MICHAEL ONDAATJE AND THE PRODUCTION OF MYTH

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Myth can be read as a synonym for literature and, more particularly, for the archetypal literature that anchors every culture. A glimmer of the latter sense lingers in the contemporary lustre of the former. Michael Ondaatje uses myth to refer to the primeval power of story. In his article on Howard O'Hagan's wilderness novel, *Tay John*, Ondaatje praises the author for his ability to present the "raw power of myth,"[1] noting the paucity of "original myth" with "original rawness"[2] in other writing. *Tay John* is

> . . . powerful because of the way O'Hagan has found it and retold it. . . . O'Hagan truly understands where the dramatic sources of myth lie.[3]

Indeed, myth is not just story; it is a production that involves the reader. "Myth," Ondaatje writes, "is biblical, surreal, brief, imagistic."[4]

Moreover, as Northrop Frye observes of The Holy Bible, "a myth takes its place in a mythology, an interconnected group of myths. . . ."[5] Ondaatje's works are so alike that each is best read as an adjunct of the others. They form a canon: they must be read in the light and the shadow of each other before their individual illuminations or obscurities can be seen. Hence, in the same manner that characters, events, and metaphors can seem to mirror each other in the Old Testament and the New, they can also seem to mirror each other in the complete works of an author. In this sense, *The Dainty Monsters* and *Secular Love* enlighten and inform each other.

Myth is also amoral: a rumour blossoms into truth; a scientific law decays into superstitition; a historical event segues into a novel; fact and fiction haunt, possess, each other. Ondaatje observes that "Somebody tells you a rumour and that becomes a truth."[6] Because myth—as generic structure—treats absolutes like

"truth" and "falsehood" as mere words, equally valid, distinctions between genres vanish. History and fiction therefore become one. Hayden White writes that "history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation."[7] Story arises from fiction; history arises from the fiction of fact.

Furthermore, myth and literature are one corpus: myth is the skeleton; literature, the flesh. To examine syntax, grammar, or punctuation is to discover myth. Frye agrees:

> Literature is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of story-telling, its mythical concepts, sun-gods and the like, become habits of metaphorical thought.[8]

Literature is, then, the overlay of technique and genre upon myth, its formal basis. It is a secret discourse, hidden in the lilt of the pentameter or the sonorous, stately progression of prose.

If the structure of language creates myth, the process of language fosters drama. Each sentence is its own script; grammar engenders ritual. Frye explains that "ritual, as the content of action, is something continuously latent in the order of words."[9] Hence, oratory, gestures and flourishes intact, still cries from the printed page, and the slow, deliberate revelation of narrative is mimed eloquence.

Myth, therefore, is drama, the story of mutability—the tendency of matter to become something other than what it first appears to be. All literature is merely a metaphor of this first myth. Thus, "plot" is action that produces change. Ondaatje's *oeuvre* chronicles, then, the genesis of myth from structure, the fiction of fact, the generality of genre, the imprecision of definition, and the realization of form as a dramatic forum for the play of metaphor. This article surveys the innate drama of his work.

For Ondaatje, storytelling is the narration of myth. He pursues a dramaturgy employing the tension among different myths, different points of view. From *The Dainty Monsters* to *Secular Love*, Ondaatje has transposed his perceptions into a canon that descants upon the dramatic promiscuity of myth.[10]

The Dainty Monsters, published in 1967, is a first collection (or rather, bestiary) of poems. The book is divided into two sections. The first, "Over the Garden Wall," features lyrics which treat animals or domestic matters; the second, "Troy Town," features poems which update Greek myths, two of which are numbered

sequences: "Peter" and "Paris." *Monsters* introduces Ondaatje's notion of myth as exotic, amoral, violent, and recurrent. This idea, which structures all of his work, is expressed concisely in "The Diverse Causes" and "In Another Fashion." These poems provide a study of Ondaatje's myth-making in *Monsters* and, by extension, his subsequent works.

The recurrence of myth is the principal idea explored in "The Diverse Causes." The poem opens with an epigraph printed in what seems to be Early Modern English, reminding the reader that it is only one more in a long line of poems on married life and domesticity: "lovers callyth to their mynde olde jantylnes and olde servyse, and many kynde dedes that was forgotyn by neclygence." The epigraph is itself the "old gentleness and old service" of such previous writings and illustrates the birth of literature out of myth. In the poem, a dog is reincarnated as "a May god" and the home as "a cell of civilized magic." Indeed, a sense of the past is conveyed by language itself. For instance, verbs such as "clean" and "fetch" derive from old Germanic roots and thus articulate a domestic vision that echoes the past world. Moreover, nouns like "cloud" and "god," verbs like "reflect" and "sleep," and consonantal correspondences such as "*w*indow *h*angs" and "*w*inter *h*unters" recur, plotting the unfolding drama like a Greek chorus. This practice follows Ondaatje's precept for myth-making: "repeating and building images and so making them more potent."[11] In fact, "Myth is . . . achieved by a very careful use of echoes—of phrases and images."[12]

"In Another Fashion" addresses the recurrence and the violence of myth. In the lyric, the speaker turns from the spontaneous, backyard performance of a cat "rippling shoulder / on a strip of fence" and declares:

> We must build new myths
> to wind up the world,
> provoke new christs
> with our beautiful women,
> bring
> plumed
> thin boned birds
> to claw carpets
> to betray
> majesty in a sway . . . .

The speaker becomes a critic, moving from observance to prescription, demanding "new myths" to "wind up" or re-order the world and engender new faiths, even one based on regal birds which "betray / majesty in a sway." A prototype of the poem stresses the radical violence of mythical re-creation:

> We must provoke new christs with our beautiful women
> challenge them to a new mental war
> a new consideration. . . .[13]

These ambiguous lines can refer to the "christs" and the "women"; most importantly, they attack an *ancien régime* of myth that has become irrelevant because it has ceased to inspire "consideration" or violent newness of thought. The speaker states that "The heavens bored / leave us to ourselves / kill us by granting our wishes." The speaker challenges the reader to create anew by cultivating the unusual: "Re [sic] establish the exotic: / plumed / thin-boned birds." Myth demands original strangeness.

Moreover, the dramatic nature of myth-making derives partly from the implicit violence of the "exotic." William Righter writes that "the claim of the exotic may be a part of the shock tactics of a writer who consciously uses his mythical material for the effect of contrast."[14] Ondaatje employs contrast-by-juxtaposition liberally: in "Diverse Causes," "Stravinsky" accompanies "powdered milk"; in "In Another Fashion," "new christs" appear with "thin-boned birds." Myths address each other in a startling verbal collage. Hence, for Ondaatje, Colombian author Gabriel Gàrcia Màrquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is "Excess caught so surely and dreamily that it becomes real."[15] Thus, baroque statement, gaudy décors, and grand actions suit the theatre of literature, and myth is fact costumed in an exotic excess of supposition.

Monsters explores, in general, the spontaneous production and reproduction of the artifice of myth, noting its drama, violence, exoticism, and amorality. This latter aspect of myth is demonstrated powerfully in an uncollected poem, published one year after *Monsters*, on the Vietnam War: "Pictures from the War."[16] The "pictures," including one of a child—its "skull drained of liquid / its side unlaced like tennis shoes"—are "Beautiful photography / that holds no morality." Although an audience may choose to discover a moral in a myth, myth remains amoral. John Berger notes that "A paper like the *Sunday Times* continues to publish

shocking photographs about Vietnam or about Northern Ireland whilst politically supporting the policies responsible for the violence."[17] Indeed, the photographs depoliticize the war: "The picture becomes evidence of the general, human condition."[18] Likewise, poetic description, even of America's Vietnam trauma, can be as bleakly precise as "beaches white . . . geometry / abstract with oil drums."

The production of dramatic myth achieves its greatest manifestation in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, published in 1970. The book employs lyrics, prose, photographs, and a shifting point of view to dramatize its story about the murderous consequences of mis-characterization and the tendency of facts to mean different—and even dangerous—things to different people. *Works* is a fictional history which purports to tell the true story of an event; in this case, the fatal interplay between the opposing myths represented by Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett.

The prose piece that begins with the statement "Not a story about me through their eyes then" (20) affirms the putative author's attempt to create his own myth. The speaker challenges the reader to "Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out" (20), referring tantalizingly perhaps to the text that hides as much as it reveals. This challenge reveals the endlessly allusive elusiveness of myth, where the beginning is never simply the first word of any literary performance but the history and experience of language up to the writing of the first word. Thus, "the maze to begin, be in" (20) describes the center of myth, where thought is free to wander any twisting path to an unforeseen conclusion. The metaphor is just because Ondaatje portrays his artist-characters as maze builders, web spinners, star makers, or net weavers whose nemeses are sleuths or policemen who will do anything to undo the mystery of artists' creations. The speaker asserts "there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning" (20), admitting the difficulty of explanation, portraying the actual silence that rests, like a black hole, in the center of discourse, always threatening to collapse language into an opaque clarity of eloquence, the dense white space of signifiers. The Kid notes:

> I have seen pictures of great stars,
> drawings which show them straining to the centre
> that would explode their white. . . . (41)

The trouble with silence is its fearsome tendency to implode or explode into discourse, the terrible center towards which all equilibrium or stasis strains.

Works conveys violence, a concern for immediacy before mediacy, in its form which can be said to create what Robin Mathews terms "protagonists who are usually anti-heroes for whom violence becomes an instrument of self-indulgence."[19] These anti-heroes—the Kid, the sensual outlaw, and Garrett, the ascetic hired gun—depict the showdown between the sensory and the abstract. Creators, whether artists or inventors, create violence.

Photography illustrates the same point. The "shootings" that occur are either executed by photographers or by gunmen. Berger argues that such juxtaposition is deliberate:

> The word *trigger*, applied to rifle and camera, reflects a correspondence which does not stop at the purely mechanical. The image seized by the camera is doubly violent and both violences reinforce the same contrast: the contrast between the photographed moment and all others.[20]

It is the contrast between life and death—and between reality and imagination. To take artistic aim at anything is to line it up within the cross-hairs of a gun sight. The photographer is thus a dishonest killer. Indeed, the Kid is caught in the radial system of narrative that fans around each photograph, possessing the same dangers as a maze, trap, net, spider web, or star—whether it be Garrett's star-shaped badge or *The Texas Star* newspaper interview: those of pinning a subject in a morgue of definition where, stiff and frozen, he may be seen, blurred or disfigured.

An adjacent prose piece spotlights the apparent entrance of the hidden author, Ondaatje, onto the stage of his work to discuss the disjuncture between the Kid's death and the persistence of his "legend." Ondaatje presents the skeleton of the man and then the living corpus of his myth:

> Imagine if you dug him up and brought him out. You'd see very little. . . . The arms would be cramped on the edge of what was the box. And a pair of handcuffs holding ridiculously the fine ankle bones. . . .
>
> His legend a jungle sleep. . . . (97)

The work pans immediately from this statement of the Kid's resurrection in the corpus of myth to a comic book excerpt that depicts a bizarre double: a Mexicanized Kid whose speech is a romanticization of cowboy-gunslinger lingo:

> "See them sawtooth peaks, Caballo? There's a little town yonder with a real cold cerveza and a fat lady who can cook Mexican food better 'n anybody in the world!" (99)

Although Garrett has managed to box the Kid in a grave (a photographic frame), he is still free to enter and leave history as he wishes because of his protean immortality as a mythic character: "His legend a jungle sleep."

In his acknowledgements in *Works*, Ondaatje confesses that the just-completed action has not been faithful to history, listing several "basic sources" of the legend that he has "edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked" (110). Only emotions still "belong to their authors" (110).

Rat Jelly, a collection of forty poems published in 1973, focusses, like *Monsters*, on mythopoeia. Indeed, myth-making, as a subject, distinguishes "Letters & Other Worlds," and "Spider Blues" as important poems. They demonstrate once again the violence and vitality of Ondaatje's mythopoeia.

"Letters & Other Worlds" introduces the seminal myth-maker in Ondaatje; namely, his father, a point underscored in *Running in the Family*. In the poem, an elegy, the speaker's father is sketched in lyrical anecdotes which recount the production of literature. Thus, the speaker notes: "His letters were a room he seldom lived in / In them the logic of his love could grow." The "room" recalls the maze metaphor pictured in *Works* (20) and the infinite difficulty of creation and interpretation. The idea that "His letters were a room his body scared" stresses the futility of discourse.

The poem also blurs genres. The first two strophes, in their iambic aspiration, resemble blank verse but convey the nuances of the ballad. Given that the rest of the poem is written in *vers libre*, their loose blank verse isolates them in meaning as well as music. They compose a dramatic chorus, commenting on action from which they remain apart. Here are the first two lines of the first strophe:

> My fá / ther's bó / dy wás / a glóbe / of féar
> His bó / dy wás / a tówn / we név / er knéw . . .

The drama in "Letters & Other Worlds" is the disjuncture between creation—the composition of epistles—and destruction—the drink-induced decomposition of brain and body. This conflict generates the current of metaphor that charges the first three and the last two strophes. A special affinity exists between the third strophe:

> He came to death with his mind drowning.
> . . . later
> fell the length of his body
> so that brain blood moved
> to new compartments
> that never knew the wash of fluid
> and he died in minutes of a new equilibrium

and the concluding tenth:

> Letters in a clear hand of the most complete empathy
> his heart widening and widening and widening
> to all manner of change in his children and friends
> . . . till he balanced and fell
> the length of his body
> the blood screaming in
> the empty reservoir of bones
> the blood searching in his head without metaphor

Metaphoric collusion creates truth. The idea of brain blood moving blind, lost, in the mystery of the skull mirrors the movement of the reader through the "maze" of *Works* (20): all movement is blind. The radial movement of "his heart widening and widening and widening" recalls similarly the expansionist tendency of myth to absorb and transform—like a photograph, a star, or a spider web—its subject.

The finest example of mythopoeia in *Jelly* is "Spider Blues," a long poem that presents the artist as spider, spinning "webs" of myths. The strongest link between artist and spider is their patient practice of their disciplines:

> I admire the spider, his control classic,
> . . . . . .
> 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 . . .

The "emptiness" the spider navigates resembles the desert intruded upon by the Kid and his confederates in *Works*. It is the world bereft of myth—a "desert of facts" (134) like that encountered by police detective Webb in *Slaughter*. Myth-making turns such deserts into lush jungles: the Kid is resurrected from his arid grave through his legend—"a jungle sleep" (97). (The space that surrounds Ondaatje's poems accents the intrusion of text into silence and the transformation of blankness into art.) The invention of the "path" charts the maze that subsequent explorers must recreate with every new encounter. The observation that "Spiders like poets are obsessed with power" reminds the reader of the rational violence that underlies genesis. The power to create is "murderous art."

The final strophe is a myth within a myth. The tale spun by the narrator is that recouped from spiders—"working black architects"—who have borne aloft his wife—"the lady locked in their dream their theme." The scene recalls two episodes in Gàrcia Màrquez's One *Hundred Years of Solitude*: the ascension of Remedios the Beauty and the dragging off, by his caul, of the last descendant of the Buendias, an infant boy with a pig's tail, by a long line of army ants.[21] The spiders are efficient engineers:

> They had surpassed themselves this time
> and with the white roads
> their eight legs built with speed
> they carried her up—her whole body
> into the dreaming air so gently
> she did not wake or scream.
> What a scene. So many trails
> the room was a shattered pane of glass.
> Everybody clapped, all the flies.
> They came and gasped, all
> everybody cried at the beauty . . .

This act of creation is dramatic. The audience—like flies—applauds the fantastic marvel—the immanent surrealism of gesture becoming sculpture. It is also violent, leaving shattered glass (a major motif in *Slaughter*). It represents the intrusion of life into art.

Coming Through Slaughter, Ondaatje's first novel, published in 1976, employs lyrics, interviews, hospital records, a faded photograph, and a sonograph to tell the story of Buddy Bolden, a founder of jazz. *Slaughter* features a chorus of metaphor, a parade

of events conveyed in a telegraphic style that suspends standard grammar to produce a more immediate narration. Moreover, like *Works*, the novel translates reality into myth, life into art.

An anonymous narrator opens *Slaughter* by reviewing the remains of the past, the artifacts of facts, still visible in mid-1970s New Orleans, Louisiana, the cradle of jazz. He notes that Bolden's old district, "the homes and stores, are a mile or so from the streets made marble by jazz" (8). In fact, the narrator reveals that

> There are no songs about Gravier Street or Phillips or First or The Mount Ararat Missionary Baptist Church his mother lived next door to, just the names of the streets written vertically on the telephone poles or the letters sunk into pavement that you walk over. (8)

This manifest, natural forgetfulness echoes the vast silence of Bolden's biography, a life performed "away from the recorded history" (10).

This mythicizing of Bolden is appropriate for he is an inveterate myth-maker, who employs the same techniques and practices the same philosophy as Ondaatje. Bolden teaches children "tall tales which they learned to sift down to the real" (13); he edits *The Cricket*, a catalogue of gossip: "All the information [Bolden] was given [was] put unedited into the broadsheet" (13). Bolden's newspaper is a newsprint collage whose effect is, as Thomas G. Rosenmeyer argues of poetic creation, "not one of information but one of communion."[22] Moreover, its inclusiveness mimics the technique of the book itself:

> It respected stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies. . . . Bolden took all the thick facts and dropped them into his pail of sub-history. (24)

Bolden is the metaphorical antecedent of the narrator in *Running in the Family* who states, "a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts" (206). And, like the speaker in "Spider Blues," Bolden sees *The Cricket* as a web-like creation. Thus, his informants and correspondents are "spiders" (24).

Bolden critiques his fellow artists in what can be called Ondaatje terms. Upon hearing the radio broadcast of an indecipherable crisis, Bolden complains that the reporters "were not being clear, they were not giving me the history of it all, and I didn't know who was supposed to be the hero of the story" (93).

He desires news as accessible as fiction. Bolden excoriates his rival John Robichaux for the allegedly dictatorial plotting of his music:

> I loathed everything he stood for. He dominated his audiences. He put his emotions into patterns which a listening crowd had to follow. (93)

Robichaux's music is an "obvious" as opposed to "well-told" lie. It is too evident. Bolden desires spontaneity and chance. He wants his audience "to be able to come in where they pleased and leave when they pleased and somehow hear the germs of the start and all the possible endings at whatever point in the music I had reached" (94). He wants them to be free to wander in and out of his music as if it were a web or maze. Bolden thus obeys Ondaatje's dictum that "you have to lead the audience into your own perpetual sense, [while] having a responsibility to lead them out again."[23] Bolden agrees:

> The right ending is an open door you can't see too far out of. It can mean exactly the opposite of what you are thinking. (94)

Spontaneity is all. The artist must be a liberal Pied Piper, allowing his audience to blunder upon surprises, to stumble within vast radii of metaphors for art: stars, nets, mazes, webs, fans, wheels, circles, brains, windows, photographs, cages, rooms, clocks, hearts, compasses, skin, blood, snow, rain, sheets, sun, ears, sounds, clouds, or languages, all of which recur in Ondaatje's work.

The artist plays dictator at his peril. The difference between Robichaux and Bolden is that the former desires to dominate, the latter does not. Bolden's ambivalent attitude sounds the climactic scene in which the cornetist translates himself, via his own music, into a heaven of silence. Though he leads an apparently festive parade, Bolden moves, incited by the undulating audience of a girl in a red dress, beyond his fellow musicians (and music itself) into silence:

> March is slowing to a stop and as it floats down slow to a thump I take off and wail long notes jerking the squawk into the end of them . . . throw the notes off the walls of people . . . and the girl is alive now mirroring my throat in her lonely, tired dance, the street silent but for us her tired breath I can hear. . . . [I]t comes up flooding past my heart in a mad

> parade, it is coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet, god can't stop god can't stop it can't stop the air the red force . . . no intake gasp, so deep blooming it up god I can't choke it the music still pouring in a roughness I've never hit, watch it, *listen* it *listen* it, can't see I CAN'T SEE. Air floating through the blood to the girl red hitting the blind spot I can feel others turning, the silence of the crowd, can't see. . . . (130-31)

Both Bolden and the girl are lost in the web of his performance. The only exit is silence. Hers is temporary; his, final. The language of this passage suggests the same: the hurtling, tumbling images, impatient with punctuation, falling, pell mell, one atop the other, like a chain reaction of acrobats, end in sudden opacity, the stark blindness of "can't see," the visual discovery of a silence where nothing need be stated because all is understood.

After this apocalyptic tango, the present-day narrator notes that "The place of his music is totally silent" (133). Yet, in death, Bolden is a "famous musician" (133). Like Billy the Kid, his legend survives his decomposition:

> There is the complete absence of him—even his skeleton has softened, disintegrated, and been lost in the water under the earth of Holtz cemetery. (133)

The corpse has become a *corpus*; the body has become a body of works. Indeed, the life of Bolden has become a collection of myths, as Ondaatje, playing narrator, reveals:

> Some saying you went mad trying to play the devil's music and hymns at the same time, and Armstrong telling historians that you went mad by playing too hard and too often drunk too wild too crazy. The excesses cloud up the page. (134)

The "excesses" are myths with which Ondaatje supplants the "desert of facts" (134).

At this juncture, the identification between Ondaatje and Bolden, hinted at throughout the novel, becomes complete. "When he went mad," Ondaatje, the putative narrator, states, "he was the same age as I am now" (133). The elaborate, radial myth that Ondaatje has cast to picture Bolden appears to picture himself instead: "The photograph moves," he notes, "and becomes a mirror" (133). Representation is self-representation:

> When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. (133)

Discussing the alienating effect of photographs, Berger argues that the only remedy is the re-creation of the milieu from which the photograph—seized time and space—has been separated: "A radial system has to be constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday, and historic."[24] *Slaughter* is a radial system of myth constructed around the faded photograph of Bolden and his band. Yet, the collage of fictions Ondaatje assembles to portray Bolden reveals himself in the end.

Slaughter closes with an archetypal Ondaatje confession of the origins of story in history and biography:

> While I have used real names and characters and historical situations I have also used more personal pieces of friends and fathers. There have been some date changes, some characters brought together, and some facts have been expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction. (159)

The fictionalization of truth creates "the truth of fiction." Ondaatje maintains that "art is . . . deceit."[25]

This artistic stance is exemplified, Eli Mandel asserts, by an informal formalism which employs "The anecdotal as opposed to the syntactical, poetry as story not as form, and as prose; not the line but the paragraph, not the margin but the whole page, not grammar but the list, not style but voice."[26] *Slaughter* exploits all of these *informalist* techniques as illustrated by the passage, quoted earlier, about the "pail of sub-history." The unpunctuated happenstance of anecdote is seen in the passage's rushes of emotive repetition—"god can't stop god can't stop"; the unmetrical flow of imagism infuses the prose with the spontaneity of poetry: "Air floating through the blood to the girl red hitting the blind spot"; the passage is a catalogue of actions separated by commas: "it is coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet." The voice is hurried, frenzied, hurtling into silence like a roller coaster that jumps its tracks and smashes into a stone wall. These techniques obscure the deceitfulness of art, the "lies that are obvious." According to Rosenmeyer, "the poet who cites his sources (often, in parodic imitation of the historian, by means of learned notes)

does so not to authenticate his link with presumed facts or events, but to sustain the force of his own [mythic] construction. . . ."[27] The poet's work becomes a theatrical production.

There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do, a verse collection, spans the years 1963-1978. Published in 1979, the book reprints selected poems from *Monsters* and *Jelly* but also features nineteen newer poems grouped in a section entitled "Pig Glass." These poems, in their concern for mythopoesis, echo the earlier mythic dramas. This point is illustrated by "Walking to Bellrock" and "Light."

"Walking to Bellrock" extends the concerns of "Letters & Other Worlds" while anticipating those of "Light." Like these poems, it transmutes autobiography and biography into history and myth. In an attempt to separate discursive from figurative language, the speaker asserts, "There is no metaphor here." Yet, his effort to render "the heat of the water, coldness of the rain, / smell of mud" is one more rhetorical trick with a knife. Indeed, the poem's first line is literally *figurative*: "Two *figures* in deep water" (my emphasis). The "figures" represent the narrator and his friend, Stan. The sixth strophe reference to "the silt of history" notes the accretion of detail that is essential to any text and can be compared to the anarchic clash of facts that constitute the "sub-pail of history" (24) employed in Bolden's *Cricket*. Verbal trickery is betrayed by the seventh strophe assertion that "there is no history or philosophy or metaphor with us," for the next strophe employs surrealist imagery that manifests history, philosophy, and metaphor:

> The problem is the toughness of the Adidas shoe
> its three stripes gleaming like fish decoration.
> The story is Russel's arm waving out of . . . a field.

The last image suggests that a story is an intrusive and dramatic gesture and reconstitutes nature as art. Thus, the speaker declares in the eighth strophe, "the plot of the afternoon is to get to Bellrock." The afternoon walk is seen in historic, philosophic, metaphoric, and mythic terms.

"Light," a lustrous paean to family, is reminiscent of "Letters & Other Worlds" and prescient of *Running in the Family*. It is a photo-induced memory of things past:

> Those relatives in my favourite slides
> re-shot from old minute photographs so they now stand
> complex ambiguous grainy on my wall.

The reference to photographs transforms the poem into a rogues gallery, populated by the same "complex ambiguous grainy" characters who people *Works, Slaughter,* and *Family.* The initial reverie introduces a list of family fictions which, although bizarre, are never developed enough to allow a definitive conclusion. The poem remains a prosaic mosaic of "fragments": "These are their fragments, all I remember, / wanting more knowledge of them. . . ." The last strophe recalls the catalytic role of the photograph: the speaker watches his relatives "parade in my brain and the expanding stories / connect to the grey grainy pictures on the wall." The "expanding stories" represent again the radius of myth. "Light" affirms Ondaatje's view of mythopoeia and develops further the autobiographical perspective which is even more pronounced in his later work.

Indeed, *Running in the Family,* published in 1982, fulfills and extends the promise of "Light." This biographical novel opens with an account of its genesis that recalls the stage-setting evident in the first strophe of "Light." Complaining about the time his art consumes, the narrator affirms the spill of history through every production of myth: "Half a page—and the morning is already ancient" (17). The persistence of history is pronounced in the narrator's analysis of the word "Asia":

> The name was a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered, would never be used as a battle cry. (22)

Indeed, *Family* is obsessed with history as story:

> No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way history is organized. (26)

History is organized identically in Bolden's ragtime rag, *The Cricket.* Like Bolden, the narrator asserts that "Truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships" (53). History comprises fragments of "torn 100-year-old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand" (69) as well as tales spun by aunts who "knit the story

together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong" (110). It is the narrator's task to effect history's collage but with malice toward none: "our job becomes to keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with 'the mercy of distance' write the histories" (179). "Honeymoon" illustrates the chaotic juxtaposition of events:

> The headlines in the local papers said, "Lindberg's Baby Found—A Corpse!" Fred Astaire's sister, Adele, got married and the 13th President of the French Republic was shot to death by a Russian. (37)

Landscape suffers similar chaos. In "Tabula Asiae," for example, "Old portraits of Ceylon" are deemed "false maps": "The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations—by Ptolemy, Mercator, François Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt—growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy" (63). The idea of Ceylon is suspended: "Ceylon floats on the Indian Ocean and holds its naive mountains, drawings of cassowary and boar who leap without perspective across imagined 'desertum' and plain" (63). Its invented maps mirror the blurred flotation of Bolden and band in the photo-developing sequence in *Slaughter* (52), and recall that book's opening: "His geography. Float by in a car" (8). In reality, there is only rumour: "The maps reveal rumours of topography" (64). This perpetual chaos is evident in the parade of names given the island-nation: "Serendip, Ratnapida ('island of gems'), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon [and now, Sri Lanka]" (64). Sri Lanka experiences the same metamorphosis as a photograph in *Slaughter*: "This pendant, once its shape stood still, became a mirror" (64).

Furthermore, the narrator, juxtaposing the tyrannies that ruled Sri Lanka in the 5th Century B.C. and 1971, conducts a political discussion of myth. He reveals that, during the early tyranny, jailed dissidents scratched "graffiti poems . . . onto the rock face of Sigiriya—the rock fortress of a despot king" (84). The poems were "Short verses to the painted women in the frescoes which spoke of love in all its confusions and brokenness" (84). Similarly, under a recent dictatorship, student dissidents imprisoned on a university campus, wrote "hundreds of poems . . . on walls, ceilings, and in hidden corners of the campus" (84). These poems were "Quatrains and free verse about the struggle, tortures, the unbroken spirit, love of friends who had died for the cause"

(84). Under both tyrannies, prisoners became anonymous bards who etched their lines into stone. The similarities between the two tyrannies affirm that history is the recurrence of metaphor.

The communal nature of the Sigirian and Vidyalankaran prison poems mirrors the construction of *Family*. In his acknowledgements, Ondaatje declares, "A literary work is a communal act" (205). Therefore, while "Women Like You" is "the communal poem—Sigiri Graffiti, 5th century," *Family* is a communal work, the child of "confused genealogies and rumour" (205). It is also a drama, possessing the same theatricality as Shakespeare's histories. Thus, Ondaatje declares, "While all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or 'gesture'" (206). Finally, the text is a radial system that, as in *Works* and *Slaughter*, pictures others but ultimately reveals the self. The photographs (29, 163) and stories of Ondaatje's forebears engender both his childhood photograph (183) and *Family*, his meditation on the necessity of memory. In the end, the architecture of myth reveals the architect.

The Sigirian frescoes that Ondaatje reveres in *Family* become the front cover of his next work, *Secular Love*, published in 1984. This collection of lyrics and prose poems explores Asia too. In fact, not surprisingly, Ondaatje considers *Love* a novel:

> I structured it like one. For me its structure and plot are novelistic. Each section deals with a specific time period but the people in them are interrelated.[28]

Its plot is conveyed through four distinct sections: "Claude Glass," "Tin Roof," "Rock Bottom," and "Skin Boat." Three extracts from the concluding section, "Skin Boat," should illustrate Ondaatje's myth-making in the book.

Because myth recurs, to write is always to quote. This proverb is affirmed by "The River Neighbour," an echo of Ezra Pound's poem "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter."[29] In his acknowledgements (128), Ondaatje states that "The River Neighbour" and "Pacific Letter" are "not so much translations as relocations into my landscape, the earlier poets making their appearance in these poems." Therefore, mountains range, merging Asia and North America; even continents are only words:

> All these rumours. You lodge in the mountains of Hangchou, a cabin in Portland township, or in Yüeh-chou for sure.... (93)[30]

The compass of the whole points in one Zen-like direction: "somewhere in the east" (94). The poem accents the tendency of myth to mythologize the myth-maker, to accord the creator an identity that can appear a non-identity. The speaker states, "this letter paints me / transparent as I am" (93).

"In a Yellow Room" resurrects another jazz artist, Fats Waller, and stresses the interrelationship of myth and human relationships. Thus the speaker's appreciation of Waller is based upon the fraternity Waller's myth-making creates:

> I have always loved him but I love him most in the company of friends. Because his body was a crowd and we desire to imitate such community. (119)

The likening of Waller's body to a crowd recalls the communal imagery of "Letter & Other Worlds": "My father's body was a . . . town we never knew."

Love ends with a final prose piece, "Escarpment," a study of the free metamorphosis of life into literature and vice versa. The speaker and his lover, in conversation, discover "fragments of the past which they piece together" (126). And, amid fragments of ideas, he conducts his search for a name for the river:

> It is not a name for a map—he knows the arguments of imperialism. It is a name for them, something temporary for their vocabulary, a code. (126)

Myth-making is thus continuous, reflexive, and prophetic.

To conclude, Ondaatje's *oeuvre* constitutes a mythology which dramatizes the creation and dissolution of myths. In Ondaatje's prose and poetry, myth issues from a landscape or stage of chaos and mirrors the source of its genesis. It is any created thing, being, action, and even the emptiness from which it is formed. It is always in motion, either becoming clearer or fading into chaos. It is eternal, submerging in one work to re-emerge in another. It is free to be—and do—whatever it desires, rendering genres irrelevant. Myth achieves its greatness when its most incredible elements seem authentic and believable. It arises spontaneously from metaphor. Its manifestation implies a concomitant negation. It is vastly inclusive and stringently exclusive; thus, it is symbolized by things that both include and exclude: net, web, maze, photograph, community, mirror, circle, and all other things—such as stars, towns, or cities—that radiate. Like nature, myth is creative

and destructive. Provoking violence, it intrudes, camouflaged as text or music, jungle or wilderness, upon blank chaos that is sometimes desert or plain, white space or silence, mist, earth, or fog. Yet myth is also characterized by ambiguity and amorality. It resists definition even as it defines. It exists in a tension of utterance and silence, motion and stillness, reality and dream, never quite being the one without being the other. Its clarity is obfuscation and its obfuscation, clarity. The more it defines an object, the more it defines itself. Composed of fragments of myths (including lies and facts), myth appears in art as collage; in nature, as menagerie. Indeed, being individual and communal, myth incorporates all things. Thus, according to Ondaatje's work, it is truth.

As a private mythology, Ondaatje's works employ the tenets of contemporary poetics, including the notion that principles are relative, that anarchy is order. In his production of myth, Ondaatje follows Haskell Block's thesis that "The anarchy of twentieth-century culture is the groundwork of personal myth."[31] However, the act of creation, though anarchic, issues order. Personal myth redeems contemporary history. Indeed, Sam Solecki, perusing *Family*, declares that "Two generations from now all postmodern fiction / writing will be read as autobiography."[32] Moreover, such writing is actually traditional: "The notion of personal myth is essentially a Romantic attitude," Block asserts.[33] The dream of an encyclopedic creation is a Romantic myth that fosters, in our time, "personal" myths ordering disorder.

Myth produces myth—the creation of one fiction from another. This cataclysm is natural, primitive, and dramatic. It represents the metamorphosis of metaphor. The chaos that precedes and follows creation is merely collapsed myth, an imploded star, a black hole in which everything is shadowy and nothing is certain. Myth is immanent in all things, but mainly, the order and disorder of words: "What remains in myth is," Righter writes, "a series of forms . . . a testimony to inner needs, a language to whose existence we may point, but which in an ultimate sense we can never read."[34] Ondaatje's works are a self-conscious realization of the tensions created by the desire to read the inscrutable. From *Monsters* to *Love*, Ondaatje conveys the ambiguous effects of his constantly thwarted desire with metaphor which, producing myth, is obsessively dramatic.

NOTES

[1] Michael Ondaatje, "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle," *Canadian Literature* 61 (Summer 1974): 24.

[2] Ondaatje, "O'Hagan's" 24.

[3] Ondaatje, "O'Hagan's" 25.

[4] Ondaatje, "O'Hagan's" 25.

[5] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press, 1982) 33.

[6] Mark Witten, "Billy, Buddy, and Michael," *Books in Canada* Vol. 6, No. 6 (June-July 1977): 9.

[7] Hayden White, "The Fictions of Factual Representation," *The Literature of Fact*, ed. Angus Fletcher (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) 23.

[8] Northrop Frye, "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada," *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Limited, 1971) 232.

[9] Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 109.

[10] In this article, "canon" is used to refer to these principal, Ondaatje texts: *The Collected Works of Billy theKid* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1970), *Coming Through Slaughter* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1970), *The Dainty Monsters* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967), *the man with seven toes* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1969), *Rat Jelly* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973), *Running in the Family* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1982), and *SecularLove* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1984).

[11] Sam Solecki, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1984)," *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. Sam Solecki (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1985) 322.

[12] Ondaatje, "O'Hagan's" 25.

[13] Michael Ondaatje, "In Another Fashion," *New Wave Canada: The New Explosion in Canadian Poetry*, ed. Raymond Souster (Toronto: Contact Press, 1966) 142.

[14] William Righter, *Myth and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1971) 31.

[15] Michael Ondaatje, "Gàrcia Màrquez and the Bus to Aracataca," *Figures in a Ground: Canadian Essays on Modern Literature*, ed. Diane Bessai and David Jackel (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978) 25.

[16] Michael Ondaatje, "Pictures from the War," *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. LXXV, No. 2 (Summer 1968): 261.

[17] John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 38.

[18] Berger, *About Looking* 40.

[19] Robin Mathews, "Private Indulgence and Public Discipline: Violence in the English Canadian Novel Since 1960," in *Violence in the Canadian Novel Since 1960 / Violence dans le roman canadien depuis 1960*, eds. Virginia Harger-Grinling and Terry Goldie (St. John's: Memorial University Printing Services, 19[?]) 40.

[20] Berger, *About Looking* 39.

[21] Gabriel Gàrcia Màrquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude [Cien Anos de Soledad* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1967)], trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) 242-43, 420.

[22] Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, "History or Poetry? The Example of Herodotus," *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1982): 247.

[23] Stephen Scobie and Douglas Barbour, "A Conversation with Michael Ondaatje," *White Pelican*, Spring 1971: 12.

[24] Berger, *About Looking* 63.

[25] Sam Solecki, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1975)," *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. Sam Solecki (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1985) 23.

[26] Eli Mandel, *The Family Romance* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986) 76.

[27] Rosenmeyer, "History or Poetry?" 247.

[28] Solecki, "Ondaatje (1984)" 324.

[29] Ezra Pound's poem, "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter," is a free translation of "A Song of Ch'Ang-Kan," a poem written by T'ang Dynasty poet Li Po (circa 700-762 A.D.). Pound's version was first published in 1911 in *Cathay*, his collection of Imagist-influenced translations of Chinese poetry.

[30] These lines are derived from the first two lines of a poem by T'ang Dynasty poet Tu Fu, entitled "To my Younger Brother": "Rumours that you lodge in a mountain temple / In Hang-chou, or in Yüeh-chou for sure." Translated by A. C. Graham, the poem appears on page 47 of *Poems of the Late T'ang* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1977).

[31] Haskell M. Block, "The Myth of the Artist," *Literary Criticism and Myth: Yearbook of Comparative Criticism*, Vol IX, ed. Joseph P. Strelka (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980) 18.

[32] Sam Solecki, "Michael Ondaatje: A Paper Promiscuous and Out of Forme with Several Inlargements and Untutored Narrative," *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. Sam Solecki (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1985) 341.

[33] Block, "The Myth" 3.

[34] Righter, *Myth and Literature* 22.