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Ondaatje's Aesthetics of Efficiency: Modernity, Time, and the Body in the Early Ontario Poems

by Carl Watts

Although Michael Ondaatje's work has been the subject of criticism addressing issues as disparate as the artist, the male gaze, and transnational identities, his earliest poems occupy a curiously anomalous position. Criticism on his first volume of poetry, *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), seems content to express bafflement at some enigmatic, detached quality permeating the author's work. While some have offered insightful examinations of the "Troy Town" sequence comprising the second half of the collection,[1] critics focussing on its first half settle for discussing the poems' "spectral uneasiness" (Bowering 65), "absence of shock" (Scobie 48), or "exploitation of reality" (Marshall 84). Such observations make little headway in deciphering the volume's repeated references to the highways of Southern Ontario and other oddly empty locations, be they the "silent roads" of Toronto's suburbs ("The Respect of Landscapes" 8) or the sterile interiors of houses where "air even is remade in the basement" ("The Republic" 4). Later studies, meanwhile, include some of these poems as part of arguments based largely on Ondaatje's later work. Sam Solecki (in *Ragas of Longing*) and Annick Hillger, for example, find in the early poetry seeds of overarching themes such as the autonomy of the artist or the movement beyond modern subjectivity, respectively. I want to suggest, however, that a closer look at the early poems themselves presents a rather different picture. Far from existing as unexplainable curios or precursors to an aesthetics that either turns inward to the perceptual or works toward a transcendence of modern identity, I contend that they present an intertwined subjectivity and sense of place defined by a set of components—technology, infrastructure, and accompanying values of efficiency—that are central to conceptions of North American modernity. While this unique aesthetics marks these early poems as a distinct stage in Ondaatje's development as a writer, it also offers a dangerous reconceptualization of place that subordinates Ontario's alternate histories, presents, and identities to a dominant condition of Western modernity.

Solecki's and Hillger's wider arguments about Ondaatje's poetry are valuable, but the critical constructions they erect seem to have their foundations in later poetry that retains little of the anomalousness of *The Dainty Monsters*. Solecki refines his earlier observation that Ondaatje is "a poet of reality" ("Nets" 93), for example, by emphasizing the early poems' concern with the aestheticism that would saturate much of the author's later work. He argues that Ondaatje's earliest writing questions the extent to which poetry "can recreate unproblematically any aspect of reality or reenact any experience" (*Ragas* 26), but stops at regarding such aestheticism as giving "priority to beauty over truth" and, consequently, functioning as "amoral" (16, 17). This argument rings true for much of Ondaatje's writing, but it does not seem to do justice to the bleak descriptions of highways and houses that are scattered across the writer's early, identifiably Ontarian landscapes. I would argue that, read in conjunction with the poems' emphasis on a totalizing efficiency within a modern infrastructure and economy, Solecki's amorality is closer to an irresponsibility woven into the very fabric of Ondaatje's aesthetics.

Similarly, Hillger states that these poems represent the artist as "someone who alerts us to the world of the senses" (26), ultimately arguing that Ondaatje's writing "echo[es], and yet silenc[es], myths of identity" (91). Hillger understands modernity as a "secularized universe" (22) in which subjectivity is split between subject and object and needs to be centred by embarking on a personal—or, by extension, national—"quest for identity" (16). She makes the larger point that Ondaatje's poetry represents a process of "acknowledging, and yet transcending, the limits of self-reflection" that accompany this quest for identity (21), but in so doing neglects the curiously *celebratory* element permeating the poems' suppression of memory and emotion in favour of bodily experience. Further, many of the early poems' key elements—landscapes that are named and located by transportation networks, for example, and repeated references to everyday life in a secular, capitalist North American setting—constitute that same condition of modernity Hillger claims Ondaatje's work transcends. Rather than moving beyond identity, in other words, I argue that the early poems depict a subjectivity that is dependent upon those very components of the modern world Hillger sees Ondaatje as having left behind.

Lee Spinks gets closer to theorizing the early poems' odd spareness and hollow references to landscape, and while his observations too seem based on Ondaatje's later work, they nevertheless provide an important tool for understanding the way perception, modernity, and efficiency become linked in the poems. Spinks affirms Solecki's description of amorality by

identifying Ondaatje's "ability to extend perception beyond its human location" in a way that is not necessarily progressive, or "in the service of a utopian politics" (19); in light of the early poems' connection of perception to twentieth-century infrastructure and economic practices, however, this extension is in fact closer to a narrowing—or, in Hillger's terms, a locating of subjectivity in modernity itself. These related phenomena in turn resonate with Eva Mackey's investigation of "unmarked and yet normative categories" such as "Western modernity" or the subjectivities of "'mainstream' or simply '*Canadian*-Canadians'" (3, emphasis in original). Mackey argues—with reference to Southern Ontario—that conceptions of Canadian multiculturalism's plurality often involve the "add[ing] up" of supposedly anterior forms of tradition into "the bounded and identifiable core culture of the nation" (151). Members of this "core culture" see themselves as having moved beyond ethnicity and as sharing "customs, beliefs, practices, morals and values" that are "normative and universal" and which they use "to place themselves in the centre of modernity" (157). If Ondaatje's early poems alter perception to aestheticize a singular, present experience over any notion of memory or tradition, what then remains? I would suggest that "Western" and "modern" remain, and that these poems centre their speakers in these "unmarked" material and economic conditions of North American modernity as opposed to transcending Hillger's philosophical conception of a modernity defined by split subjectivity and a quest for wholeness. The poems' blank landscapes and detached narrations of experience indicate not a transcendence of tradition, history, or identity, but rather the "adding up" of these things into a condition defined by technology, a highly developed infrastructure, and automobile-based patterns of migration aligned with the time of the clock. Mackey states that such "mainstream" subjects associate their condition with notions of "rationality, efficiency, equality and economic progress" (160); in Ondaatje's snapshots of movement between urban and suburban settlements, however, it is the second of these terms—an overarching efficiency in the form and content of the poems—that functions as shorthand for Mackey's emptily modern subjectivity.

Such everyday efficiency may seem incompatible with poetry defined by its aestheticism, but Evelyn Cobley reminds us that the infiltration of modern culture by notions of efficiency and individuals' consequent internalization of its values (11) is what resulted in the modernists' search for ever-sparer forms of writing (12). Regardless of whether one agrees with Barbour's contention that Ondaatje's early poems are the work of "a modernist lyricist" (*Ondaatje* 6), compact language and a preoccupation with

swift transportation mark *The Dainty Monsters* as both a description of modernity and an exercise in an aesthetic form that takes its cues from this phenomenon. Additionally, the automobiles in these poems represent a key component of the economy and infrastructure of twentieth-century North America as well as Fordism's role in compelling workers to "internalize the ideology of efficiency" (39). Cobley writes of supervisors at Ford plants influencing families to relocate, for instance, or insisting that "errant husbands break habits such as drinking whiskey and chasing women" (56). Such practices enabled more efficient production and, in turn, permitted the higher wages that allowed workers to participate in their industry as consumers (55-56). Further, owners legitimized this process as a means of helping errant citizens and "confused immigrants" (56) integrate with the economic structures of industrial modernity. The automobiles in Ondaatje's poems thus carry within them the ideological roots of both industrial efficiency and Mackey's process of assimilating outsiders or newcomers into the core culture of the North American nation. Further, Cobley's argument that efficiency transformed "from an *instrumental* function (or means) to an *ideological* investment (or end in itself)" (20, emphasis in original) goes some way in explaining the movements and actions that seem unattached to goals or outcomes in many of these early poems.

It is in this context that Ondaatje "alerts us to the world of the senses" (Hillger 26), acknowledging the centrality of the human body and its experience to his world of automobiles and amoral aesthetics. Much of Ondaatje's work is preoccupied with sexuality and sensuality, but Terry Eagleton has linked the more body-centric variations on such topics to the diminishing political energies that followed the late 1960s' initial "extension of radical politics into regions it had lamentably neglected" (129). He describes the consequent "increased concern with the body" (129) as "a desperate displacement" (130) of radical politics, and a similar dynamic is at play in Ondaatje's privileging of the body as a site for pure experience. Fredric Jameson identifies a related process, linking more recent obsessions with writing the body to the "alarming shrinkage of existential time" (647) resulting from a late-capitalist world infatuated with high-speed movement and communications. Though Jameson describes a period after Ondaatje's 1960s, *The Dainty Monsters* nevertheless contains an embryonic version of this dynamic in its repeated references to the highways that stood as the pinnacle of speed and efficiency in the automobile-centric North America of the mid-twentieth century. Further, Jameson's conception accounts for Hillger's assertion that Ondaatje's writing casts myths of

identity as outmoded; for if all a person has left is his or her "unique present" (649), Jameson goes on, "it follows that you also have nothing left but your own body" (651).

It is for this reason that recent critics such as Hillger and Spinks are willing to recognize the primacy of experience in Ondaatje's early poems without calling attention to these works' commitment to an ideology of efficiency that locates its subjects at the core of a technological and economic modernity—the empty modernity that Mackey uses to unpack the identity of "mainstream" Ontarians. Accordingly, I argue that Ondaatje's poetic spareness and recurring references to Ontario, transportation, bodies and scars suggest not a transcendence of modernity or its accompanying identities, but rather an aesthetics of efficiency that locates the Ontarian in—and maps Ontario as—the centre of an unmarked North American modernity. Though it provides a uniquely affecting style (as evidenced by the early criticism's praise and puzzlement), this aesthetics gathers other experiences and identities within its conception of modernity, in turn subordinating alternate histories and modes of being to the narrative of modernity that steadily gains ground in the first half of *The Dainty Monsters*. That same barely-graspable quality of detachment, of hollowness, that captivated early critics therefore emerges as something of a universalizing strategy, rising up from the often-brief poems to draw attention to their hegemonic conception of a modern Ontarian existence. This emerging aesthetics first pits modern conveniences against nature (in "The Republic," "Early Morning, Kingston to Gananoque," and "The Diverse Causes"); internalizes movement and efficiency in the body (in "Signature"); eventually expands to characterize a growing network of human settlements (in "Application for a Driving Licence" and "A Toronto Home for Birds and Manticores"); and, in the final poems of the section (including "Eventually the Poem for Keewaydin," "The Time Around Scars," and "The Respect of Landscapes"), expands its field to include ever larger cultural formations in its purview. The complex subjectivity that has taken shape by this point establishes these poems as part of a distinct, if dangerously flawed, phase of Ondaatje's evolution.

"The Republic" is the collection's first description of the accoutrements of modern life existing in a realm that is separate from the creatures inhabiting the collection's more animal-centric poems. The poem depicts a modern house ("exact, / coil[ing] with efficiency and style" [1-2]) in opposition to the behaviour of the house's plants, which "lust with common daisies" and "fling their noble bodies" (14, 16) as their owners sleep. Solecki reads this latter "Dionysian world of primal vitality" as a constantly present

alternative to the world of scheduled time, stating that the poem's final couplet ("At dawn gardenias revitalize / and meet the morning with decorum" [19-20]) confirms the lack of formal closure in its negotiation of the two worlds (*Ragas* 27). The clock, however, and its position in the phrasing and lineation of the poem, upsets this ambivalence. For while the plants' eruptions in the third stanza embellish themselves with descriptive phrases that either intrude upon the clauses without intervening punctuation ("the plants in frenzy heave floors apart" [13]) or occupy lines of their own ("lust with common daisies, / feel rain" [14-15]), the clock's appearance reinserts the stricter regimen of punctuation that makes the poem's opening description of the efficiency of the twentieth-century household: "The clock alone, frigid and superior, / swaggers in the hall" (17-18). The demarcation of time into waking and rest not only regulates the appearances of the upper and lower worlds, but also establishes the tighter, more prosaic lineation that concludes the poem. With the appearance of the clock, the Dionysian is revealed to be at the mercy of scheduled time, the "revitaliz[ation]" (19) of the final couplet controlled by this adherence to the clock. After the exotic beasts of the opening poems and the nighttime dancing of the plants in "The Republic," the clock, "frigid and superior," arrives to foreground the incorporation of the fantastic and the unconscious into the rhythms of domestic life. The Dionysian is converted into "decorum" (20), and what remains at the end of "The Republic" is the regulation of that world by the timepiece that has been set to keep watch as its owners sleep.

After this irruption of the rigor of the clock, "Early Morning, Kingston to Gananoque" locates the main components of Ondaatje's aesthetics of efficiency in Ontario. The poem provides a compact description of a trip by highway between the two Southeastern Ontarian destinations; with its disorienting portrayal of cows and the small wildlife that lingers along semi-rural stretches of Ontario's 400-series highways, however, it is also emblematic of the efficiency that gains ground as the defining quality for the poems' speakers and region. Opening with a measurement of space, the poem describes the recent destruction of an already unspectacular landscape of "tangled dust blue grass / burned, and smelling burned" (2-3). Its prepositions indicate a privileging of movement over any static positioning: the grass "along the highway" (4) and the "Escaping cows" (9) "along the median" (11) signify the linear movement from which the speaker views the shaped landscape and to which domesticated animals must adhere. Indeed, movement in an automobile determines the speaker's entire field of perception. What is known is positioned "along" the high-

way, and what is not is cast either as irrelevant or marked by a collision of nature and technology that is restricted to a hypothetical future and therefore not within the experience of the modern subject: "Deep in the fields" (6) "nature breeds the unnatural" (8); "Somewhere in those fields / they are shaping new kinds of women" (15-16). The highway is known, and beyond it exists only the prospect of technology's future manipulation of the forms of life lining the networks of transportation that connect cities to towns. Here, any kind of leisurely interaction with nature is out of the question: that first stretch along the highway is "land too harsh for picnics" (5).

The poem's verbs also reinforce the importance of movement and organize the speaker's interpretation of the landscape according to travel on major highways. The only grammatical constructions resembling the past tense are participial adjectives associated with dying plant life or animal prey: "tangled dust blue grass" (2), "blistered groundhogs," and "stripped snakes" (14). Verbs in the present continuous tense, meanwhile, signify a coming into being that throws agrarian life and technological efficiency into contact (grass "smelling burned" [3], cows attempting escape along a median "forming out of mist" [11]), a process that culminates in the poem's final "shaping of new women" (17). All other verbs are in the simple present tense, which reinforces the speaker's constant forward movement without placing the objects of his vision in any specific timeframe: "nature breeds the unnatural" (8) and cows "canter white / then black and white" (9-10). This mode of perception does not remark upon the unknown, and it organizes its visual impression of the cows based on the movement of the automobile. The only verb that emphasizes a conceptual valence as much as continuous movement comes with the crows, which, after eating, appear in the infinitive: "to arch behind a shield of sun" (15), having consumed and moved on. The preposition "behind" returns at this point, firmly situating non-human life and natural cycles of time outside the linear perception organizing the speaker's observations. Fittingly, the next line places the shaping of new women—that agonizingly oblique reference—"Somewhere in those fields" (16). Perception is here narrowed to exclude what mysteries remain in the ongoing collision of natural and unnatural, human and non-human. Crucially, the Ontarian landscape is reduced to a blank field for this subjectivity; not in the sense of a new land, but rather a plane upon which the contrivances of modern life can be inserted and located. Indeed, the morning drive itself takes place along a stretch of the Windsor-Quebec City corridor—a name referring not to landscape or history as much as to a high-volume transportation network linking urban centres.

The following poem, "The Diverse Causes," returns to a modern home ("a cell of civilised magic" [5]) and again depicts the incorporation of night's primal forces into the organizational rigor of daytime. Unlike "The Republic," however, this poem draws its initial contrast between life in the household and the environment outside its walls, where "a May god / moves his paws to alter wind / to scatter shadows of tree and cloud" (8-10). Its epigraph, a passage from Thomas Malory's "The Knight of the Cart" that refers to nature's ability to remind lovers of the kind deeds of their past, gestures toward nostalgia for the pastoral. Though Solecki questions the relevance of this context (*Ragas* 115), I would argue that the epigraph's Middle English rendition of a Romance tale points to a proliferation of layers of nostalgia and thereby puts any such remembrance into a perpetually outmoded, anterior zone. Ondaatje's poem builds on this cancellation of reminiscence, drawing attention to the items of domestic life and using verbs that are almost entirely in the present or present continuous tenses. The first exception, the window "shattered by winter hunters" (4), functions more as a participial adjective, the window continuing to exist as a signal of defiance of the forces outside. Elsewhere, there is another infinitive—"moths who have forgotten to waken" (17)—which casts the insects' deaths not as part of a natural process linked to the seasons, but rather as the result of a failed biological mechanism. Treating the moths as individual bodily units continues the collapsing of nature into the modern organizational principles. Further, the division into day and night here exists to cast such progress as inevitable: part of a "world not yet of men" (13). Just as the biological processes of wildlife fail in this environment, the permeating rationality of the indoor world becomes indistinguishable from the idiosyncrasies of individual human bodies: the speaker "turn[s] a page / careful not to break the rhythms / of your sleeping head on my hip" (20-22).

"Signature" continues this penetration of efficiency into more intimate spheres of human existence, exhibiting the growing primacy in these poems of what Jameson describes as "the valorization of the body and its experience as the only authentic form of materialism" (651). Detailing the speaker's nighttime trip to a hospital and the subsequent removal of his appendix, the poem flirts with an elegiac structure. It ultimately undercuts any strict interpretation as an elegy, however, by emphasizing the mundaneness of the procedure and the absurdity of mourning a non-vital organ ("Three floors down / my appendix / swims in a jar" [30-32]). Hillger states that the presence of a car in the poem emphasizes the jocularity of its elegiac qualities (38), but the automobile also tightens the links between body,

experience, and technology that are central to the speaker's identity. That same network of highways, here transporting the speaker in a contest with nature ("racing the obvious moon" [2]), again reinforces the importance of the efficiency of modern infrastructure, and the second stanza confirms the interpenetration of perception and corporeal experience in its use of organ imagery: "Difficult to make words sing / around your appendix" (4-5). Bodily elements also combine with notions of heritage, with the speaker declaring, "I was the first appendix in my family; / my brother who was given the stigma / of a rare blood type, / proved to have ulcers instead" (9-12). Technology is cast as maintaining this mixture of the corporeal and the conscious by supplementing whatever efficiency the body is not able to muster on its own. The poem invokes Gary Snyder to emphasize this heightened awareness of and existence alongside the natural, but foregrounds the replacement of recreational drug use or a commitment to deep ecology with the individual body's more fundamental internalization of efficiency. For while the speaker is described as "*high on poetry and mountains*" (29),[2] the phrase is italicized along with the *five* (18) that marks his succumbing to anaesthetization on the operating table.[3] This latter loss of consciousness, occurring as part of the events of the poem rather than the hallucination, takes precedence over whatever drug-induced expansion comes with a poetics that does not submit to the mutual reinforcement of the bodily and the modern.

The scar in "Signature" is a key image in this merging. Though both Hillger and Solecki refer to its lingering symbolic qualities—its closing of "the figurative wound that modernity has inflicted on the human body" (Hillger 40) or its "remov[ing] a character from ordinary time and bestow[ing] charisma on him and aura on the event" (Solecki, *Ragas* 18)—its function in the context of the fusion of efficiency, modernity, and the corporeal also emphasizes the *impermanence* of the effects of external phenomena on the body. Accordingly, the poem links the body with movement forward in time and uses the scar as an image of purely physical healing rather than of emotional or artistic resolution. Its form reflects this emphasis: the majority of its clauses and phrases appear either on separate lines ("The car carried him" [1]) or combined into short pairs without punctuation ("beating in the trees like a white bird" [3]). Three exceptions emerge, however: the first, "The rain fell like applause as I approached the hospital" (13), establishes nature as an ironic backdrop for the narrative of correcting the speaker's bodily ailment and depicts this process in the past tense. The second, "walks to my door, then past" (25), describes a hallucination in which a knight in plaster walks in the simple present tense. The

third, "O world, I shall be buried all over Ontario" (33), completes the poem's co-optation of nature at the expense of creating any harmony between the technologically enhanced human and the landscape. Most importantly, it uses the future tense to describe this extraction of organs and their distribution to different places in Ontario. These three passages measure forward movement by the removal of inefficient organs as a means of prolonging corporeal existence; the speaker sheds body parts until his dismembered essence has created his map of Ontario. Family history—or any history-based conception of place—is reduced to the reproduction of organs, and Ontario is the tradition-free graveyard of this process. Organs, after all, do not get tombstones.

Following several poems that take animals as their primary subject matter, "Application for a Driving Licence" appears as a strikingly brief tale of the misfortunes of non-human life in the highway-scarred landscapes of Ondaatje's Ontario. "Application," along with the following "A Toronto Home for Birds and Manticores," begins a process of spreading the aesthetics of efficiency throughout a growing network of human settlements that, as purely social and technological formations, supersede any conception of place that is built on landscape. Its very title indicates initiation into bureaucratic life, and its spartan five lines, in which "Two birds loved / in a flurry of red feathers / like a burst cottonball" (1-3) as the speaker runs them over, are premised on "nothing shock[ing]" (5) the driver. The poem's brevity reflects the tightly compacted dynamic of efficiency Cobley sees the automobile as signifying, and the bare articulation of the licensed driver's actions distills transportation, industrialization, bureaucracy, and personal efficiency into yet another utilitarian stamp on the landscape around Kingston or Gananoque. The solecism of the poem's final line ("I am a good driver, nothing shocks me" [5]) indicates the uneasy and incomplete connection between animal and human that exists when technological modernity determines this relationship. I agree with Solecki's assertion that this poem acknowledges the violence and suffering sometimes associated with artistic creation *(Ragas* 54), but its shocking spareness seems also to privilege a callously aestheticized being-in-the-present that co-opts all other life in its scope. The birds continue loving as part of a biological production of life, but they are subsumed by the driver's subjectivity and the infrastructural expansion that enables it.

"A Toronto Home for Birds and Manticores" continues this process of defining other forms of life in relation to transportation networks and settlements. This time it is Toronto ("This city with sun spreading down the street" [1]) that is likened to a form of nature—"a delicious herb" (2)—

undergoing incorporation into an aesthetics of modern experience. As with the loving birds, animals here are at once reduced to fossils ("When snows have melted / how dull to find just grass and dog shit" [3-4]) and co-opted into the speaker's aestheticization of the cycles of fashion governing urban life. The fantastic or grotesque elements of the earlier poems' animals are here reduced to hypothetical "polemic bones of centaurs" (5), which, along with the mythical beast of the title, are drafted into the poem's confirmation of an organic urban infrastructure that retains traces of the natural only as aesthetic touches—"animal fashions" (8)—incorporated into a capitalistic "survival of the fittest" (13). This ideology is in turn cast as part of a natural cycle (to be "establish[ed] once more" [12]) contained within the network of highways and cities that has become the landscape itself, and which has by this point absorbed the components and images of a mythical past into its all-encompassing present.

From here, Ondaatje's aesthetics moves outward to tackle larger constructions of culture and place. "Eventually the Poem for Keewaydin" comprises a large part of this shift; for while Solecki sees it as confirming a personal mythology that is "a profound, comprehensive, and original vision of reality" (*Ragas* 32) and Hillger reads it as "break[ing] the cycle of reading the Canadian landscape as an expression of the people's spirit" (110),[4] the poem also incorporates into Ondaatje's aesthetics the imbrication of nature and culture that is central to the cottage or summer camp. Written about the site of Ondaatje's teacher and early mentor Doug Jones's cottage (Jewinski 33), the poem takes a bizarre turn: beginning with an explanation of "seeing others write poems of the house and its cabins" (2), it ends with the intrusion of cars described as living beings, eating their way into the foliage with "chrome teeth moving among the path of the night" (17). Amid this collision of received images of nature and Ondaatje's characteristic focus on the automobile, "all this air and leaf / and mass of stars weave in the censoring lake / to become your own myth" (9-11). The lake here creates myth by censoring the other elements of the landscape; not only by distorting them in its reflection, but also by "Taking nature into our routine" (6), or reshaping landscape for a social purpose.

Taking into account the cars of the poem's final stanza as representatives of an aesthetics of efficiency emphasizes not so much the silencing of the tradition of landscape writing as Ondaatje's *transformation* of that tradition by throwing it into contact with—and subordinating it to—the modern social functions of the site of Keewaydin. The lines of the first two stanzas sprawl across the page with little punctuation, while the third is regulated to a far greater extent. When the cars enter the scene "with their

white eyes" (13) they clear "their circle of space" (14), and immediately a semicolon establishes a caesura between the electric light of the cars and "their brown backs / surfaced with gum and dust" (14-15). The automobiles here alter the summer camp's balance of nature and culture, privileging the latter and mechanizing the poet's engagement with landscape writing.[5] Tree imagery disappears with the automobiles' "chomp[ing] quietly into bushes" (16), an incident that occurs after the above break and which is consistently lineated with commas (just as the stricter punctuation marks the domination of the clock in "The Republic"). Ondaatje presents a vision of Keewaydin that does not bother to conceal the key function of the cottage: to aid in the division of time into work and leisure and the conversion of the environment into a regulated site of recreation within the expanding spatial network of Ontarian modernity. Further, the poem's very title captures this emphasis on the diachronic—the expansion of Ondaatje's aesthetics into what will eventually crystallize into a poem—while marking the site's Ojibwe name as synchronic. Any First Nations presence in this Ontario is cast as either existing in the past or reborn in the poem's hypothetical future; not, however, as part of the poem's aesthetics of the present.

"The Time Around Scars" is a reflection on memory and relationships that establishes Ondaatje's commitment to an aesthetics of efficiency on perhaps the broadest scale of any poem in *The Dainty Monsters*. Taking on relationships with the speaker's wife and "A girl whom I've not spoken to / or shared coffee with for several years" (1-2) and their commemoration in objects and scars, this poem's speaker combines these experiences into a process of sealing himself off from the past, the hypothetical, and the sentimental. Memories are here divided into two clusters. The first consists of objects and services that often bring to mind the manipulation of affects characterizing advanced stages of industrial capitalism:[6] "shared coffee" (2), "a new Italian penknife" (7), and, in an especially potent instance of reducing an entire body of work to a demarcated, manageable set of consumable images, "a nymph out of Chagall" (14). These images consist of specific (or imagined) memories, conceived from the perspective of the present and reified as identifiable physical objects. The scar, meanwhile, is part of a different set of images. Depicted as living and moving in an animalistic or natural sense, the scar "sleeps, smooth and white" (4) on the woman's wrist, while the speaker's wife "has scars like spread raindrops" (10). Animal imagery is here drafted into describing the ability of the body to experience, internalize, and move beyond stimulus without falling prey to sentimentality. The memories' lingering traces of history and personal

narrative harden into talismans that resemble the poem's set of consumable objects, ready to be drafted into the poet's repertoire of content-free affects: "a mysterious watch" (25), "medallion of no emotion" (27).

Any sentimentality that remains in these scars is written into a narrative that is trapped in the hypothetical. When they are compared to events or actions with a meaning ostensibly beyond the purely affective, such sentiments are prefaced with "would": "And would she / moving with lover or husband / conceal or flaunt it" (21-23);

> I would meet you now
> and I would wish this scar
> to have been given with
> all the love
> that never occurred between us.
> (28-32)

In an aestheticized present that transmutes the past into interchangeably affective images, distant memories are healed over, tunnel vision "freez[ing] irrelevant emotions / and divid[ing] us from present friends" (18). Nature, like the animal imagery of the scars, is also incorporated into this negation of memory and sentiment: the "broken greenhouse panes" (12) that have caused the speaker's wife's scars exist only as part of her present situation, frozen over as additional entries in an inventory of objects. For while she "talks of" (12) the greenhouse panes, the speaker can "bring little to that scene" (15) apart from the "red feet" inspired by "a nymph out of Chagall" (13, 14). Just as Ondaatje's Keewaydin is in the process of becoming a poem while the First Nations invoked by its name are shunted into a temporality in which they merely have been or could be imagined, so do meaningful relationships and past experiences find themselves lost in the object-ridden field of perception structuring "The Time Around Scars."

It is thus that the first half of *The Dainty Monsters* presents the Ontarian subject as anchored in its self-conscious modernity as opposed to any alternate identities or notions of tradition or the past. The landscape of the province is in turn conscripted as the empty site of this experience, its network of highways providing the cartography of a place defined by the continuous movement of its subjects. The totality of this aesthetics finds confirmation in the structure of *The Dainty Monsters* as a whole: the mythical "Troy Town" poems exist in a separate section of the text, further compartmentalizing those aspects of the past that are fit for remembrance. This segregation of myth and modernity is logical for a poet concerned with both

isolating experience as such and plumbing the depths of the poetic in all its forms; it also, however, reinforces the singularity of those poems that foreground their detachment from the past. Notably, the first section's penultimate poem, "The Respect of Landscapes," establishes the collection's widest, most abstract conceptual field for Ondaatje's aesthetics of efficiency: envisioning all of a vaguely Ontarian setting as the speaker's "muted landscape" (1), the poem inscribes the predominance of this aesthetics, and therefore anticipates its necessary containment within a separate section. The dainty monsters are reduced within this landscape, and North Toronto, "where few dogs / were run over" (8-9), becomes the new site for the modern subject, "unwebbed of clothes" (10) and combining the body itself with an experience beyond landscape. Fusing corporeality with the material conditions and items of modernity, the poems' subjects inhabit a landscape that is reduced to socially constructed cartography and emerges as the new natural element in Ondaatje's Ontario. It is in such an environment that this section's penultimate speaker "translate[s] [him]self" (15), "taking the egoism / of cigarette cartonned birds, / and becoming like them the centre" (17-19).

It seems likely that Ondaatje's critics have puzzled over the anomalous spareness of these early poems precisely because, in a sense, it is their emptiness that is eventually promoted to a position of centrality. This paradoxical quality is probably responsible for the poems' treatment as either unexplainable oddities or mere precursors to Ondaatje's more fully-formed works; understood as part of an aesthetics of efficiency, however, it speaks to the importance of *The Dainty Monsters* as an early version of Ondaatje's ongoing treatment of the aesthetic as a distinct category. For while such a practice is not inherently progressive, as Spinks and Solecki remind us, its implications as writing engaging with any Canadian setting are potentially dire. Though privileging a blank Ontarian modernity may work as an aesthetic strategy, the solipsism of this approach conscripts Ontario and its alternate histories and presents—such as that of its First Nations and the actually-existing space of Keewaydin—into a reconceptualization of place that silences these modalities as part of its aestheticization of one understanding of progress. Ondaatje's earliest poems therefore perform a violence more subtle than that associated with Solecki's diagnosis of amorality; accordingly, they may best be read as inchoate, dangerously restrictive versions of an aesthetics Ondaatje would later attempt to cordon off from the political in somewhat more responsible ways.

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Notes

1 See, for example, Barbour, "Last Time" and Glickman 70-77. Glickman points out that, in reorganizing his earlier poems for *There's a Trick With a Knife I'm Learning to Do*, Ondaatje makes an "unacknowledged displacement" (75) by moving "Philoctetes on the Island" from *Rat Jelly* to *The Dainty Monsters*. In a sense, this gesture integrates the latter's "Troy Town" sequence into a continuum that includes his later work, further removing his first collection's non-mythical poems from the purview of more holistic critical approaches to his work.

2 While Hillger links this phrase to a similar line in *Cold Mountain Poems* ("And here am I, high on mountains" [Snyder 39, qtd. in Hillger 38]) and states that the reference "evokes a whole tradition of poets who live near the gods and occasionally come down to the earth to bring news of the world beyond human experience" (38), a closer version of the line (exact but for its lack of italics and the presence of an ampersand in place of "and") appears in *Myths & Texts*. Hillger's point remains valid, but in the context of the latter collection the line also signifies the folly of attempting to attain transcendence with the aid of something beyond the human: "High! high on poetry & mountains. / That silly ascetic Gautama / thought he knew something" (10-12).

3 The word "five" (18) is capitalized in *The Dainty Monsters*, but appears italicized and in lower-case letters in the version anthologized in *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems*. Either way, it and the phrase "*high on poetry and mountains*" (29) are the poem's only instances of altered typeface. While the capitals of the earlier "Signature" perhaps privilege the number over the second phrase to a larger extent than in the anthologized version, the conversion of the word from capitals to italics does not detract from its primacy over the hallucinatory reference to Snyder.

4 Strangely, Hillger draws her conclusion about the poem's transcendence of tradition by reading it "within a tradition of poems on Keewaydin" (97). Her comparison of it with poems by A.J.M. Smith and Irving Layton certainly points out the differences in Ondaatje's approach, but overemphasizes "Keewaydin"'s engagement with tradition by choosing that convention as the primary context for her reading.

5 Spinks also detects the opposition of nature and culture in the early poems, identifying it as an "ideological division" that has established "the origins of our modernity" (29). He makes only brief reference to "Eventually the Poem for Keewaydin," however, puzzlingly referring to its final stanza as casting nature, "for so long an imaginative solace for the instinct of domination embodied in instrumental thought and modern intellectual culture," as instead "actively conspir[ing] in that culture's destruction" (28).

6 Michael Hardt writes that immaterial labour producing intangible products—"a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion" (96)—has characterized the "postmodernization or informatization" of the economies of "the dominant capitalist countries…since the early 1970s" (91). Rather than fitting these poems into any periodization involving a gradual succession of industry-secondary production-modernity by services-tertiary production-postmodernity (Hardt 91), however, it is more important to note that the invocation of affective labour in "The Time Around Scars" foregrounds the poem's images as mere objects in a field of perception defined by an economic environment.

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