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REVIEWS
The Name of the Father/A Knock at the Door

Sam Solecki. *Ragas of Longing: the Poetry of Michael Ondaatje*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 220 pp.

Sam Solecki has been writing about Michael Ondaatje for over twenty-five years. He edited a useful collection of interviews, reviews and articles entitled *Spider Blues* (1985), and now he has orchestrated his own essays, old and new, into a study of Ondaatje's poetry. In *Ragas of Longing* he works hard to re-tailor the essays, but some of the stitching shows. In fact, some threads are displayed prominently in short chapters ("Covers," "Titles," "Epigraphs," "Canon") that act as interludes between commentaries on the six published volumes of verse. The novels are omitted, as is *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), which can be read as a poem and even is listed in the "Poetry" section of the Bibliography. The result is better in its parts than as a whole, although the parts are strong because Solecki is so well acquainted with the poet and his poetics. His aim is to link the two by tracing the gradual refinement of Ondaatje's conflicted poetics in relation to an autobiographical subtext, and by using both to reveal a "vision of human life [that] is post-Christian, postmodern, and fundamentally tragic" (6).

The subtext concerns Ondaatje's exile from Sri Lanka—in one sense, ragas are songs of exile, Solecki explains (5)—made all the more traumatic by the loss of his father. Exile from "family, father, culture, and island" provides "a significant, perhaps dominant structure of feeling and figure in the carpet" (9) for the poems. Solecki draws a revealing parallel with Edwin Muir, who was the subject of Ondaatje's M.A. thesis, and whose youth in the Orkneys was cruelly disrupted when his family moved to Glasgow, thereby establishing a contrast between an idyllic island and a grimy city (Fable and Story, Muir called them) that haunted his poetry. Readers of Ondaatje's fanciful memoir, *Running in the Family* (1982), will be familiar with the colourful, charming, erratic, violent, self-destructive Mervyn Ondaatje. Solecki puts himself at a disadvantage, however, by declining to discuss the memoir or to delve into biography, although he knows Ondaatje personally and supplies a few bits of pertinent information. Nor is he interested in a psychological reading of the poems. Lacan

does not even qualify for the index. Ondaatje is intensely personal in the sense that he surveys experience from the isolated perspective of a hyper-sensitive, individual consciousness. Solecki is right that "he is always less interested in the social dimension of our lives than in the personal" (14). This is why several critics have berated him for being insufficiently political, or for getting too absorbed in the raw tumult of the moment, or for being a postmodern aesthete. Solecki acknowledges but is not concerned to refute these critics. However, Ondaatje is rarely personal in the sense of intimacy. He displays "an intensely subjective and violently self-expressive art" (139), but only as a theme or aesthetic problem, rarely as a self-portrait. On the contrary, he hides behind a series of masks and legends—Billy, Buddy, Kip—and later cultivates a style so indeterminate as to achieve "a dissolution of the voice and self in language" (124). Consequently, Solecki is left with little to say. Mervyn Ondaatje is "an absent presence somewhere behind the missing parental figures"(9) in his son's poetry; he is a shadow behind the lost, alcoholic and suicidal characters, but only a shadow at whom Solecki can only gesture. No doubt he is right about the importance of the lost father, and he successfully avoids the sort of reductive argument that would adduce a single source for every poem. Nevertheless, his best insights—and there are many—do not come from the autobiographical subtext.

This argument is most successful when he considers *Secular Love* (1984), because it is Ondaatje's most autobiographical work, written after the breakup of his first marriage as a result of a love affair. Since the father's marriage also ended in divorce and alcohol, the paternal ghost haunts this volume as well, but only in the most impalpable way. Solecki goes so far as to treat it as confessional poetry, but admits that it is intimate only "on the poet's terms" (140), which remain guarded, and he reminds us that in an epigraph, Ondaatje quotes one of Elmore Leonard's characters: "I'm trying to tell you how I feel without exposing myself" (146). Self-exposure is even more muted in Ondaatje's recent volume, *Handwriting* (1998), because it offers "an impersonal, classical, almost hieratic poetry in which the poet's self has disappeared either into a communal voice—'we'—or into anonymity" (165). Since "hieratic" means priestly, we might say that confession is no longer viewed from the sinner's point of view, but from the priest's.

Solecki handles his second main subject, Ondaatje's poetics, in greater detail. Here, he has a lot to say, and his analysis is informed by great expertise in modern poetic theory, which he displays with a careful combination of confidence and diffidence. He plays the role of critic almost as carefully

as Ondaatje plays the role of poet. Ondaatje's poetics can be seen as another attempt—this time viewed from the aesthetic side—to bridge the gap between life and art. The paradox of poetry is that it is the most fluent means of overcoming the various forms of alienation that constitute modernity, yet it relies on an alienated structure that reinforces the problem it tries to solve. Although Solecki discusses this dilemma primarily as modernist in provenance, it has romantic roots. As every Canadian schoolchild knows, Wordsworth called poetry a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings later recollected in tranquillity, but he went on to widen the gap between spontaneity and recollection by noting that when a poet imitates passions, "his employment is in some degree mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering." To impose an insubstantial, retrospective "meaning" on experience is to make life intelligible, to ennoble it, but also to falsify it.

Ondaatje continually replays this irreconcilable dialectic between the tumult of life and the elegant forms of art, forms that discipline but thereby dissipate the vital energy that motivates them. He also replays their rivalry through his loving-antagonism with his father. In an essay from 1977 reworked here, Solecki pictures the two extremes as "nets and chaos," the former corresponding to Michael the scrupulous poet, the latter to Mervyn the rambunctious father, now lost to the silence of death. The two cannot be reconciled because the son's success derives from the father's failure. His poetry is a betrayal, because it requires his father's disaster to inspire and torment it. Ondaatje's "theory of art is predicated on a causal relationship between suffering and creativity" (7): if he were not haunted, he would not need to write poetry; but if he exorcizes his father's ghost, he will no longer be haunted. Nevertheless,

> [t]he dialectic of language and silence leads finally, not to despair about poetry, but to an affirmation that in the poet's terms is simultaneously a betrayal of the very things admired and an affirmation of human aspiration. The fundamental and unresolvable contradiction at the heart of the poem's theme is enacted on the level of imagery… (109)

That is, it is expressed as poetic style, which rehearses rhetorically the same cycle of loss and recovery. According to Ondaatje's impassioned imagery, poetry is a tragic wound or a scar that never heals—"an inscription that recalls an event in one's life that has left its runic mark" (155).

Much of Solecki's attention is devoted to "the level of imagery," that is to commentary on selected poems, working chronologically through Ondaatje's books. He identifies biographical echoes, skilfully locates ref-

erences and allusions, establishes continuities, and then settles in for close readings of the poems he admires most. He has good taste, and he is an acute reader who insists on responding sensitively to the "the text itself," rather than using it to score ideological points (4). I have little to say about his readings except that I admire them. However, as a critic whose job is to explain how a text works and what it means, he, too, is caught in Ondaatje's dilemma. If "meaning" is a betrayal of a poem's complex relation to its creative sources, then what service is the critic doing by telling us what it means? (There is another Wordsworthian precursor here: "We murder to dissect.") Hence the diffidence that Solecki periodically displays, admitting that he only "has a hunch" about some lines of verse, or that he "can't quite articulate what [he] think[s] is being intimated" (87) in others, or that he can offer only "a tissue of guesses" (126)—the tissue again imposing a mechanical pattern on amorphous impressions. This is an honest response to Ondaatje's elusive style, but it reminds me of an anxious exchange in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*:

> Hamm: Clov!
> Clov (impatiently): What is it?
> Hamm: We're not beginning to…to…mean something?
> Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh.) Ah that's a good one!

Here is a comparable moment in *Ragas of Longing*, beginning with an echo of Wallace Stevens, one of Solecki's favourite guides, and ending with the threat of meaning, narrowly averted:

> at least in his most radical poems, Ondaatje resists almost successfully the temptations of pattern and totality. Like Muir, he wants to acknowledge chaos, but he also wants to find aesthetic strategies and forms to enact it while recreating the illusion that it isn't being contained. The danger for both…is that any transfiguration of existential, psychological, or moral chaos into aesthetic form might in the end misrepresent that chaos and inevitably create an unintended sense of meaning. (15-16)

A punctilious reviewer might object that to recognize chaos as existential, psychological or moral is already to ascribe meaning (a frame of reference) to it, but I will only ask: if meaning is an enemy who must be invited to the door of understanding but refused entry, then who is the reader's friend? Is that the critic's role? If so, must the critic betray the poet in order to satisfy the reader? Poetry can avert the threat of meaning by promising something

better in its place—wonder, revelation, absolution, the flower absent from all bouquets—whereas criticism offers no such recompense. The critic can only confess: "As so often in this book, I find myself moved by the poetry without being able to offer an adequate paraphrase, one that makes sense of all of its parts, or being able to answer the questions that the lines provokes" (186). That's a good one.

Works Cited

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