

ETHICS OF THE REAL
Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and the Touch of the World

Elke Rosochacki



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Supervisor: Daniel Roux

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.



Signature

Date

ABSTRACT

This dissertation rests on the assumption that the literary text is fundamentally part of the world from which it emerges. Following Heidegger's understanding of the work of art as a form of unconcealment, it argues that Michael Ondaatje's fictional work *Anil's Ghost* discloses the particular, historically contingent conditions that determine the ethical relations people are cast into during a time of war in the present era of globalization. The novel interrogates the idea of truth in its meta-fictional discourse and stakes out the grounds of its own fictional truth in contra-distinction to truth as fact offered by Western empiricism. Alongside the implicit criticism of Western epistemology, the novel mounts a critique of the universal human rights discourse and suggests that an ethical approach to the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka is preferable to a political solution imposed from the outside. War is presented as a radically embodying event in which the body is made vulnerable to death and injury: and the ethical imperative to alleviate physical suffering is identified as the most immediate and appropriate response to the crisis of war. Following Levinas, ethics is understood to transpire in the corporeal relation between individuals. By attending in detail to the embodied experience of being in the world, the novel prepares the ground for an ethics of the body that is closely aligned to the *ethics as first philosophy* espoused by Levinas. The dissertation argues throughout that the novel discloses the nature of ethical relations between people in the world by means of its aesthetic forms of language. The domain of the ethical and aesthetics are thus commensurate.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie verhandeling veronderstel dat die literêre teks fundamenteel deel is van die wêreld waaruit dit herkomstig is. In ooreenstemming met Heidegger se insig dat die kunswerk 'n vorm van "onverberging" is, voer die verhandeling aan dat Michael Ondaatje se fiktiewe werk *Anil's Ghost* die besondere histories-afhanklike toestande blootlê wat die etiese verhoudings bepaal waarin mense gewerp word tydens oorlogstyd in die huidige era van globalisering. Die roman interrogeer die konsep van die waarheid deur middel van sy metafiksionele diskoers en bepaal die grond van sy eie fiksionele waarheid in teenstelling met die idee van waarheid as feit wat deur Westerse empirisme aangevoer word. Buiten die ingeslote kritiek van Westerse epistemologie wat deur die roman uitgeoefen word, rig die teks ook 'n aanval teen die diskoers van universele menseregte en stel voor dat 'n etiese benadering tot die humanitêre krisis in Sri Lanka verkieslik is bo 'n oplossing wat van buite af opgelê word. Oorlog word voorgestel as 'n radikaal-verpersoonlike gebeurtenis waartydens die liggaam kwesbaar gemaak word deur die dood en besering en die etiese imperatief om liggaamlike lyding te verlig word aangewys as die mees onmiddellike en gepaste antwoord op die krisis van oorlog. In navolging van Levinas word die etiek beskou as iets wat plaasvind in die tasbare verhouding tussen individue. Deur aandag te skenk aan die liggaamlike ervaring van wees-in-die-wêreld berei die roman die grond voor vir 'n etiek van die liggaam wat nouliks ooreenstem met die *etiek as eerste filosofie* wat deur Levinas aangevoer word. Hierdie verhandeling voer deurgaans aan dat die roman die aard van die etiese verhoudings tussen mense in die wêreld deur middle van sy estetiese taalvorme blootlê. Die domein van die etiese en die estetiese is dus van dieselfde afmetinge.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Circuitry of Text and World

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and the Sri Lankan Civil War

If there occurs in a work [of art] a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is an occurring, a happening of truth at work.

Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*.

Our concrete existence is interpreted in terms of its entry into the 'openness' of being in general. We exist in a circuit of understanding with reality. Understanding is the very event that existence articulates... It turns out that the analysis of existence and of what is called its haecceity (Da) is only the description of the essence of truth, of the condition of the very understanding of being.

Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?"

truth alone is the justification of any fiction which makes the least claim to the quality of art or may hope to take its place in the culture of men and women of its time.

Joseph Conrad, Author's Note to *Under Western Eyes*.

The central premise on which this dissertation rests is that art and the world are inextricably linked. In the light of this assumption, I examine how Michael Ondaatje's fictional work *Anil's Ghost* (2000) opens ways of understanding the ethical relations into which women and men are cast during a humanitarian crisis such as the still ongoing Sri Lankan civil war. This dissertation argues that the novel offers a form of truth relevant to the material existences, both of the people in Sri Lanka whose experiences are the subject of this novel, and of a general global readership who, through the act of witnessing their suffering, become morally implicated in the disaster. In other words, the aim is to engage multiple perspectives on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics through reference to *Anil's Ghost*.

The theoretical point of departure is that we "exist in a circuit of understanding with reality", to use Levinas's words ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 5). Understanding is brought about when the experience of our "concrete existence" in the world is articulated

or brought into the open by means of language or art (5). Such a disclosure of the real is also what may be understood as the truth of a work of art. For Joseph Conrad, the purpose of any fiction "which makes the least claim to the quality of art" is to offer such a form of truth to "the culture of men and women of its time" (50). In other words, it performs the function of disclosing or bringing into "openness" the nature of our "concrete existence" in the world at a particular historical juncture.

Ethics is understood to be part of our "concrete existence" in the world. It is *lived* in the corporeal relation between individual subjects, and is not a set of abstract moral precepts. The domain of ethics is therefore the *real* and the literary text, participating in a "circuit of understanding with reality", gives access to the real (Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" 5). Because history, understood as the events women and men experience in the world, does not repeat itself in endless variations of the same, but unfolds in a series of singular happenings that continually reveal the world as essentially new, each unfolding historical moment requires a renewed entry into "openness". In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger calls this "opening up or disclosure of that into which human being as historical is already cast" the "founding of truth" (206). At each time in history, he writes, "the openness of what is had to be established in beings themselves, by the fixing in place of truth in figure. At each time there happened unconcealedness of what is. Unconcealedness sets itself into work, a setting which is accomplished by art" (206).

The position I assume in this dissertation is that Ondaatje's text as a form of art discloses or 'un-conceals' a part of what constitutes the multiple realities of the civil war as it unfolded on the island of Sri Lanka over two decades ago and continues, albeit in a much abated form, to this day. Because this reality contains, in Heidegger's words, an "undisclosed abundance of the unfamiliar and the extraordinary, which means that it also contains strife with the familiar and the ordinary" (206), the text uses figurative language which is in part still unfamiliar and strange in order to disclose what has not yet been opened or brought "into appearance" (206). Such literary forms and figures that lift the concrete experience of being in a newly unfolding world into language or into the order

of the symbolic are what I understand as the aesthetic. The concept is also linked to the Greek sense of *aesthesis* which means sense perception in general, and which is linked to the experience of the body. In short, this dissertation is interested in the disclosure of the real, as the domain of ethics, within the aesthetic forms and figures of the literary text.

The theoretical domain to be traversed here is thus marked by three conceptual beacons, namely the body, the literary text which discloses the experience of the body, and ethics as an event that takes place in the lived encounter between embodied human subjects in the world. The scheme set out by the sequence body, text and ethics organizes the study into seven chapters. Having presented in brief the theoretical ground from which this enquiry into an ethics of the body via an aesthetic text is to be undertaken, I proceed in the present chapter to locate the novel in its historical moment of production and immediate reception, taking note of ethical and political questions raised by critical readers in book reviews and scholarly articles. This will serve to identify issues that have been foregrounded as most relevant and challenging in relation to the historical events that it explicitly refers to. Chapter Two explores the body or figure most closely associated with the text, namely that of the author Michael Ondaatje. As both material and abstract entity the author figures as an essential and determining link in the circuit between text and world. Chapter Three moves the enquiry into the text itself and unpacks ideas surrounding sentient being and cognitive existence in order to show how the novel posits subjectivity as rooted in a contingent physical reality rather than as a conscious ego capable of objectifying the world spread before it. The focus on the body is momentarily put aside in Chapter Four which engages with the epistemological questions raised by the novel as well as with the novel's meta-fictional exploration of the status of truth in literary fiction, historical writing, scientific documentation and the universal human rights discourse. Chapter Five examines the representation of war in *Anil's Ghost* which posits the body as principal site or marker of the event as well as the venue for ethics. An exposition of the structure of contemporary war is undertaken in Chapter Six making use of Foucault's notion of *biopower*. This chapter concludes with an examination of the ethics of writing, thus revisiting the notion of authorship. The aim of the final chapter is to gather up several strands of the argument that open the enquiry into the domain of

ethics,¹ while also gathering up several new ones in order to uncover the considerable ethical import of Ondaatje's *Anil Ghost* and show how these diverse elements bear a close affinity to the *ethics as first philosophy* espoused by Emmanuel Levinas.

The coordinates that locate the novel's place in the world can be plotted across two distinct but also interconnected cultural and historical spaces. They encompass both the localized circumstances of the people who are the explicit referents of the book as well as the globalized community who are the readers of this novel.

The first of these contexts is the Sri Lankan civil war. Following Heidegger's notion of art as 'unconcealment', I read *Anil's Ghost* as such a bringing into the open of the human disaster that has unfolded in the course of this tumultuous period of the island's history. "Art is historical" writes Heidegger, "and as historical it is the creative preserving of truth in the work" (207). The 'truth' of history thus preserved in this work is contained in the narrative of violent death and traumatic survival experienced both privately and collectively by the people of Sri Lanka during this time. Ondaatje's fiction, as art which "grounds history" (207) in such a way, then, foregoes the right conventionally assumed by fiction writers to suspend referentiality. This is expressly signalled in the author's note which serves as preface to the book and which links the novel to this particular historical moment:

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s Sri-Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government. Eventually in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents.

Anil's Ghost is a fictional work set during this political time and historical moment. And while there existed organizations similar to those in this story, and similar events took place, the characters and incidents in the novel are invented. Today the war in Sri Lanka continues in a different form.

M.O. (v)

¹ Essays which reflect the conceptual diversity of what falls under the rubric of ethics in literature, ranging from Aristotelian conceptions through to deconstruction can be found in A. Hadfield, D. Rainsford and T. Woods (eds.), *The Ethics in Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1999); D. Rainsford and T. Woods (eds.), *Critical Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1999). A more recent overview is provided by R. Eaglestone, "Navigating an Ancient Problem: Ethics and Literature" *European Journal of English Studies* 7.2 (2003): 127-136.

The undercover war in Sri Lanka which has claimed more than sixty five thousand lives over twenty years, does indeed continue in renewed outbursts of violence today, despite a permanent ceasefire agreement between warring factions, initiated and sponsored by Norway in 2002. The war erupted in the early 1980s and has been waged chiefly between the minority of Hindu Tamils in the North, who had acquired significant political power under British rule, and the Sinhalese Buddhist government of the majority of the population. In a further complexification of events, fighting broke out between Tamil groups with different war aims as well as within the Sinhalese population which split into nationalist groups and those with Marxist objectives. All parties appear to have resorted to violence and hundreds of murdered corpses were discovered in mass graves during the course of the war. At the end of 2004 the scale of collective human suffering and loss of life in Sri Lanka was raised to a further extreme when a tsunami engulfed its eastern coast, killing more than thirty thousand people and devastating vast areas of densely inhabited coastland. At the time of writing this thesis renewed outbursts of violence still threaten to derail the shared project of restoring the disaster-struck regions of the country. In short, the war continues to this date, five years after the publication of *Anil's Ghost*.

Assuming as I do that art and the world are inextricably linked, it must surely be worth asking whether fiction such as this novel by Ondaatje can be justified or whether it offers something like truth to the people in Sri Lanka in particular as well as to the globalized citizens of the world who have witnessed from afar the suffering inflicted by both the human and natural disasters. In other words, does the novel give an appropriate or adequate answer to a devastating human situation, or does it parasitically exploit the gravity of that reality for its own aesthetic purpose?

Such realities as are depicted in *Anil's Ghost* are not confined to this war alone, but are experienced as a near commonplace occurrence in diverse parts of the contemporary world. Widespread massacres of civilian communities erupted during the civil war in Yugoslavia and Serbia and urban suicide bombings are experienced almost daily in the Middle East. In the West the spectacularly orchestrated destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York, the terror of the Madrid and London train bombings have equally

contributed to a significant sense of and unease in the unfolding consciousness of the twenty-first century. The global community has been cast in the role of collective witness to these traumatic events as they pass rapidly from an immediate visceral reality to a collectively experienced media event. The contemporary phenomenon of terror thus charts a passage from the order of the real to the order of the symbolic, and it is in the latter domain that its effects have a global reach. Geoffrey Galt Harpham notes that the effects of terror, registered in the symbolic domain, become legible in "the vast mesh of representations and narratives both, official and unofficial, public and private, in which culture works out its sense of self" (573-579). *Anil's Ghost* may then be understood as just such a symbolic registering of the aftershocks and disruption effected by the traumatic experiences of the civil war in Sri Lanka.

In the present era of globalization and mediatization the collective experience of traumatic events unfolding in various localities in the world has altered what is understood by the idea of community. It has become less a function of choice, geographical location, nationality or ethnic grouping, but rather one determined by shared experience of events. Russell Ford writes that literary writing encompasses both forms of experiencing a terror event, namely the visceral experience of survivors as well as the shared experiences of those who witnessed the events indirectly.

Literature gathers together and gives expression to those people affected by an event; not necessarily or exclusively those who were 'directly affected', but every one who found their customary style of thought insufficient to apprehend the event, everyone who was shocked by what happened. Literature is the voice not only of the injured and the wronged, of the oppressed, but it is the voice of all of these as well as those who allow the shock of the event to shake language and thought. (95)

It is within such a framework of positioning literature in relation to events in the world that I place Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. As such, it "gathers together and gives expression to those people affected by an event" as well as registering the "shock of the event" which "shake[s] language and thought". The extreme experience of witnessing and surviving something like a massacre or an urban terror attack constitutes a limit event which exceeds what may be disclosed within the conventions of ordinary language. It consequently falls to literature to forge new pathways of apprehending events such as

these that cannot be contained by conventional and established modes of understanding. Literature thus breaks thinking from its customary paths and "opens thinking onto new systems of evaluation. The work of writing is never accomplished, however, insofar as these newly consistent systems of evaluation create new horizons of meaning, and so also new points of interruption and breakdown, where new events and expressions can emerge" (Ford 95).

For Harpham the attempt to "create new horizons of meaning" to accommodate an event that fundamentally defies comprehension or signals the destruction of meaning as such, poses a problem which prompts the following series of questions: "How can we explain the present situation without giving it cause? How to give it a cause without making it reasonable? And how to make it reasonable without implicating ourselves, inserting ourselves in the causal chain that produced it?" (576). I would like to argue that Ondaatje's novel offers an answer to this on at least two levels. First, it suggests that we, as citizens of a global community, are indeed all implicated in the dynamic of terror as it unfolds in various quarters of the world. Second, the novel puts to question that which is held up as sacrosanct or irrefutable, at least in the West, namely the processes of reason itself. The dual strands of this argument will be presented in detail in the chapters to follow. For the moment I return to the immediate task at hand, which is to present the particular conditions that characterize the social and historical context out of which *Anil's Ghost* has emerged and to which it articulates a response.

One such a condition prevailing in the world presently is the ability of mass media to affect significant change in the collective consciousness of a global community by disseminating near instantaneous images of terror events or human disaster alongside ideologically inflected commentary and explanation. The sequence of event, image and text has merged almost as one in the mediatized witnessing of trauma and suffering experienced by people elsewhere. As noted by Jacqueline Foertsch, much has been written about the symbiotic relation between journalists and terrorists in the mutually constituted event of mass terror in which the 'message' inscribed on the mutilated body of

the victim is disseminated as visual text in mass media (2). It is, then, the human body itself which serves primarily both as target and template in the event of war or the terror attack, and whose destruction or mutilation must bear the message or convey the obscure or seemingly indiscernible 'meaning' of human conflict. This dynamic, given in crude outline above, underscores the significant link between the human body, the text and ethics.

It is precisely within this nexus that *Anil's Ghost* inscribes itself. Its subject matter traverses the extensive conceptual ranges that constitute the notion of the *human body*. Its characters are presented primarily as subjects whose being in the world and with others is an *embodied* experience. The novel also attends to various states of physical woundedness and psychic trauma. Physical gestures such as the touch, the caress, the embrace, the skilful repair of the wound are set out as paradigmatic of the ethical relationship. As the title suggest, the novel is equally preoccupied with the dead body, figured variously as archaeological specimen, skeleton, exhumed corpse from the mass grave or the disfigured, dismembered body of the hospital mortuary. These 'ghostly' forms of embodiment, these spectres of the dead, haunt the living and demand a response or an answering of sorts. In the deeply plumbed and finely nuanced exploration of embodied experience, the novel unfolds its *ethical agenda* which, as I will show in the final chapter, articulates an ethics of alterity and corporeality that seems very close to the Levinasian formulation of ethics. Last, the novel shows a particular preoccupation with the idea of *textuality*. It delivers extensive commentaries on all manner of texts ranging from the arcane inscriptions on ancient stone carvings to the everyday forms of text such as newspaper reports, hospital charts, maps, scientific data sheets, cinema entertainment and cartoons. Within the elaborate display of textuality in an array of forms, the novel takes particular care to assign a central position to its foremost subject, namely the human body by making it central not only to its own discourse but also as the main figure of its meta-textual explorations.

² Foertsch also raises the question whether the novelist of today has fared any better than the journalist whose task it is truthfully to repeat (report) and disseminate the message of terror 'as it is' without interference (thereby amplifying and replicating it) as opposed to the novelist who is given the freedom to mediate and so alter or subvert the 'message'. Literature is thus able to disrupt the message inscribed into the terror event and as such it must counter the force of terror (287).

Having mapped in brief the historical, cultural and conceptual coordinates of this novel, I proceed to locate a last point in the circuitry between text and world. This can be marked out as the grounds of the novel's reception and may be uncovered in book reviews and in scholarly articles. Broadly speaking, the novel has been ambiguously received. The polemic set up by the book reviews immediately after its publication and the subsequent responses in scholarly articles touch on several significant issues relating in particular to the obstacles and ethical dilemmas encountered in writing that engages with extreme states of affairs in the world such as war and humanitarian disaster.

At the most complaisant level the novel has been praised as an "extraordinary achievement" in which Ondaatje uses "magic in order to make the blood of his own country real" (Weich online). In the same interview, Ondaatje describes his novel as "cubist" in view of the shifting perspectives or truths given by the various characters. The terms "magic" and "cubist" serve to mark this text as a highly aestheticized instance of writing. This comes as no surprise from the author of the lyrical and evocative Booker prize-winning novel *The English Patient* (1992), as well as several volumes of poetry. The latest of these, *Handwriting* (2000), is a companion piece to *Anil's Ghost*. These poems constitute, according to one reviewer quoted on the book cover, a "heady realm where memory, earth and metre meld into the purest elegance" (book cover). Such book reviews seem not to register a sense of conflict between the lyrical beauty of the writing and its exceedingly grim and disturbing subject matter. For some reviewers the transformation of the grim into the beautiful is a valued accomplishment in itself. In his review significantly entitled "Horror in Paradise" John Bemrose writes that the "novel generates much of its tension from the contrast between the romantic beauty of its setting and the violence – the shootings, tortures and crucifixions – whose after-effects Ondaatje evokes with such an exquisite sense of the body's frailty. The book constantly poses the question of how much horror can happen in such idyllic surroundings: beauty it seems can save no one" (78).

In this reading the novel appears to be fixed in the enclosed and discreet realm of the aesthetic where it generates a "mixture of wonder and high tension unique in the world of

fiction", and, viewed as such, it is necessarily absolved from the responsibility of "saving [any]-one" by its beauty. Similarly the reviewer for *Time* magazine, Paul Gray, commends this novel which "has no clear demarcations between opposing forces, allies and enemies" (75). While it deals with "the terror that has now become ubiquitous – that is to say, contemporary", the

careful neutrality of Ondaatje's language sets the tone for what follows: not apolitical tract or an exercise in finger pointing but an *exquisitely imagined journey through the hellish consequences of impassioned intentions*...The uncanny power of *Anil's Ghost* stems largely from its refusal to frame his tale as a struggle between good and evil. Condemnation seems too simple a response to the complex horrors he portrays. (italics added)

According to this review, the novel ultimately reflects nothing more than the 'unknowable', casting the reader in the detached position of the painted Buddha whose unseeing and mystical gaze cast across the rice fields of Sri Lanka at the close of the book offers a consoling release both from the fiction as well as any concern with a real war.

An altogether different demand is placed on the novel by reviewers like Allen Brooke precisely because "unlike the *English Patient*, it deals with a war that is not just an imagined landscape, as Ondaatje managed, amazingly enough, to render World War II, but a very recent war that is in fact still going on" (63). He writes that as "a reader of this novel one longs for more hard information about Sri Lanka, about the life of the country, the insurgency, the war. But Ondaatje is not in the business of providing anything so prosaic; he prefers the rhetoric of pseudo-poetry, and he sticks wherever possible to the vague, the impressionistic, the foggy. Emotion and affect have priority over fact and description" (63). Similarly, Tova Reich finds that for in a "story heavily dependent on a Sri Lanka ravaged by civil war, with the Tamil guerrillas struggling for independence against the government on one front and insurgents fighting the entrenched powers on another, there is surprisingly little interest in politics" (37). Finally, she says, "the novel's existence in the present is little more than an enchantingly rendered evocation of a troubled remote place, unfamiliar landscapes, unusual occupations and rites, and high-minded truisms" (38).

A more serious indictment against this form of aestheticizing fiction is delivered by Tom Leclair for whom Ondaatje's "apolitical gaze seems irresponsible" and his use of terror as background for romance and nostalgia is an "overkill" (31-33). Leclair's argument is given further impetus by quoting a potentially problematic assertion made by Ondaatje himself in an interview given at the time of the novel's publication:

Certain words, certain phrases are said so often that they come to have no reverberation. 'Human rights', the phrase is indivisible, but the words mean nothing to me. When I hear the words politics I roll my eyes, or if I hear a political speech I can't listen to it. And so in a way I burrow beneath these words, and try not to refer to them. The words are like old coins. They just don't feel real. (Leclair 33)

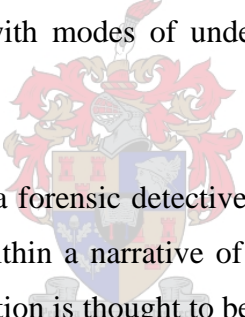
As the novel's main character Anil (a human rights activist working in the killing fields of her native Sri Lanka) expresses distrust towards her colleague Sarath for his retreat into the 'aesthetic', so too Leclair advises that Ondaatje "should distrust himself" (33). Against the apparently smug bravura of the successful author he directs an impassioned appeal, one which demands a serious reckoning of sort:

In *Anil's Ghost* Ondaatje chooses to write his 'real' words and beautiful sentences for the walking ghosts of Sri Lanka, the traumatized apolitical survivors. But what about the dead? The tens of thousands of dead – the women and men, Tamils and Sinhalese, poor and rich, loved and unloved, who died or murdered for political causes, however misguided, necessary or crazy – deserve more understanding and respect than Ondaatje gives them. (31-33)

In summary, the most important issue to be gleaned from the book reviews is the conflict that arises between the overt aestheticism of the writing and the suffering of the real people of Sri Lanka, who are the explicit referents of the novel and whose lives are caught up in a still ongoing war. It would appear that literature is indeed called upon to give answer to the pressing reality it refers to and that no lofty detachment or retreat into the aesthetic will be countenanced by so harsh a reality and by those whose interest lies with real people and not in a competitive trafficking of literary capital in an autonomous 'World Republic of Letters'.³

³ Following Pierre Bourdieu, Pascale Casanova argues in *The World Republic of Letters* that literary production is determined by the competitive struggle for literary capital in a global economy.

Expressing such a concern for the real people of Sri Lanka, Leclair calls for both "understanding and respect" from the author (31-33). In Chapter Five I show that the novel in fact expresses a great deal of respect and reverence towards human suffering and the dead by means various stylistic devices. For the moment I should like to turn to the question of whether Ondaatje's writing offers any form of understanding of the war he represents despite the fact, pointed out by Leclair, that he "never provides any information about the two groups or why they are killing people" (31-33). If the novel is not informative or factual and remains determinedly apolitical, does it offer something more useful in the form of insight or a practical understanding into the extreme manifestation of human conflict? A survey of scholarly articles published so far suggests that *Anil's Ghost* does indeed make a significant contribution in terms of such an understanding of the dynamic that surrounds the phenomenon of war, and conversely what drives people to save each other in such a disaster. It will then be the purpose of this study to engage in some detail with modes of understanding the novel offers in this regard.



Anil's Ghost may be described as a forensic detective novel in which the quest for truth and the justice is re-configured within a narrative of the forensic case study or murder mystery. The body under investigation is thought to be that of one of the many victims of the politically motivated murders committed by Sri Lankan government forces. Anil is the Western trained forensic scientist who returns to her native country on a UN mission to investigate allegations of such human rights violations. She is teamed with a Sri Lankan government archaeologist called Sarath to put together concrete evidence of these events. They set off in search of such evidence as the killing-fields of Sri Lanka will yield, looking for new and unmarked gravesites amidst the ruins of ancient monasteries and sacred burial grounds in the jungle and concealed in hilltop caves. In a government protected burial site for monks dating back to the sixth century, Anil unearths a relatively new skeleton who appears most likely to be the victim of an undercover murder by government agents. She gives him the provisional name of "Sailor" and in a strategic narrowing of focus she makes the positive identification of this skeleton the sole objective of her task. The name of one victim, deployed here as a "metonym of the

national trauma" (Farrier 85), is thus the key to unravelling an extensive network of similar victims. It is in their name, in the literal sense, that the demand for justice is made. The name functions as a cipher or code of sorts by which the individual gains entry into the order of the political. It constitutes the body as member of the body politic, slotting the individual into the circuitry of "communication and recognition"⁴ that makes the functioning of the political order possible. The story unfolds in Sri Lanka amidst the ongoing eruptions of violence as Anil establishes, by means of meticulously conducted forensic procedures, the identity of Sailor.

Anil's modus operandi is based on the belief that "[t]o give him a name would be to name the rest" (56). According to this logic, one victim will stand in for many victims and the ends of justice are served when victims on the one hand and perpetrators on the other are positively identified. For Anil, the process of uncovering the 'truth' and achieving justice is, then, a matter of providing material evidence by means of positivist scientific investigation of such personal identities. Her idea of truth and the justice which must follow is an expressly political one, as it is achieved by identifying the perpetrators, who may then be brought to book. Ironically, this is also the kind of political truth the novel is accused of keeping irresponsibly at arm's length.



The process of establishing political truths by means of forensic or positivist scientific evidence has become a well known and established practice in war crime tribunals and truth commissions in various parts of the world today. Antoinette Burton discusses this phenomenon in recent history in relation to Ondaatje's novel:

To some degree, of course, recourse to the materiality of human history is a fairly predictable response to the unprecedented havoc and destruction wreaked by twentieth century wars, whether in the form of local hostilities or the global conflicts entailed by them. What is left in the wake of Auschwitz, Vietnam, Srebrenica, Ayodhya, Colombo, Basra, 9/11 and Tora Bora is effectively the detritus of history: fragments and shards, ashes and dust, rag and bone. From these unspeakable remnants forensic scientists have laboured to extract the kinds of testimony that living witnesses often cannot, despite and of course because of the pathos of their memories, provide: objective and verifiable evidence of criminal intent which becomes, in turn, the basis for the pursuit of justice in local, national and international tribunals. (39)

⁴ The reference is to Achille's Mbembe's useful formulation of the political which he defines as twofold: "a project of autonomy [of the individual subject] and the achieving of agreement among collectivity through communication and recognition" (13).

Anil is sustained in her grim task of the reading the bones of the dead by a nearly unshaken confidence that her scientific expertise will reveal the truth in terms of the concrete and verifiable evidence that enables the law to work. The outcome of the narrative, in which both the evidence and the legality of the institution to which the appeal for justice is made are collapsed, highlights the dangers inherent in too great a faith in empiricism and the exclusion of other forms of knowledge. Such knowledges are represented in the novel by the blind epigraphist Palipana, an 'oriental' Tiresius of sorts whose disciple, the local forensic anthropologist Sarath, is teamed with Anil for the duration of their UN sponsored investigation into the widespread undercover killings taking place in Sri Lanka. Sarath's cautionary warnings about the mutability of 'truth' in the morally and politically more complex environ of war torn Sri Lanka (as opposed to the seemingly stable political order of the West) go unheeded by Anil. In order to preserve her evidence before the court of law, Sarath pays with his life while she leaves the country to return to the West. Finally, the 'truth' Anil presents as verifiable evidence is un-made by the political powers that hold sway in Sri Lanka and who are at liberty to produce and circulate their own forms of truth. Burton rightly points out that the novel calls into question the "evidence of bones which haunts the archives of violence in the twentieth century" (51) and challenges the predominantly Western idea that empirical evidence leads to justice allowing for the suspension of violence and human suffering.

The novel does not, however, offer this as its last or gravest of insights, but provides something of a transcendent ending. Having concluded the ceremonial eye-painting of a giant Buddha at the break of dawn, the artisan Ananda and his young helper, perched on top of the figure, behold the Sri Lankan countryside spread before them in a moment of rebirth and visionary hope. The triumphalist or epic rendition of the ending seems to affirm the novel's ultimate disinterest in 'real' politics. This is explained by Burton as "undoubtedly the effect of privileging history (read as technology of the self) as an analytical category over say, violence (read as technology of collectivity)" (51). Taking cognisance of Leclair's argument, Burton also points out that despite and because of the novel's evident contradictions, it raises important questions about the way fiction writers have put to use such histories as have recently unfolded in Sri Lanka.

Similarly, Margaret Scanlan grapples with the ethical risk the novel runs in its eschewal of politics and brute political facts. While noting that "*Anil's Ghost* is surely a novel of terrorism", it "reproduces no political rhetoric, adjudicates no political claims, projects no political solutions". As such, "Ondaatje might run the risk of aestheticizing terror, repeating the modernist gesture of turning away from atrocity to timeless form" (303). Scanlan shows that this charge is, at least in part, not entirely fair. First, apart from the author's head note which roots the novel in a specific time and place, the plethora of local geographical and cultural detail in the novel serves to remind the reader that "*Anil's Ghost* wrestles with real history and politics and should not be read simply as a tale about terrorism in the tropics" (303). Second, an overview of Sri Lanka's recent history, provided by Scanlan in this article, based largely on a report by social scientist Jagath Senarathne, *Political Violence in Sri Lanka 1997-1990*, suggests that Ondaatje's "unwillingness to take sides or offer solutions may owe as much to local conditions as to postmodern theory" (304). These conditions, as recorded in Senarathne's study, as well as in reports issued by Amnesty International at the time, are not easily transcribed into an entirely coherent narrative or account of events. To begin with, within the setting of such widespread and intractable undercover violence, the identities of victims and perpetrators alike were often impossible to establish, as bodies were frequently burned or mutilated before being transported far from the site of abduction to be hidden or disposed of. It was also difficult to make sense or gain any overview of the complex fragmentation within the subgroups of warring parties who were internally divided by ethnic, ideological, religious, economic or regional differences. Scanlan writes that "[m]oral distinctions and political solutions may be difficult to discern in any war, but this literal inability to discern or identify victims or agents of violence make an agency report on Sri Lanka read like a postmodern text" (305). Ondaatje's shadowy representation of the war and the much criticized retreat into such tautologies as "*The reason for war was war*" (43, original italics) may perhaps, then, stand to reason.

Using Leclair's resounding charge that Ondaatje's "apolitical gaze seems irresponsible" as a starting point, Theresa Derrickson offers a far-reaching and insightful reading of the novel. She argues that the novel "does indeed promote a political stance, and a

sophisticated one at that. As subtle as it may be, the text self-consciously engages in a discussion about one of the most highly contentious topics to be raised in the wake of economic globalization: the United Nation's universal mandate on human rights" (131). The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) was issued by the newly formed United Nations after World War II in a resolution that such atrocities as were committed during this time were never to be repeated. Since then, the globalized judicial system of human rights espoused by the UN has become deeply entrenched in workings of international affairs contributing substantially to peace and justice around the world. The Western hegemonic roots of this discourse have, however, also drawn a considerable amount of criticism from various quarters, chiefly from non-Western regions and thinkers. The particular point of contention is that this discourse is underwritten by the Enlightenment view of human beings as free and autonomous individuals and that as such this idea is both the product and ideological grounding of Western industrial democracies. In its privileging of individual over collective rights, non-Western value systems are excluded or denied.

A critic from another quarter, the Slovenian sociologist Sergej Flere, makes the more cynical assertion that the "meaning of human rights as a concept in political discourse has passed from an emancipatory stage to a one where it legitimates the existing global order and, at best, partly limits the use and abuse of political power" (59). Other critics cited by Derrickson, go even further and maintain that "in addition to supporting a non-inclusive world view, international human rights law is flagrantly tailored to privilege civil and political rights over economic and social rights, a condition that proves favourable to the proliferation of economic capitalism and the legitimation of unequal distributions of wealth and power around the world" (134). Within this context of widespread discontent or at times outright rejection of the universal human rights discourse, Ondaatje's subtle critique is highly resonant.

Burton also points out that the novel articulates several particular objections to the ethnocentric assumptions inherent in the Western approach to conflicts elsewhere, and that "Western privileging of blame and retribution as worthy ends in the search for truth"

are not necessarily shared by non-Westerners. The article also questions the norm that "the status of human rights in Sri Lanka is such that human rights trump all other moral obligations and commitments, just as they generally do in Western cultures where the primacy of the individual is such an entrenched ideology, supplanting values of social harmony and the 'good of the collective'" (146). The ideological power of science is equally exposed in the figure of Anil who echoes the Western belief that science delivers irrefutable 'facts' tantamount to 'truths' that lie beyond politics, culture or even history, echoes that of the West.

Ondaatje's refusal to provide a tidy narrative of cause and effect in which victims and perpetrators are clearly distinguished can therefore not be explained as a politically irresponsible escape into the aesthetic. The novel does evidently not deliver the neatly packaged and uncomplicated form of truth desired by the Western reader, but gestures towards another and perhaps, as yet, unfamiliar way of engaging with the events it refers to.

The novel ends on what may be read variously as a triumphalist, mystical, transcendent or a disconcertingly sentimental note. The gentle artisan and the boy perched on top of the giant Buddha at the break of dawn behold "the figure of the world" (306) before them. The epiphany of the moment is, however, not in the transcendent splendour of the scene, but in the gesture of concern as the boy touches the hand of Ananda. This is "the sweet touch from the world (307)". For Derrickson the novel's ending offers another way of dealing with the crisis, one that is

not to be found in the ideals of liberal humanism and not in the politically charged motives of a Western-based human rights discourse, but in the material world itself, in the simple show of compassion that travels from person to person, in the concrete manner in which the apprentice boy shows his care for Ananda, a hand of concern from the physical world, not a hand from the ideological world of global humanitarianism. (149)

Anil's Ghost thus poses a significant challenge to the universalizing and dominant discourse of human rights and its ideological underpinnings, as well as the hegemonic power of Western scientific empiricism. Following Albert Camus, Ford writes that

literature "constitutes the limit of dominant political values insofar as it is in literature that language comes to differ from itself" (86). The novel "opens thinking onto new systems of evaluation" (95), thus effectively disrupting the customary pathways of thinking, at least those of the West. Such thinking arises out of attending thoughtfully to the world always unfolding anew in a series of events as yet undisclosed never experienced before. Existing conceptual determinations are disrupted by the irreducible particularity of events so that they are to be reconfigured or rewritten within the always newly emergent horizons of meaning. Such writing resists the controlling operations of dominant ideologies writes Ford "not when it depicts political struggle, not when it evokes feelings of moral outrage in the reader, not even when it becomes a manifesto. Such expressions are always already determined. Writing resists when it contests the structures of thought, when it succeeds in breaking down meaning itself and experiments with unforeseen expressions" (96).

If the 'meaning' that is dismantled by *Anil's Ghost* is the assumption of individual freedom over and above the notion of personal responsibility as the highest good within the totalizing and universalizing human rights discourse of the West, then the "unforeseen expressions" have to do with the novel's realignment towards human existence as always singular, rooted within a contingent and physical reality. The novel also proposes that the kind of responsibility called for by Leclair towards the people who are the victims of war, is lived in the face to face encounter between individuals and cannot be readily passed off onto the order of the political. The novel thus redirects attention towards the individual without espousing individualism, the material without being materialistic and the body as the site of ethics as opposed to the body politic.

The following chapter offers a brief exploration of several strands of meaning that collectively constitute the figure and/or the name of the author, Michael Ondaatje. As both a real and abstract entity, the figure of the author is positioned at the dense intersection between the text and the world and shifts across these seemingly disparate conceptual domains. By examining this figure I hope to address questions relating to both the ethical and ontological status of the novel.

CHAPTER TWO

The Name of the Author Crossing the Horizon of the Sign

A proper name does not name anything which is human, which belongs to the human body, a human spirit, an essence of man. And yet this relation to the inhuman only befalls man, for him, to him, in the name of man.

Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*.

Phantasms must be allowed to function at the limits of bodies; against bodies, because they stick to bodies and protrude from them, but also because they touch them, cut them, break them into sections, regionalize them, and multiply their surfaces; and equally, outside of bodies, because they function between bodies according to laws of proximity, torsion, and variable distance – laws of which they remain ignorant. Phantasms do not extend organisms into an imaginary domain; they topologize the materiality of the body.

Michel Foucault, *Theatrum Philosophicum*.

The human body both as an *idea* in various forms and as material entity existing in the world is central to this thesis. The aim is to examine this protean or seemingly a-categorical entity as it assumes several guises or as it shifts across various modalities in the literary text. It may present as a philosophical construct, a representation, a literary figure, a form of disclosure having to do with being in the world, the trace of an embodied subject in the real world or simply as a name which refers to a real person. The obscure detective work envisaged here thus aims to track the "phantasms" of the body as described by Foucault in the hope of providing something of a "topology" of the conceptual surrounds of the material body and its appearance in and outside the text. This links to the central preoccupation of this thesis in the sense that it is the lived-in body that is the site of ethics.

I begin this exploration by unpacking the body or figure most closely associated with the text itself, namely that of the author Michael Ondaatje. This figure, in its various modes and guises, occupies a liminal space between text and world and as such it may give answer to questions regarding the relation between these seemingly disparate domains.

To gain some foothold in this ontologically slippery area, in which the body in question is both material entity as well as a textual or conceptual construct, I take my opening cue from Jean-Luc Nancy's deft analysis of bodies in literature. This formulation makes short shrift of various conceptual rifts and impasses and provides, for the moment at least, some semblance of order upon entering this daunting terrain.

[L]iterature offers us one of three things: either fiction which is by definition bodiless, with its author whose body is absent (in fact we are imprisoned in his cave, where he gives us the spectacle of bodies) or bodies covered with signs...or else writing itself abandoned or erect like a signifying body –

In this way we do not leave the horizon of the sign, of sense and of mimesis. Literature mimes the body, or makes the body mime signification, or mimes itself as body. (193)

Any exposition of the body is always already vexed by the fact that its subject cannot be incorporated into its domain which is bound by "the horizon of the sign". *Anil's Ghost*, although it invokes the presences of bodies, must remain "by definition bodiless", and its author who is the subject of my exposition here, must remain materially absent. The void of his absence is filled by his personal name.

The novel's awareness of being bound within "the horizon of the sign" is disclosed in subtle gestures that point beyond its borders as text to the world that it accords primacy in the event of being. In the world of the real presences, the order of the sign is at times rendered obsolete. An instance of such a falling away of the name as substitute for the real is enacted by Palipana, the blind forest dwelling epigraphist and celebrated figure of being and knowing in the novel. Always addressing his interlocutor by means of a simple physical gesture, he eschews the use of the personal name altogether. "You, he would say, pointing. Never using anyone's name, as if it were immaterial to the discussion or search" (94). The response of the other who is materially present is solicited by a movement of the hand in the face to face encounter, rendering the name, which stands in place of the absent body, "immaterial". The name thus serving a purely referential function is done away with in the presence of the actual referent. The scene, privileging the order of the real above the order of signification, reaffirms the novel's general orientation towards the actual human subjects whose experiences it endeavours to disclose.

The territory staked out by Nancy in locating the (absent) body in literature marks the literary space as conceptual workshop of the body or, as he puts it elsewhere, a Platonic cave in which real bodies are given as shadows or as mimes in a spectacle.¹ *Anil's Ghost* does indeed present just such a "spectacle of bodies", an artful "miming of the body", a host of "bodies covered with signs", and, in addition, a long lists of names within and outside the frame of the text, that refer to real embodied people in the world. Such a novel then surely provides impetus enough for an investigation into this most unusual feature, namely the conspicuously foregrounded display of bodies both within the text itself, its borders as well as the great number of real bodies, both dead and alive, pulled into its conceptual ambit or range of concern. This last feature, understood here as a kind of reach outside the text into the world in which real people live, opens the way for an enquiry into ethics. The domain of ethics, following Levinas, is located in the sphere of transactions between an embodied self and the other in the real world.

If the novel establishes a sort of reach into the world, as I would like to argue here and throughout the thesis, then the "horizon of the sign" or the ontological divide that according to the poststructuralist conventions of our time encloses the text within itself and severs it from the real world can in fact be opened up to allow for some passage between world and text. In a theoretical departure from the dominant view of literature as a self-enclosed and differential system of signs, I place the literary as operating within the "circuit of understanding with reality" and as an "event that existence articulates" in Levinas's formulation ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 5). As such it then offers a disclosure or an opening of reality by means of the symbolic.

The absolute demarcation between text and world is thus rethought here as a sort of infinitely deferred borderline which cannot be precisely marked but must be inferred. The figure of the author is located somewhere in this nebula or liminal zone where it provides a kind of portal between text and world. What purchase is it then possible to gain on this conceptually slippery figure, given that in literature we must deal with an "author whose

¹ Nancy writes that "The body was born in Plato's cave, or rather it was conceived and shaped in the form of a cave: as prison or tomb of the soul, and the body was first thought from the inside, as buried darkness into which light only penetrates in the form of reflections, and reality only in the form of shadows" (191).

body is absent" or, worse still, an author who as original source and final arbiter of the literary work, can no longer be thought to exist at all, if we follow Roland Barthes (142-148)? By way of circumventing these deconstructive commonplaces which reduce the author figure to a kind of blank or void, I follow Foucault in examining what may be salvaged of the idea of authorship by replacing this theoretically dismantled and materially absent figure with the name which is conventionally thought to stand in its place. Foucault examines the name of the author as a functional entity (the "author-function") operating within several modalities. Unlike other proper names, he writes, the author's name "does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real or the exterior individual who produced it, instead the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing or at least characterizing, its mode of being. The author's name manifests a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and its cultures" ("What is an Author?" 120).

Given that Michael Ondaatje as "the real or exterior individual" who has produced the text is physically and theoretically out of bounds (as there is no intention of indulging in any positivist form of scholarship here) one may then ask how his name succeeds in fulfilling the Foucauldian author-function by "revealing or at least characterizing" the status of *Anil's Ghost* as a discourse in the society and culture of this time. I suggest that it does this by tagging additional inscriptions to the margins or "the edges of the text" (understood here as both discourse and as printed matter) in the form of an author's note which serves as preface as well as an extensive list of acknowledgements printed at its close of the book. The supplementary authorial inscriptions that border this fictive text contribute to establish the novel's "mode of being" in relation to the world. Not only do these augmentations signal a particular mode of production to the reader but they implicitly also call for a particular mode of reception, thus affecting a subtle but significant shift in the idea of authorship in the context of our society and culture.

Apart from providing an author's note situating this novel in a specific historical context to which it has made itself answerable, Ondaatje also provides a three page list of acknowledgements at the close of the book, in which scores of human rights workers,

doctors, civil defence lawyers, scholars and researchers are mentioned by name and thanked for their "generosity and their knowledge and experience" (309-311). The gesture to those outside the text amounts to an open recognition by the writer that his novel is drawn from the various interstices of culture, institutional knowledges and lived experiences of actual human subjects. This is not an attempt to bolster *authority* but perhaps a conscious redefinition of authorship which distances itself from the notion of writing as the product of an original self in favour of an understanding of writing as drawn from a shared ground of human experience. In a recent essay, "Pale Flags: Reflections on Writing Anil's Ghost," Ondaatje gives expression to just such an idea, distancing himself from writing that amounts to an "advertisement of the self", be it memoir, fiction, poetry or criticism (61). It is not surprising, then, that he has been a great proponent of jazz as an art form, particularly because in this musical form the creative process is made possible by the interrelatedness of a group of artists, rather than by an individual. In an interview with Maya Jaggi, he explains how this informs his own sense of writing: "What I love is its communal form, how it is completely free and improvisational and still everything is held together. It is made by a group as opposed to an individual and this really interests me. I believe books are communal acts" (260).

By gesturing to scores of people outside the text and declaring that their experiences and knowledges are written into its pages, Ondaatje signals the text's particular mode of being and aligns himself with the idea of art as such a communal act. Such inclusions shift the idea of authorship from its authoritarian traditions to a more democratic form which draws on collectively based experiences, knowledges and voices. This is perhaps of a particular significance in a cultural or social milieu in which the cult of the author as person(ality)/commodity is fuelled by the media events generated by prestigious book prizes, the rank commercialism of the global book trade and the high public profile bestowed on prize winning authors.

A further effect of the gesture to those outside the text who have been cast into the turbulences of particular historical moment is that it signals the intention to disclose or bring those particular historically determined human experiences into the open by means

of the forms and figures of its aesthetic vocabulary. As such, literature "grounds history", in Heidegger's terms. For Derrida

[t]here is a sort of paradoxical historicity in the experience of writing. The writer can be ignorant or naïve in relation to the historical tradition which bears him or her, or which s/he transforms, invents, displaces. But I wonder whether, even in the absence of historical awareness or knowledge that s/he doesn't 'treat' history in the course of an experience which is more significant, more alive, more necessary in a word, than that of some professional 'historians' naively concerned to "objectify" the content of a science. ("This Strange Institution called Literature" 55)

The novel's avoidance of conventional historical awareness or political "knowledge" has already been noted and discussed in Chapter One. The grounding of history that is achieved by Ondaatje is not by means of providing facts or constative statements about states of affairs in the world, but rather by treating history "in the course of an experience, which is more significant, more alive, more necessary" than any form of scientific objectification. Something of this sense or process of such writing is articulated by Ondaatje: "Inventing a novel I begin from the ground up, with experienced or imagined fragments...If there is an 'idea' for the book it will emerge now, out of all this. Any idea I have for a book before I begin writing tends to be facile, more smart than true ("Pale Flags" 62). One could argue that the process of writing suggested here evolves from the experience of being in the world and not from the plane of ideas. The material precedes the ideal, as Ondaatje notes: "'No ideas but in things', William Carlos Williams said about poetry, and I feel it is utterly true for fiction" ("Pale Flags" 62).

Having linked the author to a form of writing which is expressly grounded in the experience of being in the world at a particular historical juncture, I return to the idea of the name of the author and by extension those names appended to it in the acknowledgements by following the somewhat different theoretical approach offered by Derrida. The author's name or signature is "neither quite outside the text nor at home within it, the signature is a trace resonating and disseminating the textual exterior with its interior" (Grosz 13). The author's signature, according to Derrida, can be understood on three levels. First, it is a proper name akin to Foucault's "author-function". Next, it is the writer's inimitable idiom or style left as trace in the text. Third, the signature can be

thought of as a kind of abyss, spacing or dissemination which holds the writing subject both in and beyond the text. It marks the text's inside with its outside. The author's name or signature is therefore fundamentally folded in character. It is this last space which is of interest here: "In the form of the whole name, the inscription of the signature plays strangely with the frame, with the border of the text and sometimes inside, sometimes outside, sometimes included, sometimes overthrown. But it is still included when thrown overboard and always eminent when drunk in by the surface of the text (Derrida, *Signesponge/Signsponge* 120).

It may be argued that the many signatures that border this novel, that of the author and the people whose knowledge and experience are included in this writing, "play strangely with the frame" so that the novel can be thought of as an essentially polyphonic discursive space, consciously framed or bound by names of people whose existences are actual and whose experiences and knowledges constitute the "ground" of this text. Such fiction, which expressly foregrounds its extra-textual interest or stake in the world, does in effect seem to destabilise the ontological divide that is conventionally thought to exist between the actual world and literary fiction, establishing a kind of reach into the world as suggested earlier.² The purpose is not to establish an entirely seamless continuity between intra and extra text, but an integration or dissemination of sorts between these seemingly disparate domains. Again, this is proposed in order to strengthen the claim that this novel can be understood to have something do with ethics which takes place between embodied human subjects in the world.

Foucault suggests in the conclusion to his essay "What is an Author?" that as society changes, the 'author-function' as it had been thought of hitherto will disappear. The author as final arbiter or legislator of meaning has indeed lost currency within the postmodern context. Foucault also foresees "that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of restraint – one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps experienced" (120). Perhaps it is possible to say that the mode in which Ondaatje's novel functions is

² Following the entrenchment of the Saussurian theory of language as a discreet and autonomous system and the all too literal assimilation of Derrida's dictum that there is nothing outside the text.

one which is restrained by the physical world, which it so expressly marks as its "ground" or its source and to which it makes itself answerable. This connectedness to the world is signalled by means of the novel's inclusive form, its extensive acknowledgements and the author's note linking it to a specific historical moment and place. Such an answering is, however, not beholden to the ideological powers that hold sway in the world. Towards the "extremely determinate responsibilities" demanded by socio-political institutions, Derrida calls upon the writer to assume a "duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers". Such a duty is "perhaps the highest form of responsibility" ("This Strange Institution called Literature" 38).

That this novel has indeed been called to answer to the world or assume some form of responsibility (which necessarily entails an irresponsibility towards the political structures of the day) is borne out by the reader responses given in book reviews and in academic articles, as outlined in the discussion in the introductory chapter. Even though such reviews and academic papers cannot be equated to the manifold responses of a global community of readers, who in turn are not representative of the people of Sri Lanka whose experiences constitute the subject of this book, there seems little else by which one can gauge a novel's reception, or in the immediate sense, its influence in the world. In spite of the evident limitations of these responses, they do, however, serve to make it clear that the greatest pressure brought to bear on this novel has been the demand for political responsibility. It has in turn been both upbraided and praised for apparently either failing or succeeding to answer this call. One may ask why this particular novel has been subjected to such pressure by prominent newspapers, international current affairs magazines and as the academic community when clearly not all fiction currently published is evaluated by this criterion. It may be inferred that the novel itself signals its responsibility to a real state of affairs in the world in one or several ways. I have argued here that one of the ways in which the novel does this is by means of the author's added inscriptions that open the text to the world, and in so doing places particular demands on itself.

The sense that this novel is underwritten by a consciousness of restraint or a felt responsibility to the material world of which it speaks, is confirmed to some degree or echoed in the interviews given by Ondaatje in which he relates the experience of writing *Anil's Ghost*: "You go down unexpected alleys, you discover a responsibility to diverse voices, and realise you owe them the deepest intricacy. *Anil's Ghost* – of all my books – was the one where I felt that responsibility most" ("Pale Flags" 62). In another interview he remarks, "When you are writing about a place still in the midst of tragedy and war you can't be too facile. There is a real focus out there you feel responsible to, and yet, you don't want to simply record history" (Meade online). The author, as the person speaking in the interview, can be thought of as the experiencing subject, the one who "discover[s]", "realise[s]", "feel[s]" in the process of writing and whose orientation or openness towards the world as it unfolds in a particular flux of singular events, informs the novel. The interview may perhaps be seen as a kind of parallel text of an altogether different order; a not-as-yet aesthetic text, a space in which the subject discloses aspects of the personal self in ordinary everyday spoken language. There is a transformation that occurs in the act of writing, or upon entering the aesthetic, which is enabled by an effacement of the personal, an attentiveness to what lies outside the self, a passage into language beyond the prosaic and the ordinary, that forges new ways of apprehending the ever-changing experience of the world. This reach into alterity unfolds as aesthetic language which characterizes this and other novels.

The textual space of the interview locates the author as person/individual, as an embodied subject existing within temporal and spatial coordinates, as a speaking subject but, perhaps not yet, as the writing subject who, in order to become this, must exceed the bounds of the self or the personal. The voice of the author as emanating from an individual subjectivity (given in the interview) remains only as a trace in the novel itself, integrated into the meshwork of a text drawn from a multitude of experiences. This is so because the author as writing subject "discover[s] a responsibility to diverse voices...ow[ing] them the deepest intricacy" ("Pale Flags" 62). The act of writing, which requires an effacement of the self in order to face the other (necessarily outside the category of the self), is at the same time an entry into the aesthetic. To hear what is

outside the self, namely the voice of the other given as alterity or strangeness, is possible only by abandoning the self, adopting a position of openness or vulnerability. It can be said that the act of writing, the self-effacing reach towards alterity that defines the passage into the aesthetic, which by force of necessity employs 'altered' forms of language as it ventures into what is as yet undisclosed, is in fact an ethical becoming. Levinas describes the unfolding of ethical being as follows: "I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an 'I' precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an ethical 'I'...I become a responsible or ethical 'I' to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself – to abdicate my position of centrality – in favour of the vulnerable other" (*Ethics and Infinity* 81). The coming into being as a "singular person" is thus paradoxically made possible through "abdicat[ing]" or "dethron[ing]" of the self. Something of this unfolding of personhood through the act of writing as a response to what lies outside the self can be discerned in Ondaatje's reflection that "[p]erhaps because I was aware of the responsibility outside myself, *Anil's Ghost* in some way became my most personal work" ("Pale Flags" 62).

In this sense, one may say that ethical becoming and aesthetic or literary writing are equivalent in many respects, and that far from being antithetical or incommensurate, ethics and aesthetics are both directed at apprehending the face of the other. The identification of ethics with aesthetics does of course invoke Wittgenstein's famous and enigmatic dictum given in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that "Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same". Following the argument set out by Robert Eaglestone in his article "One and the Same? Ethics, Aesthetics and Truth" in his reading of Wittgenstein in conjunction with Heidegger's *On the Origin of the Work of Art*, I return in Chapter Five to follow up the relation between ethics and literary writing already suggested here, and track its dynamic intra- textually in the meta-fictional utterances of the novel.

Unravelling the various strands that collectively constitute the figure and/or the name of the author, Michael Ondaatje, has thus opened the enquiry into several theoretical domains. Positioned precariously between text and world, this figure, both real and

abstract, stands at the dense intersection of various discourses and can be understood within various modalities, shifting across the seemingly disparate domains of 'art and life'.³ The aim in this chapter has been to gain some clarity regarding the status of this text in ethical and ontological terms. It has been argued that the novel's mode of production, signalled by the author's acknowledgements as well as by statements made in author interviews,⁴ serves to establish a link between the text and the real world. Rephrased in theoretical terms, it establishes a link between ethics (what happens between people in the world) and aesthetics (the literary text). Such a literary text does,⁵ in effect, offer a response to the human subjects who have experienced in person the traumatic historical events it refers to and in this capacity the writing assumes a performative function. For Derrida, such 'acts of writing' or "poetico-literary performativity [is] at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language, or which in changing language, change more than language" ("This Strange Institution called Literature" 56).

Understanding literature in just such a way, and doing away with the categorical thinking that casts the strict divide between text and world, the German poet and concentration camp survivor Paul Celan has remarked: "I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem" (quoted in Ravvin 66). For Levinas, Celan's poetry, articulating "a language of proximity...[of] responsibility to the neighbour", constitutes an ethical response, an "interjection, a form of expression...a sign to one's neighbour" (quoted in Ravvin 66). The point that can be made here is that the ethical content of a literary text, given by means of the performative function it assumes, rests on the premise that such a text is indeed connected, in a fundamental way, to the world in its living and material state. Apart from disclosing the varied and intricate nature of the ethical encounter by means of textual exposition, literature as such enacts an ethical reach into the world, "a sign to one's neighbour", analogous to the extended hand offered in a living encounter.

³ My construction of 'Michael Ondaatje' as author of *Anil's Ghost* has purposely avoided biographical material and is drawn from interviews and essays that are expressly related to the writing of *Anil's Ghost*. This allows for a consideration of authorial subjectivity without resorting to the positivist strategies of biographical criticism.

⁴ The novel's meta-fictional signposts functioning in support of this argument will be examined in Chapter Five.

⁵ Along with all other forms of literature which declares its interest in the world in one way or another.

That *Anil's Ghost* offers such an ethical response is signalled not only by the particular inscriptions that mark the author figure and which assiduously affirm the text's connectedness to the world, but is also affirmed in the concluding image of the text itself: having performed the precarious task of painting the Buddha's eyes perched on top of the giant statue, the artisan Ananda receives a reassuring touch from the boy who has assisted him throughout the ritual: "He felt the boy's concerned hand in his. The sweet touch from the world" (307). Both the author figure vertiginously suspended between reality and his fiction as well as the meta-fictional image of the artisan balancing on the figure of the Buddha while being supported by the boy, are suspended between the domains of art and life. Both figures, it would seem, seek their anchorage in the "touch of the world" (307).

Moving away from the border zones of this text, the following chapter extends the "topology" of the body suggested by Foucault by examining how the idea of the human body and the experience of embodiment in the world is figured within the parameters of fictional narrative.



CHAPTER THREE

Embodiment in *Anil's Ghost*

The body is the fact that thought is immersed in the world that it thinks and, consequently, expresses this world while it thinks it. The corporeal gesture is not a nervous discharge but a celebration of the world, a poetry.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*.

Anil's Ghost is concerned in an extraordinary way with the embodied experience of being "immersed in the world that it thinks". The aim of this chapter is to offer an exposition of the way the novel presents the body as the site of being in the world. Within such an understanding of embodied existence, the novel shows, perception and cognition cannot be prised apart within the duality of mind and body. The chapter also examines the way the novel negotiates the place of the body within the binary of nature and culture. Last, it explores the way the body is situated in a physical environment or a life-world in which it lives and labours and which determines the contents of its embodied consciousness. This discussion anticipates what will later be proposed as an ethics of the body, which entails being with and for others.

Given that this discussion is concerned with the lived experience of the human body in the world and that it treats this experience as it is mediated through a literary text, the relation between these seemingly disparate domains would seem in need of some theoretical explication. In other words, how is one to relate the body as the site of experience on the one hand to the text as the site which provides access to this experience on the other? Posed in theoretical terms, it may be asked, how can one formulate the relation between the real and the symbolic when talking about the experience of the body in a literary text?

It is precisely this relation that is of particular interest to the discipline of cultural phenomenology, which is concerned with the embodied experience of being immersed in

a world always already determined by multiplicity of cultural meanings. I thus turn to a theoretical proposal put forward by the cultural phenomenologist, Thomas J. Csordas, in which he attempts to negotiate the considerable difficulties presented by the body as highly unstable object of knowledge, being both a biological, material entity (and as such belonging to the order of the real) and a cultural and historical phenomenon (and therefore always already cast in terms of the symbolic). The question then arises, to what extent is culture grounded in bodiliness, or, conversely, is the body a kind of a *tabula rasa* on which culture inscribes its meanings? Rephrased in theoretical terms, how are the crossings between the real and the symbolic to be charted? In answer to this, Csordas makes an important distinction between body and embodiment which is analogous to Roland Barthes's distinction between text and textuality. The work (text) is understood as the material object on a bookshelf and textuality as the indeterminate discursive field that is entered into during the act of reading. The parallel figures here are the body and embodiment. The body is thought of "as a biological material entity and embodiment as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and by mode of presence and engagement in the world" ("Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology" 145). It is within these parameters that I explore the experience of the body in Ondaatje's text. This however still leaves the question of the text's relation to the embodied experience of being in the world. This too is considered by Csordas.

The link between textuality and embodiment is not new and underwrites much that has been written in the field of cultural studies in recent years. The metaphor of the text as articulated by Paul Ricoeur has been widely used, giving rise to an understanding of the world as a text which unfolds its meanings in chains of open signifiers. The "rule of the metaphor" has been extended to such domains as the elemental physical world which, recast as landscape, is opened to cultural reading or interpretation. In the same manner the human body, long thought of as both sense and matter, also allows itself to be viewed as a field of signification. Within this emerging pantextuality,¹ Csordas notes, it was easily denied or forgotten that there is anything outside discourse or representation such as

¹ This falls in with the increasing dominance of social constructivism in the humanities, underpinned by Saussurian sign theory, allowing for the theoretical dissolution of the real into the linguistic.

'experience'. The exclusion of the real thus affected a radical epistemological move in which language was understood not only to denote experience, but to constitute it. This move then "closes the gap between language and experience and thereby eliminates a dualism, but does so not by transcending the dualism, but by *reducing* experience to language, or discourse, or representation" ("Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology" 146).

Csordas then proposes an alternative that does not reduce experience to language or collapse the real into the symbolic. He argues that

the polarization of language and experience is itself a function of a predominantly representationalist theory of language. One need conclude neither that language is 'about' nothing other than itself, nor that language wholly constitutes experience, nor that language refers to experience that can be known in no other way. One can instead argue that language gives access to a world of experience in so far as experience is brought to language. (*Embodiment and Experience* 11).

In the domain of phenomenology, language is understood to be itself a modality of being in the world. This is expressed in Heidegger's dictum that language not only represents or refers, but discloses experience. The notion of language as modality of being in the world or a form of disclosure takes its place alongside the theoretical notion of representation. The purpose is not to overthrow representation as methodological figure but that language alternatively construed as a disclosure of experience, functions "as a dialogical partner that keeps [representation] intellectually in check – that allows us to pose the alternatives that representation constitutes experience and reality as text or that it discloses their embodied immediacy" ("Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology" 146).

Informed by Csordas's proposal in which language is understood to function within various modalities which include representing the world as well as disclosing experience which is integral to "existing in a circuit with reality" (Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" 5), the literary text and the aesthetic language it employs may thus be viewed as being deeply imbricated with the world and moving from the empirical to the conceptual without reducing the one to the other. In this view, the real and the symbolic are not incommensurate or mutually exclusive domains or polar opposites but are located

in a continuous landscape in which the horizon of the sign is visible but eludes any determinate fixing. It is within the same continuities between the real and the symbolic that the idea of the body "as a biological material entity" (more firmly belonging to the real) can be plotted alongside the parallel figure of embodiment "as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and by mode of presence and engagement in the world" (Csordas, "Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology" 145).

The experience of embodiment in *Anil's Ghost* is chiefly inflected through the figure of Anil. In a distinctive departure from dominant literary conventions of characterization which are informed by a long legacy of dualistic thinking based on the mind/body distinction, the novel avoids constructing human subjectivity in terms of an inner life which is separate, original and primary and its counterpart of outward behaviour and appearance as a reflection of this interior. References to Anil's appearance are minimal, her dialogue reveals little of an inner life and there is virtually no conventional novelistic "telling" in which "the writer intervenes authoritatively in order to describe, and often to evaluate, the motives and dispositional qualities of the characters" (Abrams 22). The novel thus accords no privilege of place to a so-called inner life as the locus of both thought and emotions. The body, no longer objectified as exterior manifestation of what resides 'within', is thus foregrounded as the site of experience and thought.

That this subtle shift away from familiar modes of representation may be received with some degree of unease is registered in a curious, possibly unconscious moment in the novel itself. Anil's lover, the science writer called Cullis, is struck by the sense that throughout their affair she has remained "a complete stranger" (35) to him. It would seem that Anil eludes being fully known by lover and reader alike. She retains a discomfiting distance or 'strangeness'. This effect may be attributed to the novel's seeming refusal to construct a sense of psychological depth or some kind of moral disposition. This apparent shortcoming, which may in fact be understood as an implicit criticism or rejection of such categories as constitutive of personhood, has evidently also unsettled several book reviewers. One of them notes that "individual characters never develop in the course of the book, and never really connect with each other in any significant way; they remain

static, isolated within their pasts in a state of incurable self-stupefaction" (Reich 38). Allen Brooke is more scathing still: "All these characters wander about in a sort of solipsistic fog, bumping against one another occasionally but all sunk too deep into their own psyches to connect on more than a primitive non verbal level" (65). These responses suggest that the novel's departure from the conventions of characterization and its foray into new modes of writing about subjective human experience are currently still (mis)read as a serious deficiency of sorts.

Alternatively, Anil's seeming strangeness or inscrutability may be construed as a distance deliberately maintained by the writer, signalling an understanding of human subjectivity as fundamentally enigmatic or never entirely knowable. Anil is thus not revealed as a character in the familiar and recognisable forms of literary convention, but rather as an embodied subject whose consciousness is incarnate and who is indissolubly connected to the world. To this end, frequent descriptions are provided that give account of bodily experience as constituted by visual, audial and tactile perception within a circumambient world or environment. More than a psychological entity, the figure Anil is shown as sensually perceptive body. The ability to think and feel is predicated on this primary ability to perceive the world. The following paragraph, set soon after Anil's arrival in Sri Lanka, is characteristic of Ondaatje's way of showing such embodied experience as grounded in sensory perception of the environment. While showering at the end of the day, Anil registers the bodily changes that announce an oncoming fever.

She was still half asleep in the shower. Her toes nestled against a piece of rough granite, cold water gushing down onto her hair.

She washed her face rubbing the peppermint soap on her closed eyelids, then rinsing it off. When she looked at the plantain leaves at shoulder level into the distance she could see the blue mountains beyond, the out-of-focus world, beautiful.

But by noon she was encased in a terrible headache. (59)

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, lived experience of the body denies the detachment of a subjective consciousness from the objective world in which it is situated. Anil's immediate physical surroundings as she showers are experienced at the same time as that which constitutes the interior of her consciousness. Thus by means of a sensually perceptive rendition of the circumambient world of the embodied subject, the writing

discloses an important aspect of experience, which is fundamentally enigmatic because it is simultaneously without and within the consciousness of the subject-body. Merleau-Ponty expresses this notion as follows: "Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself" (407). Consciousness is, thus, both incarnate in the body and inhering in the world.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied existence as inhering in the world is perhaps best given in the figure of Anil as an "exceptional swimmer" with a "talent...locked to her for life" (10). Although Anil rejects her reputation as one-time swimming champion during her youth in Sri Lanka because there has been "a lot of blood under the bridge since then" (16),² she is shown to derive great pleasure from the exhilarating river swims shared with her colleague Sarath (47). In the act of swimming, the body is immersed in the entirely different medium of water to which it must acclimatize. It does this by adjusting its mode of motility to this altered perceptual field. The body is in total contact within this medium which envelopes it entirely. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body in the world is similarly immersed in the circumambient environment with which it is in a sense at one, and towards which it develops a bodily 'intentionality'. The world is therefore not spread out before consciousness as 'object' which is separate from it, but inheres in it. In his novel *Thomas the Obscure* (1950) Maurice Blanchot articulates just such a confluence between consciousness and the circumambient environment which is heightened in the experience of swimming. In the act of swimming his character Thomas "pursued a sort of reverie in which he confused himself with the sea. The intoxication of leaving himself, of slipping into the void, of dispersing himself in the water, made him forget every discomfort" (8). The immersion in the altered medium of water is experienced as dissolution of the boundaries between the embodied mind and its circumambient environment which affects a release of sorts, a forgetting of "every discomfort".

Anil's adeptness as swimmer is mentioned several times (10, 16, 47, 67, 249). This serves to foreground her subjectivity as primarily embodied and her consciousness as inhering in

² Anil distances herself from an earlier identity associated with her youth in Sri Lanka which after many formative years in the West, she has now 'outlived'.

the world. This is so not only because the swimming body figuratively expresses the notion of the subject-body's inherence or immersion in the world, but also because swimming requires what may be called a form of embodied intelligence.

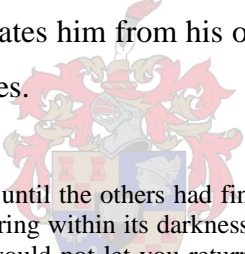
Swimming is a skill of the body that is not usually acquired through conscious reflection but learned through repeated bodily efforts until it is retained. As such it bears a similarity to dance. The body's ability to perceive is not only a passive taking in of sensory stimulation but also an ability to respond actively and creatively to an environment. This is called the 'creative receptivity' of the body and allows the body movement which is orientated within an environment and responsive to it. Such perceptive being in the world is learnt, primarily through imitation, in a communal environment.

Just as the skills of the body are learned, so is the ability to think. Sarath acquires his learning and ability to put "forward a theory" by entering a period of study or training with his mentor Palipana. "He was learning the rules and methods of argument the way a boy watching a sport from the sidelines learns timing and skills with his still body" (94). Thus the acquisition of a thinking skill is an embodied activity achieved through imitation and repetition. If the body is the site where mental processes take place, it is also affected by such cognitive processes. "Anil stood lost in the stricture of no movement, in a precise focus of thought. She had no idea how long she had been there in the courtyard, how long she had been thinking through all the possible trajectories of Sailor, but when she came out of it and moved, her neck felt as if it had an arrow in it" (176). There is no region of pure thought independent of the body but rather a 'thinking' body.

Swimming, as an activity which engages the body in a particularly heightened way, is a significant activity for several other characters in the novel. The militants who abduct the doctor Linus Chorea from his lucrative medical practice in Colombo to work in their field hospital in the jungle present him with a strange reward on his birthday. He is blindfolded and driven to an unknown place in the jungle where he is led to the edge of a precipice.

The scene unfolds initially as a possible execution but the expectation of terror aroused in both the reader and in Chorea is lifted abruptly when he realizes that he has been pushed over a rocky ledge into a mountain pool. He is joined moments later by his abductors and fellow workers in the cold and exhilarating water. "From then on, a swim became part of the day's schedule, if there was time. He always thought of it before he fell asleep. It heightened his excitement about the oncoming day. The swim." (124). The traumatic shock of the event, which echoes his first abduction, strips Chorea from what may have remained of his habitual detachment and indifference to the world around him and restores him to a fully embodied consciousness of the world.

Anil's Sri Lankan colleague Sarath, surrounded in his working life by "[p]atterns of death" (278), also takes to escaping the grim or deadening realities of his occupation by swimming in the ocean. The quickening experience of being immersed in the dark water with its dangerous undertow dislocates him from his ordinary life world and releases him from the weight of his personal cares.


 He waited until the early evening, until the others had finished swimming in the sea, before he walked into the water, disappearing within its darkness. At this dark hour, out deep, there were sometimes rogue tides that would not let you return, that insisted you away. Alone in the waves he would let go of himself, his body flung around as if in a dance, only his head in the air rational to what surrounded him, the imperceptible glint of large waves that he would slip beneath as they rose above him. (278)

The more primal or pre-reflective movements of the swimming or dancing body are experienced as freeing, a 'letting go' of the mental regime imposed on the subject during the workday. Significantly, Sarath, who stands in the novel as the man of reason, keeps his "head in the air rational to what surrounded him", as if the mind, conventionally associated with the head, must somehow always be vigilant over the body.

The integration between mind and body is figured in a heightened way in Anil's extraordinary solitary performance of a back flip. She is able to achieve this feat "when the air is light and cool" in the early morning or after an afternoon shower, allowing "music to push her into extremities and grace".

Anil moves in silence, the energy held back. Her body taut as an arm, the music brutal and loud in her head, while she waits for the rhythm to angle off so she can open her arms and leap. Which she does now throwing head back, her hair a black plume, back almost to the level of her waist. Throws her arms too, to hold the ground in her back flip, her loose skirt having no time to discover gravity and drop before she is on her feet again. (181)

What happens here, the novel tells us, is no longer a dance; it "does not contain even a remnant of the courtesy or sharing that is part of the dance". Instead she is "waking every muscle in herself, blindfolding every rule she lives by, giving every skill she has to the movement of her body...It feels as if she could eject herself out of her own body like an arrow" (181). Given the right ambient conditions in the natural environment, the intense auditory stimulus of rhythmic music and the willed exclusion of the everyday mental operations, her body gears itself to a supreme level of 'creative receptivity' which enables her to achieve what may be described here as a near transcendence or dislocation of the body or the self, reminiscent of the Romantic flight of the 'soul' or 'spirit'. In this state "she is invisible to herself, though it is a state she longs for" (190). The 'invisibility' here signifies an oblivion of sorts, an altered state or loss of the ordinary sense of self. Unknown to Anil this moment is witnessed by Sarath, who watches her from a window. He registers her profound transformation. "He watches a person he has never seen. A girl insane, a druid in moonlight, a thief in oil. This is not the Anil he knows" (181). Ondaatje thus shows an understanding of the body in which, as Levinas puts it, "the body is conceived as inseparable from creative activity and transcendence is inseparable from the corporeal movement" ("Meaning and Sense" 39). Later the novel offers another form of "fearful metamorphosis" (288) in the ethical encounter figured as the *pieta*. In this event there is an embrace of the other whose body is made strange or is transformed in some way.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that perception is not only the heart of the life-world of the embodied subject, but that it is the ground from which cognitive processes take shape. It is understood that the mind is inseparable from the subject's bodily, situated and physical nature. The interrelatedness of thinking and perceiving may be discerned in the following scene which takes place in the forest dwelling of the oriental scholar Palipana, the *Grove of Ascetics*:

[Anil] undressed by the well, unstrapped her watch and got into the *diya reddha* cloth, and dropped the bucket into the depths. There was a hollow smash far below her. The bucket sank and filled. She jerked the rope so the bucket flew up, and caught it by the rope near the handle. Now she poured the cold water over herself and its glow entered her in a rush, refreshing her. Once more she dropped the bucket into the well and jerked it up and poured it over her hair and shoulders so the water billowed within the thin cloth onto her belly and legs. She understood how wells could become sacred. They combined sparse necessity and luxury. She would give away every earring she owned for an hour by the well. She repeated the mantra of gestures again and again. When she had finished she unrapped the wet cloth and stood naked in the wind and the last of the sunlight, then put on the dry sarong. She bent over and beat the water off her hair. (90)

Stripped of the workaday garments and covered minimally by a simple cloth, Anil engages in the near primal act of washing her body by a well, reminiscent of a figure from the ancient world. The attention here is focussed almost entirely on the actions and sensations of the body washing itself. The perceiving body then becomes the reflective body as experience is drawn into the cognitive processes of thinking and knowing. Thus Anil's physical and sensory experience of washing by a well allows her to "[understand] how wells could become sacred. They combine sparse necessity with luxury." She formulates a particular aesthetic of living here, one borne out of the pleasure of a perceptual experience. This aesthetic does not draw a divide between nature and culture. The simple bodily act of washing, the formal gestures of this ritual phrased in cultural terms as a "mantra of gestures", unfolds as an inherently meaningful act of embodied being.

The notion of the aesthetic advanced here recalls the original Greek sense of *aesthesis* which means sense perception in general. According to Herbert Grabes, the aesthetic withstands epistemological deconstruction, since it "contains its own justification, foregoing as it does all [metaphysical] claims except the one that it appears whenever it appears – a state of pure being" (13). Anil, thus engaged in the act of washing her body, integrates movement, perception and thinking in an inherently meaningful embodied experience, perhaps coming close to exemplifying such an aesthetic or a "state of pure being" as described by Grabes. Significantly, meaning is not bestowed from any metaphysical domain or an outside, but is inherent in the embodied experience. In an essay strongly inflected by the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas proposes a similar understanding of meaning as arising out of the experience of being in the world: "cultural

action expresses not a pre-existing thought but being, to which, as incarnate, it belongs already. *Meaning cannot be inventoried in the inwardness of a thought.* Thought itself is inserted in Culture through the verbal gesture of the body, which precedes it and goes beyond it" ("Meaning and Sense" 40, original italics).

The passage in which Anil washes by the well similarly suggests a confluence of sorts between the sense experience of the natural body and culture as forms of shared embodied practices. The perceptive body as biological entity (nature) is the site of pleasurable sensation, and as such it is also the site of aesthetics and of culture. Monika Langer explains Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the relation between nature and culture: "The biological body does not come equipped with a ready-made immutable human nature; there is no 'natural' behaviour subtending cultural 'conventions'. A fundamental ambiguity distinguishes human life from animal life, such that everything in the former is simultaneously 'natural' and 'cultural' – nothing is absolutely independent of 'purely biological being', yet everything transcends it" (62).

The exception to this balanced notion of the nature/culture dualism that the novel as a whole seems to underwrite is presented in the figure of Anil, who as the Western trained forensic pathologist, also occupies the ideological position of empiricist scientist. Her leaning towards biological determinism is expressed in her fascination for the *Amygdala*, a "small knot of fibres made up of nerve cells" (134) housed in the brain which she dissects during an anatomy class while studying for her medical degree in England. This anatomical region is also known as the "primitive brain", the seat of "pure emotion" and "fear". The anatomy professor shares Anil's intrigue and together they wonder how far this part of the brain is genetically coded through inheritance (implicit in this is an essentialist view typical of the empiricist scientist) or if it is determined by subjective experience, in other words, if the body is a kind of a blank slate or *tabula rasa* to begin with, which is then inscribed by culture and experience (the constructivist view). The professor declares that "[w]e don't know" if there are "essential patterns" but owns to having "always liked those nineteenth century novels where brothers and sisters in different cities could feel the same pains, have the same fears" (235). Ironically, the

essentialist view is promoted here by a cultural text, suggesting perhaps the long standing interrelations between scientific and literary discourses. Anil however makes her own bias clear. Although the name *Amygdala* "doesn't sound scientific", to her, but rather "Sri Lankan" (135), perhaps in a mis/identification of herself as Sri Lankan in the language of Western scientivism, she comes to believe that "it governs everything. How we behave and make decisions, how we seek out safe marriages, how we build houses that we make secure" (135). Anil thus reveals her own deterministic or an acquired positivist understanding of the body.

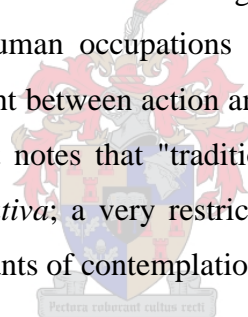
Perhaps it is significant too that Anil's girlfriend Leaf begins to suffer from loss of memory and loses the ability to recall words as a result of Alzheimer's disease which is linked in her case to an episode of encephalitis during childhood (256). The causal factor in the tragedy of Leaf is thus biological in origin. Again the situation is heavily ironic as the disease does not manifest in the physical body as most illnesses do, but it affects what is thought of as the mind, resulting in the gradual loss of her ability to command language which is an entity that is, for the greater part, constructed culturally. Again the categories mind/body and nature/culture are mutually implicated in one another.

The intensified embodied experience, presented in the novel as gift, rarity or extraordinary event, offers pleasure and release from the everyday and, possibly even transcendence of ordinary being. Such experiences are offset against the largely quotidian existence of ordinary work life. Just as the novel exults in the aesthetic or transcendent experience of the body, it takes equal care to attend to and pay tribute to the labouring body as well as to celebrate the working body. The novel's epigraph quotes a miners' folk song from Sri Lanka which offers a form of homage to those in the world who are forced to labour with their bodies, "*down in the pits seventy-two fathoms deep*" (3). Later in the book, a visually foregrounded (by means of italic script) interlude of two pages provides an account of a day in the life of a gem-pit miner called Ananda, written in a poetic prose style.

With the dark-green light of the morning around them the men appeared to float over the open landscape. They could hear and almost feel the birds that shot out of the fields with life

in their mouths. They began stripping off their vests. They were all gem-pit workers. Soon they would be under the earth, on their knees digging into walls, feeling for any hardness of stone or root or gem. They would move in the underground warrens, sloshing barefoot in mud and water, combing their fingers into the wet clay, the damp walls. Each shift was six hours long. Some entered the earth in darkness and emerged in light, some returned to dusk.
(91)

Ananda, once a sacred eye-painter in the Buddhist ceremony of Netra Mangala, becomes a gem-pit miner when his life is traumatically derailed by political violence. Later he becomes the artisan who reconstructs the face of the unidentified skeleton "Sailor". Later still, he rises to the level of artificer or eye-painter once again and participates in the momentous scene at the close of the novel. Within the time span of Anil's sojourn in Sri Lanka, the story of Ananda charts an ascending trajectory which begins with the lowly position of one who labours with the body to an occupation which requires the skill of hands, culminating finally in the elevated position of artist whose work produces spiritual or cultural meaning. The story of Ananda's ascending path from miner to artist maps out something like a hierarchy of human occupations determined by the distinction and values imposed by Western thought between action and contemplation. In her analysis of work and labour, Hannah Arendt notes that "traditionally, the *vita activa* received its meaning from the *vita contemplativa*; a very restrictive dignity was bestowed upon it because it served the needs and wants of contemplation in the living body" (362-363).



Arendt makes a further distinction between labour and work which is prompted by a remark of John Locke's, who speaks of "the labour of our body and the work of our hands". The notion of labour carries with it "unequivocal connotations of bodily experiences, of toil and trouble, and [it is] significantly also used for the pangs of birth". Ananda and his fellow gem-pit miners clearly exemplify this form of labour, their daily descent into the pits "*seventy-two fathoms deep*", rendering them "*invisible as [flies]*" (Epigraph). The "toil and trouble" of their labour is also inscribed on their bodies, leaving the "markers of occupation" (166) that Anil deciphers in her work as forensic pathologist.

The body thus marked by the practices of physical labour it performs is reminiscent of Foucault's determinist or passive notion of the body which bears the imprint of its history. The body, writes Foucault, "is moulded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken

down by the rhythms of work, rest and holidays; it is poisoned by food and values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 153). It is just such a history of the body Anil seeks to uncover when she attempts a "reading of the bones" (177) belonging to the unidentified skeleton. Aided by the scholarly text *Reconstruction of Life from the Skeleton* (this is an actual text which appears in the acknowledgements), Anil attempts to uncover what kinds of labours and activities Sailor may have practiced during his life. To this end she notes down facts such as "the arm joints showed symmetrical use, so both arms had been active. His pelvis, trunk and legs also gave the suggestion of agility, something like the swivel of a man on a trampoline" (178). Her methodology proves to be successful and Sailor is identified as a villager who has worked as a miner and a toddy tapper (269). When Ananda is given the task of reconstructing Sailor's face from the bones of the skull, he follows the same procedure in reverse. Sitting by a public well in the village where Sailor had lived, he "watched the village move around him with its distinct behaviour, its local body postures and facial characteristics. He wanted to discover what people drank here, whether there was a specific diet that would puff up the cheeks more than usual" (167). Thus by surveying the local customs of embodiment he hopes to understand the "distinct regimes" that may have marked and formed the body of Sailor.³ The practices of labour and life thus written into the muscles and bones of the human body offer a record of the material conditions of the culture and labour of that life. Thus the experiences of embodied existence are made legible on the body itself in a curious 'embodiment of text'.

Returning to Arendt's distinction between labour and work as well as the traditional distinction between the active and the contemplative life, it may be asked whether the novel as a whole replicates the conventional denigration of the labouring body and privileging of mental activity. The labouring body exemplified by the gem-pit miner is presented in the novel as hard-pressed and scarred by the gruelling regime of underground work imposed on it. The miners are, however, imbued with dignity and a near heroic status in the lyrical two page evocation of their daily toil and suffering (91-

³ Ananda's project is however not successful, as he is unable to maintain the necessary objectivity demanded in scientific procedure. Instead he moulds his subjective feelings into the reconstruction of the head which gives expression to his personal sense of loss but does not deliver scientific results.

93). By attending closely to the material conditions of their obscure subterranean existences, Ondaatje pays tribute to the miners and the toil of their bodies. Ananda is later released from the hardship of underground labour to engage in a type of work which demands manual dexterity as well as cognitive and aesthetic engagement.

The working body thus engaged in an integrated physical and cognitive activity is accorded a particular position of privilege in the novel. Such a working body is celebrated in the figure of Anil. Her workplace is the laboratory, a space she comes to love intensely as she becomes increasingly engaged with her work. Away from the laboratory, she "[misses] the thrill that [gets] knocked into her when they [slap] the lights on over the aluminium tables" (34). Similarly, the doctor Gamini "felt happiest when he stepped from disorganized youth into the exhilaration of work" (227). For Anil, too, work is refuge from the chaos of relationships, offering clearly organized categories of meaning and strict protocols to direct her modes of operating. "[S]he fell in love with working at night, and sometimes she couldn't bear to leave the lab, just rested her happily tired dark head on the table" (145). While exercising the specialized skills of forensic examination and observation she also records and interprets data within the framework of institutional knowledge. The physicality of Anil's work intensifies when she begins to do field work which involves the more labour intensive and demanding activities of digging and the clearing away of earth to uncover bodies or skeletons. At this stage she falls "even more in love with her work", her body accommodating to the new routine; she becomes thinner and cuts her hair short. (33) The intense physical regime of the workday affects her unconscious, her "hand moving constantly, as if brushing earth away" (34) even while she is sleeping. The nature of the work demands an equivalent measure of cognitive engagement, and on another level still, the work is imbued with an ethical or moral mandate. A fellow worker reflects on the moral purpose of their work as follows: "*When I have been digging and I am tired and don't want to do anymore, I think how it could be me in the grave I am working on. I would not want someone to stop digging for me*" (34). Anil's physical labour accompanied by both manual and mental skills, given anchorage in a moral and social order, is presented as an integrated and inherently meaningful activity.

The novel thus sets up the kind of work practiced by Anil and later by Gamini as an exemplary form of activity. It does this by bridging the conventional divide between the active and contemplative life which alienates the labour of the body and the practice of physical skills from the activities of the mind. The novel thus does not re-inscribe the traditional hierarchies of Western thought which denigrates the body and elevates the mind, but proposes a continuity between one category and the other in an integrated understanding of human subjectivity. Those who labour solely with the body are accorded a high degree of honour. In an earlier novel, *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), Ondaatje raises the labour and work of the body as primary concern, focussing on the experiences of loggers, cattle herders, dynamite workers, construction site workers, dye house workers, bakers, printers and all manner of artisans and factory hands in a narrative set around the turn of the nineteenth century, which saw Canada's rapid swing from undeveloped frontier land to an emergent first world nation. Ondaatje will not have us forget that 'civilization' as material entity and not as metaphysical construct is achieved on the back of the labouring body. The conventional hierarchies grounded in the mind/body binary that ascribe privilege to mental activity over the work of the body are challenged in Ondaatje's writings. There is no simplistic reversal of order here but an elevation of the body alongside the mind with which it forms a continuous whole. Most importantly, the novel establishes a link between the physical work of the body and an ethical way of being in the world which is not envisaged here as an adherence to metaphysical principles but an action performed by the body. This kind of work is exemplified by the emergency room doctors who are elevated, somewhat idealistically, perhaps, to the "kings and queens" (229) of the novel. I return to this in the final chapter.

As the notion of being always entails situatedness in the world, the novel attends to a range of lived in environments, world spaces, work places, homes, dwellings, natural and urban environments that constitute the life worlds of embodied subjects. In an italicized interlude of nearly two pages, a detailed description is given of the National Atlas of Sri Lanka, produced in "*seventy three versions of the island – each template revealing only one aspect, one obsession*" (39). These range from rainfall and wind to geological features, bird life, wealth/poverty distributions and literacy levels. The last paragraph

reads as follows: *"There are pages of isobars and altitudes. There are no city names. Only the unknown and unvisited town of Maha Illupalama is sometimes noted, where the Department of Meteorology once, in the 1930s, in what now seems a medieval time, compiled and recorded winds and rainfall and barometric pressure. There are no river names. No depiction of human life"* (40). The atlas as representation of the physical world of the island produced by the positivist discourse of science is marked by several seemingly arbitrary inclusions, some inappropriate selections, and one most particularly glaring omission, namely the *"depiction of human life"*. Left unseen by the delimited gaze of scientific empiricism, the novel attends in some detail to the life world of human beings. The spaces inhabited by people in the novel can roughly be organized within a rural/urban scheme, and will be discussed in this order.

Palipana, whose mode of being in the world is clearly celebrated in the novel, inhabits an Arcadian space in the depths of a tropical jungle. Dwelling amidst the remnants of a "leaf hall, shade-filled and muted in colour" (94) in an abandoned forest monastery called "The Grove of Ascetics", the archetypal Asian or other worldly scholar, once cast out and discredited by the institutions of the West, continues his life's occupation as "archaeological theorist". He "lived in the forest grove with books and writing tablets. But for him, now, all history was filled with sunlight, every hollow was filled with rain. Though he worked he was conscious that the paper itself that held these histories was fading fast. It was insect-bitten, sun-faded, wind-scattered. And there was his old, thin body. Palipana too now was governed only by the elements" (84). The blind scholar retreats into a sort of a primordial union with nature, the elemental world subsuming and obliterating the inscriptions of scholarly endeavour, as though offering a reminder of the greater likelihood that the physical world will long outlive the written histories that chart its passage through time. Palipana's forest existence celebrates a refined sort of natural ascetism also practiced by the monks who had inhabited the "Grove of Ascetics" during another age, "not really poor, but [living] sparsely". Palipana's finely tuned sensibilities allow him to distinguish "between the gross material world and the 'subtle' material world" (86) and always to embrace the latter.

During their stay with Palipana, Anil is drawn strongly to the tranquillity of this arboreal existence with its rhythms "aligned to the sun and moon" (106). In "this landscape of dark green and deep grey" it "felt to Anil as if her pulse had fallen asleep, that she was moving like the slowest animal in the world through the grass. She was picking up intricacies of what was around them...I will not want to leave this place she thought" (97). The immersion in nature is experienced as a sublime sort of detachment from the world. Thus Anil, sleeping in the wooden *ambalama* at night with "the crackle of thunder far away", feels as if "they were not nestled on a rock but unmoored, on a river" (102). For the most part Anil's ordinary life-world is far removed from this "'subtle' material" world and its earth bound rhythms. Some of its ascetic practices are, however, echoed in her city life. Like the forest monks, she too is careful "always to live below her means" (67), allowing herself only small luxuries or rituals of escape such as bathing her feet in a sunken pool strewn with flowers or the "miracle of a foam bath" (33). Another adherent of the pared-down ascetic life is the emergency room doctor Gamini. Unbound by the material ties of middle class existence, he sleeps in empty hospital beds but allows himself the meagre luxury of "hoard[ing] Lifebuoy and shower[ing] three times a day" (204).

Care of the body is writ large in the "Grove of Ascetics". Acts of mutual grooming are elevated to a prototypical form of ethical practice of caring for the other. This is exemplified in the relation between the old man Palipana and his niece: "In the afternoon the girl sat between his legs, and his hands were in her long hair searching for lice with those long fingers and combing it while the girl rubbed his feet" (106). Beyond the secluded forest world, in the "gross material world" of toil and labour, the bodies of gem-pit miners, emerging after a shift underground, are attended to with similar care. *"Helped by the women, they moved to the mound where they could be hosed off, beginning with hair and shoulders, the water jetting onto their almost naked bodies"* (original italics, 92). Such practices, namely the restorative rituals of grooming and washing, articulate an aesthetics of everyday living based in a fundamental attentiveness to the body. Attending to the body of the self and of the other unfolds as an ethics of responsibility in the situation when the other presents as a wounded or suffering body. No such a demand is however made within the precinct of the idyllic forest monastery in which one is

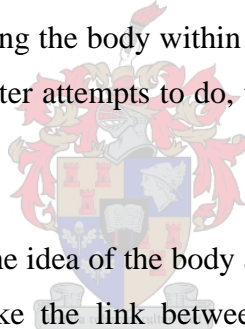
"conscious only of the noises from the surrounding ocean of trees. Farther away were the wars of terror, the gunmen in love with the sound of their shells, where the main purpose of war had become war" (98). Within the edenic harmony of "The Grove of Ascetics" the ethical call is sufficiently answered in the loving caress and care of the other. Beyond this sacred grove, in the fallen world where the "wars of terror" are directed at the destruction of the human body, the dead and wounded call for an altogether more demanding ethical response. Chapters Five and Six look in detail at the phenomenon of contemporary war and the ethical crisis that ensues when political groups assume the right to exercise power by means of deciding who is to die and who may live.

The novel constructs yet another Arcadian living space, a "*grand meaulnes*" (201) or hidden domain in which ecological and aesthetic balance combine to produce an idyllic ground for being and working. This is the "classic building, two hundred years old" (201), for generations the family home of the Wickramasinges on a tea estate, now "taken over by the Archaeological Society and Historical Board" (164), intimating the passing of the old colonial order. Anil, Sarath and Ananda move to this remote and deserted house or *walawwa* to continue their work on the skeletons: "There are two locations of shade here. The shadowed porch and the shadow under the great red tree. Beneath the tree is a low stone bench. Anil spends much of her time here, under the tree bent like an Aeolian harp that throws a hundred variations of shadow textures onto the sandy earth" (201). As the fine gradations of light outside the house evoke the other worldly beauty of a prelapsarian idyll, the inside is inscribed with mysterious lettering, words "you find in ancient romances. Not the vernacular" (165). The nostalgic longing for an escape in the ruins, finely nuanced degrees of shade and runes of a romantic past revealed amidst the abundant outgrowths of nature and the seemingly timeless movements of the elemental world can perhaps be perceived as an all too precious escapist fantasy, too severely at odds with the extreme realities disclosed in the rest of the novel. Tom Leclair's objection to the novel's 'retreat into the aesthetic' may not be entirely unjustified at least where this matter is concerned.

The quietism of life in the "Grove of Ascetics" and remote *walawwa* inhabited for a while by Anil and her colleagues is radically set off against the densely built up and technologically controlled urban spaces of the Westernised world. This is the world Anil inhabits in her usual life and in which she has come to feel equally at home: "A no-name plaza appeared at the side of the highway, and she parked beneath the blinking lights of a Bowlerama. 'I live here,' she said. 'In the West'" (36). Thus claiming ownership of her new life-world, Anil is rescripted as Westerner. The change over had not come easily. Her relocation to the West as a young woman had thrown her into a "confused geography" (141) and into the "in the smoke of a bad marriage" (140). Extricating herself from a traumatic personal history and the culture of her native country, Anil began actively to shape a new identity, allowing the structures that ordered her new life-world to become the structures that order her way of being and thinking: "In her years abroad, during her European and North American education, Anil had courted foreignness, was at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highway around Santa Fe. She felt completed abroad. (Even now her brain held the area codes of Denver and Portland.) And she had come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries. Information could always be clarified and acted upon" (54).

The passage underscores the notion that being is always situated in a particular life-world and that the nature of thought is formed by the material surrounds of the body-subject. For Levinas, there is necessarily "a *nearness and a side-by-sideness*, an alliance, a *belongingness* which unites the intellect and the intelligible on one plane of the world, forming that 'fundamental historicity' which Merleau-Ponty speaks of" ("Meaning and Sense" 43). Thus caught in the grid of various historical/cultural frameworks Anil is required to shift her mode of being each time she relocates between continents. This is never more so than on her return to Sri Lanka after having been in the West for fifteen years. The actively repressed script and language of her childhood resurfaces to cause her moments of considerable anguish. She appears for the most, however, to play her Western part with stern conviction, belied only in the moments of an all too excessive a zeal for the new forms of truth she has come to adopt.

Anil's Ghost, as this chapter has endeavoured to show, thus provides an extensive topology of the body, exploring it both "as a biological material entity" in Csordas's terms, as well as examining the notion of embodiment as "defined by perceptual experience and by mode of presence and engagement in the world". It presents embodied experience as an incorporation of both perception and cognition, proposing a confluence between the natural or biological body and the body as site of aesthetic experience and cultural practice. It pays tribute to the labouring body and celebrates work as an integrated and meaningful practice demanding both physical skill and cognitive ability. It situates the body subject within a physical life world which sets the parameters of experience. The body, clearly staked out as the site of being in an ordinary life world, provides the ground from which the novel moves into an altogether more serious consideration of the body in war. Chapters Five and Six continue the exploration of the body placed under the extreme duress inflicted upon it during a time of war. A further significant function of foregrounding the body within the dense matrix of discourses is to make it apparent, as the final chapter attempts to do, that the body of the body-subject is the body of ethics.



The subsequent chapter takes up the idea of the body as a signifying entity, a "treasury of signs", in Nancy's words, to make the link between embodiment and textuality and finally, truth (193). By linking corporeality and historical existence to the meaning or truth of a text, it is argued that the idea of truth is necessarily rooted to our concrete existence in the world and is not derived from the plane of ideality. For Levinas, the "scaffolding [of meaning] is never taken down; the ladder is never pulled up." ("Meaning and Sense" 44). Truth, in other words, is an entity derived from the material world, from our concrete existences. "Everywhere one should find the sense beneath the meaning, beneath the metaphor, the sublimation, the literature" (45).

CHAPTER FOUR

The Art and Science of Truth

The nature of art is poetry. The nature of poetry, in turn is the founding of truth.
Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*.

I have read the bill of Human Rights and some of it is true.
Leonard Cohen, *The Captain*.

The previous chapter charted a range of discourses, articulated in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, related to the experience of embodied existence. By way of taking up a new but interrelated strand of ideas, I return to the idea of the body as signifying entity which presents itself, and also its parts,¹ as a kind of a text or legible surface. These dual and interlinked strands of body and text, surfacing repeatedly throughout the novel, can be recognized as the intertwined discourses of corporeality and textuality, familiar as particular concerns of postmodern thought. The aim of this chapter is to examine the way *Anil's Ghost* presents both the human body and the physical world as material signs that are at once both legible/illegible or that disclose/conceal knowledge. Such material signs, when yielding positivist knowledge, constitute what may be variously thought of as fact, verifiable evidence or, ultimately, and most problematically, what is understood as truth. The idea of truth put forward and interrogated by this novel is therefore not a metaphysical entity, but is something that is disclosed, revealed or suggested by physical marks, signs or traces that are legible to various degrees on human bodies and the physical structures of the world. The status or acceptance of what is offered as truth is also shown by the novel to be dependent on particular conditions in the world. These conditions of truth are determined within the political order by institutions such as the Sri Lankan government and the Western academy. Most importantly, the novel's meta-fictional discourse puts forward a sophisticated argument in which it stakes out the ground of its own truth and by extension the truth offered any fiction which "makes the

¹ Most notably the bones Anil reads for forensic evidence.

least claim to the quality of art or may hope to take its place in the culture of men and women of its time" in the words of Conrad (*Under Western Eyes*, Author's Note).

The novel's concern with truth is written into several of its salient features. First, it structures the narrative quest that is directed at the uncovering the truth about human rights abuses in the Sri Lankan civil war. For Anil, as Western trained scientist, this truth is to be found in the forensic evidence gathered from the human remains recovered from the unidentified graves that have appeared over widespread areas of the countryside. For Sarath and Palipana, who as archaeologists are interested in the political upheavals of the more distant past in Sri Lanka, the truth of history is to be read, discerned or divined from the more obscure materials of the physical world such as rock graffiti, ancient Pali scripts, the "stone remnants of royal bathing pools and water gardens, the buried cities" (80). The novel thus sets up two overlapping but fundamentally antagonistic discourses of truth or ways of knowing the world. These two diverging epistemologies can be roughly organized along the cultural divide of East and West. In the latter half of this chapter, this division is unpacked further to show that it also marks a distinction between empirical truth and literary truth. I begin this exploration of the idea of truth, understood as an entity related to being in the world, by examining the figure of Anil who operates throughout the novel as a human rights activist as well as an ideological agent of Western positivist epistemology, despite her Asian birth and descent.

Something of the complexity of Anil's various subject positions and functions within the narrative is figured in a visually significant scene given as a short italicised interlude.² This scene takes place in the laboratory near the beginning of the narrative when Anil and Sarath mark off four spaces on newspaper on which they will place the four exhumed skeletons, selected for their investigation. Anil places her body, unclothed except for her red silk underpants, ironically marking her body as both private and sexual, on the newsprint as template, around which Sarath draws an outline.

² Throughout the novel, the italicized interlude, several paragraphs or up to three pages in length, serves to foreground the more densely significant images or events.

He was using the felt marker to trace her shape. You will have to put your arms down for a moment. She could feel the pen move around her hands and alongside her waist, then down her legs, both sides, so he linked the blue lines at the base of her heels.

She rose out of the outline, turned back and saw he had drawn outlines of all the four skeletons as well. (62)

Anil's body, traced on the newsprint spread over the laboratory floor, is thus positioned as both scientific and erotic object. The outline of the body drawn on the paper covered with printed text serves to emblemize the novel's conscious interlinking of the discourses of corporeality and textuality. For the moment, the regular object/subject order set up in the novel is also reversed, as it is Anil who is usually placed as principal epistemic subject and who must uncover the facts (truths) that are revealed by the objects under her scientific observation. The momentary inversion of relations in which Anil's uncovered body is objectified in the scientific process, serves by way of contrast, to highlight her usually unquestioned assumption of the epistemic subject position throughout the rest of the novel. These overlapping discourses associated with scientific empiricism, the gendered body and individualism converge within the figurative space of her body.

Anil hopes to uncover and prove what she believes to be the truth about the human rights violations in Sri Lanka by assembling empirically verifiable data that her examination of the skeleton unearthed from a concealed grave will yield.

She began to examine the skeleton again under the sulphur light, summarizing the facts of death so far, the permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy. One forearm broken. Partial burning. Vertebrae damage in the neck. The possibility of a small bullet wound in the skull. Entrance and exit. She could read Sailor's last actions by knowing the wounds on the bone. He puts his arms over his face to protect himself from the blow. He is shot with a rifle, the bullet going through his arm, then into the neck. While he is on the ground they come up and kill him. (65)

The definition of truth Anil works with is a transhistorical one, "the same for Colombo as for Troy". However, the novel warns early on that Sri Lanka, "was a more complicated world morally" and "the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening [there]" (11). When Anil sets out to begin her task, she is still blithely unheeding of the very different conditions of truth that prevail under the political (dis)order in war-torn Sri Lanka. The conditions that determine the production of

knowledge and truth are determined, as Foucault has convincingly shown, by the institutions that govern the order of the day. "We live in a society", he says, "which to a large extent marches in time with truth – what I mean by that is that ours is a society which produces and circulates discourse with a truth function, discourse which passes for the truth and holds specific powers" (*The History of Sexuality*). As it turns out at the end of the novel, Anil's evidence is accorded no truth function as it does not work in the interest of the ruling political institution.

In a second ideologically inflected move, Anil makes the universalizing assumption that a scientific fact can be unproblematically rendered as a political truth. This truth, according to her, is sufficiently constituted by the positive identification of victim and perpetrator. Her mode of thinking, which is explained as the "application of the forensic sciences to human rights" is something she "becomes caught up in" (145) during her period of training as forensic specialist in the United States. Her continued work in Arizona later on completes the ideological and conceptual grounding she receives in the Western institution of science: "She was now alongside the language of science. The femur was the bone of choice" (145). Having actively "courted foreignness" while living in the West, Anil had eventually become "at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highways of Santa Fe. She felt completed abroad" (54). Anil's "completion" or alignment "alongside the language of science" does, however, come at the cost of being inadequately equipped to deal with conditions other than those prevailing in the West. Back in Sri Lanka, after an absence of fifteen years, she is uncomfortably aware of the "lost language" (22) that divides her now from people like Lalitha who had been her nurse as a child. Her struggle to negotiate the altered conceptual and moral terrain in the country of her birth is aptly conveyed in a metaphor of an incomplete or truncated body:

And she had come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries. Information could always be clarified and acted upon. But here on this island she realized she was moving only with one arm of language and uncertain laws and fear was everywhere. There was less to hold onto with that one arm. Truth bounced between gossip and vengeance. Rumour slipped into every car and barbershop. (54)

Despite her unease about conditions in Sri Lanka (having acquired something of an orientalist view of her native country) and her distrust towards the more hesitant and circumspect Sri Lankan archaeologist Sarath, for whom "the purpose of truth is more complicated" (53), Anil is unwavering in her commitment to the task at hand. Antoinette Burton writes that like the "humanitarian liberals who have historically shared the progressive, post-Enlightenment politics derivative of the European/Lockean tradition, Anil is confident that the very sight of suffering (as embodied in the murder victims) offers irrefutable empirical evidence of injustice and that reasonable people – those who believe in and enlist the help of rational sciences like forensics – will mete out justice accordingly" (43).

Her course of action is equally unhindered by an earlier experience in which a mission to the Congo ends in complete failure.

Forensic work during a political crisis was notorious, she knew, for its three dimensional chess moves and backroom deals and muted statements for the 'good of the nation'. In the Congo one human rights group had gone too far and their collection of data had disappeared over night, their paperwork burned. As if a city from the past had been reburied. The investigative team which included Anil in a lowly role as program assistant, had nothing left to do but get on a plane and go home. So much for the international authority of Geneva. The grand logos on letterheads and European office doors meant nothing where there was a crisis. If and when you were asked by a government to leave, you left. You took nothing with you. Not a slide tray, not a piece of film. At the airport, while they searched her clothing she sat almost naked on a stool. (28-29)

The running aground of the UN Congo investigation foreshadows almost exactly the course of events that unfolds in the Sri Lankan project. Anil is dispossessed of her evidence by the local political power, rendering the so-called "international authority of Geneva" non-existent. She is forced, like several Western agents before her, to flee the country under some duress. The ends of justice Anil sought to achieve by means of her "bones-as-evidence/bones-as-truth" (Burton 44) mode of operating, are directly overthrown by her persistent course of action. In the end it is Sarath, who in an attempt to save her "twentieth-century evidence" (284), becomes victim to the "historical irony" (192) of the event when he is murdered by the forces of law "on the side of power not truth" (44). Sarath's belief that bones offer knowledge rather than truth, and that such knowledge is open to misuse by forensic scientists, archaeologists and government agents

alike, is thus borne out by his own death. Burton also reads in Sarath's crushed hands the "inescapable violent end to which alternative ways of grasping the truth about the past and the present are subject by brute force" (49). The exercise of power in this instance does not only entail the control of discourse as truth, but the mark of power is violently inscribed on the bodies of those who seek to oppose it. Thus Anil and her colleagues are literally stripped down to near nakedness and physically expelled from the Congo. Sarath is actually killed by government agents in Sri Lanka and his body is tortured and mutilated.

Anil's crossing over into the ideological space of Western science is described as a seduction of sorts:³ the primary rule of forensics, namely that "[t]he bone of choice would be the femur" (original italics, 140), had been spelt out to Anil during her first class at Guy's Hospital in London. "She had loved the way the lecturer had stated it, offhand, but with the air of a pompatus". From there on she would "progress to greater principles" (140). She had also been struck and favourably impressed by the "quietness of the English classroom" in contrast to Colombo where "there was always a racket. Birds, lorries, fighting dogs, a kindergarten's lessons of rote, street salesmen – all their sounds entered through open windows. There was no chance of an ivory tower existing in the tropics" (140). The univocal utterance of a fundamental scientific principle or truth, delivered in a seemingly natural or impressively "offhand" way in an institution of Western learning, is suggestively held up against the cacophony or polyphony of the Eastern life-world in which the existence of an "ivory tower" producing irrefutable knowledge or truths about a world it views from above is seen as an impossibility or perhaps as an absurd arrogance of sorts.

Anil's self-assured positivist epistemology acquired in the West is contrasted to the alternative procedural methods and treatment of knowledge as truth by the Sri Lankan scholars Sarath and his mentor Palipana. The latter had been at the centre of a nationalistic group that had "wrested archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the

³ The young Sikh called Kip in Ondaatje's *English Patient* undergoes a similar seduction by Western art which heightens his disappointment when the West deploys its nuclear weaponry against the cities of Asia.

Europeans" (79). Despite their evident differences, however, both the Western and Eastern scholars begin their search for knowledge by examining or deciphering the physical traces or surviving remnants of the past. Thus, just as Anil could read the "markers of occupation" (166) scored on human bones, the forensic geologist could extract ontic clues from soil samples (52) and the astronomer, by means of giant telescopes in New Mexico, could draw "information out of the skies. Information about the state of things ten billion years ago, and as many miles out" (255). So too, the novel states, "a good archaeologist can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel" and "if a bone had been grazed by any kind of stone, Sarath, [Anil] knew, could follow such grains of evidence to their likely origin" (151). The physical world thus presents as legible matter disclosing knowledge about events or the state of things in the world, both of the present as well as of the distant past. For both the Western scientists and for the Sri Lankan archaeologists and historians the material world is the starting point in their search for knowledge and truth. The common ground of scholarship shared by East and West is aptly figured in Anil and Sarath's makeshift laboratory in the harbour of Colombo aboard the permanently moored passenger liner, the *Oronsay*. Significantly, this vessel "had once travelled between Asia and England" (18), crossing the currents of the intercontinental waterways, just as now its interior served as a space for negotiating the rough waters between Eastern and Western notions of truth. The defunct vessel, a remnant of the old colonial order, now functionally reorganized as laboratory and storage space, thus serves as appropriately ungrounded but permanently moored space for the ideological meeting ground between two different ways of producing knowledge about the world.

The proverbial bone of contention for Sarath and Anil and implicitly between Eastern and Western ways of producing knowledge has to do with the idea of truth. For Anil an empirical fact is tantamount to a truth, whereas for Sarath, the "archaeological surround of a fact" (44) needs to be understood before it is cast into the turbulence of the highly conflicting discursive space generated by the powers at war in Sri Lanka's civil upheaval. Something of Foucault's concept of an "archaeology of knowledge" is brought to mind here by both the figure and sense of Sarath's expression. A fact, or anything that is

represented, is necessarily a product of a particular discourse which in turn functions within a dense network of intersecting and conflicting discourses. For Foucault this general domain of all things said is what is called the archive, and the role of archaeology is precisely to analyze that archive. Sarath thus calls for an archaeology or an understanding of how Anil's fact or truth might operate within the "general system of the formation and transformation of statements" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 130) which constitutes the archive of the particular historical moment into which they are cast. According to Sarath, Anil's facts presented as truth are inappropriate and uncalled for, "a flame held against a lake of petrol" (156). His wariness stems from having witnessed similar abuses of the truth in the past:

Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this formation, to new vengeance and slaughter. There were dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you. As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use. (156-157)

The truth or fact inappropriately published by the "foreign press" and indiscriminately disseminated and circulated across various world spaces and discursive domains can end in disaster for those not safely outside the zone of conflict, and unlike the "visiting journalist" (27) who may return or escape to the safety of the West, the people of Sri Lanka must suffer bodily the consequences of political turmoil in their own country. Thus in the circuit between the text and the world, the symbolic and the real, it is the world that must feel the sting of the irresponsibly circulated word. It is made abundantly clear by the tragic outcome of Anil's fact finding mission that scientific fact offered as political truth or as panacea for a humanitarian crisis falls far short of the expectations placed on it by the West.

Not only does the novel suggest that truth per se does not necessarily benefit human lives and that truth is easily pulled into serving the ideological powers of the day, it also outlines methods other than the strictly positivist procedures of producing truth. Both Sarath and Palipana are concerned with the more obscure or at times barely legible signs offered by the physical world. Sarath is "a man used to cuneiform, faded texts in stone"

(27) and Palipana had "made his name translating Pali scripts and recording and translating the rock graffiti of Sigiriya" (79): "These had been cut into an ancient wall from the sixth century onwards. The faded moth-coloured writings had always been a magnet and a mystery for the historians – they were enigmatic statements – and Palipana had studied them and worried over them for fifteen years of his life (80). Just as the past is at times only barely legible in "faded moth-coloured writings" cut into ancient walls, it may be completely obscured by the passage of time. In the twelfth century there had been a forest monastery at Arankale:

The knowledge of such a monastery had vanished from people's minds and the site was an abandoned forest sea. What was left of wooden altars was eaten by colonies of insects. Generations of pollen silted the bathing pool and then rough vegetation consumed it, so that it was invisible to any passerby who did not know its sudden loose depth, which was a haven for creatures that scurried on the warmth of the cut rock and on unnamed plants in this nocturnal world. (190)

"Nothing lasts', Palipana had told [his students]. 'It is an old dream. Art burns, dissolves. And to be loved with the irony of history – that isn't much" (original italics, 12). Traces of the peaceable forest community are then virtually obliterated by teeming natural life and its existence vanished from people's minds. Ironically, the novel observes, "[t]he most precisely recorded moments of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilization...Pompeii. Laetoli. Hiroshima. Vesuvius (whose fumes had asphyxiated poor Pliny while he recorded its 'tumultuous behaviour'). Tectonic slips and brutal human violence provided random time-capsules of unhistorical lives. A dog in Pompeii. A gardener's shadow in Hiroshima" (55).

The historian and archaeologist decipher, read or interpret traces, signs or marks of things that were previously present in the world. These significations of the world figured as text, in various states of legibility, offer the possibility to give account of events, both of human and of natural history. Such accounts aim at the highest level of veracity or truthfulness. Sri Lankan scholars, like their Western colleagues, follow rigorous procedural methods, but, it would appear, to somewhat different ends: "The three years Sarath spent as student of Palipana's were the most difficult of his academic career. All archaeological data proposed by a student had to be confirmed. Every rock cuneiform or

carving had to be drawn and redrawn onto the pages of journals, in sand, on blackboards, until it was a part of dreams" (79-80). The somewhat obscure sense of this passage is of a layered transcription or perhaps a near transubstantiation of the material signs of the world into the immaterial domain of dreams or the unconscious; a formalized trafficking across boundaries which constitutes a type of methodology not easily countenanced by the strictly categorical procedures followed by the academy of the West. Sarath's archaeological practice, informed by his strict mentor, who makes it adamantly clear to Anil that he is "not a random man" (88), follows a similar trajectory from the raw material of physical matter to the more loosely fragmentary domain of cultural texts; in other words, the order of the symbolic. Sarath is observed by Anil as he joins a group of students working in an historic area:

[He] was soon collecting slivers of mica, telling them where they were likely to find fragments of iron in the ground, as if he were a gifted and natural finder of things. Most of what Sarath knew was in some way linked to the earth...His desire, he had told her, was to write a book someday about a city in the south of the island that no longer existed. Not a wall of it remained but he wanted to tell the story of that place. It would emerge out of the dark trade with the earth, his knowledge of the region in chronicles – its medieval business routes, its presence as a favourite monsoon town of a certain king, as revealed in the poems that celebrated the city's daily life. (29-30)

Sarath envisions an epistemological project that draws from the material as well as the immaterial, from the real as well as from the symbolic. The knowledge or truth disclosed by the "slivers of mica" and "fragments of iron in the ground" is ranked alongside what is disclosed by chronicles, trade routes and poems. The real and the symbolic are located "in the same landscape" (191). Going further still, Palipana, the "strictest of historians, who had always relied on meticulous research," dispenses with rock bottom evidence altogether. He produces a scholarly work explaining "the political tides and royal eddies of the island in the sixth century" (81) which is initially applauded in Sri Lanka as well as abroad, but he is later "turned gracelessly out of the establishment" (81) after a former student

voiced the opinion that there was no real evidence for the existence of these texts. They were a fiction...No one could find the sentences he had quoted and translated from dying warriors, or any of the fragments from the social manifestos handed down by kings, or even the erotic verses in Pali supposedly by lovers and confidants of the court mentioned by name but never quoted in the *Culavamsa*. (81)

For Palipana this had not been a "false step but a step into another reality, the last stage of a long truthful dance" (81). The production of knowledge about the world as it once was, is presented here not as an arbitrary reach into the imagination, but as a carefully "choreographed" process. The systematically ordered methodology of Palipana's scholarship is compared in terms of its social significance to the civil code which restored order to the chaos and violence of post revolutionary France: "Archaeology lives under the same rules as the Napoleonic Code" (83). Thus accorded a significant place in social history, Palipana's historical writing or "fiction" is, nevertheless, uncomfortably suspended beyond both empirical proof and absolute disproof and consequently draws scorn and derision from the establishment. It stands accused of "crimes of laxness and inaccuracy" (82) in much the same way as Ondaatje's novel has come under fire for its political irresponsibility and its eschewal of concrete facts.

"Still, the patterns that emerged for Palipana had begun to coalesce. They linked hands. They allowed walking across water, they allowed a leap from treetop to treetop. The water filled a cut alphabet and linked this shore and that. And so the unprovable truth emerged" (83). Sarath understood very well how Palipana had arrived at his scandalously fictive/fraudulent history or 'archaeological' reading that he dared offer as truth despite not being able to prove it: "It was just the next step for him – to eliminate the borders and categories, to find everything in one landscape, and so discover the story he hadn't seen before" (191). It has already been shown that *Anil's Ghost*, too, has embarked on such an elimination of "borders and categories" between the material and the immaterial, the text and the world, and the mind and body. It would appear that a carefully constructed meta-fictional parallel has been drawn between Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Palipana's historical "fiction". Both texts are presented as scholarly and well researched, as history as well as a fiction, as a factual account of events in the world as well as an imaginative, but strictly choreographed and highly principled reading of real events. Above all, the claim is made that Palipana's works, and by implication *Anil's Ghost*, offer a truth, albeit an unprovable one, which is at least more useful than Anil's provable or empirically verifiable truth, already shown to be as potentially destructive as "a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol" (156). Thus by means of an incident in the text, the novel

gestures to its own status in the world beyond. The reader is faced with an appeal to consider a novelistic or fictional truth, as paradoxical and as strung up between uncertainties as it may be, to be of greater value than what is offered by any strictly positivist account of affairs in the world.

For Anil, as scientist relying on positivist knowledge, the truth is necessarily objective and certain. For Palipana, the writer of historical fictions, the truth is equally important, but it remains subjective and elusive. The following dialogue in the "Grove of Ascetics" rehearses the conflict between these opposing notions:

[Palipana:] 'Even [in the past] there was nothing to believe in with certainty. They still didn't know what the truth was. We have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones.'

[Anil:] 'We use the bone to search for it. "The truth shall set you free." I believe that.'

[Palipana:] 'Most of the time in our world, truth is just an opinion.' (102)

Anil's hard facts offered as truth have evidently failed to set anybody free. Do Palipana's scholarly fictions or Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* then offer a different form of knowledge or truth? Scattered throughout the novel there are meta-fictional markers suggesting that these writings consciously place themselves "at the furthest edge of...knowledge and beliefs" (104), that they strain to hear "something faint at the farthest radius point at the edge of the antenna" (202). They busy themselves with "hidden histories, intentionally lost", the "back-and-forth between what was official and unofficial", the "illegal story", "the interlinear texts" and the "verses containing the darker proof" (105). Both playfully and seriously aware of its own status as text, *Anil's Ghost* then seems to position itself meta-fictionally in some liminal zone in relation to the world, while at the same time still keeping it sharply in focus. These dual and seemingly disjunctive aspects that characterize the novel as well as Palipana's writings, namely the reach into liminality and its close proximity to the physical world, may ultimately be linked to both the ethical and the aesthetic. The following discussion is concerned with tracing the various overlaps and links between these conceptual strands.

In one instance, the desire for otherness or an openness to alterity is expressed in the search for knowledge beyond the boundaries of the known physical world. This is represented iconically in the astronomical research station in the desert of New Mexico. A "Very Large Array of Telescopes" (255) was picking up "languages of data out of the universe above the desert. [Anil] was living alongside these receivers of the huge history of the sky. Who was out there? How far away was that signal? Who was dying unmoored?" (255). The immensely far-reaching search for other worlds is undercut by an ethical reminder that while otherness may be discovered in regions conceived of as most distant to the self, the greatest imperative is to confront otherness close at hand and to be open to receive the signal which comes from a close proximity. The figurative question "Who was dying unmoored?", then, receives the literal answer: "Well, it turned out Leaf was" (255). Thus Anil's intimate friend was herself being pulled into the unreachable place of forgetting and dying as she was succumbing to the degenerative processes of Alzheimer's disease and the search for what is 'out there', is short-circuited to what is 'right here'. The reminder here is that otherness inheres in both what is far away and what is close at hand, the arcane and the quotidian.

In the same arid region or figurative space of New Mexico, the novel tells us, "the artist Walter de Maria had planted four hundred stainless-steel poles in the desert on a flat plane a mile long...Powerful winds swept in from the desert and she got to witness storms, because during the summer the poles drew lightning onto the plain. She stood among them, within the electricity, the thunder simultaneous around her" (255). The scientific research station in the desert doubled or reconfigured as artwork or "earthwork" (225) serves as a massive conductor of sorts drawing the terrifying and supra-human powers of the cosmos into the immediate space of the human body to produce an aesthetic experience of an extreme kind. The desert of New Mexico thus serves as figurative space for the parallel constructions of research station and artwork which suggests that a connection, equivalence or opposition of sorts may be discerned between the institution of art and science, as indeed the novel demonstrates throughout. The "Very Large Array of Telescopes" and the "The Lightning Field" (255) also figure as the

interlinked strands of ethics and aesthetics because both sites have to do with aspects of encountering/experiencing a form of transcendent otherness.

The novel's alignment towards alterity is thus signalled in the meta-fictional descriptions of Palipana and Sarath's 'open' epistemologies and troped in figures such as the desert telescopes, the radio antenna tuned into frequencies at the outer rim of receptivity and so on. The second dimension of alterity is given in the sensory-perceptive or aesthetic events that arise out of the extraordinary experiences of the body. Such moments are foregrounded in Anil's self-obliterating or ecstatic back-flip and the river and ocean swims by various characters which suggest an immersion in the space of difference. Most potently, the gesture towards the other as both neighbour and stranger, radically transformed by death or self-obliterating suffering, is presented in the various figures of the pieta. This extraordinary encounter will be the subject of the final chapter.

Anil's Ghost presents a further meta-fictional exploration in which the process of writing is described as an entry into water, already construed as both the space of difference and of aesthetic or heightened sensory experience. Thus the writer and the swimmer are implicitly linked. The discourses of art and science are most suggestively intertwined, yet again, in the figure of the science writer Cullis who conducts an extra-marital love affair with Anil. It is tempting to read the illicit relationship between writer and scientist as having something to do with the novel's own somewhat unorthodox foray into the domain of science. Significantly, Cullis's work takes place at night, in what appears to be an exchange of writing for sleep, a slippage from the nocturnal dreamwork of the unconscious to the work of writing.

He fought sleep. Usually he loved the letting go. When he wrote, he slipped into the page as if it were water, and tumbled on. The writer was a tumbler. (Who would remember that?) If not, then a tinker, carrying a hundred pots and pans and bits of linoleum and wires and falconer's hoods and pencils and...you carried them around for years and gradually fit them into a small, modest book. The art of packing. (264)

The medium of the text, like water, is the space of difference through which swimmers and writers alike must "tumble". For the swimmer it is an intensely embodied space, a

heightened experience of the senses, and as such it is analogous to an entry into the aesthetic. For the writer, and by implication the reader, the text offers pleasure or *jouissance* of a near physical kind while it also marks an entry into a space of difference which, as I argue throughout, is closely linked to the domain of the ethical. Here, as elsewhere, the ethical runs in tandem with the aesthetic.

The idea of the writer as a "tinker" may be linked to the second strand of the present argument, namely that while the novel signals its engagement with the liminal or the acategorical, it also keeps the material world in close focus, just as the desert telescopes, while tuned to pick up signals from the furthest possible distances, also paradoxically call attention to the signal close at hand. Cullis's odd catalogue of seemingly random artefacts is artfully packed or assembled as a book, just as the epigraphist Palipana packs words into densely meaningful phrases, stretching or exceeding the capacity of everyday language. Cullis's curious assemblage of 'materials' also recalls the assortment of objects and bits of matter that have been closely observed by the various scholars and scientists in the novel such as soil samples, bone fragments, insect larvae, stones and rocks, faded remnants of ancient texts. These bits of matter read as signs yield their meanings to produce the knowledge offered as truth in one guise or another. In their attempt to disclose the truth about the world, both writers and scholars hold the material world closely in view.

Ondaatje too, although not exactly a scholar of this kind, draws frequently from the empirical and social sciences by referring to existing scholarly texts in the novel itself. The novel is, in fact, densely packed with scientific description and terminology, ranging across the diverse disciplines of medicine, forensics, anatomy, palaeontology, geography and geology. This 'material' is integrated into the literary style, its heavy facticity conveying a sense of 'groundedness' in contradistinction to the finely tuned nuances of Ondaatje's usual poetic style. The frequent splicing of strictly referential language into the literary also has the effect of blurring the distinction between the factuality and the fictionality of the text, thus undercutting the modernist ideal of an autonomous literary space in which all reference to the physical world is suspended. Arguably, the high load

of referential language may also be read as generating a reality effect in the manner that realist texts conventionally do. I would argue that this is not so in the light of the novel's overall orientation to the world and that the referentiality of the text affirms instead a connectedness to things that exist in the world and the people who live in it.

Medical textbooks hold a particular fascination and, like Anil, Ondaatje takes a sort of ironic delight in the seemingly offhand and genteel authority of the medical expert. Much like "Palipana's conversation always seemed to include remembered phrases from historical texts" (101) Ondaatje too splices such "remembered phrases" obliquely into his telling. In a kind of mock seriousness his writing is supplemented by a touch of scientific veracity to add a semblance of the 'real' to the fiction, much like Anil, in a reversal of this move, adds "the necessary drama" and adjectives to the entomologist Chitra's "blunt description of her project" (71) to make it more appealing to potential sponsors. Even in a highly serious context Ondaatje, like Gamini, insists on a sort of "mad logic" (186) by grafting medical jargon into ordinary telling: "[Gamini] was already taking pills with a protein drink so he could be continuously awake to those dying around him. *In diagnosing a vascular injury, a high index of suspicion is necessary.* If he had not been such a good doctor his behaviour would have been reported" (original italics, 209).



Despite the unorthodox deployment of scientific language for literary purposes, the novel pays tribute to medical texts as highly valued resources offering a kind of knowledge on which human lives depend.

In the operating rooms of the base hospitals in the North Central Province there were always four books in evidence: Hammon's *Analysis of 2,187 Consecutive Penetrating Wounds of the Brain in Vietnam*; *Gunshot Wounds* by Swan and Swan; C.W. Hughes's *Arterial Repair during the Korean War*; and *Annals of Surgery*. Doctors in the midst of an operation would have an orderly turn the pages so that they could skim the text while continuing surgery. After two weeks of fifteen hour days they no longer needed assistance from books and moved with ease alongside wounds and suture techniques. But the medical texts remained for future doctors in training. (117)

Unlike the volumes of popular romances or "porous paperbacks" lining the shelves of doctor's common rooms with suggestive titles like *The Queen's Gambit* and *The Tea Planter's Bride* (118), "consumed in two or three hours, swallowed like sandwiches on

the run" to "direct thoughts away from the war" (117), the medical texts are endowed with grave significance. Perhaps more than any history or official war report they are testimony to the realities of visceral trauma inflicted on human bodies during war and thus they expose the aim of war which is to injure or kill human bodies. Moreover, they document the medical knowledge and surgical procedures that save actual lives and arrest the haemorrhages. When, after eight months of working in an emergency field hospital, the neurosurgeon Linus Chorea is permitted by his abductors to send for things from home, he sends for his books, a list of eight titles (121). The medical books are subjected to intensely critical readings by the doctors and measured against the realities of actual experience. The demand placed on the texts is for factual accuracy and practical use value. In the provincial hospital library there "was a habit among [the doctors] of critical marginalia. An exclamation point beside something not psychologically or clinically valid" (230). Despite the overwhelming seriousness of everyday work in a war zone, there are also occasional moments of levity such as when the surgeon Skanda humorously parodies the practice of annotating books with critical marginalia. He claims in a scribble added to an escapist novel to have experienced the same fictional James Bond type of sexual encounter in reality, ironically providing time and date of the event.

Another form of critical reading, this time of the film *Point Blank* (1967) by John Boorman, is provided by Anil and her fellow forensic pathologist Leaf during their time together in Arizona. In a letter that seems strangely devoid of irony, Anil writes to the director taking issue about the verisimilitude of a gunshot wound inflicted on the character played by Lee Marvin in the film's final shootout (258). The actor and the director are real people, the injury is a fiction staged in a 1960s Hollywood Western. The page long letter about their quibble seems excessive, a narrow demand for facticity in a film aimed at entertainment and that by definition has cut itself loose from the demands of the real. Anil's inappropriate forensic reading of the film anticipates her narrowly conceived application of forensic science in the volatile political situation of the Sri Lankan civil war.

Both the serious and playful marginalia consciously raise the issue of the truth value of a text. The truth of the medical text lies in its rigorous empiricism, escapist fiction delivers to the truth of the pleasure principle, the American Western as part of the nation's mythmaking apparatus locates its truth within a set of conventions and expectations about heroism and conquest. It does not aspire to absolute verisimilitude. The particular location of truth, as articulated by a text, is therefore determined by the parameters set by the type of discourse it marks itself out to be, be this serious or escapist fiction, a medical textbook or a Hollywood Western.

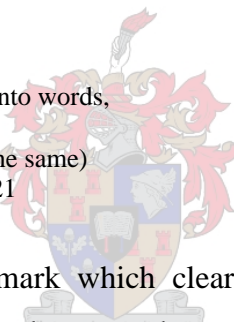
Thus by examining writing as writing and exploring the "archaeological surround" of a text, the particular location of its discourse within the archive of the historical moment that surrounds it, and the currency of truth in which it trades, may be identified. The discursive position *Anil's Ghost* assumes has in part already been signalled by the name of the author and its supplementary inscriptions. These discursive coordinates are then corroborated by certain markers in the text itself. Collectively these elements stake out the particular location of the truth it offers as a discourse. This chapter has been concerned with the novel's meta-fictional project of defining the kind of knowledge and ultimately the kind truth Ondaatje's novel advances. By extension, one may read the meta-fictional aspects of *Anil's Ghost* as a discourse on literary fiction in general and the particular kind of truth that literature posts into the archive of its time.

The nature of the truth offered by literary fiction or art in general is the subject of Robert Eaglestone's essay "One and the Same? Ethics, Aesthetics and Truth." He states that "implicit, unstated, and conflicting ideas about the nature of truth, unreflectively assumed, lie at the heart of major debates in the humanities" (596) and in literary studies in particular. The idea of truth, while constantly invoked in literary debates, "is (outside philosophy) rarely explicitly the object of reflection" (596). There is instead, a reliance, "at a deep level on methodologies and presuppositions taken from the natural sciences' way of understanding truth: the correspondence of a proposition and a state of affairs" (606). It has been shown that *Anil's Ghost*, by means of its extensive meta-fictional explorations, is expressly concerned to make a distinction between the truth of literary

fiction and empirical truth offered by the discourse of science. The latter is understood as a straightforward proposition which can be either true or false, and relies on a correspondence between a statement and a state of affairs in the world.

How might one then think about the relation between literature in general and truth, and how does the truth offered by literature differ from the propositional truth offered by empirical science? To begin with, the truth offered by literature or the aesthetic, like the truth of science, is established in relation to a state of affairs in the world.⁴ If the truth of literature has to do with the real, in other words, with how things are with people in the world, it also includes the ethical. It is therefore possible to identify a confluence between the domain of the aesthetic and ethics. The position that aesthetics and ethics are fundamentally linked is expressed in Wittgenstein's famous and much pondered over dictum:

It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words,
Ethics is transcendental.
(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same)
Tractatus Logico-Philosophico 6.421



Eaglestone uses Wittgenstein's remark which clearly affirms a relation between the aesthetic and ethics (implicitly also between the symbolic and the real) as a point of departure in his exploration of the nature of truth in art. By expressly confirming the link between ethics and aesthetics, Eaglestone advances his argument against the main stream of literary debates which, ranging between neo-humanism, deconstruction and Foucault's legacy of anti-subjectivity, have collectively tipped the balance towards an assumed division between ethics and literature.⁵ The assumption that "Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same" is one that I have relied on all along and it is one that is certainly borne out by *Anil's Ghost* as the foregoing discussions have shown. My understanding of the ethical also rests on the notion that "Ethics is transcendental" and this too is affirmed by the novel.

⁴ This does not exclude the fact that meaning is also produced differentially in relation to other texts. Nor does it exclude the meaning inherent in the sensuous apprehension of a work of art.

⁵ Reaffirming this relation does not, according to Eaglestone, signal a return to "an Arnold/Leavis position; nor is it a return to a sort of literary humanism advanced by many recent thinkers on the subject" (578).

Assuming that one can speak of truth in art, or that ethics and aesthetics can be thought of as in some sense 'one and the same', the question of how truth works in art or literature emerges. Eaglestone does this by means of an exposition of Heidegger's *On the Origin of the Work of Art*, already established as a point of reference in this dissertation. Heidegger returns to the classical Greek notion of truth as *aletheia*, explained as the unconcealedness of being or as an uncovering of the world. The location of such a truth is prior to propositional truth (truth as it is ordinarily thought of) which rests on an agreement between assertion and a state of affairs or, in Heidegger's phenomenological terms, a correspondence with *what is*. Literature on the whole does not offer facticity or agreement (which also underwrites the idea of art as mimesis) as the grounds for its truth, but locates it anterior to this more commonly accepted notion as something concerned not only with *what is*, but with the *nature of what is*. Eaglestone explains that *aletheia* is concerned with the ontological condition that pre-exists the proposition, or in the conditions that make it possible for an assertion to be true or false. One may ask, then, how such a notion works in literary texts. For Heidegger this is related to how language itself works as a sort of taking up and disclosing the world in linguistic forms and structures: "Language, by naming things for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance" (205). The ability of language to reveal, "to bring what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time" (205), allows Heidegger to state that "the linguistic work, the poem in a narrower sense, has a privileged position in the domain of arts" (205), so much so that "the nature of art is poetry. The nature of poetry, in turn, is the founding of truth". The founding of truth entails a kind of drawing up of what is hidden or unrevealed as well as defamiliarization of what has become obscured by ordinariness or by habitual forms of perception.

The same understanding of truth as *aletheia* underwrites Levinas's assertion introduced in the first chapter that our "concrete existence is interpreted in terms of its entry into the 'openness'" and that "the analysis of existence and of what is called its *haecceity* (Da) is only the description of the essence of truth, of the condition of the very understanding of being" ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 5)

It is also of particular significance that the idea of truth as *aletheia* is not a metaphysical entity in the traditional sense and that it is therefore not transhistorical or universal. Truth is related to the contingent and singular realities of the world and cannot be fixed within a totalising concept or overarching scheme. Eaglestone writes that

[w]hat actually is revealed for Heidegger, is not a content in a simple sense, but the world which both shapes and sets the frame for a content. The world unveiled will vary from work to work: the world of a Greek temple is not the world of an Henri Matisse painting, nor the world of *Finnegan's Wake*, *The Satanic Verses*, or *War and Peace*. Artworks in the broadest sense, then, disclose or give us that world in which we live as a concrete, determinate, and specific place, revealed and enframed by those artworks. What is revealed is contingent: for example, we would not think in precisely the same way about the terrors and violence of colonial power had it not been for the *Heart of Darkness*, *Things Fall Apart*, *A Grain of Rice*, and *Life and Times of Michael K*. (600)

The world that is revealed in *Anil's Ghost* is of just such a contingent and historical nature and therefore the truth it puts forward is concerned with the material and ethical conditions under which men and women conduct their lives or stand to lose them at a particular moment in history. The novel positions itself in close proximity to human subjects who live in the world, and as such it delivers a truth which, according to Joseph Conrad, "is the justification for any fiction which makes any claim to the quality of art or may hope to its place in the culture of men and women of its time" (*Under Western Eyes*, Author's Note).

Anil's Ghost extends the self-reflexive practice of postmodernity by foregrounding not only its constructedness as a text, but by plotting the location of the truth it offers. Like Palipana's scholarly fiction it offers a form of truth which cannot be located in the narrowly circumscribed gaze of scientific empiricism, but one that offers a more tentative or open-ended view of what happens in the world. Such a truth does not lay claim to being absolute, nor can it be subsumed within the totalizing scheme of rationalist thinking. This is so because it is concerned with an always newly emerging world, bringing out, according to Heidegger, "what is as yet undecided and measureless" (201). Last, the truth put forward by literary fiction takes on a performative function as it is an utterance directed at the historical subjects who live in the world. As such it constitutes a response to the world or an ethical 'Saying' in Levinasian terms which is a tentative,

provisional form of speech which avoids the fixed categories of ontological language. As such, it differs from the rigid enclosure of truth by the 'Said' instantiated by a text like the Universal Bill of Human Rights which, in its attempt to close itself off to the specific and contingent realities of history, is destabilised by the rigidity of its aspiration to legislate a final truth, as this novel subtly demonstrates.

Heidegger also affirms that literature is necessarily always imbricated with the world and that it exists within the circuit of understanding with reality:

The poetic projection of truth that sets itself into work as figure is also never carried out in the direction of an indeterminate void. Rather in the work, truth is thrown towards the coming preservers, that is towards a historical group of men [and women]. What is thus cast forth is, however, never an arbitrary demand. Genuinely poetic projection is the opening up or disclosure of that into which human being as historical is already cast. (206)

Thus the novel does not circulate in "an indeterminate void" but is directed at the real human subjects who live in the world and who always face an as yet "undisclosed abundance of the unfamiliar and the extraordinary" (206) in need of disclosure.

The following chapter shifts from these broader considerations of the nature of truth in literature to look more closely how *Anil's Ghost* discloses the central reality of the disaster of war, namely the dead and injured body.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Body in Peril Death and Injury in Contemporary Warfare

Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best art can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and the order it will become.
Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*.

We become aware that our language lacks the words to express this offence, this demolition of man.
Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*.

The previous chapter has argued that the truth offered by literary fiction such as *Anil's Ghost* discloses or brings into the open the lived realities of people's historical existences. The most overwhelming experience of living through an event like the Sri Lankan civil war must surely be the encounter with death and injury on an inordinate scale. Such is the experience of the Sri Lankan doctor Gamini who, inundated by ever-increasing numbers of wounded and dead bodies in the hospital emergency room, has been flung headlong into the disaster of war. As this devastating reality begins to bear heavily on him, the traumatic events of his working days are replayed in the nightmare visions of his disrupted sleep: "The doors opened and a thousand bodies slid in, as if caught in the nets of fisherman, as if they had been mauled. A thousand bodies of sharks and skates in the corridors, some of the dark-skinned fish thrashing . . ." (213). Amidst the chaos and devastation of this time Gamini remembers "trying to come down some kind of human order" whilst holding a book in his hands for hours as he sat in the cane chair trying to rest, "but instead only darkness came upon him in the room, his eyes peering at the pages while his brain stared past them to the truth of their times" (128). As Gamini confronts the still inassimilable experience of war, it would appear that no book "in his hands" is as yet capable of organizing his experience into any form of coherence, nor does it offer a way out of his present sense of "darkness" (128). What Gamini looks for beyond the

pages open before him may be understood as, in Heidegger's terms, an "opening up or disclosure of that into which human being as historical is already cast" (206). However, he cannot as yet glimpse this opening because it lies beyond his field of vision or is as yet unwritten in the immediate aftermath of traumatic experience. These extraordinary events effect "a breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world" precisely because no pre-existing explanatory model exists as yet (Caruth 4). The sense that there is a gap that arises between an unprecedented event and the ability to confer some form of meaning on it also occurs earlier on in the novel, when Anil realizes that in "the midst of such events...there could never be any logic to the human violence. For now it would be reported and filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it" (55). It is made evident here that reporting and filing as purely empirical forms of documentation (truth constructed as correspondence) do not offer meaning as such, nor do they open a way of apprehending newly unfolding states of affairs in the world. Giorgio Agamben describes the lag between an unprecedented event and the ability to assimilate or understand such an experience as "the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension" (12).

Arguably, then, "the truth of their times" or the understanding Gamini looks for beyond the pages of his book may be gleaned, if not from the positivist documents that chart verifiable facts, then from just such a historical fiction as *Anil's Ghost* purports to be. The question that this and the subsequent chapter is concerned with, is how *Anil's Ghost* charts the passage from fact to truth and how it moves beyond documentation and verification towards comprehending an event like the Sri Lankan civil war. Can this novel enter into the "aporia of historical knowledge" and provide that which Gamini looks for, namely "some kind of human order" within the chaos of the experience of war?

The primary reality or fact of war that the novel addresses through its chief protagonists Gamini and Anil, the medical doctor and the forensic anthropologist, are the dead or injured human bodies encountered in hospital emergency rooms and in the unmarked graves in the countryside. The event of war is thus presented first and foremost as an experience of the body, both for those whose bodies are destroyed or damaged in the

event as well as for those who are cast into a sentient relation with the afflicted bodies of others. This chapter deals with the way the novel discloses the experience of the body in war and as such it can be read as the counterpart to Chapter Three which examines the experience of the body in a more ordinary and non-threatening life world. Chapter Six takes a step back from the site of the body to examine the particular political and ethical dynamics that surround the body in war and that consequently imperil its very existence or survival in the world.

By identifying the body as the principal site or marker of war, *Anil's Ghost* falls in with an already well established set of discourses within the humanities over the last decades.

Elaine Graham writes that the move to place

the body at the centre of moral and social theorizing reflects a conviction on the part of many scholars that the human body serves as a surface upon which the most controversial and pressing dilemmas of the day are made flesh. Questions of war, peace, hunger and torture involve bodily containment, flourishing or coercion. It is bodies that bear most tangibly the marks and effects of cultural, political and cultural trends. (254)

That bodies "bear most tangibly the marks and effects" of the "most controversial and pressing dilemmas of the day" are never more viscerally evident than in the event of war. This is most expressly borne out by *Anil's Ghost* which foregrounds this most immediate fact about war: the deliberate destruction and injury to human bodies on a large scale.

To provide some conceptual context for this brutal and indisputable reality of war and to examine the grounds on which such foregrounding of the body in *Anil's Ghost* rests, I turn to Elaine Scarry's well-known analysis of the structure of war in *The Body in Pain*. Scarry maintains that the phenomenon of war can best be understood as a dynamic between the real and the symbolic. In such an understanding war arises out of a slippage between the real and the un-real, the material and the immaterial (62). The focus of the real in war is the human body. This is so because the "incontestable reality" of the "body in pain, the body maimed, the body dead and hard to dispose of...is conferred on an ideology or issue or instance of political authority impatient of, or deserted by benign sources of substantiation" (62). The process of substantiation or "reality conferring",

Scarry argues, is the basis of cultural practice in general. This is a process of transfer by which "the made world of culture" which one might call the symbolic, acquires the "incontestable reality" (125) of the physical world.

[It is] the process of perception that allows invented ideas, beliefs and made objects to be accepted and entered into as if they had the same ontological status as the naturally given world. Once the made world is put into place, it would have acquired the legitimate forms of 'substantiation' that are familiar to us. That an invented thing is 'real' will be ascertainable by the immediate apprehensible material fact of itself: the city (not the invisible city asserted to exist on the other side of the next sand dune, but one within the sensory horizon) has a materialized existence that is confirmable by vision, touch, hearing and smell. (125)

Not all cultural constructs or fictions are, however, readily translatable into reality. Consequently, the attempts to bestow the force of the material world on the immaterial does at times take on complex, bizarre or extreme manifestations. Scarry writes that the human body itself is only brought forward to substantiate something abstract like an oath or a religious belief when such a symbolic fragment or constructed fictional notion cannot be asserted or confirmed by any other material reality. In other words, only when there is a crisis of substantiation is the human body used as a concrete realization of an idea. Whereas the disembodied notion or ideology has an unanchored quality or a fluidity, its material counterpart has a reality that is confirmable by the senses of embodied observers and is therefore endowed with the 'force' or 'truth' of physical presence. In a war the material substantiation of the symbolic claims or issues which are unstable and changeable (in other words historically determined and not timeless or universal) is achieved by means of damage inflicted on bodies which is permanent and irreversible and which remains concretely evident. The conflict of ideas or verbal issues at stake in a situation of war is played out as a contest in which the "winning issue or ideology achieves for a time the force and status of material 'fact' by the sheer material weight of the multitudes of damaged and opened human bodies" (62).

Thus the relentless and extraordinary physical alterations occurring in war itself are framed on either side, at its opening and its close, by unanchored issues, issues deprived of substantiation: this framing unreality of the exterior constructs appropriates the reality of the interior content of war; the relation of inside to outside is the relation that, for example, exists in a very abbreviated form in oaths between the juxtaposed extremes of the opened body and the verbal assertion. (133)

Using Scarry's analysis of the structure of war, it is evident that Ondaatje's primary concern with war lies with "the interior content of war" and not with the "unanchored issues" that frame the event. The omission of the latter aspect of war is in fact responsible for the sharp criticism that has been levelled against the novel, as noted in the first chapter. It would appear that the conventional treatment of war demands an exploration of just such verbal issues and ideologies which, as Scarry claims, frame the event of war in order to uncover what is believed to be its cause or origin. Such origins and causes then presumably allow one to 'solve' the problem of war by means of identifying, as in a contest of sorts, the unsound or irrational (religion), unworthy (expansionist, material interest) or ethically unjustifiable (in terms of individual human rights) set of reasons or ideologies which may in turn be acted against by legal, economic or simply destructive means. Scarry shows in her far-reaching study that the relation between disembodied verbal issues and the injuring that is the cost and outcome of war is hugely complex and related to decidedly irrational human impulses. Ondaatje omits taking the conventional route into writing about war, thus avoiding the sometimes unproductive pathways of causal thinking dictated by the grammar of reason and logic. As Anil comes to understand earlier on, there can indeed be no "logic of human violence" (55) and the unquestioned assumption of reason as sole means to uncover the truth of war is short-circuited in the tautology "[t]he reason for war is war" (43). The sovereignty of the Grand Logos imposed by the European Enlightenment over the brute material world, residing "glacierlike" (15) in Geneva, is debunked in no uncertain terms: "So much for the international authority in Geneva. The grand logos on letterheads and European office doors meant nothing where there was a crisis" (29). Ultimately, and this will be discussed more fully in the final chapter, the novel assumes a position in line with a Levinasian ethics, namely that the resolution of human conflict is not "achieved on the basis of knowledge, whose Logos insures the truth" (Burggraeve 74). The truth about war that Ondaatje seeks to uncover is not located in the realm of ideas but one that is to be found in the domain of embodied existence.

Ondaatje's omission of the issues that frame the event of war clears the ground for a more urgent consideration of the most immediate fact of war, one which according to Scarry's

account has been most glaringly omitted from a long history of writing about war. This is the fact that

the main purpose and outcome of war is injuring. Though this fact is too self-evident and massive ever to be directly contested, it can be indirectly contested by many means and disappear from view along many separate paths. It may disappear from view simply by being omitted: one can read pages of a historic or strategic account of a particular military campaign, or listen to many successive instalments in a newscast narrative of events in a contemporary war, without encountering the acknowledgement that the purpose of the event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves. (63-64)

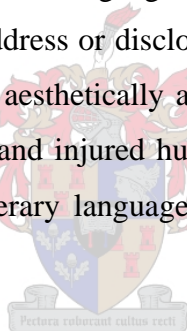
Scarry provides a convincing account and analysis of the disappearance of the visceral reality of the injured or dead human body by all manner of conventions – long naturalized by frequent use and easily unnoticed in accounts of war commonly accepted as factual and true. Against this convention, always already eroding on several fronts just as it is always newly entrenched by political interests,¹ Ondaatje's novel foregrounds the human body in war. War is indeed, as Scarry notes, "the very event that is the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate" (71). The body in war is primarily one afflicted by death and injury and these two categories organize the discussion which follows.



That the representation of the dead or injured human body is fraught with a multitude of cultural, religious and ethical difficulties or taboos is a strongly and intuitively held position borne out by the experience of everyday life. There is thus an imperative arising out of such a nearly universal sensibility that the aesthetic rendering of the dead and injured body must be undertaken with extreme circumspection and with an ethical sensibility which is adequate to the suffering and radical vulnerability of people in the world. The novel, in effect, stages an aesthetic event in which the dead and injured are brought into view for the reader who may then be brought closer to apprehending or approaching such realities as they occur in the world. The manner of the aesthetic approach, articulated in specific literary forms and stylistic devices, needs to be in accord

¹ Some films about war consciously bring the fact of visceral trauma into view in the attempt to represent the real, whereas the visual coverage of the Iraq war by American television deliberately excludes the sight of wounded or dead American soldiers from its view for ideological purposes.

with the ethical demand placed on anyone encountering dead or dying human bodies. Literary writing is thus understood here as having a performative function as it enacts an approach to others; it is interlocutory or an ethical 'Saying' in Levinas's terms. The demand placed on language here is that its ethical import and its aesthetic form are in accordance. The interdependence of ethics and aesthetics as having something to do with style is explored by Kathrin Stengel with reference to Wittgenstein's famous dictum that ethics and aesthetics are one the same. She writes that life "exemplarily manifests itself – according to Wittgenstein – insofar as it is approached through the prism of language – in nothing other than style" (616). The style of an utterance (of an individual voice), "especially of philosophical or literary utterances, reveals the speaker's value system, it manifests, necessarily, the ethical" (617). Values cannot be given in propositional statements, because they do not constitute facts, but offer a perspective on facts. As such values exceed or transcend propositional language. They are instead articulated or shown in the manner or expression of an address or disclosed by means of aesthetic form. Thus the ethical may be said to transpire aesthetically and the aesthetical is imbued with the ethical. The manner in which dead and injured human bodies are brought into view by means of the aesthetic forms of literary language in *Anil's Ghost* is tantamount to an ethical approach.



Like the decapitated head of the Medusa signifying extreme violence and terror cannot be faced directly, so too the approach to the dead or traumatized body, be this by means of aesthetic language or a camera lens, is constrained in some way or another. What is germane to this discussion is that such bodies are radically transformed or marked by the experience of death or pain suffered as a result of violent injury and that such experiences strain the ordinary capacities of language or fall beyond its reach. This is so because death, as the pre-eminent form of alterity, "is the basic relation that cannot become a concept or a form of knowledge, it is both inevitable and ungraspable, in urgent need of comprehension and yet resisting attempts to comprehend it" (Toumayan 45). If the experience of death lies beyond conceptual and linguistic categories, then the near death attendant upon the experience of severe physical pain follows close behind. As Scarry puts it, such depiction of suffering and death "may seem to have the remote character of

some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth" (3). Writing about the dead and the nearly dead is fraught with difficulties on conceptual, linguistic, aesthetic and ethical levels. How then, are these considerable obstacles negotiated in Ondaatje's text?

The first glimpse of the dead in *Anil's Ghost* is appropriately veiled and is given in the italicized interlude that opens the novel. The scene is set at a mass grave where a vigil for the dead is being held. "[H]alf-revealed forms" (5) are just visible in an opened grave. A woman sits by the grave awaiting news of her missing family. "There are no words" (6) that can describe for Anil the "the woman's face" (6). A tacit acknowledgement is thus given early on that there are limits to what writing can disclose of human suffering. The view shifts away from the woman's face which presents too overwhelming an aspect of pain, to her body as a more accessible index of her experience, expressing the "grief of love in that shoulder" (6). Only the body, it would seem, can give expression to these most intense of human emotions, namely love and grief. The opening scene of the novel thus spells out a deferential entry into this gravest domain of human experience, offering only a view from afar, the sidelong glance, the "half revealed form".



The opening pages of the novel do not, in fact, go much further than anticipating the horror of war to come by means of more generalized references before the specific reality of the Sri Lankan civil war is confronted in graduated accounts, culminating in the 'National Heroes Day' bomb suicide explosion in a crowded Colombo street.

The measured entry into the horror of war can be traced in the progressively realistic use of the image of the severed head. It is first fleetingly mentioned in the opening pages when it begins to dawn on Anil shortly after her arrival in Sri Lanka that "the darkest of Greek tragedies were innocent compared to what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Mantale" (11). The severed head planted on a stake serves perhaps as the most widely recognised emblem of human atrocity, recalling the overpowering terror of the Medusa, the guillotined heads of the French Revolution and

Marlow's distant sighting of the heads adorning the fence poles surrounding Kurtz's domain of unfathomable darkness and horror in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The description of a Buddhist cave temple in a second italicized interlude also serves in this way to foreshadow the atrocities to come. Inside the cave the carved bodies of the Bodhisattvas "*were cut out of the walls with axes and saws, the edges red, suggesting a wound's incision*". Centuries later, the same temple had become "*the place of a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off*" (12). In yet another distant century Palipana tells us, dissident monks had their heads cut off in a forest sanctuary. Because of this the whole kingdom had mounted a rebellion (87). The severed head only reappears much later, less as emblem and more as reference to an experienced reality, in what must be the most moving and traumatic account of an atrocity in the novel. The scene, again written as an italicized interlude of three pages, unfolds slowly, giving a detailed and lyrical account of the ordinary activities of a young woman called Sirissa in rural Sri Lanka.² It depicts her daily walk to the village school where she works as a servant while earnestly picking up what scraps of learning fall her way.³ The last paragraph recounts her usual morning traverse across the countryside, the closely familiar footway unfolding before her, predictable in its every turn and rise until the moment when all her known reference points are collapsed by what she sees in front of her, namely "*the heads of two students on stakes, on either side of the bridge, facing each other*" (174). "*Mind capable of nothing. She does not even think of releasing them from this public gesture. Cannot touch anything because everything feels alive, wounded and raw, but alive. She begins running forward, past their eyes, her own shut dark until she is past them. Up till the hill towards the school. She keeps running forward and then she sees no more*" (175).

The narrative, which has in the main tracked the young woman's point of view and records her visceral response to the atrocity, the grotesque overload of sentience and the undoing of her life world, cuts off at this point and the act of killing and mutilation which

² She is the wife of Ananda the artisan who later assists Anil and Sarath in identifying the victim of a clandestine government killing.

³ The dense poetic resonances of this interlude are not explored in full here in order to proceed with the main argument of the chapter.

follows remains unwitnessed and can therefore not be brought into view according to the logic of the narrative. The moment of her death, the emptying of her existence is suggested indirectly as coinciding with the moment when "she sees no more". The horror of the experience is announced by the heads on stakes that are no longer human but signal the in-human. The visual and narrative 'blackout' signal the unreachability of the experience of death, its slip beyond language and understanding, meaning and order. The trajectory of horror the novel charts in its sequenced accounts of beheading reaches its zenith a few pages later when one learns that the sight of such heads on stakes had become something like a national commonplace at the height of war. Sarath recounts the time: "We have seen so many heads stuck on poles here, these last few years. It was at its worst a couple of years ago. You'd see them in the early mornings, somebody's night work, before the families heard about them and came and removed them and took them home. Wrapping them in their shirts or just cradling them. Someone's son. These were blows to the heart" (184).

Just as the narrative carefully negotiates its representation of atrocities of war, given primarily in the image of the severed head, it treads as carefully around the event of death itself, as is evident in the account of Sirissa's killing. In contrast to her death, Ananda's attempted suicide is more viscerally brought into view, as it is witnessed (as opposed to experienced) by Anil when she discovers his bleeding body in the house at Ekneligoda and attempts to "interrupt his death" (197). As he begins to expire rapidly from the near fatal neck wound, the signs of impending death which mark his slide into a domain that cannot be grasped or comprehended are noted by Anil: "There were sounds she had never heard before...The blood on the knife and in his fingers and down his arm. His eyes like deer in her light. The sound coming from God knows where. Not his throat. It couldn't be his throat. Not now" (195). The alarming and seemingly unnatural sounds emitted by the opened, traumatized body is accompanied by an estranged gaze likened to that of a wild animal, whose interior being remains largely unfathomable to humans. The uncanniness of the encounter signals a breach of incomprehension experienced by Anil who witnesses Ananda's near passing into the radical alterity of death. This experience cannot be opened

into language; it must needs remain unsayable, indicated here only by a figure of incomprehension given in the gaze of a wild animal.

The encounter with the face of death is rendered with even greater intensity when Gamini, towards the close of the novel, is brought into the presence of his brother's corpse in the morgue the morning after his brutal murder. He struggles to understand what he sees. Bereft of life, the body on the bed no longer bears the same relation to himself, it is "no longer the counter of an argument, no longer an opinion [he] refused to accept". Instead, "[i]t was what it was" (289). The dissolution of ordinary meaning brought on by the aspect of death is signalled by the tautology, a short circuit of meaning, and Gamini cannot say what the body is now, other than what it once was. He is plunged into a darkness of sorts, unmoored in an altered space. "It was dark now. It looked as if the room were full of grey water" (290). Here, as well as elsewhere, the metaphors of darkness, invisibility, inundation, the subterranean or sub-aquatic abound in Ondaatje's writing about death, dying as well as the extreme act of killing.

The act of murder, one which violates the primary ethical injunction not to kill, is significantly staged in the dislocated space of a moving train as it enters into the "*dark claustrophobia*" of an underground tunnel.⁴ Before the interior of the train is cast in complete darkness, signalling the descent into an underworld of sorts, "*the faint muddy light of the bulbs*" still flicker briefly as if in warning of what is to follow. Next, the killer pulls a chain around the neck of a government agent and proceeds to asphyxiate him. The nightmare of this subterranean sequence, like "*a tableau in somebody's dream*" is concluded when the dead body is thrust out of the open train window. "*The buffet of wind outside flung the head and shoulders backwards. He pushed him further and then let go and the man disappeared into the noise of the tunnel*" (32). The same vocabulary of darkness is deployed in another scene of death towards the end of the book. When Sarath's wife is brought into the emergency unit after drinking lye to take her own life, her passage into death is already irreversibly set in motion. As she lies dying, "*she could see nothing in spite of the muddy flicker of light now and then*" (252). Gamini, witnessing

⁴ This episode is typographically foregrounded in italic script (31-32).

her death, is himself thrown into a severely disoriented state. He has the sense of being on board a train "*sucked into a tunnel and they moved within it, shuddering in the darkness*" (252). The approaching moment of her death is signalled as an echo of the earlier scene of death on train, "*There was a train window open and the sound of the clatter doubled. She could feel the gusts*" (253).

The writing in this scene, as in the previous descriptive scenes (Sirissa, Ananda, the train murder and Sarath's own death), brings the experience of death and dying closely into view and is self-consciously curtailed by the limits of what can be said about events that fundamentally strain linguistic and conceptual categories. These limits are indicated by language that deploys a density of images related to obscurity, darkness and inaccessibility.

Elsewhere, the novel acknowledges the obscurity of death in more general terms: "Death, loss, was 'unfinished', so you could not walk through it" (56). It presents as a conceptual impasse, loss of meaning or an even as insanity. It signals a departure from known reality, experienced collectively as a "scarring psychosis in the country" (56). Paradoxically related to the transcendent experience of death is the self-obliterating experience of love which is similarly resistant to translation into adequate or entirely coherent forms.

Lovers who read stories or who look at paintings about love do so supposedly for clarity. But the more confusing and anarchic the story, the more those caught in love will believe it. There are only a few great and trustworthy love drawings. And in these works is an aspect that continues to remain unordered and private, no matter how famous they become. They bring no sanity, give just a blue tormented light. (151)

There can be no clear order or "sanity" that art can confer on such experiences that resist being drawn out of the domain of the "unordered and private". The work is then all the more "trustworthy" or true when it does not gloss over the chaos of these experiences by offering the consolation of a meaning but brings instead the fundamental alterity of such liminal states into view.

The aesthetic of obscurity that marks this writing and which signals a conscious distance maintained in the encounter with death, is not the same as another form of aesthetic distance, perhaps more familiar in literary production and assumed in such art which places itself above reality and which is directed beyond the world "towards the region of Platonic ideas and toward the eternal which towers above the world" (Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow" 131). Such art, for Levinas, is immoral and serves to liberate the artist from a responsibility to the world and lived experience, as well assuring him or her a "pretentious and facile nobility". Instead, Levinas advocates a "disengagement on the hither side" of the world, a movement in artistic production that probes the "interstices" (131) of being in the world, despite the impossibility of subjecting the extreme experiences of living to a totalizing gaze or uncovering it in its entirety.

To go beyond is to communicate with ideas, to understand. Does not the function of art lie in not understanding? Does not obscurity provide it with its very element and a completion sui generis, foreign to dialectics and the life of ideas? Will we then say that the artist knows and expresses the obscurity of the real?...Does not the commerce with the obscure, as a totally independent ontological event, describe categories irreducible to those of cognition? We should like to show this event in art. Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow. (131-132)

The direct encounter with death, written into this novel as an "invasion of shadow", a "descent of the night", is, however, also deliberately circumnavigated or kept at arm's length by means of altogether different set of textual strategies. This can be identified as the novel's deployment of the discursive vocabulary of forensic science and the conventions of detective fiction. Apart from the many aspects of forensic science that are most productively worked into densely structured arguments of the novel, the mutilated corpse as the product of war, discursively re-organized as forensic specimen, serves just such a purpose, namely to contain the affective disturbance of violent death. This is, however, not that easily achieved and the emotional and conceptual effort of such a counter intuitive response to the deeply distressing sight of the "recently dead" remains of what could still "be someone" (13) is staged in the opening pages of the novel. Anil struggles to "stop her hands from trembling" (13) as she demonstrates the clinical procedures of forensic investigation to a group of students: "She dipped each of the fingers in a beaker of blue solution so she could check for cuts and abrasions" (13). As

the laboratory techniques transform the human body into a specimen or cadaver, the novel estranges and distances the body by recasting or transforming it as forensic object, slotting it into the popular genre of forensic fiction, at once removed but parasitically dependent on the real. Further degrees of aesthetic distancing are achieved by recasting the body as skeleton and further still as an archaeological specimen, comfortably recessed into early history. Last, the dead body appears as carving or statue. Positioned at several removes from the real, the body refigured as artwork operates on the level of the symbolic. Such bodies do indeed frame the novel: in the opening pages the Bodhissatwas of the cave temple are, "*cut out of the walls with axes and saws*" (12), anticipating the trauma to real bodies in the war. In the closing scene, the broken body of the giant Buddha is dug up from the ground adjoining the killing fields and burial grounds in the countryside by a team from the "Archaeological Department" and later reconstructed, metonymically and symbolically standing in for the multitude of bodies injured and killed during the war of Sri Lanka.

Those who work daily with the dead are challenged in a particular way. In the forensic laboratories in Oklahoma, Anil and her colleagues "*snuffed out death with music and craziness*" (147). But it would seem that no degree of distancing would snuff out the uncanny signifying properties of the human body as cadaver which persists in re-invoking the life it once held and which is now so manifestly absent from it. The manual procedures of Sarath's laboratory examination of skeletons identified as murder victims are transformed into gestures of care, indicating such a slippage between life and death, "*He loosened a new tungsten-carbide needle from its plastic container and attached it to a hand pick and began cleaning the bones of the first skeleton, drilling free the fragments of dirt. Then he turned on a slim hose and let it hover over each bone, air nestling into the evidence of trauma as if he were blowing cool breath from a pursed mouth onto a child's burn*" (74).

For Levinas the peculiarity or horror of the phenomenology of the cadaver lies in its excess over categories of being and nothingness. "*The inability of the cadaver to assume the simple status of a thing or object is manifested in its 'return' to haunt, to become a*

ghost" (Toumayan 132). The title of the novel, which is open to several interpretations, may thus be construed here as a reference to Anil's haunting by the "ghost" of the skeleton she names Sailor. The dead body thus "concretely juxtaposes presence and absence", and indicates a "bridge between here and nowhere" (133). In their work with the skeleton Anil and Ananda experience moments both willed and involuntary in which the ghostly presences of the dead are recalled by the material remnants of their absent lives.

Now Ananda picked up the skeleton and carried it in his arms. [Anil] was in no way appalled by what he was doing. There had been hours when, locked in her investigations and too focussed by hours of intricacy, she too would need to lean forward and lift Sailor into her arms, to remind herself that he was like her. Not just evidence but someone with charms and flaws, part of a family, a member of a village who in the sudden lightning of politics raised his hands at the last minute, so they were broken. Ananda held Sailor and walked slowly with him and placed him back on the table...A small yellow leaf floated down and slipped into the skeleton's ribs and pulsed there. (170)

The notion of a paradoxical presence of life in the space of its absence is rendered in the final image. The oft recurring figure of the leaf is suggestive throughout the novel of such a shadowy presence of the dead in the spaces they once dwelled in. The following lines are typical of its mode of signifying: "But in Arankale, Sarath told her, in the last years of the twelfth century, Asanga the Wise and his followers lived for decades in solitude, the world unaware of them. When they died the monastery and then the forest were stilled of humans. And in those uninhabited years the paths were *leaf-filled*, there was no song of sweeping" (190, emphasis added).

The most profound outcome of war is the widespread experience of death. The experience itself is in effect blacked out and cannot be easily broached by the living. Only the traces of its passage can be apprehended through the transformations that mark the dead and the dying bodies encountered during a time of war. Such spectres of death are difficult to countenance, requiring all manner of aesthetic manoeuvres to bring its shadow into view or else to keep it deliberately at bay. The novel's particular approach to this problematic has been the topic of the preceding discussion.

The novel also attends to the various forms of psychological suffering experienced by survivors and witnesses of war. Maurice Blanchot writes that "when the disaster comes upon us, it does not come" (*The Writing of the Disaster* 1). Those who survive witness the arrival of death which passes them by. Such a death is "one which was not yours, which you have thus neither known or lived but under the threat of which you believe you are called to live" (95). It constitutes a kind of limit event for the survivor because it ruptures the parameters of ordinary life and therefore becomes inexpressible in the linguistic forms that express what is familiar and known. The girl Lakma, who had witnessed the killing of her parents, falls into a "silent, non-reacting" period of shock after the event. "It had touched everything within her, driving both her verbal and motor abilities into infancy...She had wanted nothing more to invade her" (103). The unmediated and crushing impingement of the traumatic experience upon her consciousness gives rise to Lakma's sense of invasion. The same severe disturbance or sense of inundation by a reality that is altogether overwhelming is experienced by Gamini who, already too traumatised to examine the tortured bodies of the dead in the hospital mortuary directly, chooses instead to establish the cause of their death for the post mortem reports from photographs. The degree of mediation by which he seeks to shield himself from the invasion of death on his psyche is, however, not entirely sufficient: "He walked away from the week's pile of photographs. The doors opened and a thousand bodies slid in, as if caught in the nets of fishermen, as if they had been mauled. A thousand bodies of sharks and skates in the corridors, some of the dark-skinned fish thrashing" (213). Psychic disturbance is disclosed as an inundation by lacerated fish bodies, denizens of a sub-aquatic world nightmarishly surfacing in the space of Gamini's ordinary life world; the horror and alterity of death invading life in monstrous forms.

Anil, too, had seen that "those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic" (55). As if in an attempt to objectify their loss, Anil observes, survivors would resort to strategies like holding "onto just the coloured and patterned sarong a missing relative last slept in, which in normal times would have become a household rag but now was sacred" (56). The psychological suffering Anil observes finds expression by means of material substantiation or objectification which confers some

form of visibility on it. The experience of suffering is, in effect, brought into the open. The novel presents the experience of psychic trauma primarily in its scattered and fragmentary accounts of Lakma's recovery, Ananda's alcohol abuse, Gamini's speed addiction and the dissociation of his personal life. "I'm probably another example of trauma, you see" (132) he cynically informs Anil.

Alongside such accounts of psychic scarring the novel does not lose sight of the crushing impingement of the operations of war on the material body. To this end, it stations itself at the main portal through which the multitude of injured must necessarily pass in the emergency of war, namely the hospital emergency room. From this vantage point it witnesses the frequently elided reality of the massive scale of bodily injuries sustained during war and to those who attend such injuries. Working in these "war rooms" (120) the doctor, Gamini, knows that "the only reasonable constant was that there would be more bodies tomorrow – post-stabbings, post-landmines. Orthopaedic trauma, punctured lungs, spinal cord injuries" (120). These are the bodies which escape death, but are undone by the annihilating force of pain in the immediate aftermath of trauma. "[D]uring the first week of any offensive", the novel informs, "the hospital would run out of painkillers" and its workers would become "lost among the screaming" (118). In an attempt to explain how the novel broaches this particular reality which is an outcome of war, I turn once again to Scarry's text.

For Scarry, there is an equivalence between pain and death. This is so because each

only happens because of the body. In each the contents of consciousness are destroyed. The two are the most intense forms of negation, the purest expression of the anti-human, of annihilation, of total aversiveness, though one is an absence and the other a felt presence, one occurring in cessation of sentience, the other expressing itself in grotesque overload. Regardless, then, of the context in which it occurs, physical pain always mimes death and the infliction of physical pain is always a mock execution. (31)

The experience of severe injury to the body is then one which "mimes death" and like death it destroys the contents of consciousness. Because of this, Scarry argues, physical pain "has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language"

(5). Because physical pain mounts a singular assault on consciousness, and voids it of referential content, language has been hard pressed to "reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing *pain itself* into objectification" (6). Such "verbal strategies for overcoming that assault", writes Scarry, "are very small in number and reappear consistently as one looks at the words of patient, physician, amnesty worker, lawyer, artist" (13). These verbal strategies revolve around two metaphors. The first, and by far most frequently deployed, "specifies an external agent of pain, a weapon that is pictured as producing the pain; and the second specifies bodily damage that is pictured as accompanying the pain" (15). The argument which allows itself to be made here, is that *Anil's Ghost* employs just such a language of agency, which uses objects or weapons that inflict bodily damage to stand in for pain itself as well as a medical vocabulary of wounds, to bring physical pain and the human suffering attendant upon bodily injury into view, just as it endeavours to foreground the cost of war in terms of the inordinate scale of death it inflicts on a populace. It employs these very strategies, it would seem, following Scarry, because language offers little else by way of bringing the experience of pain into the domain of shared discourse. She also observes that "the rarity with which physical pain is represented in literature is most striking when seen within the framing fact of how consistently art confers visibility on other forms of distress" (11). Psychological suffering in particular, which does have a referential content, has so habitually been depicted in art, writes Scarry, that "there is virtually no piece of literature that is not about suffering, no piece of literature that does not stand ready to assist us" (11).⁵ Thus, by attending to the body in pain in the space of literary writing, Ondaatje ventures to disclose a physical experience which is in itself tantamount to "an assault on language" (13).

Injury to the body is first encountered when Anil, while working alone at night, "cut[s] herself badly with a surgical blade, slicing the flesh around her thumb" (38). The scene introduces the vocabulary of 'weapon' and 'wound' which is sustained throughout the novel. Anil takes herself off to the local emergency unit, but after waiting there for some

⁵ There is also a danger, Scarry writes, that "because artists so successfully express suffering, they may themselves collectively come to be thought of as the most authentic class of sufferers, and thus may inadvertently appropriate concern away from others in radical need of assistance" (11).

time and seeing ever increasing numbers of injured people coming in from the street, "her wound began to seem insignificant in comparison" (38). The emergencies of ordinary life, it would seem, do not register in the altogether different scale of bodily injury during war time. The next time Anil finds herself in the same emergency ward is when she and Sarath bring in a man they found nailed onto the road surface at night in front of a truck. When they found him, he

was alive but couldn't move. He was almost unconscious. Someone had hammered a nail into his left palm and another into his right, crucifying him to the tarmac.

...

She held the man's face between her hands while Sarath prized the nails from the tarmac, freeing his hands.

'You have to leave the nails in for now,' she said. 'Don't remove them.' (111)

The nails that function as the agents of pain are the focal point of the account and clearly suggest the degree of suffering the man, called Gunesena, has been subjected to in the deliberate act of torture. In the emergency ward Gamini swabs and anaesthetizes his hands and a little later he "pulled the bridge nails from Gunesena's anaesthetized hands. Then he washed them with Betalima, a crimson sudsing fluid that he squirted out of a plastic bottle. He dressed the wounds and talked quietly to his patient" (130). The wound and work of attending to it are held in a steady focus, the writing is discreet and measured, there is no hint of sensationalist emergency room drama, here as elsewhere, that detracts from the fact of the injured body.

The parts of the novel which track Gamini's life and work in the hospital are interspersed with what amounts to a veritable catalogue of injuries and weapons. According to Scarry, accounts that bring the visceral realities of war into view, serve indirectly to bring about the abolishment of such weapons that are intended to inflict maximum suffering on human subjects and brand a population with the debilitating marks of war upon which 'victors' may make their claims to power.

A deeply tactful, compassionate, and careful account of the alterations that occur in human tissue such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's verbal and visual accounts of the effects of incendiary weapons in Vietnam, Dresden, Hiroshima, or Nagasaki may place the injured body several inches in front of our eyes, hold the light up to the injured flesh, and keep steady the reader's head so that he cannot turn away. (65)

Just such an account of the effects of blast weaponry is forcefully delivered by Gamini in a dispute with Anil about the usefulness of her investigations into government war activities and her narrowly circumscribed view of justice. Maintaining that because everybody is implicated in the terror of war or has "blood on their hands" (154), as Sarath later puts it, there can be "no more high horses" (133), especially not from "those armchair rebels living abroad with their ideas of justice" (132). "We're all fucked, aren't we. We don't know what to do about it", says Gamini and invites such outsiders as Anil to confront, instead of mounting their "high horses", the material realities of war that present in his surgery on a daily basis.

'I mean, I know everything about blast weaponry. Mortars, Claymore mines, antipersonnel mines which contain gelignite and trinitrotoluen. And I am the doctor! That last one results in amputations below the knee. They lose consciousness and the blood pressure falls. You do a tomography of the brain and brain stem, and it shows haemorrhages and edema. We use dexamethazone and mechanical ventilation for this – it means we have to open the skull up. Mostly it is hideous mutilation, and we just keep arresting the haemorrhages...they come in all the time. You find mud, grass, metal, the remnants of a leg and boot all blasted up into the thigh and genitals when the bomb they stepped on went off. So if you plan to walk in mined areas, it is better to wear tennis shoes. Safer than combat boots. Anyway, these guys who are setting off the bombs are who the Western press calls freedom fighters...and you want to investigate the *government*?' (133)

Gamini's argument is that instead of getting lost in the ideological issues that frame the war, Anil and others like her should instead confront the material realities of war. His point is aptly underscored by holding "the light up to the injured flesh", in Scarry's words. Gamini, the novel tells us at this point, had stopped believing in politics or just causes, or such ideas as "the principle of one's land or pride of ownership, or even personal rights. All these motives somehow ended up in the arms of careless power. One was no worse and no better than the enemy" (119). The issues that frame a war or are offered in a facile and deceptive way as its causes are rejected here in no uncertain terms. Instead, the response to war that the writing seeks to elicit has to do with the multitude of individuals who suffer the outcome of war bodily through death and injury.

The question asked at the beginning of this chapter, whether *Anil's Ghost* as a work of historical fiction does indeed offer that which Gamini looks for when he is cast into the crisis of war, namely "some kind of human order", may thus be answered by way of

concluding this discussion. By bringing the lived experiences of the encounter with death and injury into view as the most profound consequence of war, as far as this is possible through the prism of language, the novel does indeed lift some form of "human order" out of a multitude of unordered facts that document the event of war. The truth that the novel discloses in this manner is not an exposition of "the logic of human violence", nor does it pass judgement over the competing ideological claims that frame this war. No attempt is made to identify a 'just cause' of any kind. What is offered instead is an understanding that the human body, in its radical vulnerability to death and injury, a fact that is most glaringly exposed in the event of war, is also the site of ethics. The dead and injured bodies thus serve as both a proscription against harming the other and as a solicitation for help.

The complex surrounds of the workings of ethics during a time of war, transpiring as corporeal transactions between humans ranging between the extremes of killing, torture, injuring, abduction to converse actions of protecting, healing, embracing and saving are examined in the following chapter.



CHAPTER SIX

Destruction, Beneficence and the Ethics of Writing Biopolitics in Contemporary Warfare

By degrees, as War passed from the hand-to-hand encounters of the middle ages into more regular and systematic form, stray reflections on [the real conduct of war] also forced themselves into men's minds, but they mostly appeared only incidentally in memoirs and narratives and in a certain measure incognito.
Carl von Clausewitz, *On the Nature of War*.

The previous chapter has shown that *Anil's Ghost* suggests that the reality of war is best confronted by addressing its most immediate and pressing consequence, namely the fact of death and injury to human bodies on a large scale. The novel is preoccupied primarily with an ethical response to war and the crisis of human suffering that is the immediate outcome of war. How this is envisaged will be the subject of the final chapter. This chapter looks at the specific nature of war as it has unfolded in the present era of globalization. These particular conditions of war, as the novel shows, shape the concrete existences of the women and men in that situation and determine the nature of the ethical relations into which they are historically cast.

Von Clausewitz noted in his famous treatise on the nature of war in 1832 that the real conduct of war, by which he presumably meant the actions that destroy human bodies, "was not considered a suitable subject for theory" (53) and that therefore reflections on these acts only made their appearances incidentally and incognito. In our present age such exclusions no longer seem possible and the brutalities of war are now thoroughly documented, investigated and made into the explicit subjects of art and theory. With reference to an Amnesty International report on the Sri Lankan war, Margaret Scanlan has shown that the war in *Anil's Ghost* is easily recognizable as a war typical of the globalization era (305). Achille Mbembe provides a detailed account and analysis of the particular features of such a war in his essay "Necropolitics" that may be aptly applied to

Anil's Ghost. He begins by examining the workings of necropower (sovereign power theorized as the right to kill) across the periods of early and late modern colonial occupation through to the present era of globalization. In the present time, he argues, wars can no longer be understood through the "typologies of 'just' and 'unjust' wars", nor do they include conquest, acquisition, and takeover of territory among their objectives (30). According to Zygmunt Bauman, they are, in effect, conducted as "hit-and-run affairs". In addition, the "exercise of the right to kill [is] no longer the sole monopoly of states, and the 'regular army' is no longer the modality of carrying out these functions". Under these conditions a "patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights to rule emerges, inextricably superimposed and tangled, in which different de facto juridical instances are geographically interwoven and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties, and enclaves abound" (31). Features such as these, outlined by Mbembe, thus mark the significant shifts that have occurred in contemporary warfare and provide a frame for understanding the war represented in *Anil's Ghost*.

As mentioned before, the novel does not set out to unravel such multiple entanglements as described by Mbembe and which evidently mark the political landscape of Sri Lanka. Nor does the novel endeavour to identify a "just" cause of sorts or apportion blame to any "side" in the moral morass of conflicting ideologies, religions and material interests. Sarath makes it clear to Anil soon after her arrival in the country that there is indeed "no hope of affixing blame" and no telling "who the victims are". "Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. *Every side*" (original italics) and every side was using "weapons, propaganda, fear, sophisticated posters, censorship" (17). The novel also informs us that from the early 1980s there had been an almost unbroken series of attacks and killings – "hit-and run affairs" in Bauman's words. These were executed on many fronts by separatist groups, guerrillas and 'special forces' alike, none of them recognizable as a 'regular army', and all of them appearing to cover the evidence of their operations: "The terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of bodies by

fire. The disposal of bodies in the rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses" (42-43).

Unlike the conventional wars of previous eras waged between the armies of two sovereign states, the Sri Lankan situation is clearly marked by just such a complex fragmentation of warring groups. In Mbembe's words, contemporary wars are usually "waged by armed groups acting behind the mask of the state against armed groups that have no state but control very distinct territories; both sides having as their main targets civilian populations that are unarmed or organized into militias" (35). It is made abundantly clear throughout the course of the novel that the cost of the Sri Lankan civil war in terms of loss of life and injury is in the main exacted from the civilian population. The scattered and ubiquitous presences of unnamed militia groups that exercise the right to kill are dispersed throughout the novel in places like road blocks, in the field hospitals or while abducting or killing villagers. Their unexplained appearances, which seem not to be connected to any discernable course of events in the novel plots, leave the reader somewhat bewildered or disorientated about the nature of this war. The apparent arbitrariness of their appearances is, however, not only a structural feature of the novel itself, but accords with the particular reality in which such "attacks and killings" are carried out covertly by warring militias as "hit-and-run affairs". In other words, the structure of the novel echoes the real nature of this warfare. Following Deleuze, Mbembe calls such quasi military units *war machines* and their mode of operating is characterized by mobility as well as by a protean ability to shift into different guises, which accounts for their seemingly random appearances in the novel as it does in reality. Mbembe's description of such war machines is apposite here:

War machines are made up of segments of armed men that split up or merge with one another depending on the tasks to be carried out and the circumstances. Polymorphous and diffuse organizations, war machines are characterized by their capacity for metamorphosis. Their relation to space is mobile. Sometimes they enjoy complex links with state forms (from autonomy to incorporation). The state may of its own doing, transform itself into a war machine. It may, of its own doing, transform itself into a war machine or help to create one. War machines function by borrowing from regular armies while incorporating new elements well adapted to segmentation and deterritorialization. (32)

Ondaatje extends the account given by Mbembe of such war machines by presenting them as both agents of destruction as well as of humanitarian beneficence. Exercising the right to kill thus operates alongside the practice of granting life. These modalities that function as a means of control over life and death or, in other words, over the most basic conditions of biological life, constitute the opposite ends of a particular formation of power which Michel Foucault calls *biopower*. Such a form of power is articulated by one villager who Anil encounters in South America: "When soldiers burned our village they say this is the law, so I thought the law meant the right of the army to kill us" (44). This concept also underwrites Mbembe's account of the struggle to achieve sovereignty (or the right to rule) in territories formally under colonial rule, as was the case in Sri Lanka, and in which sovereign statehood has been brought down or never existed in a creditable form. Anil sums up the situation in Sri Lanka in exactly these terms: "A vainglorious government. Every political opinion supported by its own army" (27). In the fragmentation of such a political landscape, political groupings, by means of the deployment of war machines, achieve sovereignty or power over the human subjects of a particular territory by taking control over the biological existences of those who are to be its subjects. Within Elaine Scarry's scheme the right to rule by war parties is substantiated by the dead or injured bodies of those over whom power is declared and who are to submit to its social or ideological order.¹

The war machines as chief operators in contemporary wars assume the right to kill or, if not to kill, then to maim as a means to achieve power. They execute the murders, beheadings, abductions, torture, mutilations that abound in *Anil's Ghost*. These events serve primarily as 'disciplinary apparatuses' in Foucault's terminology, that inscribe the marks of power onto the bodies of the people who are to be subjected to its rule or whose dead or injured bodies serve as material substantiation of that rule. The 'blast weaponry' described in detail by Gamini and quoted in the previous chapter, is particularly effective in making such inscriptions of power. The amputated human limbs that result from its

¹ Scarry's analysis, written in the early 1980s, does not yet register the extent of political fragmentation of the postcolonial era as well as the effects of globalization which enable the operatives of contemporary wars to exist as independent economies sustained by trading (arms, natural resources) across its own borders.

work of destruction, are replaced later by the prosthetic "Jaipur-limbs" in Sri Lanka's extensive rehabilitation programs for landmine injuries (118) and remain as enduring inscriptions of power. Mbembe evokes the horror of such corporeal markings with some intensity: "The traces of this demiurgic surgery persist for a long time, in the form of human shapes that are alive, to be sure, but whose bodily integrity has been replaced by pieces, fragments, folds, even immense wounds that are difficult to close. Their function is to keep before the eyes of the victim – and of the people around him or her – the morbid spectacle of severing" (35).

Mbembe also points out that in contemporary wars, the "new technologies of destruction are less concerned with inscribing bodies within disciplinary apparatuses as inscribing them, when the time comes, within the order of the maximal economy now represented by the 'massacre'" (34). The darkest fact of contemporary wars must then indubitably be the massacre. Already in its opening scene, which pans over the site of a mass grave around which survivors hold a vigil, the novel delivers witness to this. The lifeless bodies of massacred people, writes Mbembe, are "quickly reduced to the status of simple skeletons. Their morphology henceforth inscribes them in the register of undifferentiated generality: simple relics of unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities, strange deposits plunged into cruel stupor". Such remains are on the one hand reduced to a kind of debris or material waste, on the other hand such remnants maintain "a stubborn will to mean, to signify something" (35). The assault on meaning imposed by the widespread occurrence of massacres in our time seems also to undermine the rationale for humanitarian outreach which struggles, in the face of so overwhelming a negation of life, to believe in its own contribution towards the protection of human life. "I got out of the Civil Rights Movement partly because I couldn't remember which massacre took place when and where" (283), Anil remembers someone saying towards the end of the novel.

How is the magnitude and depth of such evil, then, to be apprehended? Gamini, having treated the survivors of a massacre in which thirty people had been killed and many were left to die from injuries, delivered at "close-range and intentional" (243), reels with incomprehension. "It was the formal evil of the act perhaps, he didn't know" (284). If the

word "formal" suggests that evil is in some way a planned activity which has an order or meaning of sorts, it is certainly one Gamini is unable to fathom. Likewise, the novel stays clear of any headlong confrontation with the embodiment of evil in human form, although it never diverts its unremitting gaze from the gruesome work of evil. The nightmare agents of slaughter that deliver death and suffering are never fully brought into view and are never given voice. At most, their coming is fleetingly suggested in places of darkness or in subterranean spaces. Sailor's murderers are presented as phantom-like and shadowy. They abduct him from an underground tunnel in the mine where he worked: "They had entered the tunnel where twelve men were working. They brought a *billa* – someone from the community with a gunnysack over his head, slits cut out for his eyes – to anonymously identify the rebel sympathizer. A *billa* was a monster, a ghost to scare the children in games, and it picked out Ruwan Kumara and he had been taken away" (269).

That the killer is known to the rest of the villagers suggests that evil is not an external agent but that it is immanent to the community and, as will be shown later, it is also immanent to the self. The presence of Sirissa's killers in the descending darkness of the village is also only obliquely suggested: "*So many things happened during the feathers of night. The frantic running, the terrified, the scared, the pea-brain furious and tired professional men of death punishing another village of dissent*" (174). There is no dark embodiment of human depravity or cruelty in this text, no Kurtz who has crossed the threshold or a Marlow who draws near its precipice. The novel places the phenomenon of human evil, it would seem, well outside its ken, just as Gamini does.

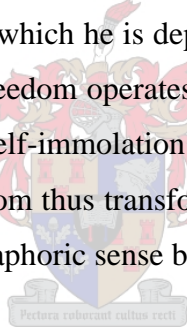
As if in avoidance of facing an agent of terror in human form, the novel's single suicide bomber, whose death delivering mission at a political rally in the streets of Colombo is closely tracked during its final minutes, is not identified by name. No details of personhood are provided and he is simply referred to as R—. In contrast, literature's first suicide bomber, famously penned nearly a century ago by Joseph Conrad in *The Secret Agent* (1907), is in full possession of both an exterior and an interior life, albeit one of extreme paucity of spirit and of mean material presence. Unambiguously presented as

despicable, devoid even of the corrupted grandeur of Kurtz, this "moral agent of destruction" (75) weaves his way through the streets of London at the turn of the previous century armed with explosives in a thick glass flask hidden under his coat and attached to an indiarubber ball detonator which he grips in his hand at all times. The concluding lines of *The Secret Agent* release this figure of malice and destruction into the as yet unwritten annals of history: "He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable – and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the streets full of men" (248).

The "unsuspected and deadly" menace in the figure of the suicide bomber disappears into the "streets full of men", his bomb remains as yet unexploded, imagined only as a potential pestilence, anticipating but not yet realizing an actual catastrophe. A century later, "the simplicity of his idea" does indeed call "madness and despair to the regeneration of the world" which is at present shaken by an almost daily reality of suicide bombings and the grizzly spectacle of scattered human remains disseminated by the media in its wake. The fictional bomber who appears in *Anil's Ghost* is armed with a device which does explode, bringing death and devastation into the streets of Colombo.

Scarry's theory of substantiation offers some means of understanding the phenomenon of suicide bombing. It can be presumed that the bomber has a cause or a belief which he seeks to substantiate and in the absence of another means of conferring reality onto this cause, he enlists his own body alongside those of many others in this most atavistic form of resolving the crisis of substantiation. In Mbembe's panoply of destructive modalities that define contemporary wars, suicide bombing takes a particular place as it marks the emergence of a "new semiosis of killing" (37) which reconfigures the relation between power and the body. In part, this particular configuration of biopower is anticipated in Conrad's most "miserable" of potential bomb throwers. Epitomizing a desperate sort of social disempowerment, the Professor attempts to gain some form of personal agency by transforming himself into a death dealing 'force' by means of his lethal apparatus. "Lost

in the crowd, miserable and undersized, he meditated confidently on his own power, keeping his hand in the left pocket of his trousers, grasping lightly the indiarubber ball, the supreme guarantee of his sinister freedom" (73-74). He thus achieves a sense of freedom and power by claiming control over his own death as well as the death of a host of others. But unlike regular killers, who exercise the right to kill in order to gain power or to secure life in the future, the suicide bomber trades such a future life for an experience, however fleeting this may be, of a sense freedom or power in the present. In other words, as Mbembe puts it, in such a "death the future is collapsed into the present" (37). Conrad's bomber clearly envisages "no future. He disdained it. He was a force". The present day suicide bomber, and presumably Ondaatje's R—, do not, however, dispense with the future. Their martyrdom carries the promise of freedom for others whilst their own future is imagined as an abstraction, namely eternal life independent of the body. Mbembe writes that by means of taking control over one's own death in suicide, the subject exercises an agency of sorts which he is deprived of in other domains of life. But death is not only the space where freedom operates, it is also the space of negation (39). What is negated in the dual act of self-immolation and murder is the value of embodied life. The candidate for such martyrdom thus transforms his body into a mere thing which functions as "a weapon, not in a metaphoric sense but in the truly ballistic sense" (36).



To deal out death is therefore to reduce the other and oneself to the status of pieces of flesh, scattered everywhere, and assembled with difficulty before the burial. In this case, war is the war of the body on body (*guerre au guerre corps-a-corpse*). To kill, one has to come as close as possible to the body of the enemy. To detonate the bomb necessitates resolving the question of distance, through the work of proximity and concealment. (37)

This is the course that the bomber R— takes and which the novel traces in minute detail, as if from some distance by a tracker device rather than by a human observer. The event described in the text ironically takes place on "National Heroes Day". Unlike Conrad's bomber, R— is a blank or as suggested by the typography, a cipher of sorts. The body, no longer the site of embodied being in the world, is transformed into a ballistic missile programmed to connect with its target.

R— wore denim shorts and a loose shirt. Underneath these was a layer of explosives and two Duracell batteries and two blue switches. One for the left hand, one for the right, linked by

wires to the explosives. The first switch armed the bomb. It would stay on as long as the bomber wished. When the other switch was turned on, the bomb detonated. Both needed to be on for the explosion to occur. You could wait as long as you wanted before turning on the second switch. Or you could turn the first switch off. R— had more clothing on above the denim shorts. Four Velcro straps held the explosives pack to his body, and along with the dynamite there was the great weight of thousands of small ball bearings. (292)

Extensive technical detail serves to bring the dehumanization or the instrumentalization in a literal sense of the body into view. The bomber's armamentarium does not guarantee his own safety as is ordinarily the case, but rather ensures the instantaneous destruction of his own flesh. The vulnerability of his body is grotesquely underscored by the sheer weight and lethal potential of paraphernalia of destruction fitted to his skin. Body and weapon are as one, operating through "proximity and concealment" to achieve an optimal strike. R—'s target is both the representative of the body politic, namely the body of the president Katugala, as well as a sizable part of the body politic itself. Ironically the president's body which becomes virtually indistinguishable from the multitude of bodies that constitute the crowd, is given a greater semblance of presence by "Gulliver-like" (294) replicas of a "platonian form" or version of the actual man, "carried like...film prop[s], bobbing up and down" (293) above the heads of the crowd. A near mockery is thus made of the artifice and deception deployed in such political rallying or even of the notion of representation as such, be this the cardboard cut out that is meant to stand in for the president or the president himself as representative of the people. It is, then, towards the actual presidential body, in reality frail and beset with fears belied by the robust and "vibrant" photographic image, that R— directs his movement, "with all the paraphernalia of devastation sewn onto himself. He was not only the weapon but the aimer of it. The bomb would destroy whomever he was facing. His own eyes and frame were the cross-hairs" (293-294). The body instrumentalized as weapon is seemingly devoid of human consciousness. The negation of embodied being is disclosed in the gaze of the suicide bomber who does not face his fellow humans but frames them as targets in the "cross-hairs" of his sight. The work of his destruction is a veritable tableau of terror made instantly visible upon detonation of the bomb. The self-immolation of the bomber is also held before the viewer, who is forced to assimilate or read, if this is possible, its visceral message that draws its force (or material substantiation) from the scene of terror. A description of this scene is delivered in the style of an eye-witness account by a survivor

of the blast, who having miraculously escaped death, shielded by the body of the president, stands amidst the sea of bodies of which more than fifty lie dead in the immediate vicinity of the blast and a further hundred are injured on its periphery:

Around him were the dead. Political supporters, an astrologer, three policemen. The armoured Range Rover just a few yards away was undamaged. There was blood on the undamaged windows. The driver sitting inside was unhurt except for damage to his ears from the sound.

Some flesh, probably from the bomber, was found on the wall of the building across the street. The right arm of Katugala rested by itself on the stomach of one of the dead policemen. There were shattered curd pots all over the pavement. Four p.m. (294-295)

Scattered flesh and shards signify the destruction of life and a life-world. The account of the scene is journalistic, providing a record only of what may be seen: there is no reading of the event, no attempt to uncover the experience beyond what a camera may record. There is as yet no possibility it would seem, to proceed towards any deeper 'truth' or uncover more ground to expose some wider "archaeological surround" of the event in the present register of factual reportage. The "National Heroes Day" bomb blast is significantly positioned as penultimate scene of the novel which also concludes the account of war. The subsequent chapter of the novel, aptly entitled *Distance* (signalling amongst other things the imaginative or formal distance taken by the writer, like Sarath's "abrupt switch to something aesthetic" (52) much decried by Anil earlier in the novel), offers a response to the event which articulates an ethical solution as an aesthetic formulation. This discussion is deferred to the next chapter and I return for the moment to the examination of biopower and its extra-ordinary manifestations during war time.

In extreme contrast to the acts of killing that serve as an assertion of power or the substantiation of rulership, the benign exercise of biopower entails the preservation of life. Of course, the main stations of humanitarian beneficence are the hospitals that are so frequently encountered in the novel. It is also made quite clear that those who tend the sick and wounded there place themselves well outside the realm of politics, state institutions or the doings of any apparatuses of war. "They were not working for a cause or a political agenda. They had found a way a place a long way from governments and

media and financial ambition" (321). Indeed, the hospital work goes on despite brutal interference by agents of war.

Insurgents entered the Ward Place Hospital in Colombo and killed a doctor and two of his assistants. They had come looking for one patient. 'Where is so and so?' they had asked. 'I don't know.' There was bedlam. After finding the patient, they pulled out long knives and cut him to pieces. Then they threatened the nurses and demanded they not come to work anymore. The next day the nurses returned, but in frocks and slippers. There were gunmen on the roof of the hospital. There were informers everywhere. But the Ward Place Hospital remained open. (127)

As the political or social order breaks down, the responsibility of caring for the sick and the wounded is no longer a function performed by the state but falls back onto the level of individual responsibility, taken here at great personal risk. These events therefore chart a kind of devolution of politics to ethics, a trajectory that the novel as a whole does seem to endorse. In the chaos and destruction of war the contractual bond between the individual and the social order is severed and names as markers of personal identity no longer serve as the connecting thread between the body and the body politic. Justice and responsibility are then not to be expected from the political order in this instance, and it may be asked if these can ever be located in the realm of the political. For Hannah Arendt the (dis)placement of ethical responsibility onto the order of the social is a particular feature of the totalitarian state. She has shown that moral responsibility kept afloat by the state apparatus casts individuals as morally vacuous beings bound only by the procedural rules that ensure order and compliance in a nebulous "rule by Nobody" (quoted in Bauman 126). Zygmunt Bauman makes the related point that "Being *with* others" can be regulated by codifiable rules. "Being *for* others" conspicuously cannot (60).

Alongside the exemplary ethical model put forward by the hospital workers whose responsibility to the wounded, extending far beyond the call of duty, exemplify an ethical "being for others", the novel also presents instances of beneficence that are more morally complicated. This is shown in the dual activities of the war machines which on the one hand pose as the "gunmen on the hospital roof" and operate as a death dealing squads whilst also doubling up as a life saving outfit in other instances. That these diametrically opposing functions do indeed go hand in hand during wartime is made quite evident in

the novel. To show its paradoxical workings, accounts are provided of concerned militia men who abduct doctors, nurses and steal medical supplies to set up field hospitals in order to attend the injured and save lives. The novel carefully exposes the moral ambiguity that inheres in these situations but refrains from tipping the balance either way or passing judgement. The most elaborate of such accounts is about a financially successful Colombo neurosurgeon, Linus Corea, who is abducted from a golf course after his body guard is coolly shot dead "precisely through the correct point in the head" (121). The assassins speak quietly to him in a "made-up language" (121) and conduct him blindfolded in a car to far away military camp hospital in the jungle. On route they continue speaking to him in an "idiot language", seemingly as a "a joke of theirs" (122). The language, purposely devoid of sense, seems to suggest a consciousness on the part of the speakers of a suspension of meaning or of the codes and conventions that uphold ordinary life. Only later, when the incongruity of their situation seems less glaringly exposed, do the insurgents instruct him, in plain Sinhalese, to perform surgery on the critically wounded lined up in the makeshift tents. His task then runs over weeks and months as seemingly endless streams of war casualties are brought in, pressing him to work in excess of twelve hours shifts a day. Linus Corea develops a profound bond with his captors and the gruelling experience turns out to be most positively life altering, lifting him out of the stupor of affluence and boredom into a sharply focussed and more deeply felt sense of existence.

Similar ethical crossings or moral dualities arise in Gamini's story. He, too, is captured by "guerrillas" (218) to perform surgery on wounded boy soldiers, whilst recovering from burn out and speed addiction at a beach hotel. After dealing with the worst of the emergencies, he orders a large amount of food from the hotel at his own expense, to share with the "gunmen" or known killers in the spirit of camaraderie. That the preservation and destruction of life are at times inextricably crossed is asserted in yet another curious incident which takes place in Gamini's childhood. He is pictured as an imaginary sniper crawling stealthily around the family garden in camouflage outfit like a fledgling guerrilla fighter (226). Under the cover of the garden greenery he takes aim and fires his air rifle at the group of women playing bridge on the porch. The peaceable scene of

middle class leisure time is shattered as Gamini's bullets begin to fly and one unsuspecting guest sustains a foot wound. The suggestion here is that Gamini is perhaps just as capable of firing guns at people as the war time killers are capable of exercising compassion and extending help. Everybody, it would seem, must own to having "blood on their clothes", as Sarath puts it earlier on (48). Far from occupying the opposite ends of a moral spectrum, then, the potential to destroy and the potential to protect human life is understood here to be inextricably tangled. The novel exposes the complex ethical dimensions that are entailed in the exercise of biopower and shows that the workings of biopower are exercised in the same domain as ethics which is in the corporeal relation between people. By placing ethics alongside the operations of biopower, namely actions that range between the destruction and preservation of human bodies, the novel lifts ethics from the conventional realm of morality.

A further corollary to the complexities uncovered here is the implicit challenge levelled at the Western held assumption, voiced by figures like Anil, that victims and perpetrators are clearly distinguishable in a war and that empirical evidence can be procured to back up this claim. A similar argument is made by Theresa Derrickson, along somewhat different lines, in the article discussed in the first chapter, namely that justice cannot be simplified into "a binary affair that offers up a tidy victim and villain" (140) and that Anil's mission is more concerned with "catering to a global (read Western) ideology of justice, than about acting in the best interest of the Sri Lankan people" (144). Ondaatje's exploration is, however, not only aimed at providing a criticism of the West, as it ventures further still by separating moral issues from the complex ethical relations that obtain during the time of war.

The disturbing idea that murderers and their victims are somehow morally bound, as this novel endeavours to show, has been raised by several writers in response to the Nazi holocaust. In W.G. Sebald's discussion of post World War II German literature the paradigmatic figure of such moral hybridity is identified as the assimilated German Jew, who like a Rumpelstilzkin cannot succeed in tearing himself in two. The delicate attempt to identify with both the murderers and the murder victim, as Gamini implicitly does, is

offered by the German writer Peter Weiss who, as Sebald notes, "confirms with the deepest self-irony when he writes in his 1964 notebook, 'How glad I am that I am not German.' This facile exoneration does not fail to make its point; on the contrary, it shows his awareness that he, once described by his Jewish parents as a young rascal of a Jew, is also a German, in least in so far as the German ideas of morality prevailed in his parental home" (190-191). Giorgio Agamben also discerns such a "new ethical element" in the survivor accounts written by Primo Levi: "Levi calls it the 'gray zone'. It is the zone in which the 'long chain of conjunction between victim and executioner' comes loose, where the oppressed becomes the oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim. A gray incessant alchemy in which good and evil and, along with them, all the metal of traditional ethics reach their point of fusion" (21).

A similar moral no-man's land and overlay of material interests and cultural allegiances is to be discerned in the internecine war which continues to this day in Sri Lanka. The moral complexities that are exposed in these discussions clearly indicate that the outmoded typologies of 'just' and 'unjust' wars, as Mbembe rightly observes, can no longer be considered as adequate models to come to terms with the present situation. This realization does, however, in no way do away with the ethical imperative to respond to the suffering of others but simply points to the hiatus between politics and ethics and reaffirms the primacy of the latter.

The moral ambiguity or "ethical gray zone" that the novel uncovers is perhaps most powerfully embodied in the figure and the corresponding reality of the child soldier, globally recognized as the most disturbing face of contemporary 'guerrilla' warfare, familiar across the globe, from Afghanistan and Bosnia through to the Sudan. Presenting both as killer and victim, this figure radically unsettles notions of guilt and innocence, thus undermining the fundamental terms upon which the possibility of justice rests. As Gamini attends to a long line of such young boys used as soldiers, lying wounded in the tents of the guerrilla camp, he wonders: "Who sent a thirteen-year-old to fight, and for what furious cause? For an old leader? For some pale flag? He had to keep reminding himself who these people were. Bombs on crowded streets, in bus stations, paddy fields,

schools had been set by people like this" (220). Gamini, having willingly shared food with a so-called enemy and extended himself to save the lives of the young killers, is clearly cognisant of the murky underground of the humanitarian crisis that has erupted before him. For the moment, however, the more pressing emergency of the wounded reduces the questions of guilt and innocence to a moralistic kind of quibble and certainly do not give him cause to take a different course of action. The ethical imperative to attend to the other's physical wound thus overrides the immediate necessity to understand or unravel the moral complexities that cloud the situation, confirming the unconditional priority of the ethical demand which rends the moral context of the given situation. Bauman, following Levinas in his consideration of postmodern ethics, declares that "I am moral *before* I think. There is no thinking without concepts (always general), standards (general again), rules (always potentially generalizable), but when concepts, standards and rules enter the stage, moral impulse makes an exit" (61).

Heeding the ethical impulse, Gamini thus enacts what Jean Fourastie has called the *morales du peuple* which is something like an instinct and which is distinct from the *morales des savants* which proceeds instead through reasoning and demonstrating (Bauman 61). The understanding of ethics as an embodied and precognitive response to the other is to be explored more fully in the final chapter.

Just as the clear distinction between killer and victim, guilt and innocence is undone in such a war, the novel also repeatedly challenges the notion that the position of independent observer or innocent bystander is in fact a tenable one. This argument is given particular force by virtue of the fact that it is through the central figure of Anil that the 'long-distance gaze' held by such outsiders as herself and implicitly by Ondaatje (both expatriate Sri-Lankans) can lay claim to independence of any kind. Anil's status as "independent" investigator, one is told at the beginning of the novel, is in fact a mere "gesture" granted by the Sri Lankan government "under pressure, and to placate trading partners in the West" (17). Although she appears at times to realize her purpose "to be the result of a gesture" (44), she insists to the last that she belongs to an "independent organisation", making "independent reports" (274). She is quick to fly at Sarath's

cautionary attitude towards the investigation into alleged government killings with characteristically Western high handedness. His assertion that "[i]nternational investigations don't mean a lot" is dismissed by her self-assured insistence that "I was invited here" (45).

Derrickson has shown that *Anil's Ghost* mounts a careful expose of the spurious objectivity or independence of scientific procedure in service of a Western notion of justice. She argues that Anil's forensic investigation practiced as human rights activism serves as the ideological front of Western economic expansionism. That there is indeed a link between global capitalism and the UN human rights discourse has been expressly confirmed by the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan. Derrickson quotes from a document written by Annan in support of this: "If the United Nations has a new-found appreciation for the role of the private sector, it is also true that business and industry are deepening their interest in the activities of the United Nations" (149-150) Not only are the officially sanctioned trade agreements entailed in the machinations of war, but the covertly practised and altogether darker trade of the international arms industry is implicated here on a more serious level. The novel points this out in several passages (17, 116, 118, 161) and states it most explicitly as follows: "It was a Hundred Years' War with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners. It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined by financial arms deals" (43).

Such transnational arms and trade deals arguably then provide the very conditions that make the wars of the globalization era possible. This falls in with Mbembe's description of war machines as "political organizations and as mercantile companies" (30). Derrickson goes as far as asserting that Ondaatje's novel exposes the fact that "Sri Lanka's civil war is big business for Western states and that those states have been capitalizing on the lucrative weapons market that the island's conflict sustains" (143). The upshot of the fact that Western states have material interests in peripheral wars in the present era, is that no outsider, foreign investigator, forensic specialist or human rights worker, and Anil is the chief proponent of all these, can claim independent status in

matters of understanding or of moral judgement regarding the war in Sri Lanka. Everybody, it would seem, is more or less sunk in the mire of its disastrous workings.

Ondaatje evidently does not exclude himself from the moral culpability the West is prompted to acknowledge here, regarding wars outside its own territory. This is expressed by way of the following metafictional commentary:

'American movies, English books – remember how they all end?' asked Gamini that night. 'The American or Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war to all purposes is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.' (285-286)

Anil's story plays out to the predictable end of an already outworn script as she sticks to the part she has so passionately taken on, astride on the 'high horse' of Western human rights activism abetted by scientific positivism. As her project is sunk by the reality of the Sri Lankan war, and her own life is in danger, she, like others before her, "gets on the plane and leaves". In an interview with Maya Yaggi, Ondaatje admits, "I didn't want to have that kind of ending" (253). Just as Ondaatje cannot write Anil out of such a plot, he cannot easily escape the moral dilemma she necessarily faces as human rights activist. Locked into "the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing", Ondaatje too, will "Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit". The ethical compromise entailed in this, arising out of the discrepancy between the considerable material well being of the West and the raw struggle for survival of the Sri Lankans, is laid out in an altercation between Sarath and Anil earlier on in the book.

'You know, I'd believe your arguments more if you lived here,' he said. 'You can't just slip in, make a discovery and leave.'

'You want me to censor myself.'

'I want you to understand the archaeological surround of a fact. Or you'll be like one of those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel. That false empathy and blame.' (44)

Ondaatje does indeed "censor [him]self" by means such self reflexive metafictional commentary in a way Anil evidently feels she should but does not. This gesture goes

some way towards releasing the stranglehold of the moral double bind he so clearly feels constrained by as a writer who achieves a great deal of personal prestige and financial gain by disclosing and aestheticizing the suffering of others whose life world he has only looked into from the outside and has not experienced in person. Ondaatje does perhaps manage to establish a somewhat less compromised position from which to write about the dire realities of others by the frankness of his self-disclosure and the willingness to step off the moral high ground assumed in "the last two hundred years of Western political writing". There is, however, no complete safeguard against the 'literary tourism' Yaggi confronts him with in an interview. "I don't know?", he concedes, "it's a real problem. I am sure I am as guilty as anyone" (253). The predicament of Ondaatje's "anyone", including himself, is indeed the general predicament that encumbers the now ubiquitous world traveller or tourist who, according to Bauman, embodies a particular mode of being in the present era of globalization. The contemporary tourist, Bauman writes, "lives his extra-territoriality as a privilege, as independence, as the right to be free, free to choose; as a licence to restructure the world" (241). That Ondaatje has claimed such privileges, rights and an independence of a kind, which makes "him as guilty as anyone", is placed clearly in the open here and is no longer a sticking point as such. Of greater interest are the questions implicitly raised here about the nature of authorship and the ethics of writing entailed in this situation. On a pragmatic level, it would appear that such "extra-territoriality" as Ondaatje has made claim to is indeed a necessary condition that makes the actual production and publication of a novel like *Anil's Ghost* possible in the first place. On a philosophical level, such "extra-territoriality" is necessitated by more complex workings which may be understood within the framework of biopower and which disclose, on closer examination, an entirely different set of ethical dynamics regarding the role of the author in such a situation.

Agamben traces such a dynamic in the writings of Levi who, as survivor of a death camp, was able to return to the outside world to tell of what he had witnessed on the inside. The fact of his return does however, Levi writes, detract from his status as a 'true witness'. He explains as follows:

We who were favoured by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate, but also that of the others, indeed the drowned; but this was a discourse 'on behalf of third parties', the story of things seen close at hand, but not experienced personally. The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death. Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned could not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy. (33-34)

The act of witnessing or delivering testimony, indeed any act of writing about an extreme manifestation of destructive biopower as was seen in the Nazi death camps and is to be seen again, albeit in mutated form, in the mass destruction of human life in contemporary wars, is caught in a moral double bind which seems to undermine the only position from which speaking of such events is possible at all. This is so because testimony of such events can only be delivered by proxy and not first hand, as Levi owns; there can only ever be a "discourse on behalf of a third party". The responsibility of testimony thus rests, ironically, on those who are not the 'true witnesses', namely the survivors or the returnees, the literary tourist or journalist, the war photographer and foreign correspondent,² the ones in short, "favoured by fate" or a favourable passport who are able to leave the death camp or war zone, be it by walking to safety or leaving by plane. The privilege of survival, escape, independence or extraterritoriality is thus paid for with the responsibility of speaking for those "who saw the Gorgon" and "have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute" (Levi quoted in Agamben 33). According to Agamben, such are the workings of biopower, namely to produce by means of inflicting severe bodily suffering and mass death, "the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, zoe and bios" (156). The imperative to fill the space left open by the mute or forever silenced 'true witness' must then be heeded by an 'outsider', an 'extraterritorial', who delivers testimony on behalf of others. "Testimony is thus always an act of an 'author'", writes Agamben, "it always implies an essential duality in which an insufficiency or an incapacity is completed or made valid" (150). It may thus be argued that the imperative to deliver testimony founds the very notion of authorship itself, producing the necessity or *raison d'être* for the act of writing, opening the ground for an aesthetic of 'being for the other' in Levinasian terms. Authoring is therefore not an act of creation out of nothing,

² Of these, the survivor can of course claim the most credibility, having suffered in person the hardships of brute physical survival.

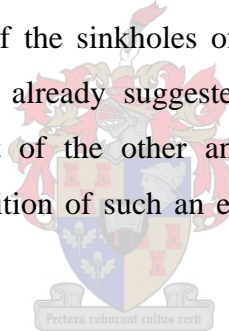
but a "setting into being" (the original meaning of *augere* identified by Benveniste, as Agamben points out) or in Heidegger's terms, a disclosure of what is already there. Agamben presents the idea as follows:

Every creator is always a co-creator, every author a co-author. The act of the *auctor* completes the act of an incapable person, giving strength or proof to what in itself lacks it and granting life to what could not live alone. It can conversely be said that the imperfect act or incapacity precedes an *auctor's* act and that the imperfect act completes and gives meaning to the word of the *auctor-witness*. An author's act that claims to be valid on its own is nonsense, just as the survivor's testimony has truth and reason for being only if it is completed by the one who cannot bear witness. (150)

This, one may argue, is the nature of the writing in *Anil's Ghost*: namely a testimony that bears witness to events that are impossible to witness. Ondaatje's speaking on behalf of others who have suffered such events in person may therefore be understood as an active response to the ethical demand of 'being for the other'. That such a form of witnessing, which is aimed at bringing into the open experiences that strain the ordinary capacity of language, unfolds as an aesthetic event is also recognized by Agamben. "Poets – witnesses – found language as what remains, as what actually survives the possibility, or impossibility, of speaking" (161). It has already been shown that Ondaatje's text has been assembled from diverse fragments of lived experiences and accounts collected from various sources directly related to the ongoing war in Sri Lanka. This makes it possible to say that *Anil's Ghost* offers an exemplary form of testimony to the extreme suffering inflicted on the people of Sri Lanka during the civil war.

Seen in the context of the workings of biopower, Ondaatje's text fulfils the ethical and aesthetic imperative to bear testimony. The metafictional inscriptions carried by the novel attest to his paradoxical incapacity to speak and the ethical compromise upon which the enterprise of his writing rests. Thus laying bare "the twisted trajectories" (Bauman 245) of its project, the novel cannot untangle the ambivalences and irreconcilable contradictions that mark its position and which place it squarely within the crisis of postmodern thought which, according to Bauman, finds itself caught in uncertainties and equivocations despite or because of the expanded horizon of its new found wisdom (245).

The notion of biopower, as formulated by Foucault and deployed as the organizational principle of this chapter, has thus opened the discussion into the domain of ethics along various pathways. It has revealed that there are indeed situations that can clearly be identified as an instantiation of either life destroying power or of beneficent action. The novel presents these diametrically opposed situations in events such as the massacre or the urban terror event and in contradistinction to this, the life saving procedures of hospital emergency rooms. There are however, more often than not, ethical crossings or "gray zones" which are not readily organised into the clear moral categories designated by the binaries of beneficence and destruction and that consequently, it is suggested here, there can be no such a thing as a moral high-ground or a position untainted by some degree of complicity with forms of power that are exploitative and destructive. Even Gamini, tireless and heroic in his endeavours to preserve life, must share his supper with the bomb-throwers and hardened child soldiers. How, then, does the novel lift the possibility of ethical action out of the sinkholes of moral relativism that it depicts as inevitably present? It argues, as already suggested, that ethical responsibility is an embodied response to the plight of the other and that it is independent of moral considerations. The novel's exposition of such an ethics is the subject of the following chapter.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Levinasian Ethics of *Anil's Ghost*

To comprehend our situation in reality is not to define it but to find ourselves in an affective disposition. To comprehend being is to exist. All this indicates, it would seem, a rupture with the theoretical structure of Western thought. To think is no longer to contemplate but to commit oneself, to be engulfed by what one thinks, to be involved. This is the dramatic event of being-in-the-world.
 Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?"

This dissertation has, in its engagement with *Anil's Ghost*, attempted to be conscious of the novel's shifting status as literary fiction, historical writing, testimony, as well as a material artefact inscribed or covered by the name of the author, Michael Ondaatje. This has been done to uncover the various ways in which the text is deeply imbricated in the world, the way it participates within "a circuit of understanding with reality" ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 5), opening up or unconcealing the lived experiences of the newly unfolding events that constitute history within the aesthetic forms and figures of its language. As such, the text is then argued to offer what Gamini calls "the truth of their times" (128). The truth of fiction is not of the same order as empirical fact but functions as a disclosure of the conditions that determine the concrete existences of the human subjects at a particular moment in history.

The aim of this final chapter is to present the considerable ethical import of Ondaatje's *Anil Ghost* and show how its diverse elements bear a close affinity to the *ethics as first philosophy* espoused by Emmanuel Levinas. Such an opening up of this novel into a Levinasian ethics has been anticipated by the preceding chapters in two ways. First, ethics for Levinas can only be lived in the corporeal relation to the other. The novel's conspicuous foregrounding of the experience of corporeal existence in the world as well as the emphasis placed on the embodied relations between human subjects, heightened dramatically within a time of war, suggest a link with such a conception of an ethics of the body. Second, according to Levinas, understanding (as both cognitive and sentient

experiences) is integral to being in the world and the literary text is itself "an event that existence articulates" ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 5). It has been the express purpose throughout this thesis to show that *Anil's Ghost* does indeed, on several levels, establish and assert such a fundamental connectedness to the world. Having thus established that both ethics and the literary or aesthetic text are 'grounded' in the experience of the real, it is possible to examine the nature of the ethical relations into which women and men are cast during a time of war in our present era through an engagement with this novel.

The difficulties of bringing Levinas's ideas on ethics into the domain of literature are, however, numerous, if not altogether forbidding, as Jill Robbins demonstrates at length in her book *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*. These difficulties arise mainly out of a seeming incommensurability between ethics and art based on Levinas's conception of art as figure or image which is static or frozen in time and therefore immobilizes being. Art is then thought of as obscuring or masking reality. Such disengagement from the real means for Levinas that art is an evasion of responsibility to the living other. Levinas's denunciation of art is however at odds with his frequent praise of the literary and especially his tendency to use literature throughout his work to illustrate philosophical argument. Robbins argues that the terms of Levinas's ethical critique of art, understood as *mimesis* or a copy of the real, implying the loss of the real world and the real person, rely on a series of binary oppositions – stage/world, dramatic play/real life, character/person and, as the title of his most vehement articulation against art implies, "Reality and its Shadow" (1948). If then, Robbins argues, "mimesis is no longer *the* privileged trope for artistic making but simply one trope among others" and if "figure, rhetoric, mimesis, the literary were not what Levinas takes them to be, then it might not be necessary to turn *away* from the figure, as Levinas does, but to face the figure otherwise, as language's ownmost figurative potential, as that which is most distinctive about language, that is, to face language as ethical possibility (*Altered Reading* 54). Robbins is thus able to press past Levinas's stern prohibitions to make a case for incorporating a Levinasian conception of ethics into the domain of the literary. My understanding of the literary language is that it is fundamentally connected to reality and that it discloses or brings into

view the nature of ethical being as it is lived in the encounter between people in the world.

The face (*le visage*) is perhaps the best known of Levinas's terms and central to the conception of ethics he envisages. The face both does and does not refer to human faces; it is both a corporeal presence as well as an epiphany or a revelation of the other. In its defencelessness (nudity, destitution) the face signifies the primary ethical proscription. Levinas articulates this as follows:

The face, it is inviolable: these eyes absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, offer nevertheless, an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation to murder is inscribed: the temptation of an absolute negation. The other is the sole being that one can be tempted to kill. This temptation of murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. (*Difficult Freedom* 8)

The ethical injunction not to kill is accompanied by a solicitation or an appeal for help. The epiphany of the face, Levinas says, is that "it makes a demand on me. The face looks at me and calls to me. It lays claim to me. What does it ask? Not to leave it alone" (Robbins, *Is it Righteous to be?* 127). Levinas develops his discourse on the face throughout all his works, making it central to his project of positioning *ethics as first philosophy* while also guarding it from the reductions of determinate speech or the propositional language of traditional philosophy.¹ The concept of the face thus encompasses a range of meanings such as expression (which includes any expressive part of the body), speech, revelation, injunction and a solicitation of the other. The compelling and deeply intriguing nature of such concepts as the face with their immediate resonances in the visual and literary arts has understandably exerted a strong pull or influence in this domain. At the same time, however, the deliberate indeterminacy of such concepts have inhibited or deterred their direct incorporation in literary critical practice. Norman Ravvin considers the numerous theoretical difficulties entailed in drawing Levinas's discourse on ethics into the domain of art and literature but suggests that despite the conceptual risks and necessary betrayals or misreadings that are inevitably committed in the process,

¹ Colin Davies discusses the considerable difficulties encountered by the reader in confronting Levinas's textual practices which are deliberately aimed at subverting or circumventing linguistic formulations rooted in ontology. Levinas attempts to inaugurate an altogether different philosophic practice (54-62).

Levinas's discourse "may, however, prove best suited to deciphering the intractable questions asked by literature that strives to represent our post-Holocaust universe. How challenging this new form of reading, and how high the stakes in its discovery of a way to decipher the 'odd configuration of lines that make up the human face'" (67).

Following Ravvin's suggestion this chapter attempts just such a reading of Ondaatje's text, namely one which employs some of the resonant and deeply compelling conceptual vocabulary gleaned from the discursive regions that surround the famously difficult and profound writings of this grave post-Holocaust philosopher. The reading is therefore not meant as direct application of Levinasian terms which do, by virtue of belonging more to the indeterminate order of Saying rather than to the fixed order of the Said, defy any such systematic usage. I own to glossing necessarily over the philosophical complexity of Levinasian ideas and to making use – or misuse – of images or terms that slip disconcertingly between the literal and the figurative. My aim is to attend primarily to Ondaatje's literary text and point out the resonances and equivalences within the broad tenor of a distinctly postmodern conception of ethics that has developed from the writings of Levinas and taken up by writers like Zygmunt Bauman, Robbins and Simon Critchley.

A particular feature of literary writing, and *Anil's Ghost* certainly demonstrates this, is its ability to intimate what in Levinasian terms can be given as *otherwise than being*,² or that which transcends the categories of ordinary ways of knowing. Rather than rooting itself in positivist assertions and propositional statements, literary language locates itself in a less strictly demarcated or ontologically insecure domain of speech. Such provisional and indeterminate forms of language, characteristic of literary writing, may then disclose encounters that cannot be grasped or contained within the ordinary categories of language or "denotative speaking that absorbs alterity into thematization" (Robbins, *Altered Reading* xiv). *Anil's Ghost*, as has been shown in Chapter Four, displays a finely tuned consciousness of different modes of speech, ranging from the empirically verifiable statements of scientific discourse to the transcendent reach of aesthetic language which is

² The reference is to Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1987) which offers an exposition of language in relation to ethics.

not contained within any totalizing scheme. While the novel clearly recognizes and also celebrates the particular value of scientific discourse, especially that of the medical discipline, it also exposes the limitations of the totalizing discourse of Western empiricism as a means of solving a humanitarian crisis such as has presented itself in the Sri Lankan civil war, and it goes as far as seriously implicating such modes of thinking in the disaster itself. A rough parallel may be drawn here between the two different modes of speech indicated in *Anil's Ghost* and Levinas's distinction between *le Dire* (Saying) and *le Dit* (the Said) which opens a way of identifying the ethical in language. This may be explained as follows: Western ways of producing knowledge about the world have been rooted in the assumption that an objective and stable reality can be apprehended by a unified and transcendent consciousness and that the nature of being can be determined and understood in its totality. Such knowledge is presented in language as the Said, comprising "statements and propositions about, for example, the world, truth, Being, personal identity, which are susceptible to established protocols of dispute, verification or disproof" (Davies 75). The assumption of such ontological certainty is however achieved at the expense of the other, Levinas shows, whose alterity is excluded from the totalizing scheme of the Western epistemology or incorporated within its already existing categories. The epistemological appropriation of the other, underpinned by ontological thinking, implies a kind of violence toward the other who is not accepted on her own terms but reduced to the order of the same. For this reason it can be said that the "relationship between the same and the other has become the site where both ethics and knowledge are at stake" (37). The encounter with the other, who cannot be incorporated within the economy of the same, then opens the venue for ethics. Levinas puts it as follows: "A calling into question of the Same – which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same – is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (*Totality and Infinity* 33-34).

The ethical encounter with the other is independent of ontology because it occurs on a more original level, prior to cognition. Critchley explains that the "ethical relation with the other is not grafted on to an antecedent *Seinsverstandniss* but is rather a foundation or infrastructure" (*Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity* 75). For these reasons Levinas seeks to reverse the priority given to ontology in traditional Western philosophy and places ethics before ontology. *Ethics is first philosophy*. Another way of phrasing this is that relation takes priority over identity.

Moreover, the Levinasian subject is not primarily a conscious ego but a sentient being rooted in an embodied existence. The ethical relation therefore takes place at a level of sensibility. Levinas writes that "the other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter, eventually of nourishing him, of clothing him" (Robbins, *Is it Righteous to Be?* 52). To respond to the other, who is "unique, isolated from all multiplicity and outside all collective necessities" is what Levinas calls love: "To approach someone as unique in the world is to love him. Affective warmth, feeling, and goodness constitute the proper mode of this approach to the unique, to the thinking of the unique" (108).

The other is a living entity in the world and not a mental construct. Responsibility for the other entails a corporeal engagement with her need or suffering and the affective bestowal of care. Just as ethics is incarnate, for Levinas, so too is thinking. "The body is the fact that thought is immersed in the world that it thinks and, consequently, expresses the world while it thinks it" ("Meaning and Sense" 40). Language as expression, as a corporeal gesture, as a sensory apprehension of the world, and "above all the creative language of poetry" (41) is what makes "the understanding of being possible" (41). Life and the thinking of it are inseparable so that there arises for Levinas a "new ontology" which is necessarily ambiguous and which is "in opposition to classical intellectualism" ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 4). He expresses the embodied nature of thinking in the following example: "To comprehend the tool is not look at it but to handle it. To comprehend our situation in reality is not to define it but to find ourselves in an affective disposition. To comprehend being is to exist" (4).

For Levinas, experiencing the world and the thinking of it through the creative forms of language, are of the same ontological order. It is then possible to locate the world and the creative text "in one landscape" (191) in Palipana's words. My approach to Ondaatje's text is thus informed by the understanding that its aesthetic forms give access to the real and that at the centre of the real is the relation to the other, which is the domain of ethics.

Having presented the barest bones of a Levinasian ethics which locates a venue for ethics in the face to face encounter with an embodied other, placing the self in a relation of responsibility which is prior to cognition and independent of knowledge about the other, it is now possible to return to Ondaatje's text in order to examine it in the light of these ideas. The fictional subjectivities of Anil and Gamini may both be read as ethical histories of a kind, offering insights into the particular challenges posed in the present world.

Given the evident relation between ethics and knowledge, the figure of Anil presents a complex case history of a contemporary epistemic/ethical subject. Anil's grounding in Western scientific positivism has already been noted and the unsuccessful outcome of her forensic fact finding project has revealed the limitations of this discourse in the morally more complicated world of present day Sri Lanka. How does Anil, given her ideological grounding in the West (exercised as scientist and human rights activist), negotiate the interpersonal spaces of the face to face encounter between herself and others, which according to Levinas, must serve as the basic norm for a society of many? The trajectory of her relationships with the people she encounters on returning to her erstwhile homeland charts a progression of sorts in which Anil is prompted to revise her previous ways of being with others. She moves successfully beyond the ultimately destructive model of Western individualism, habitually accustomed to subordinating the other into an instance of the same, towards a non reductive and non totalizing approach to whoever presents as other.

Anil's conscious self-fashioning of herself as scientist and individual (transnational rather than Sri Lankan)³ after her move to the West as a young adult is achieved by adopting, almost wholesale, the package of Western philosophy. In a brief exchange between herself and the Sri Lankan entomologist Chitra, who clearly reads her as thoroughly Westernized, Anil reveals, in essence, what it means to be a Westerner:

'...Tell me what you like about the West?'
 'Oh – What do I like? Most of all I think I like that I can do things on my own terms. Nothing is anonymous here, is it. I miss my privacy.'
 Chitra looked totally uninterested in this Western virtue. (72)

Anil's affirmation of privacy and the freedom "to do things on [her] own terms" as that which she clearly values most about the West, place her squarely in the mainstream of the Western tradition of an ego-centric conception of human subjectivity. This so-called "Western virtue", namely an autonomy which entails well-managed private interest and emancipation from any determining order, subtly dismissed here by Chitra,⁴ presumably also undergirds Anil's human rights activism which is directed at obtaining such freedoms for all. According to Roger Burggraeve's reading of Levinas, it is such an "unlimited and absolute exercise of human rights, understood as the right to freedom for every ego" which is "also the source of conflict, violence and war" (65). It has already been pointed out in Chapters One and Four that the universal human rights discourse, premised as it is on Western individualism, necessarily falters as it stumbles on its own cornerstone (freedom for all) and that it falls far short of dealing with the specific and contingent problems of political conflict in other parts of the world. Having exposed the political limitations of prioritizing individual freedom and private interest, how does the novel chart the workings of Western individualism within the interpersonal domain of ethical relations?

At the beginning of the narrative, Anil's mode of relating to others is clearly dictated by the script of Western ego-centrism. Robbins describes this seemingly benign, humanistic

³ See Victoria Cook, "Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*," *Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal* 6.3 (2004): <<http://clwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb04-3/cook04.html>>.

⁴ Just as Palipana subtly mocks Anil's confident assumption of superiority in terms of her scientific methodology: "How wonderful' he says to her, 'What a wonder you are'" (96).

mode of relating as following a distinct pattern: "comprehension, recognition, and assimilation. These latter modes – because they are forms of adequation, or suggest objectifying cognition, or have a neutralizing element – are intrinsically violent" (*Altered Reading* 10). This plays itself out in her initial dealings with Sarath, her fellow investigator in the UN sponsored human rights mission. From the very start their methodological and ideological differences are made apparent and in consequence Anil finds her mind restlessly "circling around Sarath" (28) in an attempt to comprehend his way of operating. "She had been working with him for a few days and she still had no handle on him" (28). In order to establish the position of mastery or control for herself she has evidently become accustomed to in her role as investigating scientist and as one who believes in doing "things on her own terms", she devises positivist strategies that might enable her to obtain such "a handle on him". To this end she begins to tape their conversations on various topics (45), but Sarath, alert to the implicit violation of his personhood entailed in her obvious attempt to objectify and investigate him, quietly resists her move. Some time later, she questions a guest house owner about Sarath's previous visits in order to ferret out information about his personal life. As it turns out, the *knowledge* she obtains is false and her subsequent judgement of him is disastrously misguided. Anil's dubious practice of gathering knowledge about the other, in order to preserve her own freedom and security, re-enacts the habitual response of the Western subject in the encounter with others. Burggraeve traces this dynamic, clearly recognizable in Anil's response to Sarath:

In the act of knowing the ego tries to undo the objective unruliness of the world by surprising it in those facets where it is accessible through 'insight'. Concretely, this occurs through conceptualization, categorization, thematization, systemization and *representation*, which is also understood as re-presentation of everything that had slipped away before, making it present and available again. The aim of all this is to 'com-prehend'. By understanding the world, by 'grasping' it, the ego can place it in the interest of its own self-interested struggle to be, so that if it is at first dependent on the world, science and technology, as 'grasping', immediately reverse that condition into an ever greater independence an 'infinite freedom'. To be sure, knowledge moves out of itself toward the other, but only with the aim of returning to itself 'enriched' and stronger. (54)

Anil's attempt to know Sarath, to gather information about him and have him 'on record', is thus undertaken to secure her own position of control and to order him into her scheme of the war in which victims and perpetrators are clearly distinguishable. "I really don't

know", she says to him, "which side you are on – if I can trust you" (53). Anil's trust is therefore based on the idea of certainty or knowledge. That Anil's clear cut schematics have disastrous consequences is revealed in the tragic outcome of their investigation. She does, however, come to accept that unbridgeable differences cannot be undone in close human relations and that others can never be entirely known or possessed, even in intimate relations. This is clearly demonstrated when she stabs her lover Cullis in a fury of thwarted desire to own him. Anil's shift away from the compulsion to 'comprehend' the other is indicated in a near epiphanic moment during a rain storm, near the close of the novel. She glances back at the house from the outside where she stands in the rain and observes Sarath sitting wrapped in thought and muttering to himself in what she now realizes to be an irreducible separateness. "She knows there will never be a boat to reach Sarath, to discover what he might be thinking. His wife? A cave fresco? The bounce of the rain in front of him?" (204). Veiled behind the sheets of falling rain and an imaginary expanse of water (signifying a space of difference here as it does elsewhere), Anil acknowledges Sarath's alterity and she is no longer compulsively driven to grasp at "what he might be thinking".

Her relation with Ananda also develops within a mutual respect for distance and difference. They are held in a "pact" of sorts, forged "without words" (171) but by means of gestures and touch (197).

The way he had respected the order of her tools, touching nothing, the way he had raised Sailor into his arms. She saw the sadness in Ananda's face below what might appear a drunk's easy sentiments. The hollows that seemed gnawed at. Anil put out her hand and touched his forearm, and then left him alone in the courtyard. For the next few days they went back to their mutual silences. (171)

No longer needing to lay bare the complex terrain of the other's existence by means of comprehension or exposition, Anil allows herself to be in a responsive relation of proximity and peace with Ananda on a non-verbal level, both at ease in their "mutual silences". The habitual need for subsuming the other into the categories of the self has been obviated for Anil.

On the whole, the novel seems to suggest that the expectation of an all-encompassing intimacy in personal relations is ultimately destructive and untenable and that marriage in particular, as a totalizing form of possession and subsuming closeness, ultimately erupts in one or other form of violence as two egos collide, both asserting their individual freedoms. This is evidenced in the string of wrecked marriages the novel lines up. Anil's first romance with a "many-armed seducer and note writer and flower bringer and telephone-message leaver", whose "organized passion surrounded her" (142) ends with "a time of claustrophobia and marital warfare" (143): "Days of battle and fuck" (144). Sarath, too, finds it impossible "to step back from the trauma of that place" (179) which had once been his marriage and which ended in personal tragedy with his wife's suicide. Gamini's marriage unravels as soon as it has begun and his potential romance with a colleague never materialises. Love only survives, at least in the West, Martha Gellhorn astutely observes, with a good measure of levity and distance. The novel quotes her as follows: "The best relationship is with someone who lives five blocks away with a great sense of humour and who is preoccupied with his work" (150). Pressed by the Western conventions of marriage and romance to reduce distance and difference in a totalizing all-embracing oneness, such interpersonal relations are doomed to implode with some degree of violence as each partner seeks to escape appropriation by the other. "One can die from private woes as easily as from public ones" (202), the novel warns.

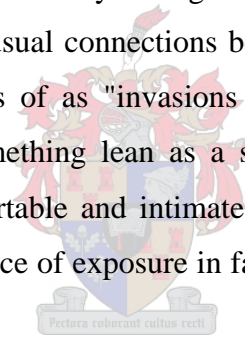
In contradistinction to such invasive modes of being together, the novel envisages an ethical being with and for the other in which distance and strangeness are preserved in a mutual relation of respect. The novel's attempt at articulating a different mode of being with another echoes the Levinasian project of describing encounters which do "not annul the otherness, the constitutive strangeness, of the Other" and in which the "imperious metaphors of possession, property and comprehension are replaced by vocabulary which instead privileges approach, proximity, caress" (Davies 25). Something of such a non-invasive mode of relating has already been glimpsed in Anil's newly forged relations with Sarath and Ananda. She becomes, as the novel significantly puts it, "citizenized by their friendship" (200), bound by mutual responsibility towards one another, rather than by

sameness. The novel's greatest proponent of responsible and non violent being for the other is presented in the figure of Gamini.

Significantly, Gamini's exemplary ethical being is brought to the fore during the crisis of war "that is the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate" (Scarry 71). Because war inflicts injury, death and suffering upon the bodies of living subjects on a massive scale, it also presents as a profound ethical crisis: at no other time is the ethical imperative to heed the call of the other made more viscerally manifest and urgent. Gamini's unconditional and unstinting physical attention to the wounded and suffering body of the other make him, as the novel ironically declares, "a perfect participant in the war" (224). His response to the war also constitutes what the novel puts forward, in line with Levinasian ideas, as a paradigm for ethical being which stands in contrast to Anil's political approach to the humanitarian crises of war. Whereas Anil's project has attempted to subsume a particular case (the death of one victim) under a general rule (justice is achieved by identifying victims and perpetrators) from a spurious position of independence, Gamini finds himself in the midst of the crisis, in close 'proximity', in Levinas's words, and implicated in the moral crisis as has been shown in the previous chapter. Gamini's ethical responsiveness is not derived from "some abstract and anonymous law, or judicious entity" ("Reality and its Shadow" 82) as Anil's is, but unfolds in the singularity of the face to face encounter. Levinas describes the ethical call as follows: "The summons to responsibility destroys the formulas of generality by which my knowledge (*savoir*) or acquaintance (*connaissance*) of the other man re-presents him to me as fellow man. In the face of the other man I am inescapably responsible and consequently the unique and chosen one" (84).

Having traced the philosophical or ideological grounding of Anil's way of conducting relations in the domains of the personal and the political, I turn now to uncover the way the novel constructs Gamini as an alternative mode of being in the world with others, in order to throw light on how he, albeit in very tentative terms, represents an ethically more successful model of being. His personal history is instructive in this regard. In contrast to Anil's self-conscious drive to develop herself as knowing subject, engaging in intense

personal relations in which she struggles to assert her autonomy and control, Gamini's subjecthood emerges in near isolation, marked by detachment from the world and disengagement from others which is both circumstantial as well as assumed. He survives a near fatal childhood illness and "armed with the secret of death, he himself did not know about" (164) he grows up in the shadow of his older brother Sarath, who in his parents' eyes "walked the heavens" (222). He passes most of his childhood almost unregarded by his parents, "not knowing half the things he was supposed to know – he was to make and discover unusual connections because he had not known the usual routes. He was for most of his life a boy spinning on a chair. And just as things had been kept away from him, he too became a container of secrets" (225). Not habituated, coerced or seduced into any one mode of being, Gamini emerges into adulthood at ease in his separateness, valuing "freedom and secrecy" (223). Unhampered by knowledge that pre-determines the world, he is now at liberty to negotiate what lies before him along new found pathways, "discovering unusual connections because he had not known the usual routes". Avoiding what he thinks of as "invasions of ourselves" (223), he also lives defensively "in the shape of something lean as a spear" and "as antisocial as bark", becoming "therefore more comfortable and intimate with strangers" (224). Not risking the threat of invasion or the violence of exposure in familiar relations, Gamini could then later in life



be vivid only with strangers – in the storm of the last stages of a party or the chaos of emergency wards. This was the state of grace. It was *here* that people could lose themselves as if in a dance, too intent on skills or desires to be conscious of their power while they chased romance or reacted to some emergency. He could be at the centre and still feel he was invisible. (223)

This richly suggestive passage spells out, albeit indirectly, what the novel discloses as ethical ways of being with others in which, according to Levinas, the irreducible strangeness of the other is preserved. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961) Levinas describes three interrelated areas in which an encounter with the other can take place in terms which are not reductive or totalizing. These are through desire, the face to face encounter and through discourse (Davies 45-46). My argument is that the passage points to the first two types of ethical encounters described by Levinas. These encounters are a function of

particular empirical events that occur in the world, thus articulating an ethics rooted in the contingent and physical realities of being. For Gamini, these events are given in the first instance, as the immediate call to respond to crisis of an injured body in an emergency room (the face to face encounter) and second, as the erotic encounter with a stranger on a dance floor (desire). What do these events have in common and by what means to they open the way for an ethical relation?

Both encounters bring about what is described in the passage as a "state of grace" or, in other words, a heightened or profound sense of being or of fulfilment. This is also described as being "at the centre" while at the same time being "invisible". This extraordinary state may be accounted for in a Levinasian reading of these empirical events. In both instances, the encounter with the other effects a rupture of autonomous selfhood; a breach which forces an exit from the self towards the other in a relation of responsibility (attending to the physical injury of the wounded) or a relation of responsivity as desiring subject. This type of encounter, according to Levinas, is originary, essential or fundamental because it brings selfhood into being. The "encounter with the Other lies at the origin of the separateness of the self", writes Davies, "only by discovering the irreducibility of the alterity of the Other can I understand that I am neither solipsistically alone in the world, nor part of a totality to which others also belong" (Davies 48). For Levinas the relationship with the other "which we live in the most ordinary social experience" is a "fundamental movement, a pure transport, an absolute orientation, sense" ("Meaning and Sense" 50). In this corporeal relation, "the Other (*Autrui*) puts me into question, empties me of myself and empties me without end showing me ever new resources. I did not know I was so rich, but I no longer have the right to keep anything to myself" (52). Gamini's encounters with strangers thus bring about an expropriation of the self which is experienced as a profound enrichment or a "state of grace". In a Levinasian sense, this state is equivalent to ethical being.

Ethics, according to Levinas is, then, not a "formal and procedural universalization of maxims or some appeal to good conscience" as Critchley writes, but is lived in the "sensitivity of corporeal obligation to the other. It is because the self is sensible, that is to

say vulnerable, passive, open to wounding, outrage and pain, but also open to the movement of the erotic, that it is capable or worthy of ethics" (*Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity* 64). As Gamini fulfils his "corporeal obligation to the other" in the emergency room and experiences "the movement of the erotic" in the late night carousing, he experiences an affirmation of selfhood which is not achieved by the exercise of power, because, under the circumstances, he is wholly taken up in the physicality of the engagement, or, as the novel puts, it "too intent on skills or desires". The experiencing self is thus instated as "central", but remains "invisible" at the same time, because it does not in any way diminish or overshadow the presence of the other in the encounter.

That the "movement of the erotic" is significant in constituting ethical subjectivity is disclosed by the novel on several levels. *Desire*, understood in the Levinasian sense, is not a lack which seeks a replenishment of the self but is an excess of sorts emanating from the self as jouissance or transcendence experienced in the irreducible and mysterious presence of the other (Davies 46; Robbins, *Altered Reading* 4). The *desire* for the other, writes Levinas, "is borne in a being that lacks nothing, or more exactly, it is borne over and beyond all that can be lacking or that can satisfy. In Desire the I is borne towards the Other (*Autrui*) in such a way as to compromise the sovereign self-identification of the I" ("Meaning and Sense" 51).

The most intense form of desire is experienced in erotic love which does not abolish the self nor the other, "both are in fact confirmed, since the Other is desired as Other, not as Other to be reduced to the same. The loved one is *caressed*, not *possessed*" (Davies 46). The caressing hand, writes Bauman, "characteristically remains open, never tightening into a grip, never 'getting hold of'; it touches without pressing, it moves obeying the shape of the caressed body" (92). For Levinas, the caress is the activity of erotic love which provides "the frame in which 'being for' in general, the moral condition as such, was to be plotted" (92). The vision of caress also "lends itself to description the way love does not" (92) and so it comes to stand for, instantiate or articulate love, understood as desire which

is a form of excess emanating from the self towards the irreducible alterity and mystery of the other.

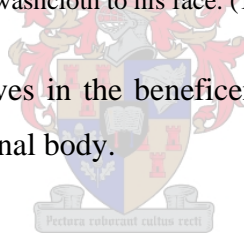
In Ondaatje's novel the "movement of the erotic", as a portal through which an ethical *being for* comes about is presented in several forms. First, the "ethics of caress" (Bauman 92) is exemplified in the figure of the maternal. It is towards such embodied expressions of love that Gamini is drawn to in the hospital wards after long hours of work in the emergency wards and that he wishes to 'bathe' in like the jaundiced infants are bathed in the seemingly unearthly but healing pale blue luminescence of the ultra-violet lights in the paediatric ward (119).

He believed only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so that the children would be confident and safe during the night.

...

If he had a few hours free he avoided the doctor's dormitory and came to lie on one of the empty beds, so that even if he could not sleep he was surrounded by something he would find nowhere else in the country. He wanted a mother's arm to hold him firm on the bed, to lie across his ribcage, to bring a cool washcloth to his face. (119)

Like his brother, Sarath too believes in the beneficence of the caress, the "sexuality of care" articulated through the maternal body.



And privately..., he would, he knew, also give his life for the rock carving from another century of the woman bending over her child. He remembered how they had stood before it in the flickering light, Palipana's arm following the line of the mother's back bowed in affection and grief. An unseen child. All the gestures of motherhood harnessed. A muffled scream in her posture. (157)

Significantly, Sarath draws solace from the vision of a maternal caress through its representation in art or the symbolic, namely a "rock carving from another century" in which "[a]ll the gestures of motherhood [are] harnessed." That aesthetic forms grant access to the nature of ethical being which always belongs to the realm of the real, is affirmed here as well as elsewhere in the novel. Art is not conceived of here as lifeless caricature, frozen idol or an impoverished imitation of reality as Levinas contends in his strange denunciation of art in "Reality and its Shadow". As Robbins points out, Levinas's obtuse equation of all art with *mimesis* (offering truth as correspondence), may be more productively understood as an opening or disclosure of reality (offering truth as *aletheia*),

as has been maintained throughout this thesis. Such a truth, namely one that gives access to the real, Levinas claims, stems wholly from concepts. The "fixity" of art, he writes, "is wholly different from that of concepts, which initiates life, offers reality to our powers, to truth, opens a dialectic" ("Reality and its Shadow" 139). What is art, then, but the creative expression of such concepts?

The novel's supreme expression of "the movement of the erotic" as that which enables an ethical relation with another, who is at once in a position of close proximity and at an infinite distance, is given in the figure of the *pieta*, familiar in the long history of visual and written arts. Ondaatje significantly expands the figure of the *pieta* as an embrace of the other who must remain irreducibly separate, foreign, or altered by the transcendent experience of sex or death.

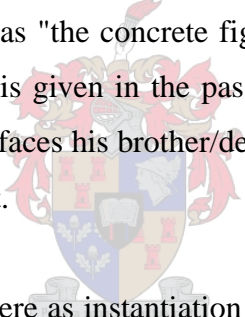
There are *pietas* of every kind. [Gamini] recalls the sexual *pieta* he saw once. A man and a woman, the man having come and the woman stroking his back, her face with the acceptance of his transformed physical state...

There were other *pietas*. The story of Savitra, who wrested her husband away from Death so that in the startling paintings of the myth you saw her hold him – joy filling her face, while *his* face looked capsized, in the midst of his fearful metamorphosis, this reversal back into love and life.

But this was a *pieta* between brothers. And all Gamini knew in his slow scrambled state was that this would be the end of it or the beginning of a permanent conversation with Sarath. If he did not talk to him in this moment, admit himself, his brother would disappear from his life. So he was too, at this moment, within the contract of the *pieta*. (288)

The series of *pietas* presented here culminates in an image of Gamini attending to the body of his murdered brother in the hospital mortuary. "He was leaning over the body, beginning to dress its wounds, and the horizontal afternoon light, held the two of them in a wide spoke" (288). Framed by the shafts of light the image is consciously rendered as a formal or aesthetic disclosure of a profound event, namely Gamini's entry into an ethical relation to his brother Sarath, perhaps for the first time. This is because in life, their relation had been strained; there had never been an openness or "a tunnel of light between them". Locked in a contest of sorts, each had "searched out and found their own dominions" (288) so that something like a "secret war" had existed (221) between them. "Each had refused to show hesitation and fear, it was only strength and anger they had revealed in each other's company" (289). They had in effect become "wolves to one

another" to one another in Hobbes's expression, each defending his own project of existence and intolerant of the perceived threat of the other. Only when Gamini brings himself to face the body of his brother, now irreversibly marked by the "fearful metamorphosis" (228) of death, are his defences broken down and his self-possession undone. For Levinas, death lies irretrievably beyond experience and cannot be known or comprehended. It therefore disrupts the subject's mastery of itself, marking "the end of the subject's virility and heroism" (*Time and the Other* 59). Thus altered and dispossessed, traumatically cast into a "slowed, scrambled state" Gamini is able to extend a caressing hand towards this brother whose body he now washes and whose wounds he dresses. Through this act, Gamini opens "a permanent conversation with Sarath" or enters into an ethical relation in with the other who can never be reached beyond the radical separation of death. For Levinas, ethics entails just such a putting into question of self-sufficiency, the interruption of self that arises in the encounter with the face of the other (*le visage d' Autrui*) which stands as "the concrete figure for alterity" (Robbins, *Altered Reading* 23). This ethical relation is given in the passage as "the contract of the pieta", which Gamini enters into when he faces his brother/death as other and extends the ethical gesture of the caress towards him/it.



The "contract of the pieta" given here as instantiation of an ethical relation, in which the self is in a relation with an other who is altered or separated by the transcendent experiences of sex, death or the approach of death also underscores the fundamental asymmetry that marks this relation. The caress as an act of giving (desire as excess) is directed at the other (the dead brother, the lover temporarily distanced in the oblivion of the sexual climax) with no possibility of reciprocity. Such an act of giving without the possibility of any return disrupts the habitual economy of the self and constitutes what Levinas calls generosity. "This is a generosity that must be thought of outside the balanced economy of reciprocal exchange, outside all economies of deficits and compensations, outside all accountable operations" (Robbins, *Altered Reading* 7). The same sense of generosity governs Gamini's work in the hospital where attending to the sick and injured entailed no "owing [of] favours" (212). In the fundamental asymmetry of the ethical relation, according to Levinas, responsibility is uncoupled from reciprocity.

Last, the figure of the pieta exemplifies the ethical relation in yet another sense, namely that the other, momentarily or irrevocably separated by the transcendent experience of sex or death, is estranged in a way that makes her unknowable (like the consciousness of an infant held by its mother is not accessible to her who is caring for it) and the self cannot locate the other within its own categories of experience or knowledge. The ethical relation with the other is then irreducible to comprehension or knowledge, and escapes the cognitive powers of the knowing subject. It is, instead, the subject's affective disposition towards alterity that becomes "the condition of possibility for the ethical relation towards the other. Ethics does not take place at the level of consciousness or reflection, rather it takes place at the level of sensibility or pre-conscious sentience" (Critchley, *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity* 194). The ethical relation, then, is precognitive and affective. It also dispossesses, troubles, commands or summons the self by drawing it out of the security of its own sufficiency or self-enclosure and it is therefore a traumatic relation. Ethical being emerges in the approach or response to the other, Levinas writes, in "the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, in the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, in exposure to traumas, in vulnerability" (*Otherwise than Being* 82). Such responsibility is primary, it is non-voluntaristic and non-volitional because, as Davies explains, "my existence as individuated subject is entirely bound up with my relation to him or her. Levinas describes this relationship as *obsession* because it entirely dominates me; or in terms repeated throughout *Otherwise than Being*, I am *hostage* of the Other, I am *persecuted* because I cannot escape the dominance of the Other over me. To do so would be to relinquish my subjectivity" (80).

"Without trauma" Critchley writes, "there would be no ethics in Levinas's particular sense of the word" (*Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity* 195). We could ask whether the extreme demands placed on the human subject by the Levinasian ethical imperative are in fact tenable in reality. It would seem that the figure of Gamini embodies just such traumatised ethical subjecthood, one who obsessively heeds the call of the stricken other at the expense of self-preservation. In the sustained emergency of war, while working in the state hospital in Colombo, Gamini clearly suffers from the effects of psychic trauma and succumbs to speed addiction, but during his early years as a recently qualified doctor

working in the rural northeast of the country, he experiences something the novel clearly celebrates as a kind of communitarian workers' idyll in service of the indigent, the sick and the victims of war.

The doctors who survived that time in the northeast remembered they never worked harder, were never more useful than to those strangers who were healed and who slipped through their fingers like grain. Not one of them returned later to the economically sensible careers of private practice. They would learn everything of value here. It was not an abstract moral quality but a physical skill that empowered them. (228)

In this exemplary ethical scenario "ethics is *lived* in the corporeal obligation to the other" (Critchley, *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity* 65). It is practiced as "a physical skill" and "not an abstract moral quality". Such labour of the body then brings about the physical healing of 'strangers', just as harvesters bring in a tangible produce which can "slip through their fingers like grain". Such ethical practice constitutes "everything of value" the doctors would learn, something evidently not to be gained from the "economically sensible careers of private practice" as the principles of ethical medicine evidently do not work in furtherance of a self-serving economy. Ennobled by their extraordinary work into the late hours of the night, these exemplary doctors, elevated to the status of "kings and queens", also slept hieratically, "like pillars of stone" (229). Even amongst themselves, their relations, marked by restraint and respect, are not marred by any "fatal romance" or "secret wars" (221). Managing to forge bonds with each other while preserving their separateness "their comradeship had been mostly anonymous" (246) and intimacy was expressed in "walking across the road with a cup of tea for someone" (229). "They were not working for any cause or political agenda. They had found a place a long way from governments or media and financial ambition" (231).

How, one must surely ask, are these women and men capable of conducting such hallowed existences? The surgeon Skanda offers what may be the most likely explanation in a remark that Gamini later "carried with him" and passed on to Anil as "gift" (231). He had said: "The important thing is to be able to live in a place or situation where you must use your sixth sense all the time" (231). Using the "sixth sense" is understood as taking material responsibility for others as well as living responsively towards others. This is

made manifest in "the physical evidence of [their] work" and the peaceable relations amongst each other. The "sixth sense" is not an "abstract moral quality" but an embodied response or an ethical sensibility elicited by concrete circumstances of the historical moment they are cast into. In other words, ethical being is bound to a particular and contingent reality and the imperative is therefore to be in the right place at the right time. When Ananda attempts to take his own life, Anil saves him by being there at the right time and doing the right thing. Sarath subsequently advises her: "You should live here. Not be here for just another job" (200), implying that her skills would best serve the interest of Sri Lanka if she would attend to the living rather than pursue the 'ghost' of justice in the evidence of bones. In the same way, the Colombo neurosurgeon Linus Chorea, abducted by insurgents from his prosperous existence as private practitioner, experiences a new and exhilarating life in the raw and severely challenging surrounds of a military field hospital where he is meaningfully put to the task of applying his surgical skills to save lives. The point that is made here is that what Levinas calls intentional consciousness (Davies 21), understood as the relationship with alterity (the practice of ethics), is "conditioned by life, by the material conditions of existence" (Critchley, *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity* 98). Thus, the surgeon Skanda's advice that the "important thing is to be able to live in a place or situation where you must use your sixth sense all the time" may be explained by the understanding that it is the situation or the lived reality in which the other appears, that opens the venue for ethics. Ethical responsibility is therefore not a property or attribute of the subject, it is not an "altruistic will, instinct of 'natural benevolence' or love" (Davies, 80). It is fundamentally non voluntaristic and non volitional, "it chooses me before I choose it" (Robbins, *Altered Reading* xv).

Thus Gamini and his fellow medical workers, cast into such material conditions by force of circumstance rather than by choice, are in a sense coerced into the exemplary ethical existences they come to live. They become "kings and queens" because they have been summoned by the events of history to exercise an extraordinary degree of responsibility and not because they possess some innate form of moral goodness. That this is so is acknowledged in the high regard, expressed by the group of doctors who worked together in the northwest territories, for some lines from a book about Jung in the communal

library: "*Jung was absolutely right about one thing. We are occupied by gods. The mistake is to identify with the god occupying you.* Whatever this meant, it seemed a thoughtful warning, and they let the remark seep into them" (230-231, original italics). Under the circumstances, then, they were indeed capable of a transcendence, as if '*occupied by gods*', but could not lay claim to being wholly transcendent beings or *gods* themselves.

Such exemplary ethical responsibility as shown by these doctors is also experienced as a form of trauma, as the novel makes apparent in several ways. The time in the northeast hospitals is one only some appear to have "survived" (228). Linus Chorea is held at gunpoint, blindfolded and forcefully led from a golf course in Colombo to do the lifesaving work in the insurgent camp. While attempting to recover in the guise of a "tourist" (218) at a sea side hotel from the effects of psychic trauma, sleep deprivation and speed addiction Gamini is also abducted and forced by unknown gunmen to operate on wounded soldiers. The ethical demand is thus thrust upon these men as a persecution of sorts, a violent disruption of private existence. Maurice Blanchot describes the untimely and unexpected interruption of responsibility as follows: "Responsibility, which withdraws me from my order – perhaps from all orders and from order itself...separates me from myself (from the 'me' that is mastery and power, from the free speaking subject) and reveals the other *in place* of me" (*Writing the Disaster* 25). As the self is effaced or violently disrupted, "the other becomes rather the Overlord, indeed the Persecutor, he who overwhelms, encumbers, undoes me...So it is that from this point of view, the relation of the other to me would tend to appear sadomasochistic, if it did not cause us to fall prematurely out of this world – the region where 'normal' and 'anomaly' have meaning" (19).

Gamini is evidently just such a dispossessed, dissociated and traumatised subject, "prematurely [fallen] out of this world" it would seem, into an existence "where 'normal' and 'anomaly'" are no longer distinguishable. Having eschewed the intimacy of marriage, romance and the comforts of domesticity in the years after the crisis had begun, he "turned away from every person who stood up for war. Or the principle of one's land,

pride of ownership, or even personal rights" (119). His life is conducted almost solely in the company of strangers in whose service he places himself at all times. He becomes what Anil describes as the "good stranger" (200) who wrests the injured from the grip of death. "His duties made him come across strangers and cut them open without ever knowing their names. He rarely spoke. He seemed not to approach people unless they had a wound" (211). Homeless, he takes to sleeping on empty hospital beds in passages and in the children's wards "where he was a stranger and felt safer"(127). Away from the hospital "he would wake up and find himself in a stranger's garden" (218). "He enjoyed talking intimately and with humour to strangers: oh he knew all this was a sickness – but he did not dislike it, this distance and anonymity" (224). Is the practice of ethics in the Levinasian sense then predicated on such an attenuated personal existence, one that would "tend to appear sadomasochistic" as Blanchot has it? A life marked by "distance and anonymity", almost a 'sickness' of sorts, that will, however, not be disliked and appears to sit well with the estranged and traumatised being Gamini is shown to be?

Before addressing the evident difficulties posed by the Levinasian conception of ethical subjectivity, figuratively embodied by Gamini, I return briefly to Anil as representative of the Western universal human rights discourse legislated and institutionalized by the global organization of the UN. The failure of Anil's mission in Sri Lanka, exacerbated by the violent miscarriage of justice prompted by her interference and resulting in Sarath's murder, clearly writes Anil and what she stands for out of an imagined solution of the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka. The novel charts Anil's belief in the solidity of her case (universal human rights underwritten by scientific positivism) giving way to an ethical, non-totalizing response to others who in their irreducible difference cannot subsumed within her own epistemological framework. Thus Anil's ontological certainty yields in the morally more complicated world of Sri Lanka to a necessary indeterminacy or what Derrida would call spectrality (*Spectres of Marx*). Ontology is deconstructed as 'hauntology' and Anil's cause stands revealed as *Anil's Ghost* at the close of the narrative. If Anil's cause was to achieve justice in the mould of the universal human rights discourse, it was certainly not to be realized in Sri Lanka. For Levinas justice cannot be founded on determinate transcendental guarantees or ontological certainties, as Anil

would have it, but must be located in the final instance in the singularity of face to face encounter: "Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity. His function is not limited to the...subsuming of particular cases under the general rule. The judge is not outside the general conflict, but is in the midst of proximity. This means that nothing is outside the control of responsibility of one for the other" (*Otherwise than Being* 248).

The first condition placed here on the possibility of rendering justice is paradoxically that the one who judges finds "himself in proximity", in other words, is implicated in the conflict. "Because we are all implicated" writes Thomas Keenan, "because the absence of any exterior has plunged us all into the proximity of one another ('nothing is outside'), there can be justice and responsibility...This implies that decisions or judgements may not be of the order of the constative or cognitive, of the actually present and interpretable" (265). This is so because "we can no longer read off what the ideal is as if it were *there*, present in the actual" says Levinas (quoted in Keenan 265). The spectre of justice will then not be contained by a definition which casts it "as the impartial application of universal laws to particular cases" (Keenan 266) as Anil was want to do.

After Anil's exit and return to the adopted country of her choice, the novel's conclusion unfolds in a tableau of three related scenes that complete its argument. The first of these present the series of ethical pietas culminating in the "pieta between brothers" (288). The final image of Gamini leaves him sitting with his dead brother in a dark room which looked "as if it were full of grey water" (290). Although cast into an abyss of suffering he is faced only an hour later with yet another wave of dead and injured bodies brought in from the latest bombings in the city (290). It is clear that the burden thus thrown upon Gamini must ultimately be an inassumable and impossible one. This begs the question whether such an exemplary ethical response to the endless demands of the dead and injured is not shown to be finally untenable or hopelessly insufficient in the face of so disastrous a reality as war? The answer is both yes and no, and indicates the necessary passage from ethics to the domain of political, namely the order of social justice and responsibility. This study has shown that the novel posits a devolution from the political

(shown up to be both defunct and morally bankrupt) to the domain of interpersonal responsibility. In the event of war however, as the text illustrates through the figure Gamini, the burden of responsibility put out by a never ending series of face to face encounters is limitless and cannot be endured by individuals and therefore shows up the need for such a second order of responsibility or justice. To preserve the individual from the impossible burden of limitless responsibility, Levinas argues that

it is necessary therefore to admit institutions and the State, to live in the world of citizens and not only in the order of the face-to-face. But on the other hand, it is starting from a relation to the face, from the before the face of the other, that we can speak of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the State. So there is a limit to the State. (Robbins, *Is it Righteous to Be?* 167)

For Levinas the interpersonal relation thus serves as the basic norm or cornerstone for the society of many and can therefore never be passed by. Bauman explains that "if solitude marks the beginning of the social act, togetherness and communion emerge at its end" (61). We are therefore not moral thanks to society but we are a society thanks to being moral. "At the heart of sociality", writes Bauman, "is the loneliness of the moral person" (61). While the novel clearly shows that ethical responsibility lies in the realm of the face to face, it does also, in the unbearable "loneliness" of the figure of Gamini, show the limits of personal responsibility and the need for a just social order.



While such an order evidently does not exist on the war torn island (hence Gamini's crisis), its form is glimmeringly discerned in the symbolic ending of the novel. By way of clearing the path for the emergence of such a new statehood, the sham political order of the day, rooted within a violent economy of war, sees its symbolic demise in the penultimate scene of the novel. A political rally is staged in the streets of Colombo in which the ruling order parades itself in a shabby and dissembling public spectacle (291-295). Streams of human bodies thronging around the frail and insignificant figure of the President, embattled representative of the body politic, are then shattered apart in the devastation of a suicide bomb explosion, turning the carnival of statehood into a nightmare scene of carnage. This includes the body of the President which is significantly never found, as its parts cannot be distinguished from the body parts of its people in a macabre literalization of the term 'body politic'. The unidentifiable and scattered pieces of

flesh spread like a grizzly text over the streets and walls of Colombo spell out the destruction and logical end of a violent political order which has traded with both terror and death in exercising its will to power. Having thus done away, in every possible sense, with the political order of the day, how does the novel envisage what is to emerge in its place?

The beginnings of such an order are tentatively imagined in the final chapter significantly entitled *Distance*. The remnants of destruction represented in the previous scene as the scattered flesh and clay pot shards that appal both reader and global citizen in the mediatized/terrorized world of the present, are symbolically reassembled in the rebuilding of a giant Buddha figure presiding over the killing fields of Sri Lanka. Here "Buddhism and its values [had] met with the harsh political events of the twentieth century" (300). The title of the final chapter signals the novel's withdrawal from its engagement with the brute realities of war into the domain of the aesthetic. It would seem that only within the indeterminate order of Saying (the aesthetic or literary), always speculative and never propositional, can the writer "peg the blueprints into the earth" (300) as Ananda does before rebuilding the Buddha, which tender a proposal for the refiguring or renewal of the social order from the ruins of civil war. The 'retreat into the aesthetic' or the aesthetic distance thus claimed by Ondaatje and for which he has been much maligned by critics, paradoxically provides the necessary portal or return to the ethical. This curious relation between ethics and aesthetics is explained by Critchley. Employing the conceptual vocabulary of both Levinas and Jacques Lacan he argues as follows: "The real (as the realm of the ethical) exceeds the symbolic (the realm of the aesthetic) but the latter provides the only access to the former. Thus access to the real or the ethical is only achieved through a form of symbolic sublimation that traces the excess within symbolization. There is no direct access to the real, only an oblique passage" (*Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity* 203). The express strategy of the final chapter, so clearly signposted by way of its title, is to establish by means of such an "oblique passage" of the aesthetic, a return to the ethical by proposing a very particular way forward for the people of Sri Lanka.

Ondaatje's "blue-print" or re-imagining of a Sri-Lankan social order is figured as a giant Buddha which is reconstructed from the ruins of the past alongside the erection of a new statue, replacing "the destroyed god" (301). The task of rebuilding the Buddha is assigned significantly to the still traumatized, but nevertheless capable, local artisan Ananda with the help of seven men and later nearly all the men and women of the local village. "It was assumed that Ananda would be working under the authority and guidance of foreign specialists but in the end these celebrities never came. There was too much political turmoil and it was unsafe" (301). The rebuilding of a new social order in Sri Lanka is thus envisaged without the habitual or imposed reliance on the "guidance and authority of foreign specialists". Mockingly referred to as "celebrities" the erstwhile colonial rulers are dismissed and the local artisan proves to be more than equal to the task of reconstruction. Only much later, it is noted, is the work undertaken by Ananda and his fellow villagers recognized, presumably by those in the West, as being a "complex and innovative" accomplishment.

Undeterred by their own traumatic histories and the still ongoing killings, Ananda and his fellow workers apply themselves to the work of rebuilding or indeed constructing a future while also dealing with the past. To this end two of the team are assigned the business of "dealing with the bodies – tagging them, contacting civil rights authorities" (301). As the visionary or artist in the team, Ananda "appeared to stare past it all", beholding a new order figured as the 120-foot statue of the Buddha. Its body is pieced together from fragments of blasted stone initially laid out and fitted together in a "mud trench, which resembled a hundred-foot-long-coffin" (301). This figure recalls Walter Benjamin's enigmatic "angel of history" who finds redemption in the devastation and ruins of historical disaster. With its face turned to the past and its wings spread in a storm blowing from paradise, Benjamin's angel "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of its feet. The angel would like to say, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed" (257). The form of a just society is paradoxically discerned in the ruins and suffering of its past and is therefore appropriately figured in the fragmentary work of art (both in the novel and in the reassembled Buddha) in which fault-lines and fissures are not smoothed over within the

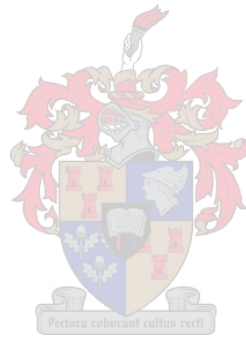
symbolic totality of a modernist aesthetic. The distinctly postmodern mode of artistic production or indeed the construction of a non totalising social institution is movingly rendered in the communal reconstruction of the Buddha. Working through the rainy months of the monsoon season, the workers are enveloped in the noise of a paradisaal storm, "cast within its noise, silent, solitary in the crowded field" (302). Towards the end the

[e]ngineers came and with a twenty-foot drill burrowed through the soles of the feet and moved up the limbs of the body, till there was a path for metal bones to be poured in, tunnels between the hips and the torso, between the shoulders and neck to the head.

During the months of assembly, Ananda had spent most of his time on the head. He and two others used a system of fusing rock. Up close the face looked quilted. They had planned to homogenize the stone, blend the face into a unit, but when he saw it this way Ananda decided to leave it as it was. He worked instead on the composure and qualities of the face. (302)

The figure of the human body, so prominent a feature here as throughout pages of this novel, is furnished with what reads like a lover's inventory of all its constituent parts and remoulded bones. But no longer willing to practice the dissembling arts that would equate beauty with truth Ananda foregoes the skilled application of his craft which would enable him to "homogenize the stone" and blend the fragmented appearance of "the face into a unit". "Now the sunlight hit the seams of it face, as if it were sewn roughly together. He wouldn't hide that" (304). Ananda's final task is to perform the *Netra Mangala* ceremony or ritual eye painting of the Buddha at the break of dawn. Hoisted in its upright position, the Buddha now faces the "figure of the world" spread before it from the present moment through to the ages still to unfold "in rainlight and sunlight", as the "great churning of weather above the earth" marks its passage over the "combustible world...even without the human element" (306). Perched on top of the statue Ananda briefly sees the world simultaneously in all its expansiveness and minute detail, as if through the eyes of a god. Ananda's moment of transcendence is at the same time earthed or grounded in "[t]he sweet touch of the world" (307) as the boy who is his helper "places his concerned hand on his" in a gesture of care. The final two lines of the novel thus assert the centrality of the face to face relation in which the exemplary ethical response to the other is given as caress. Ethics is revealed as an affective disposition toward the other and it is this which

must surely be placed at the heart of sociality if a just society is to be built out of the ruins of war.



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