

Reading Ondaatje's Poetry

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**Abstract:** Eluned Summers-Bremner pursues in her paper "Reading Ondaatje's Poetry" a psychoanalytic reading of Ondaatje's poetry based on Lacan's thought, highlighting occasions where nature and culture meet. Focusing on the volumes *Secular Love* and *The Man with Seven Toes*, Summers-Bremner explores how nature's troubled regions are navigated through the structural estrangement of looking for a name. In Lacanian terms, a proper name signals the contradiction of one's belonging to a biological or other kind of family, whence one's name often arises, and being a user or respondent of language, which produces meaning through its infringement or exceeding of its users' intentions, language being prototypically Other or alienating in this sense. Ondaatje's poetry engages nature continually, in a dynamically architectonic fashion, as a world at once embodied and infused with cultural and linguistic losses, a field of structural liminality whose correlatives are memory, love, and desire. The poetry's engagement of nature in the guise of a reading -- as of a letter, code, or name -- puts loss, as does psychoanalysis, in its proper context as the enabler which drives reading and writing subjectivity as a colloquy with these other terms.

## Eluned SUMMERS-BREMNER

### Reading Ondaatje's Poetry

In an interview with Sam Solecki in 1984, Michael Ondaatje responds to the interviewer's reference to his caginess in interviews, and to a question about whether this ever causes him regret, with the phrase: "Very few people want to talk about architecture" (Ondaatje qtd. in Solecki, "An Interview" 322). Ondaatje's desire to speak of architecture and change in the structure of the contemporary novel is timely. In the last few decades transnational displacement has made the novel -- always a kind of conversation with quotidian ways of inhabiting the world -- into a text that must imagine travel, if not in content, then in form, in order to speak to the contemporary. And not only physical travel, but the entire (post)modern architecture of displacement from familial, national and linguistic myths of belonging that Ondaatje's books chart so well, from *Billy the Kid* to *Running in the Family* to *Anil's Ghost*. But the engagement with home as a mode of travel runs throughout Ondaatje's poetry too, which, as numerous critics have observed (see Barbour; Glickman; Cooke) is dynamized by a dialogue with nature, with walking the border between the natural and the human in all its promising -- and, in the earlier work, sometimes horrifying -- imperspicuity. As architecture is a conversation with landscape, if not at the outset, then necessarily later as it succumbs to the force of wind and weather, so Ondaatje's poetics is, in my reading, a continual restaging of the mobility of dwelling; a sustained re-encounter with nature's -- and human nature's -- strangeness. As part of this endeavor, much of the poetry is also involved in what I call the "search for a name," exemplified perhaps by these lines from "Escarpment," the closing section of the volume *Secular Love*: "He loves too, as she knows, the body of rivers. Provide him with a river or a creek and he will walk along it. Will step off and sink to his waist, the sound of water and rock encasing him in solitude. The noise around them insists on silence if they are more than five feet apart. It is only later when they sit in a pool legs against each other that they can talk, their conversation roaming to include relatives, books, best friends, the history of Lewis and Clark, fragments of the past which they piece together. But otherwise this river's noise encases them and now he walks alone with its spirits, the clack and splash, the twig break, hearing only an individual noise if it occurs less than an arm's length away. He is looking, now, for a name" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 125-26).

The speaker seeks "not a name on a map," not something already laid down, but "something temporary for their vocabulary. A code" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 126) or a mnemonic, as Leslie Mundwiler, invoking Frances Yates, describes the creative ambulation of Ondaatje's work: "where the poems give a sense of place, the place is often a frame or architectonic background for image or images which are active, vivid, sensual" (Yates qtd. in Mundwiler 52), images which escape their frame, calling the retrospective understanding of architecture -- a building as structure, something stable -- into question. The search for a name here is akin to the way a building bears the traces of its dialogue with its surroundings, in its lonesome nighttime creaks, its winter dreamings. A fire in the hearth is nature become culture, the unknowable flame now a comfort, protection. And fire in the hearth is a homeopathy of weather: the variables of a state of atmosphere "with respect to heat or cold, presence or absence of rain" ( *OED* ) reduced, broken in. A house is made from a violent dialogue with nature that is then forgotten, rendered tame, but which in the night can also, disturbingly, reawaken: "He lies in bed, awake, holding her left forearm. It is 4 a.m... Through the window he can hear the creek -- which has no name" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 125).

The function of the name in the above extract is performative and suitably momentary. The speaker "slips under the fallen tree holding the cedar root the way he holds [his lover's] forearm," hanging for a moment before "being pulled by water going down river. He holds it the same way and for the same reasons. Heart creek... Arm river... he writes, he mutters to her in the darkness" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 126). The river is a moving body like and unlike the body of the beloved. *Secular Love* closes with the lines: "He has gone far enough to look for a bridge and has not found it. Turns upriver. He holds onto the cedar root the way he holds her forearm" (Ondaatje, *Secular*

Love 126). The name is a bridge the speaker cannot find on which his love might walk: something allowing nature to converse with human nature, as a man to cross a flowing river; the name for what's common to yielding to the river and the 4 a.m. waking holding his lover's forearm - both of them somehow necessary and both of them unknown. Yet the name eludes: "Sun lays its crossword, litters itself, along the whole turning length of this river so he can step into heat or shadow" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 126). The sun has human qualities, an excess of ambition or production (it litters itself, overproduces), makes the river a conversation, like a house is, with the weather: a place in which to step for winter warmth or summer shadow. But its form is a crossword - try to capture or use or subdue it, it's gone. It's more like a game or a puzzle one is engaged in. Nature at the volume's close is like the father figure at the volume's opening, who also speaks with rivers: "Tentatively / he recalls / his drunk invitation to the river. / He has steered the awesome car / past sugarbush to the blue night water / and steps out / speaking to branches / and the gulp of toads. / Subtle applause of animals" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 16).

The father startles up, too, at 4 a.m., as "the invited river flows through the house" and "he awakens and moves within it": "He wishes to swim / to each of his family and gaze / at their underwater dreaming / ... / Wife, son, household guests, all / comfortable in clean river water" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 18). *Secular Love* is poetry of travel, as love is both a labor (a travail) and a journey that begins in the family. Secularity is mortal, this-worldly, as love is, yet love is also the closest we get, while living, to expansive dissolution. The two work against each other. In staging a physical conversation with the river - and in other poems in the book, with travel, departures, and memory - the volume explores what is tangible yet at the same uncontainable of love, as of family, what escapes the stories we tell of each, that which we recall and, in doing so, remember losing ("When you can move through a house blindfolded it belongs to you"; "Things we clung to / stay on the horizon / and we become the loon / on his journey / a lone tropical taxi / to confused depth and privacy" [Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 87, 102]). As psychoanalyst Serge Leclaire, following Freud, reminds us, "consciousness and memory are mutually exclusive" (Leclaire 76). Machines -- like computers -- have been modeled on the belief that memory is "at the same time the inscription of traces and the capacity to summon them" (Leclaire 76), but this is inaccurate, the property rather of an Enlightenment dream. Properly speaking, memory is the name for the lostness of the past, its continued habitation of our lives beyond our knowing. What we are accustomed to call memory is a *trace*: an inscription "hardened... into the mute... nature of the screen, erected ... like a limit" between the one who thinks back now and the past, whose life flows on in its underwater world (Leclaire 77). One's history remains beneath and beyond and is protected by the memories that come to mind, as is human and natural life by the surface of water. Freud called these surface regulators or transmitting stations "screen memories," because their function, as Ondaatje here shows, is to live as screen: they mask and reveal, as the past continues to underwrite the present, and as direct access to this night-time writing is denied (Freud 1995). Of course, the denial of direct access is what makes us able to make use of memory and dreaming, in allowing them to make creative use of us. Thus the father in his "drunk state wants the mesh of place," physical artifacts ("glass plants, iron parrots/ ... tarpaulins of Himalaya" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 15)), all man-made things that summon the unreachable by man; un-homely elements to strain and hold, protect and enable, as alcohol does, and memory: "from now on I will drink only landscapes/ - here, pour me a cup of Spain" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 15). And just as we cannot truly know memory, to our gain, so we can never truly know our parents or their original desires for us, that are somehow encoded in the choosing of our names. The need to figure out a screen version, though, is signaled by what Jacques Lacan calls the (big) Other, referring to our arrival in an alien country -- that of the world -- that must be second-guessed ("Why am I here?" "What do they (parents, teachers, lovers) want from me?" and so on), and partly elaborated by our responses to our names. As Linda Hutcheon observes, writing of her own nominal alteration in its Canadian contexts, the changing of a name can have a bridging or enabling function but is at the same time an encrypting: to assert belonging via a new name defamiliarizes the old one, reminding us of its strangeness, its prior life, a buried history of enculturation.

A father, unlike a mother, is knowable or unknowable not as body but as name: a figure for the secondary home or encryption that is language. A mother bears a child but a father's claim lies in his word; in language (or in that of scientific tests, somewhat behind the working truth of things as usual). Thus the code of belonging that is the father's name is of a different order from that of the child housed in its mother's belly. What kind of home is the name of a father? "He wishes to swim/ to each of his family" yet "stands waiting, the sentinel,/ shambling back and forth" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 18-19). Perhaps a father is this wish to comfort and communicate unmade, the miss lived out between a person and his name, the unhappy performance of division - someone has to do it, as the saying goes. In Lacanian terms a father is a name for the performance of division worked by language, and law, an act curiously lacking in substance that must, as a result, be perpetually redone. For what does it mean to be "on the side of law" if not to be repeatedly called to make a judgment? The father in the earlier "Letter & Other Worlds" sends letters to his family that communicate this missing substance, a miscommunication or a time lag as address: "His letters were a room he seldom lived in / In them the logic of his love could grow / ... / He hid where he had been that we might lose him / His letters were a room his body scared / ... / With the clarity of architects / he would write of the row of blue flowers / his new wife had planted, / the plans for electricity in the house, / .../ his heart widening and widening and widening" (Ondaatje, *Rat Jelly* 44, 46) until he falls into "his own privacy," a "terrible acute hatred," "the empty reservoir of bones" of his death which brooks no metaphor beyond the fall, "a new equilibrium" that no one can measure and that language cannot say (Ondaatje, *Rat Jelly* 46, 44). In *Secular Love* the father's drunken river dialogue, like that of the speaker's 4 a.m. holding of the beloved's forearm and the river-searching for a bridge and code, "something temporary," are attempts to navigate the mystery that is the father's name, to discover what knits nature to culture, kin to kin, and what escapes this exploratory labor (like the sun, the river and the loved one, herself elsewhere naming), what might capture and free it at once.

A code has two languages, but each one cancels out the other, just as memory is incompatible with the memory screen, dream knowledge with waking, and the father of "Letters" with the room the letters are (one "he seldom lived in," always running instead from his body's "town of fear" (Ondaatje, *Rat Jelly* 44)). And yet a code as a method of communication conveys at least three things: the surface message (say, a name), the encoded or secret message (the name's meaning which we guess at; in the case of our own names, all our lives), and the reason for sending a secret message from one to another at all. The reason might be love, or deceit, or war, or all of these, and cannot always be discovered: the context is implicit but not always clear from our reading of the code, the hidden message. All we can do is try to figure it, the crossword of sun on river, the unavoidable estrangement humans make of nature. In his reading of language as social code, Lacan called the proper name a "trait" (Lacan qtd. in Nobus 99). A subject's identification with her or his name is a reading as attempted uncoding of the place kept for the subject, augured by the subject's name, in the *socius*, a place that is perpetually moving. Our responses to our names -- signs of the mystery of a desire which precedes us -- are thus belated attempts to guess the reason for our sending. Lacan's view of human existence as the living out of such estranging codes augurs no unwarranted intrusions into the coded worlds so aptly limned by Ondaatje's resonant poetry. The unconscious makes proper names fail (Julien 132), yet poetry, arising from the mobile interface of body and language, sense and feeling, can bring us closer to its truth. "Grammatical language and images merely produce the illusion of a consistent universe. But the unconscious disrupts these illusions, by dissociating meaning that only seems full from our pretences that it functions smoothly" (Ragland-Sullivan 69). Thus while "the human tendency is to try to explain what *is* by things from the outside or by impersonal innate tendencies, rather than by deficiencies and dissymmetries in being and knowing" (Ragland-Sullivan 69), this is a retrospectively anxious endeavor (Solecki describes Ondaatje's poetry similarly, where "what is at issue," he claims, "is the existence not of an alternate reality but of different perceptions of one which the reader has always assumed to be clear, patterned, meaningful" (Solecki, "Nets and Chaos" 93). The speaker at the close of *Secular Love* wants "not a name for a map - he knows the arguments of imperialism" which tells us such names have all been used to other ends before, but "a name for them,"

for what the lovers are doing, something to both hold and keep the present from itself, and from its fading before the future (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 126). But this name will not reveal itself, except in so far as the looking for it makes the river walking and the river writing a special kind of doing, a working code for something, maybe love: "Heart Creek? Arm River? he writes, he mutters to her in the darkness ... He holds onto the cedar root the way he holds her forearm" (Ondaatje, *Secular Love* 126).

This formally careful yet topically uncertain quality, a waltz with transience - the eventual fate of communicative efforts -- can be seen in Ondaatje's earlier poetry also, although there it is more tortured, violent, and the search for a name, a code in which to record experience, makes the natural world decidedly un-homely (as in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and many of the poems in *The Dainty Monsters* [Ondaatje, *Collected, Dainty*]). Solecki reads *The Man with Seven Toes*, for instance, as inaugurating a performative mode of reading where the reader is in the state of the woman traveling harrowingly through the desert, plagued by ravenous beasts, the words on the page our culture to her nature: "Ondaatje's structuring ... increase[s] the number of narrative possibilities that each lyric creates, to the point that the reader simply does not know what to expect from poem to poem" (Solecki, "Point Blank" 14). The second poem's opening: "Entered the clearing and they turned / faces scarred with decoration / feather, bones, paint from clay / pasted, skewered to their skin" (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 11), Solecki reads as creating "a sense of immediacy" via the ellipsis of the subject in the opening line, which puts us, with "shocking directness," in the space of the action itself (Solecki, "Point Blank" 141). The "exotic" images take this further, the "cumulative effect" being to "indicate the disorientation of the woman and to achieve that of the reader" (Solecki, "Point Blank" 141). But there is a slippage in this reading that is not there so clearly, as I see it, in the writing. Solecki earlier states that Ondaatje's removing the story of a woman, based on the historical figure of Mrs Eliza Fraser, shipwrecked off the Queensland coast of Australia in 1836, and captured by aborigines, from its original context to "an unspecified time and place" has the "overall effect" of "focus[ing] attention on the story's essential content, the effect upon an individual of her confrontation with a totally alien landscape and mode of being" (Solecki, "Nets and Chaos" 138). Yet the poems in *man* themselves render little that might be called essential or timeless content, confronting us with a violence of explosively physical details that assert the intricate commonality (not the total alienness) of woman, land, and imagined journey or poetic going. The woman's rape by the aborigines is inseparable from their slaughter and eating of animals, "shocked into death .../ alive/ alive ... in their mouths" (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 16) where death and life are horribly -- for her -- intertwined, as her later violation by her white convict rescuer (Potter) repeats: "evening. Sky was a wrecked black boot / a white world spilling through. / Noise like electricity in the leaves. / ... cock like an ostrich, mouth / a salamander / thrashing in my throat. / Above us, birds peeing from the branches" (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 32).

An early reviewer presages Solecki's wishful displacement from the equation woman as land to man as conflict-with-the-land that makes the woman's body the means of the shift and exploration. For this reader the poem "represent[s] a loss of the conscious self and a descent into the feared subconscious [sic] ... But Mrs X [the name designating Mrs Fraser within the poem] is only exhausted, drained, sunburned. The man, already prison-branded and tattooed, loses three of his toes and gets his mouth badly cut (both castration analogies within the poem)" (Lane 154). If only -- and perhaps this is felt particularly acutely by the female reader - it were so simple. Castration in Lacanian terms is "an effect of language on living beings" (Soler 53), the fraught imbrication of nature and culture that nourishes the European worldview. It is not something that is only experienced by a man. It refers, rather, to our being born prematurely, ahead of our ability to use (or be used by) language, which afterwards leaves us wondering what we lost, and anxious as to the price that was - and will be - paid for linguistic competence. This means that nature, and the maternal body with which it is contiguous, is nostalgically idealized or viewed with and as a bitter enmity (Tennyson's "red in tooth and claw"); we can only view nature through linguistically enabled and disabled lenses. As George Bowering observes, Ondaatje's early poetry explores this paradox: "Deep in the fields / behind stiff dirt fern / nature breeds the unnatural" (Ondaatje, *Dainty* 21, qtd.



in Bowering 65) where a determined poetics goes in search of the un-homely, and where what is found troubles the status of poetic endeavor (see Bowering; Solecki "Nets and Chaos"). Yet the journey into the nightmare of wilderness and society figured in *The Man with Seven Toes* resists being read (as Lane reads it) as a parable about the dark night or troubled sleep of civilization. As Solecki notes, its closing in subjunctive mood is unsettling rather than reassuring for the reader: "God bring you all some tender stories/ and keep you all from hurt and harm" (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 42; Solecki, "Nets and Chaos" 147), the lullaby evoking a woman's - or a mother's - voice, that voice which we have just witnessed being horrifyingly turned inside out ("She was too tired even to call"; "to lock her head between knees/ ... drink her throat sweat, like coconut" (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 9, 35)). In this sense there is no consoling or authoritative framework apart from the one we make and find unmade as we are reading. But the sequence equally resists being read as a tale about nature's violent life, a primitivism pure and simple. The "train" is a "low bird" from the outset (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 9) and Mrs X's red dress both is and is not a desert flower. "Stripped off like a husk" it is thrown back a "dress," and Potter's eyes later "stammer" -- a word for a bodily struggle with language -- at its "sudden colour" (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 12, 18). What neither critic notes is the way the poetic rendition of the story is another violence in which the reader, and the critic, cannot help but be engaged. The woman makes the journey, and becomes the journey, her ravaged body the sign that makes the land a work in progress, an instance of the war of colonization. Words are swallowed as if live in the reader's throat as the subject/object distinction which ordinarily sustains readerly distance is annulled ("like to you a knife down their pit, a hand in the warm/ the hot the dark boiling belly and rip" (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 16); so the rape and feasting devour subjective borders for Mrs X. On the penultimate page she, rescued, becomes the parchment of a map or page of living, brutal history: "She slept in the heart of the Royal Hotel / ... / She moved fingers onto the rough skin, / ... / sensing herself like a map, then / lowering her hands into her body" (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 41). But this communion allows no safety; it is the scene of nature in its war with culture, animal with machine, the violence of a remorseless contest of which the woman as map, the poem's mapping of her, is a trace. Her trait -- the living out of the message encoded by her name (Mrs X) -- is that of being caught in this crossfire: "In the morning she found pieces of a bird / chopped and scattered by the fan / blood sprayed onto the mosquito net, / its body leaving paths on the walls / like red snails that drifted down in lumps. // She could imagine the feathers / while she had slept / falling around her / like slow rain" (Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* 41).

As I propose above, Ondaatje uses architecture as a figure for work in progress and as attempt to accidentalize his questioner's intrusions. The journey from *The Man with Seven Toes* to *Handwriting* does seem to have taken us from the general of a nameless woman in the desert, ravaged by beasts, and the insistent strangeness of the early poetry (a kind of anti-domestication), to the particular of a war-torn Sri Lankan history, albeit one made available through the journeys and shifting confines of ancient myth. *Handwriting* seems to map a new kind of agreement between the discovery and perception of the natural world and poetic language, which now appears more openly as a search for working code with which to value transience, and thus history, the performative contours of a particular name. This journey homeward that is aware of its enabling divisions is given a more expansive treatment in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. In the novel *Anil*, the protagonist, enacts a homelessness we recognize, the world citizen's payoff: she lives for her work which involves traveling historically as well as geographically into the contested country of the past, which yields some unconsoling truths about belonging. Anil must investigate the corpses of the politically murdered of Sri Lanka, her native country, from which she has sought exile, and to which she returns. Her chosen homelessness is precisely rendered through the imagery of the un-homely places where she works and stays, as in the independence that is fought for and grudgingly conferred by her brother's second name: "In her present house in Colombo there was a small pool cut into the floor for floating flowers. It was a luxury to her. Something to confuse a thief in the dark. At night, returning from work, Anil would slip out of her sandals and stand in the shallow water, her toes among the white petals, her arms folded as she undressed the

day, removing layers of events and incidents so they would no longer be within her. She would stand there for a while, then walk wet-footed to bed" (Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* 67). Similarly, in "House on a Red Cliff" in *Handwriting*: "The flamboyant a grandfather planted / having lived through fire / lifts itself over the roof / unframed / the house an open net / where the night concentrates / on a breath / on a step / a thing or gesture / we cannot be attached to" (Ondaatje, *Handwriting* 67).

An echo of the earlier turn to a dreamlike resolution, in *Secular Love*, from a poetry earlier still obsessed with woundings and violent cartographies as a mode of action, this later poetry reminds me of Lacan's turn, late in his teaching life, to James Joyce, as a means of engagement with whose work he undid all his former theories in the elaboration of symptom - the suffering imposed by language - as *sinthome*, a kind of writerly labor of self-redemption (Lacan 1976-77; see also Tillet 37; Thurston; Rabaté 154-82). *Sinthome* also has the meaning, in my reading, of an opening of the house of subjectivity to its original conditions, its contract with weather, land, history, air, what Susana Tillet calls "a definitive suspension" of motivating or protective questions (Tillet 37). A symptom can be earlier read, in Lacan, as the form of each individual's pact with language -- the price paid in the body for the divisive yet necessary converse enabled by the father's name -- and in Ondaatje's earlier work this division is projected outward, alienating man via woman, animals and land. Yet in the later work alienation is brought inward, paradoxically once again by means of movement through a landscape, but now a landscape whose mythology is not so clearly violated, appropriated or disowned. It seems to be given its own space, rather. Writing, for the late Lacan, is a way of making and remaking a home in language, a riddling that does not deny the enjoyment of the sin or fall -- or love for crafting language -- that keeps us from feeling quite at home, keeps us at odds with our nature. And Ondaatje has remarked in interview, on the relation between an author and the material of his work, his characters: "A lot of my own world gets into their stories. It's probably a major illness" (Ondaatje qtd. in Freedman 1; Ondaatje qtd. in Bök 114). Lacan's central insight was that what we call linguistic health - for example, ease of communication -- is bought at the price of other freedoms which speak as symptoms via the unique knotting of each language user's being in and through the demands of the *socius*. Each individual pays, uniquely, for the privilege of estrangement that sustains a common language. In the late Lacan of the *sinthome*, naming becomes a creative working with the knots and holes of our real treaty with this field, the particular configuration of our suffering and enjoyment in its going (see Rabaté 181). Read against the earlier work *Handwriting* seems notable for not reading as the articulation of a trick, a joke, the record of an outlaw or a monster, however self-stylised, but simply doing what it says: returning language to pen to body, tracing the intimate converse of past and present that travels through the word, the page, the hand: "Last ink in the pen. / My body on this hard bed. / The moment in the heart / where I roam restless, searching" (Ondaatje, *Handwriting* 74).

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