apolitical 'unprovable truth' for themselves without simply relying on his own limiting perspective. In other words, he attempts to present the facts without reinterpreting them.

No one, of course, can ever know the full truth of anything. There are only moments of knowing. In the West, one can experience an 'epiphany' and, in the East, it would be termed enlightenment. According to Pandita:

We say that the mind is enveloped by darkness, and as soon as insight or wisdom arises, we say the light has come. The light reveals physical and mental phenomena so that the mind can see them clearly. It is as if you were in a dark room and were given a flashlight. You can begin to see what is present in the room. This image... called "investigation" in English and *dharma vicaya sambojhanga* in Pali (Pandita, 1993:103-104).

⁴ In an interview with Jon Pierce (1980), Ondaatje explains his view of the difference between artists/poets and artisans or writers, preferring the second because the former gives the impression of 'knowing more' (Pierce, 1980:143).

As for the western point of view, in spite of pervasive materialism, some of Sinatra's songs could be an indication of another, more quixotic side. *Come fly with me*, *Witchcraft*, and *I get a kick out of you* suggest a more Gatsby-like idealism, with the romantic notion that love conquers all. Nowhere does Ondaatje suggest that Western influences are erroneous. On the contrary, what he is suggesting is that there is a greater ideal to contemplate, and that we have a good deal to learn about the Eastern 'unprovable truth' as well as Western pragmatism. As Barbour says in his review of *Anil's Ghost*, it is a "'political novel" that refuses to play politics' (Barbour, 2002:188).

The emphasis on an 'unprovable truth' intimates a hazy perception of conflict, yet, at the same time, it encourages us to view the question of truth with a 'long distance gaze'. The 'unprovable truth' is also an idea, a construct, and one that can be examined from a higher philosophical stance.

According to Palipana, although the truth may not be discoverable there is evidence of an *ascendant* truth which may or may not be truth, and it is the *ascendancy of the idea* that is, for him, more important. He suggests that an ultimate truth 'might seem to shore up an image of a transcendent Buddhist faith that fuses past and present, and thereby transcends history' (Goldman, 2005: 34). For a better idea of what this ultimate or transcendent truth may be, the ascendancy of the *idea*, is worth exploring in detail.

Chapter Five

The ascendancy of the idea

the way astronomers
draw constellations for each other
in the markets of wisdom
(*Handwriting*, 2000:41)

As discussed in the previous chapter ‘The question of whether or not the truth is discoverable is asked and re-asked throughout the novel’ (Derrickson, 2004:140), but perhaps it is more the *idea* of truth that needs investigating. Whatever or whoever the idea belongs to, is a matter of perspective. Hence there are as many alternatives as there are people issuing these ideas. The very multiplicity or confusion of ideas entails a lack of clarity, but like Darwin’s survival of the fittest, the more successful the idea (not necessarily the best), the more it is perpetuated. An idea may, however, like truth, undergo a variety of evolutionary changes. Richard Dawkins explains this phenomenon more succinctly. If ‘idea’ is substituted for gene in the following quotation, the *ascendancy of an idea* becomes clearer.

Bad genes may pass through the sieve for a generation or two, perhaps because they have the luck to share a body with good genes. But you need more than luck to navigate successfully through a thousand genes in succession, one sieve under another. After a thousand successive generations, the genes that have made it through are likely to be good ones (Dawkins, 2004:3).

It may seem paradoxical using Western science to support elements of a largely Eastern philosophical overview (see Capra, 1982) but perhaps this may support how an integration of differing viewpoints could work.

Like a sieve, eastern philosophy has narrowed many truths down to four basic truths revolving around the idea of survival, the Four Noble Truths. The intrinsic truths of Buddhism are allocated numerical values (Pandita, 1991) so, given the 'Four' most important noble truths, the numerical value of *four* takes on an added religious significance.

The Four Noble Truths contain the idea that suffering is a given in life, that the cause of suffering is craving. In order to be freed of suffering (the cessation of suffering), one should practise the last noble truth, which is the path that leads to the cessation of suffering - the eightfold path (Pandita, 1991:97-99). The power of four is equated to the Buddhist idea of understanding or ascendancy over craving.

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje states that Palipana 'would discover among his students over the years only four dedicated protégés. Sareth was one of them' (80). The author's choice of 'four' is interesting. The *four* protégés, as well as the *four* skeletons Anil and Sareth are examining, may well allude to the Four Noble Truths (*ariya saccani*) in Buddhism.

The intimation is that each of Palipana's students had to learn to acknowledge or experience these truths. Palipana, as a teacher, would be assuming, to some extent, the role of a guru. A metaphorical use of the Four Noble Truths could allude to the skeletons as well, as they, in the process of dying, would have 'suffered' considerably before they reached their ignominious end. Each would have had to learn the lessons of the eightfold path otherwise they would be drawn back to life on earth. The eightfold path is the right view, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration (see Appendix). Thus, the play on *four* may have Buddhist overtones and the ascendancy of the idea could suggest transcendence from a Buddhist viewpoint.

Goldman suggests that 'in portraying Buddhism, Ondaatje gestures towards the ideals of transcendence, wholeness and unity' (Goldman, 2005:36), so here he may be implying that those that have achieved a level of wholeness, such as his students (or the skeletons), have transcended or are in the process of transcending suffering. The Four Noble Truths,

therefore, express a view of the world as the Buddhists see it and are an expression of the Eastern perspective. If, as Dawkins hypothesizes, ‘After a thousand successive generations, the genes that have made it through are likely to be good ones’ (Dawkins, 2004:3), perhaps, after generations of suffering those with successful genes could become sufficiently ascended to practice the Four Noble Truths.

Ondaatje’s emphasis on *four* could also hint at a number of other, admittedly tenuous ideas. Apart from the Four Noble Truths, for instance, the *four* could simultaneously allude to several other metaphorical or symbolic meanings, such as the four skeletons representing the four horsemen who come from four corners of the earth at the time of the apocalypse - a biblical reference involving the wrath of the angels. Alternatively, the four protégés and skeletons could relate to the Buddhist four guardian kings who reign over the first realm of desire.¹

Goldman sees in Ondaatje an ‘allegorical way of seeing’ in which ‘the work of the allegorist lies both in depriving the element of its function and in joining fragments to posit another meaning; the technical term here is ‘montage’ (Goldman, 2001:903).²

The ambiguity of symbolism or ‘montage’ is a way of keeping the impressions distant in spite of the clear, specific numerical delineation. In this and other ways Ondaatje does not simply fuse Eastern and Western percepts, he attempts to ‘re-inscribe’ them by providing a ‘numerous gaze’. This inclination is already evident in *The Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*. Kyser states:

¹ In the Desire realm of Tibetan Buddhism the lowest of the five migrations would be Hell Migration (thirty two hells) Of which in the sixth heaven of the Desire realm, the first is ‘the heaven of the four guardian kings’ (Thurman, 1997:301).

² She goes on to say ‘Ondaatje’s text not only relies on the production aesthetics of allegory, but also exploits the fact that allegory and, more specifically, montage stress the autonomy of the individual parts as opposed to the work as a whole. As Adorno argues, in montage the ‘negation of synthesis becomes a compositional principle’ (232). Generally speaking, the novel’s [*The English Patient*] emphasis on montage supports Benjamin’s view that, in certain historical periods when societies relation to absolutes become uncertain, ‘the production of “perfect” works of art is given over to epigones, and the creation of authentic works assumes the form of fragments or ruins’ (see Wolin 59)... [like *Anil’s Ghost*] the novel repeatedly uses images of destruction to convey the fragmentation of an organic whole, contributing to the work’s melancholy aura’ (Goldman, 2001.:904).

In the *Skin of the Lion*, Patrick initially turns to activism in his grief following Alice's death, setting fire to the Muskoka hotel. However, he does not follow through with his second planned act of sabotage, in which he intends to blow up the Toronto water filtration plant. Instead, he confronts its architect, R.C. Harris, and tells him Alice's story. This is an acknowledgement of the complicated nature of things – like Ondaatje, Patrick does not 'give an alternate but still simplified' response to his oppressors by answering violence by violence.

Instead, like the English Patient who offers 'numerous gazes' (*The English Patient*, 1993:118), the ideal storyteller offers an alternative to simplified responses, a cubist vision, and his revelation is similar to what Frye had in mind when he wrote of 'the way the world looks after the ego has disappeared.' By exploring the complex relationships between individuals' stories and the collective tale, and interweaving Eastern and biblical images, *The English Patient* provides a new vision, an alternative to the destructive apocalypse that Kip describes as 'this tremor of Western wisdom' (*The English Patient*, 1993:284) and a more complex way of seeing how to combat the reductive historical thinking that such 'wisdom' leads to... And, when a storyteller transmits such a vision in his tale, we need only recall that, as Salmon Rushdie says, 're-inscribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it' (Kyser, 2001:900).

The Four Guardian Kings in Buddhist literature who watch over the four cardinal directions of the world simply provide a different way of seeing; not unlike the biblical four horsemen of the apocalypse who come from the four corners of the earth (see Goldman, 2001, for an apocalyptic view of Ondaatje's texts) ³.

As in *The English Patient*, in *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje is offering 'numerous gazes'.

Cielo G. Festino (2006) in his article on *Handwriting (2000)*, comments on attempts to provide a broader view when he writes that Ondaatje

³ For instance, Goldman, referring to Walter Benjamin and *The English Patient*, states that 'for both Benjamin and Ondaatje, the second world war serves as a vantage point from which to survey humanity's precarious position in what both authors envision as an apocalyptic storm that threatens to erase all traces of the past' (Goldman, 2001:904).

Invites the reader to infer the lost meanings between the fragments he unearths, and so rewrites and recuperates the plenitude of the cultural past of his nation. Even so, the fragmentary nature of his poems [and texts] and the cultural and historical moments they portray simultaneously remind his reader of the impossibility of the enterprise to recuperate a cultural plenitude, with all its multicultural differences, but also, paradoxically, to represent the pressing need to do so. For it may be through persistent *attempts* to see the multimodal fragments of a culture as a nonhomogeneous whole that one may perceive the need to see how the parts are related to the whole, how cultural and racial fragments and differences are interconnected to a common history in spite of their superficial and apparent differences (Festino, 2006:145).

Ondaatje mixes both western and eastern ‘multimodal fragments of a culture’ in the form of mythological symbolism and religion quite happily. The example of the woman and child cave painting reminds us of the Madonna and Child. Similarly, the story Palipani relates to Sareth and Anil about the king in Sri Lankan mythology mentions ‘*thirty* pieces of iron’, perhaps an ironical allusion to Judas and the *thirty* pieces of silver.

Ondaatje uses Eastern and Western symbols. For example, biblical symbolism is used when the man Gunesena, found on the road by the truck, has nails in his palms ‘crucifying him to the tarmac’ (111). Here the assassins use Christian symbolism in a horrifying manner to get their terrible message broadcast. Ondaatje fuses ‘*thirty* amunu of seed’ for *thirty* pieces of silver. ‘The Jaipur limb was made for *thirty* pounds’ (118). There is the Buddhist heaven of *thirty-three* (Thurman, 1997:301). Sirissa climbs ‘one hundred and thirty two steps to the temple’. The suggestion could be that she has accomplished more than the necessary number of steps toward Buddhist ascension (101).

These are just a few examples of the proliferation of symbolism Ondaatje uses in his text to express a multitude of ideas. What is significant is that his use of symbolism and

metaphorical allusion adds different levels of meaning to his texts, providing ‘numerous gazes’, as well as a diverse wealth of artistic expression and poetry to his images.

The images also provide a sense of immediacy, we are actually able to visualize an event, beautiful or violent, a truth or untruth. For instance, if Ondaatje had said they had found some skeletons the effect would have been more generalized, less specific than saying they had discovered *four* skeletons or that Palipana had *four* protégés. The addition of *four* lends precision and therefore more clarity to the text, yet paradoxically leaves it more open to interpretation.

In *Anil’s Ghost* the four skeletons as well as Palipana’s four protégés are the custodians of a secret surrounding their untimely deaths. These are secrets Anil and Sareth are attempting to untangle. Palipana himself unearths secrets. He is

An epigraphist studying the specific style of a chisel-cut from the fourth century, then coming across an illegal story, one banned by kings and state and priests, in the interlinear texts... (105).

An ‘illegal story’ read between the lines could be an allusion not only to historical Sri Lankan conspiracies but also to past Christian conspiracies as well, of which, no doubt, there are many. That ‘these verses contain the darker proof’ (105), is as filled with intrigue as is the ghost in *Anil’s Ghost* and confirms that the truth may never be uncovered, but what is intimated is that out of these untruths a multiple of interpretations arise and a *new truth emerges*.

A text abundant with intrigue, half-truths and hidden promises bears the mark of a master craftsman. Ondaatje’s description of ‘the rock carving of another century of a woman bending over her child’ (157), like the enigmatic smile of da Vinci’s Mona Lisa (Wallace, 1973:140), the serene expression of the Madonna of the Rocks (Wallace, 1973:50), the colossal statue “Ananda” at Polonnaruwa (Smith *et al*), suggests a story. Similar to the motionless Christ figure hanging from a cross or the distant gaze of a Buddha, each story

represents its own particular truth or one person's vision. Ultimately it may only be the idea of these figures that lasts, rather than the figures themselves, as an expression of mankind in his ascendancy. Palipana's concept of *the ascendancy of the idea* therefore pertains to art as well as beauty.

All of the examples have connotations of peace and beauty, but this is only partly true. The reverse is also relevant. In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje's imagery contains numerous incidents of violence. It is also a novel about war. He provides both peaceful and violent imagery to contrast and offer different perspectives. The idea of violence does not exist in a vacuum but erupts out of a background of peace. The symbolism surrounding the *four* implies intrigue and suffering. The crucifying of Gunesena to the road is a violent image paradoxically fusing Christian faith with pain incurred by terrorism. The familiarization of ethics associated with Christianity and the crucifix such as love and forgiveness, is inverted to provide a scene of extreme violence. Bök refers to this violence in his article 'Destructive creation: The Politicization of Violence in the works of Michael Ondaatje'.

Ondaatje's infatuation with brutality may at first glance seem completely idiosyncratic; however, the violence in his work may also arise directly out of the postmodern milieu in which Ondaatje operates. Linda Hutcheon in *The Canadian Postmodern* suggests that postmodern literature disrupts any naturalized assumption that tries to efface its status as an ideological construct (12). Such disruptive impulses in postmodern writing actually embody a strategy of *ostranenie* – or “defamiliarization”, however, the unorthodox soon becomes *doxa*, a standard formula of shock tactics; consequently, more extreme strategies of defamiliarization are required to challenge reified structures. This “vicious circle” is violent, but not necessarily undesirable: the result is an expansion of discursive boundaries. Whatever has suffered violent marginalization because of oppressive ideology is in turn violently centralized (Bök, 1992:2).

Bök's Russian Formalist/Postmodern approach would or should see this strategy of defamiliarization as another indication of Ondaatje's precision as a writer. He takes an

old an accepted idea and inverts it to provide an even more startling image. This is another way in which Ondaatje plays with the *idea* of an image, not so much distancing it in this case, as providing another ‘gaze’. However, the sheer profusion of ideas lends both a sense of clarity and distance. An impression of clarity is conveyed in a more experiential manner to encourage the reader to engage more fully in the process of assimilating the contents of the text, and an impression of distance is created by providing diverse and often ambiguous links to add to the greater picture. Ultimately one idea gains ascendance true to the Buddhist notion of enlightenment where the diffusion of ideas merges into one. Diffusion becomes one reality, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

On the other hand, the diffused sense of the real and unreal, and the distance and clarity of the text, coincides with Foucault’s concept of formations, where there is a system of dispersion – when one can define regularity (Foucault 1995). In Ondaatje, a regularity can be perceived in the way in which facts are dispersed throughout the text, between objects, types of statement that exemplify concepts and thematic choices, shown, for instance, in the recurring theme of death and resurrection. Ondaatje himself states that

One of the metaphors [for *Anil’s Ghost*] was the burial and stealing of Buddhist statues, how they get stolen and buried, unearthed and resold. Like human life, a metaphor for human life (www.brainyquote.com).

Ondaatje’s mapping of individual differences, their rationalization and conceptual codes, the alienation of his characters, are all put under close scrutiny in *Anil’s Ghost*, the normative all susceptible to deviation until new surfaces appear. He does not limit but defines and gives status to subject and object without apparent bias. The discursive formation is defined if one can establish a group (Foucault, 1995). Ondaatje does this using numerous gazes, and, with the use of distance and clarity, a pattern emerges.

In order to recognize his ‘tricks of expression’ it is necessary to adopt a circular causality and identify the apparent emergence of mutually exclusive groups without modification

and attempt to distinguish the ‘more’ which Foucault speaks of when he states ‘It is the ‘more’ that we must reveal and describe’ (Foucault, 1995:49).

The formation of enunciated modalities – *who* is speaking in the Ondaatje texts, is complex. For instance, a chapter may begin with the appearance of author intervention and then mutate into the thoughts of the character. An example of this is when Anil considers the French novel *The Man in the Iron Mask*. Its initial metafictional obscurity coalesces to form a portrait of both Dumas’s hero and maybe Anil’s, considering the turn of her thoughts. The combination of possible author intervention, omniscient author, and Anil’s thoughts from a first person point of view is shown by the following excerpt:

We are often criminals in the eyes of the earth, not only for having committed crimes, but because we know that crimes have been committed.’
Words about a man buried forever in a prison. *El Hombre de la Masara de Hierro. The man in the Iron Mask*. Anil needed to comfort herself... She was working with a man efficient in his privacy... Maybe this was the only truth here... (54)

What initially began as a seemingly authorial voice melts and becomes Anil’s thoughts. It would require another dissertation to cover the versatility Ondaatje displays when moving from positions of ‘voice’.

Like Foucault’s ‘archaeology’ or theoretical ideology, Ondaatje’s protagonists are seekers, probers into the past in anticipation of the future. It is not a coincidence that they are interested in history and archaeology. Their past becomes enmeshed in their present and their futures; a cinematographic viewpoint where structure becomes dissolved and blurred into a framework equivalent to a world that is not structured by time. Interventions of flashbacks, immediacy, and flash-forwards are all part of the Ondaatje technique (although *Anil’s Ghost* is arguably one of the most straightforward or linear of his works). The concept of time becomes interrelated with ideas. As Foucault advises, ‘To analyse the formation of concepts, one must relate them neither to the horizon of

ideality, nor to the empirical progress of ideas' (Foucault, 1995:63). This implies a manipulation of time and events in such a manner that can only be managed by using distance and clarity.

One should not label Ondaatje's texts as simply post-colonialist because, as Cook explains, he 'moves beyond interpretation as a post-colonial literature of "resistance" to challenge traditional perceptions of "Self" and "Other," incorporating and transgressing boundaries in a way that invites interrogation from a transnational perspective' (Cook, 2005:6).⁵

Ondaatje's instinctual reaction to boundaries is that they must come down. Perhaps this is the outcome of a 'transnational perspective' but, more likely, it is a combination of reasons, one of them being that as a poet and a writer he strives to see the world from many different perspectives. In doing this, viewing the world from a more distant, aerial viewpoint or a close up microscopic viewpoint, he has seen that there are many different sides to a story when seen from alternating viewpoints. When these alternating viewpoints are viewed as 'discontinuities' (Foucault, 1995) the outcome is that these discontinuities merge and become fused. This is in keeping with the transcendental nature of living that stipulates that there are no boundaries, perhaps similar to the Buddhist notion of 'oneness', as described by Pandita:

Only by seeing the rapid arising and disappearance of phenomena can one be released from the delusion that things are permanent, solid and continuous (Pandita, 1993:60)

⁵ Cook goes on to say: The language of transnationalism, which Ondaatje speaks through Anil, incorporates the contradictions and paradoxes that are displayed in human and cultural diversity. Sophie A. McClennen suggests that "transnationalism renders the borders of a nation insignificant" (*The Dialectics of Exile* 25). Also Robert Gross considers there be a need for "transnationalist thinking" (384) in a world where "intellectually, people cross borders as they please" (390) and national identity is no longer seen as single and unified: he describes a global culture that becomes increasingly "a transnational *mélange*" (Cook, 2005:7).

In the process of providing multiple perspectives Ondaatje defamiliarizes his discourse while he scrutinizes and maps his characters' viewpoints, providing discontinuities that paradoxically merge and fuse to become a transcendental viewpoint embracing both distance and clarity. It is from this multiplicity of ideas that an ascendant idea emerges, a dominant new truth that is the outcome of blurring boundaries, as will be shown in the following chapter.

Chapter Six

Blurring the boundaries of conflict

They slept, famous, in palace courtyards
Then hid within the forests when they were hunted
For composing the arts of love and science
While there was war to celebrate
(*Handwriting*, 2000:23)

In *Anil's Ghost* (2001) there is a curious influence that diffuses the elements of terror and blurs the boundaries of conflict. When Ondaatje quotes David Denby (*Great Books*, 1996) saying '*The reason for war is war*' (43), he considers that one reason war persists is for financial gain. The text states that it was 'evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals' (43). This financial impetus enables wars to continue but there are other reasons. *Anil's Ghost* is a novel that attempts to understand the nature of war itself, to avoid assumptions such as human progress or dualistic concepts of good and evil.¹ Kyser maintains that

Ondaatje wants to challenge accepted narratives without reinscribing the dualism that made these narratives problematic to begin with, without simply reversing the 'good' and 'evil', the light and the dark (Kyser, 2001:892).

Western thought tends to be governed by dualistic concepts. To avoid reversing or reinscribing these concepts, Eastern mysticism provides an alternative way of thinking.

¹ Goldman explains that 'just as Ondaatje, in *Anil's Ghost*, shows himself suspicious of civilization and progress, Benjamin, in his writings – perhaps most eloquently in the "Theses" – argued that one of his era's prime evils, namely fascism, owes its success to humanity's stubborn faith in human progress because, in the name of progress, fascism's opponents 'treat it [fascism] as a historical norm' (*Illuminations*, 257). To correct this distorted and dangerous view, Benjamin advocates a radical re-evaluation of progress: 'The idea of progress must be based on the idea of catastrophe. That things have gone this far is the catastrophe. Catastrophe is not what threatens to occur at any given moment. Strinberg's conception: Hell is nothing that stands ahead of us – rather, this life in the present' ('Central Park', 50) (Goldman, 2001:906)

Fritjof Capra's explorations of this in *The Tao of Physics* explains the divide between Eastern and Western thought. He feels that with the deepening knowledge of physics and the material world, the connections with modern physics and Eastern Mysticism are becoming more apparent. He explains that

In contrast to the mechanistic Western view, the eastern view of the world is 'organic'. For the Eastern mystic, all things and events perceived by the senses are interrelated, connected, and are but different aspects or manifestations of the same ultimate reality. Our tendency to divide the perceived world into individual and separate things and to experience ourselves as isolated egos in this world is seen as an illusion which comes from our measuring and categorizing mentality. It is called *avidya*, or ignorance in Buddhist philosophy and is seen as the state of a disturbed mind which has to be overcome:

When the mind is disturbed, the multiplicity of things is produced, but
when the mind is quieted, the multiplicity of things disappears [Suzuki]
(Capra, 1982:29).

Ondaatje attempts to make 'the multiplicity of things' disappear in order to examine various aspects of a problem, particularly the dilemma of war. He attempts to blur the boundaries of conflict in an effort to view it from different angles, and he does this in several ways.

One way he accomplishes this is by showing that although there is a civil war raging, life goes on. He shows that war is simply part of the prevailing conditions of life. Between fearful moments, and, at the other end of the scale, passionate moments, there is a sense of spiritual calm. He creates this sense of peace by interspersing meditative episodes into the text. He weaves inspirational moments into the fabric of sometimes horrific scenes of death, or alternatively, erotic love scenes. For instance,

After the burnings and the burials, he [sailor] was on a wooden table washed by the moon. She walked back to the room, the glory of the music now gone.

There were nights when Cullis would lie beside her, barely touching her with the tip of his finger. He would move down the bed, kissing her brown hip, her hair, to the cave within her. (169)

The pattern becomes binding, similar to that of eastern mysticism where the ‘cosmos is seen as one inseparable reality – for ever in motion, alive, organic; spiritual and material at the same time’ (Capra, 1982:29).

In *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje uses the ritual of Anil bathing to show how the meditative process works in general; binding it to the other elements of the text, showing how she becomes one with nature. As she washes her hair and showers, ‘she could see, the out-of-focus world, beautiful’ (59); she sees a world which, like an impressionist painting, is softer, gentler and devoid of the surreal effects of an undercover war.

In theory, the Buddhist meditative practice enables one to transcend time and to experience the integration of all things. The practice may take any form. In the paragraph below, Anil meditatively performs her bathing ritual.

She undressed by the well, unstrapped her watch and got into the *diya reddha* cloth, and dropped the bucket into the depths. There was a hollow smash far below her. The bucket sank and filled. She jerked the rope so the bucket flew up, and caught the rope near the handle. Now she poured the cold water over herself and its glow entered her in a rush, refreshing her. Once more she dropped the bucket into the well and jerked it up and poured it over her hair and shoulders so the water billowed within the thin cloth onto her belly and legs. She understood how wells could become sacred. They combined sparse necessity and luxury. She would give away every earring she owned for an hour by a well. She repeated the mantra of gestures again and again. When she had finished she unwrapped the wet

cloth and stood naked in the wind and the last of the sunlight, then put on the dry sarong. She bent over and beat the water off her hair (90).

Anil's sensory awareness of everything around her is evident. Her absorption of the simple things which life and nature, 'the water, the wind and the last of the sunlight', have to offer her, and that depth of absorption, symbolized by the well, become mystical; a meditation in which she repeats 'the mantra of gestures again and again'. In this passage, Ondaatje conveys Anil's interrelationship with nature, which, as Capra claims, 'is essentially dynamic and contains time and change as essential features' (Capra, 1982:29). Time and change in nature is cyclical and regenerates; and in as much as things change seasonally, they also stay the same.

This respite from the conflict of war blurs the boundaries of its harsh reality. What this passage shows is that even in midst of conflict, conflicts of love and war, simply by communing with nature, by reaching within oneself in a form of meditation, one can find a sense of spirituality; a sense of the 'sacred'. Anil removes her watch, which could suggest a western obsession with timekeeping, and she covers herself with a '*diya reddha* cloth', indicating that she is switching characters, moving into the Eastern approach of attempting to slow time by way of contemplation. Ondaatje communicates the event in such a way that the reader can relive this contemplative mood.

Poetic imagery and myth are something of a language on their own. Capra also has something to offer as to how Eastern mysticism attempts to overcome the limitations of purely denotative language:

Several different ways have been developed in the East to deal with this problem. [the confines of language] Indian mysticism, and Hinduism in particular, clothes its statements in forms of myths, using metaphors and symbols, poetic images, similes and allegories. Mythical language is much less restricted by logic and common sense. It is full of magic and paradoxical situations, rich in suggestive images and never precise, and can thus convey the way in which mystics

experience reality much better than factual language. According to Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words' [*Hinduism and Buddhism*, Coomaraswamy] (Capra, 1982:51).

Ondaatje uses poetic language precisely, to describe certain incidents such as the similarities in the city of Colombo, past and present. Poetic imagery, metaphors and symbolism, as well as allusions to mythology and history, are used unerringly to draw the reader into the text. The mythological or historical aspect is sometimes only alluded to, such as in the phrase 'old legend' (107).

For example, in a description of Anil during her first days in Colombo, he juxtaposes the scene in the city 'full of people acknowledging the rain' (15), with a flashback to her past where her father and a woman sat in the rain 'to make sure the rain would keep coming down' (15). He repeats the auditory 'ducklike sound of the horns' of the *hajaj*, present for her now as well as in her past, as a way of linking and creating nostalgia. He does this along with the visual and tactile feelings of rain and the break in seasons.

The passing of time, the seasonal nature of life, using rain and water together with the hurried noises of 'horns' and '*hajaj*', not only stir her memories but also remind her of the closeness to rain and nature that her father shared with the people in the city. A sense of nostalgia is created, even for us, who may have had similar experiences to which we can relate.

Ondaatje uses sensory imagery such as the precise auditory echo of ducks quacking to describe the sound of the *hajaj* hooting, the tactile sensation of standing in the rain, and visual techniques to describe a bustling city, in order to recreate Anil's nostalgia. With this juxtaposition of past and present, together with the sensory effects, he blurs the boundaries of time, of the past, present and future. The word 'ducklike' not only conveys a distinct sound connecting the sound of a duck to the sound of the *hajaj*, but also creates strong visual imagery. The image of a duck in rain, linked to city bustle, simultaneously

connects and contrasts nature with civilization. Even in the city, there is a blurring of boundaries between nature and civilization.

Ondaatje uses the metaphor of a duck once more to convey a sense of history, of timelessness, in the description of how Palipani's niece prepared for his death (107). He states

'[Palipani] had once shown her runes, finding them even in his blindness, and their marginalia of ducks, for eternity. So she carved the outline of ducks on either side of his sentence. In the tank at Kaluddiya Pokuna the yardlong sentence still appears and disappears. It has already become an old legend' (107).

The imagery of the chiseled outline which 'appears and disappears' according to the level of the water, is a reflection of the timelessness of nature, using the ducks as a metaphor for migration and return. The fact that they have 'already become an old legend' propels the sentence, along with the ducks, into the future, fusing past, present and future. Any conflictual aspect of nature appears and disappears with the aspect of time. The mythology in this imagery is not stated but alluded to in the phrase 'old legend'. Sri Lanka (which means resplendent island) is rife with old legends that have become mythologized over time. A point of interest here is that the Egyptian name for Sri Lanka (previously Ceylon) was *Serendip* from which the word 'serendipity' arose. Sri Lanka is one of the oldest civilizations still intact, even after centuries of war.²

² Miscellaneous facts about Sri Lanka:

- The island of Sri Lanka existed as a country as far back as the 4th century BC.
- First female [monarch](#) in an Asian country, Queen Anula (47-42BC).
- World's leading exporter of [cinnamon](#); exported to Egypt as early as [1400 BC](#).
- The [Buddhist scriptures](#) were first committed to writing at Aluvihare in Sri Lanka.
- Its people were considered Demons by other empires in ancient times... Such is its outstanding record of achievements. Sri Lanka's King [Devanampiyatissa](#), now relegated to ancient history and undoubtedly mythologized by his people would be proud of its record in spite of its many wars.
- The tank at Kaluddiya Pokuna was part of a network of reservoirs which helped to make the Kings of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa rich until their decline in the thirteenth century. The kings, with their wealth helped to create artifacts of great beauty until, followed by their move south towards Kandy, Kurunegala and Kotte, they began commerce with the Portuguese. By 1619, the Portuguese had annexed the whole Island except for Kandy. It was only in 1815 that the British

Another way of blurring the boundaries of conflict is not to see conflict at all. Ondaatje makes metaphorical use of blindness to convey a sense of distancing life with its inevitable conflict, expressing a sense of spirituality. Palipana's blindness seems to make him more insightful, detaches him from conflict and makes him more caring towards his niece. Their shared love helps him overcome his disability until he no longer needs to see the world and all its conflicts. His blindness becomes a metaphor for purity of thought and emotion. Anil notices that if there were any 'politeness or kindness in the old man, it was only in his hand gestures and murmurs to Lakma' (106).

Blindness takes on other connotations. It is used as a form of detachment as well as to indicate a level of virtuous attainment. The eye painter is blindfolded before he ascends the ladder to paint the eyes of a Buddha statue. The blindfold is removed only when he is positioned to look at the reflection of the face in the mirror. He then paints the eyes in, enabling the transition from Bodhisattva (future Buddha) to Buddha. In Eastern tradition, the eyes are the windows to the soul. Once the eyes are painted, the statue assumes a state of godliness and none should look into those eyes (p.99). The enlightened statue of a Buddha appears to gaze into the distance. Palipani tells Anil:

'The eyes must be painted in the morning at five. The hour the Buddha attained enlightenment. The ceremonies therefore begin the night before, with recitations and decorations in the temple. Without the eyes, there is not just blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence' (99).

Ironically, though Palipani's own failing eyesight may suggest an increasing detachment from the world, and this would be an indication of the level of his spiritual attainment, another connotation may be that he is 'blind to reason', a process begun with his initial

finally overthrew the kingdom of Kandy, and for the first time the entire Island came under western power until 1947 when Ceylon was granted independence) (Colliers:1980). Kandy remains a popular tourist resort where history has become legend and stories of kings mythologized (Wikipedia 2006) (see also Appendix).

‘untruth’ as an educator. It is possible that, paradoxically, the truth may or may not have been the truth regarding his archaeological theory. This implies spiritual attainment regardless of whether he was right or wrong, as truth and untruth are one. Further, who is to say that Palipana’s truth is right or wrong? As Capra postulates, there are two types of knowledge:

Throughout history, it has been recognized that the human mind is capable of two kinds of knowledge, or two modes of consciousness, which have often been termed the rational and the intuitive, and have traditionally been associated with science and religion, respectively. In the West, the intuitive, religious type of knowledge is often devalued in favour of the rational, scientific knowledge, whereas the traditional Eastern attitude is in general just the opposite... Buddhists talk about relative and ‘absolute’ knowledge, or about ‘conditional truth’ and ‘transcendental truth’ (Capra, 1982:34).

Whatever the truth is, Palipana has distanced or disconnected himself from what the world sees. He has become impervious to the ways of the world, more particularly, the scientific ways of western reasoning. He has reverted to eastern thinking, relying more on his own instinctive cognitive processes and sense of truth. His blindness has become the physical manifestation of his changed spiritual outlook.

Sareth said this to [Anil] the night on Galle Face Green: ‘Palipana could move within archaeological sites as if they were his own historical homes from past lives – he was able to guess the existence of a water garden’s location, unearth it, reconstruct its banks, fill it with white lotus. He worked for years on the royal parks around Anuradhapura and Kandy. He’d take one imagined step and be in an earlier century. Standing in the Forest of Kings or at one of the rock structures in the western monasteries, he must have found it difficult to distinguish the present age from ancient times. The *season* was identifiable – temperature, rainfall, humidity, the odour of the grass, its burned colours. But that was all. Nothing else gave away an era.... So I can understand what he did. It was just the next step for

him – to eliminate the borders and categories, to find everything in one landscape, and to discover the story he hadn't seen before.

'Don't forget, he was going blind. In the last years of partial sight, he thought he finally saw the half-perceived interlinear texts. As letters and words began to disappear under his fingers and from his eyesight, he felt something else, the way those who are colour-blind are used to see through camouflage during war, to see the existing structure of the figure. He was living alone' (191).

The reference to 'half-perceived interlinear texts' (191) that lie hidden beneath the surface of what is seen implies that it takes the power of insight to get beyond ordinary sight. Blindness or partial blindness helps to block out what is obvious and thus less meaningful. The intrinsic value is the 'existing structure' of a situation. Consequently, to distance oneself from the situation ironically lends clarity in the same way that the 'colour-blind are used to see through camouflage during war' (191). It also blurs the boundaries of reality, ironically enabling one to 'see'.

Capra discusses this paradox in an explanation of enlightenment:

In Taoism, this notion of observation [looking inside oneself] is embodied in the name for Taoist temples, *kuan*, which originally meant 'to look'. Taoists thus regarded their temples as places of observation... and seeing is regarded as the basis of knowing in all Buddhist schools. The first item of the eightfold path, the Buddha's description for self-realization, is right seeing, followed by right knowing. D. Suzuki writes on this point:

The seeing plays the most important role in Buddhist epistemology, for seeing is the basis for knowing. Knowing is impossible without seeing; all knowledge has its origin in seeing. Knowledge and seeing are thus found generally united in Buddha's teaching. Buddhist philosophy therefore ultimately points to seeing reality as it is. Seeing is experiencing enlightenment. [Suzuki]

...The emphasis on seeing in mystical traditions should not be taken too literally, but has to be understood in a metaphorical sense, since the mystical experience of reality is an essentially non-sensory experience (Capra, 1982:43).

In a different context and in a more ambiguous allusion to what is seen, Ondaatje subtly conveys the complexity of Ananda. He hints at the duplicity of his character, using, perhaps unintentionally, arcane symbolism. Anil, alone with Ananda, finds him holding Sailor:

A small yellow leaf floated down and slipped into the skeleton's ribs and pulsed there.

She saw the two moons caught in the mirror of Ananda's glasses. It was a ramshackle pair – the lenses knitted onto the frame with wire and the stems wrapped in old cloth, rag really, so he could wipe or dry his fingers on them. Anil wished she could trade information with him, but she had long forgotten the subtleties of the language they had once shared. She would have told him what bone measurements meant in terms of posture and size. And he – God knows what insights he had (171).

The imagery is startlingly clear. The 'yellow leaf' suggests an aspect of nature that is fragile and changing, contrasting with the ribs of the skeleton, hard and unchanging, whilst the two moons reflected in a pair of glasses indicate there is more behind the glasses than is evident to the naked eye. The dual nature of the moons hints at duplicity.³

³ This is better explained with the symbolism of the tarot card thought to contain archetypal knowledge. It holds associations of which one may no longer be aware. According to A. E. Waite, an expert in arcane mysteries who lived at the turn of the twentieth century, the card in the tarot pack depicting the moon already contains a double significance. The following description of the 'moon' card XV111, with its accompanying features, helps to explain its significance (my italics).

i) The card represents life of the imagination apart from life of the spirit. The path between the towers is the issue into the unknown. [In the landscape beneath the moon] The dog and wolf are *the fears of the natural mind* in the presence of that place of exit, where there is only *reflected light* to guide it (Waite, 1978:140-142).

ii) The last reference is the key to another form of symbolism. The intellectual light is *a reflection and beyond it the unknown mystery* which it cannot shew forth. It *illuminates our animal nature*,

Ondaatje supports this imagery by linking the moon reflections with the word ‘ramshackle’, suggesting not only the broken nature of Ananda’s glasses but also that of his character. The glasses are not only mirroring the two moons, they are reflecting light, and beyond this light one cannot see the eyes.

The image of the moon as reflected light suggests a borrowing of light, or deception by feigning light. Thus, the moon presents a wealth of symbolism. The fact that there are two reflected moons suggests a dual level of intrigue. This is the portrait Ondaatje paints of Ananda, not forgetting that, like Ondaatje, Ananda is ‘an artificer’. What may lie simmering beneath the agitated mind of the artificer is doubly menacing. In one self-reflexive instant, Ondaatje portrays the devious nature of the artificer in an extended contextualization of the artist at work, weaving the elements together in an ‘undercover war’ (170), creating and destroying his protagonists as he does so.⁴

With only a few short sentences using ancient symbolism, ending with ‘God only knows what insights he had’ (171), Ondaatje conveys a plethora of information associated with sight or insight.

The suggestion that Ananda is a hidden enemy and is duplicitous in nature does not end here. In chapter three, the leading hypothesis was that Ananda is also a manifestation of the author/creator. This adds ancillary levels of interpretation, establishing the ‘interlinear texts’ of *Anil’s Ghost*, and further blurs the boundaries of conflict, as the conflict is not only confined to the characters and the obstacles they face in the civil war, but also

types of which are represented below – the dog, the wolf and that which comes up out of the deeps, the nameless and hideous tendency which is lower than the savage beast. It strives to attain manifestation, symbolized by crawling from the abyss of water to the land, but as a rule it sinks back whence it came. The face of the mind directs a calm gaze upon the *unrest below*; the dew of thought falls (Waite, 1978:140-142).

The sentence ‘*a reflection and beyond it the unknown mystery*’ describes its secrecy. Secrecy is often equated with the feminine persona as opposed to the masculine. That it ‘*illuminates our animal nature*’ alludes to the hidden, bestial nature of mankind or the darkness within, this is supported by the words ‘*unrest below*’, signifying turmoil and instability.

⁴ Waite explains the divinatory meanings of the moon more specifically when he says; ‘The Moon [represents] Hidden enemies, danger, calumny, darkness, terror, deception, occult forces, error (Waite, 1978:286). All elements that can be easily connected to ‘an undercover war’.

resides within the author as creator. The interrelationship of roles, along with the author, integrates the plot to such a degree that the roles become indistinguishable from each other. With this integration, the conflicts also become blurred because the sense is that history, like a novel, is fiction. This method of dissolving boundaries also has the dual purpose of integrating history with fiction in a typical postmodern way, as does the continual shifting of clear and distant images.

In a blurring of conflict one could presuppose a heightened level of conflict because of contrasting elements and because the nature of life is suffering. According to the four noble truths, suffering is already a given, it is a part of the cycle of life. Ondaatje's poetry describes, in a more compact way, the nature of this cycle, and how time itself blurs the boundaries of conflict.

To be buried in times of war,
in harsh weather, in the monsoon
of knives and stakes.

The stone and bronze gods carried
during a night rest of battle
between the sleeping camps
floated in catamarans down the coast
past Kalutara.

To be buried
for safety.

To bury, surrounded by flares,
large stone heads
during floods in the night.
Dragged from a temple
by one's own priests,
lifted onto palanquins,

covered with mud and straw.
Giving up the sacred
among themselves,
carrying the faith of a temple
during political crisis
away in their arms.

Hiding
the gestures of the Buddha.
Above ground, massacre and race.
A heart silenced.
The tongue removed.
The human body merged into burning tyre.
Mud glaring back
to a stare.

(‘Buried’. *Handwriting*, 2001:7)

Here, Ondaatje integrates war and spirituality. The first haiku-like verse expresses difficulty and movement but is followed by the contrasting ‘stone and bronze gods’ suggesting something static, solid and at rest, yet spiritual, with the use of the word ‘gods’.

In the first lines, even nature seems to be warring. The ‘monsoon’ of knives and stakes provides a wonderful cinematographic image of weapons raining down to the earth. The first image is one of movement and chaos, to be followed by the words ‘rest’, ‘sleeping’ and ‘floated’, suggesting something peaceful. Only the word ‘buried’ is in both stanzas and is repeated again in the third to emphasize how what is buried becomes exhumed.

The third stanza describes the ceremony of the burial. It is as though there has been some integration of the warring aspects. The words ‘flares’ and ‘floods’ are changed to a more intermediate language suppressing the initial violence, as, ‘giving up the sacred’, they ‘carry the faith’ away. This brief interlude of peace erupts back into war again in the

fourth stanza. 'Hiding the gestures of the Buddha' the war continues, but we are aware that the Buddha is still present although unseen. Images of torture aptly describe the horror of war once more. In this example, the juxtaposition of war and spirituality provides a seesawing effect of sharp imagery and adds clarity of perception to both.

The next section of the poem creates the distance which blurs the boundary of violence. The element of time is introduced and is woven into events.

750 AD the statue of a Samadhi Buddha
was carefully hidden, escaping war,
the treasure hunters, fifty-year feuds.
He was discovered by monks in 1968
sitting upright
buried in Anuradhapura earth,
eyes half closed, hands
in the gesture of meditation.

Pulled from the earth with ropes
into a surrounding world.
Pulled into heatwave, insect noise,
bathers splashing in tanks.

Bronze became bronze
around him,
colour became colour.

(‘Buried’. *Handwriting*, 2001:9)

The use of ancient historical facts, blended with more recent history, serves to detach the incidents from the present and adds a cyclical rationalization to war as being a recurring factor in human nature. The ‘Samadhi Buddha’ overrides the ‘fifty year feuds’. He is still ‘sitting upright’ in a ‘gesture of meditation’, proving his indestructibility. Pulled into the

present from his buried position, he is once more integrated with his surround. Elements such as 'heatwave', 'insect noise' and 'bathers splashing' become one with the Buddha. There is no longer conflict since 'bronze became bronze' and 'colour became colour'. The metaphorical use of the phrase 'bathers splashing' harks back to humanity's continued struggle for survival in the natural world.

Ondaatje's *swimmers* are once more 'splashing' their way through history in his recurring metaphor for the transience of life; his *leitmotif*. In this instance the 'splashing' is modulated, the 'heatwave' and 'insect noise' relieved by the implied coolness of water in tanks. Whatever the struggle, life goes on, and the conflict is blurred with time. Distance becomes clarity and clarity distance.

Chapter Seven

Fusing distance and clarity: Transience

‘Distance is always clearer. I no longer see words in focus. As if my soul is a blunt tooth... I will be able to understand the world only at arm’s length’
(*Handwriting*, 2001:55-56)

As seen in the last chapter, when Ondaatje blurs the boundaries of conflict, he is also blurring the boundaries of distance and clarity. The result is the fusion of these two concepts. He may ‘no longer see the words in focus’ (*Handwriting*, 2001:55 -56), but his understanding is sharper. It is this fusion of distance and clarity that enables him to see the world in a different light and from a different perspective.

Clarity implies closeness. When one looks at something closely, it is clearer than something seen from a distance. It also applies to what is lucid and to obtain clarity on a matter is to have understood an event or discourse. When clarity is achieved, an awareness of something that was originally uncertain becomes evident or when one achieves clarity on a subject a stage of enlightenment is realized. A not-so modern phenomenon is that there is no clarity when it comes to perspective. The following explanation of Nietzsche’s concept of ‘perspectivism’ emphasizes the relativity and ‘constructedness’ inherent to the idea of ‘truth’:

Perspectivism is the view that every ‘truth’ is an interpretation from some particular perspective. There is no neutral, all-comprehending, ‘god’s-eye view available (even for God). There are only perspectives. There is no world ‘in-itself,’ and even if there were such a world, we would not know it or even know of it (Solomon & Higgins, 2000:8).

Thus, to obtain clarity is, from the start, a nebulous procedure. Anil says to Sareth, “‘you like to remain cloudy, don’t you, Sareth, even to yourself.’” He replies “‘I don’t think clarity is necessarily truth. It’s simplicity, isn’t it?’” (259)

This premise is fundamental to the postmodern literary perspective, where there are many possible truths. For instance, Moore-Gilbert explains that

For Barthes, there is no such thing as the ‘sovereign subject’ of liberal humanism which can be fully expressed, represented, or known. In *The Grain of the Voice*, he states:

I don’t like the idea of a unitary subject, I prefer the play of a kaleidoscope: you give it a tap, and the little bits of coloured glass form a new pattern, (204)

It might be argued that Barthes develops this position purely from within the European traditions of philosophy (Moore-Gilbert, 2006:14).

Or, from a different, Derridian viewpoint, Cieta Festino writes

The texts that Ondaatje writes in his poems are visual, written, oral and performative. By putting them side by side in his text, in a Derridian fashion, he deconstructs the concept of logocentrism, as, in his own text, the written word will have no pre-eminence among the other types of writing. In turn, their juxtaposition makes them function as ‘multimodal texts’, i.e. ‘texts in which the verbal and visual modes closely interact’ (Menezes de Souza, 2003:40) and that, in turn, result in a ‘multimodal perspective’ on Sri Lankan culture. Ondaatje’s rewriting of these texts stands as an act of cultural translation (Festino, 2006:136).

More specifically, returning to *Anil's Ghost*, clarity results in the intelligibility of a formerly non-specific communication, and simplicity or clarity becomes subjective.

Whilst Gamini is at work, for example, he makes a heartrending discovery:

When he got to the third picture he recognized the wounds, the innocent ones. He left the reports where they were, went down one flight of stairs and ran along the corridor to the ward. It was unlocked. He began pulling the sheets off until he saw what he knew he would see. Ever since he had picked up the third photograph, all he could hear was his heart, its banging.

Gamini didn't know how long he stood there. There were seven bodies in the room. There were things he could do perhaps. He could see the acid burns, the twisted leg. He unlocked the cupboard that held the bandages, splints, disinfectant. He began washing the body's dark-brown markings with scrub lotion. He could heal his brother, set the left leg, deal with every wound as if he were alive, as if treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back into his life (287).

It is not until he writes 'he could heal his *brother*' (*my italics*) that the full implication of Gamini's distress is revealed. With sudden comprehension, the reader realizes that Sareth is dead.

The events leading up to this exposure provides the reader with a full appreciation of the horror of it from Gamini's perspective. Ondaatje does not say Gamini is shocked but instead shows this by precisely describing his actions, running along the corridor, pulling off the sheets. He provides a clear picture of Sareth's demise from Gamini's perspective but a removed one from the reader's perspective. Instead of describing the actual event of Sareth's death from an omniscient or third-person perspective, he reveals it through medical documentation, a procedure which is similar to the more drawn-out fashion in which facts are generally revealed in a reality, when, from a mass of general day-to-day events an incident becomes centralized.

Not many people have actually seen a murder being committed, and have to guess what actually took place. It is a more precise way of revealing information and the reader has already had described, in a variety of ways, murders being committed, for instance the death of a government official on the train. In this case, we have to visualize Sareth's death without knowing the facts. As we have come to know Sareth, his death happens unexpectedly and comes as more of a personal shock.

An awareness or insight is achieved when an event is seen with the reader's own visionary capabilities. Sareth's death is left to our imagination and therefore our perspective. The degree of clarity depends on our ability to imagine the event. The discernment of the subject properly uncovered or exposed using the reader's own emotions, therefore, encourages a more experiential change in the reader's sensibilities.

Another example of encouraging us to use our own imagination, thereby adding to our experience, occurs when the blindfolded man is abducted. The emotional nature of the event is expressed from Sareth's perspective. The precise description of the incident enables us to visualize it with clarity, yet forces us to reach our own conclusions. This is described below:

Sareth was speaking in the empty offices, but he looked around.

'I was in the south.... It was almost evening, the markets closed. Two men, insurgents I suppose, had caught a man. I don't know what he had done. Maybe he had betrayed them, maybe he had killed someone, or disobeyed an order, or not agreed quickly enough. In those days the justice of death came in at any level. I don't know if he was to be executed, or harassed or lectured at, or in the most unlikely scenario, forgiven. He was wearing a sarong, a white shirt, the long sleeves rolled up. His shirt hung outside the sarong. He had no shoes on. And he was blindfolded. They propped him up, made him sit awkwardly on the crossbar of a bicycle. One of the captors sat on the saddle, the one with the rifle stood by his side. When I saw them they were about to leave. The man could see nothing that was going on around him or where he would be going.

‘When they took off, the blindfolded man had to somehow hang on. One hand on the handle bars, but the other he had to put round the neck of his captor. It was this necessary intimacy that was disturbing. They wobbled off, the man with the rifle following on another bike.

‘It would have been easier if they had walked. But this felt in an odd way ceremonial. Perhaps a bike was a form of status for them and they wished to use it. Why transport a blindfolded victim on a bicycle? It made all life seem precarious. It made all of them more equal. Like drunk university students. The blindfolded man had to balance his body in tune with his possible killer. They cycled off and at the far end of the street, beyond the market buildings, they turned and disappeared. Of course the reason they did it that way was so none of us would forget it.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Nothing’ (155).

When Sareth says ‘insurgents I suppose’, the suggestion is that there is no sure evidence who the assailants are, let alone the eventual fate of the victim. The words ‘drunk’ and ‘wobbled’ add a sense of hilarity to an otherwise macabre scene, rendering it even more ghoulish. That it was ‘almost evening’ in a market street before witnesses – that a man could be abducted and no one move to assist him – is an indication of the level of fear aroused by those two ‘captors’ with one gun.

The graphic description of this abduction down to the smallest details – the ‘shirt hung outside the sarong’, the ‘no shoes’, and the ‘One hand on the handle bars’ – provides us with some insight into how terrorist tactics succeed. What actually happened to the victim is not as important as the effect it has on the imagination of the bystanders. Killing one person has very little effect on a war, but instilling fear in many can subjugate a much larger population and keep people silent for fear of reprisal.

When the victim puts one hand round the neck of his captor, ‘this necessary intimacy’ implies betrayal of another kind. To harm someone that the oppressor has no contact with

is somehow different from harming someone who has touched you, who in some way has become human through this intimacy. The victim is no longer some conceptual idea of the enemy or a statistic. He is real. It makes the deed more inhumane, dirtier, therefore more terrible. The violence in the text, although fused with intimacy of a kind, is still very graphic. As Bök, says, Ondaatje ‘does stress the importance of exposing violence, especially the kind that official history tries to ignore’ (Bök, 1992:122) ¹

An overriding fear of violence affects most of the characters. Anil appears to be fully aware of just how dangerous the civil war in Sri Lanka really is; she reflects, ‘*You’re six hours away from Colombo and you’re whispering think about that*’ (54). Also, Skanda (a surgeon) tells Anil ‘the important thing is to be able to live in a place or a situation where you use your sixth sense all the time’ (231). Yet, she still does not appear to fully understand how complicated and dangerous the conflict is in spite of warnings from Sareth.

Her naïveté to some extent results in his death. Her ignorance regarding just how swift reprisals can be was not because she had not been warned or for lack of evidence around her. Her own participation in Sareth’s death was due to a single-minded endeavour to get her evidence with perhaps a touch of the shortsighted ‘it won’t happen to us’ syndrome. However, it is always easier in retrospect to look back on a situation and feel it could have been avoided. It is only with distance that Anil is afforded this clarity.

Anil also seems to think that uncovering the truth brushes away the power of the perpetrators responsible for crime. She says to Sareth, ‘secrets turn powerless in the open air’. Sareth does not agree with this. He replies, ‘political secrets are not powerless in any form’ (259). This shows that while Anil feels that shedding light on a problem provides clarity and dissolves the problem and can ‘make them evaporate’ (259), Sareth sees a less clear picture. He says ‘it’s in character and mood... for the living it is the truth’ (259).

¹ Bök continues: ‘While Ondaatje has always emphasized that artistic innovation does not occur without some act of violent intensity, of extreme defamiliarization, he no longer appears to value such intensity purely for its own sake or for its privileged ability to energize a collective, social vision that resists specific forms of ideological authority’ (Bök, 1992:122).

His awareness of just how dangerous the situation really is appears very much more astute than Anil's, even if less clear and ill defined than Anil's notions.

What Ondaatje is conveying is that the West intervenes on a superficial level trying to put things straight (like Anil does), and then leaves, not seeing the grey areas as Sareth does. As Gamini says of the generalized Western author, 'the American or Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him... So the war, to all purposes, is over' (285). They (the West) leave, in their wake, the same situation if not worse, as shown by the outcome of Sareth's death. Ondaatje sees this as meddling, done without sufficient comprehension of the situation, or the nature of the war. He implies that the meddling only serves to prolong the war, helping gun-runners to line their pockets, as when he says it is 'A war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners' (43). He states: 'It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals (43).

One feels he views this cynically as in 'this tremor of Western wisdom' (*The English Patient*, 1993:284). Ultimately, Ondaatje's perception on the Sri Lankan war appears to be that the war needs to be analysed with greater clarity of vision, taking into consideration the multiplicity of perspectives. With *Anil's Ghost*, he attempts to shed some light on the subject but is aware, like other Western authors, he is in the enviable position of being able to pack up and go home.

Violence aside, Ondaatje achieves clarity with the use of vivid imagery. Establishing clarity can prompt an epiphany, a brilliance or luminosity of knowledge. This is best observed in his poetry. The following poem titled 'Driving with Dominic / in the Southern Province / We See Hints of the Circus' takes one brief episode from life, as seen from a passing car.

The tattered Hungarian Tent

A man washing a trumpet
At a roadside tap

Children in the trees

One falling

Into the grip of another

(Handwriting, 2001:54).

Within a few short lines the poem describes a tent, a man with a trumpet, and children to express the transience of life. Like the imagery of the blindfolded man in the process of being abducted, it expresses a brief moment in time with haiku-like clarity and intensity.

The incident relates to every passing event ever witnessed from a car. It is only a glimpse, but it is a luminous glimpse capturing a moment as a camera catches a moment of life. That the man and children belong to a circus is used cleverly, to express the nature of life itself, with its comedic qualities. Shakespeare would have put it differently, that 'all the world is a stage...'. Buddhists, as well, would probably agree with this sentiment. The metaphorical wheel of life turns when a circus packs up overnight to move to another town, or when a play, where each character 'struts' his role upon the stage, comes to an end. As a spectator, given objectivity and distance, a glimpse of clarity increases knowledge and awareness of how small the roles enacted are when compared to the vast sweep of history.

Ondaatje is perhaps also exploring this sense of smallness maybe even purposelessness with regard to himself, the Western author, when he has Gamini say to Anil:

The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit' (287).

Having imparted his own perspective and brand of clarity on the subject, Ondaatje is suggesting that he is simply an onlooker and all there is left to do is to 'go home'. He has presented the facts as he sees them, and perhaps some moments of clarity from the 'tired hero', but he is aware that glimpses of clarity or truth will not change history when he says 'it's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing'. This self-reflexive insight could reveal how he sees himself as the author and how powerless he feels, or rather the fruitlessness of effort when it comes to getting his ideas across. The war may be over for the writer (like himself), but he is aware it is not over for the participants.

He may also have expressed his perception of the writer's role in the poem 'Late Movies with Skyler':

In the movies of my childhood the heroes
after skilled swordplay and moral victory
leave with absolutely nothing
to do for the rest of their lives.

(The Cinnamon Peeler, 1959:74)

Ondaatje's recollection of his movie heroes could be a lighthearted, tongue-in-cheek view of his own achievements as a writer. He is heroic with 'skilled swordplay and moral victory' and yet he has a sense of nothing left to do, indicating a degree of purposelessness and detachment. He can see life objectively, and this holistic clarity demonstrates a sense of alienation - an aspect common to most individuals at some point in their lives, particularly writers and poets.

The interrelationship between objectivity, subjectivity and clarity is therefore complex and often ironic. The search for clarity becomes the odd fluctuation between the two, sometimes 'bowing' with head to the ground studying the miniscule aspects of life from a close-up, more subjective viewpoint, and sometimes from a distance, trying to gain an

aerial or more objective view of a situation. This results in the odd metaphorical gait of ‘bowing and leaping’, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter eight.

In Ondaatje’s shifting perspectives the fluidity and ambiguities of language underlying the shift from modern experimentalism to postmodern and postcolonial romanticism are cinematographic in effect. Contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, excess and short-circuiting in order to make up a whole, culminates in a self-reflexive, discursive analysis of the creative impulse as he attempts to ‘freeze this moment’.

When situations are viewed from a distance they are generally viewed from a more objective viewpoint. Authorial objectivity, for instance, is often sustained with the use of the third person or omniscient perspective and the ‘voice’ behind the text remains detached.

Other methods are available to the author. In a postmodern text, apart from a non-sequential narrative using flashbacks or flash-forwards, the text may also contain snippets from other sources. It is a method of ‘distancing’, in the sense of removing the reader temporally from the story. Interspersing the text with snippets of information provides a *collage* effect and momentarily takes one out of the story itself.

Ondaatje provides a catalogue of phenomena in *The English Patient* with his listing of winds over the desert, quoting from Hassanein Bey’s article describing sandstorms, *Through Kufra to Darfur* (1924):

There is a whirlwind in southern Morocco, the *aajej*, against which the fellahin defend themselves with knives. There is the *africo*, which has at times reached the city of Rome. The *alm*, a fall wind out of Yugoslavia. The *arfi*, also christened *aref* or *rifi*, which scorches with numerous tongues. These are permanent winds that live in the present tense.

There are other, less constant winds that change direction, that can knock down a horse and rider and realign themselves anticlockwise. The *bist roz* leaps

into Afghanistan for 170 days – burying villages. There is the hot, dry *ghibli* from Tunis, which rolls and rolls and produces a nervous condition. The *haboob* – a Sudan dust storm that dresses in bright yellow walls a thousand metres high and is followed by rain. The *harmattan*, which blows and eventually drowns itself into the Atlantic. Imbat, a sea breeze in North Africa. Some winds that just sigh towards the sky. Night dust storms that come with the cold. The *khamsin*, a dust in Egypt from March to May, named after the Arabic word for “fifty,” blooming for fifty days – the ninth plague of Egypt. The *datoo* out of Gibraltar which carries fragrance.

There is also the ***, the secret wind of the desert, whose name was erased by a king after his son died within it. And the *nafhat* – a blast out of Arabia. The *mezzar-ifoullousen* – a violent and cold south westerly known to the Berbers as “that which plucks the fowls.” The *beshabar*, a black and dry north easterly out of the Caucasus, “black wind.” The *Samiel* from Turkey, “poison and wind,” used often in battle As well as the other “poison winds,” the *simoon*, of North Africa, and the *solano*, whose dust plucks off rare petals, causing giddiness (*The English Patient*, 1993:16).

In *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje launches into a geological and meteorological description of Sri Lanka, including birds and reptiles – listings from an atlas. ‘*The National Atlas of Sri Lanka has seventy-three versions of the island...*’ (39) (printed in italics).

The geological map reveals the peat in the Muthuajawela swamp south of Negombo, coral along the coast from Ambalangoda to Dondra Head, pearl banks offshore in the Gulf of Mannar. Under the skin of the earth are even older settlements of mica, zircon, thorianite, pegmatite, arkose, topaz, terra rossa limetone, dolomite marble. Graphite near Paragoda, green marble at Katupita and Ginigalpelessa. Black shale at Andigama. Kaolin, or china clay, at Boralessamuwa. Plumbago graphite – veins and flakes of it – graphite of the greatest purity (ninety seven percent carbon), which would be mined in Sri Lanka

for one hundred and sixty years, especially during the world wars, six thousand pits around the country the main mines at Bogala, Kahatagaha and Kolongaha.

Another page reveals just bird life. The twenty species of bird out of the four hundred native to Sri Lanka, such as the blue magpie, the Indian blue chat, the six families of the bulbul, the pied ground thrush with its fading hoot, the teal, the shoveller, 'false vampires,' pin tail snipes, Indian coursers, pale harriers in the clouds (39).

Mapping a country generally means demarcating borders, labelling cities, towns, and rivers, but here *'there are pages of isobars and altitudes. There are no city names... There are no river names. No depiction of human life'* (40). It is a portrait of the island from a distance with the people removed, where only nature is examined, *'the green pit viper palo-polanga, which in daylight, when it cannot see well, attacks blindly, leaping to where it thinks humans are, fangs bared like a dog, leaping again and again towards a now hushed and fearful quietness'* (40). It is as though Ondaatje is providing a glimpse of nature as it was before humans existed, and most likely when humans cease to exist. He is putting humanity's life on earth in perspective. Humanity, he implies, has followed the Darwinian principle where the fittest survive by becoming increasingly advanced, but in time its tenure will end.

It is also a cyclical view of the rise and fall of nations and of civilizations. Nature, like *'the green pit viper'*, leaps to *'a now hushed and fearful quietness'* in the absence of humans. The choice of this snippet provides a warning. In other words, if one can distance oneself far enough in order to see the bigger picture, it is possible to see the danger that humans are imposing on the world by their behaviour. It is a lesson.

Ondaatje follows this with a contrasting list – records of missing persons. Recorded are the names, dates and time of disappearance with the approximate place of the last sighting and *'fragments of collected information'* (42). Small details like the colour of a person's shirt could lead to the victim's identification. The informative records provide part of the pastiche Ondaatje pieces together in addition to snippets of what he terms

'surreal' incidents, such as 'the warden of an orphanage who reported cases of annihilation was jailed...' (42). He concludes:

It was a Hundred Years' War with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners. It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals. *'The reason for war was war'* (311).

His point becomes clearer: *the reason for war was war*. In other words, this senseless behaviour ensures a clear-cut path towards the disappearance of yet another civilization, perhaps to be uncovered centuries in the future in further archaeological excavations. It is a quiet warning, however, because it appears inevitable that, as Palipana says, 'nothing lasts' (12) anyway.

Fusing distance and clarity, in a Buddhist cave temple where *'the panorama of Bodhisattvas – their twenty four rebirths – were cut out of the walls with axes and saws, the edges red, suggesting the wounds incision'* (12), an image is provided of battles and blood over a great period of time: *'twenty four rebirths'*. The crime is not only against humanity, it is also against art: the statues are lost or destroyed. Ondaatje feels that *'This was the place of a complete crime'* (12). It is also a reminder of the transience of art and beauty and life itself, where the poet can 'never relax his self-control' and where Ondaatje, as Bök points out, 'in effect receives critical acclaim for his ability to stylize violence, to endow it with aesthetic integrity through both technical precision and emotional detachment' (Bök, 1992:110).²

² Bök goes on to say 'As Ondaatje emphasizes to Kareda in 1983; "Writing is trying to make order, to understand something about yourself. Orderless situations are, for me, the most interesting things, and I tend to write about the finding out of order" (49). Admittedly, Ondaatje has always been fascinated by sustaining the delicate equilibrium between order and chaos in art, an equilibrium vulnerable to the "one altered move"; however, his earlier works suggest that any attempt to achieve this unstable balance is self-justifying, while his later works begin to reevaluate the autotelic nature of such an aesthetic. Whereas his earlier works emphasize the chaotic variable in the artistic equation, his later works begin to emphasize the ordered variable in the artistic equation' (Bök, 1992:116).

The juxtaposition of the crimes against art and humans, together with the use of the personification of the broken sculpture, 'the wounds incision' on temples, suggests a link between beauty and bloodthirstiness. It implies that man can be creative in many ways. Just as beauty can be hewn by axes and saws, so can destruction smash what has been created; one nullifies the other. Palipana tells his archaeology students that the '*ascendancy of the idea*' [is] *often the only survivor,*' and stresses that '*nothing lasts*' (12). In other words, life is temporal, and men destroy themselves, each other, their own creations and time does the rest.

In 'The Distance of a Shout', Ondaatje writes about the interrelationship between violence, beauty and the effects of time.

The Distance of a Shout

We lived on the medieval coast
south of warrior kingdoms
during the ancient age of the winds
as they drove all things before them.

Monks from the north came
down our streams floating - that was
the year no one ate river fish.

There was no book of the forest,
no book of the sea, but these
are the places people died.

Handwriting occurred on waves,
on leaves, the scripts of smoke,
a sign on a bridge along the Mahweli River.

A gradual acceptance of this new language.

(*Handwriting*, 2000:6)

The poem is about how *distance* is written into nature. The lines ‘There was no book of the forest, / no book of the sea, but these / are the places people died’ intimate that books, places and even memories may be destroyed but nature does not forget. It will be shown (116) that clarity evolves out of distance, these past-histories, with the ‘gradual acceptance of this new language’. The use of the word ‘handwriting’ juxtaposes nature with human histories, as in ‘Handwriting occurred on waves, / on leaves, the scripts of smoke’ (ll. 11-12).

The use of the word ‘handwriting’ also indicates expertise on a human level as well as that of nature. Humans can be skilful, write beautiful ‘scripts’, write ‘books’ as well as be ‘warriors’, yet everything they do is transient. Nature takes care of any human endeavour, but nature also takes care that ‘a new language evolves’.

Similarly, in the Buddhist cave temple where ‘*the panorama of Bodhisattvas*’ are cut out of the walls (12), art and beauty were combined in the attempt to craft immortal works. The devastation of art where human efforts have been nullified can be compared to the mortality of humanity. Yet, the *Bodhisattvas* represent a different form of handwriting; not scripts, or books or art or even warriors rewriting history, but that which strives to attain immortality.

The Bodhisattvas are considered royalty in the East, so Ondaatje adds a touch of humour when he concludes that the remains of the destroyed statues either lost or residing in museums in the West are ‘*The Royal Afterlife*’ (12). This ironic twist to the so-called immortality of the great can be likened to Shelley’s poem *Ozymandias* where all that remains of a shattered sculpture are two trunkless legs and part of a face, along with the inscription “‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye mighty. And despair!’” This poem simply illustrates the arrogance of humans in thinking that it is possible to create something that can transcend the ravages of time. Yet there is a doubly

ironic feature in that Ozymandias does still survive, for a while longer, and in a different manner, purely owing to Shelley's efforts to ridicule him, just as the ruined Bodhisattvas survive, albeit scattered all over the globe (12).

Thus, both Ozymandias and the Bodhisattvas have endured in new and different forms; a new 'language' can be constructed round them. Nature's handwriting has decreed a different role and only the concept survives.

With a Buddha statue, it is only on completion, when it is thought to have become so radiant with beauty, that it becomes Buddha and at one with nature. It becomes invested with the divinity of beauty:

So these stone bodies rising out of the earth, their faces high in the sky, often were the only human aspect a farmer would witness in his landscape during the day. They gazed over the stillness, over the buzz-scream of the cicadas which were invisible in the parched grass. They brought a permanence to brief lives (299).

Humans appear to be continually striving for permanence. Perhaps this is why history is so important and heroes or great men and women from the past are still revered.

Whereas in *The English Patient* Herodotus is the link for Almásy between the distant past and the present, in *Anil's Ghost* Archilochus (11), the soldier poet, is the link for Anil. This 'artificer' is a voice from the past, a 'voice' coming down through the centuries in lines of poetry. The retention of words or deeds appears to provide a sense of permanence, and yet also serves to remind us of our own transience.

This sense of transience is captured just as poetically in Ondaatje's own poem 'Step', with the 'disintegration' of a monk, juxtaposed with the nostalgia of 'the last hours' of a 'lazy lunch' and 'sleeping together'. It is about endings.

The ceremonial funeral structure of a monk
made up of thambali palms, white cloth

is only a vessel, disintegrates

completely as his life.

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.

He continues with the mourners' ceremony expressing their acceptance as they take each step, 'thought focused / on this step, then this step'.

On the morning of a full moon
in a forest monastery
thirty women in white
meditate on the precepts of the day
until darkness.

They walk those abstract paths
their complete heart
their burning thought focused
on this step, then this step.

Then he introduces some sense of permanence with the Buddhas as they ‘face out to each horizon’, suggesting that the realization of ‘holy seven-storey ambitions’ may not be unattainable.

In the red brick dusk
of the Sacred Quadrangle,
among holy seven-storey ambitions
where the four Buddhas
of Polonnaruwa
face out to each horizon,
is a lotus pavilion.

Taller than a man
nine lotus stalks of stone
stand solitary in the grass,
pillars that once supported
the floor of another level.

(The sensuous stalk
the sacred flower)

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.

(‘Step’. *Handwriting*, 2000:69)

When he writes ‘physical yearning’ became ‘devotional’, that ‘though it is no longer there’, he felt he had achieved an instant ‘where there was worship, lighter air’, suggesting that one can look back on moments ‘where there was worship’ with greater clarity, given the distance of time.

Worship, spirituality and the sense of distance are equated and correlate with the Buddhist theme of detachment. In *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje uses the Buddhist statue to convey a sense of ‘worship’ or spirituality, with the completion of Ananda’s eye-painting:

soon, though, there would be the evolving moment when the eyes, reflected in the mirror, would see him, fall into him. The first and last look given to someone so close. After this hour the statue would be able to witness figures only from a great distance (306).

Another entirely different but fascinating illustration of the correlation between distance and detachment is the following excerpt below from ‘The Story’. It describes the process of detachment during which memories of former lives are ‘erased’.

For his first forty days a child
is given dreams of previous lives.
Journeys, winding paths,
a hundred small lessons
and then the past is erased.

(*Handwriting*, 2000:60)

The Buddhist belief is that when a child reincarnates, within forty days he loses all memory of his past incarnations. Distancing here, therefore, would also appear to be a way of detaching and healing after having learned ‘a hundred small lessons’. Unless one has become sufficiently detached from past *kamma* it is necessary to undergo the ‘vicious cycle of *samsāra*’³ (Pandita, 1991:226) and the process of reincarnating.

Thus, distance and clarity, from the aspect of detachment, not only benefits the process of enlightenment with its *fusion*, but also is desirable as a release from the ‘vicious cycle of *samsāra*’.

Pandita goes on to explain that ‘careful attention in walking meditation shatters the perpetuating *dhammas*, bringing us closer to freedom’. He adds, ‘You can see that noting the lifting of the foot has incredible possibilities!’ (Pandita, 1991:20). ‘Step’ (*Handwriting*, 2000:69) is a meditative poem on stepping, *pas de pas*, but perhaps this is too slow for Ondaatje, given his Western influences, which may be why towards the end of *Handwriting*, he sees himself more inclined towards ‘leaping and bowing’ (*Handwriting*, 2000:74).

³ ‘the cycle of craving and suffering which is caused by ignorance of ultimate truth’ (Pandita, 1991:20)

Chapter Eight

Leaping and bowing

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.

(*Handwriting*, 2000:74)

In the poem ‘Walking to Bellrock’, Ondaatje writes, ‘Rivers are a place for philosophy’ (*The Cinnamon Peeler*, 1989:62). This statement demonstrates the importance nature holds for him. Nature is the only enduring ‘truth’, which is why it is a ‘place for philosophy’. Without nature humanity could not exist. His philosophy, therefore, appears to embody the cyclical pattern of nature. It is a Buddhist philosophy of transience and incorporates both distance and clarity. An example of a recurring metaphor for the interaction of man and nature in his texts is, as previously discussed, the imagery of individuals swimming. This aspect of Ondaatje’s texts is often overlooked. The concept of nature in general is distant, hazy and eternal. Yet, the very action of swimming entails effort and involves the complete immersion of the body and an experiential awareness of the elements of nature.

It is because of his love of nature that Ondaatje’s writing reveals an underlying, almost reluctant romantic ideology. It is not the plot that is foregrounded but nature and humanity. His characters talk with muted voices that never become strident. They hold dialogue within a novel-monologue, the distant voice of the author and the close up voice of the characters. As Ondaatje writes in *In the Skin of a Lion*, ‘He [Patrick] has come across a love story. This is only a love story. He does not wish for plot and all its consequences. Let me stay in this field with Alice Gull’ (*In the Skin of a Lion*, 1988:160).

The story is there but it is never allowed to take the place of the emotions, the mood and the tone of the text, evincing a postmodern disturbance of language, for instance the interruption of the murder on the train (31) but all the while embracing an arguably universal romantic vision. Barbour states that when Ondaatje, ‘desiring identity with Rilke, his grand romanticism, [] only discovers difference’ (Barbour, 2002:169). This difference is tempered with romantic notions undercutting hard realism where he transcribes a substitution.

As noted by Fledderus (1997) and Roxborough (1999), Almasy, Anil and Sareth are engaged in a ‘romantic’ search,¹ but this is not a straightforward ‘romantic’ search. It is interlinked for the characters both professionally and emotionally, with archaeological backgrounds juxtapositionally linked with digging into their own inner truths and identities in relation to the external world. It has also been proposed that the ‘trademark of his writing is a preoccupation with the fragility of human lives and the bodies that contain them’ (<http://galenet.galegroup.com>. 2006/11/23). This perception, however, engages in only one level of his writing.

The Ondaatje *oeuvre*² contains boundaries equally blurred with authorial intervention, a strong sense of biographical truths juxtaposed with fiction and with geohistoric-archaeological facts distorted to reveal intricate patterns of postmodern fictions along with a hazy sense of romantic underpinning resembling ‘a wave combing / the greenhair of the sea’ (*The Cinnamon Peeler*, 1989:122). Like a Renoir painting, we like better what we cannot see too clearly. The impressionist diffusion of colour adds to the aura of romance, but with a postmodern zooming in on the odd wart or blemish, the ‘romance’ is ruptured with cruel reality.

¹ For a more detailed analysis of this line of thought, Fledderus comments on the elements of Grail Romance (Fledderus 1997). See also, Roxborough, who comments ‘While it is clear that elements of Arthurian romance exist in the [Ondaatje texts], they function within a much larger religious framework that deserves close analysis’ (Roxborough, 1999:236). Here, he is referring to *The English Patient* but this can be equally applicable to *Anil’s Ghost*.

² Krantz states that ‘overall, [] Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* fits neither a procrustean postmodernism nor a pedantic postcolonialism, though both contemporary paradigms partly inform what goes on in the text’ (Krantz. 2003:106).

Ondaatje asks, 'so how do we discuss / the education of our children? / teach them to be Romantics / to veer towards the sentimental?' (*The Cinnamon Peeler*, 1989:121). He finds a way. Although his text sees ironically, it suggests emotional validity, harnessing discourse to a complex emotional project. He does this with his own inimitable 'discontinuities' while not omitting the romantic elements that are part of his own archive. At the same time, his 'text prevents readers from treating the discourses of science, art, and religion as autonomous entities' (Goldman, 2002:908) and according to Goldman 'the discourses of science art, and religion are invested with 'chips of Messianic time' (Goldman, 2002:908).

By Ondaatje's own admission, he is an 'arch-romantic' (Bök, 1992:110). Post-modern 'romance', however, can be a technological comedy. It is a contradiction. It is a comedy of errors replayed in the 21st century. What it is not is Wordsworth sighing to the trees or John Gay's highwayman riding off into the sunset singing '*over the hills and far away*'. It is dawn and a new world of desire and misbehaving in an honestly dishonest way. It is a diversity of truths arising out of a history of ideas. It is the search for what matters most. In both *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*, Almasi, Anil and Sareth discover what matters most to them in a quest filled with both romantic idealism and stony realism.

This romantic element is evident in the poem 'Last Ink' (*Handwriting*, 2000:74), where 'the dusk light, the cloud pattern, / recorded always in [his] heart / and the rest of the world-chaos, / circling [his] winter boat' places the speaker in the midst of nature with its 'dusk light' and 'cloud pattern'. The use of the word 'boat' suggests that he sees himself on water, precariously secure, because he is surrounded by 'world-chaos'.

Water mirrors the emotions. If the water is calm then one is at peace. The speaker sees himself in this instance as a lone figure in a treacherous world. Yet, towards the end of the poem he also chooses to describe himself as 'bowing and leaping', reflecting how he sees the divided nature of his progress. This is, arguably, an apt description of the contradictions of being a lover and writer attempting to make his mark against the

buffeting effects of time and nature. The poem is a self-reflective expression of this duality:

Last Ink

In certain countries aromas pierce the heart and one dies
half waking in the night as an owl and a murderer's cart go by

the way someone in your life will talk out love and grief
then leave your company laughing.

In certain languages the calligraphy celebrates
where you met the plum blossom and moon by chance

-the dusk light, the cloud pattern,
recorded always in your heart

and the rest of the world-chaos,
circling your winter boat.

The images of nature such as 'plum blossom', 'dusk light' and 'cloud pattern' are juxtaposed with images of 'calligraphy' or handwriting, and 'recorded always in your heart', introducing the human element. This is followed by the 'scroll' or 'ink' making its mark on nature, 'nudged onto stone', expressing how humans try to make their mark on nature. It also introduces the element of creation, specifically that of a creative writer, with the use of the word 'scroll' and the word 'ink'. He continues with

Night of the Plum and Moon.

Years later you shared it
on a scroll or nudged

the ink onto stone
to hold the vista of a life.

The words 'Night of the Plum and Moon' suggest fullness, roundness and completion, the plum close enough to touch, the moon distant. Then the distance of time is emphasized with 'Years later you shared it', mirroring the role Ondaatje plays in this attempt as a writer and a poet to 'hold the vista of a life', to capture in a moment the complete picture. The concepts of distance and clarity vie with each other. The transitory nature of this role or of any moment in life is reiterated with 'a condensary of time', illustrating the smallness of a life in relationship to 'the mountains', signifying the largeness of nature. Again, there is an alternation between distance (the mountains) and clarity (condensary time).

A condensary of time in the mountains
-your rain-swollen gate, a summer
scarce with human meeting.
Just bells from another village.

The memory of a woman walking down stairs.

The fragmentation of life into a series of moments like 'The memory of a woman walking down stairs', the sound of 'bells from another village', provides glimpses of life and the clarity with which he sees it. He follows this with a reflection of how miniscule life is, so much so it can sit 'on an onion leaf' or be encapsulated in a 'crowded 5th century seal'.

Life on an onion leaf
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.

He returns to the self-reflective ‘mirror-world of art’ when he describes his ‘desire’ as being cut ‘against a river stone’, suggesting difficulty in the smooth passage of a flowing river. This and the beauty of nature - ‘moon and plum’ - are juxtaposed with human longing, where the ‘indelible darker self’ causes suffering. The ‘river’ suggests natural urges and emotions as well as the symbolic river of life where human life is in constant flow. He then returns to the image of the ‘crowded 5th century seal’, representing humanity with the following stanza:

A seal, the Masters said,
must contain bowing and leaping,
“and that which hides in waters.”

This superb haiku-like pronouncement captures in three lines a miniscule containment emblematic of all human life. The ‘bowing’ appears to represent humanity at its most humble, ‘leaping’ when most alive ‘and that which hides in waters’, the deepest innermost feelings of the human race.

Yellow, drunk with ink,
the scroll unrolls to the west
a river journey, each story

and 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.

The 'river journey' with 'each story' is a journey each individual has to make in a journey through life. The writer 'drunk with ink' suggests that he is inebriated with life itself on his own journey and the stories he wishes to preserve. Each glimpse of life 'unreachable now' would be forgotten if it were not for the scribe. The following lines express poignantly, yet with a little touch of humour, a feminine '13th century' lover who says, 'I want to die on your chest but not yet' (words recorded that are most likely 'imprecise' given the passage of time).

I want to die on your chest but not yet,
she wrote, sometime in the 13th century
of our love

before the yellow age of paper

before her story became a song,
lost in imprecise reproductions

until caught in jade,

whose spectrum could hold the black greens
the chalk-blue of her eyes in daylight.

After this charming glimpse of a life in the 13th century, Ondaatje returns to his own life. His suffering is recorded with the 'last ink in the pen' as he describes his changing affections, suggested by the words 'altering love', his faithlessness, with 'our moonless

faith', and his inner restlessness, his disquiet, as he seeks to 'break through or leap' through the boundaries that confine him. That it is his 'last ink' suggests it is his art as well as his emotions that cause him such torment. The degree of finality itself is causing him pain as he struggles to distance himself from his suffering:

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.

(‘Last Ink’. *Handwriting*, 2000:71)

The poem provides a vision of how Ondaatje sees the world - as beautiful as a ‘Night of the Plum and Moon’ or as fickle ‘as altering love, our moonless faith’ - and illustrates his unstill nature, how he ‘roams restless, searching’, looking for borders to cross where he can ‘break through or leap’. With his handwriting, one feels, Ondaatje would like to leave his own ‘indelible’ mark on the passing of time. This mark would be his own perspective of life, capturing moments of clarity, both close-up ‘bowing’ and, from a distance, ‘leaping’, both philosophically and aesthetically, with his handwriting. *Handwriting*, as Summers-Bremner affirms, ‘however self-stylized, [is] simply doing what it says: returning language to pen to body, tracing the intimate converse of past and present that travels through the word, the page, the hand’ (Summers-Bremner, 2005:112).

Ondaatje's poetry in *Handwriting* largely acts as a supplement to *Anil's Ghost*, but in *Anil's Ghost* there is another connotation to 'leaping and bowing'. While Ondaatje conveys the notion that Western society 'leaps' ahead with modern technology and rapid advances in science, he suggests that it neglects introspection. Gamini implies this when he says 'that's enough reality for the West' (287) when he describes the Western author. The imagery of Eastern society is that it 'bows' its head in contemplation and prays with zen-like acceptance of adversity to the detriment of societal comforts, Gandhi being a case in point, as discussed in Chapter Six.

The eastern *yin* and *yang*, the embryonic symbol of opposites caught in the wheel of life, are enclosed within a larger circle that suggests unification and implies that although there is no resolution of universal conflicts, neither was there meant to be. This can be equated with the oppositional qualities of distance and clarity. Ondaatje hovers between these opposites, using 'numerous gazes'.

One engaging gaze is his metaphorical use of the Mynah bird (which he uses to accompany the government official to his death on the train). The Indian Mynah bird as described in *Roberts Birds of Africa* provides a graphic description of Ondaatje's own *leaping and bowing*. Although (of course) it can fly, it also forages on the ground 'walking with determined tread, or bounding in long strides... often bowing and nodding its head' in a somewhat comic and, in *Anil's Ghost*, paradoxical manner. It also, just to add a touch of humour, has a '*song sustained* jumble of squawks, whistles, croaks, creaks and whines' (Maclean, 1993:665) (my italics).

Alternatively, in *Divisadero* (2007) Ondaatje writes these beautiful lines: 'His gaze [Lucien's] holds on to this last, porous light. Some birds in the almost-dark are flying as close to their reflections as possible. (273)

An unusually gifted writer and poet, Ondaatje has managed to convey moments of great clarity, encompassing a sense of beauty and nature. Paradoxically, this is contrasted with horror and war, both aspects providing distance through which humanity can measure

itself against those from a distant past. The fusion of distance and clarity brings about a sense of understanding and along with it a sense of detachment or freedom from earthly constraints.

In the poem 'House on a Great Cliff', Ondaatje expresses with startling luminosity how release ensues through love and suffering, where one may experience in the heart the wild, 'unframed', sheer beauty of the moment:

The flamboyant a grandfather planted
having lived through fire
lifts itself over the roof

unframed

the house an open net

where the night concentrates

on a breath

on a step

a thing or gesture

we cannot be attached to...

(Handwriting, 2000:67)

Like the flamboyant, having 'lived through fire', people, having lived through war, 'lift' themselves in the much the same way, triumphing over adversity, and, as the 'unframed' flamboyant in the poem, free themselves from the boundaries of suffering.

The word 'concentrates' suggests that the process requires a change of focus, on 'a breath' or 'a step'. These miniscule framed features of living are contrasting aspects that

take up our existence. This is the very art of what is beautiful in itself, both framed and ‘unframed’.

According to Buddhist practice, in the quest for enlightenment, one is supposed to detach oneself from suffering.³ This is done one step at a time, *pas de pas*, in the East. Ondaatje, coming from a Western background, both leaping and bowing through life, fuses distance and clarity in order to attain a different level of ‘seeing’. What we can infer is that at times he reaches a level of detachment, which he describes through the eyes of Ananda. (In Sanskrit, the word ‘ananda’ means bliss.) This sense of detachment involves a sense of awareness that for one brief moment Ananda experiences as he paints the eyes of the Buddha:

And now with human sight he was seeing all the fibres of natural history around him. He could witness the smallest approach of a bird, every flick of its wing, or a hundred mile storm coming down off the mountains near Gonagola and skirting to the plains. He could feel each current of wind, every lattice-like green shadow created by cloud. There was a girl moving in the forest. The rain miles away rolling like blue dust towards him. Grasses being burned, bamboo, the smell of petrol and grenade. The crack of noise as a layer of rock on his arm exfoliated in heat. The face open-eyed in the great rainstorms of May and June. The weather formed in the temperate forests and sea, in the thorn scrub behind him in the southeast, in the deciduous hills, and moving towards the burning Savanna near Badulla, and then the coast of mangroves, lagoons and river deltas. The great churning of weather above the earth.

Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. (307)

Like Ananda, Ondaatje sees a world filled with both beauty and conflict. With distance and clarity, he conveys a sense of what it is like to see an ‘angle of the world’.

³ The Buddhist *arahant* is a ‘fully enlightened being who has uprooted all the defilements and experiences no more mental suffering. Having attained the fourth and final stage of enlightenment, he or she will not be reborn again in any form, passing entirely into the unconditional state upon death’ (Pandita, 1993:281).

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Appendix

Religion in Sri Lanka

Buddhism

Main article: [Sri Lankan Buddhism](#)

[Theravada Buddhism](#) is the majority religion in Sri Lanka, with about 70% of the country's population as followers. Sri Lanka is the country with longest continuous [history of Buddhism](#). [Mahinda](#), son of [Ashoka](#), an early supporter of Buddhism, lead the mission to Sri Lanka in [246 BC](#) where he converted the king of Sri Lanka [Devanampiyatissa](#) to Buddhism. From then on, the royal families had helped to encourage the spread of Buddhism, aiding Buddhist missionaries and building monasteries. Sanghamitra, daughter of King Ashoka, brought a shoot of the [Bodhi tree](#) in [Buddha Gaya](#) to Sri Lanka and established the Order of Nuns. It became known as [Sri Maha Bodhi](#). Around [200 BC](#) Buddhism became the official religion of Sri Lanka. The [Tooth Relic of the Buddha](#) was brought to Sri Lanka in 4th century AC by Prince Danta and Princess Hemamala. The [Pali Canon](#) was put into writing in Sri Lanka around [30 BC](#).

However, later on Hindu and European colonial influences attributed to the decline of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. By the mid [19th century](#), Gunananda, a Buddhist monk, started a revival movement in Sri Lanka. This movement eventually helped to return Buddhist dominance in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan Buddhism. The different orders of the Therevada are referred to as [nikayas](#), and in Sri Lanka there are three:

- [Siam Nikaya](#), founded in the [18th century](#) by a Thai monk who perceived corruption in the sangha and wished to purify its practices
- [Amarapura Nikaya](#), founded in [1800](#) after ordination within [Burma](#) by lower-caste Buddhists who objected to the previously dominant practice of selective ordination from the higher-castes
- [Ramanna Nikaya](#), founded in [1864](#) by [Ambagahawatte Saranankara](#).

[Buddhist](#) teachings, they appear countless times throughout the most ancient Buddhist texts, the [Pali Canon](#). They arose as the core of the [Buddha's enlightenment](#) experience, and are regarded in [Buddhism](#) as deep spiritual insight, not philosophical theory. Therefore the [Buddha](#) said in the Samyutta Nikaya: "These Four Noble Truths, monks, are actual, unerring, not otherwise. Therefore they are called noble truths."^[1]

This teaching was the basis of the Buddha's first discourse after his enlightenment, the Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of [Dhamma](#)^[2]. In the *Culamalunkya sutta*^[3] of the [Majjhima Nikaya](#), the Buddha explained why he taught them:

"Why have I declared (the four noble truths)? Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life, it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to [enlightenment](#), to [Nirvana](#). That is why I have declared it."

[Venerable Sariputta](#), the Buddha's chief disciple in wisdom said that a wise person is one who understands the four noble truths, and an unwise person is one who does not understand them^[4].

1. "Now this, monks, is the *noble truth of suffering*: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.
2. Now this, monks, is the *noble truth of the origin of suffering*: It is this [craving](#) which leads to [renewed existence](#), accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.

3. Now this, monks, is the *noble truth of the cessation of suffering*: It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it.
4. Now this, monks, is the the *noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering*: it is this [Noble Eightfold Path](#); that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."^{[2][5]} (From Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia)