

Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost

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**Marlene Goldman,**

**"Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*"**

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**Abstract:** Marlene Goldman suggests in her paper "Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" that at first glance Ondaatje appears to promote the idea of a Sri Lankan Buddhist faith as transcending history. Ondaatje introduces the subject of Buddhism early on in the novel, emphasizing initially the devastation wrought by imperial and colonial forces. Goldman, however, argues that subsequent references to Buddhism undermine the initial portrayal of a religion besieged by external imperialist forces. For example, at one point, the character Palipana refers to the assassination of his brother, Narada, a Buddhist monk. Narada was possibly the victim of a "political killing" and rumours suggest he was killed by a novice and thus his death recalls the historical connection between the JVP (termed "the antigovernment insurgents" in the novel) and young Buddhist monks. Goldman argues that rather than offering a sanitized account that ignores Buddhism's enmeshment in politics, Ondaatje's novel addresses the complex relationship between religion, politics, and violence in Sri Lanka.

## Marlene Goldman

### Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

Critical response to Michael Ondaatje's depictions of war-torn Sri Lanka have been polarized and politically charged. Early on, Arun Mukherjee condemned Ondaatje in the strongest terms for his supposed preoccupation with aesthetics at the expense of more pressing issues such as history and politics. Ondaatje, she contends, "does not get drawn into the act of living, which involves the need to deal with the burning issues of his time, such as poverty, injustice, exploitation, racism, sexism, etc., and he does not write about other human beings unless they happen to be artists -- or members of his own family" (34). Similarly, Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri in an essay entitled "'Sri Lankan' Canadian Poets: The Bourgeoisie that Fled the Revolution" categorizes Ondaatje as an Eurasian or bourgeois and claims that he has adopted a mode of artistic expression that allows him to be creative "without being committed to history, legend, culture or ideology" (64). In the end, Sugunasiri argues that the designation "Sri Lankan" is "inapplicable" not simply because writers such as Ondaatje "were a bourgeoisie that fled the revolution," but also because "they are ignorant of history, culture and the myth of the land and its people, and seem unable to relate to such sensibility" (75). Other critics, responding for the most part to Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, have been more sympathetic to Ondaatje's treatment of Sri Lanka, particularly in light of the author's complex position as a bourgeois. "Probing one's identity is problematic in the best of situations," Chelva Kanaganayakam writes, "let alone in the case of one who is seen as both the agent and victim of colonial hegemony" (35). Analysing the fate of the middle- and upper-class society after Sri Lanka's independence in 1947, Ernest MacIntyre explains that, unlike the Tamils and Sinhalese who found themselves engaged in "a tryst with destiny," the bourgeoisie, "the local descendants of the previous Dutch Empire ... were to enjoy an entire mortality of heightened unreality, a surreality, because they wouldn't be provided with even a humbug of 'a tryst with destiny' at midnight in 1947" (315). As Kanaganayakam asserts: "To be refused a role in history is to be denied the very basis of identity"; in his eyes, this explains Ondaatje's "need to establish a niche for himself in Sri Lanka, which appears time and again with obsessive insistence in his work" (34). However, Kanaganayakam still finds fault with the author for refusing "to be drawn into issues that surface in any serious discussion of the country, "an apolitical stance that makes it impossible, regardless of" the author's angle of vision or aesthetic sensibility "for Kanaganayakam, to refute Mukherjee's observations" (Kanaganayakam 36).

As the critical responses indicate, a fundamental question about Ondaatje's fiction sparks continuous debate, namely, what kind of engagement with Sri Lanka is forged within his texts? Far from receding, this question has loomed even larger with the publication of *Anil's Ghost*. Some critics continue to insist that the portrayals of Sri Lanka in *Anil's Ghost* remain apolitical and ahistorical. Kanishka Goonewardena argues, for instance, that history "is much less evident in *Anil's Ghost*, which (just like *Running in the Family*) can be and has been appreciated without any awareness of the political upheavals in Sri Lanka" (1). In his eyes, the attenuation of history and politics here is more striking than it is in *Running in the Family*, if only because *Anil's Ghost* is full of characters "obsessed with history and telling the truth, along with human rights and wrongs" (1). Goonewardena, in the end, condemns the novel on the grounds that Ondaatje "only deals with the symptoms of the Sri Lankan crisis, as he paints a picture of the everyday life there in a time of terror" (2). "To caricature crudely," Goonewardena writes, "*Anil's Ghost* reads like a story about people dragging a constant flow of dead bodies out of a river that has no hint of what's happening upstream. Who is throwing the bodies in? Why? Is that not worth knowing?" (2).

Responding to the same supposed dearth of historical and political detail, Quadri Ismail argues pointedly that this oversight supports the cause of Buddhist Sinhala nationalism: "nowhere in the entire novel," says Ismail, "do we find any engagement with the Tamil claim to being oppressed, or with the liberal/human rights/leftist argument that Sinhala (Buddhist) nationalism in Sri Lanka has an extremely repressive, criminal, perhaps even genocidal record" (25). Ismail observes further that all of the main characters are Sinhala; moreover, "all of the men have names that reso-

nate deeply within Buddhist iconography" (24). As far as he is concerned, this can mean only one thing: "When all the significant actants in a story about Sri Lanka are Sinhala, when in addition all the place names noticed by the text when it sees the National Atlas of Sri Lanka are Sinhala ones" (39), and "when the novel's only list of the Sri Lankan disappeared contain exclusively Sinhala names" (41), "its country begins to seem very like that of Sinhala nationalism" (24). Ismail goes on to insist that it is "axiomatic to the left that the oppression of the minorities has been carried out in Sri Lanka in the name of the Sinhala Buddhist majority" (25-29). But that possibility, that "Sinhala Buddhism may bear some responsibility for Sri Lanka's misery, does not even merit Ondaatje's consideration" (25). Discussing the significance of the conclusion of the novel, which deals with the reconstruction of a statue of the Buddha, Ismail once again reads it in the light of the novel's supposed bias. As he says, this final scene is "clearly a metaphor for restoring a pure Buddhism in war torn Sri Lanka" (28).

In contrast to the critics cited above, I argue that Ondaatje's novel does indeed address "the burning issues of its time." More specifically, far from advocating the restoration of "a pure Buddhism," as we will see, the narrative calls into question the long-standing ties between Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism. In *Anil's Ghost*, a human rights organization pairs a Sri Lankan archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena, with Anil Tessera, a Western-trained forensic specialist originally from Sri Lanka, to investigate claims of organized murder on the island. At one point, Sarath tells Anil: "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). As a Western critic, my aim is to convey a sense, to borrow Sarath's words, of the "archaeological surround" of the references to Buddhism in Ondaatje's fiction. Locating these references in a broader historical and cultural context will enable readers to appreciate how Ondaatje's fiction gestures toward the problematic fusion among religion, history, and politics in Sri Lanka.

At first glance, Ondaatje's novel seems to promote the idea of a unified Sri Lankan Buddhist faith that transcends history. The novel introduces the subject of Buddhism early on in the Miner's folk song referring to the "life wheel": "Blessed be the scaffolding deep down in the shaft/ Blessed be the life wheel on the mine's pit head/ Blessed be the chain attached to the life wheel" (1). The song describes an actual piece of mining equipment and simultaneously alludes to the universal symbol of Buddhism (the "life wheel" is a metaphor for the hoist, the machine used to raise and lower the miners' cage in the mine shaft; the use of the term "pit head" suggests further that the fiction is referring specifically to a coal mine). As scholars explain, a central tension exists in Theravada Buddhism between the wheel of power and the wheel of righteousness. At its worst, "the tension collapses either into a usurping of power by temporal authorities, normally by the state though sometimes even by elements within the Sangha [the monkhood] or into an indifference toward matters temporal through a misconceived notion of *Nibban*" (Obeyesekere 1972, 1; Tambiah 1976, 41-47). Subsequent references to Buddhism in the novel, including the surgeon Gamini's gesture of reaching out to touch the small Buddha in the niche of the hospital wall (119) and *the raksha bandhana*, the thread tied around Anil's wrist during a *pirit* ceremony (19), reinforce the association between Buddhism and notions of sacred protection and unity. The term *pirit* is, in fact, derived from the word *paritta*, meaning "protection." *Pirit* (or *paritta*) is a collective term designating a set of protective chants sanctioned by the Buddha for the use of both laymen and monks (see *Pirit* <<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/bps/wheels/wheel402.html>>). *Pirit* chanting is a popular ceremony among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka, the ceremonial recital of which is regarded as capable of warding off all forms of evil and danger; no important function can be considered complete without this ceremony. In Ondaatje's novel, the initial associations forged among Buddhism, protection, and unity are immediately challenged, however, by the narrator's early account of the plundering of Cave 14, "the most beautiful site in a series of Buddhist cave temples" (12). As the narrator explains, the Bodhisattvas in Cave 14 "were cut out of the walls with axes and saws.... This was the place of a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off" (12). In this instance, references to Buddhism emphasize the devastation wrought by imperial and colonial forces. We are told, for example, that in the few years following

its discovery by Japanese archaeologists in 1918, the Bodhisattvas were "quickly bought up by museums in the West" (12). As Palipana, the infamous Singhalese epigraphist in the novel, tells his archaeology student Sarath, "the 'ascendancy of the idea' [is]... often the only survivor" (12).

To complicate matters further, subsequent references to Buddhism undermine this portrayal of a religion besieged solely by external imperialist forces. At one point, Sarath relates the story of Palipana's brother, Narada, a Buddhist monk, who was shot in his room while sleeping. Sarath acknowledges that Narada was possibly the victim of a "political killing" and that rumors suggest he was killed by a novice (47-48). Narada's assassination recalls the historical connection in the late 1980s between young Buddhist monks and the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP or Peoples Liberation Front, termed "the antigovernment insurgents" in the novel). In the 1980s, as S. Tambiah explains, the JVP recruited the monk "as another foot soldier in the revolutionary struggle" (1992, 88). Tambiah goes on to assert that many of the JVP monks, "faced with what they construed as abandonment and even betrayal by their senior monks ... became condoners of, even collaborators in, acts of violence against senior monks" (1992, 98). As Tambiah states:

"The phenomenon of the late eighties may be seen by some observers as the final shift of "political Buddhism" from a more localized religiosity of earlier times primarily enacted among monastic circles in villages and towns in terms of ethical teachings, moral concerns, and gift-giving (dana) to a vocal and sloganized 'religious-mindedness,' which has objectified and fetishized the religion and espoused a "Buddhist nationalism," even as regards the monks themselves, so that important tenets of their religion regarding detachment, compassion, tranquility, and non-violence and the overcoming of mental impurities are subordinated and made less relevant to Sinhala-religio-nationalist and social reform goals. In this changed context, Buddhism in its militant, populist, fetishized form, as espoused by certain groups, seems to some observers to have been emptied of much of its normative and humane ethic ... and to function as a marker of crowd and mob identity, as a rhetorical mobilizer of volatile masses, and as an instigator of spurts of violence." (1992, 92)

Similarly, although David Little cautions that "it is important not to overrate the role of the monks in politics or to give the impression that the militants and the activists are more representative of the outlook of most monks than they are," he, too, concurs that "it would be impossible to provide a complete description of Sri Lankan political history ... without highlighting the impact of the bhikkhus" (107). In Ondaatje's novel, Palipana warns Sarath and his co-investigator, Anil, that monks in Sri Lanka have never been able to transcend politics. Citing a story from the ancient Pali chronicles, Palipana relates how a group of monks fled the court to escape the wrath of the ruler, but the king "followed them and cut their heads off" (87). At bottom, this story and the novel as a whole emphasize what a number of contemporary critics have observed, namely, that "Buddhism has never stood outside the dynamics of power" in Sri Lankan society (Kapferer 108). In keeping with this realization, rather than offer a sanitized, apolitical and ahistorical account that ignores Buddhism's enmeshment in nationalist politics, Ondaatje addresses in his novel the complex relationship between religion, politics, and violence in Sri Lanka. By outlining the fate of Palipana, a nationalist who dared to offer a radical interpretation of the Buddhist historical chronicles and was ostracized for his crimes, Ondaatje gestures to the real-life controversies concerning nationalist readings of sacred chronicles and other ancient artifacts and inscriptions. As the narrator explains, Palipana, was "for a number of years at the centre of a nationalistic group that eventually wrestled archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans. He had made his name translating Pali scripts and recording and translating the rock graffiti of Sigiriya" (79). Yet, later in life, Palipana had "been turned gracelessly out of the establishment," owing to his publication of a series of interpretations of rock graffiti that "stunned archaeologists and historians" (81). These interpretations, which explained, supposedly, the "political tides and royal eddies of the island in the sixth century" had seemed at first to "have ended arguments and debates by historians"; the work was "applauded in journals abroad and at home, until one of Palipana's protégés voiced the opinion that there was no real evidence for the existence of these texts" (81). The supposed evidence was exposed as a fiction, "a forgery by a master" (82).

Some readers might wonder why the author of the novel makes such a fuss about mythic inscriptions written in the dim past. To dismiss the depiction of the controversy as tempest in a teapot, however, is to misunderstand entirely the roots of contemporary Sri Lankan nationalism and the country's ongoing ethnic conflicts. As Bruce Kampferer declares, interpretations of myth and history are vital in the ethnic consciousness of both Sinhalese and Tamils: such interpretations are "not the stale meal of academic fare; they are alive in processes that can generate the suffering of homelessness and bring about sudden and violent death" (38). Sri Lankans today look back on a 2,500 year past, but the important point is not that the Sri Lankan past is so ancient but that it is so present, a presence that derives from the practice of chronicle-keeping, centred on the *Mahavamsa*. Referred to nowadays as Sri Lanka's "national chronicle," the *Mahavamsa* is a work in Pali verse written by Buddhist monks from the sixth century AD onwards that preserves traditions that reach back one thousand years earlier to the Lord Buddha's three sojourns on the island. Subsequent additions (translated as the *Culavamsa*) were composed in the twelfth, fourteenth, and eighteenth centuries. The *Mahavamsa* constitutes the oldest historical literature in South Asia. It is also the only ancient chronicle that has been updated and brought down to the present. In 1977, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, J.R. Jayewardene, extended the chronicle to the beginning of his administration and "great emphasis has been placed throughout the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka on the idea that the connection between past and present must be unbroken, whether between a sacred place and the historical events that created its importance or between a group of monks and the historical origins that guarantee the authenticity of their teachings" (Kemper 33). Not only are past and present unified through the chronicles, but according to nationalists, the heart of the chronicles attests to the unity of nation and religion (see Little 26-32).

Since the British conquest of the Sri Lankan state (Ceylon then) in Kandy in 1815, the *Mahavamsa* has been at the centre of nationalist debates centred on notions of unity, serving as "the warrant for the interlocked beliefs that the island and its government have traditionally been Sinhala and Buddhist, and that a person cannot be Buddhist without being Sinhala" (Kemper 2). By the 1980s, newspaper writers began to characterize Sinhalese ethnic chauvinism by calling it "the *Mahavamsa* mentality" (Kapferer 105). The problem is, as critics points out, that the past and the present are "not nearly as much alike as some scholarly and popular representations would have people believe" (Kemper 13). The understanding of communal conflict in Sri Lanka has been hindered by the "unwarranted and anachronistic imposition of the dominant political identities of the present day on to the past" (Nissan and Stirrat 19). Present day Sinhalese and Tamils are not likely to be descendants of those mentioned in the chronicles for a host of reasons (see Nissan and Stirrat 22-24). For one, wave after wave of immigration followed the chronicle's first compilation, "a complication scarcely noticed in the popular understanding of the past"; nor is it recognized that "many of today's Sinhalese are yesterday's Tamils" (Kemper 13). Attempts to link past to present seamlessly, as many critics insist, have become an important and dangerous tool of political legitimation. In Ondaatje's novel the blending of fact and fiction in Palipana's translations of the inscriptions, not to mention the blending of fact and fiction in the novel as a whole, highlights the predicament in Sri Lanka where "myth has become historical reality and history myth" (Kapferer 34).

In addition to underscoring the ongoing controversy over the truth value of the chronicles, Ondaatje reinforces further in his novel the connection between Buddhism and earthly politics by fashioning striking parallels between its portrait of Palipana and the real-life eminent Sri Lankan epigraphist Senerat Paranavitana, the first Sinhala commissioner of archaeology. In the 1920s, Paranavitana published an interpretation of inscriptional evidence that was used to legitimate the claim that the first Sinhalese king Vijaya, celebrated in the *Mahavamsa* for repeating the unification of the island first enacted by the Buddha, was not simply a hero, but a member of the Aryan race. To borrow Paranavitana's own words, "the evidence is overwhelming that the original Sinhalese came to Ceylon from the Western regions of the Aravarta [the land of the Aryans]" (Paranavitana I, 93). As the medieval historian, R.A.L.H. Gunawardana suggests, one of the most significant products of Orientalist scholarship in the nineteenth century was the invention of the Aryan; this invention, he argues, was followed not long after by the invention of Dravidian (see

Gunawardana 1990, 70-79). As Steven Kemper observes, Wilhelm Geiger, who first visited the island in 1895 and analysed the *Mahavamsa* at the turn of the nineteenth century, used the tools of comparative linguistics to analyse the morphology of Sinhala. His study led him to the conclusion that Sinhala was, in fact, an Indo-Aryan language. For Geiger, categorizing the language was "simply a matter of scientific taxonomy; for Sinhalese nationalists, it became a fundamental element in the twentieth-century claim that Sinhalese sprang from a distinct and elevated bloodline" (Kemper 90; see also Little 16; Nissan and Stirrat 22-24). A host of respected scholars have refuted the claims made by Paranavitana, including Gananath Obeyesekere, who in a letter to the *New York Times* declares: "This racist nonsense is part of the current mythology of middle-class Sinhalese" (Obeyesekere qtd. in Tambiah 1986, 183-84). Obeyesekere goes on to characterize Paranavitana's and others' references to Aryan pedigree as "a hypothesis no longer acceptable to serious historians" (Obeyesekere qtd. in Tambiah 1986, 183-84).

The parallels drawn in the novel between Palipana and Paranavitana are even more striking when one considers that in 1939 Paranavitana discovered and translated the gold foil Vallipuram inscription, offering a highly controversial reading of the text (see Gunawardana 1995, 10-16). Ironically, groups "on either sides of the barricades" found Paranavitana's 1939 view useful for their purposes; one group has seen in the reading of the inscription justification for Sinhalese domination over the Jaffna Peninsula (Gunawardana 1995, 15). In keeping with the novel, at one stage in the controversy on the Vallipuram inscription, it was noted that the gold foil in question was not traceable. According to Gunawardana, this gave rise to the claim that the inscription had been a clever forgery. More recently, the well-known monk and scholar Walpola Rahula came forward to announce that "he had safe-guarded the gold foil. It was presented to the President of the Republic on February 3rd, 1991, at a dramatic ceremony which was given wide publicity in the media. The inscription is now being kept at the National Museum in Colombo" (Gunawardana 1995, 15). However, as Ranjini Obeyesekere (Princeton University) informed me, controversy still rages over Paranavitana's reading and translation of "interlinear writing," which he claims to have deciphered on existing rock inscriptions. As Obeyesekere explains, "no other scholars or epigraphists could see such an interlinear inscription; hence the controversy over what they saw as 'fanciful imaginings' at best" (Obeyesekere, personal information). By drawing such close connections between Palipana and the real-life figure of Paranavitana, Ondaatje underscores how myths of racial superiority and national unity and purity developed in Europe in the nineteenth century, along with other "gifts" of the colonizers, influenced readings of Buddhist sacred chronicles and became intertwined with notions of religious and political identity in Sri Lanka. In fact, critics have suggested that, to a great extent, the current obsession with unity can be traced to the influence of the colonizers. In 1902, for instance, a Buddhist monk explained that, to influence the English, Buddhists had to learn their secrets: "We must now learn from them, whom we mistake to imitate more in dress and drink than in their ennobling qualities, the secret of their power of unity which makes them a great people, brings them out of a comparatively savage state in a few generations, and makes for them now a consolidated and mighty empire ... and enables them to conquer and govern us who are morally weakened by superstitious barriers. Grasp this mighty power of unity, then, true to our creed as followers of our Lord of Wisdom, use it peaceably to gain our rightful end" (qtd. in Kemper 199). As well, the leaders of the Theosophical Society founded in the USA in 1875, Colonel Henry Steele Olcott (a former Union officer in the American Civil War) and Madame Helena Blavatsky played a key role in Sri Lanka's Buddhist revivalism of the 1880s. As Little explains: "Olcott quickly published *The Buddhist Catechism*, which claimed to capture the essence of Buddhism in popular form and thereby provide a rallying point for mobilizing and unifying the Sinhala. Soon thereafter, he founded the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS), and by 1890 he had established a hundred or so BTS schools. The schools mostly mimicked the missionary model, and many of them became highly successful in disseminating" the basic religious ideology of the educated Buddhist bourgeoisie" (23).

Olcott and Blavatsky also fostered the education of Don David Hewavitarne, later known as Anagarika Dharmapala. Originally a student in the Christian school system, Dharmapala was encouraged Olcott and Blavatsky to learn Pali, the language of classical Buddhism, and to immerse

himself in the study of Buddhist doctrine. In the end, Dharmapala became the most influential figure in Buddhist revivalism, which rested on "an appeal to the past glories of Buddhism and Sinhalese civilization celebrated in the *Mahavamsa* and other chronicles as a way of infusing the Sinhalese with a new nationalist identity and self-respect in the face of humiliation and restrictions suffered under British rule and Christian missionary influence" (Tambiah 1992, 6). Dharmapala championed what has been called the Sinhala obsession with the past in speeches that referred to the sacred Sinhala legacy in terms of a glorious "colony of Aryans" or "sons of the soil" that extended well back before the second century B.C. (see Little 19-36). In Ondaatje's novel, Palipana, modelled after Senerat Paranavitana who inherited Dharmapala's ethnonationalist beliefs, refuses to give up "the unprovable truth" he claimed to have discovered, choosing instead to retreat to the Grove of Ascetics, the remains of an ancient forest monastery or "leaf hall." This, we are told, was "in keeping with the sixth-century sect of monks who lived under such strict principles that they rejected any religious decoration" (84). Palipana spends the remainder of his life with his young niece, Lakma, educating her and journeying together to sacred Buddhist sites. Once again, the description of their innocent pilgrimages might seem to shore up an image of a transcendent Buddhist faith that fuses past and present, and thereby transcends history: "We are, and I was, formed by history," Palipana tells his niece, "but the three places I love escaped it. Arankale. Kaludiya Pokuna. Ritigala" (105). However, as the legend that Palipana relates about the king's dismemberment of the monks in the sacred grove reminds us, there are no places of absolute refuge. Despite Palipana's desires, there is also no escape from history and politics. Within the novel, the danger associated with blurring the difference between past and present is perhaps best illustrated by the contemporary practice of burying victims of late-twentieth century ethnic warfare in ancient graves located in sacred sites. Indeed, the entire narrative follows Anil and Sarath's desperate attempts to distinguish past from present in their search for the identity of a skeleton, nicknamed "Sailor," buried no more than four to six years ago in a sixth-century graveyard for monks. Anil anticipates that she can deduce from the facts of his death -- the broken forearm, partial burning, damage to vertebrae in the neck, and the bullet wound -- the "permanent truths" of how he died. Furthermore, she believes that these truths combined with the place where he was found -- caves located within government-protected archaeological preserves -- are enough to prove that the government was responsible, and to point to an organized campaign of murder. The focus in the novel on sacred places dating back to the sixth century, in keeping with its emphasis on the highly politicized nature of the ancient chronicles also composed during the sixth century, can thus be understood in terms of the current overarching religious and nationalist agenda to portray a fusion of temporal and spatial horizons. Remarking on the artificial, yet incredibly powerful impact of this "fusion of horizons," Kemper notes that although renovation "saves the past," it does so, at a cost "because the process usually makes the past more like the present" (136). He goes on to recall the words of the monk who restored the relic mound words that highlight the political implications of this fusion of past and present: "'at certain times during the nights I heard *pirit* being chanted from the side of the *dagaba*. The great forest was spreading to a never-ending distance. I pondered the unbroken association of the Sinhala nation and Buddhism from beginning to end, and again from end to the beginning'" (qtd. in Kemper 136).

Indeed, what is perhaps most noteworthy in the controversy surrounding Senerat Paranavitana's discovery and translation of the Vallipuram inscription, according to Gunawardana, is the fact that rival parties "were unanimous in their acceptance of the premise that conditions prevalent eighteen centuries ago were germane to the political issue of their own times" (1995, 16). As critics observe, the war which has been fought between the armed Tamil separatists and the Sinhala-dominated government has been "accompanied by rhetorical wars fought over archaeological sites, place-name etymologies, and the interpretation of ancient inscriptions" (Little 3). A speaker at a gathering of archaeologists and historians compared the role of the archaeologist in the field to that of the soldier in the ongoing war in the North, commenting that the "contribution of the latter was no less important" (Gunawardana 1995, 16). Palipana's work as an archaeologist and his nostalgic religious pilgrimages are therefore situated in this overarching, political context. In Sri Lanka, the government has opened archeological sites continuously to the public and these



have become popular areas of Buddhist pilgrimage. According to Steven Kemper, where the "looming presence of Anaradhapura and Polonnaruva justifies Sinhalese reoccupation of these core areas, less-known sacred places serve the same function in peripheral parts of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, especially areas that have a majority of Tamil inhabitants" (Kemper 145). Charting how maps of sacred sites and Buddhist monasteries have altered, Kemper notes the steadily increasing number of ancient places from a modest count below 100 in 1979 to 276 in 1981.

Not coincidentally, the final episode in Ondaatje's novel draws our attention to the process of renovating sacred sites, featuring the artisan Ananda's attempt to rebuild a giant statue of the Buddha. According to the Pali canon, Ananda was the Buddha's constant attendant; after the latter's death, Ananda recited the entire Sutra Pitaka from memory. In a similarly elegiac gesture, Ondaatje's Ananda labours to restore a statue whose face has been broken into more than "one hundred chips and splinters of stone" (303). Although Ananda completes the statue and participates in the Buddhist tradition of the ritual of the eyes, the wounded statue of the Buddha, whose "eyes would always look north," (306) serves as a haunting reminder of the outcome of the bloody conflicts in the northern provinces. These conflicts among the Buddhist Sinhalese-dominated government, the anti-government factions, including the JVP, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have all but shattered the ideals of Buddhism. Read in the context of the ongoing historical connection between Buddhism and the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, *Anil's Ghost* does not promote a transcendent, unified vision of Buddhism free from the fetters of politics. Moreover, in a country, where symbols of temporal and racial unity and fragmentation are historically embedded and politically charged, it is significant that, as Ondaatje's narrator explains, "up close the [sculpture of the newly restored Buddha's] face looked quilted" (302). Rather than "homogenize the stone" and "blend the face into a unit," Ananda decides to "leave it as it was" (302). The novel thus registers a shift from the unifying and protecting image of the thread of the *pirit* ceremony to the image of quilting, a form of stitching that likewise unifies yet, at the same time, acknowledges separation and difference. In portraying Buddhism, Ondaatje gestures toward the ideals of transcendence, wholeness, and unity. Ultimately, these are ideals that Ananda, one of the country's finest artisans, and Ondaatje refuses to re-inscribe. Instead, we are left pondering "the fields where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century" (300).

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