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Physiognomy of War: Ruins of Memory in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

LICHUNG YANG

IN HIS BEST-KNOWN ESSAY “On the Concept of History” (1940), Walter Benjamin envisages the figure in Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* as the angel of history who casts his gaze on the past, seeing “one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet” (392).¹ Benjamin conceptualizes history as a disaster with piles of debris that grow higher and higher as time goes by. His view of history as piles of wreckage of capitalism not only expresses his questioning of the linear view of history and progress but also reveals his apocalyptic vision of history, regarding it as a process of decay and degeneration. Despite the strong storm that drives the angel irresistibly into the future, however, Benjamin emphasizes that the angel of history would like to stay in an attempt to “awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (392). If the angel is emblematic of a materialist historian who refuses to face the future but keeps looking back to the past, then his attempts also convey Benjamin’s belief in some kind of light or hope of salvation latent in the piles of debris. His angel of history, caught and struggling in the whirlwind of progress, exhibits a paradoxically ambivalent attitude toward history — extremely melancholy yet embracing some hope of salvation. This particular view of history as piles of debris is exemplified in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost*, which portrays the civil war that penetrated the heart of Sri Lankan society for more than twenty-five years. The conflict seemed to be hopelessly long and bitter when the novel was published in 2000.² Ondaatje’s fictional reworking of the Sri Lankan civil war offers a powerful example of a writer who stages or interprets the atrocity and complexity of war in an intricate and aesthetically perceived form. The novel stands, to adapt Benjamin’s phrase, as an “allegorical way of seeing” into war (*Origin* 166), which discloses itself through a variety of arresting images of ruins wrought by human violence on a vast scale.

Since initial publication, *Anil’s Ghost* has elicited conflicting responses informed by strategic positions that come to be marked or

polarized as political or apolitical, historical or ahistorical.³ In addressing this controversy, Chelva Kanaganayakam acknowledges the contentious nature of the debates, noting that *Anil's Ghost* anticipates controversial responses "through its overt preoccupation with a complex political backdrop, as well as a carefully articulated ambivalence about its project" (5). A review of a range of readings of the novel also suggests that the difficulty for most critics has revolved around how to place *Anil's Ghost*, which potentially compels bifurcation of the wide readership along lines of cultural identity or cultural knowledge. The controversial responses seem to reveal more about the strategic positions of critics than about Ondaatje's engagement with political violence in the novel. As a novel "establishing a careful balance between political engagement and aesthetic distance," *Anil's Ghost*, Kanaganayakam argues (6), "offers political engagement without taking sides, and without the realism of mimetic detail," but "problematizes the events it painstakingly describes" (20). He is right to suggest that the novel insists on its artifice because it is the capacity of art to transform reality that "enacts a realization that the personal, the political, and the social are intertwined in ways that problematize clear ethnic, religious, or ideological categories" (16).

Although my understanding of *Anil's Ghost* resonates with Kanaganayakam's position, my contribution to this conversation is to read Ondaatje's novel along with Benjamin's reflections on history, as defined in his oeuvre. Despite being six decades apart, there is an affinity between Ondaatje's fictional account of war and Benjamin's idea of history. For Ondaatje, the dilemma of how to represent the victims of a long, bitter war in Sri Lanka stands at the heart of *Anil's Ghost*, given that for Benjamin the allegory of ruins emblemizes the history of modern Europe. In a land plagued by decades of political instability and armed conflict, unseen wounds are intertwined with physical injuries and fatalities, creating fragmented communities that share a vulnerability to the haunting uncertainties. A sequential or mimetic narrative of war does not adequately convey the ongoing turmoil in a war-torn country. In what follows, I trace how Benjamin's theoretical reflections on history shed light on Ondaatje's thematic and formal treatment of the political violence with a wide array of images of ruins. Teasing out these images in *Anil's Ghost* will enable the reader to appreciate the way in which Ondaatje's famously fragmentary and ambivalent narrative inscribes the longer- and shorter-term processes of political violence

that leave their traces in types of ruins. As will be seen, what emerges from a reading of *Anil's Ghost* in light of Benjamin's concept of history is a collage of images of ruins — from remnants, material debris, and ruined landscapes to scarred, wounded bodies and in particular the social ruination of people's lives.

Ruin and Allegory

The ruin is usually connected with abandoned, decayed monuments or bleak, desolate spaces, and this kind of space or architecture can often be seen as an image typical of the past. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin takes the ruin as a theoretical venue to understand modern history, exploring the aesthetic of the ruin in literature and connecting it to historiography. Given that ruins express the fragility and impermanence of things, Benjamin argues that ruins presented in the *Trauerspiel* ("the mourning play") not only are architectural residues but also mean that all cultural and social desires eventually succumb to time and history. He asserts that human history is a mere part of natural history, inevitably subject to nature, in which all human labour becomes extinct. In the literature of the baroque, nature, Benjamin writes, is "not seen . . . in bud and bloom, but in the over-ripeness and decay of her creations" (179). Following this line of thought, modern history should be understood as part of natural history and found in ruins from the past. In these ruins, not only can the decline of the individual in the natural state of destruction be observed, but also history can be glimpsed and explored at the present moment. The ruin therefore not only is historical debris or remnant in itself but also presents itself as a venue for the formation of human history. "In the ruin," Benjamin writes, "history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of *the process* of an eternal life so much as *that of irresistible decay*" (178; emphasis added).

In Benjamin's philosophy of history, the ruin is not only emblematic of history but also a form of allegory. Benjamin contends that the ruin and allegory have an affinity to each other. In an often-quoted passage, he notes, "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (*Origin* 178). Whereas life is a process of decay and destruction, subject to natural history, allegory, to a certain extent, is a form of ruin subject to time. In allegory, the meaning of an

object is torn apart, subject to a process of mortification, scattered to “the manifold regions of meaning” (217). Just as the living body of the sovereign is subject to the agony of dismemberment in martyrdom at the hand of a torturer, so too is the human body reduced to a corpse the ultimate representation of its natural history. The body of a creature is likewise dismembered by the baroque dramatist so that the fragments can be imbued with meanings and associations. In the field of allegory, Benjamin states, “The false appearance of totality is extinguished,” and “the image is a fragment, a rune” (176). The fragment, or the forsaken object, in this sense, becomes a “rune,” a silent secret or hidden mystery. Analogically, he believes that the truth content of a work of art will be revealed only when its material content is torn apart, because the function of allegory is “not so much to unveil material objects as to strip them naked” (185). He puts it concisely: “Criticism means the mortification of the works” (182). To demystify a work of art and disrupt the unity of its form, some of his works, such as those found in *The Arcades Project*, are stylistically comparable to the fragmentary remains of a *magnum opus*.

Benjamin also asserts that only when a large number of fragments are accumulated is the true meaning of the creaturely condition likely to come across: “It is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification” (*Origin* 178). The meaning of allegory thereby resides in the oscillation between two or more discrete images. Benjamin emphasizes that allegory, like natural history, is “dialectical in character” (166). The form of allegory is changing, and so is its meaning. Allegory is rich in meaning: “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else” (175). In other words, even the smallest details can be meaningful. In Benjamin’s terms, allegory is not a rigid or pedantic metaphor but a lively, open form of literary expression. Most importantly, Benjamin accentuates that the measure of time is crucial in allegory, in which time finds expression in nature mortified, in “the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape” (166). Therefore, history appears in allegory as nature in decay or ruin, and the temporal mode is “one of retrospective contemplation” (Buck-Morss 168).

But if the ruins of the *Trauerspiel* disclose a melancholy view of the

world, this disclosure does not mean that Benjamin holds an entirely pessimistic view of history. Unlike the melancholy nature of *Trauerspiel*, allegory for Benjamin is an important approach to historiography. He believes that one of the strongest impulses in allegory is “an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity” (*Origin* 223). Historiography, like *Trauerspiel*, should “veer about slowly into a question of *form*,” the form of allegory, in the sense that allegory is “the dominant mode of expression of a world in which things have been for whatever reason utterly sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence” (Jameson 71).

War as an Allegory of Ruins

Ondaatje intends in *Anil's Ghost* “[t]o study history as if it were a body” (193). Benjamin’s allegory of the ruin has important implications for our understanding of Ondaatje’s fictional recounting of the Sri Lankan civil war in the novel. The protracted war straddling the divide between the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century escapes simple categorization.⁴ A Sri Lankan Canadian writer such as Ondaatje is well aware of the complexity of the conflict and seeks to find a narrative form that recognizes it, names it, and understands it as a significant site of narrative. The civil war encompasses not just outbreaks of war that occur randomly in time, and explosively and spectacularly in space, but also the invisible impacts of war that are incremental, their repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. For Ondaatje the writer, a central question is how to convert into image and narrative the calamities wrought by the long war on human bodies and lives, calamities that turn into haunting memories. *Anil's Ghost* is a serious novel that engages the representational and narrative challenges posed by the complexity of that long, bitter war, which officially ended in 2009.

If the ruin is often associated with the fragmentary and the imperfect, then *Anil's Ghost* can be seen metaphorically as a text composed of a wide array of narrative fragments. Ondaatje’s works are best known for different types of discontinuous, fractured narrative.⁵ In *Anil's Ghost*, the linear development of a narrative collapses, and the main narrative breaks into fragmentary narratives to cope with the division of society wrought by the war.⁶ Unlike the *National Atlas of Sri Lanka* in which each template reveals only one aspect of the island, the novel is a mosaic

of aspects of different characters, and each narrative section is independent, without clear temporal transitions among them. Speaking of his fiction writing, Ondaatje indicates that he is interested not in inventing a form but in small moments or tiny reversals of emotion. Those small discoveries for him are the first principles, and he tries to “circle around them and collect them and piece them together in some kind of mural or novel. Magpie work” (“Michael Ondaatje: An Interview” 242).

In his creation of *Anil's Ghost* as piles of textual ruins, Ondaatje also incorporates heterogeneous textual fragments, including both fictional narratives and documentary modes. Michel de Certeau considers “entombment” a figure for historiography, noting that writing is a tomb in the double sense of the word in that, in the same text, it both honours and hides (101). His view of the entombment of historical writing is pertinent to our understanding of the historical files embedded in the fictional narratives in *Anil's Ghost*. The historical files contain a brief note by M.O. before the fictional narrative, a long list of names in the acknowledgements, and a bibliography following the main narrative. There are also inserted facts and statistical figures, such as a list of the dead, including name, age, and date, time, and place of death (41), along with maps with no depiction of human life (39-40). In terms of de Certeau's notion of entombment, the intratextual tension among the dispersed archives suggests, on the one hand, the dead-and-gone past that becomes part of the historical archive and, on the other, “its haunting refusal to close its eyes and leave the living alone” (Westerman 371).

If narrative fragmentation is emblematic of the ruination of the text, *Anil's Ghost* goes further to employ constellations of architectural images to present the long-term effects of the Sri Lankan civil war.⁷ Because a certain parallel exists between architectural relics and historical traces, crucial scenes in the novel feature images of architectural ruins, suggesting what Benjamin calls the threat of “irresistible decay” (*Origin* 178). In *Anil's Ghost*, the *Oronsay*, formerly a passenger liner travelling between Asia and England, is transformed into Sarath and Anil's base for archaeological investigation. But it still contains “the smells of salt water, rust and oil, and the waft of tea in cargo” (18). The vessel was berthed in an unused quay at the north end of Colombo harbour, but a section of the transformed liner is used as their storage space and work lab, “claustrophobic, the odour of Lysol in the air” (19). To find out Sailor's identity, Sarath and Anil go to a *walawwa*,

a two-hundred-year-old house where the young Gamini was brought to stay when he was expected to die of diphtheria. The building is no longer inhabited, and “like a well that has gone dry it took on a sense of absence” (164). When Sarath visits the house, the messy emptiness of the building and grounds depresses him, trapping him into existing “in two eras” (165). The image of the forest monastery in Arankale also resonates with Benjamin’s allegory of the ruin. The monastery might have been a secluded retreat for Asanga the Wise and his followers, but centuries later the knowledge of such a monastery vanishes from people’s minds, and the site exists merely as “a haven for creatures that scurried on the warmth of the cut rock and on unnamed plants in this nocturnal world” (190). By amassing images of the deserted passenger liner, the hundred-year-old house, and the relics in the forest, Ondaatje marks different types of architectural ruins, accentuating that “history stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. . . . [H]istory has physically merged into the setting” (Benjamin, *Origin* 177-78).

In addition to its images of architectural ruins, which, like natural history, emblemize the transience of human life, *Anil’s Ghost* foregrounds the alternative histories hidden in different forms of ruins, merging micro interactions and emotions of ordinary people with macro history. Sarath and his teacher Palipana value the narrative dimensions of the ruins, focusing on the experiences embedded in the modern context. As an archaeologist, Sarath sees himself as somehow “the link between the mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of an image on rock, or even, more strangely, its immortality as a result of faith or an idea” (278). He tells Anil that he loves history, “the intimacy of entering all those landscapes. Like entering a dream,” as if “someone nudges a stone away and there’s a story” (259). As an epigraphist, Palipana also instructs his adopted orphan Lakma, saying that “history faded too, as much as battle did, and . . . only stone and rock could hold one person’s loss and another’s beauty forever” (104). Fully aware of the subtext of the ruins, he discovers the hidden histories, intentionally lost, that altered the perspective and knowledge of earlier times. Palipana perceives that it is “how one hid or wrote the truth when it was necessary to lie” (105). Through different perspectives, Ondaatje suggests that the remnants, whether they are relics or inscriptions on rocks, might no longer have instrumental or practical functions, but

they suggest heterogeneous levels of temporality, marking memories of alternative historical significance or value.

If the architectural rubble represents the eventual fate of the inorganic, the death's head or body reduced to a corpse also provides an equivalent in the realm of living things. For Benjamin, ruins suggest not only a pile of stones and rubble but also bodies reduced to corpses. The organic succumbs to nature, and so do human bodies. As mentioned above, the allegorical mutilation of the corpse is not for the purpose of salvation but for the purpose of disclosure, the ruined body bearing the truth of the creaturely condition. As Benjamin writes, "The characters of the *Trauerspiel* die, because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. It is not for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of the corpse" (*Origin* 217). In other words, the human body reduced to a corpse is more than a corpse: it is a petrified life, a ruin of the organic, and a trace of history. This allegorical way of seeing the human body is relevant to one of the narrative threads of *Anil's Ghost*, for Anil is tasked with investigating possible crimes against humanity during the Sri Lankan civil war. In her search for the identity of Sailor, Anil has to admit that Sailor is not just a dead body but also the "representative of all those lost voices," and therefore "to give him a name would name the rest" (56). As a forensic anthropologist who pursues the factual truth from the skeleton, she acknowledges that "a good archaeologist can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel" (151). In the course of her investigation, Anil begins to feel the need to reach forward and lift Sailor into her arms, "to remind herself he was like her. Not just evidence, but someone with charms and flaws, part of a family, a member of a village" suddenly killed in a violent insurgency (170).

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje also extends and expands Benjamin's view of the death's head as historical trace, enumerating different kinds of injured or ruined bodies to highlight the brutality of the civil war. The narrator relates that the body being reduced to a corpse is "a ceremony of nature" (20), and Anil believes that "the most precisely recorded moments of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilization" (55). The focus of the fictional narrative is not on the direct use of violence by organizations or in regions but on the persecution and wreckage wrought by the war. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry suggests that killing is the main

purpose and outcome of war, but this self-evident fact is often relegated to a marginal position by being simplified, renamed, or qualified in historical or strategic accounts of a military campaign (71-72). If seeing is believing, then any redescription of the injured bodies illuminates vividly the vulnerability of an armed force. It is no surprise that the sanctioned report of the disappearance of the injured body often turns public attention to the myth of war rather than the sensory reality of war, which exposes the war as organized murder. However, *Anil's Ghost* is different from political or strategic accounts; images of broken bodies recur throughout the novel. "A couple of years ago," we are told, "people just started disappearing. Or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There's no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are" (17); when the outbreaks of war occur from 1983 on, we are told again about "[t]he disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses" (43). Because the country "exists in a rocking, self-burying motion," we bear witness to "the disappearance of schoolboys, the death of lawyers by torture, the abduction of bodies from the Hokandara mass grave. Murders in the Muthurajawela marsh" (157). Confronted with incalculable deaths, Anil cannot help lamenting that "the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here" (11). Survivors are also constantly haunted by nightmares of the war. For Gamini, who almost buries himself in the war rooms, there seems to be "little difference between pre-operative and post-operative patients" (120). The only reasonable response to the war is that "there would be more bodies tomorrow — post-stabbings, post-land mines. Orthopaedic trauma, punctured lungs, spinal cord injuries" (120). Characteristically, an innocent civilian sees dead bodies in the street or gets murdered at any time. The day when Sirissa, Ananda's wife, goes to the school as usual, she sees about ten yards from the bridge "the heads of the two students on stakes, on either side of the bridge, facing each other. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old" (174). And she recognizes one of the "two more heads on the far side of the bridge" (174-75). In a land where war spreads "like a poison into the bloodstream" (156), it might not be surprising, but it is still distressing that Sirissa disappears from the world mysteriously without a trace. The sudden disappearance and reappearance of piles of injured bodies, corpses, and skulls resonate vividly with what Benjamin says: "Everything about history, from the

very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face — or rather in a death's head" (*Origin* 166).

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje not only highlights the death's head as historical trace but also indicates the difficulties of interpretation of the ruins. Having approached the ruins with the pragmatic awareness of locally inherited skills, Palipana is deeply knowledgeable about the ancient cultures and begins "to see as truth things that could only be guessed at" (83). His "gesture" or "strange act" evokes among the archaeologists the question of how to read the ruins (82). Despite his claim that he sees "the half-perceived interlinear texts" (191), the unprovable truth that Palipana offers still has the potential for "forgery or falsification" without a context (83). "In diagnosing a vascular injury," one hospital textbook also suggests, "a high index of suspicion is necessary" (118). Detecting the symptoms does not necessarily entail a comprehensive understanding or even overall control, but the scientists cannot be too careful in reading the remains of the past. Similarly, it *is* a big challenge for Sarath and Anil to identify Sailor from a nameless burned body. As Palipana tells Anil, "We have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones"; moreover, "most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion" (102). Sarath also warns her that "sometimes law is on the side of power not truth" and that it is extremely important to understand "the archaeological surround of a fact" (44). He has seen "truth broken into suitable pieces, and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs" (156). He is well aware that "a flippant gesture towards Asia . . . might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter" (156-57). Anil also understands that her investigation is complicated because of "its three-dimensional chess moves and back-room deals and muted statements for the 'good of the nation'" (28). Through the different perspectives, Ondaatje draws attention to the obvious but frequently neglected fact that the contexts in which the ruins are understood and interpreted frequently make it a challenge to read the ruins as historical traces.

Ruinous Experiences of War

"To write history means giving dates their physiognomy," writes Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* (476; [N11, 2]). In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje not only tackles the catastrophe of war, resulting in large-scale ruins and dead bodies, but also marks the aftershocks of decades

of war, particularly personal relationships at social and emotional levels. He explores the ways in which a forensics scientist and archaeologists read histories through architectural and bodily ruins. He also probes “the random time-capsules of unhistorical lives,” suffering brutal human violence (55). Ondaatje, like Benjamin, expresses deep concern about ordinary people continually coerced by political violence. He chooses, in Benjamin’s terms, to “renounce the epic element in history” and moves further to highlight the ineradicable moments that happen to people in *Anil’s Ghost* (*Arcades Project* 474; [N9a, 6]). In an interview in 1993, Ondaatje related that he is always more fascinated by minor characters in history, people who do not usually get written about (“Interview” 257). In another interview, he makes it clear that *Anil’s Ghost* is not a statement about the war as the “true and only story” (“Michael Ondaatje in Conversation” 6). Instead, it is his “individual take on four or five characters, a personal tunneling” (6). For Ondaatje, there is no hero of or glorious moment in the Sri Lankan civil war. In his novel, the war is depicted as ruination, a corrosive process that shapes the daily lives of ordinary people and weighs on their minds and futures. The major characters of the novel are not soldiers in the declared war zones or political strategists behind the scenes but professionals or “unhistorical lives” in which the war resides and persists (55). They handle or study such ruins as injured or dead bodies and inscriptions on rocks, and all of them experience social ruination in the borderland of civil war among governments, terrorists, and insurgents. During the war that tears the island apart, their loves and marriages are eroded, literally and metaphorically, and withdrawn into the recesses of the mnemonic ruins. Just as Benjamin describes remembering as excavation of a mining site (“Excavation” 576), so too Ondaatje shows interest in archaeology and the idea of unburial. For Ondaatje, the ruins not only refer to old, abandoned buildings, skulls, and other human bones but also suggest that mnemonic residues are buried deep inside individuals, especially the psychological traumas caused by political violence.

Ondaatje’s depiction of “unhistorical lives” calls to mind Jacques Derrida’s reflection on the ruin. Derrida negotiates Benjamin’s view of the ruin: “The ruin is not in front of us; it is neither a spectacle nor a love object. It is experience itself: neither the abandoned yet still monumental fragment of a totality, nor, as Benjamin thought, simply a theme of baroque culture” (69). From Derrida’s perspective, ruins are

not merely piles of stones and rubble but can also be moments of feelings, experiences, or memories. In other words, any memory or experience is a kind of ruin, since it constitutes something that was and is no longer. In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje definitely extends the materialist view of ruins to mark the traces of the ruinous experiences of the characters. Sarath and Anil's investigation of a nameless skeleton is not merely their alertness to the "track of things" but also turns out to be an excavation of "the trail of the psyche" for each character involved (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 212; [I1, 3]). Their search for the identity of the skeleton elicits in them hidden, repressed mnemonic residues. As the narrator suggests, Sri Lanka is not just a place with piles of debris and dead bodies but also "a place to house fearful memories" (134). Almost all of the characters have traumatic pasts, and the violence of war continually contributes to or aggravates the social ruination of their lives. After his wife, Ravina, commits suicide, Sarath breaks with his in-laws and hides his life in his archaeological work. He is unable to step back to the trauma, but he tries to recreate her life, their years together, "with the remaining fragments of her room" (279). As a doctor working in the war hospital, Gamini stays with the injured or dead day and night. He can hardly maintain a stable and long-lasting relationship after his marriage fails. The emergency room becomes for him "a cocoon" in which he seeks shelter from the war (215). It is in the hospital where he meets his fate, "this offstage battle with the war" (209). After his wife disappears, the artificer Ananda becomes an "emaciated body of a serious drinker, still shirtless," and he even attempts to stab himself in the throat to commit suicide (170). Lakma, Palipana's adopted girl, sees her parents killed in the civil war. The shock of the murder drives "both her verbal and motor ability into infancy" and leads to "an adult sullenness of spirit" (103). Even Anil, who has just returned from abroad, has a painful past that she would rather bury in her mind. She never mentions the disintegration of her marriage and her affair with Cullis, for "they loved each other most when they were apart" (150). Anil sees that some traumatic violence is not immediately accessible to language and logic, and silence turns out to be "the way to abandon emotion, a last protection for the self" (55-56). What the victims hold on to, we are told, is "just the colored and patterned sarong a missing relative last slept in, which in normal times would have become a household rag but now was sacred" (56). The ruinous experiences that the characters suffer

and share in *Anil's Ghost* provide a compelling evocation of the baroque mourning play, which underscores that individual and social aspirations eventually succumb to the violent effects of time and history; thus the novel is also a work of mourning for the Sri Lankan civil war.

Significantly, *Anil's Ghost* is concerned not with the question of how to recapture or reconstruct ruins but with an exploration of different types of ruins, probing the dialectic of the moment of connection, which “explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins, that is, with the present” (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 474; [N9a, 6]). Connecting different images strikes a complex temporal note, inducing in us a double gaze backward to the past and forward to a future as yet unrealized. For Ondaatje, the human face is one of the most compelling mnemonic sites of the past that can aid the leap into different temporalities. From Derrida’s perspective, any representation of the human face (whether as a portrait of the other or as a self-portrait) is a face in ruin to an extent more profound than any marks of aging and bodily deterioration. In his discussion of the self-portraits of the French painter Henri Fantin-Latour, Derrida states that “Ruin is that which overtakes the image from the very first glance. Ruin is the self-portrait, this defaced face like a memory of itself, that which remains, or returns like a ghost from the first glance at self, representation of an eclipse” (72). The target of his discussion might be the paintings, but Derrida’s observation of the ruin is pertinent to our understanding of the images of ruins in Ondaatje’s novel. If the ruin is, in Derrida’s terms, “that which overtakes the image from the very first glance,” Ondaatje highlights the faces of victims of the civil war. At the outset of *Anil's Ghost*, the experience of Anil in Guatemala is crystallized in a striking image of the grieving face of a strange woman sitting in the grave. “The grief of love in that shoulder,” we are told, “she will not forget, still remembers” (6). As a doctor in the war hospital, Gamini knows well that the face of a victim is often hideously disfigured and violated. He sees cases in which “every tooth had been removed, the nose cut apart, the eyes humiliated with liquids, the ears entered” (289). He avoids looking at the faces of victims when he is required to check them out and report for duty. But nothing is more frightening than witnessing his brother’s face among the bodies of victims. While leaning over the body of his brother and dressing every wound on it, Gamini realizes that he has failed to bring Sarath back to life, but his brother’s face brings back memories from thirty years

earlier. After years of "secret war" between them, Gamini is shocked at his own unlearned vengeance and speaks out all his yearnings for freedom beside his brother's body (221). Ondaatje describes the scene as "a *pietà* between brothers," mirroring the rock carving of a woman bending over her child and underscoring the doubleness of the ruinous experience (288). Ananda is entrusted by Sarath to reproduce Sailor's face with the skeleton as a model. However, he neither reproduces the original appearance of the deceased nor attempts to restore history. The repair rather repeatedly evokes in Ananda thoughts of his late wife. He not only examines the skeleton but also picks it up and carries it in his arms. In the face that he builds, Anil notices "a serenity . . . she did not see too often these days" and that it is "a face comfortable with itself" (184). Sarath also confirms that the face does not belong to Sailor but is "what he wants of the dead" (184). The investigations of Sailor are not just to rebuild the identity of the deceased or to reproduce his original appearance but also to become part of Anil's longing for an absent something and part of Ananda's yearning for someone he loves.

The Nētra Mangala ceremony at the end of *Anil's Ghost* culminates in a seemingly sudden but profound connection between the living and the dead that evokes the afterlife of the ruins to console the understandably devastated survivors. In her discussion of the newly restored Buddha's face, Marlene Goldman argues pointedly that Ondaatje refuses to re-inscribe the ideals of transcendence, wholeness, and unity. Quilting, Goldman states, is "a form of stitching that likewise unifies yet, at the same time, acknowledges separation and difference" (8). Although Ondaatje's novel refuses to endorse any religious belief or political group, it still seeks a moment of relief, an epiphany, or a provisional sign of hope among the many diverse ruins, in particular the ruptured statue of Buddha. If the statue is emblematic of the link in *Anil's Ghost* between the worldly and the transcendent, which "brought a permanence to brief lives," the sacred statue is rebuilt with the "stone bodies" pried open by thieves with dynamite and metal rods (299-300). The face of the reconstructed Buddha is no longer the original but "one hundred chips and splinters of stone brought together, merged, with the shadow of bamboo lying across its cheek" (303-04). Moreover, the project of reconstruction gives the villagers a purpose, gradually redeeming them from the hopeless struggles and enabling them to rise up from the debris. It gives them the opportunity to survive, for it is safer to be seen

working on the broken statue; otherwise, they “could be pulled into the army” or “rounded up as . . . suspect[s]” (302). The moments of connection between the dead and the living are further illuminated in the Nētra Mangala ceremony, in which Ananda wears the cotton shirt that Sarath gave to him some years back. Believing that he and Anil will always carry “the ghost of Sarath Diyasena” (305), Ananda cuts the eyes of the sacred statue with his late father’s chisel while imagining his wife, Sirissa, flying as a bird with “a small brave heart, in the heights she loved and in the dark she feared” (307). Only when he feels affinity with the dead is he able to feel “the boy’s concerned hand on his” (307). “This sweet touch from the world” Ananda perceives as a glimmer of hope shining among the ruins (307).

Coda

“The novel is significant,” states Benjamin, “not because it presents someone else’s fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger’s fate, by virtue of the flame which consumes it, yields to us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to a novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (“Storyteller” 156). Benjamin insists that the significance of a novel is not limited to the substitute experience, emotional purification, or catharsis that it offers. Instead, as a product of its time, a novel often lays out or exposes the experience hidden in its social community so as to summon the memories and hopes lurking in the hearts of readers. As noted at the beginning of this essay, *Anil’s Ghost* cannot evade the question of its political stance, but this does not mean that it must promote political ideas and propaganda or present itself as a political novel as seen by a politician or sociologist. The above discussion is an attempt to show that Ondaatje’s novel does not explicate ruins as the remnants of a certain regime or promote the restoration and reconstruction of ruins; rather, it marks the allegorical connection among ruins, war, and history. If the violence of Nazism serves for Benjamin as a vantage point from which to survey humanity’s precarious position, the Sri Lankan civil war is rendered by Ondaatje into “the allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history,” which assumes the form of irresistible decay (Benjamin, *Origin* 177-78). The predominance of ruins reveals the affinity between Ondaatje’s fiction and Benjamin’s vision of allegory, in which the fragmented, tortured body and the corpse play

a crucial role in historiography. Like the angel of history who mournfully looks back at the pile of debris, Ondaatje surveys and stages the war-torn land by amassing images of ruins. But his fictional endeavour is different, given the nuances of the ruins that he calls forth. Ondaatje maps out ruined spaces that weave together the various strands of lived experience — bodily, architectural, and psychic wreckage wrought by the civil war. When clustering the images of ruins, he does not turn to nostalgia or longing but redirects his melancholy eyes to the continuing war, the vulnerable, neglected existences, and in particular the unspoken bonds formed between each other. In *Anil's Ghost*, images of ruins are dialectically inscribed as “half-revealed forms” on the plain as well as allegorical fragments filled with uncertainties (5). Not only are images of architectural and corporeal ruins marked, but also illuminated are psychological ruins of survivors during the war. The images of wreckage, like petrified history, are at once historical traces, marking the fragility and finitude of life, and alternative embodiments of history, hidden deep in ordinary people's experiences, in which a faint spiritual power or provisional sign of hope might be traced, shared, or enacted.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn, is the first collection of Benjamin's essays translated for readers of English. More than thirty years apart, the four volumes of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* present a much broader selection from his oeuvre. “On the Concept of History,” included in *Volume 4, 1938-40*, is credited to Zohn, whose translation is mildly polished, edited, and annotated. Following the essay are fragments that Benjamin wrote in the course of composing the essay.

² For summaries of the political context of the Sri Lankan civil war, see, for example, Burrows (167) and Scanlan (303-05). The sustained conflict emerged from the sharp ethnic

split in 1956 when the Sinhalese-majority government “radicalized the Tamil opposition” by declaring Sinhalese the only official language of the country (Scanlan 304). Ethnic frictions erupted into carnage in 1983 when thirteen Sinhalese members of the Sri Lankan army were killed by the Tamil Tigers. From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, Sri Lanka thus underwent a period of chaotic turmoil, and it is in this context of seemingly interminable war that informs Ondaatje’s novel.

³ In his 2006 essay, Chelva Kanaganayakam reviews the dichotomous reception of Ondaatje’s novel in the West and Sri Lanka. Despite divergent views expressed by Western critics and Sri Lankan readers, Kanaganayakam observes that some critics choose to foreground the artifice of the novel, whereas others value “the specific political elements of the novel” (9). The duality of response is also evident in other readings. For example, Gillian Roberts disagrees with critics who accuse Ondaatje of “sidestepping politics or privileging one side of the conflict over the other,” arguing that his novel “does deal with the political crisis through relations of hospitality” (962). In her response to Margaret Scanlan’s claim that *Anil’s Ghost* turns “away from atrocity to timeless form” (302) and that it is characterized by those “abrupt breaks in time” or “chronoschisms” that postmodern novelists use to move away from conventional linear narrative (303), Victoria Burrows contends that the novel addresses “postcolonial trauma,” stressing its political intention to attend to “the situated knowledges of Sri Lanka and to the ongoing traumas of its citizens” (165).

⁴ Sri Lanka is an island with a long and complicated history of interethnic tension and violence that predated European colonization and persisted after independence. The ethnic split between minority Tamil and majority Sinhalese communities was a major reason for the civil war, but many other factors, such as economic, religious, and political frictions, exacerbated tensions in the war-torn country, leading to frightful turmoil and violence. To complicate matters, foreign interventions in armed conflicts internationalized the civil war (see Scanlan 303–05).

⁵ For textual strategies and politics in Ondaatje’s early works, see the special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing on Michael Ondaatje* (Smythe), especially the contributions by Ajay Heble, Julie Beddoes, and D. Mark Simpson, who discuss the work of Ondaatje in the context of postmodernism.

⁶ Critics such as Milena Marinkova (109) and Gillian Roberts (964–65) see Anil’s cultural identity as a mirror held up to Ondaatje’s, indicating that his ambiguous cultural identity and writing position make it more difficult to write about the war experience.

⁷ In this essay, “image” is used in reference to Benjamin’s definition of “dialectical image.” In *The Arcades Project*, he writes, “Image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language” (462).

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