

Rites of Passage: Moving Hearts and  
Transforming Memories in  
Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table*

Laura Savu Walker

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**Abstract:** In his latest novel, *The Cat's Table* (2011), Michael Ondaatje continues the project, started in his memoir, *Running in the Family* (1982), of understanding his childhood and mapping a space that he can call home by revisiting, from the remove of decades and another continent, the unforgettable three-week sea voyage from Colombo to London that he undertook in 1954. This essay explores the interplay between two modes of memorial expression—the first “sensory, perceptual, affective, and automatic,” the second “verbal, purposeful, and reflective” (Pillemer 100)—and the implications they carry for the narrator’s self-perception both as a boy and an adult (writer). Contributing to the emotional waters Mynah navigates in the course of his voyage is his fascination with the “ex-centric” (Hutcheon) individuals he encounters onboard the *Oronsay* and whose stories become intertwined with his. Over and against the power relations that structure modern society and that too often bespeak a “cold-blooded self-sufficiency” (*Cat's Table* 257), Ondaatje pits those intimate bonds forged across differences of age, class, gender, race, and nationality that challenge the autonomy of the feeling self by foregrounding its deeply intersubjective nature.

**Keywords:** Michael Ondaatje, *The Cat's Table*, affect, exile, imagination, memory, other, self

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Where is the intimate and truthful in all this?

Michael Ondaatje, *Running In The Family* 54

We all have an old knot in the heart we wish to loosen and untie.

Michael Ondaatje, *The Cat's Table* 145

In *The Promise of Memory: Childhood Recollection and Its Objects in Literary Modernism* (2011), Lorna Martens puts forth a provocative claim about the waning need for individual memory in our century: “It has been predicted that the twenty-first century will be the Bad Memory Century on account of the frenetic, stressful quality of life, the acceleration of information, and the resultant failure of people to retain things they experience” (187). She adds that a great deal of recent memory theory has focused on trauma and cultural or collective memory at the expense of individual memory, which is arguably “no longer cultivated” let alone appreciated (187). Still, autobiographical memories continue to fulfill a “desire to anchor one’s identity” which manifests itself in “the quest for ancestors, family history and ‘roots’” (188). It is precisely this desire “to trace the maze of relationships” in his ancestry that motivated Michael Ondaatje’s return visits to his native Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980 (*Running In The Family* 25). Ondaatje, the son of a Ceylonese family of Dutch-Tamil-Sinhalese origin who was displaced to London at the age of eleven, describes both trips as central to helping him “recreate” the era of his parents that he knew mainly from stories he heard as a child (*Running* 205).

In Sri Lanka, he, his sister, and Aunt Phyllis “trade anecdotes and faint memories, trying to swell them with the order of dates and asides, interlocking them all as if assembling the hull of a ship” (26). Since “[n]o story is every told just once” (26), telling his own version of his family (hi)story requires that Ondaatje recognize the impossibility of capturing an objective reality. Moreover, his penchant for “the well-told lie” (206), along with his double perspective as both insider and outsider to his childhood homeland, makes Ondaatje’s task of remembering inseparable from that of recreating.<sup>1</sup> Realizing, in his mid-thirties, that he “had slipped past a childhood [he] had ignored and not understood” (22), Ondaatje is reminded of a quotation from Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*: “[S]he had been forced into prudence in her youth—she learned *romance* as

she grew older—the natural sequence of an unnatural beginning” (qtd. in Ondaatje, *Running* 22; emphasis added).

In his latest novel, *The Cat's Table* (2011), Ondaatje continues the project of understanding his childhood and mapping a space that he can call home by revisiting, from the remove of decades and another continent, the unforgettable three-week sea voyage from Colombo to London that he undertook in 1954. While Ondaatje concedes in an author's note that the novel “uses the colouring and locations of memoir and autobiography,” he insists that the story is “fictional—from the captain and crew and all its passengers on the boat down to the narrator” (who shares his first name) and that the ship in the novel, the *Oronsay*, is “an imagined rendering” (*Cat's* 267). At the same time, Ondaatje considers *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* a “personal book” even though “it is set in a different country and it's about an absolute stranger to me. I found I could both reveal and discover myself more through being given a costume. I could be more honest about the things I wanted to talk about or write” (qtd. in Spinks 6). Fiction, Ondaatje believes, can deliver truths that might otherwise go unnoticed or unacknowledged. Or, as he implies in *Running in the Family*, the imagination can make up for the limitations of history and gossip, both of which see individuals only in the context of “swirling social tides” (54).

As I intend to show, the truths Ondaatje uncovers in *The Cat's Table* have less to do with historical accuracy and more with the psychic reality and emotional resonance of those childhood impressions that the author recalls, invents, or romanticizes.<sup>2</sup> The identity that emerges is constructed in the gap between the fictionalization and reality of his existence, where “the intimate and truthful” also reside. This gap is signaled in the brief section that prefaces the novel; like the epigraph to *Running in the Family*, it is written in the third person, but given the different trajectory of the journey—from Asia to England and eventually Canada—this distancing technique is reinforced by Ondaatje's use of the past, rather than present, tense: “He was eleven years old that night when, green as he could be about the world, he climbed aboard the first and only ship of his life” (*Cat's* 3–4). Trying “to imagine who the boy on the ship was,” Ondaatje writes: “Perhaps a sense of self is not even there

in his nervous stillness in the narrow bunk, in this grasshopper or little cricket, as if he has been smuggled away accidentally, with no knowledge of the act, into the future" (4). As will be seen, Ondaatje resists the tendency to retroactively construct an idealized self, for the narrator's adult perspective bespeaks not only a nostalgia shot through with pathos and sometimes irony, but also historical and cultural awareness.

Ondaatje's fictionalized account of his sea voyage across the waterways of the East captures those "personal event memories" that, according to cognitive, clinical, and developmental psychologists, involve two levels of representation, image and narrative, which coexist throughout one's life. Whereas the first is "sensory, perceptual, affective, and automatic," the second is verbal, purposeful, and reflective (Pillemer 100). This essay explores the ways in which these modes of memorial expression interact in *The Cat's Table* and the implications they carry for the narrator's self-perception both as a boy and an adult (writer). "Some events," he points out, "take a lifetime to reveal their damage and influence" (143), and desires are "fed by an earlier time" (145). Evoking, however distantly, various milestones in Ondaatje's own life—from his parents' divorce to his experiences of exile, displacement, and loss—*The Cat's Table* weaves threads of memory, imagination, history, and fiction that trigger a reassessment of his sense of belonging and a realignment of his affections and affinities. More specifically, the pathways of feeling that course through the narrator also link him to others brought close to him not so much by right of birth as by accidental encounter. The other, Ondaatje invites us to imagine, could be "as accidental as a number plucked from a pail who would then be an intimate partner for the next decade, even for the rest of our lives" (264).

Thus, contributing to the emotional waters that Michael (nicknamed Mynah) navigates in the course of his voyage are his interactions with the rich assortment of people he encounters onboard the *Oronsay*. Both strange and familiar in their otherness, he sees them with curiosity, if not fascination, and their stories become intimately entwined with Mynah's. Since most of these colorful characters are adults, they guide Mynah from his past to his future self, and this transformation is compared, as in *Running in the Family*, to the dismantling and reassembling of a ship:

“You take that older life and you link it to a stranger” (*Cat’s* 72). In the process, the “original circle of love” (*Running* 25) expands beyond that of family: “It would always be strangers like them, at the various cat’s tables of my life, who would alter me” (*Cat’s* 196). Over and against the power relations that structure modern society and too often bespeak a “cold-blooded self-sufficiency” (257), Ondaatje pits those intimate bonds forged across differences of age, class, gender, race, and nationality that challenge the autonomy of the feeling self by foregrounding its deeply intersubjective nature.

Beautifully crafted and acutely felt, *The Cat’s Table* bears out the truth of a statement made by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit: “To aestheticize our relation to the past is not to remove ourselves irresponsibly from it, but rather to live in proximity to it” (67). The past has not really passed for the adult Michael who looks back on his youth and recreates it as art, convinced, with Wordsworth, that the child is “father of the man”: “Sometimes we find our true and inherent selves during youth. It is a recognition of something that at first is small within us, that we will grow into somehow” (Ondaatje, *Cat’s* 147). “My shipboard name,” he continues, “was Mynah. Almost my name but with a step into the air and a glimpse of some extra thing” conferred by that inventive faculty, the imagination (147). Mynah’s coming-of-age tale is a way of making sense of the past by imaginatively reconstructing it as well as a way of projecting himself into the future: “There is a story, always ahead of you. Barely existing. Only gradually do you attach yourself to it and feel it. You discover the carapace that will contain and test your character. You find in this way the path of your life” (181). The novel, then, captures a unique experience of multidimensional time in which past, present, future, and even unrealized possibilities co-exist simultaneously. Once Mynah climbs the gangplank onto the *Oronsay* and finds himself “for the first time by necessity in close quarters with adults” (27), he reflects: “I do not feel protected. I feel wounded in advance with possibilities” (28). The ocean, with its mysterious depths, symbolizes the complexities of the adult world, which both fascinate and terrify him, while the ship itself functions as a metaphor for memory or consciousness: “And some events sank in only much later” (199). Consequently, the first image of

his youth, which he has held on to for years, is that of “someone startled, half formed, who had not become anything or anyone yet” (84).

Within the larger context of the novel, the ocean liner can also be interpreted as a microcosm of the world beyond it—a site for mutually transformative cultural encounters that break down, without totally dissolving, the dualities of self/other, inside/outside, familiar/strange, and center/periphery. Its fixed points of departure and arrival notwithstanding, the sea voyage allows the passengers to exist for each other while in motion which, on a deeper level, becomes a metaphor for the contingent, provisional nature of the diasporic subject’s experience. “The past is still, for us, a place that is not safely settled,” Ondaatje writes in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Canadian Short-Stories* (1990). By the same token, whatever identity his character persona can claim it is only tenuously anchored in a constantly shifting ground, “along the borders of fact and fiction” (Leon 8), which Ondaatje aptly calls the “evolving map” of his world (*Cat’s* 26).

Much like *Running in the Family*, *The Cat’s Table* explores affective and aesthetic responses to the experience of displacement. Attachments fostered by geographic mobility are juxtaposed with a longing for home, which is identified in the novel as the locus of a “grandeur” that Mynah’s memory, colored by the imagination, seeks to recover by conjuring a childlike way of seeing that is imaginative and affectively intense: “The three weeks of the sea journey, as I originally remembered it, were placid. It is only now, years later, having been prompted by my children to describe the voyage, that it becomes an adventure, when seen through their eyes, even something significant in a life. A rite of passage. But the truth is, grandeur had not been added to my life but had been taken away” (53). Since adulthood presupposes its own form of exile in time rather than space, memory alone cannot satisfy the adult’s desire for meaning; it is the imaginative eye, then, that supplies what is no longer there, the grandeur that was taken away when Mynah left his homeland. Nevertheless, childhood retains a vestigial romantic significance without being sentimentalized. Recalling his parents’ divorce, Mynah cannot tell how much its “curse” affected him at the time: “A boy goes out the door in morning and will continue to be busy in the evolving map of his

world.” The next sentence registers his adult perspective: “But it was a precarious youth” (26).<sup>3</sup>

To a large extent, the grandeur of the world that Mynah has left behind resides in the abundance of sights, smells, and sounds that surrounded him in Colombo. The stern city of Aden, where the *Oronsay* stops before entering the Red Sea, contrasts significantly with “the lush chaos of Colombo’s Pettah market, that smell of sarong cloth being unfolded and cut (a throat-catching odor), and mangosteens, and rain-soaked paperbacks in a bookstall” (103). It is telling that the two people who first sensitized Mynah to the vital energies that run through all things were not his parents—who were “either scattered or unreliable” (13)—but rather two natives: his ayah Narayan and the family’s cook Gunepala. Regarding them as “my essential and affectionate guides during that unformed stage of my life,” Mynah notes that “in some way they made me question the world I supposedly belonged to. They opened doors for me into another world. When I left the country at the age of eleven, I grieved most over losing them” (55). Gunepala, in particular, was “aware of a universe invisible to the rest of us. As he cooked he whistled a variety of birdcalls rarely heard in the city, familiar to him from his childhood” (55).

At the same time, for Ondaatje, as in the case of other transplanted writers, the “imaginary homeland,” to borrow Salman Rushdie’s term, is no longer a stable point of reference or cannot be easily reconciled with the actual homeland. Thus the narrative also evokes a sense of loss—the “wound” which, according to Julia Kristeva, causes the exile to wander (Guneratne) and for which it is both lament and compensation: “We all have an old knot in the heart we wish to loosen and untie” (Ondaatje, *Cat’s* 145). Arun Mukherjee argues, however, that Ondaatje ignores the “trauma of uprooting” and the “need for redefinition in a new context,” two “subjects that preoccupy so many immigrant writers” (qtd. in Heble). In response, Ajay Heble draws on Linda Hutcheon’s discussion of “ex-centricity” to highlight the “ex-centric” dimensions of Ondaatje’s family memoir, seizing on it as “an imaginative act of cultural recuperation” (Heble).<sup>4</sup> When “the center no longer completely holds,” Hutcheon points out, “the ‘marginal’ . . . the ‘ex-centric’ (be it

in class, race, gender, or sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance” (xi).

There is, as I demonstrate below, another way of responding to Mukherjee’s claim that Ondaatje ignores the problem of otherness, but here suffice it to say that Hutcheon’s definition of the ex-centric plays out in *The Cat’s Table* both literally and figuratively. The most obvious visual representation of ex-centricity is the table of the title, located farthest from the place where the Captain and the more select passengers take their meals, “constantly toasting one another’s significance” (Ondaatje, *Cat’s* 75). Mynah and the two boys he befriends, the calm, contemplative Ramadhin and the free-spirited, more adventurous Cassius, are relegated to this so-called “cat’s table” along with the ship’s outcasts. “We’re in the *least* privileged place” (8; emphasis in original), Miss Lasqueti remarks, but this power imbalance turns out to be a matter of perspective that produces new ways of engaging with a world full of tensions and contradictions. Put differently, the novel celebrates those special moments, Wordsworth’s “spots of time,” in which the narrator’s youthful self is not only intensely aware of but also open to *experience as a privilege*. Human subjectivity, as Ondaatje conceives of it, is immersed in the world, rather than separate from and superior to it. Hence “the small lesson” Mynah learns on his journey: “What is interesting and important happens mostly in secret, in places where there is no power” (75). This observation is only partly true, qualified by another lesson—imparted later by Miss Lasqueti—about the imagination as a function of human expressiveness and mastery. “This is where power is, you see. Always. The underneath” (221), her Italian lover had told her, referencing the Flemish tapestries in his collection. Ironically, art was a realm he “could never enter, with all his power and wealth” (231).

In this sense, the layers of authority on the ship, as seen, for instance, through the eyes of an iconoclast like Cassius, are not confined to class distinctions or conventional identity markers (38). Cassius, in fact, relishes his seemingly insignificant status precisely because it renders him invisible to figures of authority, “officials such as the Purser and the Head Steward, and the Captain” (10). Mynah attributes his own “distrust of the authority and prestige of all Head Tables” to the Captain’s mocking



attitude toward his Asian cargo (195). Together, the three boys seize the “chance to escape all order” (11) by obeying only one rule: to do “at least one thing that was forbidden” every day (25). As they devise or discover new ways to assert themselves in the ambiguous space of power on the *Oronsay* their identities become open, fluid, and relational.

Mynah and his friends, who embody a potent mix of innocence, intelligence, and youthful exuberance, are “learning about adults simply by being in their midst” (74). Rising before dawn eager to penetrate the secrets of the adult world, the boys roam every corner of the ship, “bursting all over the place like freed mercury” (79). They hide in the shadows of the deck to spy on the guests, eavesdrop from lifeboats, and imagine “complex plots and stories,” sometimes by adding to the “bare bones of an adventure Mr. Fonseka” (147), the literature teacher, “had left unfinished” (58). In doing so, they heed the advice of Mr. Mazappa and Miss Lasqueti to keep their eyes and ears open, for the voyage is “a great education” (9). To this end, Mynah fills his old St. Thomas’ College examination booklet with things that he sees or hears, while his more formal education consists of tea-time lectures on subjects such as the Crusades and the history and significance of the Suez Canal.

At the same time, the boys ritualize their being together outside the strictures of social conventions and the adult world and make the ship their home away from home, driven by currents deeper than consciousness. Mynah ultimately learns that one “must never feel unimportant in the scheme of things,” though he cannot recall whether Mr. Mazappa or Miss Lasqueti told him that, “for by the end of the journey their opinions had dove-tailed. Looking back, I am not sure who gave me what pieces of advice, or befriended us, or deceived us” (199). In fact, Mynah had already been “trained into cautiousness” (12) at the Ceylonese boarding school he attended with Cassius, where “a fear of punishment created a skill in lying” (12–13) and taught him “to withhold small pertinent truths” (13). As Mynah recalls, “the three of us had no real interest in one another’s background,” be it Ramadhin’s asthmatic condition, Cassius’ reputation as a troublemaker at school, or his own relationship with his unofficial guardian, Flavia Prins, who travels in First Class. The underlying assumption is that such distinctive facts per-

taining to the boys' personal histories—much like the identity markers of class, gender, and race—can only circumscribe the full expression of their individuality. Thus the boys set out to negotiate the boundaries of their identities apart from their cultural *roots* and through the alternative *routes* they choose to follow during and after the voyage. Again, it is the other artist-figure in the novel, Cassius, who recommends that they keep their backgrounds to themselves, and although this strong sense of self-determination can sometimes border on the “cold-blooded self-sufficiency” Ondaatje condemns throughout as a failure of the sympathetic imagination, Mynah comes to understand that there was “a gentle democracy” in Cassius, who “was only against the power of Caesar” (41).

In teaching his friends “to interpret anything that took place around [them] with a quizzical or upside-down perspective” (40–41), Cassius stresses the importance of looking at the world through different lenses than those provided by their particular socio-cultural background. Hence the boys' reactions to a prisoner being taken to face trial in England for allegedly killing an English judge. Late each evening, they slip out of their cabin to steal glimpses of the prisoner who is exercised in shackles on the deck. Though chained and barefoot, he “looked powerful, self-contained” to the boys, for whom “the very idea of a *chain*, of being *contained*, was like suffocation” (14; emphasis in original). Just as in Ondaatje's vision, the boys are anything but passive and obedient and so their imaginations endow the prisoner with agency and choices. They expect to see him “leap over the railing along with the guard who was chained to him, into the dark sea” (14–15). They are “never sure” of what it is they witness and their minds “half gra[b] the rigging of adult possibility” (52). In the absence of any “secure map” that Mynah can rely on he “reinvent[s]” himself

in this seemingly imaginary world, with its ship dismantlers and tailors, and adult passengers who, during the evening celebrations, staggered around in giant animal heads, some of the women dancing with skirts barely there, as the ship's orchestra, including Mr. Mazappa, played on the bandstand all wearing outfits of exactly the same plum color. (13)

The richness of these impressions signals the excess that permeates much of Ondaatje's fiction and characterizes both magical realism and postcolonial writing (Heble). In *The Cat's Table* such impressions are often products of a fervent imagination, as when the boys discover the background of Sir Hector de Silva's fateful journey; they believe he is dying from a curse put on him by a Buddhist priest. Thrilled by the "surreal revelations" about this prominent passenger, the boys "gathered every fragment" of his story and "remained hungry for more" (69). "Whether we had witnessed this or not, the scene remained indelible in our minds," Mynah notes, trying to "recall, or to imagine at least," the millionaire's ailing body being carried on a stretcher up the gangplank in Colombo. Even more importantly, "[f]or the first time in [their] lives [the boys] were interested in the fate of the upper classes, . . . how those with real power progressed or failed in the world" (69). In Sir Hector's case, the agent of fate is a carpet salesman's dog that Ramadhin smuggles onto the ship in Aden; the dog later bolts from their cabin, runs into Sir Hector's stateroom, and bites down into his throat, never to be seen again (107–09).

Filtered through Mynah's always limited interpretive consciousness, the boys' shipboard adventures are recorded in a series of imagistic "short takes" similar to those that structure Ondaatje's first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), and *Running in the Family*. They emphasize "the tension between biographical narrative and the experience of lived history" (Spinks 7) or, in David B. Pillemer's terms, between the "story-like, verbal narrative" and "the phenomenal experience at the time of a momentous occurrence" (52–53). The episodic structure and rhythmic unfolding of the narrative, with its constant vacillation between past and present, flashback and foreshadowing, reflect Ondaatje's enduring interests in both (jazz) music and film. Conveyed in rich sensory detail, echoes of sound, situation, gesture, or story resonate through the years of Mynah's life in England and Canada and underscore the importance of perspective, in time as well as space: "Over the years, confusing fragments, lost corners of stories, have a clearer meaning when seen in a new light, a different place" (Ondaatje, *Cat's* 253). One personal event memory that gains clarity and contour long after the fact concerns

Mynah's embroilment with a burglar known as "Baron C" who could be "English or one of those mongrels who have assumed the panache of aristocracy" (85). The Baron would slather the boy's athletic body with motor oil the better to slide between the bars on stateroom windows and open their doors to the gentlemanly thief (84). In retrospect, Mynah understands that the experience prepared him for becoming a writer, in that "what the Baron gave me was another self . . . a little escape into being somebody else, a door I would postpone opening for some years, at least until I was beyond my teens" (84). The resonant door imagery suggests that the writer risks a great deal by venturing into forbidden places, or by following a traumatic story such as Miss Lasqueti's, to its hidden yet life-altering scars.

By framing the novel around the individuals at the Cat's Table, Ondaatje grants them a privileged status that has less to do with outward distinctions or material possessions and more with the stories—or, better said, the store-house of memories, dreams, and desires—that the characters carry inside them. Take, for instance, Mr. Mazappa, also known as Sunny Meadows, a jazz pianist who entertains the boys with so many songs and tales of his life that "truth and fiction merged too closely for us to distinguish one from the other" (29). Another interesting figure is Mr. Daniels, a dope-smoking botanist who tends a secret garden in the bowels of the ship and teaches the boys about poisonous plants. Later, the "clandestine family" (155) from the Cat's Table will dine there under swaying lamps as mist and strains of gramophone music float gently down upon them. The garden, a space of solidarity and sensuality, becomes a suggestive visual representation of "the underneath"—the realm of what is concealed, yet deeply felt and imagined—where a different kind of power resides.

In his review of the novel, Philip Hensher congratulates Ondaatje "on writing a book about a Fifties liner which contains almost none of the tired pieties about class distinction, dressing-for-dinner, racial prejudice and musings about the post-colonial condition." As he notes, "[r]ather than providing a class analysis, Ondaatje's concern is how adults behave and misbehave in the presence of children; anarchy and gross misbehaviour—adultery, drug-smoking, burglary and even murder are

never very far away from the beady eyes of the juveniles.” Still, the novel is informed, albeit not solely governed by, issues of class and bigotry, as well as by the “jingoism and cowardice” dramatized in the film *Four Feathers*, the boys’ first film, which they watch four days before landing in Aden. In retrospect, the film strikes Mynah as a “somewhat tactless” attempt to “compare the brutality of Arabia with a civilized though foolish England” (Ondaatje, *Cat’s* 87). Because the movie is screened separately but not simultaneously for the ship’s different classes, the Cat’s Table denizens erupt in cheers as the First Class passengers witness the brutal massacre of English troops (88). Before the movie is over, however, a violent storm sweeps over the ship and Mynah does not learn the end of the story until he later reads A. E. W. Mason’s novel. Once they escape the turmoil of the ocean, they land in the real Arabia (88).

From a phenomenological point of view, the juxtaposition of the historical-cultural drama unfolding on the screen and the additional subplot provided by the fury of a gale in the Arabian Sea illustrates the extent to which Ondaatje’s work “challenges us simultaneously to think ourselves in and out of history and, by so doing, to expand our sense of what a historical ‘event’ might be” (Spinks 19).<sup>5</sup> More pointedly, Ondaatje’s project is not limited to “a negotiation between already determined poles of distinction like the Same and the Other, centre and margin, or East and West” (18). For him, “another experience of life is possible: a singular experience in which our perception of life is not specific to external criteria or imposed frames of reference” but open to the “infinitely complex and intense flux that flows through and beyond us” (18). As already touched on, this way of seeing and relating to the world is the catalyst for the “grandeur” that Mynah tries to recapture throughout the novel. Put differently, Ondaatje taps into the realm of affect, defined by Brian Massumi as an exchange of intensities among distinct bodies as well as between bodies and the world (24). Pillemer’s distinction between the sensory and verbal layers of memory thus roughly corresponds to that between affect and emotion; unlike affect, which is pre-subjective or impersonal and encompasses a fluid set of responses, emotion is a “qualified intensity” that is “owned and recognized” by an individual conscious subject and therefore subject to narration (Massumi 28). In much the

same way, “[t]he verbal narrative is constructed or created from the underlying imagistic trace” (Pillemer 100).

Ondaatje’s recreation of the child’s perspective and sensibility foregrounds emotionally charged memories of places, people, and events which, in their narrative form, have a core imagistic component. About Ramadhin, for instance, Mynah writes that he possesses “not even one blurred snapshot” of his time on the *Oronsay* to tell him what his friend looked like during that journey. All he has are “*images* from [his] memory” (Ondaatje, *Cat’s* 79; emphasis added). One such image is of Ramadhin standing for hours at the prow, “his gaze locked into the distance, hypnotized by something out there or held in some thought” (78). On the *Oronsay*, the borders between body and world become relatively permeable to allow for an alternative, almost mystical apprehension of reality, as when, floating on their backs and looking at the stars, the boys feel they are “swimming in the sea, rather than a walled-in pool in the middle of the ocean” (19). The “stricter confines” of the Red Sea, on the other hand, do not sit well with the boys, prefiguring adult anxieties and nostalgias that surface in the wake of the millionaire’s gruesome end: “Perhaps emotionally we felt landlocked after all the freedom that came with the wilder oceans we had crossed. And Death existed after all, or the more complicated idea of Fate. Doors were closing, it seemed, on our adventurous travels” (110). Ondaatje links the child self’s coming to consciousness with awareness of time and mortality.

Since the boys’ activities “had no possibility of permanence” (80), their discoveries, whether about themselves or the other passengers, are thoroughly tentative, sets of possibilities rather than unalterable facts: “But what did we really know, even of one another? We never thought of a future. . . . And how long would each of us mean something to the others?” (146). In England, Mynah loses track of Cassius but follows his remarkable artistic career, which reveals that they are both in the business of turning memories into aesthetic objects—he as a writer and Cassius as a painter. The latter’s paintings, on display at a London art gallery that Mynah visits in his late twenties, record their “most vivid memory of the journey” (128), the night the ship paused at the Suez Canal en route to Port Said and the boys “hung over the railings, gulp-

ing in air, taking it in" (127). That night, as "a constantly changing world slid past our ship, the darkness various and full of suggestion" (128), Mynah came to "understand that small and important thing, that our lives could be large with interesting strangers who would pass us without any personal involvement" (128–29). What makes these strangers interesting has partly to do with the fact that they are different, and not subsumed within the recognition of the same. This recognition of and respect for the other's radical otherness lies at the heart of the ethical vision that runs throughout Ondaatje's work—a vision that, it bears repeating, privileges flow over form, change over mere repetition, and becoming over being. In his friend's paintings, Mynah again finds "the exact angle of vision Cassius and I had that night," looking down at the men "working in those pods of light" (132). He instantly feels himself "back on the railing, watching, which was where Cassius was emotionally, when he was doing these paintings. Goodbye, we were saying to all of them. Goodbye" (132). By the same token, the act of painting those "interesting strangers" (129) with whom both Mynah and Cassius felt "oddly aligned" (131) is Cassius' way of saying "[h]ello" to his friend, "a sort of private message between [the] two men in place of an adult meeting" (Hensher).

It is Ramadhin with whom Mynah keeps in touch during his teenage years in London, going to movies with him and his more spirited sister, Massi. Ramadhin's modest, quiet home becomes Mynah's "sanctuary" (136), and in marrying Ramadhin's sister Mynah sought to "stay close to a community from childhood I felt safe in, and, I realized, still wished for" (143). He reflects that "[t]he weight of the tradition of exiles had fallen over us" (145), identifying himself more with Ramadhin, who is "haunted by the persistent ghost of an earlier place" (139), than with Massi. Though she arrives in England a year later than Mynah and Ramadhin, Massi adapts easily to "a city that was not quite ours and where we were made to feel it was not quite ours" (137). Mynah believes that "[e]very immigrant family has someone who does not belong in the new country they have come to" (139) and in the case of Ramadhin's family, that person is Ramadhin himself, who never gives up the past his family brought to England (135).

Nor can Mynah give up the past he shared with Ramadhin, especially when, after not seeing him for eight years, he flies from Canada to London to attend his funeral: “How much more of Ramadhin did I take into myself, just with memory, after we stopped seeing each other?” (141). Ramadhin’s death from his “unsafe heart” (201) leaves a void that Mynah can hope to fill only by opening up his own, until now too “cautious,” heart (203): “[M]aybe it was this new affection between us that so quickly erased the years, but he came right into my heart and I started crying. Everything about him was suddenly there in me” (141). He comes to realize that “[w]e are expanded by tears,” “not reduced by them” (142). The empathetic expansion fostered by this cathartic episode—which brings to mind the last scene in Saul Bellow’s novel *Seize the Day*—involves his recognition that he “had not really thought of Ramadhin as someone I had been close to for some time. In our twenties we were busy becoming other people” (141). Once the loss of Ramadhin breaks down the emotional wall Mynah has erected around himself, he remembers their relationship afresh: “I must have begun remembering, replaying all the little fragments of him that revealed the concern he had for me” (141).

In his family memoir, Ondaatje expresses a wish to learn more about the “closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other’s presence” (*Running* 54). As he sees it, a personal relationship involves an “exchange of gift and character” whereby one person takes on and recognizes in oneself the smile of a lover (*Running* 54). One such person, in *The Cat’s Table*, is Mynah’s seventeen-year-old cousin Emily, with whom he shares a passion for music and in whose presence he feels the first stirrings of sexual desire. This in turn compels him to look at himself with “a distant eye” (*Cat’s* 115), aware of the absolute otherness of other people, including his mother. When, after a three-year separation, he and his mother meet on the docks at Tilbury, she has “already become ‘another,’ a stranger whose fold I would cautiously enter” (114). Likewise, he recalls that at times Emily had “an unreachable face, but when she returned to you, it was a gift” (117). This dynamic of intimacy and distance carries over into Mynah’s other personal relationships: “I must have been taught, or learned early in life, to break easily from intimacy” (203).<sup>6</sup>



In *The Cat's Table*, Ondaatje reflects on the limits of knowing and representing the other at every turn and recognizes this inscrutability as “a first principle of art” (208). He even alludes to a lecture by the Belgian filmmaker Luc Dardenne who spoke of how “viewers of his films should not assume everything about the characters” (208). “Does knowing give me permission to assume I understand most things about him?” Mynah asks himself at Ramadhin’s funeral (147). Even as he comes to see “the various milestones in my life that connected the two of us,” the Ramadhin he needs to understand fully in order to bury is “not catchable” (147). His memory of Ramadhin, whose asthmatic condition becomes obvious to Mynah during their teenage years in London, overlaps with that of another friend, “whose heart ‘moved’ after a traumatic incident that he refused to recognize,” this “physical shift” being discovered only a few years later, during a check-up for a minor ailment (257). As he recalls this, Mynah cannot help wondering

how many of us have a moved heart that shies away to a different angle, a millimeter or even less from the place where it first existed, some repositioning unknown to us. Emily. Myself. Cassius. How have our emotions glanced off rather than directly faced others ever since, resulting in simple unawareness or in some cases in cold-blooded self-sufficiency that is damaging to us? (257–58)

This crucial insight—that “cold-blooded self-sufficiency” can indeed be “damaging” to both self and others—is borne out by the story of “the most enigmatic and surprising one” among the boys’ companions, Perinetta Lasqueti (168). A woman who “had often been seen in the corridors of Whitehall” (75), Miss Lasqueti keeps a cage of pigeons and hides them in the pockets of her jacket; that she also hides a pistol is “not a fully believed piece of grit” in the boys’ initial portrait of her (211). She is often seen drawing sketches or reading crime thrillers, which she flings overboard when they bore her (169). She remains a source of mystery for most of the journey, “the only one from the Cat’s Table who was able to force us out of ourselves in order to imagine another’s life” (74). As with the prisoner, the boys’ sympathetic imagination is fueled by the

sense that “there was an unfairness in someone else’s life” (74) and more to Miss Lasqueti than meets the eye.

The mystery deepens when Miss Lasqueti invites Mynah to her cabin, where he is surprised to find Emily, as well as another figure that seems to beckon to him—a mannequin-like statue with a scar on its alabaster belly. “See this? You get over such things in time. You learn to alter your life” (210), Miss Lasqueti tells him, and the meaning of these sentences becomes clear to Mynah much later when he reads a letter from Miss Lasqueti addressed to Emily. As he learns, the latter seemed to have been caught in a situation similar to one Miss Lasqueti experienced in her twenties when she fell prey to the sexual advances of an art collector named Horace for whom she worked in Italy. “I thought I was being loved because I was being altered,” Miss Lasqueti recalls, hinting at a relationship that involved “the annihilation of the weaker part” (226). For a while, she was that “weaker part,” but after exposing her lover for what he was, “a bully who hid in his courteous power and authority,” she saved herself—or, as she puts it, “I became myself”—by walking out on him (229). When Miss Lasqueti invited Emily to her cabin that afternoon, she would have liked to share this story with her as she feared that Emily was “under [the] spell” of the seemingly dangerous Sunil from the Jankla troupe and needed protecting: “I thought I could save you” (231). Before long, Miss Lasqueti once again finds herself “caught up in something fraught and dangerous” (216).

Two years after Mynah received the correspondence from Miss Lasqueti and fifteen years since he last saw Emily, the latter calls him to meet her at her cabin on Bowen Island, British Columbia, where she retreated after her divorce three years earlier. “She had journeyed all these years to another island. But an island can imprison you as well as protect you” (254) the adult Mynah reflects, while also agreeing with Emily that they do not belong anywhere (258). If, as David Malouf observes, “only with what we have fully comprehended and feel at home in do we feel safe” (89), then Emily is right to think that Mynah cannot “love [her] into safety” (250). Emily opens up to him about her marriage—“too cold of a building to live in for the rest of her life” (Ondaatje, *Cat’s* 246)—but is more hesitant when Mynah asks her about her role in the

events that led up to the prisoner's escape from the *Oronsay*. During the voyage, Mynah sensed that part of Emily's "disguised life" (118) had to do with the deaf girl Asuntha, for every time the two were together, whispering and holding hands, Emily, otherwise "the glittering public beauty," struck Mynah as "a very different soul" (77). Asuntha "appeared to be the most powerless passenger on the ship" (76) but, like Miss Lasqueti, turned out to possess an inner strength, a "self-sufficient nature" that was not, however, "cold-blooded" (181).

The novel builds to a climax as Mynah recounts how both Emily and Miss Lasqueti helped Sunil and Asuntha free the latter's father, Niemeyer, one night when the ship was still in the Mediterranean. Sunil (or possibly Emily) stabbed the Ceylonese police officer, Perera, to death, and soon after Miss Lasqueti shot the English guard, Giggs. The dramatic turn of events made it possible for the prisoner and his daughter to jump into the sea (242). Clenched in Asuntha's teeth was the key that had been taken from Perera, and we are left to imagine that they might swim to safety or "somewhere . . . to make a new life" (260), just as Mynah, Cassius, and Ramadhin might when they make their own landfall. For the diasporic subject, Ondaatje implies, the place of arrival is bound to become yet another point of departure and set off yet another rite of passage.

As Mynah looks in silence at the "yellow glow" over Colombo in the novel's opening scene, he feels that already "there was a wall between him and what took place there" and that "nothing ahead of him existed" except "the dark harbor and the sea" (4). At the end of the novel, when he walks down the gangplank in Tilbury, new uncertainties and possibilities await him and he embraces them as vital to his self-development. Recalling their meeting from his mother's perspective, he imagines her "searching for the son she left in Colombo four or five years earlier" with no sure memory of what he looks like: "It must have been a hopeful or terrible moment, full of possibilities. How would he behave towards her? A courteous but private boy, or someone eager for affection" (264). As it happens, Mynah recognizes his mother's face and puts his arms around her, no longer worried of being lost forever but feeling cold, which emphasizes his longing for affection. As his mother holds him

tightly against herself, Mynah sees part of the world to the side of her, the world in which, after he loses sight of Cassius and Ramadhin, Emily too disappears to complete her last two years of schooling. It is only fitting that the final memory-image the narrator records is that of his cousin waving at him because she is “the one he has never been able to let go of . . . in spite of disappearances and separations” (256). As attuned to the inexorable flow of time as the deep-running attachments that endure in the face of change, *The Cat's Table* leaves its youthful protagonists poised on the threshold of sexual and social adulthood; everything they have seen and experienced onboard the *Oronsay* is being carried ashore by them in “memories, damaged psyches, degrees of loss, evanescent joy and reordered lives” (Proulx).

Equally significant, however, is that Mynah dedicates his account of the sea voyage to Cassius, the “self-contained creature” whose “only gesture outward” (261) was his concern for Asuntha. Mynah believes that after seeing her disappear into the sea Cassius must have retreated further into himself, “burnt by an adult truth” (261) that “he can rely on no one and believe in nothing” (Ondaatje, *Cat's* 262). Like Billy the Kid, Cassius, described by Mynah as a “a belligerent force in the art scene” (262), embodies a singular blend of the artist and the outlaw who, in Susan Glickman's view, needs to “hone his edge” by detaching himself from others even though “the man longs for affiliation and comfort and family” (qtd. in Spinks 236). This longing, as we have seen, was felt most intensely by Ramadhin, which explains why Mynah agrees with Mr. Fonseka that “it was after all Ramadhin who had the natural sensitivity and intelligence to be an artist. I do not believe those are necessary requisites, but I half believed it then” (Ondaatje, *Cat's* 144). It is Mr. Fonseka who, taking quiet comfort in his erudition, reveals to Mynah the “serenity and certainty I have seen only among those who have the armor of books close by” (59). Whatever its form, art provides the only safety net available to exiles like Ondaatje's protagonists, a space where they can feel at home.

The portrait of the artist that Mynah embodies in *The Cat's Table* is ultimately a hybrid between Cassius' self-sufficiency and Ramadhin's emotional vulnerability. Indeed, to the extent that the sympathetic links

forged during the sea voyage point to the value of self-other interaction, they drive Mynah to engage in the world beyond the confines of the ivory tower. We sense that the inner journey through Mynah's deeply submerged layers of memory was necessary for him to end up where he has arrived even though the adventures he narrates belong to an *imagined* past. What is *real*, or vividly present to Mynah/Ondaatje, is, to borrow Wordsworth's words, the "emotion recollected in tranquility" that gives such events the charge of truth and intimacy because it allows them to explore, if not unlock, the mysteries of the human heart and thus confront the limits of what is knowable.

## Notes

- 1 Drawing on Rushdie's 1982 essay "Imaginary Homelands" as a framework for reading Ondaatje's fictionalized memoir, Davis shows that, in his attempt "to come to terms with a past that is both personal and cultural" (267) Ondaatje does not limit himself to setting down "shards of memory" (cf. Rushdie), but he "romanticizes further and invents what he needs" (272). Similarly, Heble emphasizes Ondaatje's "admiration for, and his ability to traffic in" what he calls, *vis-à-vis* the magical realism of Márquez, "excess caught so surely and dreamily that it becomes real."
- 2 See also Ondaatje's acknowledgements in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, where he lists several "basic sources" of the legend that he has "edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked" and notes that the emotions still "belong to their authors" (110).
- 3 The same sense of precariousness informs a passage in *Running in the Family*, in which Ondaatje writes: "The easy life of the tea estate was over and the theatrical wars were over. They had come a long way in fourteen years from being the products of two of the best known and wealthiest families in Ceylon: my father owning now only a chicken farm at Rock Hill, my mother working in a hotel" (172). Their impoverished condition forced his mother to move to London while Ondaatje and his sister were left behind in Colombo with relatives.
- 4 As Heble argues, Ondaatje's "textual strategies of decentering" alert us not so much to "the power of the center to recuperate—and hence dominate—the margins" as to enable "a dialogic relation between precolonial values and postcolonial cultural syncretism." For Spinks, too, Ondaatje's literary portrait of his own hybrid origins appears to open up the possibility of what Bhabha calls a "Third Space of Enunciation" in which the colonial subject "might elude the politics of polarity by inhabiting a position between centre and margin where cultural meaning and representation have no primordial unity or fixity" (Spinks 17).

- 5 Spinks sets out to show that Ondaatje's work, particularly in its early phase, steps back from our habitual view of the world "to illuminate the movement of perception from which it is composed" (18). In his poetry, for instance, Ondaatje achieves this "estranging effect" by adopting what Spinks calls "an 'inhuman' perspective upon worldly experience" (18).
- 6 Emily's smallest gestures stay with him as he makes his own passage into adulthood, and one in particular is linked with the break-up of his marriage. Thus a glimpse of the strap of Massi's dress shifting slightly as a man lowers his face to her shoulder brings back Mynah's memory-image of Emily "leaning back against the railing with her beau, when she glanced for a moment at her bare shoulder and then up at the stars, and I remembered the sexual knot beginning to form in me as well" (155).

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