

In Defense of *Anil's Ghost*

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The echoes of Sir Philip Sidney and Percy Bysshe Shelley that my title invokes are, in some senses, deliberate, since there are striking similarities between the situations in which *The Defence of Poesie* (1595) and *A Defence of Poetry* (1821, published 1840) were written and the complex political and literary backdrop that frames Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000). Sidney's argument offers a taxonomy of the arts and sciences in order to establish the supremacy of poetry. The abstraction of poetry is turned into a sign of strength as Sidney discusses the limitations of disciplines that merely document and quantify. Shelley's essay, written more than two centuries later, traverses similar ground by exalting the imaginative strength of poetry without jettisoning its social and moral function. Both were written during times of heightened political activity when there were several attempts to reiterate the significance of the arts. Sidney and Shelley assert that poets may well rely on vision and emotion, but they remain, to use Shelley's famous phrasing, "unacknowledged legislators of the world." In a general sense, the opposition between a socially conscious literature and a form of art that is aesthetically complete but distanced from social or political realities has been the subject of recurrent debates, including the well-known exchange between Salvador Lopez and Gabriel Garcia Villa concerning the role and significance of literature in the Philippines.¹

Anil's Ghost compels a reopening of the debate over literature's relation to politics through its overt preoccupation with a complex political backdrop, as well as a carefully articulated ambivalence about its project. Ondaatje's decision to write a so-called political novel is obviously a deliberate one, and the critical responses to it have been unexpectedly diverse. The multiple analyses advanced by critics have specific implications for the evaluation of Sri Lankan fiction in particular and for postcolonial literatures in general. Over the last decade, Sri Lankan

writing has been, for the most part, driven by politics, and Ondaatje's intervention needs to be seen as a significant attempt to champion a particular stance. This paper argues that, far from being biased, orientalist or otherwise irresponsible, Ondaatje's novel charts new territory by establishing a careful balance between political engagement and aesthetic distance.

That said, it can be argued that there is no real urgency to defend Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Despite its political content and its provocative subject matter, it did not invite the kind of censorship and public outcry occasioned by the works of Salman Rushdie. It did not even arouse the kind of controversy that Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* did.² In fact, the opposite is true. For almost a whole year the novel was on bestseller lists in Canada. And the list of awards it gathered is impressive. Within a matter of months it received several prizes, including the Governor-General's award, the Prix Medicis for foreign literature, and the Kiriyaama Pacific Rim Book Prize; it was also the co-recipient of the prestigious Giller Prize. In a representative and clearly laudatory review, Silvia Albertazzi concludes that in this novel the author wants "to restate his commitment to pacifism and his denouncement of the brutality of war," a comment that establishes the text as benign and wholly appropriate (74). This defense, then, is of a particular kind in that this article addresses the concerns of "local" or Sri Lankan-born diasporic critics who see the novel as a shameless act of appropriation, essentialism, distortion or blatant prejudice. The fact that the Sri Lankan critics do not have a consensus about why the novel is flawed adds to the complexity of the problem.³ The dichotomous situation caused by the praise heaped on the novel by the West makes the defense relevant, even urgent to some degree. One does not wish to privilege Sri Lankan critics and imply that their perspective is somehow more significant than that of Western critics, but the fact that the Sri Lankan response is generally negative raises a number of questions about critical practice, readership, and the literary marketplace.

Praise from the West, particularly for books that fall within the general rubric of "South Asian literature," seems fated to invite hostile opposition as well. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an example

of a work that elicited very different kinds of response in the West and the East, some very laudatory and others decidedly critical. The manner in which the strengths and weaknesses of such novels get configured points to significant differences in expectations among readers. *Anil's Ghost* appears to have prompted such a duality as well. The dichotomy in critical reception is not simply a matter of stylistics or narrative. Such a response was perhaps true of *The English Patient*, which was, in stylistic and formal terms, more typical of the Ondaatje aesthetic mode that appeals to some and irritates others. With *Anil's Ghost* the situation is arguably more complex, and the objective of this article is to raise several questions about the assumptions and practices that form the backdrop to this lack of consensus.

At the most obvious level, the duality of responses has to do with the relation between the ostensible subject matter and the literary marketplace itself. In this instance it refers to the kinds of circumstances that make it possible for the South Asian novel to find a huge readership in the West. In short, the argument would be that if the novel gave the West what it wanted to read, the success of the novel would be assured. An extension of the argument would be that the West has imagined a Sri Lanka, which the novel then corroborates. In turn exotic and savage in its description of local conditions, the novel, according to this reading, offers the West a biased representation of the Third World. In Edward Said's terms, the novel is part of a discourse that orientalizes Sri Lanka. The conviction that novelists are complicit in promoting a vision of the East for Western consumption also has the effect of forcing a closer scrutiny of the novel in the Third World by critics who are in a position to test the claims of the novel through comparative or "nativist" eyes. They are also aware, quite often, of the complexity of the political and social context that is evoked in the text. The divide between the two critical schools is not necessarily a spatial one, but the fundamental duality in critical reception remains intact. In other words, the comparative or nativist response would provide a corrective to the euphoria of the novel's success in the West. If the West finds in the novel a reassuring affirmation of an imagined nation, the Third World is dismayed by the novel's refusal to engage with the "realities" of the country.

As I mentioned early on, *Anil's Ghost* is by no means alone in eliciting both praise and condemnation. The last few decades have been the golden age for postcolonial writers and several of those who achieved tremendous praise in the West have confronted this ambivalence. *Anil's Ghost*, however, has a particular significance. Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* was seen as a semi-autobiographical about a family. It did not remain unscathed as critics faulted it for various reasons, and even his brother Christopher Ondaatje had reason to express some measure of reservation about its portrayal of family history.⁴ On the whole, the personal nature of the narrative redeemed it. *The English Patient* was seen as the quintessential diasporic novel, and its internationalism was, given the displacement of the author, predictable. A more recent book of poems entitled *Handwriting* included disturbing political elements, but not enough to cause concern among the critics. *Anil's Ghost* is much more problematic in its subject matter and narrative stance. The novel is about the political events that sharpened animosities in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, and that specific focus, I would argue, makes it far less immune to the kinds of expectations that politically engaged postcolonial literature appears to generate.

Ondaatje's failure to satisfy many local Sri Lankan readers is also based implicitly on the premise that novels such as *Anil's Ghost* have the effect of producing meaning. Such novels become the window to the outside world, but they do more than reveal or reflect local reality. Their power lies in their capacity to generate meaning. It has been said anecdotally that one lawyer in Toronto used the novel as a form of judicial notice in defining the backdrop to his client's case. Presumably, the lawyer's decision to cite the novel as evidence was based at least partially on the premise that the judge would have read the novel and been aware of its relation to the conditions in the country. In such instances the novel is not simply a representation of the real. It is real to the extent that its accuracy cannot reasonably be questioned. In this case, the novel takes on the status of a document whose representation is sufficiently authentic to be considered a form of evidence.

The issue, from a postcolonial perspective, then, becomes one of trying to define an adequate critical stance to read or explicate the

novel. If the novel adopts a “public” persona, then its validity is that of allegory, in Fredric Jameson’s sense of the term.⁵ Unlike *Running in the Family*, this novel almost announces its allegorical stance by saying that what happens in one village may well happen in another. Further, the fact that the novel begins outside Sri Lanka tends to reinforce its allegorical and universal element. Whatever problems one has with Jameson’s statement of the postcolonial project, the idea of allegory as a staple feature of postcolonial writing has remained with some measure of stubbornness. *Anil's Ghost* would be seen as an attempt to present in metaphoric form the turmoil of the country. By including an author’s note that highlights the political backdrop involving the insurgents, separatists and the government, Ondaatje deliberately forges the connection with “real” conditions before insisting on the fictive aspect of his novel.⁶ Even a cursory reading of the “Acknowledgments” at the end would indicate that the author’s research was comprehensive and thorough.

Regardless of what the author/narrator claims, at one end of the spectrum is the critic who chooses to downplay the specific political elements of the novel. The novel, from this angle, belongs to a global tradition of writing and what is at stake is the formal aspect of the text. A second category claims the need for accuracy through an interrogation of the prior text that allegory assumes, and by shifting the focus of this critique from metaphor to metonymy. For critics who are committed to this approach, the history of conflict occupies an unambiguous space and what is important for the reader is to discern how close the novel gets to a sense of truth. The benchmark here is accuracy. Often, what tends to dominate this methodology is the position that Terry Eagleton calls a “normative illusion” that refuses to see the object for what it is. Eagleton adds that this approach “‘corrects’ [the novel] against an independent pre-existent model of which the empirical text is an imperfect copy... The typical gesture of normative criticism is to inscribe a ‘could do better’ in the text’s margin” (11).

In some ways, these are different approaches that we often encounter in postcolonial criticism. Allegory of a particular kind offers some measure of distance, but it can also be capable of radicalism, depending

on how it is structured. A purely formal approach escapes the difficulties of context and tradition, and is particularly useful when dealing with transnational writers who need to be accommodated in national literary histories or when the target readers are not likely to be informed about local conditions. A more context-based approach works with texts that insist on the reader's awareness of local conditions. Topicality is the mainstay of such works.

Depending on who reads *Anil's Ghost* and where, any one of these approaches is likely to be adopted. Typically, the reviews that appeared in the *New York Times on the Web*, *Queen's Quarterly* or *Maclean's Magazine* appear to underscore the formal aspect, and in the process give the mantle of universalism or internationalism to the novel. Tod Hoffman, in his review, remarks that "Ondaatje's use of language is, it goes without saying, superb. His greatness lies in combining the poet's gift for word selection and rhythm with the novelist's sense of plot" (450). The *Maclean's* review gives priority to Ondaatje as an international writer first and a Canadian writer second. Writes Brian Johnson, "Ondaatje is our most international author. Quintessentially Canadian, his fiction deciphers identity and bleeds through borders" (67). Implicit here are certain assumptions about identity and nationality. Brenda Glover's essay appears to move in the direction of an allegorical reading, where the details of the novel, while important in themselves, also imply a larger process at work. "In each of his novels," says Glover, "Ondaatje creates an extreme situation with a small cast of central characters, through whom he is able to explore the dynamics of displacement, isolation and alienation, as well as strategies for survival" (79). Under this rubric the novel charts a personal quest, and the political context becomes secondary. Glover's assessment is not very different from Heike Härting's conclusion that "*Anil's Ghost* represents and ... regulates diasporic identity through both the construction of Anil as a nomadic subject and its narrative's modernist configuration of history" (50).

It would be simplistic to assume that essays by Western critics have not paid attention to the political events recorded in the text. But there are differences that need to be noted as well. Margaret Scanlan, for example, refers to Bosnia, Ireland, and Guatemala, and adds "one ob-

vious difference, however, between Sri Lanka and these other trouble spots, at least for North American readers, is its unfamiliarity” (303). Nonetheless, she claims that Ondaatje’s “distinctive achievement in *Anil's Ghost* is to create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror” (302). But her main concern is with the function of “abrupt breaks in time” that postmodern novelists use in order to move away from traditional linear narratives (303). Antoinette Burton is equally preoccupied with history and historiography, although her intention is to show how the novel tests the limits of historical narrative.⁷ After a comprehensive and valuable explication of the novel, Paul Brians concludes with a reference to Ananda and the boy who reaches out to him: “such small gestures of compassion are all the book offers as counterbalance to the grotesque cruelty all around; but in the long run the concern of one human being for another is the only hope we have” (193).⁸ All these commentaries have much to offer, but they do not, for the most part, interrogate the way in which the novel projects the political violence in Sri Lanka.

For the purpose of this article, the second category of criticism is crucial, since the articles that belong to it are ones that are critical of the novel for what they deem an inadequate portrayal of local conditions. And, this is precisely where the critical response becomes complex and problematic. The analysis of three Sri Lankan critics, all living and teaching in the West, demonstrates not only the multiplicity of critical response but also the difficulties inherent in finding a consensus among critics who adopt a similar approach. The three Sri Lankan critics whose work is looked at here are all unhappy with the novel’s representation of Sri Lanka, but for very different reasons. Their approaches are remarkably similar, but they arrive at very different conclusions concerning the novel’s referential claims. The issue, then, is not so much about methodology as it is about the novel’s vulnerability when the depiction of political conflict becomes an overarching concern in literary practice.

The first example is a long review by Ranjini Mendis who offers a comprehensive reading of the novel. Having drawn attention to Ondaatje’s failure to counter “the stereotype of the savage, violent South Asian”

(11), she goes on to conclude that “the absence of detail in historical context, however, works against an informed reading, leaving just a general impression of self-destructive violence as the major thread of the novel” (9). Mendis’s article stresses the significance of historically informed reading. The position is clearly comparative and mindful of authorial responsibility, of the critic’s task and of the urgency of post-colonial issues. She too, working in the West, is aligned with Ondaatje’s status as a “native-alien” of sorts, but her critique underscores the “native” element, which in her view the novel fails to capture. In other words, Mendis provides an analysis of the local situation against which the novel needs to be appraised. At the outset of the review, Mendis sets up her interpretation of local conditions. Having made the assertion about what needs emphasis, she goes on to demonstrate that the novel does not measure up. The intention here is not to take issue with the historical and political reading espoused by Mendis. But I would like to raise what appears to be an interesting problematic that arises out of such a stance. Her position is clear. Says Mendis:

In the last two decades, ‘Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,’ a guerilla organization ironically called ‘Freedom Fighters,’ has been attacking Sri Lanka’s socialist-democratic Sinhalese government and civilian population. Funded by Tamil immigrants in Western countries (‘Terrorism funds’), their goal is to cripple the power base and establish a separate homeland of nearly half the island for the 12% who are Tamil. (8)

Mendis is troubled by the fact that the novel offers a flawed view of the nation by stressing the atrocities of the government while ignoring the crimes of the Tamil terrorists. Again, to quote from the review, “Ceylon Tamils, with a different history from the Indian Tamils brought to Ceylon by the British for tea plucking, have fought for self-government and to move further south in the island ever since the early recorded history of Ceylon” (8). This is an authoritative position, offered not as historiography but as history. There is no ambivalence, no sense of contingency in her statement, and it is from this position that the partial truths and relativism of the novel are judged. In short, Mendis

maintains that the novel's perspective is a biased one that implicitly exonerates the Tamil Tigers while blaming the Sinhalese government.

In contrast, Qadri Ismail writes a polemical essay in which he maintains from the very beginning that some form of social commitment is a *sine qua non* for the novelist. Having thus established his critical standpoint, he then goes on to analyze the novel in some depth. He points to several "errors" in the text—a shortcoming that clearly weakens the referential veracity of the novel. His conclusions are totally unequivocal: "When all the significant actants in a story about Sri Lanka are Sinhala, when in addition all the place names noticed by the text when it sees the National Atlas of Sri Lanka are Sinhala ones, and when the novel's only list of the Sri Lankans disappeared contain exclusively Sinhala names, its country begins to seem very like that of Sinhala nationalism" (39, 41, 24). In a position that is the very opposite of Mendis, Ismail claims that in the novel "The JVP ... is portrayed as human; the LTTE [Tigers] in contrast, as inhuman terrorists, killers of children" (26). Ondaatje's bias in the novel, according to Ismail, is clearly in favor of a monolithic Sri Lanka in which the minority groups are irrelevant: "Sri Lankan history, to this text, is Sinhala and Buddhist history. A more humane history than we are used to hearing, yes; but not a multi-ethnic history, either. We now know whose side this novel is on" (27). In short, for Mendis, the novel is clearly anti-Sinhalese, and for Ismail the novel is blatantly against all minority groups and decidedly pro-Sinhalese.

A third position is established by Kanishka Goonewardena, who faults the novel for failing to capture the "truth of history." Clearly unhappy with statements such as "the reason for war was war," Goonewardena argues "beyond that transcendental tautology, anyhow, no character in the novel offers an insight into the condition of the human condition in war-torn Sri Lanka" (43). The universalist dimension of the novel—evident in references to the brutality in Guatemala, for example—and the refusal to engage directly with the origins and history of the violence in Sri Lanka are, for Goonewardena, both inadequate and potentially misleading. Goonewardena writes: "The decision to write an apolitical novel set in the tragic situation of Sri Lanka is profoundly

political” (43). In short, Goonewardena does not say that the novel is being partial by locating itself on one side or the other; instead, he maintains, that the author has a responsibility to go beyond effects to focus on causes, and to engage with the origins of the conflict. The approach here is broadly Marxist, and the critic is wary of a text that is inadequately informed about the historical context. Goonewardena is thus less concerned with the political bias of the novel than with the aestheticism that masquerades as universalism while it simultaneously moves away from the tragic realities of the country.

The three critics write forcefully, even authoritatively, about a situation in which their expertise is a given. However, the very fact that they adopt three decidedly different and contrasting positions also points to significant concerns about Sri Lankan literature and its current role. The lack of consensus among the three critics is also a salutary reminder to the reader that “objectivity” might well be an impossible ideal. In the process of insisting on authorial accountability, I would suggest that the critics themselves may have unwittingly foregrounded their own subjective positions. The last twenty years have been crucial ones for Sri Lanka as the country has undergone a number of significant political changes. This has also been a period of intense literary activity in which a number of authors, including Jean Arasanayagam, Yasmine Gooneratne, Romesh Gunsekera, Chandani Lokuge, Ashley Halpe, Carl Muller, Shyam Selvadurai, Rajiva Wijesinha and Rienzi Cruz have produced a body of varied and often controversial work. Their texts are certainly not politically neutral and regardless of whether they are “local” or diasporic, they shape the way the island is seen by the region and the West. Within this framework, no text is inconsequential, and certainly a novel by Ondaatje that explicitly addresses the political situation cannot be taken only as artifice or allegory. Arasanayagam, for example, is predominantly mimetic while Wijesinha is stubbornly allegorical. Importantly, Ondaatje locates himself somewhere in the middle, thereby frustrating the Sri Lankan critics who find the portrayal of Sri Lanka flawed.

It is interesting that Ondaatje himself has offered at least three different perspectives about the novel. In his acceptance speech for the

Governor General's Award, he spoke of reconciliation and forgiveness. "Pacifism,' 'reconciliation,' 'forgiveness,' are easily mocked words," says Ondaatje, "but only these principles will save us" (2). More importantly, in an interview he deflects the attention away from himself and toward individuals, their private demons and their moments of apprehension that matter to him as a writer claiming, "it isn't a statement about the war, as though this is the 'true and only story.' It's my individual take on four or five characters, a personal tunneling into it" (qtd. in Jaggi 6). It is of significance that the novel itself ends on a note of optimism and rejuvenation with the image of Ananda performing the Netra Mangala ceremony, thereby symbolically suggesting a new beginning. Similarly, the novel also begins with a prefatory note in which the author—"M.O."—comments that in the country the war is going on in a different form than the one depicted in the text. The narrator articulates yet another voice that does not always coincide with the author's opinions. I suggest that these are three different positions espoused by Ondaatje and his narrator in a deliberate gesture that maintains a measure of ambivalence. The shift from one register of emotion to another is a purposeful one, since the novel reveals a deep-seated anxiety about the process of telling the tale. It is hardly possible to read the novel without an awareness of all three voices, not to mention the indeterminacy of the narrative mode. Any appraisal of the novel must be aware that while all three perspectives at times bleed into one another, they also occupy distinct spaces.⁹

The framing of the text, then, is very ambivalent. While Ondaatje explicates what he wants to do and what he does not want to attempt, the novel at times subversively contradicts him. An example of this can be found in the detailed description of a man being flung out of a moving train in ways that suggest a more personal and self-referential text was not outside Ondaatje's purview. This particular episode eschews all but a minimum of mimetic details, but it does so in a manner that reveals a shadow text that the author chooses not to write. For the critic who wants to see in the text a direct engagement with empirical realities, it is precisely this shadow text, with all its potential for conventional realism, that would have salvaged the novel.¹⁰

Given the multiplicity and complexity of political preoccupations, the novel does what it sets out to do, though there is an inevitable necessity about the way in which it is done. Critical practice might well occupy oppositional stances, but the text itself demonstrates the need for a productive middle ground. *Anil's Ghost* enacts a realization that the personal, the political, and the social are intertwined in ways that problematize clear ethnic, religious, or ideological categories. The novel insists on its artifice, not because life does not matter, but because it is the capacity of art to transform reality that allows for the perception of intersections. Anil's meeting with the old servant at the beginning of the novel is a case in point. Intertextually, the meeting recalls a poem in *Handwriting* that describes the poet's deep sense of guilt at having abandoned a servant. In the novel, the similar episode underscores the deep emotional bond that connects to potential antagonists, Anil, who is Sinhalese, and Lalitha, who is Tamil. For the two of them, ethnicity might not matter, but it certainly does to the granddaughter who works in a refugee camp in the North.

The novel is not autobiographical but it is intensely personal, and its quest is not for realism but rather for truth. The archetypal quest narrative, underlined by its modern counterpart the detective story, provides the structural basis for the novel. However, what drives the text is Ondaatje's own sense of grief, as is evident in the book of poems entitled *Handwriting*, and developed further in the novel. Speaking about what appealed to him in his novel, Ondaatje says: "I was thinking what do I like most about *Anil's Ghost*? It was a scene when Gamini doesn't want to embrace Sarath's wife because she'd discover how thin he is. For me, that was a heartbreaking moment, light years away from the official stories" (7). Memory does not constitute a dominant motif in the novel, but that is what drives the text and determines its form and content. The novel must then "invent" and in the process create a mask that would become a gateway to truth. It is the process by which Ananda, tormented by the death of his wife, deliberately constructs a different identity for "Sailor," thereby subverting the mode of detection, but reaching out to a truth that for him has greater significance. At this point, Anil, whose quest is framed by total faith in scientific rational-

ity, recognizes the metamorphosis of which art is capable: “[Ananda] had been standing outside, listening to them speaking in English in the courtyard. But now he faced her, not knowing that the tears were partly for him. Or, that she realized the face was in no way a portrait of Sailor but showed a calm Ananda had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim” (187). By the same token, Palipana begins to “see” when his rational, scientific mode fails him together with his eyes. It could be argued that this is a relativist position, a kind of indeterminacy that sidesteps the turbulence of the present. If that kind of ambivalence smacks of a lack of commitment, it is also likely that Ondaatje’s identity may not coincide with that of the narrator.

Among the characters in the novel, Anil, Palipana and Ananda may well be considered artist-figures whose roles offer a metafictional commentary on the text. All three have their own convictions about (re)creating the identity of Sailor. They work together and their varied approaches complement each other, but each espouses different perspectives. Anil occupies one end with her faith in scientific rationality and Palipana occupies the other with his belief in intuition. If, in the end, no position is privileged, it can also be interpreted as Ondaatje’s reticence to endorse any single ideological position.

Graham Huggan points out in a discussion of Janette Turner Hospital’s *The Ivory Swing* and Yvon Rivard’s *Les silences du corbeau* that the quest novel, with some modifications, works admirably well within a general discourse of orientalism.¹¹ *Anil's Ghost* is clearly a quest novel and its plot line can be read in a manner that reinforces an orientalist perspective. If this novel veers away from such a position and avoids anthropologizing the nation, it is because it chooses to locate itself as a reflective work rather than an authoritative one. There is in the novel a genuine engagement with the dangers of false historiography and with the inability to arrive at a definitive position. The words that Lakma engraves in stone before Palipana dies are a version of the truth that will endure. But they remain ‘partial truths,’ valid only in so far as a particular mode of communication is privileged. As a novel that self-consciously questions the perspectives it offers, it could not have espoused a position in unequivocal terms. It is hardly an accident that Palipana,

the renowned epigraphist, who succeeded in claiming agency from colonial historians, begins to see the limitations of a nationalist historiography. He then “invents” the truth in a move that is described by the narrator as “not a false step but the step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance” (81). And the narrator adds a comment that is crucial to the novel as a whole: “A forgery by a master always meant much more than mischief, it meant scorn” (82).

When Anil first visits Palipana in the grove, he feels her arm to get a sense of her person. A particular kind of logic is at work here, and Anil is impressed by the scientific rigor of the man who requires a specific kind of objectivity. The reader is at the same time reminded of the allusion to the Biblical story of Abraham and his two sons Esau and Jacob, and the duplicity practiced by his wife Rebekah to ensure that one son is privileged over the other. The two narratives intersect to subvert the ostensible purpose of the scene. If Palipana serves the purpose of questioning nationalist and official versions of history, the allusion insists that Palipana himself is treated with a degree of irony.

It is equally important to remember that the political events in Sri Lanka during the last few years have borne out the risks of easy generalizations. In a country faced with the violence of ethnic strife, it has become increasingly clear that positions of power change, and agency shifts in curious ways, not to mention that categories that were shown to be homogenous have proved to be otherwise. Postcolonial authors, particularly in nations such as Sri Lanka, are confronted with the anxiety of uncertainty and are aware that positions that were once relatively straightforward have become complex.¹²

A comprehensive reading of the novel is not the objective of this article. Rather, the idea is to position Ondaatje’s novel as one that is neither aesthetically distanced nor overtly tendentious. That it is a paradoxical position, particularly in a South Asian context, hardly needs emphasis, although it is important to recognize the inevitability of such a standpoint. For writers like Ondaatje there is often no real choice about what they write or how they write. Regardless of the limitations of their perspective, it is also important to acknowledge that the myth of homogeneity can hardly be asserted in most nation states. There can be no

unified reading of the nation, any more than a unified reading of a text. Ondaatje is situated as a Sri Lankan-Canadian and therefore an insider whose ancestral memories go back to the time of Dutch rule. However, as a Burgher who left the country in the 1960s he is an outsider to the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

A historically informed position is a necessity for the postcolonial critic. Having moved away from a critical tradition that removes itself from the context altogether, it would now be futile for the postcolonial critic to jettison the need for a nuanced awareness of local conditions. But to insist that the novel must validate a particular position is to reduce the text to an ideological construct. To look for what the text says or does not say from the perspective of the historian or sociologist is also to deny the literariness of a novel. For the critic to wear the mantle of historian or sociologist can be risky, counterproductive, or even unfair, particularly when the effect is to tell both the reader and the author what merits attention. To make this claim is not to revert to a formalist position that subordinates political and social realities to aesthetic ones. Such distancing is likely to be equally hegemonic even when it masquerades as art. A culturally and politically sensitive reading fills the gaps, identifies connections that are made or deliberately suppressed, but in no way ignores the artifice of the novel. It is possible to look for and celebrate books that offer a strong and unequivocal message. And if we look hard enough we are likely to find one whose subjective position coincides with our own. But such texts do not test the limits of language, they do not reveal the struggle of the author to embellish the everyday with invention, they do not challenge the critic to question his or her own biases, and often, they do not endure. Responsible critics play a crucial role in positioning texts, for only they would know where realism ends and artifice begins. The critic's task, then, is to distinguish between realism and artifice in order to elucidate their functions rather than conflate them.

I do believe that it can be difficult to defend the realism of *Anil's Ghost*. The descriptions of landscapes, buildings and even characters do not convince the reader of mimetic accuracy. In fact Ismail documents several errors that have found their way into the novel.¹³ The complex-

ity of the political situation may well be outside the reach of the novel. However, for critics to say that the novel is wrong-headed, misinformed or naïve is to miss the point that mimetic representation is not the text's primary aim. For the critic who brings to the novel a complex historical consciousness the challenge is to grant the text its autonomy, to appraise the novel within the terms it sets out for itself rather than from a position that reflects the critic's own subjective stance. Surely, the postcolonial critic should not wish to colonize the postcolonial novel.

Among the many approaches to the issue of authenticity is one that looks at vernacular literatures and their response to the events that form the backdrop to the novel. At least in Sri Lankan Tamil literature the response has been one that provides a curious perspective. In this corpus, it is not often that one encounters the kind of political analysis that one would normally expect in a vernacular text. The displacement caused by political strife might well be shown from the perspective of an old man who can no longer understand why his daughter-in-law has suddenly become hostile. A text might describe the bewilderment of a farmer who is told that he must move to make way for the security forces and does not quite understand who would attend to his plot of land. It is true that vernacular literatures have also been capable of profound mimetic accuracy and political analysis, but that is not necessarily the norm. In general vernacular writing tends to focus on effects rather than causes, while literature in English often favors abstraction. It can be argued that a novel like *Anil's Ghost* is difficult to write in the vernacular, and that it is also the strength of writing in English to produce such works.

That said, *Anil's Ghost* invites attention to its political engagement. It is, at some level, a rewriting of *Running in the Family*. The time period is approximately the same, and here again is an exiled subject who is returning to the home country after fifteen years. What the earlier work failed to do, this novel attempts, but on its own terms. *Anil's Ghost* offers political engagement without taking sides, and without the realism of mimetic detail. The earlier text pays little attention the insurgency of 1971, since its objective was to foreground the history of a family. *Anil's Ghost* is steeped in politics, but decides to problematize the events it painstakingly describes.

The text does, however, embody a deliberately fragmentary style that invites the kind of criticism that has been leveled against it. The novel's configuration of time and space, its gradual filling-in of information, and its micro-narratives that involve several characters, invite a particular kind of criticism. It must be noted, however, that in the micro-narrative that occurs on the train there is the nucleus of a plot, which, even in the hands of a second-rate novelist, could well become the structure of a novel. The story of Lakma, the girl who looks after Palipana, or even the story of Ananda would lend itself very easily to a plot that would lead to a kind of realism. The choice to write a different kind of novel, then, is deliberate.

One of the criticisms is that the novel insists on an allegorical dimension. What happens in one place happens everywhere. Guatemala is the same as Sri Lanka. Goonewardena expresses disappointment with such universalism. Alternatively, it can be asserted that what we have here is not the kind of allegory to which Jameson refers. *Anil's Ghost* is particularly specific about its local concern. The disgrace of a specific person, and the hunt for a specific victim are not peripheral to the narrative. These are not entirely allegorical pursuits. If Anil or Sarath at some stage do not see distinctions between the specific and the general, that does not necessarily deny the specificity of the quest. Individual characters, even minor ones like the old servant who appears at the beginning, do matter in the novel.

In structural terms, the novel is quite straightforward. The objective is to detect and unravel the identity of a murdered person. When that fails, we have a situation in which the form works against content. The identity of Sailor is established at the end, but it leads to no resolution, no *denouement*. It is thus no more than an aside. A whole epistemology is brought into question when the novel's form works against content. Anil, with all her faith in a western way of knowing, is made to understand that not only is rationality sometimes futile, it is also destructive. Sarath dies because of her insistence. He will be her ghost, her shadow. In fact, as the text says at the end, both Ananda and Anil carry within them Sarath's ghost.

And this is where the entire episode involving Palipana becomes

significant. Palipana is, in some ways, Senarat Paranavitana's *doppelganger*.¹⁴ As readers, we are made to be aware of the intersection of fact and fiction. Palipana is accused of forgery. His is the power of artifice. If his forgery implies scorn, it is the scorn for a particular kind of realism. His power of vision is in direct proportion to his loss of sight. He exemplifies the paradox of existence: you see best when you are not involved any more. His forgery must be seen as imitation and as forging. In the process of distorting he also forges—creates anew—a reality that needs to be recognized as legitimate.

In both Mendis and Ismail, there is a deep concern with official narratives. And that is precisely what Palipana acknowledges and later abandons. Official histories are not dismissed in the process, but they too are seen as textual constructs, often driven by ideology. Palipana is also treated with some measure of irony, but that whole section in the grove reveals that what we know is less important than the artifice, which results from “facts.” By the same token, one needs to look carefully at Ananda—a name that recalls the chief disciple of Buddha. He too recognizes the limitations of rationality. As he recreates Sailor in the image of his wife, he privileges metaphor over simile and creates a dichotomy between signifier and signified. At the end Sailor might remain a shadowy presence, but the quest certainly does not fail.

The whole episode involving the *Walawe* to which Anil, Ananda and Sarath retire is in fact deeply problematic. Despite the plausible and rational reasons that are given for this choice, the fact remains that the entire episode can only be a staging of artifice. The entire image is preposterous in realistic terms. One needs to be completely ignorant of tropical jungles in order to accept the realism of that section. But that is also precisely the point. The metaphor is meant to accommodate opposites. The rational is tempted by the instinctual while the intuitive is captivated by the rational. Both succeed, in different ways, at different moments. The sheer artifice of the episode forces the recognition of opposites and contradictions, both of which are important markers in the novel.

It is possible to contend that the diasporic novel is at its best when it works with metaphor rather than metonymy. In practice, however,

the two often complement each other in significant ways. To confuse one with the other would be to misjudge the purpose of the text. *Anil's Ghost* is likely to remain flawed in its knowledge of the local scene. But its strength lies in its willingness to capture the contradictions without which a nuanced representation is hardly possible. The moral stance of the novel might well nudge the edges of elitism, but it is also an assertion of its commitment to a humanism that is cathartic. In relation to much that has been written about Sri Lanka in the recent past, by scholars and writers, this novel establishes its unique niche by demonstrating that if artifice takes liberties, it also has the capacity to hone perception and shape realities in ways that are profound. Ideological positions do matter, according to the novel, but more important is the human cost of conflict. By the same token, human misery, the text argues, cannot be decontextualized and aestheticized in universalist terms. Critics may well admire *Anil's Ghost* for its formal sophistication or critique it for its ideological position, but the novel, in the final analysis, defends its stance by establishing a sophisticated rapport between political engagement and aesthetic distance. Edward Said puts these ideas across admirably well:

Texts have to be read as texts that were produced and live on in all of sorts of what I have called worldly ways. But this by no means excludes power, since on the contrary I have tried to show the insinuations, the imbrications of power into even the most recondite of studies. And lastly, most important, humanism is the only, and I would go so far as to say the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history. (6)

Anil's Ghost does not jettison its commitment to represent ethnic strife and political violence, but it also insists that any engagement with the referential must recognize the discourse that determines what is said and how it is said.

Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive overview, see Lopez.

- 2 The combination of politics and gay sexuality in the novel did not find easy acceptance in Sri Lanka. During the first few years, the fact that the author did not launch his book in Sri Lanka was an indication of the hostility of the state.
- 3 I use the terms “Sri Lankan” and “local” in a very specific sense to underline the distinction between Western critics who have viewed the novel favorably and Sri Lankan born critics who are troubled by the politics of the novel. The fact that all three Sri Lankans referred to later live in the West does not alter the substance of the argument.
- 4 For instance, referring to the death of Lalla, Christopher Ondaatje writes: “In my brother’s book, Lalla dies when she is carried off in the great Nuwara Eliya flood. It is a marvelous piece of literature and true to her zany character, but in fact she died of alcohol poisoning. . . . That is a sadder and more depressing account than Michael’s. Nor was there much charm in seeing that crazy and eccentric old woman sitting on a stool in the busy, chaotic Nuwara Eliya market bragging to bemused strangers about her son, my uncle, then the attorney general of the island” (50).
- 5 Jameson’s well-known essay, which advances the argument that third world literatures tend to be national allegories, appeared in *Social Text* (1986).
- 6 In the note at the beginning, the author says: “From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government. Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents.”
- 7 According to Burton, “if *Anil’s Ghost* does not fully resolve the question of how to recuperate those stories that remain buried or are without a trace in the aftermath of history’s violence, past and present—or does not do so to our satisfaction—it nonetheless offers one example of how and why histories are made at a time when the traditional *matériel* of History (whether archives or bones) is proving increasingly unavailable and reliable” (52).
- 8 It is also of some significance that Brians, in his annotated bibliography, refers to a review by Dinali Fernando, which he glosses as “a nitpicking review in a Colombo newspaper that catches Ondaatje in a few errors of local detail” (193).
- 9 An interesting comparison with *Anil’s Ghost* would be Gunsekera’s *Heaven’s Edge*. The two texts reveal an “anxiety” about postcolonial realities, but while Gunsekera works at the level of allegory, Ondaatje straddles both allegory and realism.
- 10 Pages 31 and 32, which are not numbered, stand outside the main narrative, but its effect is to alert the reader to the kind of novel that the author chooses

not to write. The episode that is described is all the more horrific because it is not contextualized.

- 11 According to Huggan, “the formula is a familiar one: a restless Western writer takes temporary refuge in the East, hoping to find physical stimulation and/or spiritual enrichment there but discovering instead the limitations of his/her own culture, a culture to which he/she nonetheless returns, suitably ‘enlightened’ (46). With minor changes, the definition applies to Ondaatje’s novel as well.
- 12 The intervention of Norway and several countries to bring about a negotiated peace in Sri Lanka amounts to a rethinking of national politics, and the more recent split among the Tigers is a reflection of primordial loyalties that transcend ethnic ones.
- 13 Unlike Rushdie, who deliberately inserts errors in his novels, Ondaatje in *Anil's Ghost* unwittingly overlooks them.
- 14 The well-known archaeologist Senarat Paranavitana, who also made claims about interlinear texts, is deliberately invoked through the character of Palipana. Goonatilake refers to “the case of the hallucinatory inscriptions which the well-known archaeologist Paranawithana saw in his dotage” (46).

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