

Travel Memoir as Nonfiction Novel:
Michael Ondaatje's
"Running in the Family"

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Solecki: . . . do you ever look back to the various media interviews you've done and think of subjects you would like to have discussed?

Ondaatje: Very few people want to talk about architecture.

Spider Blues 322

IN 1978 AND 1980, Michael Ondaatje made two extended trips to Sri Lanka, the place of his birth, and *Running in the Family*, published in 1982, became what he called his "composite" account of these journeys. In the same year, Robert Byron's *Road to Oxiana* was re-issued, also a "composite account" of a protracted journey, in the preface to which Paul Fussell wrote: "Normally a travel book offers a continuous, seamless narration. Not this one. It gathers and arranges the most heterogeneous rhetorical materials, juxtaposing them . . . without apparent reference to familiar traditional orders" (x). What Fussell remarks here not only has application to Ondaatje's memoir but would also elevate it to the same category as Byron's — a literary artifact of great stylistic range, developing a unique structure that carries it beyond the boundaries of the travel genre, into those of the nonfiction novel.

Running in the Family begins with a brief prologue called "Asian Rumours." Headed by a longshot photograph of Colombo's waterfront — the first of a series of pictures that help to demarcate this narrative — "Asian Rumours" goes on to explain the lure the author's birthplace has for him, inducing him to return after a twenty-five-year absence to undertake his marathon "run" through his family history. Shortly after World War II, his family split up;

his mother took her children to England, and Michael followed his elder brother to Canada. On his return, following his mother's death, the "rumours" that would flock to him, he knew, would bring him memories of her and his father, as well as the legendary doings of his grandmother Lalla. But the summons that Asia made him feel, in pursuit of family legends, could not have foretold his deep re-immersion in Ceylonese life. Here the travel portions of the two journeys come to vie with the more routine visits to informants from his parents' generation. The haphazard path he followed, never reconstructed in a linear way, becomes responsible for the aesthetic structure of the nonfiction novel he produced.

Initially, the stories he sought were of the 1920s and 1930s before he was born. From the "tropical pleasaunce" his parents' cronies had established — to use E. M. Forster's term (7) — Ondaatje's forerunners were able to ignore the onus of British dominion around them. Thus, in his first main section, "A Fine Romance," his parents are shown amidst a dreamlike set of people, who have never calculated any costs. Of the Gasanawa rubber estate that served them as a playground, the son observes, people's "memories about Gasanawa, even today, are mythic" (44). His summation of Francis de Saram, the estate's manager, does not discount a single superlative by which this man is remembered:

Francis de Saram had the most extreme case of alcoholism in my father's generation, and, always the quickest, was the first to drink himself into the grave. He was my father's . . . closest friend and the best man at several weddings he tried to spoil. Unambitious, and generous, he lost all his teeth young. . . . (44)

If Francis, his teeth gone, seemed one kind of pace-setter, Ondaatje is also told of another exotic figure who died young, this one remembered for dentures of another sort: "poor Wilfred Batholomeusz who had large teeth . . . killed while out hunting when [mistaken] for a wild boar" (40). The dental allusions suggest almost talismanic force, yet the "facts" are set down ingenuously as though in a straightforward biography. (Meanwhile the non-fiction novelist is shepherding a constructed myth before him.)

Still Ondaatje might lay all this to the eagerness with which his informants have welcomed him. He becomes for a time their amanuensis — "those relations from my parents' generation who

stood in my memory like frozen opera" (22). "Aunts," he calls one chapter, and begins it with: "How I have used them." They resemble *Alice in Wonderland* informants, as when Aunt Phyllis instructs him about the good and bad Ondaatjes of old, and thrillingly tells of one who was "savaged to pieces by his own horse" (25). Impetuous pursuits—racing, gambling, lovemaking—had their own savor; yet beyond the gossip value lay another reason for the Gatsby-like excesses in the highlands to be commemorated.

For, if excesses were flagrant, nature had her way of rectifying things. A mistreated horse did kill its owner. (And another horse, badly inbred, caused havoc to its owners, who had given it an ominous name: "Forced Potato.") But the islanders accepted these occasional judgments against them. The main point was that they felt in league with their environs. An aunt tells of wild joyrides by moonlight, when cars might go skidding off the road only to "sink slowly up to the door handles in a paddy field" (52). There could have been tragedies, but to a large degree their pre-war pleasure-land cushioned them.

The prudential British had a quieter goal before the war—that of exploitation. But Ondaatje's forebears in "A Fine Romance" lacked contact with the British, whose exclusiveness was itself inbred. Here Ondaatje seizes on a powerful fact: his people may have inbred some race-horses, but they had come from European stock, intent on setting up domiciles in Ceylon, thus were partial to intermixing of bloodlines with the natives. They secured upland retreats in Kegalle or Nuwara Eliya, after which their heirs broke contact with the ruling hegemony—adopting lives of "happy suspension," as one critic says, in surroundings they did not spoil (MacIntyre 316).¹

This was Nuwara Eliya in the twenties and thirties. Everyone . . . had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British, and Burgher blood in them going back many generations. . . . The English were seen as transients, snobs and racists, and were quite separate from those who had intermarried and lived here permanently. (41)

It should be noted that Ondaatje does allow for some "British" admixture—but then shifts the idiom to "the English." Only one recent Ondaatje had sought colonial preferment—his grandfather, whose "English" pretensions had made him a taskmaster

to his son Mervyn, Michael's father. It shows a sure grasp of structure for the author to undercut that grandfather by ending "A Fine Romance" with his dipsomaniac father and a pet polecat holed up in the family estate at Kegalle. The opening movement closes with these words: "Whatever 'empire' my grandfather had fought for had . . . disappeared" (60).

While the father's evading the influence of the grandfather conforms with the book's anti-colonialism, there remains the "operatic" quality of its first movement. It really is a form of "frozen opera" that Ondaatje's relations presented him with. Through this whole early section, their tall tales, latent with wonder, drive his pen on, leaving an experiential gap. A belated hunger arises in him to see past the myths of his parents' world, a mythos rendered all-but-official in the telling. (It becomes part of the *donnée* of nonfiction novels that they subvert the official.) "I still cannot break the code," he says, "of how 'interested' or 'attracted' [my parents' circle] were to each other." For as history retreats, gossip remains, explaining "nothing of the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other's presence" (53-54).

What needs to be decoded, it turns out, requires some form of steepage — which must be managed in present, not past time. With the new section this need is supplied, as the author cuts free from his relatives and begins some expeditions of his own. In fact, the book's binary structure is glimpsed here, as Michael ponders some old maps of Ceylon. Their way of "growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy" forecasts a route his narrative will follow (63).

Later his relatives reappear (in choric roles, for the Lalla and Mervyn centerpieces); now the author becomes more a participant in island life. And modern Sri Lanka offers a merger between the romantic past and what may be hoped for despite the third-world trials besetting the country.

Often in nonfiction novels, especially the travel-book sort, the author-traveller meets someone of a reciprocal type. This kind of meeting befalls Ondaatje twice. The encounters, both with younger people, add importantly to that "steepage" I spoke of. One of his new friends, the scholar Ian Goonetilleke, helps make a conservator

of Michael; his influence is the most important in the book. Ian appears before the central Lalla-Mervyn episodes. The other key person is the author's half-sister Susan, who becomes important after the chaotic wartime chapter about her father. She causes *Running in the Family* to pivot dramatically, towards a most unexpected conclusion.

The steepage, resulting from many side excursions, resurrects for Michael a Ceylon — only vaguely remembered from childhood — in an intensely tactile way. Michael starts a "Monsoon Notebook"; he makes a visit to a former prime minister who all but stupefies him; he learns from his friend Ian what the insurgency of the early 1970s was like. These are concrete ways of gathering data, unlike the opera-recitals he is treated to. Though the exaggerated mode is not dispensed with, it tends to give way now to events that happen unexpectedly and draw judgments from him. So that, despite a scattershot appearance, the structure, as one critic has said, "is organic and . . . not collage; rather it's the scrupulous dissection — anatomization — of consciousness" (Hoy 330-31).

Once the second movement is underway, the author becomes everything from packrat to poet. Returning from the church where his ancestors are buried, he hurries to "transcribe names and dates . . . into a notebook," having just dealt with "100-year-old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand, information tough as plastic dolls" (68-69). From a source so ephemeral comes information that is solid, "tough"; such acts of retrieval add to the story's documented strength. A parallel method of retrieval is owing to sheer plenitude: in Ceylon, *growing* cannot be stopped. "One morning I would wake and just smell things, it was so rich I had to select senses" (70-71). This amplitude affects him till the book's final pages, where his "body must remember" even an insect bite, that as it swells sends the tiny offender aloft, "Riding on their own poison" (202-03).

But if texture threatens to overwhelm, when we return to structure, to the six subdivisions or sections in their proper order, it becomes clear that the plan is binary: Ondaatje means us to see the main sections as working in pairs. The visual clues, the photographs, seem especially to confirm this.²

The six subdivisions are unnumbered but set up by page-breaks with photographs placed under captions. As we look at these close-ups (unlike the longshot view that precedes the prologue), they appear to require assistance from us. That is, *half* of them do. By which I mean Ondaatje can be certain that we are thrown off or destabilized by the pictures from the even-numbered sections, whereas the photographs in the sections preceding them are composed, centred, and show stability by conforming with their captions each time.

The perception of nature itself as stabilizer and destabilizer flows from this deliberate structuring. Section three, focusing on Lalla, evidently vouches for the stabilizing effect of her *implicit* alliance with nature — while her son-in-law Mervyn, in section four, represents the “destabilizing” effect that nature is *complicit* in. (But complicit because thwarted — for imperial authority, which in no way affected Lalla, did affect Mervyn, from the time of his duels with his father to his running amok as an officer of the Crown during the war years.) If the centerpiece action of *Running in the Family* presents Lalla and Mervyn as chaotic lords of misrule, the book’s main disclosure reveals how opposite they are: she was a born activist; he a reactor, a man who might burst into action if thrown off his guard, but intrinsically passive. Even the photographs are arranged to make the even-numbered sections (like Mervyn’s) the ones full of mystery and concealment, opposed in a binary way to the sections preceding them, which flash with legend and natural triumphs.

The subdivisions that may be numbered two, four, and six work empirically. In these, the “Monsoon Notebook” entries appear, once in each. Placed near them are incidents involving Michael’s encounters with wild creatures; at times dangerous, at other times quasi-dangerous. In all these, the island and its denizens are meant to take precedence over humans, who render up due respect. The close-up photographs for subdivisions two, four, and six also show the presence of natural danger. From the writer’s point of view, the material here is less rehearsed, less foreknown — again, a nonfiction novel desideratum.

For Ondaatje’s section headings in the columns below, the binary opposition is a lateral one:

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|--------------------------------------|--|
| (1) A Fine Romance | (2) Don't Talk To Me About Matisse |
| (3) Eclipse Plumage | (4) The Prodigal |
| (5) What We Think Of
Married Life | (6) The Ceylon Cactus and
Succulent Society |

The photographs accompanying subdivisions one, three, and five depict his parents and their set, confronted by no dangers. These pictures not only are stabilized but also make instant sense, unlike those of the other group, so that we have "A Fine Romance" (with Michael's parents pictured before their marriage), "Eclipse Plumage" (a group photograph of a fancy-dress party where the "plumage" disguises the party-goers), and "What We Think of Married Life" (beneath which we see a picture of the parents clowning on their wedding day).

But in the intervening subdivisions — two, four, and six — we are faced with enigmas. In the last one, "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society," Michael, in a swimsuit, and his brother and two sisters are sitting in a rock pool; behind them is a waterfall. Michael, the baby, is slightly apprehensive, while the other children are beaming. What can this have to do with a "Cactus and Succulent Society"? With Ondaatje's increasingly deflective book, it turns out that the waterfall picture synchronizes with late revelations about his father, who not only nourished a garden of rare succulent plants, but had founded a *society* for their continuance. And more importantly, this "protectiveness" extends to the father's conviction about dangers on all sides, so that the unstably situated children, waterfall angular, dominating the picture behind them — his brood, young children in a rush of water — could be called succulents in fact; and they allude to some of the paranoiac sources of the father's behaviour, only now perceived by his son, the author. The photograph of section four is similarly elusive: it shows us a precipitous view, whose relationship to "The Prodigal" we cannot readily construe. What has the picture of a locomotive hugging a mountain curve to do with *prodigality*? The reader initially cannot imagine, but when his chance arrives for finding out, he discovers that British colonialism underwent a shocking foretaste of its disestablishment, thanks to the doings of Michael's father.

In sections two, four, and six, the author buries some devious forms of militancy — his father's and to some degree his own.

Militancy against the West — as it could be called — manifest even after Sri Lankan independence. Not that the title of section two, “Don’t Talk to Me About Matisse,” gives anything away. The accompanying photograph is of a flooded market street. Ceylonese shoppers face the camera, looking something like wild cattle; not belligerent, yet innately formidable. But for them to have the name of Matisse above their heads is puzzling: what can this group with their angular umbrellas (anything but eclipsed with frivolous plumage) have to do with French modernist painting?

The answer lies in age-old plunder, in the grass-roots insurgency that was smashed by the Sri Lankan government in 1971, with the jailing of youthful revolutionaries. In a word, this section is striking out against the country’s continued derivativeness.

Of all things, at the end of the “Matisse” section, we learn that Michael’s father, long dead by 1971, had donated some acres of his Kegalle property for recreational activities of the young and that the insurgents, remembering this, treated the Kegalle house kindly when they came through the town on a raid. They actually interrupted their “official business” of gun-requisition to start up a makeshift game “on the front lawn” (101). This is contemporary history with which section two of the novel comes in contact — *novel*, as I call it, because in this “nonfiction” form, the side event, the lightheartedness of serious (and soon-to-be-defeated) rebels, is cherished above the official mission they were on, the overthrowing of a postcolonial cartel government. That is typical of the incidental flavoring one finds to be such a staple of nonfiction novel form.⁸

In backtracking, as we have done here, to section two of *Running in the Family*, we see this section as a companion piece to “A Fine Romance.” It is here that the author meets Ian Goonetilleke, who wrote a book on the Insurgency. Goonetilleke is a conservator, and it is through him that Ondaatje encounters the poems of his own contemporary Lakdasa. The section takes its title from Lakdasa’s attack on the West and its spurious bequeathal, namely, the superimposition of modern art forms (however good) where modern Western cupidity and rapine made nonsense of the values of true reflective art. Lakdasa would have it remembered that it was on

the current of Western invasion (like riding on poison) that artists were enabled to come à la Gauguin to the exotic islands of the East; but their legacy must be devalued, says Lakdasa, and so he writes:

Don't talk to me about Matisse . . .
 the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio . . .
 Talk to me instead of the culture generally —
 how the murderers were sustained
 by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote
 villages the painters came, and our white-washed
 mud-huts were splattered with gunfire. (85-86)

The fusion of painters with splatterers of gunfire tells the whole story: the predation of the second type implicates the artists too, with their "beauty robbed of savages."

Ondaatje could not meet Lakdasa (who was "two years ahead of [him] at St. Thomas's") because the poet had died in a drowning accident. Ian Goonetilleke gets credit for keeping his memory alive: "a man," Ondaatje says, "who knows history is always present, is the last hour of his friend Lakdasa blacking out in the blue sea at Mount Lavinia" (85). It is the re-visualization of the actual drowning that ranks as history: the retention of a presence. This Ondaatje sees by the close of section two as his own errand. It now becomes his duty to record another drowning, that of his grandmother, affording the book's first climactic moment.

Leslie Mundwiler, in *Michael Ondaatje* (1984), emphasizes how the writer's architectural sense extends to the process of book-making itself, with photographic selection being crucially involved. He quotes Ondaatje as saying, "I find it very difficult to write while a finished book is in the process of being printed," the reason being that "printing itself is an art form and I'm deeply involved in it" (15). Going on to consider the treatment of the "great death" Michael's grandmother sought, Mundwiler categorizes the "three different modes in which the truth-value of Ondaatje's narrative" is premised: oral history, observation language, and imaginary experience — the last of these suggesting a kind of magical realism as a way of reconciling the first two (136). In the schematic I have been setting up, one could say (of the oral tradition) that Ondaatje has been aurally bowled over; that he gets onto the

tactile target with his notebook observations; and that in his climactic excursions — the death of Lalla being the first — the aural and tactile merge; he sifts from the one to achieve (not just report) the other through conjectures only the imagination can make.

When Ondaatje says of his grandmother, who died in floodwaters at Nuwara Eliya, it was “her last perfect journey” (128), we assent because of the way he has shown her as allied with benign forces. *This* particular ride culminates a life which had been borne along in ways naturally sanctioned. She thought the thunder spoke to her on the day she died. She always wore jacaranda blossoms. How fitting that her waterborne ride should end in “the blue arms of a jacaranda tree” (113). But most importantly, in the “Eclipse Plumage” section, we find a woman not meant for the societal roles of mother, grandmother, and householder. For these conformed to “only one muscle in her chameleon nature, which had too many other things to reflect” (124). Here in part is what “Eclipse Plumage” means. Camouflage eclipses the character, as a chameleon’s colour changes eclipse the animal, but not for safety’s sake. The photograph heading section three — Lalla in the midst of twenty people in fancy dress — cries out for artifice, which creates the chance for *play*.

Lalla and her neighbour, Rene de Saram, as young widows ran a dairy farm together. With workdays ending early, they lived for after-hours, combining their talents for getting away with things; they were “so busy,” Lalla said, that they “were always tired” (41). One sees, as nature’s artifices coaxed man to emulation, how there would be danger, exhaustion, even death — all part of the schema, and viewed as disinterestedly good.

“Lalla and Rene,” says Ondaatje, “took the law into their own hands whenever necessary” (115). Lalla even harboured a murderer — one of her dairy hands, who stabbed a man for molesting a servant girl. She perceived this as natural justice, and her dairyman never had to face the law. As for acquisitions, her grandson tells us that property “was there to be taken or given away.” She herself is called “a lyrical socialist” (122). But the key issue is that in floribundant Ceylon this attitude can be seen as legitimate, and maraud though she might (for example, for flowers), she did

not plunder that which did not re-grow itself, and she dispensed goods as quickly as she acquired them. Consequently, as Ondaatje describes her descent on the flood waters, showing her alliance with wild things and fondness for gimmicks and trappings, he imagines it all ceremonially.

On the eve of the flood, she and her brother Vere travelled by motorcycle to Nuwara Eliya. They went up to Moon Plains; flood signs were dismissible at that altitude. They then cycled down to the chalet where they were staying, from which, before daylight, Lalla "stepped out [in the] dark . . . and straight into the floods" (127). All this Vere would have reported. The rest Ondaatje has to imagine. He knows she had a scarf which must have trailed past snags, that she lost her false breast, and that she was a contract-bridge fanatic and carried decks of cards about. And so he visualizes "her handbag bursting open" and "208 cards [moving] ahead of her like a disturbed nest as she was thrown downhill still comfortable and drunk" (127-28). The ceremonial perspective includes animals that plausibly accompanied her: "She overtook Jesus lizards that swam and ran in bursts over the waters . . . nightjars forced to keep awake . . . snake eagles, scimitar-babblers . . . unable to alight on anything except what was moving" (128).

The factual adequacy of this cortege granted Lalla lies not in the premise that each creature was there, but in the fact that the floods would have had to exact these behaviours from animals of the region, that Lalla was knowledgeable of the species of those uplands, and that the course her body took would have brought her over the Nuwara Eliya public gardens — from which she had been banned — till she came to rest against the underwater tree trunk, every propellant and every stoppage having been natural.

If Lalla was banned from public gardens, her son-in-law Mervyn was banned from public trains. The photograph of Lalla and her friends at the start of "Eclipse Plumage" was taken in a garden; as one turns the page to "The Prodigal," there appears the locomotive: it represents Mervyn as well as a different sort of climax from that involving Lalla, which is really a paean to her primordial impulses. The swath she cut may have been unstoppable, but she rarely needed to react to challenge and, as the downhill torrent she

rode indicates, Lalla instinctively *coasted*. Mervyn's story, the counterpart of Lalla's, reaches its climax during wartime, a climax that conversely involves *coast-watching* rather than coasting.

Mervyn's dipsomania, which plagued his wife Doris in their marriage, was not what made him a prodigal to others, alcohol not expressly seen as destructive. His friend Francis was lauded in the 1930s for being the quickest to succumb to alcohol. Manic activity was predictable and tolerated in the burgher set during the pre-war years, whereas the book's next climax requires countermoves based on fear and anxiety. The empire being at war foists this anxiety onto the Ceylonese who did not order the war. During this period, Mervyn becomes madly protective.

The "prodigality" of Michael's father in section four merely amounted to how much license he could take while in the uniform of the Ceylon Light Infantry. Allowed free train passes, he "wore the railway as if it was a public suit of clothes" (148). Before the war, he did once hold up a train, officer's pistol brandished, to enable a crony of his, Arthur, to join him. This action is one of bravado rather than anxiety — yet that same Arthur was once prevailed on to handle Mervyn's "runaway complex" — he had stopped a train and run "naked into the jungle." When Arthur found him in a clearing, Mervyn was holding hostage five "evil" dogs on ropes (181-82). Paranoia has entered the picture, not just bravado.

With the advent of war, Mervyn was put in charge of troop transport and stationed at the northeast railroad terminus of Trincomalee. His "reactivity" became manic — quadruply so when he became drunk. What he thought he was doing, though, was soldiering. Since the Japanese path of attack was from the northeast, he would rush "whole battalions . . . to various points of the harbour or coastline," until, "moved onto a plateau of constant alcohol, [he] had to be hospitalized" (152). We are told how, when put in the custody of John Kotelawala, the future Prime Minister, he secured that officer's gun and took over the train. For this act, he was banned from the railway thenceforward.

But since the future Sir John, who gave up his gun, is a toady of the British, a symbol for the dissolution of the Empire is now incarnated in *Running in the Family*. Mervyn had gotten the

locomotive engineer drunk, and as the train approached Colombo, it only shunted back and forth into the night. Mervyn was convinced he was making crucial war-saving decisions. Meanwhile, in the middle of the train there was a carriage containing senior *British* officers who had turned in early, effectively permitting this man of Tamil-Sinhalese-Dutch blood, wearing their uniform, to best them under their averted eyes. And all those moving through the train complicitly agreed with Mervyn to walk across the top of the British car.

Fellow officers who were trying to subdue him would never have considered waking up the English. They slept on serenely with their rage for order in the tropics, while the train shunted and reversed into the night and there was chaos and hilarity in the parentheses around them. (154)

Lalla's son Noel, Mervyn's brother-in-law, collected him in a jeep outside the railroad bridge to Colombo and delivered him to the hospital. But Noel understood the manic patriotism of Mervyn, who had caused all civilians to detrain that morning, having discovered Japanese bombs on the train. (Anxiety — a reaction to that which threatens — remained the motivation through this whole climax; it constitutes a terrible heritage of colonialism, even though it came from the direction of Imperial Japan.) What Mervyn found in searching the train were round black pots of buffalo curd which the passengers had taken on board. In Noel's custody now,

[Mervyn] said he couldn't leave the bombs on the train. . . . Before [Noel] drove to the hospital, he stopped at the Kelani-Colombo bridge and [Mervyn] dropped all twenty-five pots into the river below, witnessing huge explosions as they smacked into the water. (155)

It is no wonder that the vertiginous picture of a train on a mountain curve heads up the story of the prodigal. The contest — Mervyn against his British superiors, as it were — was fought on tracks crossing midland mountains and level plains, between the northeast and southwest ports, which were never to suffer the invasion Mervyn was protecting against. Michael's father won but his victory lacked the insouciance of Lalla, on her downhill glide, accompanied by flora and fauna. It was a pitched battle; centrifugal activity characterized it — "The train sped through tunnels,

scrubland, careened round sharp bends, and my father's fury imitated it" (153) — with gravitation only entering as the bombs tumbled into the ravine.

A studio shot of Doris and Mervyn Ondaatje on their wedding day introduces section five, "What We Think of Married Life." This reversion to their honeymoon re-establishes buoyancy and centrality. The integral figure here is Doris, as the book leans, at its denouement, toward people's coping out of principle (not reacting out of fury).

The stabilization in Doris's make-up comes from humour; and when an aunt produces the wedding picture, Michael sees in a flash that this bond was the sure one between his parents. For the newlyweds were mugging for the camera, had contorted their features in idiotic grimaces, yet their handsomeness and happiness, along with real composure, shows through. For fourteen years, mostly spent at the tea estate of Kuttapitiya, Doris was able to keep that marriage and eventual family of six together by means of a shared "code of humour" (170). Doris could count on Mervyn, after his drinking bouts, to revert over quite long periods to that code.

But only for a year or so *after* the war could she manage this; and when she finally did leave him she was acting on last-ditch principle. Some of her trial attempts were carried out with such resiliency that calms could ensue from the storms she caused — as when she once announced to Mervyn she would be leaving the tea estate with the children just before midnight. No sooner did he, reactive as ever, throw their car key "into the darkness of a hundred tea bushes" than she marshalled four servants and "with each of us [children] on a pair of shoulders, marched off through . . . dense jungle in utter darkness to a neighbouring home five miles away" (170). Her 1947 divorce showed the same nobleness. She arrived at court in a "stunning white" outfit, "demanding no alimony — nothing for her and nothing for the children. She got a job at The Grand Oriental Hotel, trained herself as a housekeeper-manager and supported [her children] through schools by working in hotels in Ceylon and then England till she died" (172). Theatrical verve and high-heartedness carried her through. She probably understood the source of darkness at the heart of Mervyn (which Michael discovers in this fifth and penultimate section).

The accident that causes the book's final evolution occurs when, in this same tea country, Michael pays a visit to his half-sister Susan. Initially a storm erupts, and the house is even hit by lightning. On the morning after, Michael watches his young relative: "Susan moves up and down halls . . . organizing meals, reorganizing after the chaos" (167) — a sub-theme repeated a dozen pages later. "Chaos and hilarity" may have underpinned the father's runaway-train exploits, but Michael is beginning to sense the painful aftermath of chaos; and as he ponders such ameliorative figures as Shakespeare's Fortinbras and Edgar, he sees himself and his siblings as "remnants" and conservators. "So our job becomes to keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with 'the mercy of distance' write the histories" (179).

But Susan's even graver effect on Michael originates in a genetic insight that she reveals to him. It is one of those nonfiction-novel moments caught on the wing, which can alter perception. Shy and very self-contained, Susan, it dawns on the author, lacks the Doris Gratiaen bloodline, derived in part also from Lalla:

I have been thinking that if she has Ondaatje blood and no Gratiaen blood then obviously it is from my mother's side that we got the sense of the dramatic. . . . The ham in us. While from my father, in spite of his temporary manic public behaviour, we got our sense of secrecy, the desire to be reclusive. (168)

From this single insight into his sister's reserve, he divines a quality unsuspected in Mervyn's nature. Evidence bears him out in the upcoming section, now that he knows the direction to take for understanding his father's character, strangely based on shyness, decorum, "minimalism." The inheritance from Doris and Lalla's side would suggest people who faced life directly — but from Mervyn's, it is the reverse.

All this leads to spiritual aloneness. "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society" becomes an overarching title for Mervyn's secret fosterage, and its first chapter, "Thanikama," defines this aloneness. Ondaatje tries to picture his father in 1947, by which time his mother had broken away and taken a job in a Colombo hotel. This was the year of Lalla's death — which Michael has imagined communally, as a gravitational process. The event that

Michael conjures up for Mervyn is counter-gravitational: an uphill drive to Kegalle, through torques and switchbacks — “He weaved up the . . . U-turns, then into the town” — reminiscent of the lone locomotive curving above a sheer drop and of Lalla riding the motorbike to see the moon. “*Moon Plains*,” pointed up by italics, characterizes Lalla’s ride; “*Moonless*” (188), also italicized, marks Mervyn’s ascent. Michael envisions a swarm of ants carrying off a page of a book as Mervyn padded his way to his upstairs room. Out of league with their workings, Mervyn did not disturb the ants. He pondered the word “duty,” but then took a final drink. “There,” we are told, at last, he “saw the midnight rat” (189). The son imagines this parental failure in duty culminating in the quest for an unnatural thing. All the other stages in this mood piece of the father’s ride upward could be justified as a composite of one of his lonely nights. The bathroom nocturne with the ants may have been an invented symbol, but not the midnight rat. That was an awaited apparition, certain to keep Mervyn destabilized, the product of *delirium tremens*. Ondaatje depicts it as an unnatural need, guaranteed to prolong the state of “Thanikama”; and, despite his other imaginings, for this he has some evidence.

Among the book’s late informants is V. C. de Silva, Mervyn’s doctor, who says of his patient: “When he had the D.T.’s I would give him half a grain of morphine to sedate him” (196). De Silva and a lawyer, Archer Jayawardene, are the last to make revelations in the story (entirely the opposite of the myth-supplying relatives of the start). Ondaatje lets the narrative wind down by way of them, all but giving up the authorial role as he listens to them tell of his father’s last years with his cactuses and succulents and his quiet second family.

The key revelation is the *source* of the paranoia that held the man at bay in his later years. He was “amazingly protective” (194); but the paranoia did not make him this way; it was *vice versa*; even his bouts with alcohol were the result of a craving to protect. When his friend Arthur found him with the dogs in the jungle clearing, the upshot was that Mervyn “had captured all the evil in the regions he had passed through and was holding it” (182). He was no less than a catcher in the rye, a warder-off of evil that threatened others. That is why his last close friend,

Archer, understood his great silences. Mervyn as a young man was driven to take bizarre actions. Thus he was a prodigal. But a catcher in the rye's affliction is virtually a sainted one, and in Mervyn's case he finally went on silent duty, unable to give alarms. "That was his only defense. To keep it within so the fear would not hurt others" (198).

The doctor and the lawyer arranged for a nursing-home stay for Mervyn, from which he returned rather fit. When Archer visited him, he remembered the explanation Mervyn gave him of his approach:

When I saw you come . . . I saw poisonous gas around you. You walked across the lawn to me and you were wading through green gas as if you were crossing a river by foot and you were not aware of it. And I thought if I speak, if I point it out it will destroy you instantly. I was immune. It would not kill me but if I revealed this world to you you would suffer for you had no knowledge, no defenses against it. . . . (200)

Mervyn is lucid in his diagnosis of what he had to hold in mind; and his companions are remarkable in that they kept such exactness in *their* minds, helping the son trace the patterns.

These accounts of what Michael learns about Mervyn from his step-sister Susan, which the lawyer and the doctor later confirm, lead to the book's conclusion. We tend to speculate that these are the last and most crucial fill-ins the author learns in his Sri Lankan visit. That is not necessarily the case, but structurally that is his achievement. In a fine essay on this book, Linda Hutcheon bears out this nonfiction novelist's intention "to represent a reality outside of literature" (an "anti-totalizing gesture," she calls it), accomplished by a "performing narrator, whose act of searching and ordering forms part of the narrative itself" (303). *Searching* takes place in life, *ordering* in the mind. All these placements by Ondaatje, with the six parts yoked in their binary ways, have, like the structuring of most nonfiction novels, urged pairings, reciprocations, because this kind of writer invariably, unlike a journalist, is attempting to meld himself with his material, not report on it.

A form becomes intuited, as it were, from this effort. For this reason, we need to say that the last words are not the ones with which the narrative ends, but the words beyond the text in the

late-placed "Acknowledgments." Michael Ondaatje here names and thanks all his helpers. At this point, he allies himself with his oldest Ceylon informant, Robert Knox, whose *Historical Relation* was a source for Defoe, and whose words he adopts in thanking his friends, "for my papers were promiscuous and out of forme with severall inlargements and untutored narrative" (206).

NOTES

- ¹ MacIntyre describes this special enclave when he recalls the neo-colonial rule Sri Lanka came under, directed by Sinhalese and Tamil public servants. But Ondaatje's forebears, "descendants of the previous Dutch empire," escaped the "humbug" passed along at independence that a benign and provident government would commence. "I at least," says MacIntyre, "cannot escape the feeling that the whole explanation of the fantastic way in which they lived, loved and died lies in their perforce happy suspension outside the deception held by their wealthy Sinhalese and Tamil counterparts" (316).
- ² These photographs are omitted in the paperback edition of *Running in the Family*, published by General Publishing, Toronto, 1984.
- ³ In R. Z. Sheppard's recent *Time* essay on V. S. Naipaul as traveller, we are told that on the "road, Naipaul operates largely through honed instinct, avoiding official sources and searching for the obscure informant and off-center incident" (60). It is the same with Ondaatje, and the point may be elaborated further — the apparent aimlessness, the sudden serendipitous event from which meaning may be forthcoming, constituents of nonfiction novels, are lacking in those travel books whose authors appear manifestly in control of things. The authorial sureness of travelogues like those of Paul Theroux, Peter Matthiessen, Jan Morris, Tom Wolfe keep them aesthetically out of the running, as far as any claim to the novel form goes.

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