

“We live permanently in the recurrence  
of our own stories”:  
Michael Ondaatje’s *Divisadero*

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WHEN READING *DIVISADERO*, Michael Ondaatje’s most recent novel, readers who are familiar with his oeuvre may get the impression that the author is recycling in a way he never has before. Characters and events from previous novels resurface, as do Ondaatje’s **now familiar disruptions of the conventions of the novel** and several of his major thematic and formal concerns. This recycling — of events, characters, thematic interests, and formal characteristics — is, of course, **not new, neither to literature in general nor to Ondaatje’s writing in particular**: *The English Patient* features characters from *In the Skin of a Lion*, and *Running in the Family* shares with the latter, among others, its indebtedness to oral narratives. What is new, however, is the way this recycling so strongly forms part of the novel’s essence as it adds to its overall formal and thematic preoccupation with repetition, doubling, and splitting. Much like Ondaatje’s **other novels, *Divisadero*, “the Spanish word for ‘division”** (142), **foregrounds that both sign and subject are always already divided, split, double, and in the process of becoming**; but never before did these poststructuralist ideas and the emphasis on the interrelationship between language and subjectivity appear so central.

It is widely acknowledged that Ondaatje has always been interested in the poetic potential of words and obsessed with the weaknesses inherent in language and its relationship to subjectivity. *Coming Through Slaughter*, his first foray into the genre of the novel, already forcefully linked the disintegration of its protagonists with the breakdown of language<sup>1</sup> and *In the Skin of a Lion* portrayed a protagonist’s — albeit more successful — **struggle with becoming and being a speaking subject**,<sup>2</sup> adding weight to the idea that the subject never succeeds in coinciding with itself. Both sign and subject, in other words, are shown to be split.

The question as to why, in *Divisadero*, these concerns are not simply present in the background but formative and defining can be answered in multiple ways. One explanation is that *Divisadero* is the first of Ondaatje's novels to feature a fictional character that is a (professional) writer suffering from a trauma, and that can moreover be argued to be writing the text we are reading. It is no secret that most of Ondaatje's novels have a strong metafictional bent and do not hesitate to question and problematize the process of writing. Think, for instance, of *Coming Through Slaughter*, where "Ondaatje" makes his appearance towards the end of the novel and questions his affinities with the main character; *Running in the Family*, in which he repeatedly comments on the difficulties involved in reconstructing his family history; and *In the Skin of a Lion*, where it is never sure who is telling; at the beginning, Hana is presented as gathering the story, but Patrick, on his turn, is argued to feel "comfortable joking with [Hana], gathering her perspective" (222; emphasis added). The roles are never fixed. None of Ondaatje's previous novels had a writer as protagonist, a shift that allows him to explore his interest in language and subjectivity to the full. Not unrelated to this is the fact that *Divisadero* can be called Michael Ondaatje's most fictional novel so far. Although the novel obviously does contain references to real-life events and places (e.g. the Gulf War, Las Vegas), it lacks the strong historical anchorage characteristic of his other work.<sup>3</sup> *Coming Through Slaughter's* focus on the jazz cornetist Buddy Bolden, *Running in the Family's* investigation into the Ondaatje family history, *In the Skin of a Lion's* attempt at reconstructing the building of Toronto, *The English Patient's* interest in desert exploration and the Second World War, and *Anil's Ghost's* spotlight on the Sri Lankan civil war did not prevent Ondaatje from exploring the borders of language and structure or portraying divided subjects, but these concerns were never as strongly tailored to one another as in *Divisadero*. The emphasis in his latest novel is much more on writing. In what follows, I will therefore focus on the novel's structure and themes, paying close attention to the idea of splitting and doubling as it is explored and skilfully interwoven on the level of language, character, and textual composition.

### "It's like a villanelle" (136)

A description within the novel of the villanelle, a genre characteristically preoccupied with repetition, proves to be of vital importance when

interpreting *Divisadero's* narrative structure. The "inclination of going back to events in our past" is associated with "the way the villanelle's form refuses to move forward in linear development, circling instead at those familiar moments of emotion" (136). As the actual reading of the novel cannot but proceed in a linear way, the potential significance of most of these non-identical repetitions, the importance of which has been stressed by most reviewers, dawns on the reader only a posteriori. This postmodern text demands that the reader be actively engaged in the interpretation process.

The first part of the novel is preceded by an italicized text, where an I-narrator who addresses an anonymous "you" — **who may be interpreted as the reader — is someone who used to be called Anna. The fact that the text opens with the phrase "When I come to lie in your arms" is striking, especially since "lie" both connotes "to lie down" and "to tell lies."** The reader is immediately warned to be wary, the more so since the speaker presents herself as a fan of Colette's, "*a writer who remarked that her only virtue was self-doubt*" (emphasis added). Since she notes that "*the raw truth of an incident never ends,*" one might expect a narrative that goes back to the past in order to deal with the trauma she suffered, and that explains why Anna has not seen Coop, the boy next door who saw his parents murdered and came to live on their farm, and her sister Claire since late adolescence. It soon becomes clear, however, that the ambiguities present in the italicized text are symptomatic and that the narrative is going to be a complicated one. Anna opens the first chapter with a description of Claire, which would not be problematic if she were not describing her sister as an *adult*<sup>4</sup> riding *alone* in the hills. Anna, in other words, seems to be describing something she cannot possibly have witnessed, a textual element that suggests the fictional world will be an inextricable mix of fact and fiction.

The idea that what is told should be taken with a grain of salt is supported by the fact that Anna corrects herself while narrating. At first, she seems quite confident of her ability to recount the day she and Claire were smashed down by a horse: "Claire recalls whistling as she entered the horse barn" (18). But in the next paragraph she has to admit that "there is a broken path in both our memories towards this incident" (18). She starts telling the event anew: "Claire recalls herself whistling as she entered the barn" (18). **Telling already seems to be retelling — no phrasing will ever be completely satisfactory.**

To complicate matters even more, Anna suddenly disappears as a narrator and is replaced by an omniscient narrator who puts into words the event that tore the family apart (Anna's **father's discovery of his** daughter making love with Coop), and the adult lives of Coop, Anna, and Claire. A number of striking textual elements add to the complexity of this narrative break. A question Anna asks herself — "**Who was Coop, really?**" (16) — **re-emerges the moment she disappears as an I-narrator**: "Who is Coop, really? [Anna and Claire] asked themselves" (21). What is more, the omniscient narrator opens with a description of Coop that echoes the beginning of the chapter titled "**The Orphan,**" where Anna describes Claire in the same setting, and uses similar phrasing. Compare "Coop began living in the *grandfather's cabin*. From there, on the *high ridge*, he could look out onto black oaks and *buckeye trees*, where a glacier of *mist* appeared caught for an hour or so each morning" (21; emphasis added) with Anna's description of Claire: "**By our grandfather's cabin**, on the *high ridge*, opposite a slope of *buckeye trees* [ . . . ] Claire moves slowly on the ridge above the two valleys full of morning *mist*" (7; emphasis added). The similarities between these passages are striking and seem to suggest that a process of rewriting and reformulating is taking place.

As the narrative proceeds, it also becomes clear that the italicized text at the beginning of the novel is not so unproblematic as it first appeared. The first part of the italicized text is repeated on pages 141-42, albeit not literally, and the anonymous "you" is identified as Rafael, the man Anna meets in the house of the French writer she is doing research on and who becomes her lover. The second part of the italicized text reappears, slightly modified, at the end of the novel (267-68), and the fact that Anna has changed her name is repeated several times as well (90, 138). In other words, what appeared to be the "beginning" of the novel is shown to be a repetition: it is impossible to say which phrasing came "first." The "beginning" as such appears to be a fiction since non-identical repetitions undermine the belief in originality and singularity. The possibility of repeating, and, consequently, of distorting, is present from the "start."<sup>5</sup>

The remarkable resemblances between several phases of the protagonists' **lives add to the idea that everything is rewritten and recycled**: Anna and Coop do not mention their names to their new lovers (69, 115); Coop is not only beaten up by Anna's father but also by a group

of gamblers, and it is again his lover who puts herself between him and his aggressor(s) (31-32, 131-32).<sup>6</sup> The coloured flags Anna hangs at the cabin Coop lives in appear on several locations as well (29, 161), and the day Coop mistakes Claire for Anna reminds one of the moment he called Anna “Claire” (19-20, 152-53). The description of their adult lives makes these seem to a large extent a repetition of their youths.

In this respect, “**The Person Formerly Known as Anna,**” halfway into the novel, may be considered a key chapter. It is there that Anna, a literary scholar who finds herself studying the work of Lucien Segura in France, resurfaces as a first-person narrator and observes that

there was nothing more assuring than a mask. Under the mask she could rewrite herself into any place, in any form. 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. (142)<sup>7</sup>

It looks as if Anna has constructed the story, something that is also suggested by Robert McGill in his review of the novel. The aforementioned similarities and repetitions seem to add to the idea of Anna as the hidden architect, as do several of her remarks: “I don’t know if this is what I am doing, from this distance, *imagining* the life of my sister, and *imagining* the future of Coop” (137; emphasis added).<sup>8</sup> In the first chapter, Anna was already shown to have a vivid imagination at her disposal: “I wondered *even then* how [Coop] would survive or live in a future world” (17; emphasis added).

The third-person narrator, in other words, seems to have given Anna the opportunity to watch the events from a distance and to fictionalize, turning the narrative itself into “a vehicle for her to gain a new perspective on herself” (McGill 19). Anna was brutally separated from her mother at birth, and when she was sixteen, circumstances forced her to part company from Coop and the rest of her family. The fact that Anna keeps repeating these events hints at their traumatic nature, and putting them into words might be seen as a means to help her cope with this multiple loss, or as it is noted in the first italicized text: “*We have art . . . so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth.*” The fact that “A wall of *black light* holds [Anna] away from” (75; emphasis added) the traumatic

departure from her family moreover suggests the black sun image used by Julia Kristeva in her book on melancholia and artistic sublimation as a temporary triumph over sorrow.

As Kristeva suggests, melancholia is related to an unsuccessful entrance into the symbolic order and the inability to fruitfully disconnect from the (m)other. In her discussion of Kristeva's *Black Sun*, Noëlle McAfee notes, "Whereas all people must eventually lose their mothers . . . most will compensate for this lost object of desire by using language, words, to chase what has been lost" (63). It is this last resource that is unavailable to the melancholic, who "is like an orphan in the symbolic order" (McAfee 63). Anna's **mother disappeared before Anna** entered the symbolic realm, before, in other words, she could name what had been taken from her. When Anna's **father discovers his sixteen-year-old daughter making love to Coop** and separates her from him, Anna is "naked as an *infant*" (31; **emphasis added**), **reminding one** of the moment she was born and lost her mother. In addition, Coop is said to have been "handed the moderating role a mother would have had" (22).<sup>9</sup> In view of Coop's **implicit and explicit comparison with her mother**, it could be argued that the distressing separation from Coop revives Anna's **tragic separation from her mother**. According to Kristeva, "Conscious of our being doomed to lose our loves, we grieve perhaps even more when we glimpse in our lover the shadow of a long lost former loved one" (5).

Consequently, Anna's **first reaction to her separation from Coop** is one of overwhelming silence (36, 144), a wordlessness that is echoed in Coop after seeing his parents killed (8), in Rafael after a love lost (73, 90), and in Lucien, who never met his biological father. They all learn to respond to their losses and grief by means of art (in the widest possible sense: music, literature, poker, gold digging), "because," as Anna justifies her obsession with history and writing, "if you do not plunder the past, the absence feeds on you" (141).

When one identifies Anna as the writer of the chapters discussed above, the chapter "**Le Manouche,**" which is written in the third person and precedes "**The Person Formerly Known as Anna,**" comes to occupy a special place. It deals with Anna's **time in France — the "present,"** in other words — and the repression of her childhood trauma(s). "**Le Manouche**" is situated in between the chapters that deal with the adult Coop and Claire, and that we assume to have been constructed

by Anna. Does this suggest Anna should be seen as the architect of “Le Manouche” as well and that the chapter is an instance of — as Philippe Lejeune puts it — “autobiography in the third person”? Is this what is suggested by the similarities with the other chapters? There is, for instance, the reference to *Le rouge et le noir* (77), which can be linked with the chapter “The Red and the Black” and a club called “the Stendhal” (106)<sup>10</sup>; the fact that Anna and Coop do not tell Rafael and Bridget, their respective lovers, their names (69, 115); the question “Who is she?” (76), which resembles “Who was Coop?” (16, 21); and the description of a woman in nature, which reminds one of Claire (7, 63). Or does the French title — the only one in the first part of the novel (*Le rouge et le noir* is translated) — suggest that “Le Manouche” should be perceived differently? The narrative text offers no simple answers. The questions of who is narrating and what is true and what imagined — within the fictional world — seem impossible to answer.

As the first part of the novel is followed by an italicized passage in which Anna acts as a first-person narrator (167), it is tempting to suggest that this adds to the idea that Anna wrote everything that can be found in between the italicized texts. On the other hand, since the “first” italicized text is a repetition, perceiving it as a stable boundary to the narrative is highly problematic. In addition, the second italicized text simultaneously follows the first part and precedes the last two parts: it is both an ending and a beginning. The second italicized text itself, moreover, seems to comment on the impossibility of drawing clear boundaries between, for instance, fact and fiction or beginning and end. Anna and Rafael are following a river when suddenly their “river meets a road and covers it, or from another perspective, where the road has come upon the river and sunk below its surface, as if from a life lived to a life imagined” (167). Fact — “a life lived” — and fiction — “a life imagined” — seem to mingle in such a way that it becomes impossible to assign absolute authority to either of them or to distinguish them from one another: “They merge, the river and the road, like two lives, a tale told backwards and a tale told first” (167).<sup>11</sup>

The same can be argued with regard to the relationship between the first part and the last two parts of the novel. Although the layout changes after the first part (the titles of the chapters no longer appear on separate pages) and another set of characters is introduced, the repetition of certain textual elements clearly continues. The descriptions of

the lives of Lucien — **the writer Anna is studying** — **and of his mother** and neighbours Roman and Marie-Neige, as remarked by most reviewers, manifestly mirror the lives of Anna, Coop, and Claire.

The quasi-incestuous relationship<sup>12</sup> between Anna and Coop, for instance, is repeated several times: Roman and Marie-Neige, disguised as brother and sister, make love in the moonlight (213), and Marie-Neige, like a sister to Lucien, has sex with him by the river (251-52). Lucien, like Anna's **father, witnesses one of his children enjoying** "the needs of an adult" (229),<sup>13</sup> and just like Coop, Lucien ends up with a severely damaged eye<sup>14</sup> (33-34, 206) and is described as "speaking in tongues" (44, 201). We learn that Anna loved reading Dumas (28), something that is echoed in Lucien's **and Marie-Neige's exploration of** the same novels (200). A blue table keeps reappearing<sup>15</sup>: in the cabin where Coop and Anna discover their passion for one another (30),<sup>16</sup> in Roman and Marie-Neige's **kitchen (197), and in Lucien Segura's house,** where Anna is living (70). Rivers as well are omnipresent: on the farm of Anna's **father (37), as the last card in a game of poker (58), and near Segura's house (87).**<sup>17</sup> Just as Coop mistakes Anna and Claire (19-20, 23, 152-53), Lucien confuses his daughters (224), and Marie-Neige takes Lucien to be Roman (259). This last case of mistaken identity also appears in the novels Lucien Segura is supposed to have written under a pseudonym (265-66), and one could therefore speak of a *mise en abyme*.

Other passages as well suggest a continuity between the first part and the rest of the novel, hinting at a mutual architect. In the last chapter of the first part, Claire tells Coop "you need to say your good-byes" (164), a remark that gains in significance when it turns out that the last chapter of *Divisadero* is entitled "Say Your Good-Byes" (262).<sup>18</sup> Roman is said to be working on "the twisted tower" (232) of a church, a tower Anna elaborately describes in "The Person Formerly Known as Anna" **and which looks like the water tower on her father's farm (135-36).** Lucien appears in his own novels as "One-Eyed Jacques" (265), which reminds one of the movie *One-Eyed Jacks* (43), mentioned in the chapter on Coop's **life as a cardsharp, and of Anna's allusion to "the Jack of Hearts" (141) — one of the two Jacks displayed in profile and thus showing only one eye.**<sup>19</sup>

The similarities are too numerous and prominent to be ignored. They seem to hint in the direction of Anna as the engineer of Lucien

Segura's **life story**.<sup>20</sup> She appears to have melded fact with fiction into an intricate mixture: "So I find the lives of Coop and my sister and my father everywhere (I draw portraits of them *everywhere*)" (268), a process that may have been influenced as well by the fact that Anna is a literary scholar (89). It appears that Anna has not only imagined a future for Coop and Claire, and talked about her past, but also infused her biographical interest in Lucien Segura with autobiographical concerns. By doing so, she has successfully blurred the traditional boundary separating fiction, biography, and autobiography, and the one distinguishing author, narrator, and character, making it impossible to formulate neat categories. It should be stressed that there is no one-on-one relationship between the characters: Lucien, for instance, reminds us of Anna's father, as well as of Anna and Coop. It is, moreover, not the case that the **"first" part, consisting of the stories of Anna, Coop, and Claire, can be unproblematically interpreted as the "original" on which the next two parts are modelled: the passages mutually influence one another and change the way every single one of them is read. Every description is, as Derrida puts it, "in itself divided or multiplied in advance by its structure of repeatability" (Limited 48).**

Throughout, as becomes clear, Anna seems to have been compulsively repeating and trying to give a voice to the traumatic, repressed events of her past. It is significant that she is referred to, or rather refers to herself, as "a creature of a hundred natures and voices" (90). The reader has to accept that it is impossible to decide which mask is the most "authentic" one. Whatever voice Anna uses, be it that of a first-person or third-person narrator, she is always already wearing the mask of language. To quote Terry Eagleton:

it is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but *me*. (130)

Whatever story Anna tells, no linguistic rendition will be able to capture **"the truth."** **Neither she nor the persons she portrays are ever present *as such*** in the stories she creates, as she is always already *rewriting*. It is the telling itself that matters and the combination of the tales.

To complicate matters even more, the echoes among characters include some from other Ondaatje novels. The names Anna and Claire,

for instance, sound a lot like Hana and Clara, who appear in *The English Patient* as well as *In the Skin of a Lion*. In the latter, Hana, like Anna, is presented as the architect of the narrative<sup>21</sup> and Clara is pictured as “a spirit” (*Skin* 79) or benevolent ghost. This is a description that — as will be argued — **initially seems to apply to Claire as well.** In addition, Rafael’s father, the nameless thief in *Divisadero*, reminds one of Caravaggio.<sup>22</sup> In *Divisadero*, it is mentioned that Rafael’s father left Italy after the Second World War (82), which is the setting of *The English Patient*. It is also noted that he was married and once had to disguise himself wearing women’s clothes (82-83), **elements that are linked with Caravaggio in *In the Skin of a Lion* (*Skin* 204-05).** Anil and Katharine spring to mind as well, as both women stab their lovers (*Anil* 101; *English* 163), the way Anna stabs her father (31-32). These similarities are but the tip of the iceberg, suggesting that if the reader is familiar with Ondaatje’s other novels, **this will probably influence the way *Divisadero* is read.** The idea that texts always refer to other texts, signifiers to other signifiers, and that originality is an illusion is, in other words, exemplified not only by the fact that the stories told in *Divisadero* continually refer to one another, obfuscating clear boundaries, but also by the many references to other literary texts by Ondaatje himself, as well as Balzac, Dumas, Stendhal, and Dickens,<sup>23</sup> and even to television series. The doublings seem interminable. One could wonder whether all of these echoes are **“Anna’s” doing. To what extent can they be seen as projections of her personal obsessions?** Should they be interpreted as examples of “Ondaatje” speaking through “Anna”? And how about the distinction between **“Anna’s” voices and “Ondaatje’s,”** and the reader’s function in all of this? Once again, the questions outnumber the answers.

### **“And perhaps this is the story of twinship” (141)**

The idea that non-identical repetitions and masks should be considered the norm, that originality and pure singularity are illusions, and that boundaries are never stable is not only present on the level of the novel’s structure, but thematically as well. The thought that nothing is unique and nobody ever fully coincides with her — or himself rematerializes throughout the novel in the form of the double and the question of naming, a constant in Ondaatje’s novels, **and a theme that again stresses the relationship between language and subjectivity.**

When discussing these thematic doubles, it is vital to keep in mind the discussion with respect to the novel's **complex narrative situation** and structure. It is often difficult to tell who is at the source of these doubles: is it "**Anna, who can be argued to be the engineer of the stories**" and who is, after all, presented as a dyed-in-the-wool reader (16) familiar with tales of twinship (141); is it "ourselves" as readers; is it "Ondaatje"; or is it an obscure combination of any of these or other instances? Is it at all possible to distinguish between these instances and to define them? Rather than advancing univocal answers to these questions, I will use phrasings such as "the novel encourages," "the text both supports and undermines," not in order to evade the problem, but so as to keep the questions as open as possible and to stress the fact that we can only rely on the text and our plausible interpretation of it.

The most obvious doubles in the novel are Claire and Anna. From the very beginning, the reader is led to believe that the two girls are twins, a logical conclusion in view of Anna's **reference to "A father, his two eleven-year-old daughters"** (8; emphasis added) and Lydia Mendez, who "was *our* mother" (9; emphasis added). It is only later that Claire is revealed to be "the daughter of another mother" (11), and that they are, in fact, pseudo-twins. At first sight, the novel seems to encourage traditional allegorical interpretations of their relationship. It is rather remarkable, for instance, that Claire is described as physically impaired, especially in view of the fact that a double's **physicality is often used as a metaphor for its allegorical meaning** (Robert Louis Stevenson's **portrayal of Mr. Hyde is prototypical**). Claire's **limp**<sup>24</sup> could be interpreted as an indication of her representing a repressed or unconscious part of Anna's mental self. Another, less psychoanalytically informed allegorical interpretation hinted at is that of the traditional virgin/whore dichotomy. There are no references whatsoever to Claire's **sexuality, and at one moment she is even compared to a Madonna** (102). The reference is an ambiguous one, since Claire's **appearance as a chaste virgin is revealed to be one of the roles she, being a lawyer's assistant, has to play so as "to get people to talk"** (102). **These allegorical interpretations do not take a reader very far, and it becomes clear that different interests are at stake.** Polarized distinctions such as the one between virgin and whore appear to be highly problematic.

Although the girls initially do not mind being compared, their eagerness to define an identity of their own increases and culminates in an

incident in the barn on the farm of Anna's father, where Coop accidentally calls Anna "Claire" (19). As a result, neither of the girls is able to tell who she is. The event seems to emphasize the problematic relationship between a name and its bearer, and between language and subjectivity. As Derrida notes, "The proper name is a mark: something like confusion can occur at any time because the proper name bears confusion within itself" ("Roundtable" 108), which is another way of saying that our name is never fully ours or controlled by us. Anna is not Claire, but neither is she (identical with the name) "Anna"<sup>25</sup>: "The proper name should not be taken as an example of an indivisible immediate unity between sign and bearer" (Stocker 56). The sense of alienation involved in the incident makes the girls realize they "would now need to be distinctly Anna and distinctly Claire" (19).<sup>26</sup> The clearly demarcated identities here depicted necessarily remain illusory. Self and other are always linked and we cannot escape the predicament of being (in language). The uncanny effect generated by the event is reinforced each time the confusion is repeated, not only between Anna and Claire (23; 152-53), but also between Lucien and Roman (259) and between Lucien's daughters (224). The double is not presented as an embodiment of the unconscious, but rather appears as a means to question the notion of identity and its relation to language, and to foreground the idea that no subject can ever be fully self-identical.

Interestingly, Juliana de Nooy and Gordon Slethaug have associated several of the insights put forward by poststructuralist thinkers with contemporary cultural and literary examples of twins and the double. Psychoanalysis has changed since the earliest theorizations of the double, and so have culture and literature, and it would be naïve to presume that these shifts have not affected its use. Although Slethaug's conclusions are more radical than De Nooy's, both scholars emphasize that the double is now indeed often seen as an ideal way "to question the very notions of sameness and difference" (De Nooy 5), rather than as a "projection of the unconscious" (De Nooy 2), an insight *Divisadero* seems to support.

The idea that a name and its bearer cannot be equated remains important. Several characters, Anna as well as Lucien and Rafael's father, are presented as dissatisfied with the names they have been given<sup>27</sup> and appear to think they can start afresh with a name of their own choosing, assuming that the name will enable them to find an identity of

their own.<sup>28</sup> What they appear to long for is a name that expresses their truest, innermost selves. As J. Hillis Miller remarks with respect to a person “who takes a pseudonym”:

He does not feel that he coincides wholly with himself, or with the given name and the patronymic which he wears before the world. He may find who he is by pretending to be someone else, by taking another name, another style, and wearing them as one wears a new suit of clothes on the assumption that “clothes make the man.” . . . [He hopes] to express obliquely some aspect of himself, or perhaps to take on a self where there was none before if the name and habit should happen to stick. (81)

These attempts, however, are doomed to fail. As a “name constitutes [people] without being anything of themselves, condemning them to be what, beneath the mask, they are not, to being merged with the mask” (Derrida, “Aphorism” 427), **no name can ever be quite right or fitting: Rafael’s father is destined to carry on using “names like passwords, all of them with a brief lifespan”** (182). As mentioned before, the sense of alienation accompanying this is the predicament of subjectivity, of the fact that **“to be” is necessarily “to be in language.”**

Anna appears to be the most tenacious of the three, and her refusal to reveal her new name could be attributed to a desire to keep it as uncontaminated as possible and free from expectations. One could wonder, however, whether a truly secret name could still be called a name. As Niall Lucy remarks:

If my name were truly proper, if it were truly mine exclusively, no one — **including myself** — **would know how to say it, to repeat it, to exchange it.** No one could even know it *as* a name. Even if someone had a name that had never been used before in history . . . it could function as a name only to the extent that it could be recognized as conforming to a code. (104)

A name can function only when it is inscribed in a differential system, when it can be used and misused. What is more, in the narrative, and one could argue *tout court*, Anna is present only as “Anna.” She moreover seems unable to dissociate from her given name and gives herself away when she writes: “It is in fact *I, Anna*, who should be identified as the serious sister” (137; emphasis added).

The idea that “the name . . . can never match our ‘real’ selves” (Douzinas 10) is insisted upon, as the tendency to attribute meaning to a name and to see it as a key to someone’s personality is discredited. With respect to Lucien Segura: “Sometimes he lost that crucial part of himself that allowed him to feel secure. *Segura*. The irony of his name was not lost on him. The safe world disappeared” (223). In view of his psychotic inclinations, Lucien’s **first name** — *lux, light* — **could be seen** as highly ironic too. The distance that is created between a name and its bearer is especially relevant regarding certain characters who, in the first place because of their names, appear as allegorical doubles: as messengers or healers who inspire other characters to face their repressed inner selves. Advancing their names as arguments in the discussion, then, becomes highly problematic. It is interesting to have a closer look at characters such as Bridget, Claire, Rafael, and Astolphe, to see how the text both supports and undermines an allegorical psychoanalytical reading that is incited by their names.

First of all, there is Bridget, Cooper’s **lover, a heroine addict and singer**. It is tempting to read her name as “bridge it” and to assign her the task of helping Coop deal with his traumatic past. Several elements underscore such a reading. For one, Bridget is described as reviving Coop while making love (117), and when she says his name, “holding it up like a sword pulled out of a lake” (117), it is almost as if she is helping him to be born again. In addition, she is repeatedly associated with gold (117, 125). This is especially relevant as Coop, if he wants to go back to Petaluma — **to his past** — **will have to cross the Golden Gate Bridge**, which separates San Francisco from Petaluma. The question is whether this is sufficient to hand Bridget the role of benevolent double. The text itself remains undecided as to Bridget’s **position vis-à-vis Coop**: Cooper himself does “not know whether she was a lens to focus the past or a fog to obliterate it” (119), and indirectly, she is responsible for Cooper’s amnesia, for blowing up the bridge to his past: if it were not for her, the gamblers would not have beaten his memories out of him.

A second, equally ambiguous figure is Claire. Although her name conjures up ideas of light and brightness, and even though Claire is twice presented as the one who saves Coop’s **life, it again proves difficult** to unproblematically assign her the role of messenger or guardian angel, something I have already pointed out with respect to her relationship with Anna. On the one hand, the words used to convey Coop’s **rescue**

add to the interpretation of Claire as a benevolent spirit or bringer of light. Claire is made to resemble an apparition when she is described as “the voice” and “that figure” (131); when she is “dragging [Coop] through the dark yard” (131) and stretching “him out before the fire in the empty, dark house” (36), it is as though she is bringing Cooper back to consciousness — and not only in a literal sense.

On the other hand, several textual elements seem to cast doubt on such an allegorical reading and undercut the expectations that are created by her name. What to think, for instance, of the fact that Claire, as I have already mentioned, is said to play the role of “a creature of empathy” (102) so as “to get people to talk” (102)? And although Claire is indeed the one stimulating Coop to cross the Golden Gate Bridge (164), Coop has no clue as to who Claire is (he does not even know her name): “she could tell he recognized nothing. It was as if she did not exist” (155).<sup>29</sup> One could wonder whether Coop will ever be able to reconnect with his past and whether crossing the bridge will turn out to be more than just a physical voyage. What is more, Claire herself initially does not seem to be able to see the bridge as a connection to her past, but rather as a clear boundary. She is said to be “living two distinct lives” (99), travelling back and forth between Petaluma and San Francisco. In Petaluma, she allows herself to let go of her constraints, but she does not seem able to fully reconcile the two parts of her life. When she is driving with Coop across the bridge, “She wanted to fold the two halves of her life together like a map” (164) — **and these two halves could be past and present, as well as the divided parts of her present life.** In other words, interpreting Claire in an allegorical way could be argued to do an injustice to her inner complexity and the relationship between the characters.

A third character whose name invites an allegorical reading is Rafael, the man Anna meets in France and who becomes her lover. The link with the archangel Rafael, who brings about healing, is easily made. Interestingly, on the way from San Francisco — **where Anna normally lives — to Petaluma, there is a city called San Rafael and another one called Rafael Village.** As was the case with Bridget, one could argue that this further testifies to Rafael’s role as a messenger or healer, as someone on Anna’s way to (a reconciliation with) her traumatic past. In addition, Rafael is repeatedly associated with light and it is said that “There appeared to be no darkness in him” (73).

The verb *appear*, however, is of crucial importance and it turns out that Rafael has a traumatic past of his own to deal with. Rafael as well, in other words, is more complex than is suggested by an allegorical reading initiated by his name. Additionally, the way Anna meets Rafael is highly remarkable: she encounters him in a clearing in the forest (66-67) while he is playing his guitar, and later on, when he pays a visit to an attic that used to be a dovecot, “feathers paste themselves onto his back” (85), almost grotesquely transforming him into an angel. These descriptions are too striking to be taken for granted, especially in view of the fact that other passages with similar Romantic characteristics are often dismantled. Portrayals of characters contemplating or enjoying the beauty of nature are frequently disrupted by an act of violence that strips the scene of its serenity and discloses nature not as a place of solace but of potential danger: Anna shortens her walks in the countryside after bumping into a group of hunters (63), and Lucien, staring out of a window, is attacked by a dog breaking through the glass (204). Equally striking is that, earlier in the novel, there is a reference to “Claire and Anna” wearing “their San Rafael dresses” (21), making the appearance of Rafael all the more conspicuous. Is Anna aware of this? Who is playing a trick on whom? The text is our only guideline and has long ceased being a gateway to an absolute truth.

Images that may be related to the unconscious reoccur in the description of Rafael’s father, who is described as Lucien Segura’s “echo” (176) and who, in an attempt to photograph him together with Lucien, turns out as “a dark blur, something unknown . . . a bat in the daylight” (187). What is more, Astolphe, one of the names he temporarily adopts, is the one who, in *Orlando Furioso*, reunites Orlando with his wits. The fact that Rafael’s father says to Lucien “You have lost or misplaced your wits” (178), moreover, seems to heighten the relevance of this association and contributes to the interpretation of Astolphe as the one who confronts Lucien with his repressed self.

However, as it is only after he has made that remark that Rafael’s father takes on the name Astolphe, the causal link established between name and bearer appears somewhat contrived. Since Rafael’s father continues changing names, assigning too much importance to one of them seems incongruous. The passage where Astolphe turns out as “a dark blur” (187), moreover, need not necessarily be read in terms of the unconscious; it can be just as easily related to his resistance to being

photographed and being equated with his image (90).<sup>30</sup> Just as he will never find a name that expresses his innermost self, he will never be able to fully coincide with an image: that is the burden every subject has to carry (Lapsley 74-75).

Apart from my remark on Lucien Segura's **ill-fitting surname**, I have been mainly concerned with first names. The reason is that the French author is the only protagonist with a surname, the one he inherited from his mother. Cooper could be seen as another exception as his family name is used as a first name (10). The absence of family names could be linked to the pervasive absence of fathers in *Divisadero* (as well as in most of Ondaatje's novels), **and to a refusal or inability to identify with the (name of the) father**. Claire, for instance, never met her real father, and Anna banished hers after he tried to murder Coop. As the subject only emerges in the symbolic order of language, it could be argued that not being talked about is one of the worst things that could happen to a person. It is, moreover, not only the family names that are missing; the fathers themselves are hardly ever heard. Anna's **father does not even** get one line of speech in the text. The fact that the characters do not seem to succeed in identifying with their family names only adds to their sense of alienation in the symbolic realm of language, and to the identity crises through which they are going.

**"Some birds in the almost-dark are flying as close to their reflections as possible" (273)**

This is the "last" line of *Divisadero* and it is a description in full accordance with the novel's **main concerns**. **Just as the birds can never coincide** with their reflections, the sign and the subject are shown to be split and are never self-identical. The title of the book can be appropriately read as both "division" and "to gaze at something from a distance" (142), and it soon becomes clear that no division is final and no gaze all-embracing. **"The past is always carried into the present by small things"** (77), and everything that is told appears to be the result of non-identical repetitions. The validity of binary thinking and thinking in strict categories is brought into question as oppositions such as fact-fiction, biography-autobiography, and self-other are deconstructed. The characters that emerge as doubles question the consequences of the subject's **necessary** immersion in language, where every sign unavoidably refers to another. Although it is possible to interpret Bridget, Claire, Rafael, and Astolphe

as messengers or allegorical doubles, ironic comments on the impossibility of establishing a causal link between a name and its bearer simultaneously seem to defuse such a reading. Form and context are perfectly geared to one another as they both foreground the idea of division and doubling. And just as Anna will never find the perfect words for her story, we will never find the perfect interpretation. “Only the rereading counts” (136): the end is just a beginning.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, De Smyter.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Schumacher.

<sup>3</sup> This comment is also made by Robert McGill in his review of the novel.

<sup>4</sup> “Ten years earlier, in [Claire’s] youth” (7): the time frame reveals that Anna is talking about Claire as an adult.

<sup>5</sup> “All oppositions based on the distinction between the original and the derived, the simple and the repeated, the first and the second, etc., lose their pertinence from the moment everything ‘begins’ by following a vestige. *I.e.* a certain repetition or text” (Derrida, *Dissemination* 330).

<sup>6</sup> Here as well, the similarity contains some interesting differences. Whereas Anna stabs her father in order to make him stop, Bridget injects Cooper with a drug to make sure he does not feel anything while he is being attacked. She does not do anything to stop his assailants.

<sup>7</sup> It is hard not to recognize several of Ondaatje’s own remarks about his authorship in some of the novel’s more metafictional passages. In an interview with Catherine Bush, he noted: “I found I could both reveal and discover myself more through being given a costume. I could be more honest about the things I wanted to talk about or witness” (240).

<sup>8</sup> Consider also: “It is what I [i.e., Anna] do with my work, I suppose. I look into the distance for those I have lost, so that I see them everywhere” (143).

<sup>9</sup> Coop is made to appear as a mother figure: “Since the death of our mother it was Coop who listened to us complain and worry” (9).

<sup>10</sup> In the last part of the novel as well, *Le rouge et le noir* is referred to (247).

<sup>11</sup> Another possibility is to interpret the river as symbolizing the unconscious and the road as symbolizing the characters’ conscious lives. The conclusion, however, remains the

same: consciousness and the unconscious are heavily intertwined; what we have repressed has not vanished without a trace. Interestingly, Sam Solecki refers to a similar image, that of green wild rivers covered by ice in Ondaatje's *the man with seven toes*, relating ice to consciousness and the wild rivers to everything opposed to it. He suggests that "at any moment the ice could crack and melt, letting through everything seemingly implied by the 'Green wild rivers'" (70).

<sup>12</sup> See Wadell.

<sup>13</sup> See McGill.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that it is Lucien's *left* eye that is removed, the left being traditionally associated with the 'other' within the self. I am a bit wary of associating Lucien's partial blindness with castration (cf. Sigmund Freud "The Uncanny"), an interpretation Jennifer Murray does not shy away from in her discussion of *In the Skin of a Lion*. In my opinion, and although Murray acknowledges this to a certain extent, such readings are in danger of appearing empty and contrived, especially when the text itself links the character's blindness with psychological repression: "When Marie-Neige reconsidered his accident with the dog, she felt as if that partial blindness must have already been there in him" (242).

<sup>15</sup> See Wadell.

<sup>16</sup> It is remarkable that the table in Coop's cabin is only partially painted. Interestingly, the colour blue is associated with "limitless space or mind" (29), and it is at the blue table that both Anna and Lucien can be found writing, bending over it "as if over a mirror, to see what could be found" (269). As the table in the cabin is only partially blue, it could be suggested that it is an indication of the fact that the full potential of writing as sublimation has not been discovered yet, or that the characters are not ready to confront their repressed selves.

<sup>17</sup> Although one should be careful not to equate every river with the unconscious (as Sam Solecki remarks with respect to such recurring images: "Sometimes cigars are just cigars" [62]), certain rivers give way to a symbolic reading (cf. note 11). After the tragic incident that tears the family apart, for instance, Claire "rode past their river, black with a mud that had probably never surfaced before" (37) — a sentence that could be read as an indication of all those repressed emotions the incident triggered. The sentence gains relevance when Anna is described as having "woven the roots of two small muddy plants into her blond hair, so it appears as if mullein and rosemary are growing out of the plastered earth on her head" (188; emphasis added). It is as though she has finally been able to confront the trauma she has repressed. This interpretation could also apply to the second italicized text, where the river (unconscious) and the road (consciousness) merge and Rafael and Anna leave the darkness of the forest behind. In addition, at the end of the novel, Lucien Segura "comes out from the shadows of the trees" (273) and sinks into a small lake. Here, as well, one could suggest Lucien has finally found peace, but it would be preposterous to suggest this as an ultimate interpretation, especially as the novel is highly poetical and focuses on rereading, on the fact that "the meaning of a text comes from the future" (Lapsley 74). The image of Mervyn Ondaatje walking out of the jungle in *Running in the Family* springs to mind as well.

<sup>18</sup> As the line is the last thing the *villains* in Lucien's novels hear, one could wonder whether Coop also should be identified as the villain of the story. Since Lucien's heroes are "inconstant" (264) as well, however, and as the novel deconstructs established dualisms, one had perhaps better not think in black and white terms.

<sup>19</sup> Is it a coincidence, one could wonder, that the main character in the series *Twin Peaks* is called Cooper and that *One-Eyed Jacks* is the name of a brothel that appears in the series? In addition, in San Francisco, there are two hills called Twin Peaks. This link could be related to the theme of doubling, as well as to the idea of looking ("to peek"). One of

the meanings of *Divisadero* is, after all, “to gaze at something from a distance” (142). The link adds to the importance of intertextual references, which not only heighten the reader’s vigilance, but also point towards the centrality of the idea of repetition and the lack of pure origins. I would like to thank the participants of *Sign of the Times?* for pointing out the link with the television series and the San Francisco hills.

<sup>20</sup> See McGill 19; Menand 90. Don Oldenburg merely calls Anna “the book’s primary narrator.”

<sup>21</sup> “*This is a story a young girl gathers in a car*” (*Skin* n. pag.).

<sup>22</sup> See Wadell.

<sup>23</sup> As Robert McGill puts it, “No other novel by Ondaatje has so ebulliently embraced the notion that books are made out of other books” (19).

<sup>24</sup> Claire’s **limp also links her to Bellocq, a character from *Coming Through Slaughter***, whom various critics have interpreted as “the other.”

<sup>25</sup> Although a name and its bearer should not be equated, it is worth noting that Anna’s name itself is double. As a palindrome it seems to be hinting at her multiple split self.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Wadell rightly remarks: “It is clear that the girls constantly seek out these distinctions only because they have no internal sense of their separate identities” and that “Even more than she [Anna] knows, her self-identity is grounded in her relation to Claire.”

<sup>27</sup> According to Rob Lapsley, “naming gives rise to a sense of alienation. Although there is no self prior to the subject’s **constitution within the signifying chain, prior to the conferral of an identity with its name**, the subject feels that its true self has somehow been lost and betrayed” (75).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Anil’s Ghost*, where Anil swaps the name she has been given for a name of her own choosing.

<sup>29</sup> See also: “he opened his eyes and looked at her, looked, she thought, at nothing” (156).

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Coop also never succeeds in being photographed, which adds to the enigma of his identity (20).

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