

# Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*: Civil Wars, Mystics, and Rationalists

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MICHAEL ONDAATJE habitually provides a mythic or religious framework to his narratives: the Trojan Cycle in his early poems, the Gilgamesh myth for *In the Skin of a Lion*, the biblical and grail motifs of *The English Patient*. In *Anil's Ghost* the grim record of atrocities during the civil emergency in Sri Lanka that began in 1983 is interspersed with descriptions of Buddhist icons, fragments of the philosophy and references to one of the sacred texts of Sri Lankan Buddhism, the Culavamsa. Early in the novel, the narrative is framed with a description of temples in the Shanxi province of China, introducing the spiritual ambience and the philosophic structure of Buddhism:

*Cave 14 was once the most beautiful site in a series of Buddhist cave temples in Shanxi province. When you entered, it looked as if huge blocks of salt had been carted away. The panorama of Bodhishattvas — their twenty-four rebirths — were cut out of the walls with axes and saws, the edges red, suggesting the wound's incision.*

*"Nothing lasts," Palipana told them. "It is an old dream. Art burns, dissolves. And to be loved with the irony of history — that isn't much."*  
(12; emphasis in original)

The epilogue describes statues of the Buddha and Bodhishattva (on the path to enlightenment) overlooking a "killing field" (301) of the Sri Lankan emergency: "These were the fields where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century" (300). As Linda Hutcheon suggests, Ondaatje has always trusted his readers to see how certain works might be "relevant to his story's form and content" ("The Empire" 23), and this paper will argue that, as a key intertext, the body of Buddhist thought deserves consideration for its relevance to the structure and themes of *Anil's Ghost*.

The narrative involves the attempt by the forensic scientist Anil

Tissera, appointed by the Centre for Human Rights in Geneva, and Sarath, the local archaeologist steeped in the religious philosophy of his country, to establish the identity of a corpse they suspect to have been the victim of a political killing by the government. For Anil, herself a Sri Lankan who has returned to her home country after an education and career in the West, this soon becomes not just a forensic task, but an enlightenment project: the establishment of empirical truth will lay the foundations of a legal process through which a just social order can be established. It is in the conflict between Anil's enlightenment rationalism and Sarath's religio-philosophical apprehension of the significance of "Sailor," as the dead man comes to be known, that the novel's debate between mystic and rationalist, Buddhist and secular perceptions of the world is conducted.

Much of Ondaatje's work has set out to explore and compare different kinds of truth: temporal and transcendent, fact and fable, objective record and subjective conviction. One of his early poems, "In Another Fashion," announces a poetic manifesto in which "We must build new myths / to wind up the world" (*Dainty* 34). Myth's function, then, is to "wind up the world," to raise the quotidian to iconic status, which lifts it out of temporalities administered by a timidly conformist public or by an alliance of economic and political power, and into the realm of the universal and absolute. Equally, however, his more recent work has shown a politically motivated interest in the detailed historical record: the role of immigrant labourers in the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct in Toronto (*In the Skin of a Lion*), the position of Sikhs in the British Army in the Second World War or the Indian Nationalist struggles prior to independence (*The English Patient*), the life experience of workers in the Sri Lankan economy (*Running in the Family* and *Anil's Ghost*). The passages that address these subjects forge a sense of community through the depiction of collective forms of labour and political action. There is also the increasing element of the research novel in his work — the dazzling mastery of technical discourses such as bridge building, bomb disposal, military weaponry, archaeology, forensic science, and mining. The investigative, empirical element, with its political agenda, is important in Ondaatje's work, but it goes along with his interest in the fabulous and fabulation: as the author says at the end of *Running in the Family*, in Sri Lanka "a well told lie is worth a thousand facts" (206), and in *The English Patient*, Herodotus, consulted as geographical and historical authority, is described as the "guidebook, ancient and modern, of supposed lies" (246).

Ondaatje's later novels also give a privileged position to the exile and outsider, whose cultural hybridity questions narrow definitions of truth based on nationality or race; in *The English Patient's* Villa San Girolamo, Almásy announces, "I was just another . . . international bastard" (251), and his encyclopedic knowledge moves with ease between the culture of English gardens, quattrocento Florence, the customs of desert nomads, and the military strategies of the Crusaders and Xerxes. All this has been taken to attest to Ondaatje as the exemplary postmodernist, and his earlier work was included in Linda Hutcheon's study, *The Canadian Postmodern*. The recognition of his own multiple heritage, the collapsing of the clear distinction between fact and fiction, the pervasive allusiveness and intertextuality that juxtapose traditions so that their distinct truths and meanings relativize one another, the apocalyptic sense of the end of Western civilization that infuses *The English Patient's* second world war setting — all these contribute to a scepticism about any overarching system, to "the breaking up of the Grand Narratives" (Lyotard 15). As Bill Fledderus notes, however, in a study of the use of Arthurian legend in *The English Patient*, Ondaatje's use of myth "is both modern in its attempt to reveal universal psychological truths and postmodern in its blurring and recreating of identity" (49). Mythic patterns provide universal structures that compensate for contemporary breakdown, while Ondaatje's particular method of intermixing traditions with one another and with contemporary social reality undermines stable meanings and identity in a postmodernist affirmation of heterogeneity and cultural relativism.

The different impulses in Ondaatje's work find expression in the public and private subject matter of *Anil's Ghost*. The atrocities committed in the civil emergency in Sri Lanka are tragic confirmation of the human cost of rivalries based on nationalism and race. The complexities of the religio-ethnic conflict — the sequence of killings followed by reprisals — resist comprehension and assume an aura of unreality as each group lays claim to its version of the truth, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction. As "the prodigal" (10) returned, Anil herself exemplifies the position of the outsider. Her familiarity with contemporary America, films, songs, and bowling alleys sets up a series of juxtapositions with modern and ancient Sri Lankan customs and motifs, while the detailed account of her forensic investigation introduces a positivist scientific discourse into the situation of civil crisis and sets up a competing regime of truth with the traditional religious philosophy of Sri Lanka.

As will be seen, the Buddhist passages in the novel have a complex

relationship to the thematic contexts outlined above.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Anil's rationalism and empiricism, they work to undermine our conventional knowledge of the world, attributing to it a fundamental irrationality that answers to the civil crisis of Sri Lanka. Central to Buddhist thought is the doctrine that all existence is characterized by suffering, and that the cause of suffering is blind craving. Enlightenment, Nirvana, is achieved when the individual is able to eradicate blind cravings directed to the world through a proper grasp of reality — through a recognition that all objects of perception are based on emptiness in a world that is a web of fluxing, interdependent phenomena. This insight leads not to nihilism but to the knowledge of a transcendental reality, the unity of being beyond the discriminations of everyday consciousness, beyond the conceptual categories normally applied to the external world. Enlightenment is also attained through a proper understanding of, and relation to, process — to historical process and the private processes of human lives. The Bodhishattva learns to disassociate the “true self” from the illusory empirical self which is tied to the cycle of death and rebirth (in Sanskrit *Samsara*). Sometimes referred to as the wheel of life, the cycle of death and rebirth is said to be founded on a particular form of causality known as “dependent origins”; all situations, psychological states, and motivations originate from a causal chain whose main determinants are desire and ignorance. The individual's state of being, *karma*, is dependent on a chain of reactions based on these factors, and he or she achieves freedom when able to liberate the self from the cycle of birth and rebirth. I will suggest that Buddhist concepts of time and causality provide narrative models in *Anil's Ghost*, which also has fictive approximations to the Buddhist ideal of Nirvana, when subjective delusion and unreason are transcended in an experience of cosmic unity, and the sage has an outpouring of compassion for the suffering world. Such experiences provide utopian moments of communion as an alternative to the alienated ego of the exile as well as to divisive formulations of identity based on nation and race. Buddhism's particular blend of detachment and compassion offers an alternative to the extremes of passion that fuel public and private violence. By arguing that the verities of the past and present have been based on illusion, Buddhism relativizes cultural truths, while it also promises the initiate insight into a higher order reality, into the “suchness” of things. Buddhist iconography provides religio-aesthetic images of a transcendental state of calm and compassion. Its presence in the novel allows Ondaatje to negotiate between postmodernist relativism and epiphanic insight into universal truths.

## The Grove of Ascetics

*Anil's Ghost* is at one level a detective story in which the heroine's forensic science leads to the exposure of a government crime and the revelation of a truth. The progressive linear plot with its revelatory conclusion is set against disconnected descriptions of killings and kidnappings, suggestive of a random sequence of horror. The Buddhist passages mediate between the enlightenment narrative and the spectre of incoherence, offering an alternative moral and emotional economy for dealing with civil and private trauma. In one of these passages Anil is taken by Sarath to consult an archaeologist, Palipana, about the identification of their suspected murder victim. Palipana, now blind, has withdrawn from nationalistic controversies<sup>2</sup> in a meditative retreat to the remains of an ancient monastery in the forest. Forest retreat has been a feature of Buddhist practice from the earliest times in Sri Lanka; the poet Aryama in about 200 AD describes how the great-souled man "having abandoned all concern with material property and sense objects ... lived in the middle of a forest, in a place delightful for its solitude, and beautiful like a lovely garden" (Conze 27).

In the sanctuary of the Grove of Ascetics, Anil undergoes a cognitive shift as the simple architecture and the spartan routines induce a trance-like state in which consciousness loses its sense of individuality and becomes absorbed in the particulars of the environment:

These bones of an old settlement. It felt to Anil as if her pulse had fallen asleep, that she was moving like the slowest animal in the world through grass. She was picking up intricacies of what was around them. (97)

Earlier, she had felt that Palipana's blindness had given him a particular relationship to the phenomenal world:

She imagined he could hear the one bird in the forest distance. She imagined he could hear Sarath's sandals pacing, the scrape of his match ... She was sure he could hear all that, the light wind, the other fragments of noise that passed by his thin face, that glassy brown boniness of his own skull. (87)

The ego of the observer has been assimilated into the details of surrounding nature in a way that anticipates the account of the Buddha's eye awakening to enlightenment at the end of the novel. Such passages recall the Buddhist view of enlightenment as an insight into the interdependence

of all phenomena and an experience in which the dualism of subject and object is overcome through the individual's absorption into the world:

4. Pursue not the outer entanglements,  
Dwell not in the inner Void;  
Be serene in the oneness of things,  
And dualism vanishes by itself.

25. In the higher realm of true Suchness  
There is neither "self" nor "other" ...  
We can only say "not two."

(verses from Seng-Ts'An, "On Believing in Mind," Conze 171-74)

Trained in a tradition of Cartesian dualism, Anil has been taught to treat the material world, such as bodies, insects, and seeds of plants as passive, inert, and meaningless until submitted to the analytic intelligence of the scientist. However, the separation of the analytic mind from insentient nature is overtaken by an experience of empathy in which the boundaries of self and other are broken down, and Anil encounters a form of intersubjectivity alien to her Western conceptions of selfhood. Appropriating her male name from her brother has shown a determination to define her own identity against society's prescriptive labels. She values her privacy and has rejected her Sri Lankan culture, finding its strong communal ties oppressive. In the course of a nomadic life and a series of broken relationships she has re-defined herself — "I live here ... in the West." (36) — but the exile with her Western commitment to autonomy comes up against forms of consciousness that break down the ego's separateness in a mystical experience of relatedness and interdependence.

The second of Buddhism's noble truths is the realization that the origins of suffering lie in the cravings of passion: "'There has always been slaughter in passion,' she heard Palipana say" (102). In the later visit to the Forest Monastery of Arankale, Sarath explains that achieving mental calm depends on disciplining the self to exclude passion: "Those who cannot love make places like this. One needs to be in a stage beyond passion" (189). Next, the self must reject the material world of power, including "historical honour, measured ownership, their sure truths" (190). And yet the paradox of retreat is that the individual first has to experience the defilements of the Samsaric world before he or she is able to transcend them: "the Bodhishattva possessed in himself the root cause of enlightenment, but he could reach it only after first enjoying the pleasures of the senses" ("The Legend of the Buddha Shakyamuni," Conze 39). Wisdom and the defile-

ments of the senses, the calmness of Nirvana and the perturbation of passion are in a dialectical relationship, as Palipana recognizes, and as will be seen this becomes a structuring device for the narrative: “You renounce society, but to do so you must first be a part of it, learn your decision from it. This is the paradox of retreat” (103).

In the forest scenes, Anil is informed by Palipana of “the distinction between the gross material world and the ‘subtle’ material world” (86), and this forms the basis of a debate between Western and Eastern theories of knowledge. Buddhist texts make frequent reference to the difference between surface appearance and “the ultimate reality of things” (Conze 49).<sup>3</sup> Enlightenment comes from a proper grasp of reality, the recognition that all objects of perception are based on emptiness; they are a web of interdependent, baseless phenomena in a perpetual state of flux, and it is wrong to make them the object of knowledge or desire. By contrast, as a forensic scientist writing for the Geneva Centre for Human Rights, Anil holds to a positivist epistemology and a liberal ideology: “We use the bone to search for it. ‘The truth shall set you free.’ I believe that” (102). But the novel deals with a murder committed at the height of the civil emergency in 1988-89. What had begun as a conflict between the dominant Buddhist Sinhalese and the minority Hindu Tamils demanding secession had now become more complex. The Sinhalese-dominated government was now in conflict with an extreme Nationalist Buddhist insurgency in the South while in the North and East an Indian Peacekeeping Force had been provoked into atrocities against its fellow Hindu Tamils. In addition to interethnic violence, co-religionists were now killing one another, as armed gangs and death squads carried out executions and “disappearances.” The situation had become indecipherable, and a BBC journalist John Rettie commented, “What you do know is that nothing is what people are telling you. It’s not what the Tamils say and it is not what the Indians say” (qtd. in McGowan 310). Ethnic cleansing and civil war pose a challenge to Western liberalism and its epistemological assumptions, because in such situations “truth” and “reality” are manifestly being constructed in different ways by the parties in conflict. Buddhist epistemology answers more convincingly to such crises of legitimacy. From an ontological position which sees reality as a flux of baseless phenomena, Buddhism is sceptical of the possibility of achieving knowledge since to do so is to apply permanent conceptual categories to something that is essentially fluid:

Transformations going on in an empty world which confronts us  
Appear real all because of ignorance:

Try not to seek after the true,  
Only cease to cherish opinions. (Conze 172)

And the categories we apply will be the product of our cravings: international politics bears witness to the way reality is constructed by the dominant global powers.<sup>4</sup> Anil's belief that she can be disinterested in her pursuit of objective knowledge — "Truth comes finally into the light. It's in the bones and sediment" — is therefore naïve, and Sarath responds, "I don't think clarity is necessarily truth. It's simplicity isn't it? ... [Truth] is in character and nuance and mood" (259). Or, as Palipana puts it, "We have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones. ... Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion" (102).<sup>5</sup>

In the extremes of inter-ethnic violence, an alternative epistemology founded on a more relativistic view of truth answers to the situation more effectively:

Sarath knew that [for Anil] the journey was in getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. (156-57)

The Buddhist image of fire vividly depicts irrational passion igniting the "truth" for some destructive end, and it exposes the simplicity of Anil's belief that she can take her evidence to some Western court of appeal. Truth will be reconstituted to suit the West's interests in a game of global realpolitik.

### The Combustible World

The scenes involving Palipana and the forest monasteries represent a sphere of peace and wisdom that transcends the temporal world governed by public or private motives. Around these there rages the Sri Lankan emergency, which follows a "mad logic" (186), erupting in scenes of violence and suffering whose significance remains inaccessible: the assassination of a government official on a train (32); the list of disappearances (41); the killing of Palipana's brother, a monk who had established a commune for unemployed youth (46); the description of a captive ludicrously being taken to his interrogation or death on the crossbar of his captor's bicycle (154); the beheaded schoolboys witnessed by Ananda's



wife, who then disappears (175); bodies washed ashore or down the four main rivers of Sri Lanka. “Those days you didn’t know who was killing who,” says Sarath: “Now we all have blood on our clothes” (48). As a Sinhalese academic wrote of the years 1998-99, “In a world without sense / One must look for meaning wherever one / Can find it — if only for a day / Or two” (McGowan 281). The social reality of that period presents a challenge to narrativization itself. Typical narrative models of Western fiction and history, based on selection, organization, temporal pacing, and emplotment seem inadequate to represent their inchoate horror, and Ondaatje turns to alternative models of causality.

In Buddhist thought, the cycle of birth and death (*Samsara*) is thought to be dependent on “conditioned arising,” a causal chain founded on ignorance and craving, and therefore in a profound sense unreal: “The link of causes and effects which now have brought us here together — / They are like the sound of echoes, the sport of a game of illusion” (Conze 92). In *Anil’s Ghost*, too, the Sri Lankan emergency is thought to be based on “a mad logic” (186), a concatenation of deeds and motives that defy rational explanation, and which therefore assume an aura of unreality:

In the shadow of war and politics there came to be surreal turns of cause and effect. At a mass grave found in Naipattimunai in 1985, bloodstained clothing was identified by a parent as that worn by his son at the time of his arrest and disappearance. When an ID card was found in a shirt pocket, the police called an immediate halt to the unburial, and the following day the president of the Citizens’ Committee — who had brought the police to the location — was arrested. (42)

Tectonic slips and brutal human violence provided random time-capsules of unhistorical lives. A dog in Pompeii. A gardener’s shadow in Hiroshima. But in the midst of such events, she realized, there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time. For now it would be reported, filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it. ... those who were ... stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection of the self. (55-56)

For Anil, the situation becomes indecipherable as a collective aphasia overcomes those involved in the crisis; they are no longer able to articulate rational motive or purpose. With the accumulating horrors an insane

delirium envelops the passage of time itself, its “surreal turns of cause and effect.” In order to free the true self from the world of suffering, Buddhist meditative exercises “include prolonged exercise on the impermanence and repulsiveness of the empirical self and the contemplation of rotting bodies” (Dumoulin 22). The extreme instability of the world is frequently imaged through fire:

for you ought to know that the world everywhere is ablaze with the fire of some faults or others ... therefore, my friend, do not hanker after the glittering objects of this world! And, once this hankering is extinct in you, then you will see that this entire world of the living can be said to be on fire. (Conze 111)

The framing passages of Buddhism at the beginning and end of *Anil's Ghost* link impermanence with the dissolution of fire — “‘*Nothing last, Palipana told them ... 'Art burns, dissolves'*” (12; emphasis in original); “It was the figure of the world the statue [of the Buddha] would see for ever, in rainlight and sunlight, a combustible world” (306) — and the theme of dissolution becomes a recurrent motif in the novel, linking the private and public. The “evaporation” of Gamini’s marriage (132) and the “disintegration” of Anil’s relationship with her husband (144) are paralleled by the literal disintegration of the President in a suicide bomb which forms the climax of the public plot: “The cutting action of the explosion shredded Katugala into pieces. ... the President could not be found. *Where was the President?* ... The body, what remained of it, was not found for a long time” (294-95). In the epilogue, robbers are described destroying a statue of the Buddha “to find ... a way to get out of their disintegrating lives” (300). In order to bring out the full horror of the Sri Lankan emergency the novel understandably itemizes the full extent and variety of suffering endured by victims of atrocities, but taken with the details of forensic pathology in the USA as well as Sri Lanka, the cumulative emphasis on bodily putrefaction implies a wider thematic concern, posing the fact of human decay as an existential truth, as does the emptiness of the desert setting of the Arizona scenes:

[The forensic pathologists in Oklahoma] snuffed out death with music and craziness. The warnings of *carpe diem* were on the gurneys in the hall. They heard the rhetoric of death over the intercom; “vaporization” or “microfragmentation” meant the customer in question had been blown to bits. They couldn’t miss death, it was in every texture and cell around them. (147)

In the southwestern deserts you needed to look twice at emptiness,  
you needed to take your time. (148)

As in the second century Heart Sutra, “Whatsoever is material shape is emptiness and whatsoever is emptiness that is material shape” (qtd. in Harvey 99).

Josef Pesch has shown how, in *The English Patient*, Ondaatje had come to associate modern warfare with an apocalyptic vision. “[It] feels like the end of the world,” says Hana of the last stages of the Second World War (292), and the experience of apocalypse culminates in the Indian sapper Pip’s vision of nuclear holocaust: “he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom” (284). Likewise, the scale of atrocities in *Anil’s Ghost* precipitates a sense of the world and humanity on the point of disintegration, consumed by its own destructive energy, by fire. It is a state akin to the end of history envisaged by Baudrillard, when events confront us with “a haemorrhage of objective causality” (*Fatal* 13), creating a “specter of historical unreality” and “a sudden collapse of time and the real” (15). In *Anil’s Ghost*, there is a systematic dislocation of temporal perspective beginning with the novel’s opening reference to the Buddha’s cycle of births and rebirths. Buddhists draw a distinction between historical time measured in years or centuries, and cosmic time, measured in incalculable aeons. Since a Buddha’s rebirths can extend across several aeons, the novel’s opening reference to rebirths encourages the reader, like Palipana, to view the horrors of the Sri Lankan emergency from the perspective of eternity. The juxtapositioning of vast time scales with the briefer dimensions of the emergency is reinforced by the archaeological and geological perspectives adopted in the novel. Anil’s consciousness is typically presented as temporally bound. Her thoughts relate to the project she is engaged in or to memories from childhood to the present which constitute a single life. Both Sarath and Palipana, by contrast, often collapse the distinction between the ancient past and present. Sarath wanted “to write a book someday about a city in the south of the island that no longer existed” (29). He could “take one imagined step and be in an earlier century” (191). Reluctant to excavate his own past, “he would hold statues two thousand years old in his arms” (279) and recreate a meeting hall from that period. The reference to the Buddhist view of cyclical time like the abrupt shifts of temporal perspective “volatizes the historical real,” as Baudrillard puts it (*Fatal* 15), drawing attention to the lack of linear logic in contemporary events, which occur as “catastrophic

singularit[ies]" (*End* 111) — a man nailed to the road through his hands and feet, the heads of schoolboys on a row of stakes — in a vertiginous succession of effects without discernible cause.

Private relationships are shown to be governed by the same principles of delusion, passion, and violence. Anil's past is given in non-chronological fragments. The Sri Lankan she is briefly married to while studying in London is motivated by "sexual jealousy ... the first handcuff of marriage" (144), while she remembers her own violent reaction to her lover Cullis's possessiveness: "she swung the small knife ... and stabbed it into the arm holding her" (100). This flashback is juxtaposed with Palipana's observation in the Grove of Ascetics that "There has always been slaughter in passion" (102). Personal relationships are based on self-deception — "She had been fooled by [her husband's] energy and charm" (144) — and Anil acknowledges that "her view of [Cullis] had been a partially blindfolded one" (100). (Compare the *Mahavastu*, "When passion overcomes a man, he becomes blinded," Jones 199.) Anil's closest friend is Leaf Niedecker, a woman she met while working in the Arizona pathology laboratories. Drawn to one another by a shared love of old movies, they take the television set into Leaf's backyard watching simulacra on the screen against a background of the Arizona desert. Anil discovers that Leaf has prematurely developed Alzheimer's disease, losing the memories she shared with Anil, confirming our sense of the insubstantiality of the ego constituted from memories of the past: in a Buddhist text on meditation, the Buddha explains to Nanda, "Among beings whom their being draws along in the cycle of Samsara, who is a stranger, who is a relation? Delusion alone ties one person to another" (Conze 100).

### Versions of Enlightenment

In *Anil's Ghost*, the public and private worlds are shown to be founded on illusion and the violence generated by destructive passions, and the novel's central concern is to show how different moral-philosophical systems respond to this truth. In keeping with her positivist liberal ideology, Anil demands empirical evidence of guilt on the basis of which justice can be administered. Sarath, by contrast, feeling implicated in the collective guilt of his country — "Now we all have blood on our clothes" (48) —, is sceptical of enlightenment ideals of truth and civil justice, and his taking Anil to a forest monastery represents a subtle schooling of her in Buddhist precepts. The "sure truths" (190) of the

world are the product of the desires of the powerful, and it is only those in a stage beyond passion who can grasp their illusory nature. Passionless himself, Sarath lacks physical tenderness, Anil notes; she turns away from the social world around him, preferring to recreate in imagination an ancient city that no longer existed (29). His archaeological knowledge gives him a sense of the transitoriness of the present, of the relativity of political systems and cultural values, and in the face of atrocities he turns to eternal images of art expressive of the Buddhist conception of compassion such as the rock carving of a mother bending over her child in affection or grief (156-57): “Patterns of death always surrounded him. In his work he felt he was somehow the link between the mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of an image on rock, or even, more strangely, its immortality as a result of faith or an idea” (278).

If Sarath’s distinguishing feature is his detachment from the world, his brother Gamini is associated with the Buddhist quality of *karuna*, compassion, shown in an active involvement in the world. After rejecting the social forms demanded by his wife and her family as part of an illusory world — “My marriage disappeared. All that ceremony — and then it evaporated in a couple of months” (132) — Gamini turns away from his elite background and immerses himself in the treatment of victims of the civil emergency, treating the Tamil separatists and their opponents alike. Exhausted by the unending sequence of terrifying injuries, vividly detailed in the novel, Gamini grasps “the truth of their times” (128). He sees through the motives of power and patriotism (119) and finds no sense in the civil war situation. In the midst of the pervasive suffering, he gains an insight into the insubstantiality of the ego: “You were without self in those times, lost among the screaming” (118). The picture of him covered in the blood of his patients expresses his solidarity with mankind — “Sleeping in the wards, he could be one limb of a large creature, linked to the others by the thread of noises” (244). As Harvey explains, “the [Buddhist] teaching on not-self, that no permanent self or I exists, ... means that ‘your’ suffering and ‘my’ suffering are not inherently different. They are just suffering, so the barrier which generally keeps us within our own ‘self-interest’ should be dissolved or widened in its scope till it includes all beings” (197-98). Like his brother, Gamini finds solace in the forest monastery of Arunkale, but whereas Sarath represents the Buddhist idea of wisdom as detachment from the world of illusion, Gamini enacts the compassion of the Buddha. As he walks through a ward of sick children, he reflects that “he believed only in the

mothers sleeping against their children, ... the sexuality of care" (119). His gesture of touching the small Buddha in a niche of the hospital ward invokes the great overflowing compassion that the Buddha is also described as experiencing towards a humanity bonded together by its common experience of suffering.

Despite his detachment from the social world and his skepticism about Anil's attempt to establish guilt by scientific methods, Sarath makes a final commitment to her project and himself becomes the victim of a political murder. He exemplifies the paradox of Buddhist retreat: that to renounce society you must first be part of it and learn your decision from it. The penultimate section of the novel is titled "The Life Wheel," alluding to a Sri Lankan miner's song describing the pit-head wheel that brings the miners to the surface after a night shift. In this chapter, the corpse is identified as the victim of a political murder. He was someone who had been a plumbago miner, and is now brought to the surface again after his body had been hidden underground by the government. Given the novel's Buddhist framework, the life wheel could also allude to a metaphor frequently used in Buddhist texts to characterize the cycle of deaths and rebirths: "When he had recalled his own births and deaths in all these various lives of his, the Sage, full of pity, ... thought to himself, '... Surely this world is unprotected and helpless, and like a wheel it goes round and round'" (Conze 49). The section title points to a crisis in Sarath's relation to the lived world. Though "since the death of his wife, Sarath had never found the old road back into the world" (277), his decision to defy the government by helping Anil to complete her report on the corpse of "Sailor" represents his commitment to the world, the wheel of life, before the final retreat of his death: "But now, this afternoon, he had returned to the intricacies of the public world, with its various truths. ... He knew he would not be forgiven that" (279). After his murder by government agents, Sarath does undergo an apotheosis of a kind. In a characteristic collocation of Eastern and Western religious traditions, his brother's identification of Sarath's body in the hospital morgue is described as a "pietà between brothers" (288), and Gamini's bathing of the fatal wound carries echoes of another elevation of the human into the divine. In the final passage in which Ananda reconstructs the statue of the Buddha that had been destroyed by bombs, he wears the shirt Sarath had given him. By identifying Sarath as the eponymous ghost of the title at this point — "He [Ananda] and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena" (305) — the narrative hints that like the

life history of the Buddha, Sarath has left the cycle of birth and death to enter immortality as a divine exemplar of wise compassion.

## Epilogue

In *Anil's Ghost*, the horrors of the Sri Lankan civil war are confronted by Western and Eastern philosophical and ethical systems. The plot is driven by Anil's confidence that empirical evidence gained by her scientific method can liberate this society from political oppression and provide the grounds for establishing guilt through the authority of such liberal institutions as the Geneva Convention of Human Rights. The plot would seem to vindicate her project. Anil gains her evidence and leaves Sri Lanka with a report she can file in Geneva. However, the novel leaves uncertain whether the truth will be accurately reported or adapted to the ideological preconceptions of audiences on the lecture circuit (285-86). Moreover, in reconstructing the corpse that constitutes her evidence, Anil relies not just on the methods of forensic science, but also on a craftsman skilled in the construction of Buddhist statues, and particularly in performing the eye ceremony that re-enacts the Buddha's awakening to enlightenment. The craftsman is Ananda, the name of the faithful disciple of the Buddha, and when Ananda has completed his reconstruction, Anil "realized the face was in no way a portrait of Sailor but showed a calm Ananda had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim" (187). The reconstruction leads not simply to the establishment of an empirical truth but to an evocation of the ideal of Nirvana, the state of mental calm with which the Buddha contemplates the world of human suffering.

The epilogue to the novel, "Distance," also invites a comparison of Western and Eastern perspectives on the civil war through its account of Ananda supervising the repair of a statue of the Buddha destroyed by explosives during the emergency and performing the eye ceremony on another perfect statue that is to replace the damaged Buddha. According to tradition, the eye ceremony is performed at 5 a.m. when the Buddha is said to have gained enlightenment. The artist looks in a mirror as he carves the eye, since no human is allowed to gaze on the Buddha. The first-century poet Ashvaghosha provides an influential version of this moment:

Second to none in valour, he then, in the *second watch* of the night, acquired the supreme heavenly eye, for he himself was the best of all those who have sight. Thereupon with the perfectly pure heavenly eye he looked upon the entire world, which appeared to him as though

reflected in a spotless mirror. He saw that the decease and rebirth of beings depends on whether they have done superior or inferior deeds. And his compassionateness grew still further. It became clear to him that no security can be found in this flood of Samsaric existence, and that the threat of death is ever-present. Beset on all sides, creatures can find no resting place. ... And he found nothing substantial in the world of becoming, just as the core of heartwood is present in a plantain tree when the layers are peeled off. ... Now that he had grasped the principle of causation and finally convinced himself of the lack of self in all that is, he roused himself again from his deep trance, and in his great compassion he surveyed the world with his Buddha-eye, intent on giving it peace. When, however, he saw on the one side the world lost in low views and confused efforts, thickly covered with the dirt of the passions, and saw on the other side the exceeding subtlety of the Dharma of emancipation, he felt inclined to take no action. But when he weighed up the significance of the pledge to enlighten all beings ... he became again more favourable to the idea of proclaiming the path to Peace. (Conze 50-52)

The eye ceremony, first described by Palipana during Anil's visit to the Grove of Ascetics and enacted by Ananda in the Epilogue, is structurally located so as to provide a counter to Western conceptual systems for managing the trauma of civil war.

Where the perspectives of all participants, including Western observers, are shown to be partial and motivated by self-interest, the novel asks from what position can a calculus of guilt be established to submit to international tribunals — how can punishment be administered when all have blood on their hands? The temptation is to lapse into relativism. The Buddhist account of the awakening of the heavenly eye provides a paradigm more acceptable to the moral imagination. The gaze of the Buddha's eye encompasses all "the low views and confused events, thickly covered with the dirt of passions," providing inclusiveness and unity of a kind to the deluded suffering egos that constitute human existence. It offers compassion, not retribution, and the promise of emancipation through setting the self free from a life process founded on blind craving. Ananda's performance of the eye ceremony alludes to a form of knowledge different from that which Anil takes with her to Geneva, one that does not try to attribute individual guilt on the basis of empirical evidence, but subsumes the human tragedy of Sri Lanka's emergency in a universal condition characterized by illusion and irrationality. Instead of a punitive justice administered by



international courts in the West, the novel concludes with an act of imaginative identification through which a compassion for the “combustible world” is expressed:

Then he drew from a satchel the colours for the eye. He looked past the vertical line of cheek into the landscape. Pale greens, dark greens, bird movement and their nearby sounds. It was the figure of the world the statue would see forever, in rainlight and sunlight, a combustible world of weather even without the human element.

The eyes, like his at this moment, would always look north. As would the great scarred face half a mile away, which he had helped knit together from damaged stone, a statue that was no longer a god, that no longer had its graceful line but only the pure sad glance Ananda had found.

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

Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. There was a seduction for him there. The eyes he had cut and focussed with his father's chisel showed him this. (306-07)

By making the focalizer ambiguous — “And now with human sight *he* was seeing,” “the crack of noise as a layer of rock on *his* arm exfoliated in the heat” (emphasis added) — the passage leaves uncertain whether this vision of the world is human or divine, whether it is the product of spiritual detachment or physical engagement, or both. It is a world whose apparent solidity is belied by the fact that it is undergoing a continuous mutation. Even without the human element, it is a “combustible world of weather” in which grasses are being burned, there is the smell of petrol and grenade, layers of rock exfoliate or are being eroded by rain, and hundred-mile storms threaten destruction from the mountains. Although it is in a state of imminent collapse and disintegration, under the compassionate eye of Ananda-Buddha it achieves unity through a common involvement in the process of change. The novel's vision is particularly suited to our millennial

moment, when, as Baudrillard suggests in *Illusion of the End*, “We know only the signs of catastrophe; we no longer know the signs of destiny” (114). The Buddhist vision denies purpose and fatality to the phenomenal world, seeing it as condemned to an endless process of becoming and extinction, but it restores this world by making dissolution paradoxically the principle of a higher form of cohesion, and in the inclusive gaze of the Buddha’s eye it proffers a vantage point from which the fragments of the world, the disparate localized instances of grief and trauma, can be reconstituted and reconsecrated in a universal relationality.

The conflation of the human and divine in the passage above is repeated in the figure of the other Buddha destroyed by treasure hunters. For centuries “It had looked over these hot fields towards green terraces in the distant north. It had seen the wars and offered peace or irony to those dying under it” (304). After its destruction, it has been rebuilt by Ananda and its face, now quilted by the seams that join the broken fragments, symbolizes its transition from divine detachment to a human engagement with the suffering of the world. The broken Buddha provides a parallel with Sarath — who also moves from detachment to human commitment through the destruction of his body — and the parallel raises Sarath’s destiny to the status of myth. The two Buddhas combine in a trope that unites the novel’s thematic strands. The broken Buddha figures the fragmentation of collective and individual identities, while its reconstruction by villagers overseen by Ananda restates Ondaatje’s faith in the collective energies of working people. By drawing parallels between the “innovatory” science of the medical teams treating victims of terrorism and Ananda’s innovatory methods of reconstruction — he too operates a “triage” (301; cf. 239-40) — the passage equates Western and Eastern, ancient and modern technologies and discourses. The reconstruction of the Buddha constitutes an overdetermined figure, incorporating Ondaatje’s sense of fragmentation, the relativity of cultural truths, and the value of collective material endeavour, while the statue of the perfect Buddha redeems the fallen world, providing an eternal and universal idea of wisdom and compassion.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While the main Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka has been Theravada, there has also been a significant incorporation of Mahayana elements, and the account that follows draws on both traditions. The *Culavamsa* is cited in the novel as the source of the passages on

Buddhist practices in the Grove of Ascetics (86-87). It is a continuation of the *Mahavamsa*, the ancient Buddhist chronicle of the island from 250 B.C. to the nineteenth century. Both works include some of the essential elements of Buddhist teaching and devotional practice.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that Palipana's name is a compound of Pali, the ancient language of Sinhalese Buddhism, and *panna*, the Pali word for the highest wisdom achieved by the sage. He is associated with the Sinhalese Nationalist Movement, which began in the nineteenth century under the leadership of Anagarika Dharmapala. Drawing on the *Mahavamsa*, the movement challenged British cultural hegemony by proving the existence of a sophisticated civilization in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) that predated European civilization. At the time of independence the movement developed into an exclusive Sinhalese-Buddhist view of Sri Lanka's past, in which the country's destiny was seen in terms of preserving the purity of the Buddhist religion. History and archaeological research, including, as with Palipana in the novel, the interpretation of inscriptions, were used to support Sinhalese nationalist ideology, which claimed a continuous Sinhalese-Buddhist tradition from the fifth century B.C. and founded in particular on the Buddhist monastic communities, the Sangha. It marginalized the role of the minority Tamils by presenting the past as heroic Sinhalese resistance to Hindu-Tamil invaders. Recent historiographic research has shown that this nationalist ideology distorted Sri Lanka's past, in which there was peaceful co-existence between Tamils and Sinhala, with some of the country's great dynasties being Tamil. Palipana's withdrawal from nationalistic controversies is a particularly important point in the narrative, since it aligns the novel with a distrust of those competing Buddhist and Hindu nationalist ideologies which had begun and continue to influence the inter-ethnic violence in Sri Lanka. See chapters by J. Spencer, R.A.L.H. Gunawardna, Elizabeth Nissam and R.L. Shopal, in Spencer, ed. and Jeganathan and Ismail.

<sup>3</sup> Compare the following passages: "Thereupon, the Buddha turned to his Disciples and said to them ... recognize the true nature of the living world, and do not be anxious... When the light of *gnosis* has dispelled the darkness of ignorance, when all existence has been seen as without substance, peace ensues when life draws to an end"; "The things of the Samsaric world are an illusion, like a dream / Wherever one looks, where is the substance?"; "[True worship] is the thorough understanding of all conditioned things, wise attention, the consideration of the application of mindfulness, the seizing of the real essence of all objects of thought" (Conze 68, 91, 96).

<sup>4</sup> In this context it is interesting to consider Ron Suskind's account in *The New York Times* on 17 October 2004, of a conversation with a representative of one such global power: "In the summer of 2002, an adviser to Bush told me that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as 'people who believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality — judiciously as you will — we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too."

<sup>5</sup> Antoinette Burton assesses the novel as a critique of Western historiography and its positivist tradition. Burton notes that the novel "set[s] up a dichotomy between western epistemological assumptions and practices — to which Anil is attached — and those derived from non-western experiences and sources" (44). I would argue that the nature of that dichotomy can be more fully understood through a knowledge of the Buddhist context for the concepts to which the novel continually alludes.

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