NETS AND CHAOS: THE POETRY OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE

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My mind is pouring chaos
in nets onto the page.[1]

Michael Ondaatje is a poet of reality. In applying this phrase to Ondaatje, I wish to call attention to the fact that in his poetry the fundamental or essential nature of experience is consistently being described and examined. The entire thrust of his vision is directed at compelling the reader to reperceive reality, to assume an unusual angle of vision from which reality appears surreal, absurd, inchoate, dynamic, and, most importantly, ambiguous. His poetic world is filled with mad or suicidal herons, one-eyed mythic dogs, tortured people, oneiric scenes, gorillas, dragons, creative spiders, and imploding stars. These extraordinary images function as a kind of metaphoric shorthand to disorient the reader, to make him enter a psychological or material reality which has been revealed as almost overwhelmingly anarchic or chaotic. What is at issue in Ondaatje's poetry is the existence not of an alternate reality but of different perceptions of one which the reader has always assumed to be clear, patterned, and meaningful. To use Wallace Stevens' apt phrase, Ondaatje is often a "connoisseur of chaos"; and whether his poems depict an unconscious mode of being similar to Freud's primary process ("Biography," "King Kong," "King Kong meets Wallace Stevens") or simply the ordinary phenomenal flux of life ("Loop," "We're at the graveyard"), the central formal and thematic concern in his work has been the description of internal and external reality as dynamic, chaotic, and ambiguous.[2]

But his major poems not only redefine our sense of reality; they also create an awareness of the extent to which the mind distorts reality in any act of perception and description. In the period between *The Dainty Monsters* (1967) and *Rat Jelly* (1973), Ondaatje has shown an increasing awareness of the epistemological difficulties involved in the relationship between the "nets" of the perceiving and recreating mind and the "chaos" of life. Not content to raise just the usual issue about the limitations of language as a representational medium, Ondaatje has shown more concern for the possibility that poetry might not be able to do justice to the existential complexity of reality because of the inevitable tendency of the mind to see pattern and clarity where life offers only flux and ambiguity. This tension between mind and chaos is at the centre of Ondaatje's poetry; and its implications can be seen in the dualistic nature of his imagery, in the deliberate thematic irresolution of his major lyrics, and in the complex

[1]" 'the gate in his head,' " in *Rat Jelly* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973), p. 62.
[2]Compare, Michael Ondaatje, *Leonard Cohen* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 36.

structuring of his two longer poems, *the man with seven toes* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid.* Without resorting to what R. P. Blackmur has called the fallacy of expressive form,[3] one variant of which can be seen in some of the work of the Black Mountain school and in Victor Coleman's poetry, Ondaatje has written poems describing the fundamentally chaotic nature of experience.

In his first collection, *The Dainty Monsters,* most of the poems simply reflect the assumption that a lyric can recreate any aspect of reality or re-enact any experience which the poet chooses. Only in the poems about poetry — "Four Eyes," "The Martinique," and "Eventually the Poem for Keewaydin" — is the question raised — but only implicitly — to what extent is such an assumption valid and, if it is valid, what are the problems involved in transfiguring life into poetry? Many poems describe life dualistically in terms of a suggestive dialectic between a dark oneiric or surreal world and a daylight one. The former is shown as co-existent with the latter ("The Republic"), vaguely threatening to it ("Gorillas"), or in danger of being extirpated by it ("Dragon"). As is usual in his work, Ondaatje is primarily concerned with the relationship between kinds of reality or modes of being. "The Republic" is a representative poem:

> This house, exact,
> coils with efficiency and style.
> A different heaven here,
> air even is remade in the basement.
>
> The plants fed daily
> stand like footmen by the windows,
> flush with decent green
> and meet the breeze with polish;
> no dancing with the wind here.
>
> Too much reason in its element
> passions crack the mask in dreams.
> While we sleep
> the plants in frenzy heave floors apart,
> lust with common daisies,
> feel rain,
> fling their noble bodies, release a fart.
> The clock alone, frigid and superior,
> swaggers in the hall.
>
> At dawn gardenias revitalize
> and meet the morning with decorum.[4]

In the day this is a world of "reason" and order, but at night the Dionysian world of primal vitality reasserts itself and establishes the republic of the title. But the point of the poem is that this world is there unperceived all the time. It is a necessary counter-balance to a world of "too much reason." The final couplet even suggests that its vitality and chaos "revitalize" the realm of order and light. It is typical of Ondaatje that the relationship between the two worlds is presented as a complex one and that no

[3] R. P. Blackmur, *Form and Value in Modern Poetry* (New York: Anchor, 1957), p. 256.
[4] *The Dainty Monsters* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967), p. 20.

simplistic resolution is offered. Thus although "decorum" is restored at the end of the poem, the verb "revitalize" serves as a disturbing reminder of the anarchic frenzy of the nighttime. The final couplet subtly reiterates the emotional tension created by the central juxtaposition of two opposed realities. This tension, as it relates to the theme, works against the formal closure which arises inevitably with the last word of any poem, and, in doing so, it implies a deliberate thematic irresolution which gives the poem the open-endedness characteristic of Ondaatje's best work.

While "The Republic" is primarily concerned with the description of a scene or an event, "Four Eyes" is more concerned with an examination of the actual process by which a poet transforms a lived, dynamic moment into poetry. The speaker, choosing to see only what is within his companion's field of vision, breaks from the moment in order to record it:

> Naked I lie here
> attempting to separate toes
> with no help from hands.
> You with scattered nightgown
> listen to music, hug a knee.
>
> I pick this moment up
> with our common eyes
> only choose what you can see
>
> a photograph of you with posing dog
> a picture with Chagall's red
> a sprawling dress.
>
> This moment I broke to record,
> walking round the house
> to look for paper.
> Returning
> I saw you, in your gaze,
> still netted the picture, the dog.
> The music continuing
> you were still being unfurled
> shaped by the scene.
>
> I would freeze this moment
> and in supreme patience
> place pianos
> and craggy black horses on a beach
> and in immobilised time
> attempt to reconstruct. (p. 46)

In its focus on the act of creation, the poem anticipates that group of difficult and ambitious lyrics in *Rat Jelly* which deal explicitly with this theme. "Four Eyes" does not examine the problem as perceptively as those more mature poems do, but it is nevertheless exploring a similar area of creative experience. Ondaatje is concerned here with what happens when a poet tries to "reconstruct" a lived moment into art. In "Four Eyes" the first consequence of such an attempt is the poet's necessary separation from the experience itself. In order to write about it, he must leave it:

"This moment I broke to record." With its double meaning of separating and breaking, "broke" questions the quality of the writer's departure and suggests that ultimately he values art over life. Instead of being a participant, he becomes a detached observer who prefers searching for a verbal equivalent of a lived moment to life itself. While "record" indicates the probability of a point by point imitation, the final stanza reveals that the reconstruction will be metaphoric. The writer will use "pianos/and craggy black horses on a beach," images not present in the original scene. The poem ends by suggesting that the essential qualities of a scene "still being unfurled" can only be captured in metaphor. But Ondaatje's final lines simultaneously point to the possibility that even this reconstruction may misrepresent the original moment. The connotations of "freeze" and "immobilized time" imply that the poet will ultimately fail to do justice to life's temporal dimension and its dynamic quality. If my reading is correct, then "Four Eyes" offers both a solution to the problem it poses and a searching critique of that solution. It is not the best poem in Ondaatje's first volume — "Dragon" and "The Time Around Scars" are better — but, together with "The Martinique" and "Eventually the Poem for Keewaydin," it is the one in which he most profoundly questions the possibilities of the kind of poetry he is writing.[5]

In his second book, the long narrative poem *the man with seven toes* (1969), the very form and texture of the poem attempt to recreate for the reader the sense of an unpredictable and often chaotic experience "being unfurled" in the actual body of the poem. Without resorting to formlessness, Ondaatje nevertheless conveys the sense of a descent into a psychological and material chaos. The book is concerned with the response of an anonymous civilized woman to a landscape and culture completely different from her own. Like Margaret Atwood's Susanna Moodie, she is placed in a world the reality of which is ostensibly unrelated to her own. The poem is the account of the confrontation with and gradual acceptance of the darker and more chaotic aspects of life which, by the end of the book, are recognized as not only outside the self but within it as well.

Each of the brief self-contained lyrics vividly re-enacts a stage in her development.

> goats black goats, balls bushed in the centre
> cocks rising like birds flying to you reeling on you
> and smiles smiles as they ruffle you open
> spill you down, jump and spill over you
> white leaping like fountains in your hair
> your head and mouth till it dries
> and tightens your face like a scar
> Then up to cook a fox or whatever
> goats eating goats heaving the bodies
> open like purple cunts under ribs, then tear
> like to you a knife down their pit, a hand in the warm
> the hot the dark boiling belly and rip
> open and blood spraying out like dynamite
> caught in the children's mouths on the ground
> laughing collecting it in their hands

[5]This kind of interrogation is also present in Ondaatje's most recent film, *The Clinton Special*, in which an actor speculates about the quality of Theatre Passe Muraille's interpretation of rural life. The scene was not in the original script of *The Farm Show*.

or off to a pan, holding blood like gold
and the men rip flesh tearing, the muscles
nerves green and red still jumping
stringing them out, like you[6]

The syntax, imagery, and rhythm, the very texture of the verse, re-enact her complex response to an experience which, prior to becoming lost, she had not even imagined. The violent rape evokes a curiously ambivalent response; some of the similes — "like birds," "white leaping like fountains" — have quite positive connotations, but their hint of beauty suddenly disappears in an image — "a scar" — which begins the comparison of the rape and the cutting up of a fox. Her confusion and terror are brilliantly caught in a simile which, because of the deliberate absence of punctuation, has a double reference: "open and blood spraying out like dynamite/caught in the children's mouths on the ground." Because of the syntactical ambiguity, both the blood and the dynamite are "caught in the children's mouths"; this association of violence, sexuality, and innocence stunningly registers the woman's own shocked response. But the similes in this lyric also fulfill another function: they indicate her attempt to appropriate, in terms of analogous or more familiar images, certain experiences which she finds almost indescribable. In describing the tearing apart of a fox in terms of a rape, for example, she is able to articulate her reaction to what has happened to herself as well.

Yet, despite her suffering throughout the journey — and "goats black goats" is a typical instance — she is described at the end of the book as lying on a bed and

sensing herself like a map, then
lowering her hands into her body. (p. 41)

This suggests that an increased awareness of herself has been gained from her experiences. The poem continues with the following stanzas:

In the morning she found pieces of a bird
chopped and scattered by the fan
blood sprayed onto the mosquito net,
its body leaving paths on the walls
like red snails that drifted down in lumps.

She could imagine the feathers
while she had slept
falling around her
like slow rain.

The violent death of the bird is a clear reminder of the world from which she had recently escaped. Her change in attitude to that world, however, is indicated in her ability to imagine the death of the bird in terms of "feathers/while she had slept/falling around her." Again, like Atwood's Moodie, she has achieved a new awareness of herself and of aspects of reality about which she had been previously ignorant.

[6]*the man with seven toes* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1969), p. 16.

A similar but even more developed and complex reperception of reality takes place in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), the events of which are consistently ambiguous in their significance and in which the two central characters are both paradoxes. Billy the Kid is a murderer and "the pink of politeness/and as courteous a little gentleman/as I ever met."[7] Pat Garrett, the ostensible representative of law and order, is a "sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane" (p. 29) with the final stress falling on "— in sane." In the world of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid,* peace and violence, sanity and insanity, order and chaos, and darkness and light are almost inextricably confused. It is as if the key characters have all made "the one altered move" (p. 41) to remove themselves from the normal expectations and moral judgments taken for granted by the reader.

Ondaatje's handling of the story subjects the reader to a process of defamiliarization in which the standard western made familiar by Burns, Penn, and Peckinpah is deliberately "made new." Every aspect of Ondaatje's version emphasizes both the difficulties inherent and the artistic problems involved in recreating that reality in art. As in *the man with seven toes,* Ondaatje achieves this by making the reader experience many of the episodes as if he were a direct witness to them, a temporary insider in the events themselves. But then in his normal position as an objective reader, inevitably outside the text, he must also stand back, organize and evaluate these "collected" but still, so to speak, disorganized "works" which are told from a variety of viewpoints and which lack a summarizing judgment by an omniscient narrator. The effect is similar to that achieved in Robbe-Grillet's fiction where the reader also enters a confusing fictive world knowing that there will be no ostensible authorial guidance. Both authors compel the reader to become both a surrogate character and a surrogate author in order to make him implicitly aware of the difficulties involved in the perceiving and describing of reality. The initial disorientation leads ultimately to a new awareness.

The allusions to Billy's non-picture (p. 5) and the episodes which emphasize that the apparent is not the real serve a similar function. John Chisum's story of Livingstone, the mad breeder of dogs, is a case in point. Chisum says that Livingstone "seemed a pretty sane guy to me. I mean he didn't twitch or nothing like that" (p. 60). This "pretty sane guy" "clinically and scientifically" (p. 61) bred a race of mad dogs on his farm. Sallie Chisum reacts to the story by telling her bassett Henry, "Aint that a nasty story Henry, aint it? Aint it nasty" (p. 62). The story may be "nasty," but its significance is not summed up in that judgment. The story is a reminder that we should refrain from assuming that the apparent is the real. If Livingstone was able to deceive John Chisum about his sanity, then what kind of final judgment can the reader make about the sanity or insanity of Billy the Kid or Pat Garrett? Ondaatje's point is that the task of art is to present the reader with the "collected works" so that he can experience them in their total complexity. Sallie Chisum's final judgment of Billy and Pat seems authoritative because it preserves their ambiguities and contradictions:

[7] *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1970), p. 87.

I knew both these men intimately.
There was good mixed in with the bad
in Billy the Kid
and bad mixed in with the good
in Pat Garrett.

No matter what they did in the world
or what the world thought of them
they were my friends.
Both were worth knowing. (p. 89)

Despite Billy's death, the book remains thematically open-ended. One of its last prose pieces suggests that Billy's story will be written again, interpreted again:

> Imagine if you dug him up and brought him out. You'd see very little. There'd be the buck teeth. Perhaps Garrett's bullet no longer in thick wet flesh would roll in the skull like a marble. From the head there'd be a trail of vertebrae like a row of pearl buttons off a rich coat down to the pelvis. The arms would be cramped on the edge of what was the box. And a pair of hand-cuffs holding ridiculously fine ankle bones. (Even though dead they buried him in leg-irons). There would be the silver from the toe of each boot.
>
> His legend a jungle sleep. (p. 97)

The metaphor in the last line is almost oxymoronic and contains within itself both peace and a potential violence, Billy's gentleness and his killing. The image has an undefined but thoroughly disturbing and haunting quality which leaves the reader with a sense of anticipation and even anxiety. It is as if the violence in Billy and the story is only temporarily quiescent. Ondaatje has managed to summarize within a single sensuous complex the unresolved tensions and ambiguities of the book.

While Ondaatje was writing his two longer works, he was also working on those poems in *Rat Jelly* which as a group constitute his most explicit exploration of the relationship between poetry and reality: "King Kong meets Wallace Stevens," "Spider Blues," "Taking," "'the gate in his head,'" "Burning Hills," and "White Dwarfs." In its concern with the creative mind's "fencing" of chaos, the first of these is representative of the group:

Take two photographs —
Wallace Stevens and King Kong
(Is it significant that I eat bananas as I write this?)

Stevens is portly, benign, a white brush cut
striped tie. Businessman but
for the dark thick hands, the naked brain
the thought in him.

Kong is staggering
lost in New York streets again
a spawn of annoyed cars at his toes.

The mind is nowhere.
Fingers are plastic, electric under the skin.
He's at the call of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Meanwhile W.S. in his suit
is thinking chaos is thinking fences.
In his head the seeds of fresh pain
his exorcising,
the bellow of locked blood.

The hands drain from his jacket,
pose in the murderer's shadow.[8] (p. 61)

The poem is structured upon a series of antitheses; the primary contrast is between Stevens, the businessman whose "thought is in him," and Kong, whose "mind is nowhere." But, as so often in Ondaatje's poetry, the opposed terms are ultimately related. Kong, after all, is more than just a suggestive photographer's image of directable energy; he is also, as the poem's structure and imagery suggest, an aspect of Stevens himself, and the meeting between them occurs not only in the juxtaposing of their photographs but also within Stevens' mind. This is established by the presentation of analogous situations in the third and fourth stanzas: MGM directs Kong; Stevens fences the chaos and blood within himself. No comma or conjunction appears between the two clauses of "is thinking chaos is thinking fences" because the poem is suggesting the problematic simultaneity of both the "chaos" and the "fences" in the "thinking" of Stevens. If, as I have suggested, Kong and "chaos" or "blood" are synonymous, then the entire fourth stanza points to Kong's presence within Stevens himself: both the containing form and the contained energy are within the mind of the businessman who is also a poet. This connection between the two is also present in the image of Stevens' "dark thick hands" which, at the poem's end, "drain from his jacket/pose in the murderer's shadow." The poem closes on the alarming association between Stevens and "the murderer's shadow" which can only be his own. He is a murderer because he has subdued his "chaos" or "blood," his unconscious self.[9]

But the poem also suggests, almost too casually, that Stevens is not the only poet with a shadow self. After all, the writer-speaker of the poem asks humourously in the opening stanza, "Is it significant that I eat bananas as I write this?" In view of the almost symbiotic relationship between Stevens and Kong, there can only be one answer. Despite the parenthetical nature of the question, the image of the "bananas" functions as a comic allusion to the speaker's Kong-like aspect. Thus the poem indicates that both of the poets within it are in creative contact with everything that the ostensibly antithetical Kong represents; but they are able to transform, control, and shape this "chaos" within the self into an aesthetic construct, into "King Kong meets Wallace Stevens." There is also a lingering suggestion,

[8]Compare the image of the hands to Margaret Atwood's "the green man": "They did not look/in his green pockets, where he kept/his hands changing their shape" (*The Animals in That Country* [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973], p. 13). See also the artist with "the murderer's bloodstained hands" in *"Las Manos de Orlac"* in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, Chapter One.
[9]In "King Kong" the psychological implications are even clearer: "we renew him/capable in the zoo of night" only to murder or sacrifice him in the morning (*Rat Jelly*, p. 44).

however, that some of the "chaos" will resist and even escape the poet's act of transformation. Both "the *bellow* of locked blood" and "hands *drain* from his jacket" (my italics) raise this possibility.[10]

The notion that the poet pays a price for creating a poem — "In his head the seeds of fresh pain his exorcising" — reappears in "Spider Blues" in which the poet is seen as an admirable, because dextrous, spider:

> I admire the spider, his control classic,
> his eight legs finicky,
> making lines out of the juice in his abdomen.
> A kind of writer I suppose.
> He thinks a path and travels
> the emptiness that was there
> leaves his bridge behind
> looking back saying Jeez
> did I do that?
> and uses his ending
> to swivel to new regions
> where the raw of feelings exist. (pp. 63-64)

The spider as creative artist is a cartographer of the unknown, and, as the image in the last line reveals, he brings back a message about some essential or primal reality. But, like the speaker in "Four Eyes," he can only do this by separating himself from that reality. The spider may be more talented than the fly; yet, in terms of the allegory of the poem, the fly, because it is closer to life, is the necessary subject matter of art:

> And spider comes to fly, says
> Love me I can kill you, love me
> my intelligence has run rings about you
> love me, I kill you for that clarity that
> comes when roads I make are being made
> love me, antisocial, lovely
> . . . . . .
> And the spider in his loathing
> crucifies his victims in his spit
> making them the art he cannot be.

Mind distinguishes Wallace Stevens from King Kong, and "intelligence" the spider from the fly; but the cost of the distinction is registered by the title of the poem. "Spider Blues": it is sung by Ray Charles or B. B. King, not Anne Murray. But the poem is also a blues song because in the relationship between the spider and the fly, the former creates "beauty" by "crucifying" the latter. It is not clear what alternative modes of creation are possible, but the suggestion is nevertheless felt that this is not an ideal relationship between art and life.

If a poem is a mediation between mind and experience, then the ultimate poem for Ondaatje is the one which transforms reality into poetry without "crucifying" it. " 'the gate in his head' " is not that poem, but it is Ondaatje's most emphatic statement about what poetry should be:

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[10] This idea that the poem is never the whole truth also appears in two of the epigraphs used by Ondaatje in *The Dainty Monsters* and *Rat Jelly*, which warn the reader that the artist may be lying.

My mind is pouring chaos
in nets onto the page.
A blind lover, dont know
what I love till I write it out.
And then from Gibson's your letter
with a blurred photograph of a gull.
Caught vision. The stunning white bird
an unclear stir.

And that is all this writing should be then.
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
so they are shapeless, awkward
moving to the clear. (p. 62)

The "chaos" here is synonymous with whatever reality the poet has chosen to describe. It is the basic life stuff or substance out of which he shapes a poem. The central tension of the poem is between this "chaos" and the mental "nets" of language within which the poet represents it. The "nets" recall the "fences" in "King Kong meets Wallace Stevens" and the "webs" in "Spider Blues" and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*:[11] they are the actual medium — film or words — in which the vision is recreated or caught. Although "caught" is Ondaatje's word, it does not really do justice to either his essentially heuristic assumption about poetic creativity — "A blind lover, dont know/what I love till I write it out" — or his concern with registering as sensitively as possible the dynamic quality of a moment or of an image. His concern is that the poem describe "the unclear stir" made by "a beautiful formed thing" perceived "at the wrong moment." This last detail is particularly important if the poetic perception is to yield a new, unexpected awareness of the image and, consequently, of reality. Yet, as I pointed out earlier, the poem must deal with motion, flux and formlessness within the confines of poetic form. Ondaatje's poem achieves this by hinting at forms — the page, the photograph — and then subtly, through oxymoron, syntax, and an inter-weaving of sounds — n's and r's — recreating the reality, the image of the bird.

The photograph is by Victor Coleman and the entire poem is a *hommage* to a writer whose extremely difficult poems reveal

. . . the faint scars
coloured strata of the brain,
not clarity but *the sense of shift.* (my italics)

The "faint scars" are metaphors for Coleman's poems (*One Eye Love, Stranger*) which, in a mode much more radical than Ondaatje's, attempt to give the reader a sense of life as pure process, as "shift" and "chaos."[12] But the "scars" are also literally scars. Here, as elsewhere in Ondaatje's work, a physical scar represents caught motion, just as a mental scar or an emotional scar is caught memory.[13] In other words, the scar literally

[11] Billy describes the cobwebs in the barn as follows: "When I walked I avoided the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish. The flies caught in those acrobat nets were the only murder I saw" (p. 17). For a slightly different use of webs and acrobats, see "We're at the graveyard" in *Rat Jelly*, p. 51.

[12] For the line "the gate in his head" see "Day 20" in *One Eye Love* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967).

[13] Compare this to Cohen's "A scar is what happens when the word is made flesh" (*The Favourite Game* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970], p. 8).

incorporates and memorializes an emotion, an act, or an experience. In terms of the imagery of "The Time Around Scars," a scar is a "medallion" or "watch" which records a violent and revealing event. One could even say that a scar is finally analogous to an ideal, because nonverbal, poem in which the distinction between word and thing or state of being has finally disappeared. I shall return to this idea when discussing "White Dwarfs."

The very fact that in comparing his work to Coleman's Ondaatje writes "that is all this writing *should be* then" (my italics) is a reminder of an ideal which he feels he has not yet achieved. I would suggest that it is a mark of Ondaatje's integrity as a poet that his most successful poems raise this kind of question. He has said in an interview that "in writing you have to get all the truth down — the qualifications, the lies, the uncertainties —."[14] And if "'the gate in his head'" voices his doubts about the possibility — or impossibility — of an adequate linguistic representation — "all the truth" — of external or objective reality, "Burning Hills," one of his finest personal poems, indicates an awareness that any attempt to come to terms with an emotionally charged complex of memories carries with it its own difficulties:

> Since he began burning hills
> the Shell strip has taken effect.
> A wasp is crawling on the floor
> tumbling over, its motor fanatic.
> He has smoked five cigarettes.
> He has written slowly and carefully
> With great love and great coldness.
> When he finishes he will go back
> hunting for the lies that are obvious.
>
> (*Rat Jelly*, p. 58)

Unlike most of Ondaatje's personal poems, this one is written, almost over-insistently ("He has . . . He has"), in the third person. The repetition of the pronoun suggests the attempted, but not completely realized, distancing of his personal memories. The "burning hills," the wasp, and the five cigarettes are not random details; their cumulative significance is to point to how difficult it is for him to achieve an attitude of "great love and great coldness." Yet this is how he must write in order to achieve a successful, because objective, recreation of his personal experiences. In this poem his "coldness," both emotional and tonal, is evident in the ending's unsentimental and deliberately monotoned voice "hunting for the lies that are obvious." In what sounds like a line from Cohen's *The Energy of Slaves* (but isn't), Ondaatje is indicating that, despite his attempts at objectivity, his poem may be a misrepresentation or lie. And if the lies to be sought out are the "obvious" ones, there is the disturbing implication that the "un-obvious" lies will remain. In either case, the reader has been warned about the poem and the poet's limitations in getting "all the truth down."

Ondaatje's most radical gesture in the direction of indicating that there are times when "all the truth" cannot be stated, described, or re-enacted is the final poem in *Rat Jelly*, "White Dwarfs." Here the poet

[14]Interview in *Runz*, No. 2 (Spring 1975), p. 50.

confronts not just the unconscious, or process or chaos, but events that in their total human significance seem to demand a response of awed silence. A variation on T. W. Adorno's "No poetry after Auschwitz,"[15] the poem is a profound meditation on both life and art. It is a tribute to those who have gone beyond "social fuel" and language:

> This is for those people who disappear
> for those who descend into the code
> and make their room a fridge for Superman
> —who exhaust costume and bones that could perform flight,
> who shave their moral so raw
> they can tear themselves through the eye of a needle
> this is for those people
> that hover and hover
> and die in the ether peripheries (p. 70)

The key word here is "moral," which, although slightly ambiguous, does seem to be synonymous with life-meaning or mode of being. Those who "shave their moral . . . raw" live in a condition in which their character or self exists without a social persona, "where there is no social fuel"; consequently, they come in touch with the very ground of their being, which is here quite subtly associated with heaven ("through the eye of a needle").[16] Like Ondaatje's outlaws (Billy), alienated loners (Pat Garrett and Charlie Wilson), and sufferers (Philoctetes, his father), they are the ones who can provide a glimpse of what the terrifyingly brilliant poem about his father calls the "other worlds"[17] lying beyond either consciousness or social forms.

In "White Dwarfs" the speaker admires those people whose achievement or experience in patience or suffering is beyond him:

> Why do I love most
> among my heroes those
> who sail to that perfect edge
> where there is no social fuel
> Release of sandbags
> to understand their altitude—
>
> > that silence of the third cross
> > 3rd man hung so high and lonely
> > we dont hear him say
> > say his pain, say his unbrotherhood
> > What has he to do with the smell of ladies
> > can they eat off his skeleton of pain?

Himself afraid of "no words of/falling without words," he loves those whose language is an expressive and deafening silence: for them the experience and their expression of it are one. Silence is here a final poetry

[15] "Engagement," in *Noten zur Literatur III* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965), pp. 125-26.

[16] For other rare examples of Ondaatje's use of more traditional images and symbols, see the apple in "Burning Hills" (*Rat Jelly*, p. 58) and the pearls in "Henri Rousseau and Friends" (*The Dainty Monsters*, p. 26).

[17] "Letters and Other Worlds," in *Rat Jelly*, pp. 24-26.

— like the earlier image of a scar — which cannot be improved upon by the poet's facility with words. This is a supreme fiction in which the dualities of nets and chaos, Wallace Stevens and King Kong, art and life, words and objects have been finally dissolved — but only at a price which the traditional poet cannot pay. Even as he suggests that poetry in such a context would be superfluous and perhaps blasphemous, he is nevertheless writing a poem. Like other poets who interrogate the validity of language — Rozewicz and Celan, for example — Ondaatje inevitably uses language to conduct that interrogation.[18] This dialectic of language and silence leads finally not to despair about poetry but to an affirmation. The confrontation with a reality which at first seemed resistant to the "nets" of verbal representation has not silenced the poet; rather it has provoked him into an even more ambitious poetry. In the final movement of the poem, he attempts to describe the unknown:

> And Dashiell Hammett in success
> suffered conversation and moved
> to the perfect white between words
>
> This white that can grow
> is fridge, bed,
> is an egg — most beautiful
> when unbroken, where
> what we cannot see is growing
> in all the colours we cannot see
>
> there are those burned out stars
> who implode into silence
> after parading in the sky
> after such choreography what would they wish to speak of
> anyway (p. 71)

The poem ends by pointing hauntingly to a beauty ("an egg") and a human profundity (the personified "star") which are beyond more explicit description and discussion. The tentative metaphoric gestures of the poem are all that can be expected of poetry in such a situation. Yet Ondaatje's willingness to risk these inevitably anti-climactic lines ("after such choreography"), to explore "the perfect white between words" and "the colours we cannot see," is a paradoxical attestation of his belief in poetry.

Ondaatje's work as a whole can be described as an attempt to make us aware of aspects of reality — surreal, oneiric, dynamic, chaotic — which we normally "cannot see" or perhaps do not want to see. Sheila Watson has written that Ondaatje "is as intelligent as Auden but less afraid of what living means."[19] To be unafraid of life involves a willingness to confront and, if one is an artist, to describe reality in its full complexity. Ondaatje has done this, and his poems, among the most impressive of his generation, are the re-enactments of such confrontations with life and art.

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[18]For a provocative discussion of this aspect of modernism, see Susan Sontag's "The Aesthetics of Silence" and "Bergman's Persona" in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Delta, 1970).
[19]"Michael Ondaatje: The Mechanization of Death," *Open Letter*, Third Series, No. 1 (Winter 1974-75), p. 161.