JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES, II (2000), 125-157

MICHAEL ONDAATJE´S *RAT JELLY* AND THE POETICS OF AMBIVALENCE

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ABSTRACT. Michael Ondaatje's second collection of poems, Rat Jelly *(1973), is a crucial transitional work that simultaneously consolidates the early promise and achievement of* The Dainty Monsters *(1967) and* The Collected Works of Billy the Kid *(1969), articulates Ondaatje's early poetics in a handful of ambitious, sometimes almost allegorical lyrics, and in two of its poems,'Letters & Other Worlds' and 'Burning Hills,' anticipates Ondaatje's turn in the late 1970s and early 1980s towards his Sri Lankan past as a central concern in his poetry and prose. Though the collection contains some of Ondaatje's finest lyrics, it also marks the end of what might be called the modernist phase of his development as a poet, the phase in which one might still hear echoes of Edwin Muir or Wallace Stevens.*

Only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory.
Friedrich Nietzsche (1969: 58)

If *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1969) established Ondaatje as a writer to watch, *Rat Jelly* (1973) confirmed the promise he had shown in *Dainty Monsters* (1967) as a lyric poet. Its finest lyrics show not only the figurative flair, wit and surreal imagination of his early work but an ambition in theme as well as a poise and maturity only hinted at a decade earlier. The first two sections of this closely organized collection –'Families' and 'Live Bait'– develop situations and concerns similar to those in the earlier lyrics but often display a range and control of mood and tone that suggest how much Ondaatje developed in the intervening years. This is particularly evident in 'Billboards' (a poem about his wife, Kim) and 'Letters & Other Worlds' (an elegy for

his father, Philip Mervyn Ondaatje). But the most surprising and accomplished poems are gathered in 'White Dwarfs,' the third section. Individually these constitute some of Ondaatje´s best work in the genre; as a group they develop some of the hints –and that's all they are– in 'Peter' and in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* about the relationship between destroying and making, between wounds and creativity, into a poetics. 'Burning Hills,' 'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens,' '"the gate in his head,"' 'Spider Blues,' and 'White Dwarfs' consolidate and develop in lyrical form the critical hunches and ideas of the thesis on Edwin Muir, the short study of Leonard Cohen (1970) and the lessons Ondaatje learned during the writing of the postmodern *Billy the Kid*, his most ambitious work to date.

Though we couldn´t have known it in 1973, the book´s dedication to his parents, brother and sisters and the elegy for his father represent the first step toward the writing of *Running in the Family* (1982) where he finally comes to terms with his Ceylonese / Sri Lankan past. His continuing reluctance to do so is hinted at in the book´s three epigraphs. In the first, from Richard Stark´s *The Sour Lemon Score,* the female speaker berates the male for his failure to be more communicative: 'She waited and then said, "Say something, Parker. God to get you to gossip it´s like pulling teeth.' 'Handy retired.' Parker said. 'I *know* he retired! Tell me about it. Tell me why he retired, tell me where he is, how he´s doing. Talk to me, Parker, goddammit.' (Ondaatje 1973: 8).[1] The second and third, from Howard O´Hagan´s *Tay John* and Herman Melville´s *The Confidence Man*, raise roughly similar concerns about lying, silence and self-revelation. Not unexpectedly the book´s first and last poems –'War Machine' and 'White Dwarfs'– show a speaker, probably the poet, paradoxically attracted to silence. In the former he brags about the stories and gossip he could tell–'30 jayne mansfield stories'– but concludes with the following ambivalent comment: 'Perhaps / wd like to live mute / all day long / not talk // just listen to the loathing' (11). There´s nothing in the poem to explain the 'loathing' nor the desire, surprising in a writer, 'to live mute.' And the title metaphor is too strong and too vague a figure for the poem that follows. Whether the title refers to the poet or to poetry, it doesn´t quite come off. If the poem remains in the reader´s mind, it does so primarily as a thematic prologue to the more tough-minded and focussed concern with silence in 'Letters & Other Worlds' and 'White Dwarfs,' both of which will be dealt with in some detail below.

Most of the remaining poems in the first section offer various domestic perspectives on the poet´s wife, marriage and his dogs. Only on finishing the section does one realize that these sometimes playful and affectionate poems are framed, even shadowed by the

1. All future references to *Rat Jelly* will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the essay in a parenthesis following the quotation mark.

more menacing 'War Machine' and 'Letters & Other Worlds.' With the exception of 'White Room,' however, each presents a situation in which there is a division or a sense of separation. 'Notes for the Legend of Salad Woman' begins with a playfully exaggerated image of the speaker´s wife:

> Since my wife was born
> she must have eaten
> the equivalent of two-thirds
> of the original garden of Eden.
> Not the dripping lush fruit
> or the meat in the ribs of animals
> but the green salad garden of that place. (18)

The 'meat in the ribs of animals' momentarily recalls 'Peter' but the remainder of the verse combines burlesque and comic book fantasy (Salad Woman, Wonder Woman). The catalogue continues through the second stanza, but while the tone and images remain comic the reader begins to sense a more sombre note in the references to the destruction 'Salad Woman' leaves in her wake:

> She is never in fields
> but is sucking the pith out of grass.
> I have noticed the very leaves from flower decorations
> grow sparse in their week long performance in our house.
> The garden is a dust bowl.

The third stanza opens by recalling the 'garden of Eden' mentioned in the first and implying a connection between her compulsive eating and their expulsion from Eden: 'On our last day in Eden as we walked out / she nibbled the leaves at her breasts and crotch.' And though the speaker ends by reassuring us and himself that 'there´s none to touch / none to equal / the Chlorophyll Kiss,' the assertion comes in the same stanza as the expulsion from Eden and is inseparable from the earlier images of destruction. If the wife is a life force, she is simultaneously capable of destruction; if life with her is paradisal, the paradise is dependent on her. She isn´t quite La Belle Dame Sans Merci, but the poem is tensed about the speaker´s ambivalent response to her–admiration and anxiety.

'Billboards,' a domestic poem about his wife and her children from a previous marriage, shows Ondaatje in a relaxed, reflective mood writing with affection, humour and some perplexity about his situation. The poem begins by contrasting 'my virgin past' to the domestic complexity, even confusion of his present which is filled with 'Reunions for Easter egg hunts / kite flying, Christmases' with his wife´s children who 'descend on

my shoulders every holiday.' The poem then shifts into the past, to the time when 'she lay beginning / this anthology of kids' and he

> moved–blind but senses
> jutting faux pas, terrible humour,
> shifted with a sea of persons,
> breaking when necessary
> into smaller self sufficient bits of mercury.
> My mind a carefully empty diary
> till I hit the barrier reef
> that was my wife–
> there
> the right bright fish
> among the coral. (14)

The shift to a highly figurative style allows Ondaatje to swerve away from dealing with the painful particulars of his past, though: 'sea of persons,' 'breaking' and 'smaller self sufficient bits of mercury' as well as the attempt to keep the 'mind a carefully empty diary' hint strongly at traumatic events that the speaker wants to avoid making explicit.

The suggestive tension is maintained in the third stanza in his comment that before meeting her, he 'was ... trying to live / with a neutrality so great / I´d have nothing to think of.' Whereas 'Nowadays I somehow get the feeling / I´m in a complex situation, / one of several billboard posters / blending in the rain' (15). The withheld or implied image here is of his wife as a driver looking at various aspects of her past represented by 'several billboard posters.' The image of the billboard probably comes from a passage in *Beautiful Losers* that Ondaatje quotes in *Leonard Cohen*: 'Truth was, I felt that F was using me like an advertisement for his own body. I was the tattered billboard for his reality' (1970: 50). But why 'in the rain,' unless the landscape is an objective correlative for his feelings about the situation?

Although the poem begins with a note of domestic comedy and ends with an affectionate evocation of his wife, each of the first three stanzas contains one or more images that suggest anxiety, menace and unhappiness. In the first, the speaker wonders in a parenthesis about when his wife´s children will 'produce a gun and shoot me / at Union Station by Gate 4?' In the second, in addition to the already quoted references to 'terrible humour,' 'breaking' and the 'carefully empty diary' we also find the speaker describing his first meeting with his wife in terms of a fish hitting 'the barrier reef.' And the third, which ends with 'in the rain,' begins with a reference to 'the locusts of [his wife´s] history.' The cumulative effect of these is to leave one with the impression that the 'complex situation' the speaker refers to is even more complicated than one expected

on the basis of the first stanza. As a portrait of a marriage, the poem reminds us that each partner brings his or her own burdens from the past, whether obvious or concealed.

The final stanza, however, also points to the relationship between the poet´s life and his writing. As in 'Burning Hills,' we see the poet writing or finishing the poem we have just read: 'I am writing this with a pen my wife has used / to write a letter to her first husband.' But he doesn´t stop at this scene which is charged with ambivalence. He brings his wife more sensuously to the reader´s attention by mentioning that on the pen

> is the smell of her hair.
> She must have placed it down between sentences
> and thought, and driven her fingers round her skull
> gathered the slightest smell of her head
> and brought it back to the pen.

The run-on lines and the sibilants followed by the assertive plosives evoke the scene of writing by means of rhythm and sound. The imagined scene sums up the complexity of the relationship: the current husband writes a poem about his wife writing to her first husband, and he does so with the pen she used. But I wonder whether there isn´t also a suggestion that his writing is in some mysterious sense dependent on her, and that his book or collection of poems is his answer to her 'anthology of kids'? That this poem, in other words, wouldn´t or couldn´t exist without her and her complex past. Though the closing stanza doesn´t make this explicit, there is a hint of doubling and merging in it: not only does the speaker use the same pen as his wife, but the wife´s gestures during the writing implicitly evoke the gestures that he might be making while writing this poem.

'Dates,' a poem later in the first section, switches the focus from Canada to Ceylon, from himself and his wife to himself and his mother. From the perspective of the section as a unit, it can also be seen as preparing the way for the elegy for his father. Read in the context of the volume´s concern with poetry and poetics, it shows Ondaatje acknowledging some of his literary debts at a point in his development when he has already left his past masters behind. Though the poem alludes to Auden´s 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' and though Stevens is a central figure in it, its style owes nothing to the great moderns. The date in question is the date of the poet´s birth. As he remarks sardonically in the opening stanza,

> My birth was heralded by nothing
> but the anniversary of Winston Churchill´s marriage.
> No monuments bled, no instruments
> agreed on a specific weather.
> It was a seasonal insignificance. (21)

The third and fourth lines draw our attention to more significant anniversaries and occasions, the deaths of a poet (Yeats) and a god (see the stigmata in 'No monuments bled'). The second and third stanzas juxtapose, each in a single, long flowing sentence, two acts of creation: his mother´s pregnancy and Wallace Stevens´s writing of 'The Well Dressed Man with a Beard' (1955: 247). If the poet´s birth is first mentioned in relationship to ''Winston Churchill´s marriage'' and under the shadow of two deaths, in the poem´s final movement he exists as a foetus whose evolution and birth are counterpointed to the development and completion of a poem celebrating creativity and the imagination.

> Stevens put words together
> that grew to sentences
> and shaved them clean and
> shaped them, the page suddenly
> becoming thought where nothing had been,
> his head making his hand
> move where he wanted
> and he saw his hand was saying
> the mind is never finished, no, never
> and I in my mother´s stomach was growing
> as were the flowers outside the Connecticut windows.

Although the syntax, the enjambed lineation and the idea of organic creation link the poet´s mother, Stevens and the poet, the key verbs suggest a difference between the gestation of a child and the creation of a poem. The words may *grow* into sentences but they are initially 'put together' and need to be 'shaved' and 'shaped' by the 'head . . . making his hand / move where he wanted.'

It is worth noting that Ondaatje doesn´t italicize or put into quotation marks the words that Stevens´s 'hand was saying.' A simple reason for this may be that his line doesn´t quote from Stevens´s poem, it paraphrases it. The last line of 'The Well Dressed Man with a Beard' is 'It can never be satisfied, the mind, never' which is not quite synonymous with 'the mind is never finished, no, never.' I´m tempted to suggest that Ondaatje´s rewriting of Stevens, like his casual appropriation of an image from the first stanza of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats,' is both an example of a strong or original young poet flexing his creative muscles against the major figures in the tradition as well as an illustration of Stevens´s assertion that 'It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.' The misquoted borrowed line also implies that for the poet *as* poet, the significant dates and filiations are not necessarily the conventional ones. Michael Ondaatje may have been born on 12 September, 1943, but an equally important 'birth' occurred when he discovered Yeats, Auden, Stevens and the other poets who helped make him into a poet.

The 'Families' section ends with two poems, 'Griffin of the night' and 'Letters & Other Worlds' whose relationship to each other becomes evident only after we have read the second. In fact, it´s possible that the full implications of 'Griffin of the night' can only be felt if one has also read *Running in the Family* (1982) and the 'Claude Glass' section of *Secular Love* (1984). This isn´t to suggest that 'Griffin of the night' is a difficult poem. Its only interpretive crux occurs between the title and the first line where the reader needs to shift from thinking that 'Griffin' denotes a mythical beast to understanding that the substantive refers to Ondaatje´s son. Since the poem will be about 'nightmares,' which are, after all, figurative monsters, it is a felicitous, ironic confusion. In the end, one understands its intensity, its complex quality of emotion and the full implications of its last line –'sweating after nightmares'– only when one sees the relationship between the speaker and his son in the context of the speaker´s here unspoken relationship to his father, the source of the poet´s own nightmares.

'Griffin of the night' is a simple poem and one of Ondaatje´s shortest.

> I´m holding my son in my arms
> sweating after nightmares
> small me
> fingers in his mouth
> his other fist clenched in my hair
> small me
> sweating after nightmares (23)

The style is spare, almost minimalist: simple diction, an almost monotoned or uninflected voice, no punctuation, no affective adverbs or adjectives and a palette without colours. By contrast, the subject matter or the story is emotionally charged –a father comforting a son 'sweating after nightmares'– and threatens line by line to overwhelm the speaker´s poise and seeming detachment. The tension between the scene and its treatment is intensified by the chiasmic repetition of the second and third lines as the sixth and seventh. The chiasmus allows a syntactic ambiguity in which the final 'sweating after nightmares' is allowed to modify both the father and the son since each is potentially the 'small me' of the sixth line. The ambiguity intensifies the poem´s pathos while simultaneously implicating the speaker and the reader in the withheld temporally earlier scene in which the father was himself a son 'sweating after nightmares.' Whether someone comforted him is the implicit question with which the poem closes. Three decades after the its first publication it is difficult not to think of the poem as carrying the subtitle 'Running in the Family.'

If we remember how often Ondaatje has commented on the care with which he arranges his poems, we won´t be surprised that a poem about himself and his son introduces, in a manner of speaking, his first attempt to deal directly with his father.

'Letters & Other Worlds' frames the unnamed father´s life with two figurative though stylistically different accounts of his death, a structure Ondaatje also uses in 'Burning Hills' and 'Light,' two other autobiographical poems that look back to his family and Ceylon. Though the poem is an elegy and begins and ends with an appropriately sombre tone, its long middle section of six verses is lighter and shows a deft control in the presentation of the 'terrifying comedy' of his father´s life and his parents´ marriage.

The epigraph is taken from Alfred Jarry´s 'Descendit ad infernos,' and its description of the hero´s approaching death is also an anticipatory summary of the father´s: *'for there was no more darkness for him and, no doubt like Adam before the fall, he could see in the dark´* (24) Worth noting is Ondaatje´s omission of Jarry´s first clause, '*But soon he could drink no more*.' The letters of the title recur in the two verses that open the poem. Written in a style that combines a series of grammatically simple and direct unpunctuated sentences and a highly figurative language, the verses both amplify the implications of the title and the epigraph and serve as a prologue to the poem.

> My father´s body was a globe of fear
> His body was a town we never knew
> He hid that he had been where we were going
> His letters were a room he seldom lived in
> In them the logic of his love could grow
>
> My father´s body was a town of fear
> He was the only witness to its fear dance
> He hid where he had been that we might lose him
> His letters were a room his body scared

The several repetitions suggest the effort involved in the speaker´s attempt to address the subject of his father´s life and death. The second stanza´s near recapitulation of the first suggests that he wants or needs to try again because the first stanza doesn´t quite express what he is trying to say. Similarly the simple diction and style and the succession of short sentences hint at the difficulty and tension involved in dealing with a complex subject towards which the speaker´s feelings may be not only ambivalent but conflicted. The figurative progression in the two stanzas from globe to town to room suggests a gradual shrinking of the father´s world as he edges towards death. An affective and thematic countermovement is established, however, in the momentarily enigmatic references to his letters –the title has prepared us for their significance– and in the darkly monitory comment that 'He hid that he had been where we were going.' The surrounding lines suggest that he had been in a place of suffering and pain and that his letters with 'the logic of love' attempt to shield his family from, in a manner of speaking, 'coming through slaughter.' The last line of the second verse also contains the

ambiguous intimation–created by the ambiguous syntax and the lack of punctuation–that he tries to avoid the family to shield them from the 'town of fear' in which he spent much of his adult life.

As I mentioned, the third stanza repeats and amplifies the prologue´s solemn concern with the father´s death before giving way to the slightly more relaxed lines, marked by extensive enjambment, dealing with scenes from his life and his marriage. These anticipate similar though less unsettling scenes of eccentric family behaviour in 'Light.' And both poems look forward to Ondaatje´s full treatment of the family in *Running in the Family*. Here, the humour and 'comedy' are described as 'terrifying,' and are enacted in the shadow of the opening descriptions of the father´s death –'He came to death with his mind drowning.' The events described almost without emotional inflection are reports from the valley of the shadow of death, each suggesting others that we are left to imagine.

The last two stanzas return to the father´s last years and death with words and images that call to mind Pat Garrett´s alcoholism, the creative but deadly spiders of 'Spider Blues,' the silent imploded figures of 'White Dwarfs' and Buddy Bolden. The father is shown as withdrawing to drink 'until he was drunk / and until he was sober.' And in the hard-earned sobriety he produces 'speeches, head dreams, apologies, / the gentle letters.' The last are written

> 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
> while he himself edged
> into the terrible acute hatred
> of his own privacy

Though the overall tone in the last two stanzas is melancholy and rueful, there is also a note of admiration for the desperate and frangible creativity of Mervyn Ondaatje´s last phase. Like Bolden´s cornet playing, the father´s creativity is made possible by pain, guilt and 'acute hatred.' His writing, like Bolden´s music, 'was immediately on top of his own life' (Ondaatje 1976: 32). It´s as if the clarity, delicacy and empathy of his vision are only possible because of the suffering; there is even a note of melancholy and menace in the subjects he chooses to write about: 'blue flowers,' 'electricity,' and the sleeping snake disturbed by the speaker´s half-sister. The first long sentence of the closing stanza celebrates the flood of grace that occurs during his moments of desperate lucidity; the second continues this motif, but, then, as can be seen in the last line of the above quotation, it shifts attention back to the father´s collapse and death. The lines become shorter, the clauses more terse until the last line whose expansive length and lack

of closing punctuation mimic 'the blood searching in his head without metaphor.' I assume that 'his head' is 'without metaphor' because he is dying and, to use the imagery of 'White Dwarfs,' has gone into 'the white' where he is beyond language. Though we won´t know this until we read the final poem in the collection, he is one of those 'people who disappear / . . . who descend into the code' or 'who implode into silence / after parading in the sky' (71). It is arguable that the answer to that poem´s poignant and ambivalent question –'Why do I love most / among my heroes those / who sail to that perfect edge / where there is no social fuel'– is because they are surrogates of his father and, as we shall see in 'Claude Glass' and 'Tin Roof,' himself. Had Ondaatje written 'Why do I *admire*' instead of 'Why do I love,' I would be less confident in making this suggestion.[2]

There is very little in Ondaatje´s earlier lyrics to prepare one for the complexity, poise and maturity of 'Letters & Other Worlds.' It is recognizably by the poet who wrote 'Dragon,' 'The Time around Scars' and 'Peter.' But in comparison with it the earlier poems are clearly apprentice work in which the poet was perfecting his style and voice –his 'tricks with a knife'– in anticipation of a subject more worthy of his talent. From the perspective of the later work, it is obvious that this pivotal poem is as much about his tragic view of creativity as often inseparable from suffering as it is an elegy for a father. As a poem about poetics it looks back to poems as different as 'Peter' and 'Dates' while simultaneously anticipating the five major lyrics of the collection´s final section in which various aspects of the creative act are a central concern. Together with these it also points forward to Ondaatje´s most profound and extended treatment of his own creativity in *Coming Through Slaughter*.

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2. Ondaatje returns to the father-son theme in 'Fabulous Shadow' (60), though this isn´t as obvious as it was when the poem was first published in *Quarry* as the last poem in a sequence of six short lyrics. The first poem, 'Photosynthesis,' names the central figure as 'Icarus.' But it is the fourth poem, 'Daddy,' that establishes a perhaps too obvious link between Crete and Ceylon, Daedalus and Mervyn Ondaatje.

Daddy dancing took my skin
and poured his body into it
threw me responsibility
and drank his way from sight
We fell like sycamores in the sky
his hair stood up and looked like trees
his crooked legs caught in a wind
but the sea thumped up to me (my emphasis)

In this version of the myth, Icarus is abandoned by a Dedalus who 'drank his way from sight' before the 'sea thumped up' to the son. 'Fabulous Shadow' names neither the father nor the son. All we have is an anonymous voice describing how his (or her) body was 'fished from this Quebec river.' The slightly ambiguous title may refer either to the shadow cast from above by a figure from myth or it may touch closer to home by suggesting that the son is a ''shadow'' of the father or lives in his shadow.

After the tense and tortured autobiographical intensities of 'Letters & Other Worlds,' the thirteen poems of the 'Live Bait' section seem, for the most part, anticlimactic. They are a disparate, often wryly humorous collection of poems in various voices. With the exception of 'Leo,' each one either focuses on an animal or refers to one. And as so often in Ondaatje´s early work, the animals intimate or symbolize as ''live bait'' the world of instinct, energy and chaos on which poetry and art depend for their material and which they transform, often with violence, into artifacts. I almost have the impression that before confronting the reader with the book´s other major poems, Ondaatje felt he needed a section lighter in tone and less intensely focussed on poetics. This is not to say that these concerns are completely absent from the second section. They aren´t, but they appear in a different form.

The epigraph, as mentioned earlier, alerts readers obliquely to the truth status of the poems they are about to read. Where the first epigraph hinted that the poet´s reticence might prevent the poems from offering a sufficiently sincere or honest account of reality, the epigraph from *Tay John* ends with the comment, '"After See!' She said, 'he was a great liar, and the word has choked him!"' Almost as if to contradict the implications of this, the section´s first poem is 'Rat Jelly' in which, as in the misanthropic 'War Machine,' the speaker, sardonic and jaundiced, seems to tell us the worst about himself using an image associated in his previous book with Billy the Kid (Billy´s head, for example, is 'smaller than a rat' [1969: 109]).

> See the rat in the jelly
> steaming dirty hair
> frozen, bring it out on a glass tray
> split the pie four ways and eat
> I took great care cooking this treat for you
> and tho it looks good to yuh
> and tho it smells of the Westinghouse still
> and tastes of exotic fish or
> maybe the expensive arse of a cow
> I want you to know it´s rat
> steamy dirty hair and still alive
>
> (Caught him last Sunday
> thinking of the fridge, thinking of you.) (31)

Though the slightly cryptic references to the Westinghouse and the fridge seem to indicate that the speaker has a particular 'you' in mind, I have the impression that he is also addressing the reader. The fact that this is the title poem of the collection and that some of its concerns are more explicit in 'A Bad Taste' (42) leads me to assume that 'rat

jelly' is a metaphor for poems and poetry. Like the pies in the stained glass window reproduced on the cover of the first edition, the poem ('rat jelly') 'looks good,' and seems to taste of 'exotic fish' or 'the expensive arse of a cow,' but in origin and essence it remains 'rat / steamy dirty hair and still alive.' Though I can´t quite articulate what I think is being intimated by the references to the 'Westinghouse' and the 'fridge,' I have a hunch that it´s connected to the fridge in 'White Dwarfs.' There it is mentioned twice. First in the opening lines: 'This is for people who disappear / for those who descend into the code / and make their room a fridge for Superman' (71). It then reappears later in the final stanza: '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.' Though the speaker admires the white and the silence, he simultaneously realizes that his fate *as a poet* lies with language and what John Crowe Ransom 'the rich contingent materiality of things' (Preminger 1974: 149). The poem´s existence confirms that as a poet he has no choice.

Like colour, energy and speech, the 'rat' cannot be kept in the 'fridge' nor can it be completely baked or cooked if the poem is to be alive. 'A Bad Taste' seems to confirm this reading. It begins with the speaker attempting to renounce his vocation as an artist.

> Moving to the forefronts of honesty
> he comes to them with rat blood in his mouth.
> He would turn them into ladies
> place his brain at their hip.
> Love his friends so completely
> they would admit no artist in him to be found,
> save eating an ice cream cone while reading Ezra Pound.
> This friendship fat as God. (42)

As in 'Burning Hills,' the speaker suggests that the writer cannot be attentive to or love his friends completely simply because as a writer he´s always conscious of the possibility of turning life into art. The London 'rats' of the University of Western Ontario–where Ondaatje taught in the late 1960s–are compared to surgeons feeding off their patients: 'They travel so sly / you do not see the teeth / till in the operating room.' Like the spiders in 'Spider Blues,' they may promise salvation or to turn life into art but they do so by preferring the latter to the former. A reference to 'the Paradise Lost Motel' implies a contrast between the fallen, because self-conscious rat/artist´s way of being in the world and ours.

The poem ends, however, by suggesting that the speaker´s condition is incurable. Although he indicates in the first stanza that he wants to separate himself from them and to move 'to the forefronts of honesty,' he ends with an admiring reminder about the informing value of the rat to writing.

> But it was the rat in Ezra who wrote best,
> that dirt thought we want as guest
> travelling mad within the poem
> eating up pronunciation, who farts
> heat into the line. You see
> them shaved in the anthology.
> You will be frozen and glib when
> they aim for the sponge under the rib.
>
> God being made fat
> by eating the rat in us. (43)

In the next couplet, it´s not obvious to me who is being referred to by the 'you' and why he or she is 'glib' and has a 'sponge under the rib.' The 'sponge' and the 'rib' call to mind the crucifixion, an association that becomes less irrelevant than it first seems when the line is followed by the couplet 'God being made fat / by eating the rat in us.' Though the image is repulsive, it seems to say no more than that by dying on the cross, God redeems us by taking our sins upon himself. What that has to do with the poem´s central theme is beyond me, unless Ondaatje is suggesting, as he does in 'White Dwarfs,' that the poet sacrifices himself by acknowledging our full humanity in his poems.

It´s worth noting at this point that the crucifixion is alluded to twice more in the book; in 'White Dwarfs,' as was just mentioned, and in 'King Kong.' In the latter, Kong is presented in a way that combines both his image in the film and a surreal scene in which he is 'Last seen in Chicago with helicopters / cutting into his head like thorns' (44). The Christological hint is prepared by an earlier suggestive reference to 'our lady in his fingers.' But if Kong is a Christ figure, he is a parodic and apocalyptic one who 'perishes magnanimous / tearing the world apart.' Instead of loving humanity, 'he must swallow what he loves / caressing with wounds / the ones who reach for him.' And though we know that he will die, still, as the poem´s final couplet tells us, 'we renew him / capable in the zoo of night.' As in 'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens,' discussed below, Kong represents a problematically constitutive aspect of ourselves that links us through the unconscious or through our dreams with non-human life. Both poems also suggest, the second more explicitly than the first, that what Kong represents is an essential component of the poetic act. Seen this way, he is indeed a savage redeemer if we believe that poetry has redemptive value. The poet, and this is made explicit in 'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens,' is the 'connoisseur of chaos' whose creativity is inseparable from his dark side. Ondaatje´s artists, from Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden to the poet-novelist in *Secular Love* occasionally resemble Kong who 'must swallow what he loves / caressing wounds / the ones who reach for him.'

The fascination with violence, wounds, scars and creativity –the four are cognate for Ondaatje– is pervasive in this section, and I want to turn now to three very different poems each of which deals with some aspect of them: 'Loop', 'The Ceremony: A Dragon, a Hero, and a Lady, by Uccello,' and 'Philoctetes on the Island.' At the centre of each is a figure who is in some sense a social outcast who also happens to be wounded.

'Loop' is one of those animal poems in which we understand Stevens´s comment that 'The bare image and the image as symbol are the contrast: the image without meaning and the image as meaning. When the image is used to suggest something else, it is secondary. Poetry as an imaginative thing consists of more than lies on the surface' (1982: 161). In the pull between 'Loop' as dog and 'Loop' as symbol, we sense that the second is stronger. The issue will be clearer if we compare the poem to the earlier 'Flirt and Wallace,' Ondaatje´s poem about the two hounds to whom he dedicated his study of *Leonard Cohen*.

> The dog almost
> *tore* my son´s left eye out
> *with love*, left a *welt* of passion
> across his cheek
>
> The other dog licks
> the armpits of my shirt
> for the salt
> the smell and taste
> that identifies me from others
>
> With teeth they carry broken birds
> with wet fur jaws that eat snow
> suck the juice from branches
> swallowing them all down
> leaving their mouths tasteless, extroverted,
> they *graze* our bodies with their love (My emphases, 36)

The focus here is on the dogs as animals, as something other than human, even though their names make an anthropomorphic gesture: one is named after a playful and self-conscious human attitude, the other after Wallace Stevens, a poet Ondaatje has always admired and from whom he will borrow a particularly important image in 'White Dwarfs,' the collection´s last poem. The poem may begin and end 'with love,' but each stanza reminds us that this love is as unpredictable as it is unconditional. In the first stanza, the perfect placing of 'tore' and 'with love' startles us into this awareness; and the third ends with a deft verbal ambiguity: 'they graze our bodies with their love.' Throughout the poem we feel the claims of word and image on reality.

'Loop,' however, opens with a contrast between, on the one hand, the speaker´s dogs and 'all social animals' and, on the other, these dogs and

> the one
> who appears again on roads
> one eye torn out and chasing.
>
> He is only a space filled
> and blurred with passing,
> transient as shit–will fade
> to reappear somewhere else. (46)

The metaphor and simile of the second stanza develop what has been suggested by 'roads' and 'chasing' while simultaneously nudging the dog from realism to romance. He becomes less a particular dog than the embodiment and personification of a way of being in the world. The paratactic syntax and sentences give a compressed but comprehensive summary of his life. The effect is to leave the reader with the impression of a life force that transcends not only social categories –'I leave behind all social animals'– but perhaps even language itself. While the poem says nothing about language or poetry, it is difficult not to read it with '"the gate in his head"' in mind. In the famous closing lines of that poem, the speaker suggests

> 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. (62)

The animal 'caught at the wrong moment' in that poem is a 'stunning white bird / an unclear stir.' The dog 'Loop' seems to me an early trying out without the metaphysical baggage and the burden of poetics of the final movement of '"the gate in his head"'. But instead of developing the epistemological implications of his existence, Ondaatje offers a self-sufficient portrait that culminates in a surreal resolution. While 'Loop' tears into the garbage at a drive-in, the bird carrying the 'one eye torn out' 'lopes into the rectangle nest of images / / and parts of him move on.' The poem ends with two suggestively ambiguous lines: 'the rectangle nest of images' is both the film on the screen into which the bird 'lopes' and that other 'nest of images,' the poem. And the plural 'parts' looks back to the eye in the bird´s mouth and to the remaining 'parts' of the dog disappearing or dissolving in the metrically regular last line.

In 'Philoctetes on the Island,' Ondaatje returns to the Greek archer who in 'The Goodnight' (in *The Dainty Monsters*) is shown shooting Paris after his rescue from the island. The poem´s presence in this collection is surprising simply because of the lack of

interest elsewhere in his work, after *The Dainty Monsters*, in the classical myths that were so important in his early work and in his thesis on Muir. That Philoctetes was on his mind during this period –the poem was published in 1969– is also indicated by Ondaatje´s comment in *Leonard Cohen* (1972: 43) that 'Cohen is making heroes out of these people not because they, like Philoctetes, have brilliant bows, but because they have magnificent wounds.' The Greek archer, of course, has both. In the present poem, Philoctetes describes his lonely existence on the island in a style compressed and figurative: 'Sun moves broken in the trees / drops like a paw / turns sea to red leopard. (34)' The omission of articles, conjunctions and punctuation continues through the poem. There is the possibility that the images here owe something to Ondaatje´s early interest in Henri Rousseau. In the 1908 painting 'Exotic Landscape,' for instance, the orange-red sun is broken up by the dense green foliage that we see it through. And the 'paw' and the 'leopard' may recall several of the jungle paintings in which a lion or jaguar is shown attacking its prey (see 'Surprise' [1891], 'The Hungry Lion' [1905], 'Combat of a Tiger and a Buffalo' [1908], 'Forest Landscape with Setting Sun' [1910]).

The poem is filled with images of violence, including the emotional violence of what 'Letters & Other Worlds' calls 'the terrible acute hatred / of his own privacy.' In words and images that occasionally recall *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and anticipate 'White Dwarfs' and *Coming Through Slaughter*, the archer articulates his divided impulses –to survive or to die?– and the longing for oblivion that simultaneously produces an acute awareness of self. Though reduced to an animal-like existence, he is nevertheless aware of his radical separation from the animals that he must kill in order to continue to survive.

> To slow an animal
> you break its foot with a stone
> so two run wounded
> reel in the bush, flap
> bodies at each other
> till free of forest
> it gallops broken in the sand,
> then use a bow
> and pin the tongue back down its throat. (35)

The unexpected iambic beat of the last three lines lends a ritual quality to the closing horrific and violent image that is unsettling. We have already seen it in 'Peter' ('After the first year they cut out his tongue') and there is a variant of it in 'White Dwarfs' ('The Gurkhas in Malaya / cut the tongues of mules'). Though extreme, the violent image is psychologically right, reflecting as it does Philoctetes´s rage at his abandonment and isolation. In Sophocles´s play, he pleads with Neoptolemus to talk to him:

Take pity on me; speak to me; speak,
speak if you come as friends.
No–answer me.
If this is all
that we can have from one another, speech,
this, at least, we should have. (1957: ll. 228-233)

In the poem, he aims his arrow at the tongue that is mute to human ears. But it´s also tempting to speculate that Ondaatje´s attachment to or fascination with Philoctetes has its origins in his continuing fascination with the figure of the silent or silenced poet tempted or compelled to renounce his art. In this poem, however, it is difficult once again not to sense behind the figure of Philoctetes abandoned on an island the withheld presence of the silent father, left behind in Ceylon and writing alone in a room. Philoctetes´s isolation is reiterated in the closing couplet whose lack of terminal punctuation reminds us that his solitude and pain will continue: 'then they smell me, / the beautiful animals.'

Perhaps the most surprising poem in *Rat Jelly* is 'The Ceremony: A Dragon, a Hero, and a Lady, by Paolo Uccello,' a traditional three stanza lyric, with four lines in each stanza, the second and fourth lines rhyming, and an iambic tetrameter metre. Uccello painted two versions of 'St. George and the Dragon,' the first in 1439-40 (the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris), the second between 1455-60 (the National Gallery, London). Ondaatje describes the second.[3]

The clouds burn blue, hang like sweat.
The green fields bounce the horse´s paws.
A boy-knight shafts the dragon´s eye
–the animal with a spine of claws.

In the foreground linked to dragon
with a leash of golden chain
dressed in silk there leans a lady
calmly holding to his pain.

From the mood I think it´s Sunday
the monster´s eye and throat blood strangled.
The horse´s legs are bent like lightning.
The boy is perfect in his angle. (39)

3. See Franco and Stefano Borsi, *Paolo Uccello*, tr. Elfreda Powell, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994, 256-59.

On first reading, it is tempting to treat this simply as an ekphrastic poem in which the poet transposes a visual image into a verbal one. But Ondaatje isn´t Ralph Gustafson, and this is the only poem of this kind in his early work. Interesting to note is the fact that six of the details in his account of the painting are wrong. In the painting, the clouds do not 'burn blue,' the fields aren´t 'green,' the dragon doesn´t have 'a spine of claws,' and the 'lady' holds what looks like a green rope not a 'golden chain,' and she doesn´t lean. If this suggests that Ondaatje isn´t paying close attention to the tones, textures, details and composition of the painting, then it is worth pausing to speculate on what drew his attention to it. 'Dragon' provides the most obvious and relevant clue. If I´m right in reading that poem as a symbolic and displaced account of a confrontation between the poet and his father, it´s possible that 'A Ceremony' recapitulates the same scene and complex set of feelings in a different form. Read symbolically or allegorically, Uccello´s painting offered the young poet another version of the one story and one story only that mattered to him at the time and that, ironically, he couldn´t deal with directly. It is also the one story that he would go on telling throughout his career.

Here the story becomes an Oedipal one of the 'boy-knight' rescuing the 'lady' by slaying the dragon-father. But, in fact, as in Uccello´s painting, the dragon doesn´t seem to pose a threat either to the town or to the woman who seems to be holding him by the leash. When St. George 'shafts the dragon´s eye,' the lady leans solicitously 'calmly holding to his pain.' 'The boy' may be 'perfect in his angle,' but as much as in *Running in the Family* he is excluded from the drama´s central couple which is paradoxically joined by the masculine figure´s 'pain.' Pertinent here is George Whalley´s (1953: 140) suggestion that the poet´s 'transmutation' of his feelings to the words and images with which they have associated in his memory and imagination 'is probably never complete; there is always an untranslatable residue. This no doubt explains how poems and even novels tend to be written in families, as a series of approximations to a recurrent complex of feeling.' Ondaatje´s next stop in this particular autobiographical pilgrimage will be 'White Dwarfs.'

But before turning to the book´s final section, I want to look at a couple of very small verbal details that further complicate any reading of 'The Ceremony.' Some of the poem´s images relate it to poems dealing with Doris Gratiaen as well as Ondaatje´s first wife, Kim. A slim connection exists between 'Dates' and the Uccello poem on the basis of variants of the verb 'sweat.' In 'Dates' we are told that the mother 'sweated out her pregnancy in Ceylon,' while 'The Ceremony' has a sky with clouds that 'hang like sweat.' The relationship with 'White Room,' the poem about the poet and his wife, is more interesting because it introduces the possibility that 'The Ceremony' is simultaneously about a second triangle, the poet, his wife, and her first husband. As was mentioned, the lady in 'The Ceremony' is described as leaning; the 'dear thin lady' in 'White Room' is described as 'bending over your stomach.' Similarly, the 'boy is perfect

in his angle' in the ekphrastic poem, whereas the couple are described as collapsing 'as flesh / within the angles of the room' (22). This isn´t much, but in the work of a poet as elusive as Ondaatje, a hint is often all that we will get at this stage. To go back to our original question about what it was that attracted him to 'St. George and the Dragon,' we might venture the answer that writing about it, allowed him to deal with two triangular relationships about which he had ambivalent feelings. These and other triangles in Ondaatje´s work–Buddy-Robin-Jaelin; Patrick-Ambrose-Clara; Almasy-Katherine Clifton-her husband–testify to an inescapable autobiographical given for which he has had to find various structural and aesthetic strategies that have helped him to understand and cope with it.

The best poems of the third section of *Rat Jelly* –and they are among the finest in Ondaatje´s body of work– are magnificent lyrical footnotes to many of the existential and poetic issues implicit in 'Letters & Other Worlds': fathers and sons, wounds and creativity, chaos and form, and the temptation of silence in the face of suffering. Read as a group the poems leave me with the impression of a complex emotional and intellectual pattern painfully and slowly shaped out of difficult and disparate materials. Particularly fascinating is the felt often tacit interaction between autobiographical concerns and pressures and creative ones. These are most evident in the seven poems about creativity that, as a group, constitute an early poetics: 'We´re at the Graveyard,' 'Taking,' 'Burning Hills,' 'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens,' 'the gate in his head', 'Spider Blues,' 'White Dwarfs.' These poems have roughly the same relationship to Ondaatje´s body of work of his first decade as Stevens´s 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' does to his oeuvre. They are a theoretical stock-taking that is a confluence of the various lessons he learned writing the thesis on Muir, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and his monograph on Cohen. But if they are a summary they are simultaneously a preparation for the writing of *Coming Through Slaughter* in which Ondaatje pushes the theory to the limit. In the novel he explores the same situations and issues in the story of an artist-hero, with some autobiographical roots, whose cornet playing incarnates and enacts the aesthetic assumptions of *Rat Jelly*.

Of the section´s thirteen poems, all but three touch on death (accident, murder, suicide). Even the gentle first lyric, 'We´re at the Graveyard,' juxtaposes death to the pregnancy of one of Ondaatje´s friends. Its form depends on an antithesis between the clarity, imperceptible movement and seeming permanence of the stars and earthly transience and mortality.

> Up there the clear charts
> the systems´ intricate branches
> which change with hours and solstices,
> the bone geometry of moving from there, to there.

> And down here–friends
> whose minds and bodies
> shift like acrobats to each other.
> When we leave, they move
> to an altitude of silence. (51)

The complex dependance of our relationships is finely caught in the simile of the acrobats (an image that will return both in *Running in the Family* and *Secular Love*) which also introduces the unavoidable suggestion of falling and danger. And the idea that we live out our lives in the shadow of death, that, in a sense, we are always 'at the graveyard,' is gently reiterated in the poem´s two closing images: 'Sally is like grey snow in the grass. / Sally of the beautiful bones / pregnant below stars.' The quietly foregrounded 'g' reminds us of 'graveyard' which is the eventual resting place of all bones. Unlike the sempiternal 'bone geometry' of the stars, ours is short-lived. A small compensation is offered, however, in the third stanza´s paradoxical first sentence:

> So our minds shape
> and lock the transient,
> parallel these bats
> who organize the air
> with thick blinks of travel.

Our lives may be marked by the various griefs of living, but the mind attempts to compensate by shaping/making something permanent of our transient existence. I assume that we ''parallel these bats'' in being unable to see what is to come and not fully understanding our situation. Though the general sense of the last two lines is clear, I´m as puzzled by 'thick blinks of travel' as I was in 1973.

'We´re at the Graveyard,' a fine achievement in itself, is also an effective introduction to the section as a whole and an anticipation, though in an emotionally antithetical mode, to its closing poem, 'White Dwarfs.' The latter will develop in another direction its concern with 'sliding stars,' 'an altitude of silence,' and the implied image of Sally´s white, convex stomach concealing and containing a colourful growth. More generally, the poem also introduces the question of the sources of poetry and of the poet´s creative relationship with reality. 'Taking,' for instance, presents the poet as someone willing to appropriate whatever he thinks can be turned into a poem.

> It is the formal need
> to suck blossoms out of the flesh
>
> in those we admire
> planting them private in the brain
> and cause fruit in lonely gardens. (55)

The anonymous voice and the third person copula together with the closing image of 'fruit in lonely gardens' lend this an unearned momentary general force. It takes a moment to realize that the speaker, whose pronominal mask slips in the second stanza, is describing the relationship between a parasite and its admired host. The relationship may produce something as positive as a poem but it is nevertheless based on exploitation. The second stanza offers a comic variant on this before undermining the tone and complicating the theme.

> I have stroked the mood and tone
> of hundred year dead men and women
> Emily Dickinson´s large dog, Conrad´s beard
> and, for myself,
> removed them from historical traffic.
> Having tasted their brain. Or heard
> the wet sound of a death cough.

In other words, everything from a 'large dog' to 'the wet sound of a death cough' is of potential use to the artist whose justification for his attitude is that he can transform transient, labile and perishable life into the 'immaculate moment' of the work of art. The various organic images scavenged by the jackal poet are 'rumours' that 'pass on / are planted / till they become a spine.' Like the gossip and the stories in 'War Machine,' they are turned into a poem. Ondaatje´s tone may be more bizarre and light-hearted than Horace´s, but this is his version of the Latin poet´s 'Exegi monumentum aere perennius' (Odes III, 30). It is worth noting in passing that the opening lines of the second stanza, slightly out of place in 'Taking,' reappear as the thematically clinching image in 'the gate in his head.'

The troubling question of the poet´s relationship to his material is brought closer to home in the next poem, 'Burning Hills.' The narrative situation here is sketched in the first few lines.

> So he came to write again
> in the burnt hill region
> north of Kingston. A cabin
> with mildew spreading down walls.
> Bullfrogs on either side of him.
>
> Hanging his lantern of Shell Vapona Strip
> on a hook in the centre of the room
> he waited a long time. Opened
> the Hilroy writing pad, yellow Bic pen.
> Every summer he believed would be his last. (56)

The burnt hills, mildew, and the Vapona Strip suggest death and decay, while the last line transfers this suggestion to his anxieties about his creativity (as well as, perhaps, his own life). The bullfrogs remind us of a simpler, less ambivalent or conflicted music. Like several other poems, this one frames images from the past with opening and closing sections set in the poem´s present. The poem is about its own writing, and the poet´s realization of the price he pays for being a writer. The three works mentioned implicitly comment on this: 'A copy of *Strangelove*, / of *The Intervals*, a postcard of Rousseau´s *The Dream*.' The first prepares us for the poet´s 'strange love' for those he simultaneously loves and uses in his work. The second reinforces this by describing Stuart Mackinnon´s poems, and by implication Ondaatje´s, with violent images in which the poem is 'strict as lightning / unclothing the bark of a tree, a shaved hook.' And the third, Rousseau´s 'The Dream,' reminds us that the artist´s imagined reality will often be different from ours and the reality with which he began: 'The postcard was a test pattern by the window / through which he saw growing scenery.'

Among the memories that constitute the poem´s long central section, the most telling is a remembered photograph.

> There is one picture that fuses the 5 summers.
> Eight of them are leaning against a wall
> arms around each other
> looking into the camera and the sun
> trying to smile at the unseen adult photographer
> trying against the glare to look 21 and confident.
> The summer and friendship will last forever.
> Except one who was eating an apple. That was him
> oblivious to the significance of the moment.
> Now he hungers to have that arm around the next shoulder.
> The wretched apple is fresh and white.

The wretched apple, like most apples in the Western canon, needs no commentary. In the context of the poem as a whole, it is one of several images of separation and alienation like the third person narrative voice.

The poem might have ended here, but Ondaatje´s shifts it back to the present and changes the original reference of the title from the 'burnt hill region / north of Kingston to the act of writing: 'Since he began burning hills.' The suggestion that writing and destruction are in some deep sense coextensive is immediately reinforced with the mention that 'the Shell strip has taken effect. / A wasp is crawling on the floor / tumbling over, its motor fanatic.' And the slowly paced closing four lines look back to '*Strangelove*,' '*The Intervals*,' and '*The Dream*.'

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. (58)

To love with 'great love and great coldness' is to offer the 'strange love' of the artist who is never completely involved with life because as an artist he simultaneously stands apart and observes. Equally interesting is the teasing closing confession that the revised poem will have only lies that are not obvious. In what sounds like a line from Cohen, but isn´t, Ondaatje is indicating that, despite his attempts at objectivity, his poem may be a misrepresentation or lie.[4] And if the lies to be sought out are the 'obvious ones', there is the disturbing implication that the not 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.' Like 'The Dream,' whatever its debt to the real, the poem will enact its own version of reality.

The poet´s relationship to his subject matter is dramatized again in 'Spider Blues' where in the central symbolic fable, the poet is seen as an admirable, because dextrous and ruthless, spider. Though Ondaatje may know Emily Dickinson´s 'The Spider as an Artist,' his is simultaneously more anthropomorphic, comic and calculating.

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. (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

4. There is, however, an indirect link with Cohen. In *Leonard Cohen*, Ondaatje summarizes *The Favourite Game* as follows: 'The book is an autobiography of Breavman told in the third person, like one of those group photographs with a white circle drawn around the central character. Breavman, then, is studying his own portrait while making it, and the stress is on the fact that the portrait is unfinished' (1972: 24).

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, not Céline Dion. 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.

But the fable of the spider and the fly is also about the spiders and the poet´s wife, as we learn from the surreal opening stanza and as we are reminded by the equally surreal or oneiric last one. In the first, the spiders´ attraction to the wife is described by the poet who also admits to having his 'own devious nightmares.' In the closing movement, however, he refers to a

> Nightmare for my wife and me:
>
> It was a large white room
> and the spiders had thrown
> their scaffolds off the floor
> onto four walls and the ceiling.
> . . . . .
> 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

ALL
except the working black architects
and the lady locked in their dream their theme (65)

The metaphor and the homophonic pun (pane/pain) of the 'shattered pane of glass' look back to the cobwebs earlier in poem and forward to one of the most memorable images in *Coming Through Slaughter*, a novel whose hero-spider is unable to escape from Webb the detective. Ironically, the creative act gives no pleasure to either of its participants. Only the flies, themselves sometime victims, applaud.

It is clear why this is a 'nightmare' for his wife. But to understand why it is also one for him we need to recall that spiders and poets were compared in the brief third stanza.

Spiders like poets are obsessed with power.
They write their murderous art which sleeps
like stars in the corner of rooms,
a mouth to catch audiences
weak broken sick

While there is a slight syntactical ambiguity in the last line (is it the audience or the spider/poet who is 'weak broken sick' or is it both?) the context implies that the adjectives refer to the artist. The poem suggests that whatever we may think of the work of art, its origins are troubling and suspect. Ondaatje´s poet isn´t quite Stevens´s 'The Weeping Burgher,' but he would have to agree with the latter that 'It is with a strange malice / That I distort the world' (1955: 61).

'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens' presents this troubling situation in the form of a psychodrama in which the two figures of the title represent two aspects or faculties of the poet. The poem, the situation suggests, is the product of their tense interaction.

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. (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´s 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 Stevens´s 'thinking.' If, as I have suggested, Kong and chaos or blood are synonymous, then the entire fourth stanza points to Kong´s simultaneous 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´s '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/blood, his unconscious self.

But the poem also suggests playfully that Stevens is not the only poet with a shadow self. After all, the writer-speaker of the poem asks humorously 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 'bananas' allude comically 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, 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. Ondaatje and Stevens are also linked by the younger poets use of his subject´s imagery. The 'dark thick hands' hinting at violence may owe something to 'My hands such sharp imagined things' ('The Weeping Burgher'), though there is also the possibility that Ondaatje is recalling Margaret Atwood´s 'The Green Man' ('They did not look / in his green pockets, where he kept / his hands changing their shape') from *The Animals in that Country* (1968: 13). Similarly the tell-tale 'bananas' may owe as much to Stevens´s 'Floral Decorations for Bananas' (1955: 53) as to King Kong´s diet.

The interest, even fascination with chaos and the irrational is already present, as was mentioned earlier, in *The Dainty Monsters*, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* as well as in some key pages of the thesis on Muir and the study of Cohen. In *Rat Jelly*, 'Taking' and 'the gate in his head' point to the problem the poet faces in trying to depict or represent the irrational or the chaotic in poetry. Having examined the writer´s questionable intentions –the why– towards his material, he now turns to the issue of whether such representation –the how– is possible without significant distortion or falsification. Helen Vendler (1995: 106), with characteristic acumen, points to the heart of the dilemma in her discussion of the poetry of Jorie Graham. 'To allow the primacy of the material over the spiritual, to admit into art the unexpected detour, the chance event, whimsy even, is to be forced to abandon the neat stanzas of a 'classical' poem. It is to allow an equal role to the sensual, to make form mirror the unstoppable avalanche of sensations and the equal avalanche of units of verbal consciousness responding to those sensations.' The dilemma the artist faces in such a situation is that if he or she transfigures 'chaos' or 'the unstoppable avalanche of sensations' into aesthetic form, the result might misrepresent that chaos and create an unintended and misleading meaning. In this respect, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Running in the Family* and *Secular Love* may be closer to the poetic ideal of these poems in *Rat Jelly* than the poems themselves.

As we have seen, the key term or image for Ondaatje, whether his concern is with the self or external reality, is chaos, a concept also important to Muir and especially Stevens. Though there is an anticipation of this issue in 'Taking,' 'The gate in his head' is Ondaatje´s most explicit indication of how he thinks a poem should mirror or enact or express reality:

> 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. (62)

As I wrote, there is an anticipation of this in 'Taking' where the ideal is 'To learn to pour the exact arc / of steel still soft and crazy / before it hits the page.' In the later poem, 'chaos' is synonymous with whatever reality the poet has chosen to describe. It is the basic life stuff or substance, human and non-human, out of which he shapes a poem. The poem´s central tension is between this 'chaos' and the 'mental nets' of imagination, language and poetic form. 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*; they are the medium –film or words– in which the vision is enacted or caught. Although 'caught' is Ondaatje´s word, it does not really do justice to either his essentially heuristic assumptions 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 an image or an event. His concern is that the poem describe or enact '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 also to yield a new, unexpected awareness or perception. 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 recreating through oxymoron and an interweaving of sounds–n´s and r´s–the reality. The ideal sought is 'not clarity but the sense of shift.'

The photograph that is the metaphor for Ondaatje´s ideal poem is by Victor Coleman, and the entire poem is an *hommage* to a writer whose difficult poems reveal 'the faint scars / coloured strata of the brain, / not clarity but the sense of shift.' The 'faint scars' are metaphors for Coleman´s poems (*One-Eye Love*, *Stranger*) that, in a mode much more radical than Ondaatje´s, attempt to give the reader a sense of life as pure process, as 'shift' or 'chaos.' 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. In other words, the scar literally incorporates and records 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 event has disappeared.

Ondaatje´s most radical gesture in the direction of suggesting that there are time when 'all the truth' cannot and sometimes *should not* be stated is the collection´s ambitious and powerfully ambivalent poem 'White Dwarfs.' The last of the poems about poetry, it builds on the others´ insights and questions but reexamines these through lenses coloured by 'Letters & Other Worlds.' As a result, it interweaves two concerns: poetry´s potential inability to deal with certain kinds of experience, and the poet´s paradoxical attraction to silence.

In 'White Dwarfs' the poet confronts not just the unconscious or chaos but events that in their full human significance seem to demand a response of awed silence from humanity and art. It´s as if the poet simply throws his pen down in despair when he realizes that he will be unable to deal with certain aspects of life. There is also a hint that to attempt to describe these might also entail betrayal. Individuals involved in such events are the 'white dwarfs' of the title, stars of small volume but high density that have imploded into darkness and silence. The poem is a tribute to those who, for whatever reason, have gone beyond 'social fuel,' language and creativity.

> 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 (7)

The key word here is 'moral' which, although slightly ambiguous, seems to be synonymous with life-meaning or way of being in the world. Those who 'shave their moral so raw' live in a condition in which their self exists without a social persona, 'where there is no social fuel'; consequently they come in touch with the very ground of their being, subtly associated here with heaven ('through the eye of a needle'). 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 disturbing but necessary glimpse of what the elegy for his father calls the 'other worlds' lying beyond or beneath consciousness or social forms. In 'White Dwarfs' the speaker admires, without explaining why, those whose achievement or experience is beyond him as man and poet.

> 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 (why not the more expected 'admires') those whose language is an expressive and deafening silence: for them the experience and their expression of it are one. Silence is here, as later in *Coming Through Slaughter* where Buddy Bolden is described as 'crucified and drunk' (1976: 76), a final poetry that cannot be improved by the poet´s facility with words.[5] Incidentally, the image of the crucified figure probably owes less to the New Testament than to Kafka´s 'The Hunger Artist,' a story Ondaatje doubtless read when working on his thesis. Kafka (1970: 270) doesn´t refer to the crucifixion, but he does limit the hunger artist´s fast to forty days. He describes its end as follows.

> Experience had proved that for about forty days the interest of the public could be stimulated by a steadily increasing pressure of advertisement, but after that the town began to lose interest. So on the fortieth day the flower-bedecked cage was opened, enthusiastic spectators filled the hall, a military band played, two doctors entered the cage to measure the results of the fast, which were announced through a megaphone, and finally two young ladies appeared, blissful at having been selected for the honour, to help the hunger artist down the few steps leading to a small table on which was spread a carefully chosen invalid repast. And at this very moment the artist always turned stubborn. (. . .) And he looked up into the eyes of the ladies who were apparently so friendly and in reality so cruel, and shook his head, which felt too heavy on its strengthless neck.

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5. The image of the crucified figure may also owe something to Edwin Muir´s 'The Annunciation' which is discussed in Ondaatje´s thesis: 'Muir also captures the immediacy of the crucifixion by concentrating on the physical aspect of Christs´s death and avoiding the social comment. By seeing Christ without the cloak of Christian theorizing around him, Muir gives him an even greater timelessness. Christ becomes an archetype akin to Prometheus or Theseus' (86). Since the thesis also mentions Francis Bacon´s work, there´s a strong possibility that the image also owes something to 'Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion' (1944) and 'Crucifixion' (1965).

I also have a hunch, based on the image of 'the smell of ladies' that Ondaatje may have remembered Kafka´s 'In the Penal Colony' which he would have read in the Edwin and Willa Muir translation when working on his thesis. In this story, the self literally becomes the site of writing on the death machine. At one point, the officer supervising the execution says to the condemned man, 'Here are your handkerchiefs' . . . and threw them to [him]. And to the explorer he said in explanation: 'A gift from the ladies.' (1971: 162).

The hunger artist´s supreme work of art will be silence and death. This is a supreme fiction in which the dualities of nets and chaos, Stevens and Kong, Michael and Mervyn, language and reality, and art and life have finally been dissolved but only at a price that the poet as poet cannot afford to pay. Even as he suggests that poetry in such a situation might be superfluous and perhaps blasphemous –whatever that word means in Ondaatje´s secular world– he is nevertheless writing a poem. Like other poets who interrogate the validity of language –Paul Celan, Tadeusz Rozewicz, and Ingeborg Bachmann, for instance– Ondaatje inevitably uses language. This dialectic of language and silence leads finally not to despair about poetry but to an affirmation that in the terms the poem sets out is simultaneously a betrayal of the very things admired. The confrontation with a reality that 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 which language and silence struggle to coexist.

The poem´s final movement attempts to evoke silence and the unknown.

> And Dashiell Hammett in success
> suffered conversation and moved
> to the perfect while 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

The poem ends by pointing hauntingly to a beauty ('an egg') and a human profundity (the personified 'star') beyond more explicit description and discussion. The tentative metaphoric gestures 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 'the perfect white between the words' and 'the colours we cannot see' is a paradoxical attestation of his belief in poetry. It seems appropriate that the image of the egg is borrowed from Stevens´s 'Things of August' (1955: 490):

We make, although inside an egg,
Variations on the words spread sail.
The morning glories grow in an egg.
It is full of myrrh and camphor of summer
And Adirondack glittering. The cat hawks it
And the hawk cats and we say spread sail.

Spread sail. We say spread white, spread away.
The shell is a shore. The egg of the sea

And the egg of the sky are in shell, in wall, in skins
And the egg of the earth lies deep within an egg.

Spread outward. Crack the round dome. Break through.
Have liberty not as air within a grave

Or down a well. Breathe freedom, oh, my native,
In the space of horizons that neither love nor hate.

Stevens´s 'The Poems of Our Climate,' another poem about the insufficiency of white and harmony, may also have been in Ondaatje´s mind here since he commented on it and quoted from it in the Muir thesis (1967b: 118).

Three decades after publication, *Rat Jelly* can be seen both as a summing up and reexamination of some of the constitutive personal and aesthetic issues raised implicitly in *The Dainty Monsters* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* while simultaneously preparing the ground for *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family*. In the novel, Ondaatje imagines the worst case scenario for the kind of lacerating self-expressive creativity that punctuates his early work. In the often fictional memoir, he comes to terms with the Ceylonese/Sri Lankan past that he felt he deserted and that abandoned him. Though the new poems in *There´s a Trick with a Knife I´m Learning to Do* (1979) were written before his return to Sri Lanka in 1978 and before the writing of the memoir, they seem, for the most part, to be written in a style less tense, heated and figuratively and allegorically inflected and to be free of the obsessive concerns that are the signature of the early work. 'Light,' the loving elegy for his mother seems to be the key transitional work mediating between the poet´s past and present, his 'lost' Ceylonese family and his present Canadian one. Whatever the reason, the *post-Rat* Jelly poems reveal Ondaatje, on the one hand treating his past like a burden or source of inevitable anxiety and remorse, and, on the other, moving in new directions in style and content.

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