

JUDIT MOLNÁR

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S RUNNING TO AND AWAY  
FROM SRI LANKA

Michael Ondaatje in his fictional travel memoir, *Running in the Family* (RF) (1982), relates his experiences accumulated during his two visits (1978, 1980) to his place of birth, Ceylon, that has been called Sri Lanka since 1978, “the resplendent land” in Sanskrit. Milica Zivkovic emphasizes that particularly in multicultural writing “[t]here is a need for affirmation of self and *origin*” (97; emphasis added). Later on she quotes (102) from Ondaatje’s third novel *The English Patient* (1992) where Hanna, a Canadian nurse, tells the English patient: “Kip [a Sikh sapper] and I are both international bastards—born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or to get away from our homelands all our lives” (176). Apparently, in Ondaatje’s works circular migration i.e. migration in and out of places, is a recurring theme in his attempt to construct a meaningful world in the course of which he dramatizes the problem of multiple cultural identity/ies that are closely connected to places. One is reminded of Homi Bhabha’s notion of “the third space” as a space of in-betweenness. (“Location” 36–39)

After his parents’ divorce, Ondaatje left Sri Lanka for England at the age of eleven in 1954 together with his mother; he spent most of his adult life far away from his homeland. Not only did he want to get to know more about his family background, particularly about his father, but he also decided to discover his father’s *land*. This is a small country in comparison with Canada and India: “Ceylon *falls* on the map and its outline is the shape of a *tear*. After the *spaces* of India and Canada it is so small” (147; emphasis added). This place is invisible; it “falls on a map”, exists almost by chance, it is tiny; and its shape is symbolic of its status for Ondaatje as a place of loss. His father used to travel around on his

“infamous” train rides being always drunk with no difficulty from place to place because of the size of the island. In *RF* the author guides the reader by tours to different places in the island whose passages or trajectory is always interrupted; these “stops” become closely associated with meditations of various sorts. This explains why we have the feeling that the narrative “falters” quite often; the narrator’s voice has a meandering tendency.

Ondaatje’s motivation for his return journey was complex; it was to explore lost places and times: the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. Huggan Graham notes, “The celebratory nature of modern ethnic autobiography must [...] be balanced against its pathos: its sometimes agonized *sense of loss* (“Exoticism” 119; emphasis added). Similarly, what Relph finds important in this regard, certainly holds true for Ondaatje’s case. The changing character of places through time is of course related to modifications of buildings and landscapes as well as to changes in our attitudes, and is likely to seem quite *dramatic after a prolonged absence*. On the other hand, the persistence of character of places is apparently related to a continuity to both in our experience of change and in the very nature of change that serves to reinforce a *sense of association and attachment to these places*. (31; emphasis added) Ondaatje says that his aim was “to trace the maze of relationships in [his] ancestry” (25). He manages to do so with re/familiarizing himself with a *maze of places* that are central to his narrative. To date, most critics with a few exceptional cases have given priority to the colonial and postcolonial social issues embedded in the novel over the spacial dimensions that relate directly to those. By contrast, particular places and spaces will serve as springboards for my analysis, which reads their significance in term of Ondaatje’s personal inner journey. The importance of places is reflected also in Ondaatje’s choice of subchapter titles among which are many place names like: “*Asia*”, “*Jaffna Afternoons*”, “*Kegalle*” (i), “*Kegalle*” (ii), “*To Colombo*”, “*Wilpattu*”, “*Kuttapitiya*”, “*Travels in Ceylon*”. Hutcheon notes that Ondaatje “[offers] much about the *geographical* and historical background of Sri Lanka itself [...]”. (“Interview” 201; emphasis added) Ondaatje, himself tells us:

[...] I wanted to establish a kind of *map*, I wanted to make clear that this was just a part of a long tradition of invasions and so forth. So the *map* and the history and the poetry made a more social voice, became the balance to the family story, the other end of the see-saw. (201; emphasis added)

Nancy Pedri suggests: “The coincidence of land and identity across time is nowhere more apparent than in the mapping of the colonized lands [...]” (42). She confirms that *RF* is a text that “[p]rovides an awareness of the close connection between representation of space and the process of mapping space on the one hand, and the intimate quest for personal and cultural identity on the other” (41). Maps are current in postcolonial literatures both as “symbols of imposed political authority or as metaphors for territorial dispossession” (Huggan “Territorial” 32).

It is not by accident that the frontispiece in this “memory novel” defying classification (“memoir, fiction, history, autobiography, biography”) (“Interview” 201) is a spacial design that happens to be an idiosyncratic map of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. Ashcroft claims: “Geography, maps and mapping have arguably had a greater effect on our ways of imagining the world than any other discourse” (“Transformation” 128) What is recognizable on this special map placed right on the very first page? On close scrutiny the reader will acknowledge the fact that this is a good example of cultural cartography. Why is it so? To find the answer I shall rely on Perdy’s observations she made in her most important article about “cartographic explorations” (41). She claims:

The inclusion of an introductory map coupled with extensive commentary on the manipulative processes of cartographic inscription and the indeterminacy of cartographic interpretation provokes an exploration into how the map reader’s identity is negotiated within and across the map’s lines. (45)

In the following, I would like to concentrate on the visual map on the very first page of the novel. It certainly directs the reading strategy in order to be able to understand the author’s goal which is to reclaim his past.

Ondaatje’s endeavour was to “augment maps with stories” (Kort 165). The reader should “parse” the map carefully and then one can realize that it is actually a speculative interpretation of the visual image. The mapping “operation” is all the more important because in the process of the narrator’s retrieving and reinventing his past the alternative spatial configurations gain more and more importance. Pedri calls our attention to the fact that Ondaatje on “his” map excludes the names of villages “[r]eferred to in the narrative as being inhabited by indigenous peoples (such as *Wattala*, *Kalutara*, *Usetakeiyawa* and *Pelmadulla*) [which] indicates that these places and their peoples are not part of his ‘official’

map” (52). His unique quest for belonging manifests also in the places he has or has not chosen as important geographical markers on his map; they reflect his own cultural ambivalence. Strangely enough, his map “[d]oes not mark out a space for the indigenous people of Ceylon” (Pedri 53). Jose Rabasa’s view is concurrent with that of Pedri’s when she says: “Since the totality of the world can never be apprehended as such in a cartographical objectification, maps have significance only within a *subjective* reconstitution of the fragments” (360; emphasis added).

Ondaatje’s naming strategy on his map should not be left unnoticed either. Pedri points out that the narrator’s linguistic choices do not reflect the cultural mix of the country: Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British, and Burgher. (52) Pedri gives two examples for “linguistic digressions”: *Ganga* is not accompanied by the English word *river* and *Sigiriya* is used and not the anglicized spelling *Sigiri*. (52; emphasis original) Further on Pedri adds: The introductory map of Ceylon mirrors [...] domination; only the places that are not inhabited by people, namely rivers and the fortified ancient city and palace Sigiriya (c. 459 A.D.) escape English labelling. (54) It makes one wonder whether the narrator’s idiosyncratic way of charting his land is intentional or it only accentuates the fictionality of the narrative since “[i]n Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (206) as Ondaatje says in the *Acknowledgements* in his novel. But it may well be that the “untold”, “the silenced”, and the “selected” bear significance. If so, the narrator takes up a position of power by giving examples of colonial/postcolonial enigmatic mislocations and misnomers. Huggan tends to think that Ondaatje’s map “[i]s a questionable concept more closely associated with *rumour* than with truth” (“Territorial” 79; emphasis added). This could be supported by the fact that the first chapter is called: “Asian Rumours”. At the same time, one also has to bear in mind that: “[M]aps [...] are unstable products of social, historical and political circumstance” (Huggan, “Territorial” 4).

Huggan differentiates among three possible literary functions that [visual] maps can have: they can be icons, motifs, and metaphors. (“Territorial” 21) I would argue that in Ondaatje’s case all the three operate simultaneously. The map as an icon calls our attention to the importance of the geographical location of the narrative and thus “[t]he act of reading the text involves an alternation between verbal and visual codes” (Huggan “Territorial” 21). It is also a motif because it supports “the novel’s central theme of hidden truth” (Huggan “Territorial” 24); here it is the narrator’s attempt to identify himself spatially and culturally

with his homeland. Map as metaphor for Huggan “could be of control, appropriation of territory” (24). I think this function is more prominent in the non-visual maps in the narrative that delineate the colonial history of Sri Lanka.

Mention should be made of the two epigraphs facing the map as companion pieces generating cartographic imagination. One is by Oderic, a Franciscan Friar, from the 14th century, who is fascinated by the “miraculous things” in the island. He “[t]ransforms the reality of a country into one that suggests myth and fable [...]” (Chelva Kanaganayakam 38) This is followed by and contrasted with a newspaper clipping from *Ceylon Sunday Times* (29.1.78.) in which the Americans are glorified for their knowledge of English and the local people of Sri Lanka are downgraded because their lack of it. In Huggan’s view: “The power of language to reconstruct the world, suggests Ondaatje, depends on the power and influence of the society or culture that uses it; the world that is reconstructed by a dominant language is no more ‘real’; but the version it produces will almost certainly achieve wider credibility” (“Territorial” 80–1). Similarly Kanaganayakam thinks that the second quotation “[e]xpresses a world view conditioned by centuries of colonial domination” (38). The realities expressed in the two quotations are both true despite the essential differences in their emphases.

It is not only these two epigraphs’ sharp contrast with each other that suggests that situating different territories and empowering them with virtues and excellence on the one hand, and impoverishing them on the other hand, are consequences of evasive ideological constructs. As the two quotations differ, Ondaatje’s brother’s maps of Ceylon in his home in Toronto are not like the author’s visual map at the beginning of the text. However, in this case the dubious truth value of the representations are closer to each other. His brother’s maps are central to the narrative demonstrating the alternative realities that emerge from maps. As Huggan reminds us, “[w]hile in one sense maps are the products of precise research, in another they are the projects of dreams or visions which, once signed in the name of a dominant culture, acquire the spurious badge of ‘truth’” (“Territorial” 80). In the chapter called “Tabula Asiae” Ondaatje describes his brother’s “*false maps*”. Old portraits of Ceylon” (63; emphasis added). Paul Jay notes, “Ondaatje rarely takes the time to explore Sri Lanka’s location as a colonial island and its connection to other locations of British colonialism. One exception is the short chapter entitled ‘Tabula Asiae’” (3). Looking at these maps he sees “mythic

shapes [growing] into eventual accuracy” (63). Hutcheon connects this to the fact that Ondaatje is a writer “[w]ho is fascinated with borders, including those between literature and reality” (“Running in the Family” 301). Ondaatje can see the history of many centuries on these maps:

The maps reveal *rumours of topography*, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellers’ tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese and medieval records. The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape [...]. (64; emphasis added)

The Greek, the Arabs, the Portuguese, the English named the island differently. So it was not only through military invasion that the island was exploited but through “the redefinitional strategies of a dominant language” (Huggan “Territorial” 80). While contemplating in the course of viewing these maps, Ondaatje is reminded of his own past. His ancestors also arrived centuries ago.

[...] my *own* ancestor arriving in 1600, a doctor who cured the residing governor’s daughter with a strange herb and was *rewarded with land*, a foreign wife, a new name which was the Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. (64; emphasis added)

As Huggan interprets it, “The ‘exotic’ maps of old Ceylon on his brother’s wall in Toronto hold out promise of untold wealth, a country rich for the picking. [...] Ondaatje [could] also be a claimant (“Exoticism” 123). He is fully and nostalgically aware of his and his family’s once recognized but by now lost social status. This sense of loss never leaves him and this time guides him to understand the maps from a new perspective. He is puzzled by his brother’s maps. He trusts only Robert Knox, who wrote *Historical Relations of Ceylon* (1681) one of the sources for Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. He believes that “[a]part from Knox, and later Leonard Woolf in his novel *A (sic) Village in the Jungle*, very few foreigners truly knew where they were” (83). Interestingly enough, years later, his brother, Christopher Ondaatje became a Leonard Woolf scholar providing the Afterword for the 2005 edition of *The Village in the Jungle*, furthermore writing the Introduction to Woolf’s *Stories in the East* that was republished in 2007. He also wrote a monograph entitled *Woolf in Ceylon: An Imperial Journey in the Shadow of Leonard Woolf* (1904–1911). All these were preceded by *The Man-eater of Punanai—a Journey of Discovery to the Jungles of Old Ceylon* (1992). One wonders how Christopher Ondaatje’s “false” and bewildering

maps triggered the author for further investigations into the shared homeland with his brother. It is also interesting to note their common appreciation of Leonard Woolf.

In similar ways, as it is impossible to reduce the interpretation of the maps elaborated upon above to one and only unambiguous and credible solution, we can assert that the “actual” places Ondaatje visited lend themselves to speculative ruminations as well. His two trips blur into one another combined with his haunting memories from his early childhood; this would give free reign to both his and the reader’s imagination. The narrative operates on different planes in the process of articulating space as self-affirmation. Huggan stresses this point, too: But the truth claims of travel memoir are always open to suspicion. It insists that it has witnessed places and events it may have just invented; instead of recording facts, it may be spreading, or ‘substantiating’ *rumours*. (“Exoticism” 121; emphasis added) Ondaatje’s displacedness, and his “divided cultural allegiances” (Huggan, “Exoticism” 123) may aggravate the problem of following him in his attempt to find his rootedness in his native island.

Over the course of the story the narrator chooses physical locations where he would stop; it is difficult to decide if there is a planning space in his head with specific purposes, or the visits happen at random. Hutcheon sees the narrator in *RF* as somebody who collects historical facts, and “As readers we see both the collecting and the attempts to make a narrative order” (“Poetics” 114). In order to be able to collect historical facts he has to make field trips in the island, however, what his empirical experiences united with his imagination will result in is unpredictable.

Jay points out that “Ondaatje’s references to place and location tend to be personal [...]. Specific houses, buildings, and other structures important to his family history figure prominently in the book [...] (3). Upon return, first we find him in Jaffna: “I sit in the huge living room of the governor’s home in Jaffna.” (24) Jaffna is basically a Tamil city that was controlled by the Dutch between 1685–1798. Kanaganayakam remarks: “Ondaatje’s choice of beginning his work in Jaffna and not in Colombo suggests a partial recognition of his father’s claim to be a Jaffna Tamil” (36). The narrator gives a detailed description of the *house*:

The walls, painted in recent years a warm-rose, stretch awesome distance away to my left to my right and up towards the a white ceiling. When the Dutch first built this house egg white was used to paint the walls. The doors are twenty feet high, as if awaiting the day when a family of acrobats will walk from room to room sideways, without

dismantling themselves from each other's arms. [...] The house was built in 1700 and is the prize building in this northern region of Ceylon. In spite of its internal vastness, it appears modest from the outside, tucked in one corner of the fort. (24–5)

The narrator is together with his family members who tell him stories in this “haunted” (25) place where time stops. This is a place of memories and the building takes over the story telling that happens to take place in the “[s]pacious centre of the labyrinth of [an] 18th century Dutch defense” (25). What is emphasized here is not the subject matter of the parole among the people but the locale of it. The *genius loci* of this old colonial building is in the focus, despite the fact that it is “an injuring symbol of subjugation and defeat” (Kanaganayakam 36). After all, he says: In the heart of this 250-year old fort we will trade *anecdotes* and *faint* memories, *trying* to swell them with order of dates and *asides*, interlocking them all as if assembling the hull of a ship. *No story is ever told just once.* (26; emphasis added) Kanaganayakam criticizes the narrator for “[i]solating himself in the Fort [and] taking an elitist seclusion in the governor’s home” (36) without paying attention to the bloody ethnic clashes that the Tamils and the Sinhalese are engaged in. Indeed, he is more preoccupied with his grandiose and spacious environment than the political confrontations the island has to face and live with. The interior space evokes earlier colonial times in his imagination.

Finally, I shall concentrate on the most important places that are mentioned in the text keeping in sight: “To recreate fictionally the land and the family one had left decades ago is inevitably coupled with the failure to arrive at any objective truth because the distances of time and space distort facts and memories contain only incomplete truths, the only material the between-world writer can record” (Zivkovic 103). The stories he tells are “both of the past and the present” (Douglas Barbour 139).

*Kegalle* which is at the bottom of a steep rock face is the place where Ondaatje’s ancestral home was established. This was “the home the ancient patriarch built to find a dynasty” (Barbour 142). Two subchapters are devoted to this place and they differ to some extent. *Kegalle* (i) is more a place of memory while *Kegalle* (ii) is also a political place which was important in 1971, the year of the Insurgence. In *Kegalle* Ondaatje’s grandfather marked out a land for himself at *Rock Hill* “[l]iving in his empire—acres of choice land in the heart of Kegalle” (56). Later his dipsomaniac father moved there with his second wife. Traces of his heavy



drinking are revealed in: “The cement niches on the side of the house [which] held so many bottles that from the side the house resembled a wine cellar” (58). He would hide his bottles at all sorts of unimaginable places in the by now overrun garden. His half-sister shows him: “*Here*, she said *and here*” (60; emphasis original). His illusion is even more shattered by having to get know about these secret and scandalous spots in the “depressed garden of gauva trees, plantains, old forgotten flowerbeds” (60). They tell him a lot about his father’s ill-fated character. In his memory there was a “lovely spacious *house* [which] was now small and dark, fading into the landscape. But the mangosteen tree in which he “practically lived in as a child during its season of fruit, was full and strong” (59). It fills him with some comfort that his most private place in his childhood is left untouched. All in all, however, he concludes: “Whatever ‘empire’ my grandfather had fought for had to all purposes disappeared” (60). Kanagayakam notes, “Ondaatje’s return to the country of his birth needs to be seen as a complex version of the familiar ‘been-to’ situation” (34).

*Kegalle* (ii) falls into two parts. In the first part the familiar space we read about in *Kegalle* (i) becomes a strange and undesirable place, an altered reality, described in magic realist terms. Among the fabulous elements are the cobras and the snakes that often visit the family home at *Rock Hill* in search for eggs. His father distributed ping-pong balls among the chickens and the snakes died because they could not digest them. After his father’s death he kept returning to the house in the form of a cobra. Here fictionality takes over realism. The home in the second part should have been part of the political and social reality closely surrounding it; the insurgents went from house to house to collect weapons in *Kegalle*, but at their house they played cricket on the front lawn instead. Kanaganayakam notes that despite the fact that Ondaatje mentions the bloody bottles in *Kegalle*, he does so “only to shift the emphasis into one of irony” (37). His ancestral home is permeated by a multitude of spirits: compassionate, harassed, and rebellious.

He spent his childhood years on the estate of *Kuttapitiya*. Coleman emphasizes “the unreality and the isolation” (119) of the house. Ondaatje has very fond memories of this place: “We had everything. It was and still is the most beautiful place in the world” (145). On his visit Ondaatje reconciles childhood memories with reality so that what were dreams at some point he could relive it. According to Bachelard:

Through dreams, the various *dwelling-places* in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all immemorial things are. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of *protection*. (5–6; emphasis added)

The house on the estate corresponds to his childhood “existential space”. According to Relp’s definition: “Existential space or lived space is the inner structure of space as it appears to us in our concrete experiences of the world as members of a cultural group. It is *inter-subjective* and hence *amenable* [...]. (12; emphasis added) His daughter tells him: “‘If we lived here it would be *perfect*.’ ‘Yes.’ I said.” (146; emphasis added). It is an Eden-like place an image that often appears in postcolonial literatures.

His maternal grandparents used to live in *Colombo*, a city with a rich colonial heritage. One of his poems in the novel is dedicated to the city: “To Colombo” but he does not speak about the city itself in it. We don’t get to know much about the city itself but instead about a specific place that of *St. Thomas’ Church* which bears the title of a separate subchapter, too. The church is not treated as a religious, “sacred” place now but rather as a site for Ondaatje to protectively familiarize himself with his genealogical history. But to some extent it is a sacred place even if not in the traditional sense of the word. Relp writes:

Sacred space is that of archaic religious experience; it is continuously differentiated and replete with symbols, *sacred centres and meaningful objects*. [...] the experience of such space is primordial, equivalent perhaps to an experience of the founding of the world [...]. (15; emphasis added)

For Ondaatje the building becomes sacred because of the unexpected and “meaningful objects”. In a way, he is trying to guard himself: “To kneel on the floors of a church built in 1650 and see your name chiselled in large letters so that it stretches from your fingertips to your elbow in some strange way removes vanity, eliminates the personal” (65–66). In the church “[h]e confronts a past that part of him apparently wants to keep uncertain” (Huggan “Exoticism” 120). He confesses: “What saved me was the lack of clarity. The slab was five feet long, three feet wide, a good portion of it had worn away” (66). Huggan asserts that here Ondaatje’s balance between “inscription and erasure” is “captured” (“Exoticism” 120). Ondaatje and his half-sister go through many old church ledgers

which abound in the name of Ondaatje: “We had not expected to find more than one Ondaatje here but the stones and pages are full of them.” (66) It was here in 1915 that the first service was given according to the Anglican tradition and prayers were said in Tamil by G.J. Ondaatje. (“lankalibrary” 2) But for Ondaatje the experience is both “uplifting and painful” (Kanaganayakam 37). He feels: “When I finish there will be that eerie moment when I wash my hands and see very clearly the deep grey colour of old paper dust going down the drain” (68).

Colombo’s large *harbour* is a privileged location for Ondaatje; it has a substantial influence on him. His liminal state is displaced in his feelings when he says right in the very beginning of the short subchapter called “Harbour”: “I arrived in a plane but love the harbour” (133). He is aware of his threshold existence to be enjoyed in the here and now because he will be on the plane again. The harbour means freedom but it is a constraint, too, for it is a place for saying good-byes. As Barbour sees it: “[t]he harbour is a container of contradictions” (152). The harbour is real: “There is nothing wise about a harbour, but it is real life” (133). But it is also an imaginative space: “*Harbour. Lost ship. Chandler. Estuary.*” (135; emphasis original).

*Nuwara Eliya* is a place for liberation among the mountains with a blessed climate where Ondaatje’s grandparents spent the otherwise almost unbearable hot days in Colombo. “*Nuwara Eliya* is a different *world* [from Colombo]”. (39; emphasis added) The pleasant physical environment was ideal for the local culture to flourish in the days of colonial rule. It could provide space for parties, horse races, dancing, and all sorts of entertainments. Lalla, Ondaatje’s maternal grandmother, says about the 1920s that they were “so whimsical, so busy—that we were always tired” (41). It “[w]as also fertile ground for a never-ending series of relationships” (Barbour 141): “This was Nuwara Eliya in the twenties and thirties. Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations” (41). Other places associated with amusement of different sorts was *Gasawana*, a rubber estate, “[t]he estate a perfect place for parties” (45–46). In winter time they met in *Galle Gymkhana*, and at *Ambalagonda. Mount Lavina Hotel*, with its imperial elegance, a legacy of Sri Lanka’s colonial heritage, is the place where after long nights they used to go for breakfast and “wild” swimming. This is where Ondaatje’s mother found a job after her divorce, too. *Palm Lodge* was Lalla’s unique place for all generations where they could have fun and forget themselves. She had a unique

character: “Her schemes for organizing parties and bridge games exaggerated themselves. She was full of the ‘passions’ whether drunk or not.” (122) Lalla later on opened up a boarding house, too. Often times all of these social places are spaces for unselfconscious and outrageous behaviour individual and collective as well. They represent the “lost generation of aristocratic grandeur” (Huggan, “Exoticism”, 123).

Lalla’s death, however, can be connected to a very different space that of a fluid space: water. She was swept away by flood; “It was her last perfect journey” (138). Here again Ondaatje tells us specific names that Lalla was floating by: “Below the main street of *Nuwara Eliya* the land drops suddenly and Lalla fell into deeper waters, past the houses of ‘*Cranleigh*’ and *Ferncliff*. They were homes *she knew well*, where she had played and argued over cards.” (129; emphasis added) Finally, she died “[i]n the blue arms of a jacaranda tree” (113). As Barbour puts it “[s]he rushes towards her final apotheosis in the trees” (152). \_ivkovic points out that “[L]alla’s death is a natural outcome of Lalla’s life who had lived in complete harmony with herself and her surrounding” (106). According to Ernest MacIntyre “[t]his is one of finest scenes of imagination” (317) in the novel.

A place for imagination and contemplation is *Sigirya*, an archeological site, which is an ancient rock fortress and palace famous for the “Sigiri Graffiti”. Ondaatje says: “In the 5th Century B.C. graffiti poems were scratched onto the rock fortress of a despot king. [...] These were the first folk poems of the country” (84). In the next paragraph he talks about the “Quatrains and free verse about the struggles, tortures, the unspoken spirit, love of friends who died for the cause” (84). They were written and later whitewashed on the walls of the *Vidyalankara* campus of the university of Ceylon during the 1971 Insurgency. The author implies a kind of connection between the ancient graffiti and the recent poems on the walls. Kanaganayakam notes, “[t]he parallel with the graffiti poems on the rock face of Sigiry, and the implied contrast between love poems written to satisfy the despot king and the angry verses to defy a hostility government provide a saving sensitivity” (37). Barbour calls our attention to the fact that these poems were not only whitewashed but they were also covered by “lye”; suggesting “lie”. (Barbour 146) The poems on the wall of the campus bear some resonances with the paintings on the wall erected in Bombay separating the Parsi community from the rest of Bombay in the turbulent year of 1971 when East Pakistan became Bangladesh. Christian Bök notes, “Ondaatje begins to recognize that the

privacy of silence can be defied via graffiti; such writing can be more than an autotelic act of violent transgression; such writing can also be a revolutionary statement of communal solidarity” (118). The spirit of these two places *Sigirya* and the *Vidyalanka campus* are behind Ondaatje’s aesthetical and philosophical meditations. Through identifying himself with them his local pride shows.

Ondaatje’s communal identification is also manifest in the two schools he mentions: *St. Thomas College* only briefly regretting that he had never met Lakdasa Wikkramasinha who studied there at the same time when he did and later became “A powerful and angry poet” (85). He expands more on *St. Thomas College Boy School* where he learnt the Sinhalese alphabet: “I still believe the most beautiful alphabet was created by the Sinhalese. The insect of ink curves into a shape that is almost sickle, spoon, eyelid” (83). He illustrates it, too, which gives an effective appeal to the text. Bök claims that “Subjected to a multilingual heritage, the country has, not surprisingly, cultivated a myth of language [...]” (119).

In Sri Lanka it is not only the language that is fabled but the land itself as well. Ondaatje takes his family to *Wilpattu*, one of the largest and oldest national parks in the jungle. They feel out of place there and can only behave as lost tourists; they are surrounded by crocodiles, deer, storks, boars, and leopards. In Barbour’s summary:

“Wilpattu” with its nicely judged comedy of tourists tribulations, demonstrates how far Ondaatje has traveled from his home even as it also reveals his sympathetic perceptions of that now alien-place. His and his family’s behaviour at the wildlife sanctuary marks them as foreigners, and this is confirmed when his soap disappears and the cook and tracker both tell him that the “wild pig has taken it.” (153)

It is a moment of high comedy (Barbour 153); the subchapter ends: “My eyes [Ondaatje’s] are peeled for a last sight of the oora, my soap caught in his tusk and his mouth foaming” (143). To be part of the exotic natural landscape of Sri Lanka plays a significant role in Ondaatje’s return trips. This is marked by a compelling desire to belong to this luscious space that is offered by the flora and fauna of the country. Huggan compares him to a tourist: “Ondaatje relishes the role of being a tourist in his own country. Impressionistic descriptions [...] come straight out the traveller’s manual” (“Exoticism”, 122). The following few lines aptly illustrate what Huggan has in mind.

Kabaragoyas and thalogayas are common in Ceylon and are seldom found anywhere else in the world. [...] The kabaragoya is in fact a useful scavenger and is now protected by law as it preys on fresh water crabs that undermine and ruin the bunds of paddy fields. [...] The thalogaya, on the other hand, will eat snails, beetles, centipedes, toads, skunks, eggs and young birds, and is not averse to garbage. (73)

Despite some of the “picture-postcard landscape” (Huggan, “Exoticism”, 118) he wants to internalize “the sensuous experience[s]” that revisit him from his childhood (Zivkovic 105) as well:

My body must remember everything, this brief insect bite, smell of wet fruit, the slow snail light, rain, rain, and underneath the hint of colours a sound of furious wet birds whose range of mimicry includes what one imagines to be large beasts, trains, burning electricity. Dark trees, the mildewed garden wall, the slow air pinned by rain. (202)

The natural environment is both menacing and also something to be admired and never to be forgotten: “I can leave this table, walk ten yards out of the house, and be surrounded by versions of green” (167). The subtropical evergreen forests due to ample rainfall are responsible for this unforgettable scenery. Ondaatje’s relation towards the complex reality of Sri Lanka’s and his own past and presence is manifold in itself, too. His displacement is double: “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (79). His attachment to the birth of his place is ambiguous: “[h]e feels both and does not feel Sri Lankan” (Huggan, “Exoticism” 122). Kanaganayakam thinks along the same lines:

*Running* is as much about running “in” as it is about “to,” “from” or “against.” The constant shifts in perspective, the foregrounding textuality, the anxiety to belong and the need for distance, the awareness of history and the self-consciousness about historiography—all combine to create the effect of a complex quest in which the notion of identity need to be explored in all its multiplicity. (35)

Spatial proximity to his homeland and all the literary energy Ondaatje devoted to find a stable point or resting place in his native island seems to have failed. It is not by accident that he quotes D. H. Lawrence: “[...] we’re rather like Jonahs running away from the place we belong”. “[...] Ceylon is an experience—but heavens, not a permanence.” (78) Revisiting all the various places great in number be it real, imaginative or imaginary have not helped him create a space that he could claim his own. In the end, places and histories leak into each other in subjective

memory, providing an always tenuous mapping which gives both the writer and the reader an uncertain place to stand.

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