On Rock and Book and Leaf: Reading Ondaatje's *Handwriting*

Rochelle Vigurs

In *Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje recounts his discovery upon waking one morning that a wild boar has made off during the night with his bar of Pears Transparent Soap. "Why not my copy of Rumi poetry?" he exclaims in frustration. "Or Merwin translations?" (143). The "Merwin translations" accompanying him on his return journeys to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980 may have been any number of works in W.S. Merwin's extensive *œuvre*, or it may have been one in which Ondaatje discovered a source and companion for his evolving poetics. In the introduction to the Merwin translations of Sanskrit love poetry published in 1977 (one poem of which Ondaatje chose as an epigraph for the first section of *There's a Trick With a Knife I'm Learning to Do*), collaborator and scholar J. Moussaieff Masson cites psychoanalyst Lawrence Kubie: "It is the artist's unconscious which leaves a personal signature on his work as on his handwriting; and like a fingerprint left by a thief in the night, it is unmodifiable and therefore non-creative" (Merwin 7). In *Handwriting* (1998) Ondaatje declares, "What is eternal is brick, stone" (10), "the places people died" (6), old languages in the arms of trees, chronicles brought across the sea, lines "composed and ribboned / in cursive script" (58). The fragmentary nature of the poems in *Handwriting* bears witness to lives fractured by loss. What is creative is the consciousness behind the hand that inscribes that loss.

Handwriting is an emblem of selfhood — literally and, in the context of Ondaatje's latest collection of poems, metaphorically. The act of inscription is to set down clues as to the identity of the inscriber. In *Handwriting*'s signature poem, "Last Ink," the poet catches a mirror-world of himself in an inked rubbing: that "indelible darker self" (73). Memories inked onto stone "hold the vista of a life" (72); a woman's story is "caught in jade" (74). To catch, to hold, to remember — these are familiar strains

in the Ondaatje repertoire. Motifs from earlier poems (net, trap, freeze, immobilize, shape; myths, webs, wounds, scars, fences, rooms) become in *Handwriting* the burial and unearthing of symbols in stone and mud, the marking of a culture on leaves, scrolls, and seals, the arts of stonecutting, divination, mapmaking, storytelling, and the "wild cursive scripts" (4) of the calligrapher's pen. The introductory dirge to Ondaatje's 1971 elegy for his father, "Letters and Other Worlds," ascribes metaphorical containers for his father's fear that paradoxically act to separate the speaker from the parent for whom he longs. Mervyn Ondaatje's letters were "a room he seldom lived in … a room his body scared" (*Trick* 44). Inscribed in the very nature of fear is the fear of being unable to contain it; inherent in the chaos — one of Ondaatje's recurrent symbols for the unknowable and omnipresent — is the dislocated self, the exile, the prodigal, the profusion and confusion of boundaries. The child sent away from the country of his birth who returns home as an adult to excavate the past is a classic story. In the attempt to foreground the self, questions arise as to what is left behind. W.M. Verhoeven made the following remarks about Ondaatje's prose, but I would argue that the same is true of his poetry: "Again and again persons (or their identities) get lost in Ondaatje's stories — lost in legend, lost in the bush, lost in the past, lost in history, lost in memory, lost in myth — and in each case people go after them in order to recover them, to remember them, or to recreate them" (22). The impetus behind this enactment of loss and recovery resides not only in the characters who search for, uncover, and recover themselves and each other, but in the author who imagines these characters. "Letters and Other Worlds" speaks to the fear inherent in a loss of control; it also speaks to the control of the hand that seeks to immortalize the loss. This may be the one story Ondaatje writes.

Throughout his career, Michael Ondaatje has been leaving traces of himself, his personal and artistic marks and impressions. To read the Ondaatje "canon" chronologically is to trace the arc of a life, and in that life an evolving poetics. The identity subsumed beneath the casual domesticity of the poems in *The Dainty Monsters* (1967) was extracted and examined in its role as creator — of self, of art, and of self in art — in *Rat Jelly* (1973). If *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) were "Left Handed Poems" as their subtitle suggested, the confusion between hands to which Ondaatje alluded in his postscript to *Rat Jelly* indicated his continuing search for a dynamic form which would embody both the conscious and the unconscious, the ordered and the chaotic. The duplicities inherent in such a relationship provided a framework of endless possibilities for

Ondaatje's vision of the "violent beauty" of life. In *The Dainty Monsters* it was Peter who "formed violent beauty … carved death … made fragments of people" (90); in *The Man with Seven Toes* it was the wild, alien landscape that both desecrated and shaped the individual life; in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* it was the self divided. A poem from *Rat Jelly*, "We're at the Graveyard," seemed to signal a tentative move in the direction of community; in the same collection Ondaatje named the father in "Letters and Other Worlds." The new poems in *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* (1979) interrogated questions of community and probed the nature of friendship as exemplified in the much-anthologized "Walking to Bellrock." In the same collection, Ondaatje turned toward his own past and familial connections in his elegy to his mother, "Light," and moved out into the larger world with the five travel poems. In 1982 he published *Running in the Family*.

This pendulum swing of self extracted and retracted over a poetic career spanning almost twenty years (Verhoeven calls it "an ontological conjuring trick of appearing and disappearing, of facing and defacing the self" [25]) may have paved the way for the self confessed in the autobiographical poem sequence, *Secular Love* (1984). Interwoven subplots and ambiguous syntactical fragments distorted and intensified this work's emotional landscape, creating the "chiaroscuro" effect of the "claude glass" in the epigraph. They also prefigured the fragmentary nature of the poems in *Handwriting* and, together with "Peter," *The Man with Seven Toes*, and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, showed Ondaatje's early interest in the sequence poem, which surfaces in a number of poems in *Handwriting*. The reordering of selected poems in *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1992) reinforced the accumulating significance in Ondaatje's life and art of ties that bind: "Light," the last poem in *Trick*, became the first poem in the new collection. Just as the reader seemed to be invited to connect with the past (and past collection of poems), the gesture also indicated an opening out, a sense of continuance, and future possibility. "Escarpment" became the penultimate poem in the "*Secular Love*" section, followed by "Birch Bark," dedicated to friend and mentor George Whalley, and celebrating friendship as "an old song we break into / not needing all the words" (*Cinnamon* 192). In his final statement in *The Cinnamon Peeler*, "Breeze," an elegy for friend and fellow poet bp Nichol, Ondaatje wrote, "We sit down to clean and sharpen / the other's most personal lines," and vowed: "From now on / no more solos" (193-94). Nine years later in *Handwriting* he will mark a similar connection in "The Great Tree," where a poet-calligrapher

celebrates his friend's painting by inscribing a colophon on its surface, "each sweep and gesture … echoing the other's art" (58).

Such sweeps and gestures in Ondaatje's career led many of us to expect another transformation in his next collection of poems. Perhaps what we did not expect was that the arc of accumulating self-exposure would culminate in the fragmented poetics of *Handwriting* where the self is again defaced, but in a fundamentally different way. Perhaps this explains the relative silence — was it bafflement? — that greeted Ondaatje's first new poems in fourteen years. To be sure, there was some positive reception, most notably Sam Solecki's laudatory review in *Books in Canada* in which he referred to the "astonishing economy" of a "lyrical and multi-layered mosaic" (7); Jay Ruzesky's appreciation in *The Malahat Review* of the "levels of thought and expression" (119); and Sudeep Sen's unequivocal admiration in *World Literature Today*: "Michael Ondaatje's *Handwriting* is … elliptical and careful, raw and perfectly pitched, but always beautifully conceived and delicately etched in 'wild cursive scripts' with the stylized slant of a fine and practiced hand" (339). Although the *Globe and Mail's* Fraser Sutherland noted the collection's "dense poetic texture" and "gorgeous images," he characterized an Ondaatje book as "rather like a train journey in which the traveler sees wondrous sights and miraculous events flash by at the window without any easy assurance that there's a destination, an engineer or even a train" (D16). Kenneth Sherman in Arc criticized what he saw as the lack of emotional range: "All characters and movements carry the same weight" (68). Henry Taylor in *Poetry* described the language as "precise yet remote, like a thoughtful and troubled voice-over" (108).

Who is the self that speaks? The authorial self is diffused in *Handwriting*. It is a disembodied hand that writes "on waves, / on leaves, the scripts of smoke" (*Handwriting* 6). Ondaatje has toyed with this idea before. In "Walking to Bellrock," his river journey with friend Stan Dragland, there are images of "heads decapitated" and "frames truncated at the stomach" (*Trick* 81-82). In "The Hour of Cowdust," one of the poems emerging from his travel across the Indian subcontinent to Sri Lanka in 1978, he wrote: "Everything is reducing itself to shape … there is no longer / depth of perception" (86-87). In "Uswetakei-yawa" from the same collection, the "trickster" dog takes on "outrageous transformations," and may be the "something" that slips into the canal, losing its shape in the night (89-91). In *Handwriting*, "No human image remains. / What is eternal is brick, stone, / a black lake where water disappears / below mud and rises again" (10). Without depth of perception, identity is unstable, dynamic, in flux

— chaotic. By suppressing the authoritative voice, the tyranny of system is transgressed and the very nature of selfhood interrogated. Reduced to essentials, the voice that speaks rehearses the alternative narrative, retells its story in a way that is complicated, less sequential than the established version. Like Ondaatje's, Edward Said's personal history is one of displacement. Advocating a narrative of the dispossessed, Said writes, "With no acceptable narrative to rely on, with no sustained permission to narrate, you feel crowded out and silenced" (325). By sublimating the authorial voice, the opportunity for an inclusive pluralism arises: in the poems of *Handwriting*, the community is permitted to break silence.

Handwriting is an antiphony of the voices of many selves: responses echo across pages, across history. In the multitude of voices resides the contradictory nature of the split self, the self that must cross over, straddle boundaries, and speak back. As a very different poet wrote, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then … I contradict myself; / I am large … I contain multitudes" (Whitman 87). To read the collection whole is to come away with a sense of the past turning over on itself, mixing with the present, past and present both informing and reforming one another. The personal and collective memorials to marginalized, suppressed, or forgotten histories that are unearthed in these poems evoke T.S. Eliot's concept of tradition in the individual talent as the "historical sense" that Said so admires. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that historical influences — empire, geography, culture — create a texture of shared memory, that "the pastness of the past" is not lodged irrevocably in the past, but stretches across time to inform the present. The individual writer is inextricably connected to the tradition of which he or she is a part. He quotes Eliot from "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (qtd. in Said 4). Ondaatje's "historical sense" collides with his vision of the "violent beauty" of life, forming a mix that is complex, non-sequential, and always provocative. He offers a narration which resists prescribing, a counter-narrative in which there is no central position but multiple positions. Resisting the one authoritative voice, Ondaatje's text permits a range of voices. In doing so, it imposes recognition of the loss of self and becomes, in the

language of Roland Barthes, a "text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts … , unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (14). The split self that reads and writes for pleasure in a text that is rooted in the culture that produces it, while simultaneously reading and writing the text of bliss that has, in the interstices of its discourse, broken with that culture, must find a way of reading and writing that is also fragmentary, jarring, disjunctive. The critic who would attempt a commentary on a text of bliss faces a similar challenge: "With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text. This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, *unless it is reached through another text of bliss*: you cannot speak 'on' such a text, you can only speak 'in' it, *in its fashion*" (22).

Ultimately, then, I indulge myself, returning to a close, personal reading of these poems. As the reader of classical Indian poetry found delight in uncovering layers of meaning in a literary text, so I continually delight — find my bliss — in the intricately wrought and unsettling architecture of an Ondaatje poem. I am reminded of the penultimate lyric in the collection, "Step," as I think of an Ondaatje poem as a pavilion whose pillars can hold up "your house, / your lover's house, the house of your god" (*Handwriting* 70). In poem as pavilion, I am also intimately aware of the pillars — the poetics and their controlling hand — that support it. Spending time with Ondaatje's complete poetic œuvre from *The Dainty Monsters to Handwriting* is like going up steps — "to a higher room," to "lighter air" (71).

The opening poem in *Handwriting*, "A Gentleman Compares His Virtue to a Piece of Jade," presents aspects of a country, its people, and its history in a series of poetic fragments, all qualified by a ubiquitous "we" who seems to stand apart from this place and this culture and simultaneously belong to it. The fragments resemble miniature tableaux, interludes in stop motion. Until the final two verse paragraphs, there is little discernible tone colour. The narrative voice is restrained, there is no sure direction or argument, and the emotional shading is subtle. Images are set into white space, arranged like pieces of tile on a smooth surface. The poet leaves us sensuously fulfilled, semantically bereft. We are the stilt-walker looking for a firm footing. We are the tightrope-walker from Kurunegala, who, "the generator shut down by insurgents / stood there / swaying in the"darkness" (5).

And in that darkness, there is silence; in that silence, an invitation.

Bangles from Polonnaruwa.
A nine-chambered box from Gampola.
The archaeology of cattle bells. (4)

Listen and receive. Dispel all former beliefs. Desire nothing. "We began with myths," the narrative voice reports, "and later included actual events" (3). Points of information will not be immediately forthcoming; a glossary of the language or readings in the social and political history of Sri Lanka will be of nominal assistance. The poems in *Handwriting* are rather like minimalism in music where repeated patterns gradually lengthen, incorporating changes as the composition proceeds. Almost any image in "A Gentleman Compares His Virtue to a Piece of Jade" — bells, bangles, water, the Buddha, the tightrope-walker, the moon, the "wild cursive scripts" — can be traced from poem to poem throughout the text, and in its journey, exposed and re-exposed in various contexts, altering in form, accumulating meaning. The process is, potentially, without end. As long as the writer or composer is willing and able to reconfigure form and content, there is no finality, no ultimate meaning or solution. In this manner the reader/listener experiences an increasing sense of wholeness which is also incalculable, an ephemerality that is so like the modern experience of life as to be strangely satisfying.

In *Handwriting*, Ondaatje invites us to enter into the imaginative spirit of place, and specifically into his imaginative interpretation of it. In the process of listening and receiving, one might read for a quality shared by a sequence of phrases, or even a sequence of poems, and from that quality name a feeling. *Rasa* is a Sanskrit word alluding to the emotional state derived from an aesthetic experience.[1] In his postscript to *Handwriting*, Ondaatje refers to *rasas* as "flavours" (78). If one were to attempt to ascribe a "flavour" to "A Gentleman Compares His Virtue to a Piece of Jade," nostalgia might do. The formal diction of the title suggests the narrator is a member of the educated elite. If he were a Burgher of Portuguese descent[2] he might call his feeling as he compares his virtue to a piece of jade *saudade*, which translates loosely as nostalgia for the grandeur of the past, a kind of bittersweet melancholy, a pleasure from which one suffers. In contemplating his "piece of jade," the gentleman might be contemplating his own green island, its concurrent pleasures and sufferings captured, gem-like, simultaneously translucent and diffused. In the final poem, "Last Ink," a woman's story threatens to become "lost in imprecise reproductions / until caught in jade, / whose spectrum could hold the black greens / the chalk-blue of her eyes in daylight" (74).

"A Gentleman Compares His Virtue to a Piece of Jade" is a map to a distant country of the mind where poetic conventions and epistemological expectations will not be reliable guides. Images that occur in it are points of departure; each will recur as succeeding poems open out to enlarge context and register meaning. "There are maps now," Ondaatje wrote in a previous poem, "whose portraits / have nothing to do with surface" (*Secular* 36). *Handwriting* is one man's attempt to penetrate the surface. As each succeeding poem incorporates the whole, we are left, ultimately, with one man's portrait of place, one man's imaginative map. In this country of "a hundred beliefs" (*Handwriting* 11) there is no authority but the traveller himself.

And yet these same hundred beliefs are inscribed within the collective memory:

> Handwriting occurred on waves,
> on leaves, the scripts of smoke,
> a sign on a bridge along the Mahaweli River. (6)

Writing, like burying and unearthing, is a way to preserve a culture and to memorialize it. In any country where conflict is indelibly written into its history, ordinary people find ways to leave signs. These are political acts. In the first section of *Handwriting* Ondaatje steps inside the history of Sri Lanka to unearth the conflict of two millennia and to bear witness to those who attempt to defend a way of life, and to remember it. "To be buried in times of war … for safety," and "to bury … giving up the sacred … carrying the faith of a temple" (7), and then to unearth and to be unearthed — these are the acts of defiance when "above ground" all is "massacre and race" (8). In "Buried" those who defy the enemy are "men carrying recumbent Buddhas," burying them in earth and stone. They are also "men carrying mortars / burning the enemy, disappearing into pits" and "girls with poison necklaces / to save themselves from torture" (12). An ethos of a people is buried and exhumed in reincarnations of stone. In the last section of the poem the narrator is drawn into a personal experience of death and rebirth. He looks out onto a lake that has buried a village and feels "water in my bones" as he struggles with a debilitating fever like someone who is "buried / in the darkness of a room" or in a "black lake / that reappears and / disappears" (11), or like someone who champions a cause only to die by the gift of light ("Thomas Merton who died of electricity" [13]). The consequences of burial and revival, drowning and recovering, life and violent death beg the question, "But if I had to perish twice? (13)."

In "The Brother Thief," it is not clear whether the stolen statue of the Buddha will be preserved. What is clear is that the stonecutter's *art* endures, that the carved gestures of the Buddha and its eyes "restless / from firelight" invoke emotion and insight in the young thief — at the very least, a sense of "dark peace, / like a cave of water" (16). Gestures and signs abound. On the road "To Anuradhapura" the poet contemplates the "flutter and drift" (18) of humanity as he encounters the many faces of God: Hindu shrines to Lord Ganesh, the elephant-headed god who links the worldly and the spiritual; a family of stilt-walkers, men practising god-like feats "twenty feet high / walking over fields" (17); and Anuradhapura itself, an ancient Sinhalese city, home to the sacred Bo tree grown from a sapling of the tree under which the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment in 528 B.C. Present-day pilgrims circle a dagoba which houses relics of the Buddha. In this city of faith, as in this country, the ancient and the modern merge and drift in the "tow of this river" (18), and God is everywhere.

The leitmotif of preservation through burial recurs in "Buried 2." An incantatory narrative voice recounts the rescue of the tooth relic from the "hot loam" of the Buddha's funeral pyre in which it was buried, only to be buried in hair and "buried again / within the rapids of a river" as it was smuggled "from temple to temple for five hundred years" (21). Libraries are buried under trees; harbours drown invaders' ships. Dark forests hide poets; they are revealed "— as if a torch were held above the night sea / exposing the bodies of fish —" and when killed are only "made more famous" (23). Stories, legends, and traditions form a mythology of a people, and so mark their place. "What we lost" are the signs that mark a significant cultural identity and in "Buried 2" raise questions about the value of preservation: poems that inscribe "the deeper levels of the self / landscapes of daily life" (24), rules of courtesy, the art of drumming and of eye-painting, certain gestures and patterns, knowledge handed down through generations "hidden in clouds, / in rivers, in unbroken rock" (25). The loss is enumerated in a metrical pulse of arrest and motion, striving and stillness:

> Nine finger and eye gestures
> to signal key emotions.
> The small boats of solitude.
>
> Lyrics that rose
> from love
> back into the air

naked with guile
and praise.

Our works and days. (24-25)

In a diction that echoes the vocabulary of Buddhism (the "Ten Precepts," the "Four Noble Truths," the "Eightfold Path" [Gombrich 67-94]) the metrical pulse halts in the final, startling recognition:

All this we burned or traded for power and wealth
from the eight compass points of vengeance

from the two levels of envy. (25)

The consequences of losing those things which were bartered for are addressed in the following sections of the poem, where the forests which were the raw material of visionaries in part *ii* now signify boundaries: "In the south most violence began / over the ownership of trees" (26). What is being unearthed currently are "the disappeared / bodies of schoolchildren" (27), and sometimes nothing is preserved: "Those whose bodies / could not be found" (28). The poem asks whether the burial and loss of a culture is a fair trade for the gratification of ambition or the desire to define our separateness. The answer can be found in the ironic understatement of the last poem in the sequence which, by its title, "'All those poets famous as kings,'" recalls the earlier reference to those famous poets who were "killed and made more famous" (23). Together with its title and its formal presentation as a translation of a poem, part *viii* suggests the work of one of the ancient poets who "wrote their stories on rock and leaf," so as to record and render timeless the simple, exquisite moment:

A woman who journeys to a tryst

having no jewels,

darkness in her hair,

the sky lovely with its stars. (29)

Patterns of sound and form recur in subtle shades of metaphor and meaning throughout *Handwriting*, always serving to incorporate and enlarge the whole. Nevertheless, the eight poems that comprise part i share a prominent thematic concern: the investigation and exposure of the cultural and political history of Sri Lanka. The narrative voice is distanced, often identified impersonally as the voice of a whole people in the collective "we." The central poem sequence "The Nine Sentiments"

bridges the generalized political concerns of the first section and the more personalized lyrics of the third. The compressed, fragmentary style and the repetition of suggestive images from preceding poems sustain the collection's minimalist aesthetic. The poetic fragments that comprise the eleven poems in the sequence revel in some of "what we lost" from "Buried 2": "The interior love poem … The art of eye-painting … Gestures between lovers … Lyrics that rose / from love / back into the air / naked with guile and praise" (24-25). Ondaatje's phrase "the interior love poem" recalls the *akam* genre of the Tamil literary tradition, which addresses the inner or private life through the drama of cross-gender relations. The references to women's painted eyes (34, 37), "sidelong coquetry" (35), and "three folds on their stomachs / considered a sign of beauty" (39) recall the attributes typified by women in classical Indian works: "girls and women shoot well-directed, wounding looks from the corners of their eyes. They have moon or lotus faces, graceful liana arms, lotus feet, narrow waists with three folds of skin round the navel as a sign of beauty" (Lienhard 33). The lovers' tryst and the monsoon season are favourite themes in classical Indian poetry: in Ondaatje's poem "*x*" the lover is "walking through rainstorms to a tryst" (*Handwriting* 42). The speaker of poem "*xi*" who laments "Where is there a room / without the damn god of love?" (43) echoes lines from a poem by Bhartrihari, a fifth century philosopher-poet who wrote, "Damn her, damn him, the god of love, / the other woman, and myself!" (Miller 3).

In his study of classical Sanskrit poetry, Swedish scholar Siegfried Lienhard describes the practice in both Sanskrit and Tamil of a highly developed theoretical system of fixed literary conventions. Artistry lay in an individual poet's unique juxtaposition of standard elements, poetic brilliance in the imaginative expression of familiar themes, phrases, and associations. It was in the short lyric, where classical Indian poetry originated (65), that compression of poetic message was paramount. Readers delighted in formulaic verses where conventional language was skilfully and subtly manipulated. For the connoisseur of classical Indian poetry, the essence of poetic enjoyment resided in the ability of a poem to ignite *camatkara*, the aesthetic astonishment resulting in a feeling of bliss caused by the accumulative comprehension of a literary text. Connotative words and images created a poetic resonance through the power of suggestion (*dhvani*), awakening an aesthetic response (*rasa*) in the reader — not the "direct naming of an emotional tone," but a "slow and undeniable creation, imperceptibly, of a climate of feeling" (Merwin 19). Sudeep Sen describes reading the poems in *Handwriting* as "going through a

darkroom experience, developing a negative to a positive — slow, gentle, translucent, and evocative" (338). In the formal and stylistic mini-malism, he writes, where language is reduced to "the precision of a razor's micron edge," there is "fine-tuned movement that incorporates as its primary tool suggestiveness and all that falls in that subtle space." Viewed in the light of classical Indian poetics, the "set pieces of Indian love poetry" comprising "The Nine Sentiments" to which an early reviewer of *Handwriting* referred disparagingly as "exoticism, affectation" (Sherman 70) rather implicate Ondaatje as a writer poised at the intersection of cultures, mediating both, embedding a Western poetic in an Eastern tradition. By choosing to footnote his claim to "*some* of the traditions and marginalia of classical Sanskrit poetry and Tamil love poetry" in the postscript to the volume (*Handwriting* 78; emphasis added), Ondaatje seems to invite a casual, perhaps unsophisticated approach, a suggestion that we avoid reading these poems against the ancient and exacting science of Indian literary theory but instead note — and take pleasure from — the interplay of selected images. Though we might (from the title) expect nine poems, each one dealing with a "sentiment," Ondaatje gives us eleven poems. Though our understanding of a "sequence" leads us to expect a narrative link, the narrative in "The Nine Sentiments" is subtle and accretive. Related images and an accumulating emotional tone are evoked by poetic miniatures that comprise the whole, yet can stand alone as elements in a series. As in an earlier poem, "The Wars" (*Trick* 92), where "hundreds of unseen bats" sing in the language of archaic Tamil in the Bo tree where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment, the poems in *Handwriting* are polyphonic, many-voiced, inclusive, and, in the spirit of Said's words, represent a "pull away from separatist nationalism toward a more integrative view of human community and human liberation" (216). The reader who is called upon to work to uncover the sense of a difficult text joins the poetic process, as did the reader of classical Indian poetry, in an imaginative re-creation, breathing life into an entity in which the poet first breathed life.

Point of view in "The Nine Sentiments" shifts from references to the general and plural ("desire / enters the hearts of men"; "arrows of flint / in their hair"; "One sees these fires" [*Handwriting* 33-35]) toward the specific and singular ("your arm," "My path," "her foot," "her echo" [36-37]), and back again ("we fear" [42]; "You stare into the mirror" [37]). In poem "ix" it is "I" who cannot hold on to love the way knowledge is held in old books, or the way astronomers who cannot hold the stars calculate their movement by "placing shells / on a dark blanket / saying 'these / are the

heavens'" (41). As in the classical literature, the women in the sequence are portrayed as objects of the narrator's desire, stimuli to the poet's lyric mood. In "The Nine Sentiments," the narrator is drawn to their sexuality, the "calling bells" (33) at their hips, their painted eyes, green silk dresses, "brush of sandalwood along the collarbone" (34), and "sidelong coquetry" (35). These women are not passive recipients: they "uproot lotus in mid-river" (39), recalling the casual eroticism of "tugging his lotus stalk … on Edith Grove" (35); they laugh while husbands are away (39). While she might loosen the string of bells at her hips, inviting sex, the desired woman also possesses a "fearless heart" (40). Her arm movements cause "states of confusion" (36); her hair on his stomach releases a "heavy arrow"; she leaves an echo in her wake; flowers that she kicks in passing bloom (37). In her absence, the male persona experiences a profound dislocation of self as he stares "into the mirror / that held her painted eye." The problem of desire, and of the transient nature of life that percolates throughout *Handwriting*, is personified in the image of the beloved who has become a "ghost," a "shadow" (41). "Love arrives and dies in all disguises," writes the poet-lover, "and we fear to move / because of old darknesses" (42). Refusing to participate, however, only leads to increased longing. For this man, there is no resting place, no room without desire, "without the damn god of love" (43).

In "The Nine Sentiments," the male speaker stands distanced: the women are the *dramatis personae* whose actions, conscious and unconscious, direct the course of the narrative and its concomitant tone of frustrated desire. The confluence of love and eroticism provides only a momentary stay against the chaos: this lover may hold ancient wisdom in the form of books, maps, and chronicles, but he can hold only a shadow of the real woman, can only point to her memory like the astronomers who point to replicas of stars. In lyric "*x*" he invokes classical Sanskrit poetics to conflate history, poetry, and life. The woman who journeyed to a tryst in "Buried 2" (29) re-enters here in the continuous present:

> Walking through rainstorms to a tryst,
> the wet darkness of her aureoles
>
> the Sloka, the Pada, the secret Rasas
>
> the curved line of her shadow
>
> the Vasanta-Tilaka or Upajati metres
>
> bare feet down ironwood stairs. (42)

In the third section of *Handwriting*, it is personal history that fuels the artistic process. The transcription of the significant moments that make up a life is the writing that results from the signs, marks, and impressions of subjective experience:

> the way someone you know
> might lean forward
> and mark the place
> where your soul is
> — always, they say,
> near to a wound. ("Wells *iii*" 51)

> The way someone's name holds terraces of character, contains all of our adventures together. ("Death at Kataragama" 55)

> The way someone in your life will talk out love and grief
> then leave your company laughing. ("Last Ink" 72)

In "The Great Tree," a young poet-calligrapher mourns the death of his artist friend and memorializes that loss in an impassioned colophon to his friend's most famous painting. By doing so, he enters into the ultimate collaboration, sharing with Zou Fulei "his leaps and darknesses," each of them "echoing the other's art" (58-59). In "Wells" (48-51), water is not the agent of drowning as it was in previous poems, but the mark of life, the link to past pleasures as the child or man-child catches a bucket of showering water, "standing in sunlight / wanting more." The happy kisses that feel like diving become tears on leaving his "ayah," that "almost-mother in those years / of thirsty love." Soldiers perform a "puja," a prayer, by digging a well "in an unnamed grove" and pulling water out of the depths of the earth, just as the poet must plunge the depths of memory to pull out the substance of his art.

"Death at Kataragama" centralizes the immediate problem of making poetry. In what might stand for a description of the poetics of *Handwriting*, the narrator sees "paragraphs reduced to one word. A punctuation mark. Then another word, complete as a thought." He fears that what he writes "will drift away. I will be able to understand the world only at arm's length" (55). He longs for transmutability, that he might enter the body of bird or animal, released from the complications of human desire and the "brutal aloneness" (56) of the artistic process. He would give up love and "that book I wanted to make and shape tight as a stone" (57) for the choice. Without resolving the obsessions and personal conflicts of his present life, however, the possibility exists

that he would enter the next life "as I always do another's nest, in their clothes and with their rules for a particular life" (56).

Ondaatje's pervasive desire for the personal and artistic attachments that will immobilize time and cure the deep ache has been a constant theme in his poetry. It began in *The Dainty Monsters* with an examination of the "other" in the form of animals whose behaviour seemed to comment on or reflect upon human behaviour — "other" as projection of "self." In *Rat Jelly*, the other took up residence inside the self, but not without fear: the creative principle took on murderous proportions. In the new poems of *Trick*, the writer began to contemplate a vision of self as part of a larger continuum rooted in a sense of place. In moving out to explore his own past he began to move in, to "come home," in a sense, with a new understanding of otherness as integral to an understanding of self. By the end of *Secular Love*, the narrator at least seemed ready to receive forms of love that move beyond obsessive attachment, and to direct the course of his own wanderings while alternately holding on and letting go: "He has gone far enough to look for a bridge and has not found it. Turns upriver. He holds onto the cedar root the way he holds her forearm" (*Secular* 126). Throughout *Handwriting* Ondaatje flirts with old desires to contain, attach, preserve, and hold while briefly allowing glimpses of a life without these needs.

The motif of life without desire persists in the many voices modulated by the teachings of the Buddha, Siddharta Gautama (563-483 B.C.). The Buddha preached that life is suffering and that suffering is caused by desire — one craves things in order to relieve pain.[3] By following the path of right conduct, and turning inward to master one's own mind and finding peace within, it is possible to reach the state of desiring nothing, and so obviate the necessity for rebirth in which *karma*, the law of causation set in place by the conduct of one's past lives, must be experienced. The soul that finally attains such enlightenment attains *nirvana* or freedom from the cycle of rebirth. Death and rebirth are dramatized throughout *Handwriting* in imagery of burying and unearthing, of drowning and recovering, and in the enumeration of things lost and gained. In "The Story" the newborn's face "is a lake / of fast moving clouds and emotions" as past lives are recalled in waking dreams during the first forty days of life, "before we bury the maps" (*Handwriting* 60). Dreams of the past, future imaginings, stories, maps, what is remembered and not remembered, the building and rebuilding of lives and familial connections — this is life's journey, its ending unknown. One can only lower the rope and descend, "hoping it will be long enough / into the darkness of the night" (66).

"House on a Red Cliff" contemplates similar mysteries: "the sea is

in the leaves / the waves are in the palms / old languages in the arms / of the casuarina pine" (67). The tree planted by a grandfather lives through fire, lifts *itself* over the roof of the house. The poem suggests there is no mirror, no human creation, which will adequately reflect the knowledge that exists beyond understanding and that thrives "from / generation to generation." The house, so often the symbolic repository of desire and attachment, is here "unframed … an open net" through which things pass, continue, or re-form, even into formlessness.

In "Step," the evanescent nature of life is apparent in the manner in which a monk's funeral pyre disintegrates "completely as his life" (69). But the ego is attached to present pleasures and to overwhelming emotions: grief, desire. The nuns in meditation, "their complete heart / their burning thought focused / on this step, then *this* step," have, like the devotees who constructed the lotus pavillion, managed to transform desire into devotion. The strength of such devotion transcends time and understanding — like pillars, it can hold up "your house, / your lover's house, the house of your god" (70). As the monk's ceremonial funeral structure represented an ending that disappears only to be replaced by something else (even something as "abstract / as air" [69]), so the solitary standing pillars once released the soul "to a higher room / where there was worship, lighter air" (71). Ondaatje's poem itself stands as a kind of pillar, releasing the imagination to its own new level.

"Last Ink" is Ondaatje's signature to the collection. The poem gathers the central images and concerns of the entire text under the wing of its dominant image, writing. The moments that sustain and transfigure human existence are the sudden encounters and aesthetic pleasures that are "recorded always in your heart" (72) and in the act of writing. In "The Medieval Coast" the poet recorded, "Every stone-cutter has his secret mark, angle of his chisel" (20). In "Last Ink," the stone-cutter is the lover who cuts desire against river stones, captures his "indelible darker self" (73) in inked rubbings. Like the poets of "Buried 2" who "wrote their stories on rock and leaf" (23), artists' signatures are inked into scrolls, stone, and seals, a calligraphy that celebrates and mirrors life. These are the distinctive marks that inscribe a collective and personal identity, that "hold the vista of a life" and keep chaos at bay:

> and the rest of the world — chaos,
> circling your winter boat. (72)

The ambiguous syntax of this phrase underscores the problem of finding a form for the artistic vision, of finding a language that will incorporate

life with all its inherent chaos and transience. Does the phrase suggest it is the chaos always at the edge of experience that circles the poet? Or is it incumbent on the poet to circle chaos and defend against it by containing it in art?

> A seal, the Masters said,
> must contain bowing and leaping,
> 'and that which hides in waters.' (73)

If this is "Life on an ancient leaf / or a crowded 5th-century seal" (73), the poem suggests that all things in life, including the chaos, are part of the whole, but that the parts must exist independently, not merged with it but retaining their wholeness, much as a culture must retain its identity within a larger social construct by narrating its own story. Ondaatje uses his "last ink in the pen" to remind us of our fallibility and limitations ("our altering love, our moonless faith"), but also our limitless capacity. The narrator who touches the "moment in the heart" (74) is the visionary who searches for "the thin border of the fence / to break through or leap" (75), the devotee who steps "to a higher room" (71), or the reader who, when encountering the end, circles back, to look again.

A seal, like a poem, must (the Masters say) contain the "bowing and leaping" (73) that is the price of existence; it must reflect the formlessness out of which form is assembled. The technical strengths that marked Ondaatje's early poems — his strong ear for rhythm and tonal nuances, and his early predilection for the distillation of form and meaning that has become his hallmark — are refined in *Handwriting*. The mature poems are finely tuned, restrained, even austere, but reduced as close as possible to the minimum. Architect and designer John Pawson writes about "the minimum" in art and architecture, but his definition can just as easily substitute for a statement of Ondaatje's mature poetics: "The minimum could be defined as the perfection that an artefact achieves when it is no longer possible to improve it by subtraction. This is the quality that an object has when every component, every detail, and every junction has been reduced or condensed to the essentials. It is the result of the omission of the inessentials" (7).

Ondaatje reduces language to its bones, omits the inessentials. Inside his poems, words articulate like joints inside a skin of sensuous rhythms. Like the image of the poets in "Buried 2" who are "revealed in their darknesses / — as if a torch were held above the night sea / exposing the bodies of fish" (*Handwriting* 23), the minimalist aesthetic

that underpins and informs the text casts a singular light on the individual manifestation of selfhood while setting in motion a reflective rhythm that incorporates the voice of collective memory. Each image is dropped into an ever-widening pool of perception, spilling over the rim of the poem. In such dialectic, the text creates spaces for reflection, but never for repose. Like a Chinese scroll painting, excitement lies in the intersection of space and line. If his father's letters were rooms in which he seldom lived, Ondaatje's poems are rooms in which we *can* live, where movement and compression, release and restraint, proportion, scale, and light co-exist with the sheer physicality of space. Patterns of sound and form that recur throughout the work confer a sense of order — of "home," perhaps — similar to the way repetition functions in architecture. As one passes from collection to collection, poem to poem, there is a sense of travelling from one space to another all within the same building.

Notes

[1] The conception of *rasa* as an aesthetic construct originated in Bharata's *Natya Sastra*, considered to be the first written treatise on the arts of drama, music, dance, and poetry, and thought to have been compiled between the third and sixth centuries A.D. Formulating a theory of poetic expression in which Eastern influences were brought to bear on Western traditions, René Daumal (1908-1944) translated the *Natya Sastra*, among other Sanskrit texts, into modern French. In his essay, "To Approach the Hindu Poetic Art," first published in *Les Cahiers du Sud*, No. 236, 1941, Daumal attempted to explain the concept of *rasa* to the occidental mind: "[The aesthetic principle] is expressed in poetry through the concept of *rasa*, 'savor,' direct apprehension of a state of being" (9).

> If one analyzes a poem … and discerns the literal and derived meanings, a 'surplus meaning' remains … not deducible by logical inference, and perceived … as the true meaning of the poem by 'he who savors it.' This meaning, this new 'power' of the word, is called 'resonance' (*dhvani*) or 'suggestion' (*vyanjana*) or still 'gustation' (*rasana*). It is born from certain combinations of words whose interpretation by literal and derived meanings is insufficient …. The savor is the essence, the 'self' (*atman*) of the poem. (11-12)

[2] The term "Burgher" is used by Sinhalas and Tamils to refer to all descendants of European colonizers (Bartholomeusz 178 n 3). The Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in the early 1500s for purposes of monopoly in the spice trade. They were ousted by the Dutch in 1638, and the Dutch by the British in 1796. Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948 but remained a member of the Commonwealth until a constitutional republic was declared in 1972. A Portuguese dialect was spoken in Sri Lanka until well into the twentieth century, but a 1981 census shows that Burghers in total made up only 0.3% of the population (De Silva 4). Sinhalese was declared the sole official language in 1956 (referred to in Ondaatje's poem

as "the formalization of the vernacular" [*Handwriting* 4]), but both Sinhalese and Tamil are recognized as national languages.

[3] For a brief introduction to the beginnings of Buddhism in Sri Lanka see De Silva 21-23; for a biographical discussion and its relation to present beliefs in Sri Lanka see Gombrich 95-168.

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