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PLACES AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES IN ONDAATJE'S
RUNNING IN THE FAMILY

Introduction

The notion of place is closely connected to the concept of memory, as both of them are important signifiers of culture and identity. The present paper aims at examining the issue of memory and place in Canadian author Michael Ondaatje's travelogue-memoir, *Running in the Family*.

The intricate ways of constructing memory and place, the dynamics of remembering and forgetting as well as place as fiction built up of layers of memories will be at the centre of my investigation. I will focus on the search for belonging and the creation of homespace in this narrative which crosses generic boundaries. I will also deal with the motif of rewriting "home" in a text which figures the overlapping of geographic and discursive spaces.

Memory in the retrieval of national and personal history

The attempt to build a narrative about one's homeland on the basis of memory has been shown to be an irresistible challenge and a compelling necessity for immigrant writers. Such narratives may serve as points of reference for identity and meaning. This is the case with Sri Lanka-born Canadian Michael Ondaatje's memoir, *Running in the Family* which is also an attempt to revise the history of his homeland and his family.

In his 1982 essay entitled *Imaginary Homelands* Salman Rushdie deals with the discourse of writers in the between-world condition. He claims that those writers who write about their homeland from the outside must necessarily "deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been

irretrievably lost” (Rushdie, 1992:11). However, the fragmentary nature of these memories, their partial truths and incomplete explanations make them highly precious for the immigrant writer. “These shards of memory”, Rushdie claims, “acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities.” (Rushdie, 1992:12).

Ondaatje reacts to Sri Lanka, the homeland of his childhood from a background of displacement: he left Ceylon for England and then Canada at the age of 11, after his parents’ divorce and chronicles in the novel his return twenty-five years later. The book is the result of two return journeys made by Ondaatje to the island in 1978 and 1980 and reveals the importance of home to the writer. It is made up of novelistic, autobiographic, poetic and documentary elements, apparently unstructured and randomly placed texts as well as snapshots from the family album. Abounding in colourful, mind-boggling events the novel tries to recapture the world of the parents, “the roaring twenties”, Ceylon in the early decades of the 20th century which Ondaatje knew mainly from fragments of stories he had heard as a child. His commitment in writing this work is clearly to come to terms with a past that is both personal and cultural.

Belonging to a family and having a role in history are the very basis of identity: therefore the author, realizing that he had “slipped past a childhood that (he) had ignored and not understood” yearns to reconstruct his family’s story. This involves looking back both at a history that began its process of formation three centuries ago, that is, history in the national sense and history in the private sense. Thus the narrator’s task is twofold: he has to articulate both the complexities of a colonial inheritance and the intricacies of family connections. (Davis, 1996:267) He attempts to reconstruct the Ondaatje family history from stories and comments by friends, fictions and myths, all of them subject to the workings of memory. National history is equally difficult to disentangle on account of the colonial mythos, the native propensity for invention and not least by the intricacy of social affiliations in Ceylon. The interrelationships between different national and cultural identities, the interactions between the Tamils, Sinhalese, Burghers, Dutch and English formed a complex Ceylonese identity, a society in which intermarriage caused everybody to be vaguely related. As a Ceylonese man asked by a British governor said about his nationality, “God alone knows” (Ondaatje, 1982:32).

The authenticity of Ondaatje's narrative is due to his voice as an expatriate, a voice that is both central and marginal. His perception of Ceylon is profound and complex because it views the past both as a prodigal and a foreigner: "Geographically, he is the foreigner coming for a short visit; generationally, he is the native son connected to the homeland by his family lineage." (Ray, 1993:38) Also, he is aware of this duality, this between-world position: "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner." (Ondaatje, 1982: 67) This paradoxical status allows him to examine the past with what Rushdie calls a "stereoscopic vision... a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society." (Rushdie, 1982:19)

As Rocío G. Davis points out, "Ondaatje's principal discursive technique in creating his history is the gathering of data on both Sri Lankan history and that of his family and, when the facts fail to speak, turning to myth to give explanations and to fill in the gaps." (Davis, 1996:269)

Although the presentation of historical and familiar constructions hints at linearity, the parallel recounting of national and personal history is unexpectedly episodic. The novel abounds in recurring images, foreshadowing and flashbacks, themes taken up and discarded only to be addressed later. The stereoscopic vision, the simultaneous perception of present and past, personal and collective history results in a fragmented narrative. To give just one example, the chapter entitled *Honeymoon* promises a logical sequence of events, an account of what followed the parents' wedding. What we are offered instead is a listing of events going on at the time in Ceylon and abroad:

Fred Asteire's sister, Adele, got married and the 13th President of the French Republic was shot to death by a Russian. The lepers of Colombo went on a hunger strike, a bottle of beer cost one rupee, and there were upsetting rumours that ladies were going to play at Wimbledon in shorts. (Ondaatje, 1982: 29)

Instead of progressing directly to a national and universal history, the narrative suggests an interactive relation between personal and public histories. The anecdotes, gossips and memories around which Ondaatje constructs his family history are subject to the exaggerations and omissions of their "original" tellers and also the narrator's fictionalizing. Ondaatje's narrative makes us conscious that the process of history writing does not essentially differ from the construction of family histories and other narratives. It is subject to the same fictionalizing

processes. The pun on *Historical Relations* underlines the chaos of actual 'historical facts' and the ordering processes acting upon them. *Historical Relations*, which is the title of a section in the novel refers to relations or relatives in the Ondaatje family. However, it also means 'connections with history'. As Linda Hutcheon points out, it is later in the novel that we discover it to be the title of a memoir by Robert Knox, a man held captive in Ceylon for twenty years. This memoir constitutes one of Ondaatje's main sources of historical information about the land and its traditions. (Hutcheon, 1985:307) Ondaatje reveals the 'mechanisms' of making history, and the essential subjectivity of any type of narration, underlining that history is a process, not a product:

...we will trade anecdotes and faint memories, trying to swell them with the order of dates and asides, interlocking them all as if assembling the hull of a ship. No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgements thrown in. In this way history is organized. (Ondaatje 1982: 19)

Thus history is shown to be subject to our fictionalizing memory.

Sonia Snelling considers that the search for an ancestral past and the process of making history are the main subjects of Ondaatje's memoir. (Snelling, 1997:21) She claims that the search for absent or lost parents is a challenge to the authority and universality of Western historicism since the traceable ancestral line in Western culture is a sign of the continuity and purity characterizing European history. Ondaatje unsettles the received history of colonial past as told by the imperial masters as well as the narrative structures and forms through which history validates Europe's appropriation of the rest of the world. The search for an ancestral past develops into an interrogation of the whole process of history-making: the inaccessibility of the narrator's father emphasizes the elusiveness of a knowable past, the inadequacy of totalizing narratives and the impossibility of closure. Ondaatje produces a text which tells his history through multiple voices and perspectives: the omissions, incongruities and the awareness of his own limitations prove his rejection of the discursive dominance of the West. (Snelling, 1997: 22) As the absent parent becomes the metaphor of the elusiveness of the past, the researching of the absent father's life demonstrates the flaws inherent in gathering historical material. Mervyn, the father's story is often postponed as other stories intrude upon the text: they obviously interrelate with it but also prove the arbitrariness of inclusion. When relating the

events of the 1971 Insurgency in Ceylon, Ondaatje playfully speculates on the random progress of personal and national histories:

The insurgents were remarkably well organized and the general belief is that they would have taken over the whole country if one group hadn't mixed up the dates and attacked the police station in Wellawaya a day too soon. (Ondaatje, 1982: 83)

Ondaatje is often charged with not considering the political and social realities of Ceylon. Sonia Snelling explains: "Although he does not write a direct response to the social and historical consequences of colonial rule, he subtly undermines the racist and uninformed comments of European visitors that appear as epigraphs of certain chapters. (Snelling, 1997: 28) The text celebrates the landscape and cultural identity of Ceylon, praises the country's folk poems and its beautiful alphabet. The absence of direct engagement with the colonizers is a deliberate ploy to exclude them from history—and this is a mirror image of European history's traditional exclusion of the colonized. We could also say that the narrative disruptions, the inconsistencies are all a refusal of the Western emphasis on large-scale historical events, the coherence and authority of Western historiography. The text undermines notions of historical fact as a fixed and complete statement and reveals the subjective and partial nature of archival evidence. The two epigraphs of the book are also significant in connection with Ondaatje's view on colonialism. They express two different perceptions of Ceylon. The first—a statement by Oderi, a Franciscan friar of the 14th century—is clearly Orientalist, suggesting myth and fable. The second one—a comment by Douglas Amerasekara from 1978—is neocolonial and expresses a world view conditioned by centuries of colonial domination. Ondaatje suggests that it is the myths that remain to shape the present of the country: "From Sellyan to Paradise is forty miles", says a legend, "the sound of the fountains of Paradise is heard there." (Ondaatje, 1982: 64)

As Carol E. Leon argues, *Running in the Family* registers a continuation of colonial culture through a sustained engagement with the discourse of cartography which is a vital feature of the text. (Leon, 2003: 15)

Maps and mapmaking belong to a discourse that often functions to structure and symbolize hegemonic power. Ondaatje's travel account, however, portrays earlier cartographic representations of the island as incomplete and indeterminate 'translations'. The map topos in the narrative displays a resistance to conventional forms of cartography which function as spatial paradigms of imperialism.

Returning once again to the issue of history, although Ondaatje dispels illusions about historical facts, he longs for the legitimating power of history. His quest encompasses history because it involves the need to establish roots and the desire to create himself a homeland that is not only imaginary. The fear of being severed from his own history through immigration comes across in this statement: “After the cups of tea, coffee and public conversations... I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover.” (Ondaatje, 1982: 43)

The episode when he comes across his own family name cut across the stone floor of a church has several different interpretations. Sangeeta Ray considers it a way of showing that history and subjectivity can never be carved out in stone; they are present in the form of moments that can only be translated into a fragmented autobiography. Rocío G. Davis, on the other hand, thinks that “To kneel on the floors of a church and see your name chiselled in large letters...” confirms the prodigal his legitimacy. I share this second opinion.

Memory and the act of writing/telling

Integral to the process of collecting history is the act of writing and the concern for language. In the following I propose to deal with the relationship between language and memory, more precisely, the role of language in creating and preserving memories.

Ondaatje’s memoir abounds in references to the materiality of language: letters carved on gravestones or church floors, family names in ledgers and the beauty of the Sinhalese alphabet being determined by natural resources.

Sanskrit was governed by verticals, but its sharp grid features were not possible in Ceylon. Here the Ola leaves which people wrote on were too brittle. A straight line would cut apart the leaf and so a curling alphabet was derived from its Indian cousin. Moon coconut. The bones of a lover’s spine. (Ondaatje, 1982: 69)

Ondaatje also mentions the graffiti poems scratched on the rock face of a despot king, the first folk poems which were love poems written to mythological women as well as the old frescoes in Sigiriya. Writing is also conceived in terms of punishment for schoolchildren as well as an act of protest against the authorities. Quatrains and free verse about the struggle of students during the 1971 Insurgency had been inscribed on the

walls of a university turned into prison camp. “The students went around for days transcribing them into their notebooks before they were covered with whitewash and lye.” (Ondaatje, 1982: 70)

Ondaatje is present in the text as a physical writer of it. This becomes evident from the opening part when he wakes up from a nightmare and finds himself in Ceylon: “Half a page—and the morning is already ancient.” (Ondaatje, 1982: 16) The self-reflexivity of the text shows the power of the written word.

Throughout the novel Ondaatje makes it clear that writing this history is his only way of seizing the disappearing truths of his past. This is a charge given to him by his family: “‘You must get this book right’, my brother tells me, ‘You can only write it once.’” (Ondaatje, 1982: 28)

Although writing has the power to preserve, even create memories, the homeland and its past, just like facts, escape narration. As Ondaatje confesses at the end of his memoir, “the book is not a history but a portrait or ‘gesture’”. Moreover, “in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts.” (Ondaatje, 1982: 176)

The whole narrative springs in fact from the strong wish to understand the past, the urge to recreate the figure of the father: “There is so much to know and we can only guess. Guess around him. To know him from these stray actions I am told by those who loved him. And yet, he is still one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut.” (Ondaatje, 1982: 171)

Eloquence and the gift of storytelling are central issues in the memoir. Local legend had it that those who ate thalagoia tongue became brilliant speakers: “There is a myth that if a child is given thalagoia tongue to eat he will become brilliantly articulate, will always speak beautifully, and in his speech be able to “catch” and collect wonderful, humorous information.” (Ondaatje, 1982: 61). The narrator’s Uncle Noel became a successful lawyer and a great storyteller from eating just part of the tongue. We do not have evidence about the narrator having ever eaten of the infamous tongue, nevertheless we may consider that he epitomizes the love of storytelling. He spins an entire web of family myths, the most memorable being perhaps the tall tales about Lalla the grandmother and the drunk father. Being a spinner of yarns is a family trait and heritage: eloquence runs in the family. Recording or rather, reconstructing family history is therefore doubly significant: it helps forging the narrator’s sense of identity by making him part of a family, moreover, it links him to the lineage of eloquent storytellers thus confirming the prodigal his legitimacy.

The act of blowing up insignificant details, that is, recording by exaggeration was a characteristic trait of Ceylonese women. The narrator's mother is shown to have shared this talent:

She belonged to a type of Ceylonese family whose women would take the minutest reaction from one another and blow it up into a tremendously exciting tale, then later use it as an example of someone's strain of character. If anything kept their generation alive it was this recording by exaggeration. The silence of tea estates and no doubt my mother's sense of theatre and romance (...) combined the edited delicacies of fiction with the last era of a colonial Ceylon. (Ondaatje, 1982: 143)

The act of storytelling is shown to resemble in its nature the activation of a clockwork or the act of blowing life into papier-mâché puppets. The narrator mentions relatives from his parents' generation who stood in his memory like frozen opera: "I wanted to touch them into words." (Ondaatje, 1982: 16) The magic act begins in a carnivalesque time: "It began with that moment when I was dancing and laughing wildly within the comfort and order of my life."

One of the narrator's many aunts performs the same act of revival: even though half deaf and blind she has the power of transforming the 'flat characters' of an old photograph into sensuous, life-like people:

Before I leave she points to a group photograph of a fancy dress party that shows herself and my grandmother Lalla among the crowd. She has looked at it for years and has in this way memorized everyone's place in the picture. She reels off names and laughs at the facial expressions she can no longer see. It has moved tangible, palpable, into her brain, the way memory invades the present in those who are old, the way gardens invade houses here, the way her tiny body steps into mine as intimate as anything I have witnessed and I have to force myself to be gentle with this frailty in the midst of my embrace. (Ondaatje, 1982: 92)

Photographs are therefore important means of structuring memory. The snapshots from the Ondaatje family album thus interact with texts: stories and photographs, text and image together build up the space where the narrator belongs to. It is at the confluence of image and text that the identity of the narrative and of the narrator is formed.

Place and Homespace

As Carol E. Leon claims, *Running in the Family* is a travel narrative which explores alternatives to traditional forms of travel writing. It

creates the homespace as the narrative crosses both generic and disciplinary boundaries.

Conjuring the past and the homeland as well as the longing to return pervades the diasporic narrative. It is along the borders of fact and fiction that Ondaatje creates the homespace that he can understand, articulate and belong to.

Although Ondaatje's homespace is superimposed on an empirical location (Sri Lanka), he experiences spaces in flux, "dwellings in travel". As in all good travel narrative the outer expedition is undertaken simultaneously with the exploration of emotional and social geographies. The memoir is thus a quest for identity of self and place.

From the very beginning Ceylon is enveloped in a dream: "What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto." (Ondaatje, 1982: 16) The preliminary part of the memoir written in italics differs from the narrative as here the narrator puts on a third person singular mask, distancing himself from the traveller experiencing the journey. The traveller is therefore Othered.

Travel to the homespace may unsettle the diasporic individual's sense of identity. At the same time, the homeland can never be completely reclaimed: loss of the homeland also means loss of self.

Ondaatje evokes the homespace of Ceylon as "sites of exploration". He describes the maps generated by colonial activity as "old portraits", translations growing from mythic shapes into accuracy:

The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape,—Serendip, Ratnapida ("island of gems"), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon and Ceylon—the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. (Ondaatje, 1982: 54)

Ondaatje implies that the imperial acts of delimiting and mapping cannot subdue the fluidity of the place of Ceylon. This elusiveness of the island is a metaphor of Ondaatje's writing.

Ceylon is juxtaposed with Canada, and, relevantly enough, the text dissolves the points of arrival and departure. Back in Canada, Ondaatje plays a tape with nocturnal sounds in Ceylon. Two separate places are thus superimposed while Canada loses its initial position as a point of reference. The diasporic individual's experience of home is always ambiguous. As Iain Chambers says,

While 'going home' recalls the nostalgic associations of a mythologized point of origins (our mothers and fathers), 'being at home' in the world involves finding ourselves in a wider, shifting, but more flexible, framework in which our mothers and fathers, bonds and traditions, the myths we know to be myths yet cling to, cherish and dream, exist alongside other stories, other fragments of memory and traces of time. (Chambers 1990, 104 in Leon, 2003, 16)

Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to highlight connections between place and memory in a diasporic narrative about the homespace. First I dealt with the issue of memory in the retrieval of national and personal history coming to the conclusion that there is no strict division between personal and public history, 'fact' and 'fiction', story and history. Secondly, I focused on the act of writing and storytelling in the context of the materiality of culture as well as the search for identity. Finally I pointed out that reconstructing or rather, creating the homespace is an important means of forging identity and a sense of belonging in Ondaatje's narrative which does not allow for lament, bitterness or regret about the past, but professes an immense joy.

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