



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

This thesis has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree (e.g. PhD, MPhil, DClinPsychol) at the University of Edinburgh. Please note the following terms and conditions of use:

- This work is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, which are retained by the thesis author, unless otherwise stated.
- A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge.
- This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author.
- The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author.
- When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given.

Myth, Memory, and Narrative:
(Re)Inventing the Self in Canadian Fiction

Sharon Selby

PhD English Literature
The University of Edinburgh
2011

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Sharon Selby August 31 2011

Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine how the themes of memory, storytelling, and the construction of narrative identity develop in the works of Canadian authors Alistair MacLeod, Michael Ondaatje, and Jane Urquhart. As a means of delving more deeply into these themes, I focus on the specific narrative strategies that all three writers employ in the expression of the relationship between the individual and his/her community, as well as between physical and psychological realities. For the narrative voices in these authors' works—given the different ways they envision and encode communal identity as constitutive of subjectivity—the past is inextricably embedded in the present. As they construct and record unfolding experience, a wider cultural history is written over with personal connections and significance. In the works of each of these authors, the act of telling stories (re)shapes people and events for the audience: speakers reform and reconstitute their experiences, allowing them both to rewrite the past and be haunted by it. Storytelling becomes an existential act in which personal landscapes are invested with structures of feeling that transcend local significance yet are manifested in everyday connections between ordinary people, and in daily (often unrecognized) struggles and acts of heroism. This includes a study of the means through which psychological evolution and trauma can be depicted. I also discuss how stylistic techniques such as fragmentation, repetition, self-reflexivity, and literary allusion function within these narratives. This aspect of my investigation provides the opportunity to engage more fully with the body of literary research that has already been produced on these authors.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Lee Spinks, for his mentorship and encouragement throughout my doctoral studies. I would also like to thank Dr Colin Nicholson, for beginning this project with me. My undying gratitude goes out to Liz Elliot, Cat Stevens, and Linda Tym for their editing suggestions, general advice, and limitless moral support—particularly during the craziness of the final stages of writing. I am also extremely grateful to my parents, Larry and Glenda Selby, for their unfailing encouragement and support throughout my studies.

I must also include special thanks to my friends and family across the pond in Canada who have been part of this five-year process. In particular, I'd like to thank my four siblings Tracy Sanders, Julie Shirtliff, Liz Selby, and Robert Selby; Mikaela MacDonald (who read this thesis in its entirety before anyone else, including me); and John Plantus (who provided substantial 11th hour hand-holding and a general inspiration to finish). These people have played key roles in the completion of this thesis and I feel very fortunate to have them in my life.

Contents

Introduction: Autobiographical Memory and Narrative Identity	1
Chapter One: Grounded in an Ephemeral Past: Alistair MacLeod	15
Chapter Two: Embodied Resistance: Michael Ondaatje's <i>The Collected Works of Billy the Kid</i> and <i>Coming Through Slaughter</i>	63
Chapter Three: Beyond Self-Representation: Michael Ondaatje's <i>The English Patient</i> and <i>Divisadero</i>	114
Chapter Four: Outside the Frame: Jane Urquhart's <i>The Whirlpool</i> and <i>Away</i>	161
Chapter Five: Speaking for a Nation's People: Jane Urquhart's <i>The Stone Carvers</i> and <i>Sanctuary Line</i>	210
Conclusion: Embracing Disunity in Canada's National Narrative	264
Works Cited	269

Introduction: Autobiographical Memory and Narrative Identity

In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche argues that “[t]he subject’ is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the ‘similarity’ of these states; our adjusting them and making them similar is the fact, not their similarity” (269). Furthermore, he declares, “The fundamental false observation is that I believe it is *I* who do something, suffer something, ‘have’ something, ‘have’ a quality” (*WP* 294). Although we may be unsettled by the argument that the “I” by which one identifies oneself is a fiction and may ultimately disagree with this premise, it is difficult to deny Nietzsche’s claim out of hand. When we consider the number of roles we play in our lives—I am a Canadian when I am abroad, an expatriate who lives in Scotland when I am in Canada, a woman, an academic, an aunt, a daughter, a sister, a friend, etc.—we begin to see not only a multiplicity of selves, but that those selves are often so different that it is difficult to think of them as projections or aspects of an underlying core being. Further, when we reflect on our lives, we find that we are also temporally divided between past and present selves; in fact, when looking back on our personal histories, many of us often think “I am not the person I was.” Our very state of consciousness is divided between levels of conscious and unconscious awareness. With even these few examples, we begin to see how divided this self-referential “I” really is.¹

¹ In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Paul John Eakin discusses at length the multiplicity of “selves” that comprise the individual’s subjectivity.

At the same time, however, one maintains a sense of self-awareness that Kim Worthington refers to as “personal continuity through time” (13), which takes the form of a coherent narrative identity and allows one to remember oneself as “me.”² As I will discuss in Chapter One, this sense of self is the product of episodic or autobiographical memory, which “involves narration and constitutes us as a storyteller, for it enables us to weave our personal tale using cognitive as well as cogitative powers, such as belief, thinking and interpreting” (Kasabova 78).³ In other words, as the study of literature reminds us, we are all storytellers: we constantly narrate and interpret for ourselves and for each other the events of our lives. However, this narrative—like memory itself—is not static. It changes as we do, and is subject to revision according to our ongoing experiences; it is also, as Worthington points out, open to misreading and misinterpretation and forgetfulness (13).⁴ For example, we can believe in things (or even people) that no longer exist, or that are frozen (perhaps inaccurately) in our memories. We can “rewrite” or revisit events in our memory, and attach those narratives to places or objects to create memorials and souvenirs that commemorate events or people from

² Paul Ricoeur argues that it is “*narrative identity which constitutes us*.” He “stress[es] the expression ‘narrative identity’ for what we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent series of events nor an immutable substantiality, impervious to evolution. This is precisely the sort of identity which narrative composition alone can create through its dynamism. . . . In this sense, our self-understanding presents the same features of traditionality as the understanding of a literary work. It is in this way that we learn to become the *narrator* and the hero *of our own story*” (Wood 32).

³ Eakin argues convincingly of the role of the body in the construction of subjectivity and narratives of self; consequently, his notions of embodied consciousness inform my discussion of bodily experience in Chapter Two.

⁴ Richard Terdiman explains that memory is “the essential condition of our cognition” for “[c]ognition cannot be divorced from the *re*-cognition of memory: no memory, no meaning” (9). However, any discussion of memory is necessarily complicated by memory’s relationship with forgetfulness. According to Terdiman, “within the discourses that organize our current understanding, it is impossible to conceive of forgetting as nothing more than a failure of inscription, as a simple *absence*. Any construction of memory as ‘presence’ and forgetting as ‘absence’ collapses the complexity of the dialectic that produces culture out of their complex interplay” (14).

our past. These narratives of commemoration become profoundly important, for narrative provides our only access to that which has passed or been lost; through narrative, the past is available to us in the richness of all its (sometimes invented or inaccurate) detail (Rimmon-Kenan 21).⁵

In addition to allowing us access to our past, the narrative of autobiographical memory provides an opportunity both to understand and to control (or at least come to terms with) the external forces that act upon us. The settings of our stories become places in which symbolic meaning is tied to a landscape both physical and psychological; through the events and relationships that we encounter in these landscapes, we are able to see ourselves more clearly and to invest meaning in our experiences. Significantly, this meaning is often culturally determined, as we are shaped by the societies and social spaces in which we find ourselves. Elizabeth Tonkin observes, “To distinguish the individual from the social in any human being’s makeup is like trying to pull apart the two sides of a piece of paper” (*Narrating* 102). Tonkin’s analogy is fitting for, as Barbara A. Misztal’s discussion of “appropriated” and “personally acquired” memories demonstrates, memories need not have been our own for us to accept them as part of our personal experience. We are able to appropriate

⁵ One example of such invention is Gérard Genette’s “anachrony,” a term that he uses “to designate all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative [i.e. analepsis and prolepsis]” (36). According to Genette, this form of discord or disorder is “one of the constitutive features of narrative temporality” (85). Despite the fact that such discrepancies between memory and supposed reality are characteristic of narrative, writers such as Marcel Proust suggest that it is possible to reclaim the past through memory. In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust’s protagonist’s memory is triggered by physical stimulus—the taste of a Madeleine cake. Deeply moved by this experience, he observes, “when from a long distant past nothing subsists, . . . taste and smell alone. . . remain poised a long time, . . . and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection” (54). As Stevenson observes, this experience “transports him back into an ‘identical moment’ in his childhood,” demonstrating that “past time. . . [continues] to exist not only in the recesses of the mind, but virtually in the body; digested, deeply engrained, within the physical structure of the self” (90).

communal memories and seamlessly integrate them into our narratives—without remembering that we appropriated them from elsewhere in the first place. Thus, the narrative of self is always in the process of evolution, dependent on the unreliable faculty of memory, and continuously informed by the culture and community to which we belong. For the purpose of my research, this process through which experience is translated into memory and assimilated into autobiographical narrative is of particular importance, as are the motivations and consequences of such translations.

In short, my dissertation focuses on the connection between memory, narrative, and subjectivity rather than on providing, for example, an overview of different forms of memory as they appear in literature or a history of memory studies.⁶ Because my interest is in autobiographical memory as a form of narrative, I have chosen to write about three Canadian authors who adapt various forms of biographical and historical fiction to their own ends in order to create characters who are consciously engaged in the self-reflexive process of telling their own stories. My investigation into this process has been informed by Naomi Jacobs' comments on the evolving genre of the "fiction biography." She observes that "these books are novels convincing and memorable in their own terms, in which the biographical elements come to seem nearly irrelevant" (1). In fact, she suggests, good fictional biographies

aspire not to fill the gaps in the biographical record with invented facts, but to overwhelm the biographical facts with the flow of imagined facts to which the former give rise. Sceptical about historical or biographical objectivity and

⁶ For such an overview, Anne Whitehead's *Memory* is useful. She traces the history of memory studies from Plato to contemporary philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, Andreas Huyssen, and Jay Winter, all of whom endeavor to explain the nature of memory and how it functions in the constitution of personal and communal identity.

generally distrustful of facts, they make large claims for fiction, both as a way of approaching truth and as an endeavour worthy in itself. (Jacobs 3)

This notion of fiction as a means of “approaching truth” is particularly appropriate when discussing the works of Alistair MacLeod, Michael Ondaatje, and Jane Urquhart.

Although none of these authors creates fictional lives for historical figures in *all* of their works, Jacobs’ definition of the fictional biography serves as a leaping off point for my discussion of these authors’ representations of their characters’ “autobiographical” narratives. All three authors appropriate historical and cultural details that contribute to the authenticity of their characters’ psychological and emotional responses to the experiences that they narrate. At the same time, they display the scepticism that Jacobs outlines in terms of the way they problematize historical fact, thereby creating “a context in which [invented and verifiable] facts are indistinguishable, serving both the stimulative function of the truth and the symbolic and evocative functions of fiction. Fact and fiction must be seamless, or at least simultaneous” (Jacobs 3). By creating these first person narratives in which the blending of fact and fiction is indeed seamless, MacLeod, Ondaatje, and Urquhart all draw attention to the ongoing process of narrative self-invention in which we all participate all the time.

Structures of Repetition

In order to investigate more effectively the “truth of fiction” as it applies to the study of autobiographical memory and its role in self-construction, I have structured my dissertation in a manner that is not straightforwardly chronological, in order to mirror the workings of memory. My discussion of each author is divided into two parts. The

first part of my discussion focuses on the primary concerns and themes of that author's early prose works. The second part of each discussion looks at the evolution of that author's most recent novels and their respective concerns. To trace that process of evolution, I continuously return to the early novels in order to examine how their sub-themes serve as both a foundation for these authors' later concerns.

In Chapter One, therefore, I am concerned with that fact that, although MacLeod's early works are preoccupied with the beauty of communal identity and the consolations of an inherited Gaelic culture, the narrator of *No Great Mischief* grows increasingly concerned with the dangers of nostalgia and the unreliable nature of memory. Yet, despite this seeming shift in perspective, all of MacLeod's works are concerned with the disappearance of this cherished culture, which is represented by the fading memory of the Gaelic language. Similarly, in Chapter Two, I discuss how Ondaatje's early prose works explore his fascination with "extreme" characters and the ways in which these characters resist the conformity expected by their communities.⁷ However, as Chapter Three demonstrates, despite his fascination and even identification with his characters' self-destructive natures, Ondaatje's later works focus on the way the artist uses his/her art as a means of protecting him/herself from the pain of such extreme experiences. Again, when looking back, we discover that the ways in which art provides protection through aesthetic distance is implicit in his earlier texts. Billy the Kid, for example, uses his narrative to distance himself from his experiences while Bolden resists narrating his experiences precisely because he wishes to avoid such distance; despite his obvious

⁷ My description of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden as "extreme" characters is indebted to Sam Solecki's article "Making and Destroying: *Coming Through Slaughter* and Extremist Art."

attraction to these characters, Ondaatje himself (or, at least, his narrative persona) is never able to fully identify with either Billy the Kid or Buddy Bolden.⁸ In Chapter Four, we find a similar recurrence of theme in Urquhart's works. Her first novels are concerned with the danger of becoming trapped by traditions and silenced by the past; however, despite her continuing concern with what Terdiman calls "too much memory" (14), Urquhart's later works become preoccupied with the dangers of forgetting as well. Chapter Five reflects on the fact that this need for what Urquhart considers a balance between remembering and forgetting, though not always explicitly stated, is always at stake throughout her novels. In short, each of these authors expresses a concern with how we remember, and how our memories shape and are shaped by our ongoing experiences. Thus, we can see how, in hindsight, the seeds of these authors' later concerns are in fact present in their early texts, which allows later novels to shed light on our readings of earlier novels as well.

Layers of Diversity in Canadian Literature

Alistair MacLeod

Whereas critical examinations of historical and genealogical background, and of Gaelic language and mythology combined with existential philosophy have already created pathways into this remarkable body of fiction (for example, see Francis Berces, Uwe Zagratzlo, Colin Nicholson, and Claire Omhové), the role of memory,

⁸ Although Ondaatje himself makes his identification with these characters explicit, Stephen Scobie also notes how Ondaatje identifies with Bolden's nemesis Webb, for (like Webb) Ondaatje seeks to "think in [Bolden's] brain and body" (135); a similar argument can be made that Ondaatje identifies on some levels with Pat Garrett as well.

particularly in the invention of self and other, has not received the attention it deserves. I have framed MacLeod's fiction within contemporary sociological and anthropological theories of memory, particularly relating to communal identity and autobiography, in order to open the texts up for fruitful investigations in which storytelling becomes more than a mere representation of the past. Rather, it becomes a means of articulating and interpreting the individual's existence in time, as well as of inventing personal and social identity.

MacLeod's fiction memorialises Canada as a refuge for Clearance Highlanders in ways that produce compelling narratives for a modern international readership. Chapter One responds to this process of memorialisation by introducing contemporary sociological theories about the essential function of memory, both personal and communal, in the shaping of our continuing cognition. As MacLeod demonstrates, the past is necessarily present in our conscious experiencing, just as our present understanding continuously reinvents our reflections on what has been and our expectations of what is to come. MacLeod re-mythologizes ancient Gaelic concerns through his appropriation of the traditional *seannaichie* (storyteller) and warrior roles, roles which find expression in his narrators' reminiscences of their own life-changing events and their corresponding sense of what it means to "look after your blood" (*NGM* 12). My argument introduces recent work on the ways in which Canadian citizenship imagines multiple identities, which are informed by efforts to preserve a connection with their Highland ancestors. The survival of Gaelic phrase and saying in Macleod's English language fiction, for example, is just one index of an ancient orality finding sanctuary in Canada after forced immigrations from the Old World to the New. For Macleod, the

authenticity of Canada as refuge is tested on and resonates with the pulse of his own family genealogy. For MacLeod's narrators, storytelling becomes an existential act, serving as a bridge between memory and the constitution of selfhood. Canada, once a literal refuge for dispossessed Highland Scots, has become a refuge for culture and history in which Gaelic memory functions as a basis for cognition and as an essential element in the construction of modern identities.

Michael Ondaatje

In Chapters Two and Three, I turn to the works of Michael Ondaatje. Studies of his work by critics such as Douglas Barbour, Dennis Cooley, Sofie De Smyter, Smaro Kamboureli, Sam Solecki, and Lee Spinks have focused on his unconventional appropriations of genre and form, from his earliest collections of poetry to his most recent novel. Widely considered a postmodernist, Ondaatje's shifting perspectives and fragmented interior monologues draw attention to the elements of personal and communal history that we often take for granted: certainties are questioned, inconsistencies are identified, things forgotten or repressed are returned (if only in traces) to the conscious mind. Consequently, despite the fact that so many of his protagonists rebel against external societal influences, the role that communal narratives play in the construction of individual subjectivity and their consequences are also of great importance in Ondaatje's writing.

Chapter Two closely examines Ondaatje's early works, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. My focus is on Ondaatje's representations of the characters and experiences of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden through their

narrative constructions of self, and how those personal narratives are assimilated into communal narratives that, over time, come to be the stuff of legends. Through his focalizing characters' emerging multi-voiced narratives, Ondaatje illustrates how the tension between fact and invention is manifested in fiction and even in supposedly non-fiction writing. In Chapter Three, I consider the way Ondaatje weaves together multiple stories and shifting perspectives in order to disclose the complex networks of influence in what we think of as our individual histories. *The English Patient* and *Divisadero* present us with narrators who speak of themselves in the third person, and who find in art a means to metamorphose their traumatic experiences into a more universal character.⁹ Cathy Caruth's trauma theory informs my interpretation of the driving need that these narrators experience as they compulsively return to these painful narratives. For Caruth, trauma interrupts the process through which experience is assimilated into our autobiographical narrative, causing the event to become unknowable. This disjunction between experience and perception occurs because, as Henri Bergson observes, "in truth every perception is already memory. Practically we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future" (193). Because trauma is by definition unknowable, it takes the shape of a blank space in memory (Caruth 4). Through the translation of trauma into narratives not of self but of other, mysteries of love and estrangement can be examined from a relatively safe distance, lost loved ones can be eternalized, and the narrator him/herself can remain

⁹ According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "the construction of the subject sometimes depends on a detour via the other (which involves blurring the inside/outside distinction), and the multiplication of narrative levels (hence also of narrators) can become a way of taking charge of one's own subjectivity as well as of gaining a convoluted and indirect access to a 'reality'" (24).

hidden. As each of these texts reveals, Ondaatje returns again and again to the impact of memory on the individual's construction of self; his novels reveal the ways in which memory informs our autobiographical narratives, which in turn determine how we see ourselves in the unfolding present and how we envision our otherwise unknown future.

Jane Urquhart

Although Urquhart's fiction has not received as much critical attention as either MacLeod's or Ondaatje's, the work that has been done tends to focus on issues of Canadian identity and Urquhart's own uncertain status as a postcolonial writer. While critics such as Anna Branach-Kallas, Shelley Kulpberger, Claire Omhovère, and Herb Wyile see Urquhart as challenging colonial ideals, other critics—notably Cynthia Sugars—argue that she is in fact reinforcing them. Urquhart's fascination with obsession and obsessive memory, as well as her interest in Romantic literature and its representations of the sublime, have also provided fodder for critical investigation by critics such as Barbara Bruce, Marlene Goldman, and Marta Dvořák. My interests lie in a combination of these themes, as I investigate the impact that socially inscribed space has on individual narrative, and the ways in which communal memory provides frameworks for these narratives. These frameworks and social spaces create the psychological landscapes within which Urquhart's characters exist and which they often seek to escape.

In Chapter Four, I focus in particular on the relationship between Urquhart's characters and their social spaces. In her early works, Urquhart's female characters' metaphorical "place" in the world is frequently represented by the physical spaces in

which they find themselves. These places are inscribed with the narratives of history and their community; often, these narratives have mythical or supernatural as well as personal resonance for the individual. These resonances make it particularly difficult for the characters to escape the expectations of their communities. In order to explain the means through which the communal memory is translated into frames of meaning through storytelling, I have appropriated Homi Bhabha's theory of the doubling of time. Bhabha's theory reveals the ways in which certain voices are excluded and unsavoury moments are repressed in order to create an imagined homogeneity amongst a group of people. However, when placed in the context of personal and communal histories in which the constructedness of memory is already recognised, this performative discourse is useful in discussing the dual nature of storytelling. As Bhabha demonstrates, narrative time is paradoxically empty yet meaningful, static yet perpetually evolving, and always haunted by the inevitable return of that which has been repressed. The significance of Bhabha's conception of narrative time surfaces in Urquhart's texts, as the ways in which her characters are haunted, and their efforts (which sometimes fail) to reinvent themselves and redefine their "place" provide the basis for her heroines' narratives in both *The Whirlpool* and *Away*.

In Chapter Five, I turn to Urquhart's concern with the story of our nation and the recent practice of publicly commemorating tragedy and death, a practice that has come under much critical scrutiny. Debate arises on the grounds that national memorials and other forms of public mourning (such as the funeral processions that attend the internment of soldiers who have been killed in action overseas and whose bodies have been returned to Canada) are meant both to signify individual loss and to demonstrate

communal unity, yet how can any monument ever speak for everyone? Theorists such as Paul Connerton, and Andreas Huyssen argue that such memorials and tributes actually contribute to forgetfulness by removing the need to remember. Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* approaches questions of the appropriateness and adequacy of public representations of mourning in her retelling of the creation of the Vimy Ridge Memorial. *Sanctuary Line* has a similar subtext, as the focalising character seeks to come to terms with the ghosts in her past. Urquhart blurs the boundary between public and private grief as she reveals how communal expressions of mourning can be invested with individual meaning, and how such personal meaning can have significance for a larger society. Furthermore, she explores the ways in which the narratives attached to such commemorative acts become the true memorial to those who have died. In all of her narratives, the underlying theme of the reciprocal relationship between communal and individual identity and how this relationship contributes to a larger Canadian identity remain constantly in play.

That I have chosen three Canadian authors is both deliberate and significant as I am interested in the culturally determined frames of meaning that inform Canadian literature. However, just as I do not propose to provide an exhaustive discussion of memory studies, this dissertation is not meant to provide an overview of Canadian literature nor is it an attempt to define or unify our literary voices. Rather, it is an investigation of the diversity of memories and voices within this literature. At the same time, I am not attempting to exhaustively represent Canada's multicultural mosaic. Canada became "officially" multicultural in 1971 (Hammill 27); in recent years, writers

and critics have struggled to give voice to groups and individuals whose positions had heretofore been marginalised. As Smaro Kamboureli points out, “Representing Canada’s multiculturalism with a spattering of only one or two authors, making such writers visible only by viewing them as representative of their cultural groups, does virtually nothing to dispel the ‘marginality’ attributed to those authors” (3). Therefore, I have followed the lead of such writers as Kamboureli, Charlotte Sturgess and Margaret E. Turner by considering these authors as “Canadian writers, and not as representatives of cultural groups” (Kamboureli 3). My intention in doing so has been to maintain this notion of Canadian narrative and identity as something which is always in the process of reinvention, which Robert Kroetsch identifies as a “willingness to refuse privilege to a restricted or restrictive cluster of metanarratives.” Kroetsch powerfully argues that this refusal to privilege such metanarratives has become “a Canadian strategy for survival. We must, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, remain polyphonic” (357). Thus, in choosing these authors, my purpose is to explore the self-consciousness with which these authors contribute to the polyphony of Canada’s literature, rather than to suggest that in some way they represent it.

Chapter One

Grounded in an Ephemeral Past: Alistair MacLeod

I am not sure how much I speak with the voice of that time or how much in the voice of what I have since become.

(Alistair MacLeod, "To Everything there is a Season," 209)

Alistair MacLeod is a contemporary Canadian writer much concerned with memory and the past. Set in the Gaelic communities of Canada's east coast, his works typically examine the lives of miners, farmers, fishermen, and their families. While some of these men have sons who have followed in their footsteps, others are tormented by the way their children have abandoned family tradition and gone on to more "modern" occupations. This movement away from tradition is perhaps understandable, for these men lead difficult and often dangerous lives. In MacLeod's narratives, his characters wrestle with and grimly endure the emotional trauma caused by the deaths of or injury to or estrangement from loved ones, the driving pressures of economic hardship, and the threat to a long cherished but now fading heritage. They are also ravaged by physical trauma in the form of scars, lost or broken limbs, blindness, deafness, and so on. Such hardships are typically met with fortitude if not hope, lending an element of the heroic to characters in the throes of ongoing existential crises. Colin Nicholson notes that readers have observed "an abiding sense of loss and regret [and] a pervasive sense of

sadness” in MacLeod’s works, which arise from the knowledge that, in moving away from traditional occupations, the “modern” generation is also forgetting the language and the heritage that has defined and united previous generations (“Signatures” 98). Although MacLeod has produced only sixteen short stories and a single novel, his contribution to Canadian literature is noteworthy, particularly in terms of his representations of the impact of communal memory and identity on individual subjectivity. Thematic and figurative relationships between his internationally acclaimed short stories and his celebrated novel *No Great Mischief* mirror the workings of memory, and are sufficiently dramatic to constitute an intertextual realm in themselves. These patterns of repetition enable ways of reading resonances and connections which can focus not only on what is said but on what is not: these texts supplement each other, adding nuance and depth of meaning through verbal and imagistic echoes.

To appreciate more fully the effect of such echoes between MacLeod’s texts, an understanding of the connection between memory and individual narrative is essential. Recent sociological theories suggest that memory is active not only in our interpretation of past experiences but also in our perception of present (and even future) experience, as MacLeod’s storytellers—often painfully—reveal. Richard Terdiman observes that because memory “functions in every act of perception, in every act of intellection, in every act of language,” it becomes “the essential condition of our cognition” (9). Through memory, we become conscious of temporal existence, both as individuals and as members of a community. In particular, “episodic memory” is identified as the seat of subjectivity. Episodic or autobiographical memory is defined as that part of memory which is concerned with “memory for personal experiences and their temporal relations”

(Baddeley 317). In fact, “[o]ur episodic or autobiographical memory. . . involves narration and constitutes us as a storyteller, for it enables us to weave our personal tale using cognitive as well as cogitative powers, such as belief, thinking and interpreting” (Kasabova 78). Anthropologists such as Paul Connerton and Barbara Misztal agree that it is memory, this sense of an on-going personal narrative, which allows the subjective self to exist and evolve: if one does not remember a past, there can be no imagining of a future or even understanding of the present moment.¹⁰ In order to render comprehensible our perceptions of the present, we constantly reinvent our personal narratives in the attempt to reconcile our current experience with what has been, as well as to reinterpret our past experiences through the light of current ones. For MacLeod’s storytellers, the moment of articulation represents the paradoxical process through which narrators both shape and are shaped by the stories that they tell.

It is primarily through personal narration that the experiences of the mind and the senses are integrated to create a more or less coherent self-understanding. Kim L. Worthington explains this process of integration: “It is because we can understand or conceptualize the connection and interrelations between remembered, experienced, and anticipated actions and events, and because we can situate them in space and time, that the plethora of stimuli and experiences that constitute our lived world (and our selves) come to have meaning” (14). Self-narration is an implicit element of the individual’s ongoing cognitive experience; it is not limited to narratives that have been written or

¹⁰ Paul John Eakin emphasises the necessity of narrative identity as the foundation upon which subjectivity depends: he observes, “we need only consider the plight of individuals suffering Korsakov’s syndrome. . . or from Alzheimer’s disease, for a grim picture of the death of the self” (46). Furthermore, he contends, “there is no question that the self of the amnesiac is radically altered by the loss of explicit memory” (125).

even articulated to another. In fact, Paul John Eakin's definition of autobiographical narrative refers not only to the means through which we are able to relate our life stories to others but rather to the way we "[live] autobiography, [perform] it in our daily lives. Narrative and identity are performed simultaneously. . . in a single act of self-narration; the self in question is a self defined by and transacted in narrative process" (101). Consequently, autobiographical narrative is "not merely about the self but rather in some profound way a constituent part of self" (Eakin 101). In other words, autobiographical narratives assimilate the individual's conscious and unconscious selves, personas, and roles—both past and present—into a single cohering narrative, creating an identity that is as much a construction as any character in a novel.

Through the careful construction of his characters' experience of the past, MacLeod reveals the ubiquitous presence of memory in the evolution of individual self-awareness. Every new experience is assimilated into and filtered through the individual's record of previous experience in order to be remembered as well as understood. Boundaries between past and present are blurred: "not simply because present factors tend to influence—some might want to say distort—our recollections of the past, but also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present" (Connerton 2). The fluidity of such boundaries and the ease with which we cross them cause the past to be present in our conscious experiencing, just as our present understanding is continuously brought to bear on our reflections of what has been and our expectations of what is to come. MacLeod's storytellers dramatize how their experience of a narrative present continues to be influenced by the events that occurred during their lives, simultaneously disclosing how their present perceptions and on-going

interpretations of both the past and their role in it are affected. Every recollection has an irreducibly subjective inflection, for “[m]emories of most everyday life events are transformed, distorted or forgotten because autobiographical memory changes over time as we change” (Misztal 79). If remembered events within any personal narrative are continuously re-considered and re-collected, as well as re-constructed in the act of articulation, then the narrative act itself remains in a state of flux—not necessarily based on experience “as it happened” but as it was perceived, and as it is recalled at the time of retelling.

This notion of temporal contingency is what lends a sense of immediacy to MacLeod’s writing: in recognizing the importance of past experience in shaping the narrator’s evolving perception of self and story, MacLeod leaves his readers with a sense that the unfolding narrative is dependent on the narrator’s perception at that moment, a perception that may have been different had it been “told” at any other time, past or future, in the narrator’s “life.” As a result, “the construction or reconstruction of our past experience also provides the basis for constructing another fiction: the *remembered* self. We could even argue that reminiscence requires two selves, a present and a past self which require a bridging process rather than identification” (Kasabova 78). To bridge the gap between these two selves, “[w]e impose an order on [events], having considered and decided how they fit together—what to include, what to delete and what to add to embellish our tale—so in self-narrative events do not and cannot appear in the same way as they were lived” (Kasabova 81).¹¹ Or, as one of MacLeod’s narrators observes when

¹¹ Like MacLeod, Michael Ondaatje employs this form of double-voiced narrative in his latest novel, *The Cat’s Table*, in which the narrator speaks with both the voice of his mature present self and that of his

recounting a childhood experience, “I am not sure how much I speak with the voice of that time or how much in the voice of what I have since become” (“To Everything There Is a Season” 209).¹²

Literary theorists have increasingly emphasised the way that the fluid nature of memory “leaves open the possibility of revision of one’s conception of self, and also acknowledges the potential for misreading and misinterpretation of the narratives of self and others” (Worthington 13). MacLeod dramatizes how this human ability to revise (and possibly misread) the narratives of self and other reflects the malleable nature of subjectivity, since the continuous rewriting of the past reflects the changing perception of the “I” that is presently speaking. Reality (in the sense of “what really happened”) and “truth” need not bear any concrete connection with memory (Worthington 15). In short, memory—like story—allows us to create the illusion of preserving time but it is, in fact, subject to it.

Centrally, then, storytelling has at its root an awareness of time, and therefore of transience. As MacLeod’s narrators come to terms with the external forces acting upon them, they disclose how the past is inextricably embedded in the present. With this awareness of the passage of time comes the consciousness of mortality. Storytelling becomes an existential act for many of these speakers in the sense that it provides a means through which an individual is able to affirm his/her being or existence and selfhood—what MacLeod calls “an intensified realisation” (“Closing” 185)—while exploring the conditions in which that self exists.

eleven year old self.

¹² All short story references are taken from Alistair MacLeod’s collection, *Island* (London: Vintage, 2002).

Among these conditions is the individual's experience of him or herself as part of a larger group. The ability to articulate one's own existence within a meaningful context is an essential element of the individual's self-construction, which "should be understood as a creative narrative process achieved within a plurality of intersubjective communicative protocols. In the act of conceptualizing one's selfhood, one writes a narrative of personal continuity through time" (Worthington 13). In other words, the individual's sense of self is neither an autonomous nor a predetermined creation; rather, it evolves over time within a context of communication and community. This relationship between self and social context brings to light a complex interplay between personal and communal memory—each of which exerts substantial influence in the shaping of the other—as well as the effect they have on the developing self. In his discussion of this relationship, Connerton posits that "[t]he narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity" (21). As a consequence, over the course of a lifetime, these groups or communities have a profound effect not only on what an individual remembers but on how he or she interprets those memories. In fact, Barbara A. Misztal explains, "appropriated" and "personally acquired" memories lose their distinctive contours because "much of what we seem to 'remember' and what we assume to be our personal memories we have not actually experienced personally. For instance, many of our childhood 'memories' are actually recollections of stories told by our parents" (76). Through such appropriations, we are able fill the inevitable gaps in our memories. Furthermore, they allow us to write ourselves into our communal history, which allows us to participate in a narrative that moves beyond the bounds of our

individual life spans.

As MacLeod's fiction frequently illustrates, recognising oneself as a member of a larger communal history satisfies the human desire "for a wholeness of experience or an immediacy of fruition that would gather up in itself past, present, and future" (Macquarrie 201). His narrators tend to be brutally aware of the passing of time and the frailty of the human body; this "wholeness of experience" offers some comfort as they face the reality of their own encroaching mortality or that of a loved one. Through this concentration of time within the individual subject, the discursive boundaries between myth and storytelling are irretrievably blurred: both are meaning-making practices that locate purpose and intention, and both provide context and direction for human motive and agency. Such practices allow us to situate ourselves, deliberately and consciously, as active forces within the stream of time and the ever-expanding communal history to which we belong. At the same time, we become a vessel for that history: members of a community become repositories of its memory and culture, whether they are conscious of this fact or not.

The inscription of the self as a repository of collective memory and communal history creates a mode of temporal transcendence in the form of narrative continuity: memory mythologizes the past because "myths occur universally throughout human experience—not merely as a primitive residue which has not yet been superseded by rationality or true belief, but seemingly as a continuing substratum of the basic structures of our experiencing" (Falck 129). As MacKinnon, the narrator of MacLeod's "The Closing Down of Summer" observes, "[T]he private experience, if articulated with skill, may communicate an appeal that is universal beyond the limitations of time or landscape"

(196). In this reading, myth functions as a sort of collective unconscious, shaping and being shaped by human agency. As a result, myth becomes an integral part of both personally acquired and appropriated memories, influencing the individual's interpretations of both. Myth also influences the ways in which a community defines itself: "[b]ecause MacLeod's narrators tell tales that unfold myths of origin connecting them with a Highland past, the collective unconscious of an imagined historical community significantly constructs present selfhood and landscape out of remembered events" (Nicholson, "Re-sourcing" 96). A shared history—particularly one which, over time, develops mythical overtones—creates bonds of experience between people who might otherwise drift apart. For MacLeod's Gaelic-Canadian narrators, who cling steadfastly to their mythical Highland heritage, the result is that a "genealogical fiction produces a fiction of genealogy that has been internalized as self-definition" (Nicholson "Re-sourcing" 98). Through the internalising of such fictions, individual narratives not only achieve mythic resonance but sustain it, even during (in MacLeod's narratives, particularly during) times of acute disillusionment.

Disillusionment is never far off for any of MacLeod's characters, who are frequently faced with hardship, turmoil, and physical decline. As a consequence, they deeply value these mythical narratives. MacLeod recognises the fact that contemporary humanity "grapple[s] with many of the same intractable and elusive problems of the human condition as the ancient myths, and make us realize that – whatever the status of the gods – human beings are more than their material circumstances and that all have sacred, numinous value" (Armstrong 142). It is perhaps this recognition of the value inherent in the individual that drives MacLeod's concern to demythologize myth and reattach its

customary referents to daily existence by “defamiliarising. . . quotidian working life and giving it a magnified status” (Lepaludier 49). What he produces, then, can be read as a form of mythology in which profound meaning is invested in everyday connections between ordinary people, and in daily struggles and acts of heroism.

“Vision” tells the story of such connections and such struggles. Told to the narrator by his father, “Vision” is not merely a family history but rather a family mythology in which one story inevitably leads to and is embedded in another. As the title suggests, the narrative focuses on the ways in which interpretation depends on perspective or ways of seeing the world. Such perspectives include both the prophetic vision of second sight and the altered vision of hindsight, both of which are presented with equal credibility. The poignancy of the tale is derived in part from the effect that it has on the narrator himself, an effect that is

[s]omething like when you cut your hand with a knife by accident, and even as you’re trying to staunch the blood flowing out of the wound, you know the wound will never really heal totally.... It is something like that, although you know in one case the future scar will be forever on the outside, while the memory will remain forever deep within. (321-2).

Although the narrator’s own role in the story he tells is very small—this narrative is, after all, largely about his father’s childhood adventures—he has been deeply affected by his father’s experiences. The narrative describes how, over time, the narrator’s father Alex and his twin brother Angus pieced together the meaning of unusual circumstances to reveal hidden facts of their family’s genealogy, a piecing together which results in the mythic and creative re-visioning of the image of their grandparents that the boys had held in their minds. This mythic revisioning has a profound impact on Alex and Angus

as they grow into men, and becomes an essential part of the narrator's sense of his own origins.

At the heart of the story, then, is a childhood journey made by the twins to see their grandparents on the island of Canna, a fictional destination situated off the coast of New Brunswick.¹³ However, the mythic resonances generated by this visit are far more significant than the mere facts of the journey. Travelling on their own for the first time, the twins experience a series of misadventures, of which mistaken identity and misunderstanding are key elements. MacLeod sets the scene for misunderstanding when the boys arrive on Canna in rain that “obscured the landmarks. . . that they thought they would remember” (332) and they become lost. This literal obscuring of the familiar landscape parallels the limitations of the characters' knowledge and understanding. The drenched boys are rescued from their plight by a local shopkeeper, who offers them a lift. Upon discovering the boys' names and whom they intend to visit, the shopkeeper asks, “Your grandmother, are you sure?” (333). This question irritates the boys because they do not understand why he questions them: they feel the question is at once presumptuous and somehow insulting.

The boys are conducted, mistakenly it seems, to the house of a blind woman rather than to the home of their grandparents. It is only when they are much older that the boys realize that they were the ones who were mistaken— that they had in fact been taken to the house of their biological grandmother, though she was not the grandmother they knew and hers was not the house that they had intended to visit. Once the twins (and the

¹³ In her article, “Mapping Alistair MacLeod's ‘Vision’”, Simone Vauthier elaborates on the mythical significance of the name “Canna,” as well as of the archetypal figure whose blindness causes him or her to “see” more profoundly. Colin Nicholson likewise addresses these issues in “Itinerary of a Song.”

reader) know their grandmother's true identity, the shopkeeper's question is overwritten with a different intent. Likewise, the blind woman's enigmatic words—such as her comment that “I have relatives in Kintail” when she is told where the boys are from (336) and her sardonic observation “I have a long association with that name” (338) upon learning that the narrator's father has been named after their grandfather Alex — become laden with significance and loss, as does her final question, “We will meet again?” (339). The woman's words suggest her intuition of who the boys are, and become dramatically ironic when she dies. MacLeod builds this narrative upon such seemingly innocent phrases that later become pregnant with meaning when recontextualized within the narrative of the tempestuous but romantic relationship between the blind woman and their grandfather.¹⁴

The twins' confusion continues even after they have excused themselves from the blind woman's presence and made their way to their grandparents' home. When at last they arrive, the two boys are still quite shaken by day's strange events. Seeing that “[t]he barn door was open,” the twins “stepped inside for a moment to compose themselves” (340) before presenting themselves to their grandparents. However, they quickly discover they are not alone in the barn. Just as they do not know their biological grandmother, the twins fail to recognize their grandfather when they first see him. The man whom they find masturbating in the barn, “rhythmically rocking from his heels to the balls of his feet and thrusting his hips back and forth and moaning and talking to himself in Gaelic” (340) is nothing like the grandfather they think they know—a man

¹⁴ Vauthier's discussion of the hidden resonance of these repeated phrases locates these embedded narratives “on the interface between the outside and the inside world” to explicate the ways in which MacLeod blurs the boundary between realistic and mythical forms of representation (164).

who “had always been gracious and clear-headed and well attired” (*Island* 343). The boys are frightened then embarrassed by their broadened perspective of their grandfather’s character. When they see him in the morning, he is the grandfather they had always known, and “[t]he drunk moaning man in the barn was like a dream they wished they had not had” (*Island* 344). That drunken figure does not fit with the narrative that the boys have held in their minds about their grandfather, and the event remains troubling and mysterious. Years later, when the twins enlist to fight in World War I, the truth behind these events is revealed when they meet “a young man from Canna who had come to enlist as well” (35). This young man, who knows more about their grandfather than they do, shares a narrative that contains the story of the twins’ grandfather’s scandalous relationship with the blind woman. This narrative introduces the twins to a wider communal history: as a result, their perception of the man in the barn changes as they (and the reader through the knowing eyes of the narrator) recognize him not merely as the twins’ grandfather Alex but also as *Mac an Amharuis* (Son of Uncertainty).

There are mythic elements about *Mac an Amharuis*—a man who was “tremendously talented and clever as a young man but also restless and reluctant to join the other young men in their fishing boats.” According to the young man from Canna, *Mac an Amharuis* was “thought to be handsome and possess a ‘strong nature’ or ‘too much nature,’ which meant he was highly sexed” (355). This wild young man meets his match in a woman from Canna, but their tempestuous relationship ends when *Mac an Amharuis* becomes possessed of *Da Shealladh* or second sight. After he “sees” a terrible storm in which many men were drowned and the burning of his mother’s house which resulted in her

death, *Mac an Amharuis* feels that he has been cursed: “It became a weight upon him and he could not stop the visions or do anything to interfere with the events” (356). The local priest tells the couple that *Mac an Amharuis* and the woman must separate if he is to be relieved of this second sight; against her will, they part (at least in the public eye) and he marries her younger sister. This younger sister is the grandmother that the boys know. What is not known, at least by the twins at the time of their visit, is that although she raised the twins’ mother, she did not give birth to her. Rather, the twins’ mother is the surviving illegitimate child of *Mac an Amharuis* and the woman, who blinded herself while delivering her own set of twins. There is a sense of tragedy and loss, then, upon revisiting the scene in the barn as the twins, the narrator, and the reader recognize that it is *Mac an Amharuis* who speaks Gaelic to his absent partner and leans his head against his arm. Just as there is tragedy in the grandfather’s statement, “God help me. . . but I could not pass her by” (349) when he encounters her on the road as he is taking the boys to catch their boat home. For the narrator and the reader, the grandfather’s mythic past and present (as the “oversexed” youth and the “splendid” old man) merge when, in the moments after the final meeting with the blind woman on the road, the boys attempt to interpret their grandfather's emotions: “There was water running down his face and they thought for a moment he might be crying; but just as when they had looked for the semen on his overalls a week earlier, they could not tell because of the rain” (349-50).¹⁵

This family mythology, which draws together the stories of the narrator's father and

¹⁵ The mythical elements continue as the ghost of the blind woman later appears to save the narrator’s father from certain death on the beaches of Normandy during WWII, when he is blinded by a blast from a shell or a rocket. At the same moment, *Mac an Amharuis*, who was himself blinded by cataracts and “over a hundred years at the time,” died speaking of “youth and sex and of the splendid young stallion. . . And of walls of flame and billowing smoke” (361).

great-grandfather with his own, “became” the narrator’s on the day of the remembered telling (321). Now, when he retells it for the reader, his own memory of the day of the telling—in which he and his blind father were involved in a memorable bar brawl with their neighbours—has been woven into it (and so changed by it) as well. Through the narrator’s appropriation of the many stories contained within this narrative and his explanations of the misrecognitions they have involved, he is able to see beyond the vision limited by time and circumstance of the characters he describes, and to see his own character more clearly through his re-visioning of others. Like one possessed of second sight, the narrator of “Vision” is able to incorporate mythical elements of prophecy, fate, and heroism into his retrospectively constructed myth of selfhood as he speaks in the narrative present with the many voices of the past through these serially embedded fictions. Thus “Vision” is also a story about the art of storytelling in which “no story ever really stands alone,” and through which the narrator achieves a sense of identity and connection with the past by appropriating and becoming part of his father’s story (366).

In the story “The Boat,” the act of storytelling arises from a similar desire for wholeness and connection with the past; for this narrator, however, the desire remains unsatisfied. The speaker compulsively relives painful experiences of his youth as he seeks to make sense of his father’s suicide and his own life. In this short story, MacLeod complicates the organizing role of memory in these oft-repeated inner narratives that shape the individual’s construction of a life: not only is the narrator haunted by the ghosts of his past, but his ability to live in the present is severely compromised by his inability to let go of the past. “The Boat” demonstrates how memory shapes and can

actually paralyse understanding through the narrator's search for meaning in the face of a continuing existential crisis.

"The Boat" begins with the narrator waking from a recurrent nightmare that has haunted him since his youth. In this nightmare, he is called to work on the family boat by the sound of men throwing stones at his window while his father waits for him in a Dickensian book-filled room below the stairs. As the narrator's story unfolds, we realize that it is the meaning he subsequently attaches to the memory rather than the memory itself that causes his distress. Cathy Caruth envisions the relationship between memory and traumatic experience as a "wound of the mind," which causes a

breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. . . . [T]rauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (4)¹⁶

MacLeod represents this haunting through the way the narrator attempts to cope with his nightmares. Unable to escape his traumatic memories of his father's death, the narrator habitually "walk[s] the mile to the all-night restaurant" at four in the morning to seek out the company of those "who are always in such places at such times" in order to make "uninteresting little protective chit-chat until dawn reluctantly arrives" (2). Of course,

¹⁶ Caruth's definition of trauma is further illuminated by Henri Bergson's description of the act of perception, in which "[y]our perception, however instantaneous, consists then in an incalculable multitude of remembered elements; and in truth every perception is already memory. Practically we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future. Consciousness, then, illumines, at each moment of time, that immediate part of the past which, impending over the future, seeks to realize and associate with it" (193-4). All our present perceptions are only comprehended once they have been inscribed in memory; traumatic experiences interrupt that process of inscription, causing the event to be "experienced too soon. . . to be known."

this “protective chit-chat” does little to heal or protect the protagonist, who remains vulnerable to the ghosts and nightmares that such chit-chat temporarily allows him to evade.

With the arrival of the dawn, the narrator is able once again to repress what he calls the “shadows and echoes” of the past and return to his life after his brush with Death: he says, “I know then that that day will go by as have all the days of the past ten years, for the call and the voices and the shapes and the boat were not really there in the early morning’s darkness and I have all kinds of comforting reality to prove it” (2). The narrator hopes these comforting realities might create a protective barrier between present and past, light and dark, thereby keeping his memories at bay. He reassures himself that the past is gone, that his fears are nothing more than “the animals a child’s hands make on the wall by lamplight, and the voices from the rain barrel; the cuttings from an old movie made in the black and white of long ago” (2). However, these careful constructions of daylight logic fail each time these nightmarish “voices from the rain barrel” displace his own rational voice. Nothing can prevent repressed memories from resurfacing, and the resulting narrative reflects the narrator’s guilty sense that he is responsible for his father’s act of suicide, committed (the narrator feels certain) in order to release the narrator from the life of a fisherman. The intrusion of the past into the narrator’s present life as a professor in a “great” Midwestern university compels this division of his life into “comforting realities” and “shadows and echoes,” perpetuating an opposition that characterizes the narrator’s personal evolution.

Mythic elements in the story appear as the narrator describes growing up in a household divided between the wills of his mother and father. We see the narrator torn

between his two parents, wishing to please them both but feeling forced, in the end, to choose between them. Even as a child, he wished regretfully “that the two things [he] loved so dearly did not exclude each other in a manner that was so blunt and too clear” (19). He is referring literally to his love of both fishing and study but, in this world of black and white, the child is also speaking of his love for his parents: he feels he cannot love one without betraying the other. In this equation, there is no room for compromise—his parental worlds are as clearly divided in his mind as the division between land and sea.

The narrator has created a mythology in an attempt to make fit what does not fit. The conflict between the two parents has taken the form of an epic battle in his mind, which has been shaped by the perceptions of the child who witnessed their divisive relationship. There is a legendary element of the heroic in the narrator’s characterisation of his father whom he describes “galumphing” (an allusion to Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky”) and singing “the laments and the wild and haunting Gaelic war songs of those spattered Highland ancestors” (13-14). The narrator’s youthful perception of his father’s noble, self-sacrificing nature contrasts sharply with his depiction of a mother who is linked to the sea in a manner that recalls the forces of nature that would traditionally oppose a hero’s progress. In MacLeod’s fiction, the natural world “is unrelenting, dangerous, and devouring. The raging seas. . . make manifest the force of chaos, which underlies nature’s drive to assimilate and extinguish” (Creelman 83). Similarly, the mother is wilful, unreasonable, and discontented with her husband and her children who she (rightly) fears will abandon her and the only life that, she believes, matters; consequently, her words become “iron-tipped harpoons” (21) that she hurls into

the hearts of her family. Through these emotionally charged and diametrically opposed descriptions of his parents, the narrator dramatizes a battle in which his own self-awareness is forged.¹⁷

The critical moment for the narrator occurs during the single season that he and his father work together on the boat. By this point, our speaker has become aware that his father “had never been intended for a fisherman either physically or mentally” (21). The narrator recognises that his father has been trapped in this life, and he is determined to share (and thereby lighten) his father's burden. He explains, “And then there came into my heart a very great love for my father and I thought it was very much braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want rather than selfishly following forever your own dreams and inclinations” (21). Despite his earlier objections, the narrator's father does not argue when the narrator declares that he “would remain with him as long as he lived and [they] would fish the sea together.” Instead, he merely replies, “I hope you will remember what you've said” (21-22). These words, delivered with what initially seems to be a smile of acquiescence, come back to haunt the narrator in the context of their final journey together.

The recurrent nightmare that opens the story, in which the other fishermen summon the narrator and his father to the boat, arises from this otherwise happy period in the narrator's life. For at the end of this season, his father falls from the boat into the icy waters in the midst of a storm as the two return home from their final run of the season.

¹⁷ Toward the end of the story, the narrator describes how he and his father struggle in the boat in the storm, “charting our course from the compass and the sea, running with the waves and between them but never confronting their towering might” (23). This description of their manoeuvring amidst the waves reflects the way the father, who is associated with the boat, deals with the mother who is, herself, “of the sea” (5). His decision to commit suicide rather than directly confront his wife about their son's future seems to be consistent with this image.

Because of his father's statement, "I hope you will remember what you've said," the son is convinced that this was not an accident but rather a suicide. Freed by his father's death from both the life of a fisherman and the influence of his mother, the narrator leaves home to study and become a university professor as he knew his father would have wanted. However, he is haunted by his assumed responsibility for his father's death and betrayal of his mother, and trapped by memories that he cannot put to rest. In terms of the mythos of the story, the young hero is tested and found wanting: as Macquarrie observes, for the existentialist "man is never just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities for tragic conflict" (17). In other words, this testing is not merely the stuff of stories but is in fact a reality that must be faced by all humans. The story, then, is as much about how a hero atones for failure as how he grieves for loss.

The conflict between mother and father, sea and land, life and death resides in the narrator himself. In each case, he feels compelled to choose one over the other, as he seems unable to reconcile the two. In the end, guilt bends him to live in the manner he believes his father had: he bravely lives a life of another's choosing, despite his own love of the sea and his guilt over his mother's bitterness. It is significant that the image of his father's broken body is the final image of the story, for it is this image (rather than, say, that of his father as a would-be scholar) that lies behind the choice he has made. "The Boat" leaves us with a vivid impression of the power our memories have over us, for "[b]y memory the existent has brought his past with him into the present; and by anticipation and imagination he has already laid hold on his future and projects himself into it" (Macquarrie 200). The narrator's ability to imagine the future is inescapably

coloured by his inability to forget the past. The narrator's perception of his father's efforts to release his son from a life in which the father himself felt trapped by "the chain of tradition" ("The Boat" 4), symbolically represented in the chain link bracelets the father always wore at sea to prevent his wrists from chafing, have resulted in a similar form of imprisonment for the narrator in a haunted and guilt-ridden existence. As Frances Berces observes, "his liberty seems like exile and is diminished mentally and emotionally by guilt, fear, and loneliness" (118).¹⁸ Each of these elements—the need to voice his story, the "complicated shafts of guilt" that plague him ("Island" 393), and the need to atone for what he perceives as his failure—motivate the narrator's retelling.

Despite their differing reasons for telling their stories and the possibility that details have been embellished or revised, the narrators of "Vision" and "The Boat" imply (and the reader accepts) that there is a direct correspondence between their memories and "what really happened."¹⁹ The story "Island" further illustrates how tenuous that connection is, in a narrative which develops from the perspective of a woman who has lived all her life on an island and who has spent her latter years alone. Seamlessly weaving together fantasy and reality, "Island" reminds us that, over time, a person's remembered experiences can be overwritten with fantasy until what actually happened remains only in ghostly traces.

"Island" is a paradigm of MacLeod's narrative resourcefulness in convincing the reader not only that cognition is mediated by operations of memory, but that ongoing

¹⁸ Although Berces acknowledges these negative consequences of the father's choice, she also argues that the narrator's choice "was the right one" and that "his father's death (whether accidental or suicidal) was not entirely in vain" (118); however, given the narrator's haunted state of existence, his feelings of having betrayed his mother, and his grim resignation to follow his father's dream, I tend to disagree.

¹⁹ In "Vision," we trust that the narrator gives a faithful rendition of the family mythology as it has been told to him.

perception is itself an act of remembering. The role of memory in our cognitive processes is initially invoked by the description of the protagonist looking across the water to the mainland:

Because of her failing sight and the nature of the weather [Agnes] was not sure if she could really see [the mainland]. But she had seen it in all weathers and over so many decades that the image of it was clearly in her mind, and whether she actually saw it or remembered it, now, seemed to make no difference. (370)

At the heart of Agnes MacPhedran's story lie questions about the reliability of this protagonist's recollections of her life. We see more fully here than in any of the other short stories how reality or "history" is effectively translated into the stuff of fiction which, in the process, can become indistinguishable from myth and legend. Truth beckons to the reader through the raising of questions and uncertainties but there are no easily discernible answers.

From the beginning of Agnes' narrative, we see MacLeod working to undermine our faith not just in our memories, but even in our recorded history. The earliest parts of the protagonist's story (such as the circumstances of her birth and the story of her grandfather's death) were "told [to her] much later" (372), but she imagines these events vividly and assimilates these appropriated memories into her narrative as though she recalls them from personal experience rather than as embroidered recollections of another's memories. If fact and fantasy are already blending in these appropriated memories, MacLeod also problematizes even the most seemingly concrete forms of cognition and recorded memory. The old clergyman who fills in her birth certificate mistakes or misremembers the date and place of her birth, and he misspells her middle name so that what should have been "Agnes" becomes "Angus." As the protagonist's

reflections on these events show, so-called “facts” are unreliable: Agnes “remembers” her birth and the events of her family history as though she herself had witnessed them, while the old clergyman records events that did not happen—that is, the mainland birth of a child called Angus MacPhedran.

Conversely, we also see how “real” events can disappear from history: the protagonist’s birth (and hence her existence, though both are real within the framework of the story) will be forgotten and so effectively erased when she dies because “[t]he event no longer lived in anybody’s mind, nor was it recorded with accuracy anywhere on paper” (371). Only in local folklore, which has dubbed her “the mad woman of the island” (406), is any trace of the woman’s existence likely to remain. These errors of cognition and memory set the stage for what is perhaps the most intriguing element of the woman’s recollections: the key events that comprise the narrative—such as her experience of orgiastic sex on the beach with several fishermen—may not have happened (or at least not in the way she remembers them) while the events that actually occurred may, over time, become silenced “as if they had never been” (401).

MacLeod draws attention again and again to the mind’s ability both to trick and console itself with fantasy and illusion. He emphasizes the loneliness of the island and the mindset of the people who lived there out of the necessity of holding on to their inherited government job:

[T]hey told themselves they would get used to it. They told themselves they were already used to it, coming as they did from a people in the far north of Scotland who had for generations been used to the sea and the wind and sleet and rocky outcrops. (375)

He goes on to describe the effect that such isolation has on people who would habitually

“spend months that sometimes stretched into years, talking only to dogs or to themselves or to imaginary people who blended into ghosts” (376). As Agnes’ story develops, the reader is repeatedly reminded of the power of imagination to fill in empty spaces and invent a version of reality in which physical and psychological realms do not necessarily correspond.

Meanwhile, the plot of this complex and uncertain narrative is entirely convincing. The events are described lucidly and in sufficient detail to render them credible: the story of the protagonist’s tragic affair with the red haired man and the unhappy decisions she is required to make as a result of his death (particularly leaving her child in the care of her aunt, then returning to the island with her parents and remaining there alone after their deaths) is romantic, but it does not seem to be beyond the reader’s ability to believe, given that the island has become an essential part of the family identity. Even the scene where she encounters the fishermen is perhaps a bit surprising, but not unbelievable. According to the narrative, she saw the fishermen approaching the island and waved them toward a school of mackerel. Having filled their boat to capacity, the fishermen join her on the shore, where she proceeds to have sex with all of them. They leave her (after emptying their boat of the now-spoiled fish), and as she watches them go she hopes that she will become pregnant “because there was so much of it and it went on for so long” (403). Later she reveals that, to her disappointment, “her expected child had never arrived” (404). However, upon rereading the story, we begin to challenge the authenticity of these events as we realise they exist only in the memory of an old woman whose own perceptions are far from reliable. With this narrative context in mind, it becomes evident that many narrative details are incongruous with the “reality” of the

story and that the phrasing of these details echoes earlier events. For example, the dogs (whose vicious response to strangers is noted every other time a stranger approaches the island) are silent when the fishermen disembark; in fact, they “lay above the water line, panting and watching everything,” just as they do when watching Agnes wade into the sea (397).²⁰ As she waits, she observes aloud, “They seem to be taking an awfully long time.” She speaks “to no one in particular” to break the building tension as she waits for them to respond to her signal; it is only then that “she saw the prow of the boat rounding the island’s end” (400). It is perhaps in this moment of delay that the narrative drifts into fantasy.

When she describes her sexual encounter with the fishermen, Agnes emphasises how the “frenzy” (402) between them was driven by “all that had happened and not happened to them. By all the heat and the loneliness and the waiting and all the varied events that had conspired to create their day” (401), leaving open the possibility that it is her heat and loneliness and waiting that she remembers and projects onto the men. It is problematic that she speaks not only of all that has happened but also of what has *not* happened. Her memory of the white-haired man, the fisherman on whom her attention particularly focuses, likewise forces the reader to question events, for her description of his actions as he carefully folds his clothes and places his cap upon them “as if he were doing it out of long habit and was preparing to lie down with his wife” (402) seems

²⁰ For example, we are told that the red-haired man comes at a time when “the family’s dogs still ran down to the wharf to bark at the approaching boats and to snarl at the men who got out of them” (378). Likewise, the protagonist’s father follows the dogs who “ran down to the wharf barking and snarling” when the men return in the spring, “calling to the dogs and welcoming the men and telling them not to be afraid” (385). When the party of men go out to the island in winter to look for her brother, “[t]he dogs came down snarling and circling” (391). Later, “[w]hen the boats approached, the dogs barked,” the protagonist envisions herself “in her disheveled men’s clothing and surrounded by her snarling dogs;” and she looks out the window “in answer to the barking of the dogs... and saw the boat approaching” (406).

inconsistent with her memory of their frenzied lovemaking. When Agnes again meets the white-haired man in a store on the mainland two years later, she remembers “the whiteness of his body beneath the blue jersey and the frenzied afternoon beneath the summer sun” (404) but there is no sign of recognition from him. This lack of recognition also points to narrative indeterminacy, unless fishermen are not unused to meeting libidinous, scantily clad young women who live alone on islands guarded by vicious dogs. We are left to wonder if this is a returning trace of a solitary fantasy that evolved when the fishermen, whom she had waved around the island to where the mackerel could be found, failed to follow her signal.

Further ambiguity arises in Agnes’s narrative when doubt is cast on whether or not even the mackerel are actually there: “she could see, or thought she could see, pods or schools of mackerel breaking the surface” (398).²¹ The ambiguity of what is real, in combination with the earlier reference to lonely people engaging in conversation with imaginary people and ghosts, raises questions about the reliability of this episode and, by extension, about the rest of the narrative—particularly its conclusion. The effect of such unreliability is a narrative in which “[t]he constructs of memory and the fictions of myth merge to unsettling effect” (Nicholson “Regions” 135). MacLeod sets a scene fraught with sexual tension leading up to the encounter with the fishermen, but we are also

²¹ Yet another example of the way in which MacLeod combines elements of sexual frustration with the ways in which perception can become distorted can be seen in his description of Agnes wading out into the sea and noticing how her “coveralled limbs” were “distorted in the green water” (397). Afterward, she returns to the lighthouse, hangs her wet coveralls, then is startled by the sight of them when she glimpses them over her shoulder—as they hang on the line, she perhaps imagines for a moment that she is not alone. MacLeod describes how “[t]heir dangling legs rasped together with the gentlest of frictions and the moisture had changed their colour up to the waist. Droplets dripped from them onto the summer grass which was visibly distorted by their own moving shadow” (398). Further images of her sexual frustration anticipate the arrival of the fisherman.

reminded of the protagonist's relative inexperience during the encounter, for "[s]he had never seen fully aroused men before, having known only one man at one time, and having experienced in that damp darkness more of feeling than sight" (401).

Furthermore, her inexperience, combined with the earlier observation that she seldom walked down by the shanties "because she felt uncomfortable walking so close to so many men" (379), makes her reception of the four fisherman rather surprising.

In addition to these carefully crafted incongruities, imagistic echoes haunt Agnes' narrative and create an unrelieved tension as she recounts her experiences. Images of the "blackening clots of blood" on the fishermen's clothes (401) echo the blood that began to "darken and dry" (387) when she punctured her thumb with a knitting needle in the moment she received news of her lover's death, which is further echoed when the men snag their thumbs on fishhooks. Similarly, the words that colour Agnes' reminiscence of her encounter with the fishermen echo her descriptions of "frenzied mackerel" that are "deep into their spawning season," and of "watch[ing the dogs] in the fury of their own mating" (402), suggesting both the primal quality of her desire as well as raising the possibility that she has fantasized these events and incorporated the details of past memories into her fantasies. These verbal repetitions suggest that she has appropriated details from other parts of her narrative to fill gaps and (re)invent events in order to rewrite a lonely history that may otherwise be too painful to face. This repetition is consistent with what psychoanalysts call "acting out" trauma, in which

the subject, in the grip of unconscious wishes and fantasies, relives these in the present with an impression of immediacy which is heightened by the analysand's refusal or inability to acknowledge their origin and, therefore, their repetitive character. The behaviour of acting out generally displays a compulsive aspect

which is at odds with the rest of the analysand's behaviour patterns. (Connerton 25)

As Connerton explains, "in the compulsive repetition the agents fail to remember the prototype of their present actions. On the contrary, they have the strong impression that the situations in which they are 'caught up' are fully determined by the circumstances of the moment. The compulsion to repeat has replaced the capacity to remember" (25). Such repression, repetition, and (re)invention would be consistent with the solitary and traumatic experiences of Agnes' life, in which traces of truth haunt not only her rewriting of the past but her perceptions of the present.

The most dramatic example of Agnes' rewriting of the present takes place at the end of the story. Here, history repeats itself with the appearance of another red-haired man who again promises to take her away. This time, however, she is old and the red-haired man is her grandson who has just returned from Toronto, and who leaves her with his promise to return. She anxiously waits for her grandson, not entirely certain whether she's just imagined him (410-1)—a problematic acknowledgment that must also inform our reading of her "memory" of the fisherman. The conversation between Agnes and her grandson contains eerie echoes of an earlier conversation with her red-headed lover. Before he leaves, he too promises that they "will go and live somewhere else;" as he leaves, he tells her "I have to go now. . . but I'll see you later. I'll come back" (381, 382, 410). As the season progresses, she takes little interest in her usual winter preparations since she believes she will soon be leaving the island. On the stormy night described at the onset of the story, while Agnes sits wondering if she sees or merely remembers the mainland, the red-haired man returns to keep his promise.

However, it is not the grandson who has come to take her away but rather her own lost red-haired lover, appearing as a ghostly figure who is still twenty one. Again, events follow the same sequence as they did when he came to her in the past. She follows him down to the water and into his boat which, he tells her in an echo of the conversation they had on their one night together, “has to be back by dawn” (384, 410). The story ends in mystery, for when the lighthouse beam crosses the water, “its solitary beam found no MacPhedrans on the island or the sea” (412). As Nicholson writes, the mystery is constructed by the way “‘Island’ shades from being a study in the psychology of loneliness into a ghost story, using that sub-genre to explore the condition of myth, as a combination of sexual longing, disappointed love and frustrated motherhood turns relentless realism into fantasy” (“Regions” 135). We are left, in the end, to wonder whether the ghost in the story is supernatural or psychological in origin: has Agnes at last been rescued by her long lost lover, or has she experienced a hallucination and walked into the sea? And, if we suspect the ghost originates in her mind, we must also wonder: at what point did ghosts and fantasies enter the story?

“Island” articulates the notion that “memory, when we look at it, dissolves its boundaries and cannot be wholly distinguished from imagination or from thought itself” (Tonkin 104). For Agnes, who seems at the end to be rescued from the island by the ghost of her lover, ideas or images (“shadows and echoes,” as they are described in “The Boat”) held in the mind are no less real than what can be said to have “actually” existed, at least not in any meaningful way for the impressions of the senses are unreliable and can be rewritten in one’s memory. The only clues to help the reader determine the veracity of the events described in the story exist in ghosts and traces that the narrative is

unable to repress or erase.

The questions raised in Agnes' narrative (which like most of MacLeod's tales takes place "now," in the present tense, and unfolds as we read) cause the reader to look back and wonder when memory became unreliable, and at which point fact became translated from memory into fantasy. Of course, MacLeod also causes us—for it is in the very fabric of the short stories that we cannot separate memory and fantasy—to wonder if such questions are even worth the asking. In the end, it does not really matter whether or not the protagonist of "Island" experienced her sexual encounter with the fishermen, or is taken from the island by her long-dead lover. Just as it does not really matter whether or not the narrator's great-grandfather in "Vision" was really afflicted with second sight, or the father in "The Boat" committed heroic suicide to "save" his son. The significance of these stories lies in the fact that they represent cohering forms of reality for their narrators. In other words, the narratives that people hold in their minds, as well as the memories in which they invest meaning and belief, shape their perceptions of reality, and—as we see in "Island"—can come to replace "what really happened." In Karen Armstrong's words, "A myth. . . is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information" (10). MacLeod's mythic fiction exploits a sense of realism that is always and everywhere compromised, so that truth and fiction, and memory and cognition are inseparable.

As a result, MacLeod's narrators are often unreliable—though with varying degrees of self-awareness—because of their ongoing investment in the mythologies of the past. For some, this investment takes the form of absolute immersion in the past as we saw in Agnes' narrative; for others, like the narrator of "The Vastness of the Dark," it manifests

in their attempts to escape the confines of tradition and community.²² MacLeod continues to investigate the consequences of viewing our present experiences through the lens of the past in *No Great Mischief*. The novel's themes of history, memory, identity, and loss resonate with MacLeod's earlier fiction, particularly when the reader is attuned to the organizing role of memory in a narrative where much is left unsaid. Through the eyes of Alexander MacDonald, *No Great Mischief* traces the evolution of the MacDonald family history over a span of two centuries. In particular, MacLeod focuses on the ways in which the family divides into two distinct branches, creating what Jane Urquhart playfully describes in *Sanctuary Line* as a "bifurcating" family history (137). While one of these branches moves forward with the times and eagerly adapts to modern trends and progress, the other remains firmly entrenched in the traditions of the past. MacLeod is particularly interested in the ways in which the more progressive members of clan MacDonald, despite the luxury and privilege of their lives, seek to invest meaning and value in their lives by connecting with the traditions and history that they seem to have abandoned. Through Alexander's representations of the more traditional branch of the family, particularly his older brother Calum, MacLeod illustrates for his readers the critical importance of maintaining a sense of connection with one's origins that moves beyond the scope of Canadian history and borders.

Alexander's tale begins with the first Calum MacDonald's immigration to Cape Breton Island in 1779, which had been undertaken for reasons that "[a]nyone who knows

²² In this story, the young narrator James leaves home on his eighteenth birthday, in order to escape the family tradition of working in the local coal mine. However, like many of MacLeod's narrators "who acknowledge fully the desire for change," he is at least partially "paralysed mentally by [his] ingrained commitment to the burden of historical obligations" (Hiscock 55).

the history of Scotland. . . is not hard-pressed to understand” (18). Here, Alexander alludes to the Highland Clearances of the 1700s, which left an indelible mark on not only the social and communal histories of Scotland but of Eastern Canada as well. The Highlanders, who were forced from their land by English land-owners and sometimes their own chieftains, brought with them to the new world vivid memories of home and clan. These cultural memories are of central concern in all of MacLeod’s fiction, and continue to be more than nostalgic reminiscences of a lost homeland. Rather, they have been an essential element of living memory for more than two hundred years, and have been embedded in perceptions of the unfolding present to become a determining factor in the way in which modern Scottish-Canadian identity has continued to evolve. As we saw in the short stories, the narrative of *No Great Mischief* is densely packed with references to the myths, traditions, and language of the Scottish Highlanders. For Alexander, the communal histories and family mythologies of *clann Chalum Ruaidh* not only provide the context for his experiences but shape, both consciously and unconsciously, his ongoing interpretations of those experiences and relationships into similar mythical forms. By interweaving Alexander’s reminiscences of the history of the Highland clans with the defining moments of his own personal experience, MacLeod remythologizes what he perceives as ancient Gaelic concerns.

This remythologizing reverberates between the novel and the short stories through Alexander’s description of the contemporary *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. Despite the seemingly anachronistic and archaic nature of the clan system, the notion of the *clann* provides an essential foundation of identity for the MacDonald family, particularly as it is embodied in the gang of miners—including the narrator’s three elder brothers—who

“follow the shafts” out of both economic necessity and loyalty to the past. Like MacKinnon (the narrator of the short story “The Closing Down of Summer” and also a miner), who describes himself as “a gladiator who fights always the impassiveness of water as it drips on darkened stone” (198), these clansmen are contemporary warriors, linked to Highland ancestors through myth and genealogy. For the other descendants of *Calum Ruadh* who have moved away from such close identification with the past, these representatives of the *clann* provide a living connection to the history and language of their ancestors, which likewise informs their notion of communal identity. These links are forged and preserved in the memory of their own *seanaichie*—embodied by Alexander, the “book one” (*Mischief* 173)—who is, in turn, shaped by the story that he tells. Like the narrator of “The Boat,” Alexander has been in a position to “choose between upholding old beliefs and forging his own path in life” (Riegel 234). Although he has not followed in his brothers’ footsteps, his sense of self is heavily informed by the history he shares with these men, having lived and worked with them for a brief but meaningful period of time during his youth. Alexander is well equipped for the role of *seanaichie*: in his narrative, he is able to bridge the gap between the modern and the more traditional manifestations of the *clann* for he has shared history with both.

In Gaelic tradition, the *seanaichie*’s chief occupation was “the study and transmission of traditional history, genealogy, and legend” (*OED*). Historically, both warrior and *seanaichie* played very different but complementary roles in the survival of the clans: on the one hand, the warrior ensured the physical, day to day survival of his people against hostile clans and armies, whereas the *seanaichie* ensured that both the warrior and the clan he protected survived the battle against time. By fulfilling his role as *seanaichie*,

Alexander is likewise able to fulfil the fundamental duty prescribed by his grandparents, which links the family back to those mythical Highland ancestors: “always look after your own blood” (*Mischief* 12). Through Alexander’s sense of what it means to “look after your blood” in both a personal and an historical narrative context, MacLeod dramatizes the shared provenance between memory, myth, and story.

This shared provenance is addressed repeatedly in Alexander’s characterisations of his family members, particularly of his oldest brother Calum. When first introducing his brother, Alexander takes us through the streets of Toronto and into the cheap housing that shelters a transient population. The narrator speaks with the voice of experience when he describes the poverty—both material and spiritual—that surrounds him as he approaches Calum’s door. This description contains Alexander’s memories of many previous ventures into similar places:

Between these storefront doors, there are often other doors that the casual person might not notice because they seem so commonplace. . . . Almost all of these buildings. . . have a wooden stairway that leads steeply up to a hall lit by a yellow forty-watt bulb, and along this hallway and sometimes along other hallways above it are the people who live above the street level stores. Contrary to the myth, few of the people who live here are the owners of the stores beneath them. They are, instead, people who do not own much of anything. (4)

Unlike the financially successful orthodontist who narrates the events, Calum fits the generalizations that Alexander has made about the people who inhabit such places: they are typically “men who eat too little and drink too much” (8), many of whom “move in the night without paying their rent” or who “stab one another with kitchen knives in quarrels over their wine; or when they are found dead in their urine-soaked beds, strangled and choked on strands of their own vomit” have no “next of kin to contact” (5-

6). It is perhaps understandable, then, that the narrator approaches his brother's door with trepidation, "troubled, as always, by the fear of what I might find" (7).

The meeting between the two brothers is, as always, tense and characterised by conversations about the distant past—both their own and that of their famed ancestor, *Calum Ruadh*, for whom the clan is named. Alexander's description of Calum's advanced alcoholism culminates in an image of him "spitting blood or swaying in the shadows as he attempts to urinate in the sink" (*Mischief* 11); combined with Alexander's hasty retreat from the apartment to buy his volatile brother more drink, this image creates a vision of Calum as a wreck of a man who has been burdened with a "long history of violent transgressions" (242). However, during what has been described as "the longest trip in literature to the beer store" (Williams 98), Alexander constructs another image of his brother. Prompted by memories of their shared history, the narrator envisions Calum as a warrior and a leader. Actions that resulted in violence are invested with meaning and extenuating circumstance; finer sensibilities and loyalties are inscribed on his character. We discover that Calum is a man haunted not only by the loss of parents and a younger brother but by his imagined responsibility for their deaths, for he was not there to save them when they perished.²³ He is deeply affected by what Margarét Gunnarsdóttir Champion refers to as "*foundational losses*," in which "exile, death of loved ones, violent conflict, and destitution form beginnings, turning points, and explanations" (227) for an individual's character and motivation. As a consequence

²³ The differences in the brothers' perspectives and their differing senses of responsibility to their "blood" are summed up in Calum's response to the narrator's observation that, had Calum been on the ice when their parents and brother fell through, he would have been lost as well. Calum replies, "I look at it differently.... If I had been with them I might have saved them" (93)

of these losses, Calum, whom the narrator describes as naturally taciturn, has been further silenced by the crushing weight of his past.

It is significant, therefore, that Alexander gives voice to Calum's narrative. In "The Closing Down of Summer," MacLeod explores "the problem of the intelligent, reflective, inarticulate person" (Nicholson "Alistair" 198), a problem which provides insight into Alexander's representation of Calum's character. In his monologue, MacKinnon expresses an unfulfilled desire for communication: "I would like somehow to show and tell the nature of my work and perhaps some of my entombed feelings to those that I would love, if they would care to listen" (*Island* 197). The reader of *No Great Mischief* can infer that Calum shares McKinnon's sentiments from Alexander's interpretations of his brother's actions and from Calum's own terse observations, which often echo their grandparents' inherited clichés.²⁴ A man to whom action comes more naturally than words, Calum internalizes and lives the maxims of the *clann*.

Connected by verbal echoes and imagery to legendary clan chief Mac Ian, Calum is the miners' undisputed leader. He is the one with whom the manager negotiates; he is the one chosen for the difficult jobs (135). He is also the one who assumes responsibility—and is assumed responsible—for the members of his gang and his family. MacLeod himself makes the connection explicit in an interview with William Baer: "[Mac Ian] had the same kind of self-confidence and self-sufficiency that can be seen in Alexander's

²⁴ These echoes often contain some irony, as we see in Calum's appropriation of Grandma's expression, "Always look after your own blood" (for example, 12) or of Grandpa's favourite quote, "My hope is constant in thee, Clan MacDonald" (for example, 175). At the same time, the maxims seem to provide a means of expressing affection or sorrow that he otherwise could not articulate. Throughout his narrative, Alexander balances Calum's reputation for violence with evidence of a gentle nature by drawing attention to Calum singing to the whales (93-4), his kindness to the mare Christy (95, 122), and his rescue of an abandoned kitten (196). Alexander also recalls Calum's thoughtful remembrances of their parents (199-200), and his unstinting loyalty to the members of his *clann*.

oldest brother, Calum, who generally faces his problems by thinking, ‘I’ve been looking after myself since I was sixteen. I can handle this.’ But you can’t always handle everything, as Mac Ian and Calum eventually found out” (346). Like Mac Ian, another “troublesome man” who was made to “serve as an example for those who chose to break the law” (*Mischief* 242), Calum is translated in his brother’s narrative from an ex-convict spending his final days drinking away his sorrows into the sort of leader around whom legends grow. Through this translation, he is not only an elder brother who is slowly succumbing to the ravages of his own turbulent history but a representative of a traditional way of life that is being swallowed by the modern. Alexander fulfils the duty of looking after his blood by translating the past—both personal and communal—into an essential and relevant element of living twentieth century memory.²⁵

From the outset, the tension between traditional and modern culture is represented by the tension between the two brothers. Alexander, the successful orthodontist, reluctantly describes himself as “a twentieth-century man. . . . ‘*whether I like it or not*’” (*NGM* 14). By becoming an orthodontist, Alexander has broken with the clan tradition that has led his surviving brothers to their work in the mines. There is in this break a sense of progress for, as his Grandpa laughingly tells him, “This means you will never have to work again” (101); however, there is also the lurking sense of an unacknowledged betrayal, which reverberates in Calum’s cryptic comment, “We have come a long way,

²⁵ MacLeod himself observes that Alexander is “haunted by what his grandparents taught him as a child after the death of his parents, ‘Always look after your own blood.’ So Alexander, always indebted to his grandparents, feels this obligation far more than his older brothers who lived on their own after the death of their parents” (Baer 343). At the same time, however, in the context of Calum’s role as clan leader and the loyalty he shows for his *clann*, we begin to suspect that the elder brothers have a more discerning sense of who is regarded as “your own blood.” For them, “blood” is defined and reinforced by communal or tribal connections rather than mere genetics.

you and I, and there are no hard feelings” (9). Again, it is MacKinnon in “The Closing Down of Summer” who is able to articulate the two brothers’ feelings:

Our sons will go to the universities to study dentistry or law and to become fatly affluent before they are thirty. . . . They will join expensive clubs. . . . and they will not die in falling stone or chilling water or thousands of miles from those they love. They will not die in any such manner, partially at least because we have told them not to. . . [And] because it seems they will follow our advice instead of our lives, we will experience, in any future that is ours, only an increased sense of anguished isolation and an ironic feeling of confused bereavement. (“Closing” 199)

The sense of isolation and bereavement that MacKinnon describes is felt not only by Calum, who has followed the family tradition, but by Alexander as well. This not-quite betrayal haunts Alexander in ways that he himself seems unable to explain: as MacKinnon further observes, “[p]erhaps the dentist feels mute anguish as he circles his chair. . . . Perhaps he too in his quiet heart sings something akin to Gaelic songs, sings in an old archaic language private words that reach no one” (199). In a manner that recalls the narrator from “The Boat,” Alexander searches for meaning in the face of a continuing existential crisis as he finds himself “trapped in the net of [his] own guilt and history” (*Mischief* 12). All he can do in this situation is attempt to assuage his anguish and his guilty conscience by making these painful weekly visits to Calum, and through his revisioning of his brother in what he perceives to be the spirit of their Highland ancestors. Through Alexander’s uneasy awareness that he is part of a movement away from tradition, MacLeod signals to his readers what is at stake for the Gaelic community: the orthodontist adopts the role of the traditional storyteller in an attempt to preserve that which is in danger of being lost.

Alexander's attempts to preserve his sense of their Highland heritage are most apparent in his depiction of the summer during which he passed up a scholarship to work in the mine with his brothers after one of their gang is killed. It is during this time that Alexander becomes an active participant in his brothers' lives, and through them finds a way to connect with a larger family history. Alexander envisions the miners, like the Highland warriors of legend, battling their enemies (whether stone and clay or human) and living by a code of honour, wherein loyalty to the *clann* is of the utmost importance. However, this loyalty is not a simple matter of "always look[ing] after your own blood" in the politely civilized fashion that Alexander has experienced: it is an allegiance that transcends all other social codes and any form of self-interest. For example, when one of their miners is killed in a suspicious accident, the *clann* disregards the foreman's orders and they return *en masse* to Cape Breton for the young man's funeral: "most of them had quit. They had come out of the bunkhouses and up out of the drifts and the shaft's bottom and some had flung their gear into the bush. . . . Some of them had collected their pay before they left, while others had not bothered" (113).²⁶ This unhesitating dedication culminates in a mortal battle between the *clann* and their French-Canadian rivals in the camp, whom many members of the *clann* blame for their kinsman's death. Caught up in a life-and-death struggle with the French leader, Fern Picard, Calum avenges his cousin, saves his own life, and ends the fight by bludgeoning Picard to death with a wrench—a crime for which he would receive sentence of life imprisonment

²⁶ This image directly connects the miners with the Highland warriors of the past, for it echoes Alexander's grandfather's description of the warriors "throwing [their weapons] away into heather" as they return home from battle (85).

(242).²⁷ Lepaludier's description of McKinnon's miners as "primitive men" speaks to Alexander's perception of his older brothers and the *clann*: he argues that McKinnon's men "form a tribe like their Scottish ancestors on the 'battlefield of the world' ["Closing" 185], fighting 'adversary' walls ["Closing" 201]. They have their own rules and seem to be above the laws applying to ordinary citizens. . . . In fact, the miners belong to a timeless, hence mythical world" (49-50). Alexander seeks to preserve in his narrative this mythical world, which contrasts so absolutely with his own; however, he does so in a manner less naive than, for example, we see in his Grandpa's sanguine memories of Highland history.²⁸

The brief period of time that Alexander spent in the mining camp expands to fill much of his narrative. The significance of this time is reflected in the way it continues to inform his present perceptions of the work he does as an orthodontist: "When I first started practising dentistry, I sometimes saw myself in my white coat with my dentist's drill as an extension of my earlier self, with the jackleg drill. Leaning toward the surface that I drilled while the cooling water splashed back towards my face. Drilling deep but not too deep. Trying to get it right" (*Mischief* 253). The time he spent with his brothers in the mines has had an irrevocable impact on his perceptions of the world, as his ongoing concern with "[t]rying to get it right" implies. This concern is clearly fundamental to his memories of himself as a miner, which in turn inform his perceptions of himself as an orthodontist and as a seanaichie. His narrative is not only an attempt to

²⁷ There are further connections with the Highlanders for, like the ancient warriors, the miners "fight in the old way," even when "they had also lost a lot" (83); in addition, they share the (occasionally unfortunate) tendency of "fighting with their hearts rather than their heads" which results in "giving their hearts and their sinew not for 'management' but for the shared history of one another" (218-9).

²⁸ See, for example, the contrast between Alexander's two grandfather's perceptions of the Battle of Killiecrankie, as well as Alexander's own analysis of it (83-6).

look after his blood, but to get it—the spirit of this history—right in the process. Janice Kulyk Keefer argues that Alexander’s narrative “underscores the fraudulence of his chosen profession. Throughout the novel, MacLeod insists upon the superficiality, triviality and even dishonesty of Alexander’s life as defined by the so-called work he does” (“Loved” 74). Keefer sees in *No Great Mischief* a critique of the “uselessness and opportunism of a safe, respectable, remunerative profession that caters to people’s vanity and plunders their wallets,” which leads to “exalt[ing] the kind of skilled, laborious and largely thankless work which involved dirtying or cracking the hands, and risking life and limb” (74-5). She proceeds to create a heroic and heavily romanticised portrait of “‘the doom of Calum’: his fall from grace, in order to defend the honour of his clan, his harsh period of penitential exile, and his long-delayed redemption, in the form of a permanent return to his homeland, to the dark earth of Cape Breton” (79). In Keefer’s reading, Calum becomes an idealised hero representing the struggles of Canada’s Gaelic communities both past and present—struggles that she believes Alexander has, in effect, sold out.

However, as Alexander himself might say, “It’s not that simple” (*NGM* 55). Keefer’s reading of Alexander’s responses to his occupation and to his brother seems reductive, as she inadequately elaborates on Alexander’s attempts to commemorate the past *appropriately* and on the way Alexander’s personal history and experience distinguishes him from his fellow orthodontists and their superficial lives.²⁹ MacLeod also takes care

²⁹ There is an important distinction between an attempt to represent a people or events in accordance with their spirit as opposed to accurately according to the “facts”: as the narrator’s twin sister, Catriona, observes in a discussion about the ways in which the past can be rewritten to accommodate personal perspectives, “I guess when you look at it now, one meaning can be true and the other can be accurate”

to demonstrate that Alexander is keenly aware of the fact that he has abandoned tradition in favour of the comfort provided by a safer and more consistently lucrative profession. At the same time, this awareness is complicated by Alexander's recognition of the drawbacks of clinging to the past, as well as the dangers of nostalgia—dangers from which Keefer herself does not appear to be immune. Therefore, it is important to note that, as Alexander's initial depiction of his brother suggests, the transformation of Calum into a hero is the result of Alexander's careful narrative construction: as we saw with *Mac an Amharuis*, the past and present are brought together to create a composite image of Calum's character. This image contains both his best and worst aspects. In this way, Alexander manages to evoke his audience's sympathy while avoiding the overt romanticism that characterises Keefer's interpretation of Calum's narrative; the contrast between these two interpretations of Calum's history demonstrates the importance of our awareness of the implications of "authorial" agenda on any narrative perspective.

Alexander's narrative has significance beyond his attempts to commemorate his eldest brother, for his narrative incorporates appropriated memories and so becomes a record of communal history as well. As MacLeod's depiction of a twentieth century Gaelic community illustrates, the society into which we are born (constructed as it is of language, tradition, convention, and moral codes) has a determining effect not only on how we remember but *what* we remember. Maurice Halbwachs explains that "the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances of each other. It is not necessary that the group be familiar with them. It suffices that we cannot consider them except from the outside—that is, by putting ourselves in the

(91).

position of others—and that in order to retrieve these remembrances we must tread the same path that others would have followed had they been in our position” (53). In other words, our memories can only be recalled and interpreted in relation to “persons, places, dates, words, forms of language, that is to say the whole material and moral life of the societies of which we are part or of which we have been part” (Connerton 36). We cannot extract ourselves from the context of our community, for its influence extends even to our thoughts and memories of private experiences which are not shared and remain unarticulated. Through the ways in which the members of clan MacDonald interact with each other, we see the effects of these commonly held appropriated memories on their sense of community—despite the fact that “[w]hat these descendants of the first immigrants ‘recall’ is not a world that they have seen for themselves but an echo of voices that they have always heard” (Williams 85). Through these appropriated memories, Alexander is able to reconstruct and represent the events not only of his life, but of his ancestors and relatives despite the fact that (as he says) “obviously much of this information is not really mine—not in the sense that I experienced it. . . . But still, whatever its inaccuracies, this information has come to be known in the manner that family members come to know one another because they share such close proximity. Or as Alexander’s grandmother would say, “How could you *not* know that?” (53).

The past is regarded with great reverence by the MacDonald family in ways that call to mind what Misztal refers to as Romantic definitions of memory. She argues that “[a]t the heart of the Romantic movement in nineteenth-century Europe was the concept of memory as a power of the soul, a nostalgia for the past and a focus on the imaginative power of memory. . . . The Romantics claimed that each human group must strive after

‘what lies in its bones’” (41). This notion of embodied memory is unexpectedly fitting, particularly for the members of clan MacDonald whose collective experience of the past seems inscribed in their DNA:

There are a few physical characteristics of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* which seem to have been passed on and, in some cases almost to have been intensified. One seems to be a predisposition to have twins, most of whom are fraternal rather than identical. And another has to do with what is sometimes called “colouring”. Most of the people are fair-skinned, but within families some of the individuals have bright red hair while that of their brothers and sisters is a deep, intense and shining black. (26)

This genetic phenomenon allows members of clan MacDonald to be recognised anywhere, as Alexander’s young nephew discovers when he is stopped by several men (who turn out to be members of the clan) on the street: “And then another of the men reached into his pocket and passed him a fifty-dollar bill. ‘What’s this for?’ asked my nephew named Pankovich. ‘It is,’ said the man, ‘for the way you look. Tell your mother it is from *clann Chalum Ruaidh*’” (27). This episode demonstrates that, for this family, the connection to the communal past is almost mystical in nature as it is literally encoded in blood and bone.³⁰

The effect of Alexander’s appropriation of and participation in shared communal memories not only locates the contemporary *clann Chalum Ruaidh* within the larger community but within the *clann* mythology. According to Mircea Eliade, the “essential function” of such mythologies is the “provision of an opening into the Great Time, a periodic re-entry into Time primordial” which allows individuals to “break through the

³⁰ We see another example of this when Catriona, the narrator’s twin sister, has a deeply idealized and terribly romanticised experience of homecoming when she visits Scotland. There, she seems to walk into mythology as she is greeted by Scottish members of *clann Chalum Ruaidh* who not only recognise her immediately but, after a few minutes’ acquaintance, tell her joyfully, “It is as if you had never left” (150).

homogeneity of time, to 'get beyond' duration and re-enter a time qualitatively different from that which creates, in its course, their own history" (34). These mythologies thereby allow them to transcend temporality by entering mythic time, as the blank spaces that exist beyond their personal memory are filled. Furthermore, it recreates lost ancestral landscapes in memory, thereby reducing the sense of temporal and geographical distance from those places that causes the homesickness inherited by the descendants of the immigrant. Jane Urquhart describes Canada as "a nation composed of people longing for a variety of abandoned homelands and the tribes that inhabited them, whether these be the distant homelands of our natives [sic] peoples, the rural homelands vacated by the post-war migrations to the cities, or the various European or Asian homelands left behind by our earliest settlers" ("MacLeod" 37-8). Further, she discusses the desire of such people "to preserve that which was, and even that which is, against the heartbreaking ravages of time; to preserve, not necessarily with factual accuracy, but rather with something that one can only call, trite though it sounds, emotional truth" (39). Because of this "emotional truth," which is echoed in MacLeod's distinction between "true" and "accurate" (*NGM* 91), "a tale from the past sheds as much clear light on a character or a situation as a contemporary word or deed and, in the end, preservation is accomplished by establishing the timelessness of legend" (Urquhart, "MacLeod" 41).

This sense of the timelessness of legend takes us back to Macquarrie's description of the human desire "for a wholeness of experience. . . that would gather up in itself past, present, and future" (Macquarrie 201). The urgency of the MacDonald family's desire to maintain a connection with their Highland ancestors is expressed in the painful

reflections of a dying schoolteacher in “The Road to Rankin’s Point,” who asks, “what is the significance of ancestral islands long left and never seen?” (*Island* 159). He explains this longing in terms of the importance of not merely escaping death but of transcending time itself:

I feel myself falling back into the past now, hoping to have more and more past as I have less and less future. My twenty-six years are not enough and I would want to go farther and farther back through previous generations so that I might have more of what now seems so little. (176)

There is, in this lament, the desire to transcend temporality that motivates the integration of personal narrative with that of the larger community in an attempt to both remember and belong to a history beyond one’s own.

As my earlier discussion of the short stories demonstrates, a wider history for MacLeod includes the ongoing and inescapable effect of trauma on his characters’ depiction of their narrative present. This trauma is often personal in nature, such as the death of a loved one or an injury or scar; however, underlying these personal traumas is always the communal sorrow that resulted from the Clearances and other instances of forced immigration. Storytelling allows MacLeod’s characters to cope with traumatic experiences, whether the event occurred in the recent or distant past, and whether it involves the individual or the community. Through the inscription of Gaelic language in his texts, MacLeod establishes a signifying system in which an endangered cultural narrative can be reclaimed. Alexander explains how, when he worked in the camp with his brothers, “certain voices would quietly attempt to identify us. ‘Those are the Highlanders,’ they would say, ‘from Cape Breton. They stay mostly to themselves’” (127). In addition to the “Highlander” designation, their use of Gaelic distinguishes them

as a group and further connects them to their Scottish ancestry: “It is hard to know why,” Alexander comments, “in such circumstances, we spoke Gaelic more and more. Perhaps by being surrounded by other individual groups we felt our lives more intensely through what we perceived as our own language” (127). Speaking in “our own language” reinforces group solidarity and creates an intensity of experience that allows these “Highlanders” to face traumatic experiences, such as the death of their cousin, in a manner that they imagine reflects the clan spirit of their ancestors. The inclusion of Gaelic words and phrases in the stories becomes both a reminder of trauma and a means of facing it, for the language connects its speakers with their past, allows them a sense of participating in an unchanging communal narrative, and becomes a language of shared intimacy and experience. For the reader, this relationship between past and present history reinforces the inevitable conclusion reached by the narrator of “Vision”: that “no story ever really stands alone” (*Island* 366).

That Gaelic communities in Canada, such as that of Cape Breton Island, have resisted invasive pressures from external influences—most obviously in the attempted preservation of Gaelic as the community’s first language—is a phenomenon that has received much critical attention. This resistance has been compromised in recent times; as Colin Nicholson notes, MacLeod “belongs to the first generation of Nova Scotians not brought up as Gaelic speakers” (“Decline” 43). MacLeod draws attention to the significance of this new privileging of English over Gaelic, referring to the change as the “breakdown of that [Gaelic] culture” (“Alistair” 190). The social and psychological effects of this breakdown on those of Gaelic ancestry register poignantly in his writings, in which Gaelic phrase and language are always present as ghostly reminders of an

endangered cultural memory. For many of MacLeod's narrators, Gaelic is "the language of the heart" (*NGM* 178), which is "constant and unchanging and speak[s] to [them] as the privately familiar" ("Closing" 194). There is a sense of melancholy in the narratives of these English-speaking storytellers: Gaelic forms a "shadow text" in their tales in which their "living possibility is inseparable from because mediated through a cultural past that is paradoxically marked by the sense of an inevitable ending and a simultaneous refusal to let go" (Nicholson "Decline" 44). In keeping with this paradox, MacLeod's fiction both laments and memorialises Highland culture without being limited by the connotations of separation and "pastness" that are inherent in these terms. His complex representation of the temporal relationship between individuals and their history (both personal and communal) is an essential element of his fiction, in which the past—even the distant past—is ever present.

For MacLeod, there is a certain insistent necessity in maintaining a relationship with the past. His older characters find comfort and consolation in belonging to a narrative that connects them to both their ancestors and their descendants; even his youngest and most rebellious characters' self-definitions are reliably shaped by the stories they inherit along with more apparent physical characteristics such as hair or eye colour. We do not, however, find this valorisation of the past in Michael Ondaatje's fiction. In fact, as I will discuss in Chapter 2, these communal narratives and identities are the very things that two of Ondaatje's most vivid characters, Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, reject and react against. For Ondaatje, connections with and memories of the past are much less straightforward, and even the desire to preserve such connections and memories is, at best, problematic.

Chapter Two

Embodied Resistance: Michael Ondaatje's *Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*

Not a story about me through their eyes then...

(Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* 20)

In my discussion of Alistair MacLeod's works, I focused on the ways in which memory is "the essential condition of our cognition" (Terdiman 9), particularly in terms of how, over time, the individual's autobiographical narrative evolves through the assimilation of multiple voices and remembered selves in order to create and maintain the sense of a single, cohering identity. As we have seen, this sense of a unified identity is "an existential necessity, necessary for our psychological survival amid the flux of experience" (Eakin 46)—even if, as Eakin suggests, such an identity is ultimately illusory.³¹ I also examined the ways in which these narratives of self are relational in nature, informed by the interplay between the individual's personal evolution and his or

³¹ Eakin observes that, throughout an individual's life, "the body changes, consciousness changes, memories change, and identity changes too, whether we like it or not" (93-4). When we speak of ourselves in the first person, the "simultaneous double reference of first-person autobiographical discourse to the present and the past masks the disruptions of identity produced by passing time and memory's limitations" (93).

her existence within a pre-existing community. This interplay derives from the fact that “memory is produced by an individual but is always produced in relation to the larger interpersonal and cultural worlds in which that individual lives—for example, one remembers one’s childhood as part of a family” (Miztal 76-77). Language, shared history, mythology, and shared genetics are all aspects of these larger communal worlds that play particularly important roles in the shaping of individual memories in MacLeod’s fiction. As MacLeod’s Gaelic-Canadian narrators illustrate through their attempts to interpret the past and position themselves within it, this relationship between individuals and their community forms the foundation upon which personal identity and narratives of self are constructed.

In Michael Ondaatje’s works, we find a similar concern with the role of both personal and communal memory in the creation of individual subjectivity. He, too, reflects on how both appropriated and personally acquired memories inevitably influence the developing consciousness, as do the community into which one is born and the relationships in which one becomes involved. Furthermore, like MacLeod, Ondaatje explore the ways in which the past is malleable and subject to revision according to the changing perspectives that come with age and experience. Ondaatje’s characters—particularly, as I will discuss in Chapter Three, those who possess the characteristics of the artist—are always cognisant on some level of the ways in which “collective memory not only reflects the past but also shapes present reality by providing people with understandings and symbolic frameworks that enable them to make sense of the world” (Miztal 13). These frameworks are reflected in the expectations of one’s community and the ways in which those expectations shape one’s own self-definitions. Both authors

create characters who rebel against their society's demands; however, whereas MacLeod envisions communal memory as an intrinsic element of subjectivity that "lies in [the] bones" (Misztal 41) of even the most rebellious individual's identity, Ondaatje's characters often feel disconnected from their community, oppressed by the weight of the past, and at odds with the group's expectations. As a consequence, when Ondaatje's characters rebel against these communal frameworks, they attempt to divorce themselves from the past and reinvent themselves entirely.

These authors' differing attitudes toward communal identity are reflected in their treatment of representations of the body. Both MacLeod and Ondaatje identify the body as a repository for personal and communal memory. Further, they both emphasise the relationship between the body and the mind, wherein identity is constructed by an embodied subject from physical as well as psychological and emotional experiences.³² However, Ondaatje also recognises the body as the site of "pre-personal" experience, which I will discuss below, wherein experience begins on a sensory level *before* subjectivity evolves. As a consequence, the tension between these two modes of perception—which also reflects the tension between memory and forgetfulness—causes the body to become a site of resistance in Ondaatje's works.

In order to map what we might call Ondaatje's labyrinthine representations of subjectivity, I have found it useful to begin with a definition of pre-personal or singular experience. If "personal" consciousness involves "[h]aving the nature or attributes of a

³² This notion of an embodied subject plays a critical role in our understanding of how subjectivity evolves for, according to Eakin, "[i]dentity turns on the question of the organism acknowledging or 'owning' what is proper to it" (29). Such acknowledgment or "owning" is essential because "[t]he body constitutes a physical representation of the individual's ongoing experience in time, which assists the mind in imagining a unified self" (47).

person; existing as an entity with self-awareness, not as an abstraction or an impersonal force” (*OED Online*), then “pre-personal” consciousness involves the experiencing of life forces before self-awareness evolves into subjectivity and is organised into narrative. It is a mode of perception that has not yet organised its experience of life into concepts or representations: such perceptions provide the raw material from which the individual’s subjectivity is composed. Ondaatje’s interest in bodily experience as the source of self-knowledge is vividly represented in his early works *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, where the central characters engage with the world in a manner that reflects their attraction to pre-personal (un)consciousness. For Billy the Kid, this attraction is symbolically represented by his fascination with plant and animal life. For Buddy Bolden, the spontaneous and intensely physical elements of his style of musical improvisation and performance become a metaphor for his attempts to remain engaged with life on a pre-personal level.

To remain thus engaged with pre-personal life, Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden must also remain fully immersed in the present moment. In order to do so, a sort of amnesia is required.³³ They must become temporally ungrounded without memory of the past or expectation for the future; experience must be broken down into its sensorial components; the world and its inhabitants must be regarded as an extension of their own consciousness. As Spinks demonstrates, Ondaatje’s representations of this process evoke

³³ In “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche discusses the necessity of forgetting. He contends that “Forgetting is essential to action of any kind. . . . Thus: it is possible to live almost without memory, and to live happily moreover, as the animal demonstrates; but it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting” (*Untimely* 62). Nietzsche suggests that, without the ability to forget, the burden of the past would paralyse us, and prevent us from taking action or experiencing happiness. In his representations of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, Ondaatje takes this form of active forgetting to an extreme in characters who feel compelled to sustain a state of constant activity and who favour a level of animal-like consciousness. For further discussion of active forgetting, please see Chapter Five.

what Deleuze and Guattari have called a ‘molecular’ perception of life: a vision that remains absolutely at the level of singularities and pre-personal attachments before they are organized and extended into collective or ‘molar’ formations such as law, ideology, history, and subjectivity. To begin from the perspective of molecular experience is to think of life in terms of the singular and partial investments from which individual ways of being are composed. (71)

According to Deleuze and Guattari, beings “which are of a molecular order” are those “whose functioning is indiscernible from their formation” (286). As a consequence, beings who function in such a manner “represent nothing, signify nothing, mean nothing, and are exactly what one makes of them, what is made with them, what they make in themselves” (288). “Molecular” perception, then, registers pre-personal experience in its most active form. It is instinctive and sensorial, separate not only from social discourse but from self-awareness: its “[a]ffects are sensible experiences. . . . liberated from organising systems of representation” (Colebrook 22). As a result, for a character viewing the world from a molecular perspective, all forms of social interaction are experienced in terms of their immediate effect on that character. Because this perspective is grounded in the body and its immediate responses, empathy and self-reflection are not part of molecular experience; such abstract emotions belong to higher forms of consciousness.

Whereas sympathy, empathy, and moral values and judgements are part of evolved personal consciousness, pre-personal interactions with others register largely in a sensorial, instinctual, or physical dimension. One can imagine that, for the outlaw whose infamy resides in the number of cold-blooded murders he has committed and the musician who is remembered for his reputation as a womaniser and a drinker as much as for his art, the absence of conscience and personal responsibility might have great

appeal. However, when we look more closely at the narratives of these two characters, we discover that the public personas of the outlaw and the philandering musician do not adequately represent the private experiences or motivations of these men. Rather, they are each seeking a form of “pure” existence, a concept I will develop throughout the chapter, which transcends the constraints of time and memory. These characters also attempt to resist the constraints of the relational nature of identity, in which “the self is defined by—and lives in terms of—its relations with others” (Eakin 43). It is significant, therefore, that Billy and Buddy each attempt to “[wipe] out his past” (*CTS* 16): neither one speaks of his childhood or immediate family.

Desirous in many ways of intimacy and relationships with others, both Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden simultaneously pursue and reject the investments and vulnerabilities that inevitably arise from engaging with others on a personal (as opposed to a pre-personal) level. In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden seek to immerse themselves in their pre-personal experiences in order to preserve their own sense of autonomy and thereby “escape the bonds of relational identity as an act of self-preservation” (Eakin 91). I will also discuss how this immersion in pre-personal experience is translated into their autobiographical narratives, and is then reinterpreted according to their evolving perspectives. Finally, I will consider the ways in which such reinterpretations affect memories of the past as well as impressions of the present. The resulting distortions of both past and present are fundamental to Ondaatje’s illustration of the paradoxical consequences of a conscious subject’s attempts to remain absorbed in his own pre-personal experience through a continual process of remembering to forget. This process of remembering to forget provides the basis of

these characters' resistance of their society's frameworks of meaning, which in turn contributes to the characters' "sheer *unreadability*" (Spinks 66).³⁴

There are few authentic historical traces left of William H. Bonney or Buddy Bolden, the real-life individuals upon whom the novels are based.³⁵ Ondaatje addresses the question of "what really happened" within the artistic frame of these texts by contextualising his characters through the inclusion of other historical figures, events, quotations, and photographs. However, this contextualisation is continually problematized as Ondaatje makes no attempt to distinguish the "authentic" elements from his invented ones. Jon Saklofske observes that

Ondaatje focuses his creative authority on actual people that have been neglected or overwhelmed by history. . . . His activity of collecting and transforming particular seeds and scraps of the past in a fragmented and fictional form enables Ondaatje to avoid the limitation of historical tradition and expectation of historical validity. Covered by his fingerprints, these privately recovered and restored fragments are retold and reintroduced into public circulation. (73)

Saklofske's image of historical fragments covered in Ondaatje's fingerprints is a telling one, illustrating how these appropriated narratives serve the dual purpose of providing (and simultaneously undermining) a familiar historical context for Ondaatje's characters,

³⁴ In "Sense and Singularity," Spinks refers specifically to the "unreadability" of Billy the Kid's character; however, his remarks can be applied effectively to Ondaatje's representation of Buddy Bolden as well. Spinks argues that "[w]hilst acknowledging the historically conditioned character of historical knowledge" (66), Ondaatje's depiction of pre-personal experience "rips a hole in representation by breaking experience down into the singular processes from which it is composed in order to explore the way events become facts and a self comes to conceive of its world" (65). Billy and Buddy both become "unreadable" in the sense that their personal narratives are expressions of atemporal sensorial impression rather than representations of a conscious and historically grounded subjectivity.

³⁵ Despite the overabundance of legends and rumours that surround Billy the Kid, genuine facts about his life are as rare as they are for Bolden. Michael Wallis observes in the Preface to his biography of Billy the Kid "[t]hat a young man known as Billy the Kid ever existed is an indisputable fact. His name is about all that anyone can ever agree upon when it comes to the telling of his story" (xi). He points to the difficulty of separating fact from fiction as he lists Billy the Kid's known aliases, including Henry Antrim, Kid Antrim, the Wandering Kid, Billy Bonney, El Chivato, Henry McCarty, and Billy the Kid (5).

while allowing for the creation of characters that are infused with the author's own imaginative interpretations.

These imaginative interpretations are of primary importance to Ondaatje, and serve a greater purpose than simply to illustrate the unreliable nature of historical record. In an interview with Sam Solecki, he explains, "what disturbs me in having my work interpreted as either physically or biographically right or wrong is that there's an emotional or psychological rightness which, for me, is more important than the other two" (23). This privileging of "emotional or psychological rightness" illuminates the reason Ondaatje virtually ignores the events that history has deemed memorable in these two men's lives; he is more concerned with circumstances that relate to their evolving characters and psyches, and to the effect that their growing legends have on their relationships with their contemporaries. For example, Ondaatje hardly mentions the Lincoln County war, which writers such as Walter Noble Burns and Michael Wallis have regarded as having crucial significance in Billy the Kid's evolution as an outlaw. Similarly, he ignores events (including Bolden's accelerating alcoholism and dementia, and his subsequent arrests) that, according to Donald M. Marquis's biography of the musician, occur in the year between Bolden's breakdown during the parade and his commitment to the East Louisiana State Hospital. To do so, he creates a time lapse of only a few months between the crisis and his incarceration.³⁶ This manipulation of

³⁶ Marquis also goes on to demonstrate that *Jazzmen*, one of Ondaatje's primary research sources, is itself entirely unreliable (4-6). He observes that, because so many researchers and jazz historians have relied on the information in *Jazzmen* and accepted it without question, "unsubstantiated facts became part of the legend" (6).

historical perspective and point-of-view is the enabling precondition for Ondaatje's aesthetic reworking of historical narrative.

As a result, the absence of uncontested fact is far from a hindrance for this author. Ondaatje himself declares, "I'm really drawn to unfinished stories. There's all those empty spaces you can put stuff in'" (Barbour 99). Nor do "the obligations to objectivity, accuracy, and completeness that characterize a good biography" dominate his representations of these historical characters (Jacobs 2). Rather, Ondaatje knowingly uses unverified and apocryphal sources because "even unsubstantiated rumors exist as 'historical' texts, whether oral or written, having been repeated so often. . . that they have taken on a existence separate from, and to a writer superior to, fact" (Barbour 100). For Ondaatje, such sources are superior to fact because, unlike the restrictive certainties of fact, rumour and gossip create opportunities for speculation and creative invention. Because he is interested in more than the archival remains of these men, such gaps in the narrative allow him to expand and develop these often contradictory traces by filling in the blanks of Billy's and Bolden's histories as his imagination and intuition prompt. The results are compelling and complex visions of two men who are both very concerned with the power of narrative: one because he intends to be remembered, the other because he intends to be forgotten.

Of course, it is unlikely that any reader will approach *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* without some sense of the legend upon which Ondaatje is drawing—a fact that would certainly meet with *this* Billy the Kid's approval, determined as he is to "be with the world till she dies" (*BTK* 84). The text itself is a collection of stories and anecdotes concerning the last year of outlaw William Bonney's life as he is relentlessly pursued by

his nemesis, Sheriff Pat Garrett. One by one, Billy's friends die violently at the hands of Garrett and his deputies. Billy himself is arrested and sentenced to death, though he escapes from prison and manages to evade Garrett for two and a half months before he, too, is assassinated in the summer of 1881. These are the historical "facts" that comprise the backbone of the collection. However, these events are of secondary importance in Ondaatje's portrayal of Billy the Kid, whose posthumous reflections on these events focalise much, though not all, of the collection and whose self-narration challenges our preconceptions of the figure we "know" from history.

Billy's *Collected Works* begin after the outlaw himself has already met an untimely end; consequently, the narrative does not follow a linear trajectory because the chronological progression of events leading to his "final minutes" in the "Texas midnight" at the Maxwell ranch has already been interrupted (*BTK* 92). Rather, the collection begins with Billy's acknowledgement from beyond the grave that "Pat Garrett / sliced off my head. / Blood a necklace on me all my life" (*BTK* 6). The collection is chronologically fragmented, and riddled with such images of and allusions to the violence of Billy's life and death. Douglas Barbour notes that "it is because that general story is so well known, because the death has always already happened for both readers and writers, that the text can concentrate on other things, what might have occurred in the interstices of the 'given' story, which myth or epic never tell" (39). Such spaces in the "given" narrative allow Ondaatje to create not only a distinction but a conflict between Billy's private voice and his public persona.

Of primary importance, then, is Ondaatje's imagining of Billy's internal landscape. Billy's impressions of people and events create the basis of our understanding of his

character; the inclusion of others' impressions of him—much of which is taken verbatim from Burns' novel—supplements our reading of that character.³⁷ The inspiration for Ondaatje's characterisation of Billy the Kid can be found, at least in part, in Burns' *Billy the Kid*. In melodramatic terms, Burns asks his reader to imagine him or herself in Billy's place in order to understand his motivations. Little more than a boy, he explains, Billy is already a seasoned killer. The murders he commits, which he considered justified and could not regret (though he might regret their necessity), earn him the hatred of the friends and family of those killed; fear of their vengeance plagues his every step. His ensuing "sinister reputation" causes all men to look on him with suspicion, a sentiment that he returns:

Fear would walk hand in hand with you and lay down with you at night. . . .
[T]here would be no zest, no joy for you this side of the grave. In your despair you would welcome death as an escape from the hopeless hell of your hunted, haunted life. . . . There must have been in him a remarkable capacity for forgetfulness. . . .
For him there was no past. He lived in the present from minute to minute, yet he lived happily. He killed without emotion and he accepted the consequences of his killings without emotion. (Burns 57)

Burns presents us with a romanticised anti-hero, who is simultaneously haunted, ruthless, joyful, and temporally ungrounded for he is a man without a past. Ondaatje builds on and complicates these qualities, using Billy's interactions with his environment, friends, enemies, and lovers to reveal the outlaw's character and thereby emphasise the ways in which each relationship reveals different aspects of his personality. More subtly, Ondaatje develops the ways in which Billy perceives the roles

³⁷ The inclusion of these alternative perspectives speaks to Ondaatje's developing interest in collage and pastiche as a metaphor for subjectivity, an interest which he expresses more fully and explicitly (as I will discuss in Chapter 3) in *Divisadero*.

he plays in those relationships and interprets the “singularities and intensities” (Spinks 72) of his own experience. Spinks argues that “[i]nstead of portraying Billy as a particular type of personality who represents a particular set of beliefs and values, Ondaatje focuses upon the way Billy’s subjectivity is composed from a series of investments, desires, and affects” (70).³⁸ For Billy, these “investments, desires, and affects” are retrospectively reconfigured through memory into his narrative, and then subjected to further revision in order to create a narrative with which he can live.

The scene in which Billy describes a week spent in a barn “burn[ing] out [his] fever” (17) most explicitly illustrates his attraction to molecular experience which, we begin to see, represents for him a form of “pure” experience.³⁹ There is no logical explanation for Billy’s stay in the barn: rather, he reflects, it was “the colour and the light of the place that made me stay there, not my fever. It became a calm week. It was the colour and the light” (17). Sensory experience becomes Billy’s primary focus. He observes, “I began to block my mind of all thought. Just sensed the room and learnt what my body could do, what it could survive what colours it liked best, what songs I sang best.” As he becomes increasingly aware of his own body, human society recedes and he enters the world of the animals with whom he shares the barn. Here, more clearly than anywhere else in the collection except perhaps in the climactic moments of Billy’s death, we see the “disintegration of subjectivity into the singularities that compose it” (Spinks 73).

³⁸ Ondaatje draws attention to the ways in which Billy is caricatured in popular culture through his inclusion of the comic book legend, “Billy the Kid and the Princess” (*BTK* 99-102). The legend is another example of the narrative enclosure that Billy seeks to undermine in his narrative.

³⁹ I am using “pure” in this context to represent an experience that is undisturbed by higher forms of cogitation and consciousness, as well one that is untainted by the guilt and fear associated with the violence that colours the rest of his existence. In short, it is the animal-like forgetfulness and happiness that Nietzsche describes (*Untimely* 62).

During this time, Billy “saw no human and heard no human voice.” Instead, he becomes part of a primal animal community: he observes that the animals “did not move out and accepted me as a larger breed.” His sense of an affinity with nature, which is a recurring theme throughout the text, dominates the first half of this reflection. Having left all the modern conveniences associated with civilization behind, Billy explains that he “ate grain with them, drank from a constant puddle about twenty yards away from the barn. . . . learned to squat the best way when shitting, used leaves for wiping, never ate flesh or touched another animal's flesh, never entered his boundary” (*BTK* 17). Focused solely on the bare elements of survival, Billy is freed from the complications of human relationship—in which boundaries are crossed and blurred, and autonomy and self-determination are compromised—that draw one away from such pure forms of existence.

Despite Billy’s obvious attraction to this mode of perception, Spinks’ contention that “Billy expresses a commitment to molecular experience” (73) requires some qualification because Billy’s ability to remain immersed in this mode of perception is compromised throughout the text. In this instance, he retreats from molecular perception when the peace of this time is shattered by the appearance of rats. Billy recalls that “in the barn next to us, there was another granary. . . . In it a hundred or so rats. . . thick rats, eating and eating” and becoming drunk on the abandoned and fermenting grain. To his horror, the drunken rats

abandoned the sanity of eating the food before them and turned on each other and grotesque and awkwardly because of their size they went for each other's eyes and ribs. . . and they came through that door and killed a chipmunk—about ten of them

onto that one striped thing and the ten eating each other before they realized the chipmunk was long gone. (18)

This shocking turn of events, which stands in such explicit contrast with Billy's earlier observation that he "never ate flesh or touched another animal's flesh" (17), reminds Billy of the dangers of existing at the level of pre-reflective life.⁴⁰

Billy's repugnance toward the rats' violence is evident in his language. Words tumble over each other as he is forced to observe this "grotesque" experience. Grammar and linear representations of consciousness are abandoned in the intensity of the moment, which is expressed with flashes into the present tense: "sitting on the open window with its thick sill where they couldnt reach me, filled my gun and fired again and again into their slow wheel across the room at each boommm, and reloaded and fired again and again till I went through the whole bag of bullet supplies—the noise breaking out the seal of silence in my ears. . . ." (*BTK* 18). After the peace of the barn, this violent interaction with these feral enemies has a disorientating effect: he has shifted from being immersed in his body and "what [it] could do best" (17) to an external position from which he watches himself shooting into the mass of rats until "my hand was black and the gun was hot and no other animal of any kind remained in that room but for the boy in the blue shirt sitting there coughing at the dust, rubbing sweat from his upper lip with his left forearm" (18). The intrusion provides a horrific demonstration of the ways in which the autonomy of the self is threatened when boundaries are, to use Ondaatje's term,

⁴⁰ The irony of this anecdote, which lies in the contrast between Billy's horror of the rats' attack and the violence of his own existence, illustrates Ondaatje's challenging of traditional depictions (such as we see in Burns' novel) of Billy the Kid as a cold blooded killer and a sociopath.

“entered” (17).⁴¹ In response to his sense of vulnerability during this assault, a sense which is evident in his description of sitting “where they couldnt reach me” (18), the outlaw assumes the position of a detached observer. He retreats from the experience through his narrative, distancing himself from it to the extent that he renders himself in third person.

Dennis Cooley uses cinematographic imagery to explain how Billy creates this sense of distance. Cooley argues that “[i]n a number of [Billy’s] interior monologues, he actually assumes the position of a movie camera, but he uses it in the hope of avoiding the images erupting around him” (223). Cooley’s metaphor illuminates the way Billy uses language, here and in other monologues, both as a means of imposing control and creating emotional distance from situations that he feels could otherwise overwhelm him. Throughout the text, such moments of intense experience recall Billy’s sympathy with non-human life and his desire to similarly dissolve into unconsciousness. However, these moments are always followed by resistance to such dissolution: the emotional withdrawal from such moments of intensity, represented in this instance by a deliberate move into a third person perspective of himself, re-establishes Billy within a context of conscious self-creation and narrative autonomy.

Through the inclusion of multiple narrative voices, however, Ondaatje reminds us that Billy’s desire for autonomy is always problematized by his inescapable position within a community. Billy struggles to exclude other perspectives from his narrative as

⁴¹ Ondaatje’s use of the phrase “entered” (*BTK* 17) to describe the crossing of boundaries has immediate significance for his characterisations of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, but also for his later notions of subjectivity as a collage in which we contain the “bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom” and “characters we have climbed into as if trees” (*EP* 261). In *Divisadero*, Anna explicitly observes, “Everything is collage, even genetics. There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross” (16).

he tells his audience, “Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in” (20). It is both significant and ironic that Billy, a figure of legend as well as of Ondaatje’s creation, begins by struggling against the attempts of others to represent him “through their eyes” (*BTK* 20). At the same time, as Barbour affirms, “what [Billy] says is that this version of the myth, in which we are already entangled, will not be like the other versions” (40). Billy’s attempts to preserve the autonomy of his own narrative are focused by his desire to “[f]ind the beginning.” By returning to the beginning, Billy suggests, we will be able “to dig out” an insight into the rest of his “story.” This sentiment reflects the notion of the present past and the tangled strands of relational identity that are, as we saw in MacLeod’s works, of such fundamental importance in self-invention.

The “beginning” that Billy offers is itself a maze of symbolic significance, a memory that goes back two years to an image of himself and Charlie Bowdre as they “criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. . . . The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge of action rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat” (20). There is little sentiment here—as Billy puts it, there “is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know” (20)—but it is Billy’s choice of *this* moment as a beginning and the vividness of his memory that lends it significance. It is also worth noting that Billy identifies what is perhaps the beginning of the end for himself and his friends as *his* “beginning,” rather than his birth or childhood. It is during this period that

the legend of Billy the Kid begins to overshadow the man himself; the “birth” of his legend is the beginning that he wants history to remember.

By the time we see Billy and Charlie riding down “to Mexico and old heat” (20), we have already witnessed Charlie’s gruesome death in an ambush at Tivan Arroyo. Despite Billy’s claim that his description of their journey has nothing of “depth,” “accuracy,” or “wealth” in it (20), knowledge of Charlie’s brutal end lends poignancy to this memory. The collection includes two versions of the ambush, both of which are focalised through Billy’s perspective. The first telling captures in few words the shocking speed of the shooting and the dawning of Billy’s understanding of what has just happened to his friend. He remembers,

When I caught Charlie Bowdre dying
tossed 3 feet by bang bullets giggling
at me face tossed in a gaggle
he pissing into his trouser legs in pain
face changing fast like sunshine o my god
o my god billy I’m pissing watch
your hands
while the eyes grew all over his body

The rawness of this experience is captured through stream of consciousness, in which sensation and emotion are—in the moment—inextricably entangled. When Charlie’s death is revisited later in the collection, the telling takes the form of a more conventional narrative. Billy again relates events in the first person but there is a profound sense of narrative distance. His immediate, instinctual responses of shock and horror have been replaced by cause-and-effect rationalisations, which are then assimilated into a linear, articulate plot. This radical change in representation reminds us that the ordering

principles of narrative are what allow us to make sense of the tangle of sensations, emotions, and memories that comprise our experiences. Further, it draws attention to two distinct voices between which Billy's narrative perspective alternates: the private voice of a young man attempting to make sense of his experiences, viewed by his friends "as a defender of the people who was forced to kill in self-defense" (Wallis 245); and the voice of his public persona, the cold-blooded killer who had been dubbed "'the daredevil desperado' and a 'young demon' whose name 'has long been the synonym of all that is malignant and cruel'" (Wallis 244).⁴²

These two voices characterise the striking differences between the two versions of Charlie's death. Billy's carefully constructed retelling of the shooting betrays little evidence of the raw emotions building in the first version. As Billy describes Charlie being "tossed 3 feet by bang bullets giggling / at me face tossed in a gaggle" (*BTK* 12), the onomatopoeic "bang" emphasises the violence and unexpectedness of the event as well as the force of the impact. The sensory impressions of sight and sound lend immediacy to the experience; the grammatical indeterminacy of the source of the "giggling"—is it Charlie or the bullets?—adds to the confusion and surrealism. These chaotic sensations pour over us as Billy registers Charlie "pissing into his trouser legs in pain / face changing like fast sunshine o my god / o my god billy i'm pissing watch / your hands." Ondaatje's language in this description is stark, the syntax broken:

impression is piled on top of impression, transgressing the rules of structure and

⁴² Billy's desire to be remembered by history (*BTK* 84) provides an essential insight into the conflict between Billy's private and public voices, as I will discuss further below. Ondaatje's conception of this conflict complicates Burns' interpretation, in which he observes, "Billy the Kid doubtless would fare badly under the microscope of psychoanalysis. . . . [H]e would be dropped, neatly labeled, into some category of split personality and abnormal psychosis. The desperado complex, of which he was an exemplar, may perhaps be defined as frozen egoism plus recklessness and minus mercy" (50).

grammar in the form of fused and fragmented sentences, and misplaced modifiers. Our attention is focused on Billy's own adrenalin-fuelled reactions to the physical trauma of Charlie's wounds. Though Billy acknowledges the terrible pain that causes Bowdre to "[piss] into his trouser legs" (12), his incongruous use of "giggling" and "gaggle" suggests that Billy initially fails to comprehend what has happened. As Barbour contends, "The imagery here dissolves from the visual into the aural, that very dissolution reflecting the destruction of the body Billy is witnessing" (49), though in the initial seconds he seems unable to comprehend what he is witnessing.

Comprehension perhaps begins to dawn for Billy as Bowdre's "face chang[es] like fast sunshine o my god" (12). Shock enters the description when, for a moment, the voices of Billy and Bowdre merge in that first "o my god."⁴³ The confusion and momentum of events is further emphasised by Bowdre's own incredulous cry of "o my god billy I'm pissing watch / your hands." Bombarded by the stimulus of the senses, Billy's interactions with the dying Charlie do not move beyond his awareness of his own instinctual responses to the rapidly unfolding events. Lost in the experience, there is no time between the event and comprehension for sympathy or sorrow: "Billy is unable to maintain the distinction between subject and object or self and world upon which such sympathy depends; instead he projects himself *into* the bodies and objects he perceives all around him" (Spinks 71). Moments whirl past, and Billy finds himself at the heart of "a world in motion where nothing is settled, where things only approach clarity" (Cooley 233). In the chaos of these moments, Bowdre himself "dissolves into the

⁴³ There are times when we see Garrett's voice merging with Billy's as well (e.g. *BTK* 73, 90). For an in-depth discussion of this merging of voices, see for example Lee Spinks' discussion of the relationship between Garrett and Billy (74).

repertoire of body parts, reflexes and gestures from which [Billy's] image of Bowdre is assembled" (Spinks 72). By reducing Charlie to a collection of parts, Billy is able to distance himself from this traumatic experience; the eyes that "grew all over [Charlie's] body" represent Billy's distancing gaze. Billy's chilling second account makes sense in the context of this emotional distancing though it, too, is haunted by details from this "repertoire."

Unlike the initial telling of Charlie's narrative, which "casts us adrift in the stream of pre-personal singularities before they are subsumed into the symbolic order of concepts, identities, and values" (Spinks 72), the second version of Charlie's death has none of the drama or horror of the first. Even sorrow and sympathy have no place in this narrative. Billy has distanced himself not only from the events but from his own reactions: he speaks from the perspective of a detached observer rather than as a participant within the events themselves. Yet, despite Billy's seeming detachment, he vividly recalls the context and circumstances of the shooting:

January at Tivan Arroyo, called Stinking Springs more often. With me, Charlie, Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh. Snow. Charlie took my hat and went out to get wood and feed the horses. The shot burnt the clothes on his stomach off and lifted him back into the room. Snow on Charlie's left boot. He had taken one step out. In one hand had been an axe, in the other a pail. No guns. (22)

In this version, when a wounded Charlie falls back into the room, he and Billy engage in a dialogue that casts Billy in a heartless light: "Get up Charlie, get up, go and get one. No Billy. I'm tired, please. Jesus, watch your hands Billy. Get up Charlie. I prop him to the door, put his gun in his hand. Take off, good luck Charlie" (*BTK* 22). Billy's tone echoes his earlier catalogue of "the killed" (6), in which the "blunt, affectless air" gives

the poem “the air of a police confession” (Spinks 67). However, as Barbara Misztal reminds us, “[e]motions play an essential role in any recollection because memories not tagged by ongoing social emotions tend to fade out” (80). The more powerful the emotion, the more vividly the experience is remembered. Despite his attempts to contain and neutralise this experience through his narrative, Billy’s attention to such minute details “suggests involvement rather than neutrality” (Barbour 50) and reinforces the impact his friend’s death has had on Billy. Judith Owens concurs, pointing out that Billy’s

unadmitted feelings of horror and fear. . . express themselves in an unwarranted emphasis on ‘snow,’ and a curious obsession with the ‘straightness’ of Charlie’s walk toward Garrett. Billy’s mind fixes on these two seemingly irrelevant details (especially the latter) with an intensity that belies his posture of emotional neutrality and control. (128)

So, too, does the bitter tone of the statement, “No guns,” although the otherwise emotionless quality of the narrative, his bravado, and his emphasis on his own lack of sympathy for Charlie’s pleas might seem to suggest otherwise.⁴⁴

The repetition of “Jesus watch your hands” echoes the earlier lyric, demonstrating Billy’s fixation on certain details and recalling to mind for the reader the horrified (though here repressed) repeated cry of “oh my god” (12). Billy quickly goes on to describe how he forced Charlie to “go and get one” of their assailants, insisting, “Get up Charlie kill him kill him” despite the fact that Charlie “couldnt even lift his gun” (*BTK* 22). Billy seems to be rationalising as he explains, “Charlie he knew he was already dead now, had to go somewhere, do something, to get his mind off the pain” (*BTK* 22).

⁴⁴ The bitterness of this statement is echoed when Billy describes the aftermath of the shooting in which he and his surviving companions are arrested by Garrett and his deputies (see *BTK* p. 48).

By attributing his own rationalisations to Charlie, Billy is able to gloss over his own emotions as he attempts to disguise them from his audience while simultaneously attempting to justify sending his friend out to face Garrett. However, this “mixture of stuttering sentences and fragments renders the fear, anger, and sorrow Billy feels as he enters this scene once more” (Barbour 50). As we saw with much of Alexander’s narrative in *No Great Mischief*, Billy’s text is haunted by the things he does not say and cannot adequately express. Barbour elaborates,

The passage as a whole lacks the dramatic urgency of the earlier poem, but it is still full of conflicting emotions, held in tension in the syntax as they would be in the action. Billy expresses feeling as much through form as he does through imagery and language. (50)

Reading the passage in this way allows the reader to reconcile the seemingly detached quality of this scene with the jarring emotions of Billy’s initial description of Bowdre’s death. It also provides the reader with another glimpse of the public persona that Billy is attempting both to perpetuate and live up to.

These two versions of Billy’s experience of Charlie’s death highlight the tension between the detailed way Billy describes the scene and his apparent emotional detachment; this tension further points to the tightly reined emotions that lie behind the passionless retelling, suggesting that this is a memory that has often been revisited and refined. Primo Levi offers the explanation that “a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallised, perfect, adorned, which installs itself in the place of raw memory and grows at its expense” (King 25). We see this sort of “crystallised” expression in the disquieting coldness with which Billy relates his friend’s death, and

through which he reduces himself to the stereotype of an outlaw and a killer. Like Cooley, Owens reads this tendency to distance himself from his experience as a sign that he wishes “to purge the moment of its immediacy, a desire in Billy to distance himself from the event by rendering it impersonal” (Owens 127). Billy’s desire for emotional distance is not limited to this event, but extends to his relationships with all of the people in his life. This distancing of himself from others reflects the fact that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on”(Caruth 4). Thus, “[t]he story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on life” (Caruth 7). The “endless impact” of this event upon Billy becomes apparent as Charlie Bowdre haunts the rest of the collection: memories of Charlie frequently resurface and become an ineluctable part of Billy’s narrative.⁴⁵

We see what Burns referred to as the outlaw’s “remarkable capacity for forgetfulness” (57) as Billy attempts throughout his narrative to repress his emotional responses to his friend’s death. These attempts at repression create tension in the text for, as we have seen in his telling and retelling of Charlie’s death, Billy is never quite able to forget. This tension is further exacerbated by Billy’s conflicting desires for relationship and autonomy, and becomes more pronounced in his descriptions of his sexual encounters with “Miss Angela Dickinson of Tucson” (*BTK* 25). Because

⁴⁵ For example, we see memories of experiences that Charlie and Billy have shared (7, 20, 39, 49, 57, 81, 82) as well as multiple allusions to his death (6, 12, 22, 27, 76, 79).

sexuality itself is an experience located at the very borders of our notions of autonomy and control, the dangers of participating in such an experience involve a threat to Billy's very sense of self. As a result, Billy's descriptions of his relationship with Angie project her as "a reminder of the pleasure, fears, and violence the life of the body entails. . . She is, in other words, the prosopopoeia of paradox itself. . . Billy both resists and adores her" (Kamboureli 193-4). In Billy's reflections on his relationship with Angie D., sexuality and danger are always intertwined.

In a poem that flashes back to his love-making with Angie, Billy describes how she "[t]ilts back to fall / black hair swivelling off her / shattering the pillow / Billy she says / the tall gawky body spitting electric/ off the sheets to my arm" (16). Sexual desire infuses the lines, magnifying details as he creates a montage of body parts, describing how she "leans her whole body out / so breasts are thinner / stomach is a hollow / where the bright bush jumps / . . . / bite into her side leave / a string of teeth marks" (16). That he is drawn to her physical power and her desire is reflected in the energy and sensual details that infuse the poem: "Angela D's gaunt body spits 'electric' off the sheets onto his arm; the 'bright bush' of her sex jumps startlingly into the centre of his field of vision; while the ecstatic force of her body almost breaks off his fingers" (Spinks 72). The poem's immediacy similarly demonstrates the extent to which Billy is drawn into the memory; he observes in the present tense that "this is the first time" (16). Through this shift in tense, Billy reveals once again his ability to become immersed in the sheer joy of sensory experience.

However, it is also apparent that "Angela brings tension, danger, and a powerful and daunting sexuality into her relations with Billy" (Barbour 56). In response to this danger,

Billy shifts into the language of a gunfighter as he describes the way “she hooks in two and covers me.” Initially, the sexualised imagery suggests a movement toward self-abandonment as she “covers” him; however, the image becomes one of entrapment as he continues, “my hand locked / her body nearly breaking off my fingers / pivoting like machines in final speed” (*BTK* 16). For the gunslinger, who “never used his left hand for anything except of course to shoot” and who “did fingers exercises subconsciously, on the average 12 hours a day” (43) to maintain his fighting form, this entrapment presents both a physical and a psychological threat. Spinks finds in this image evidence that “lovemaking and gunslinging become inextricably entwined: but Billy is unmanned, his hand ‘locked,’ his prone and helpless profile an eerie premonition of the figure Garrett will gun down in the [climactic] episode at Maxwell’s ranch” (72). The final stanza draws out this wordplay as Billy remarks on how his hands were “later cracked in love juice / fingers paralysed by it arthritic / these beautiful fingers I couldn’t move / faster than a crippled witch now” (16). There is a boast here about the ardour of their lovemaking; at the same time, there is an acknowledgement of the threat to self-preservation that, for Billy, arises from such intimacy. It emphasises Billy’s fear of the psychological and emotional vulnerability that arises from relationships, a state that results in what Ondaatje would later describe in *The English Patient* as being “disassembled” (*EP* 265).

These impressions of danger become more acute in the song “about the lady Miss A D” (64). The song’s adolescent humour contains a distinctly misogynistic undertone. Miss A D, “her mind the only one in town high on the pox,” takes on a particularly sinister character for she “has a mouth like a bee / she eats and off all your honey / her

teeth leave a sting on your very best thing/ and its best when she gets the best money”

(64). As an apparently syphilitic prostitute, her “sting” poses a serious threat to male sexuality. In an attempt to contain and thereby control Angie’s influence over him, Billy goes on to describe the grotesque dangers of her body. He begins,

Miss Angela Dickinson
blurred in the dark
her teeth are a tunnel
her eyes need a boat

Her mouth is an outlaw
she can swallow your breath
a thigh it can drown you
or break off your neck. . . . (64)

He goes on to describe, in a similar fashion, the dangers of her throat, ears, toes, and fingers; tellingly, he finishes with the observation that she will “swallow you blind”

(64). Filled with images of the ways in which Angie’s body threatens him with annihilation, this lyric vividly illustrates Billy’s fear of losing self-control and his desperate desire to prevent it. “Combining fear and ecstasy in a traditional male comic displacing of the source of emotional uncertainty,” Barbour suggests, “the song distorts and dismantles her body into parts, as if such fragmentation of the female body control it (an old and conventional form of sexist inscription)” (59). The images that follow this trope depict her as a creature both monstrous and emasculating: with her mouth, she will “swallow your breath,” with a thigh she can “drown you/ or break off your neck” (64). As we saw in the poems about Charlie Bowdre’s death, this process of dismantling (this time through his misogynistic humour) allows Billy to repress emotions that could otherwise cause him to lose emotional and “authorial” control. These dangers, so

explicitly catalogued in this bathetic ballad, are submerged in and paradoxically emerge from Billy's obvious desire for Angie. As Barbour remarks, "This song 'about the lady Miss A D,' reveals more about Billy. . . than it does about her" (59).

Later, as Billy lies dying, his scrambled thoughts return once more to Angie. Distorted echoes of earlier experiences fill Billy's consciousness as he allows himself to dissolve into the sensations of his death:

the eyes bright scales
(watch) bullet claws coming
at me like women fingers
part my hair slow
go in slow in slow,
. . .
as if fire pours out
red grey brain the hair slow
startled by it all pour
Miss Angela D her eyes like a boat
on fire her throat is a kitchen
warm on my face heaving
my head mouth out
she swallows your breath
like warm tar pour
the man in the bright tin armour star
blurred in the dark
saying stop jesus jesus jesus jesus JESUS

As the "red grey brain" slowly pours out of Billy's gunshot wound, memories of Angie pour into his mind. Angie is personified as Death in these sexualised images; the combination of sexuality and death evoke Billy's desire for, as well as his fear of, his own annihilation. The image of "Miss Angela Dickenson / blurred in the dark" (*BTK* 64) from the vaudevillian ballad is echoed in and thereby linked to the image of "the man in

the bright tin armour star” who is likewise “blurred in the dark” (73). Van Wart observes,

the repetition of the line ‘blurred in the dark’ interconnects and juxtaposes a sexual encounter between Billy and Angela with the later encounter of Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid. The last line of this sequence could be either Angela D. or Billy speaking as life merges with his death and Angela’s dark sexuality becomes the bright star of Garrett’s badge waiting in the dark room to kill Billy. (18)

As Billy’s memories of life blend with his experience of death, the growing panic of the final lines ends with a confusion of voices—is the dying outlaw shouting “JESUS”? Or is it Angie, as Van Wart wonders? Or is it in fact man behind the sheriff’s badge? The juxtaposition of these two key figures, who become agents of Death for Billy and whose voices merge with his own, further reminds us of Billy’s drive toward self-destruction. Our inability to distinguish individual voices in this moment not only frustrates our desire for narrative certainty but also reminds us of the complexity inherent in our representations of our relationships with others.

As a result of this complexity, Pat Garrett’s role within the text is unexpectedly problematic. As Barbour observes, “Billy cannot be inscribed into any text without Garrett, and if he is represented as hero/victim, Garrett must appear as villain/killer, though this text is never that pure in its representations” (44). We have seen the ways in which Billy represents himself as (and is perceived by others to be) a cold blooded killer; Ondaatje gives Garrett a similarly multifaceted character so that he is more than an unmitigated villain.⁴⁶ As Sallie Chisum observes in her “Final Thoughts” on the outlaw and the sheriff, “There was good mixed in with bad in Billy the Kid and bad

⁴⁶ See, for example, Garrett’s own narrative about meeting Billy the Kid in which Ondaatje represents their characters from yet another perspective (42-45).

mixed in with the good in Pat Garrett. . . . Both were worth knowing” (89). There are no clear heroes or villains. Ultimately, therefore, it is perhaps more enlightening to view the contrast between Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett in terms of their different perceptions of life and vitality. Spinks argues,

Garrett’s obsessive need to transcend molecular modes of becoming is tellingly illuminated halfway through his ordeal [in which he is teaching himself “how to drink” (*BTK* 28)] when he begins to evince a strange terror of flowers. Garrett is terrified by natural organisms because they simply are what they do; they make no distinction between the primal force of life and its idea or representation. (73)

Whereas Garrett could not bear the simplicity of this primal life force because “he couldn’t tell what they planned to do” (28), plant and animal life are attractive to Billy precisely because, as Spinks says, “they simply are what they do.” As the antagonism between the men illustrates, Billy rejects the lawman’s obsession with order and control. However, Billy’s attraction to this mode of perception is tempered by his instinctive understanding that pre-personal experience involves a death of self as identity is subsumed in a physicality that has no memory. As we saw, Billy is unable to remain immersed in pre-personal experience because his sense of self-preservation (both literally as a gunslinger and psychologically as a constructed subject) is too strong to allow him to surrender to the unconsciousness of such an existence. There can be no easy resolution for Billy’s conflicting desire for and fear of pre-personal experience. In the end, Billy’s death at the hands of Pat Garrett becomes not only a matter of historical imperative but dramatic necessity for the conflicts in his character can be resolved no other way. The singularity he embraces is ultimately always subsumed in the narrative constructs of the history by which he wishes to be remembered, as well as in his own

revised narratives which provide the emotional distance from experiences that he cannot otherwise bear.

In contrast with Billy the Kid, whose “real” life remains shrouded in mystery as a result of the vast body of conflicting rumours and legends that surrounds him, the protagonist of *Coming Through Slaughter* is relatively unknown. Set in New Orleans’ Storyville district at the turn of the twentieth century, the novel is based on the life of jazzman Charles “Buddy” Bolden. Remembered by jazz enthusiasts for his innovative and improvisational method of cornet playing, the “real” Bolden is recognized as a ground-breaking performer although his music was never recorded. Little is known about the musician beyond his reputation, and Ondaatje again takes liberties with his sources. He portrays Bolden as a man whose wish to immerse himself in the chaotic life of the senses causes him to abandon his family and his musical career, but whose community cannot understand or permit this break from convention and the disappointment of their expectations.

Unlike Billy the Kid, who ultimately depends upon narrative to preserve his identity and autonomy, Bolden attempts to dissolve subjectivity entirely in the physicality of pre-personal perception. Because Bolden has no desire for the emotional distance that Billy actively seeks, he resists self-narration; for this reason, much of his story is narrated by others. His resistance is based on his intuitive awareness that he cannot sustain pre-personal perception if he is forced to detach from his immediate sensations in order to articulate his perceptions, particularly as this involves defining himself and his relationships with others. Such definitions create boundaries between self and other; his desire not only to “enter” (*BTK* 17) but to shatter such boundaries precipitates a break

with all his defining relationships in order to return to a state of pre-personal perception. In an observation that resonates particularly strongly with *Coming Through Slaughter*, Spinks suggests that what is “unsettling” about Ondaatje’s narrative is “its dissolution of subjectivity into singular, partial, and affective experience” (72). This dissolution generates an amnesiac experience of the self in which the past is forgotten and self-knowledge is reborn every moment through the senses. It also redefines “relationship” as something that is likewise grounded in the present moment and in which “the other” is *not* other, but rather functions as an extension of the individual’s pre-personal (un)consciousness.

In Ondaatje’s rewriting of the musician’s legend, Bolden disappears for a period of more than two years, during which time he lives with his lover Robin Brewitt and her husband. Through his relationship with Robin, Bolden escapes from the demands of the various “audiences” for whom he feels he must always perform. This escape is temporary, however, for he is eventually tracked down by his friend Webb who pushes him back to his old life.⁴⁷ Torn away from Robin and the reprieve she represents, Bolden descends into a complete mental breakdown, the consequence of which is his lifelong incarceration in the East Louisiana State Hospital.

During the period of Bolden’s disappearance, a substantial portion of the narrative is focalised by the police detective Webb. Webb’s anxious search for the musician drives much of the plot as he moves through the different spheres of Bolden’s world, interviewing Bolden’s family and (former) friends to seek clues to the musician’s

⁴⁷ Webb is often referred to as a fictional character (for example, see Barbour 134); however, mention is made in *Jazzmen* of a friend of Bolden’s who was a police detective, characterised as a “spider” (11).

whereabouts. However, the detective's search is hindered by the fact that, despite the many conversations he has with Bolden's intimates, he "discovered nothing" about Bolden for "[t]heir stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them" (CTS 60). Because Bolden "gave himself completely" in his relationships and maintained "no barriers" (7), he seemed to have no fixed identity, no set habits or patterns that would assist in the detective's search. As Webb's investigation continues, we realise that this search is less concerned with locating Bolden physically or geographically than with locating him within a narrative context, in which Webb intends to expose Bolden's character fully and pin his story down.

Pinning Bolden down is no easy task. From the beginning of *Coming Through Slaughter*, Bolden is an elusive and fragmented character, though the extent to which his sense of self has disintegrated is not immediately apparent. When we are first introduced to him, we view him through the eyes of those who were close to him. Barbour describes the way in which "[c]omplex and almost surreptitious shifts of focalisation occur throughout [the novel's early] scenes, as the narration moves in for close-ups and then retreats for more generalized overviews" (106). In a manner reminiscent of Ondaatje's narrative structure in *Billy the Kid*, this shifting of voice and perspective allows us to observe how Bolden's dramatic rise and fall became part of local mythology. The spirit of this mythology is implicit in the narrator's portrait of Bolden at work in "N. Joseph's Shaving Parlor":

What he did too little of was sleep and what he did too much of was drink and many interpreted his later crack-up as a morality tale of a talent that debauched

itself. But his life at this time [i.e. before his disappearance] had a fine and precise balance to it, with a careful allotment of hours. A barber, publisher of *The Cricket*, a cornet player, good husband and father, and an infamous man about town. (7)

By ventriloquizing aspects of a collective moral judgement, the narrator turns Bolden's life into a morality tale that can explain his eventual descent into madness. In labelling Bolden as “[a] barber, publisher of *The Cricket*, a cornet player, good husband and father, and an infamous man about town” (7), the narrative establishes the boundaries that are meant to contain and the relationships that are meant to define the mercurial musician's character.

From the beginning of the novel, we are reminded of the inexorable passage of time and the ephemeral nature of fame. As the narrator describes “His geography,” he draws attention to the fact that there are no physical traces left of Bolden in Storyville today, no memorials to his skill or his fleeting fame. The narrator reports,

[t]his district, the homes and stores, are a mile or so from the streets made marble by jazz. There are no songs about Gravier Street or Phillips or First or the Mount Ararat Missionary Baptist Church his mother lived next door to, just the names of the streets written vertically on the telephone poles or the letters sunk into pavement that you walk over. (2)

Only the names remain, detached from the things they once signified, and even these names—like Bolden's—are fading. The narrator initially refers to *his* geography and *his* mother without naming Bolden: at once ambiguous and intimate, it is as though the reader has stumbled into a conversation already in progress. The narrator “asks us to ‘see’ this geography ‘today,’ and the imperative implicates reader with writer in the mapping and storytelling that follow” (Barbour 105). This tactic reflects Bolden's own musical style, which allowed his audience to “come in where they pleased and leave

where they pleased and somehow hear the germs of the start and all the possible endings at whatever point in the music [he] had reached then” (CTS 92).

This style of performance creates an important distinction between Bolden and the other musicians of his time, a distinction emphasised by his animosity toward John Robichaux. Bolden says of Robichaux, “I loathed everything he stood for. He dominated his audiences. He put his emotions into patterns which a listening crowd had to follow” (CTS 91). In contrast, Bolden sought to create a form of music that “was coarse and rough, immediate, dated in half an hour” (38). The very act of performance becomes an expression of Bolden’s engagement with molecular experience. Bolden “was obsessed with the magic of air. . . . The way the side of his mouth would drag a net of air in and dress it in notes and make it last and last, yearning to leave it up there in the sky like air transformed into cloud” (8). It is not the consciousness of financial success or fame or even artistic creation that motivates him. Rather, he is driven by the sheer pleasure of the physical sensations of playing and his absorption in the sound and the moment: experiences which are as temporary and as transient as the cloud he imagines. Bolden embraces a manner of playing—and, we discover, of living—that “always has to be unpredictable, one which demands that he stay ahead of himself, as well as the other musicians” and which would allow him to “remain open at every moment to change and improvisation” (Van Wart 12-3).⁴⁸ Bolden’s need to exist in a state of perpetual improvisation is emphasised by band member Frank Lewis, who insists that Bolden’s

⁴⁸ In her discussion of the significance of memory and improvisation in jazz performance, Mirja Lobnik observes that this style of music is concerned with “the creative potential inherent in the immediate moment. . . . Composing and performing on the spur of the moment, jazz performers privilege the palpability and sometimes overwhelming emotional intensity of sounds, themselves deeply anchored in the past, over the attempt to permanently and safely contain them” (89).

music could not be recorded, lest it lose its essence in the process: “If you never heard him play some place where the weather for instance could change the next series of notes—then you should never have heard him at all” (*CTS* 32).

In addition to his improvisational style of performance, Bolden’s fascination with pre-personal perception manifests in his concept of relationship. Even more effectively than in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje uses Bolden’s narrative to explore not only how “we open up a world of sense to ourselves and others” (Spinks 66) but how we can shatter the boundaries between self and others, in order to experience “cruel, pure relationship” that reaches the extremes of intensity but also impermanence (*CTS* 85). Bolden’s notion of “pure relationship” is illustrated by his desire “to be the reservoir where engines and people drank, blood sperm music spouting out and getting hooked in someone’s ear. The way flowers were still and fed bees” (110). The stream of consciousness of Ondaatje’s syntax reflects the dissolution of subjectivity into a jumble of association and sensation; here, there is neither empathy for the other nor awareness of the self. In such a context, “relationship” manages to preserve singularity through an absolute absence of boundaries. There is no distinguishing of self from other, which means there is no genuine consciousness of the other as an individual with thoughts or needs separate from one’s own. Through his music and his experience of pre-personal perception in his relationships, Bolden seeks to merge with the “primal force of life” (Spinks 73). Bolden’s early relationship with Nora demonstrates this blurring of boundaries:

he learned all he could about [her], questioning her long into the night about her past. Her body a system of emotions and triggers he got lost in. Every hair she lost

in the bath, every dead cell she rubbed off on a towel. The way she went crazy sniffing steam from a cup of coffee. He was lost in the details, he could find no exact focus toward her. And so he drew her power over himself. (9)

As we have seen, Spinks suggests that Billy the Kid “projects himself *into* the bodies and objects he perceives around him” (71). Bolden likewise immerses himself in his consciousness of the bodies of others as he reduces his wife to “a system of emotions and triggers:” as a consequence of this immersion, he becomes “lost in the details” that comprise her being. As he loses himself, Nora’s identity (and so her “power”) becomes an extension of his own.⁴⁹

Similarly, Bolden loses himself in his sexual encounters with Robin Brewitt. At times, the intensity of his experiences causes narrative coherence itself to be lost as consciousness is broken down into a stream of random impressions: “I attack her into the wall my cock cushioned my hands at the front of the thigh pulling her at me we are hardly breathing her crazy flesh twisted into corners me slipping out from the move and our hands meet as we put it in quick *christ* quickly back in again” (59). Unlike Billy the Kid, who uses the misogynistic lyric about Angela D to maintain control, Bolden never attempts to dominate a situation by creating narrative distance from the experience. In fact, when Robin attempts to discuss the complexities of their relationship (66), he resists her efforts to impose a narrative on events and experiences by smashing things, just as he did with Nora.⁵⁰ These shows of violence represent his efforts to test the limits

⁴⁹ Ondaatje re-examines this form of relationship in *The English Patient*, wherein characters “assimilate one another’s experiences” and “submerge their individual identities in those of other people” (Cook, “Imploding” 121).

⁵⁰ For example, we see him raging against Nora (10) and fighting with Tom Pickett who claims to be having an affair with her (68-72), then pouring a pitcher of milk over Robin after an argument (65). Robin also expresses concern about “which window are you going to break next, which chair” (66) whenever

and shatter the constraints that consciousness and social expectations otherwise impose.⁵¹

We see a similar kind of violence in his catch phrase, “come on, put your hands through the window” (8). This phrase captures more than Bolden’s desire to reach distant listeners and his craving for spontaneity. It also reflects the spirit of a drastic break with traditional forms and styles of representation. It creates what Solecki describes as a form of “extremist” art, in which the artist “flays himself psychologically as he returns obsessively to rendering emotions and experiences to provide himself with subject matter for his art” (247). As his thoughts drift repeatedly toward the violent shattering of boundaries, Bolden’s immersion in his bodily experiences is not merely an example of the aforementioned “talent that debauched itself” (*CTS* 7) but rather a means of escape from the external influences that plague him and threaten to suffocate him.

However, Bolden’s ability to sustain such an escape is frequently challenged. In one of the novel’s pivotal images, Bolden observes Robin Brewitt slicing carrots, a mundane domestic activity that provides a useful analogy for the complicated nature of his experience of molecular perception. The narrator explains, “[a]s with all skills he watches for it to fail. If she thinks what she is doing she will lose control. He knows that the only way to catch a fly for instance is to move the hand without the brain telling it to move fast, interfering” (*CTS* 26). This observation illustrates Bolden’s awareness of the way in which conscious thought interrupts experience, an awareness that is reflected in

they have an argument.

⁵¹ At the same time, to avoid overly romanticizing such moments, we must remember that these violent and abusive displays become characteristic of all Bolden’s relationships and signal his rapidly deteriorating mental state.

the fact that “[his] ability to continue as a musician whose ‘music was immediately on top of his own life’ [(CTS 32)] depended on a technique independent of brain” or self-consciousness (Solecki, 260). Such a form of independence requires that one surrenders entirely to physical and sensorial instinct in order to exist in a perpetual state of improvisation.

Mirja Lobnik emphasises the significance of being “independent of brain” and relying instead on “the muscular memory of a jazz musician, a form of memory capable of generating musical material. Based on the repetition of finger movements, this memory of the body involves neuromuscular responses to familiar finger patters (most commonly chords) that free up a musician’s capacity for improvisation” (88). However, as much as Bolden desires (or even requires) such a state of being, we see that he is also drawn to the idea of order and permanence and certainly—if only to test it and prove that it all such “certainties” must eventually break down.⁵² Frank Lewis suggests that “[Bolden] was tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot” (CTS 32). This torment is at the heart of the contradictions in Bolden’s character, which drive him to actively seek the things he fears. His knowledge that “the certainties he loathed and needed were liquid at the root” (75) is represented in the image of the musician as a “boy with fear of heights climbing slowly up a tree” (18). This counterpoint of fear and desire lies at the heart of the musician’s need for improvisation in all aspects of his life.

⁵² In many ways, for example, the fight with Pickett (and Bolden’s subsequent disappearance) seems to have been provoked not simply because Pickett claims that he is having an affair with Nora but because this claim shatters Bolden’s “certainties” about his wife (Rooke 277). Bolden’s absolute belief in Pickett’s claims, which is based on the notion that “Pickett didn’t have the brain to have fantasies” (CTS 75), strikes at the heart of Bolden’s fears and cancels out everything he thought he knew about Nora.

These warring drives of fear and desire are illustrated by the antithetical influences of Webb and the hydrocephalic photographer, Bellocq. Both Webb and Nora blame Bellocq for Bolden's disappearance and subsequent breakdown, for it is under Bellocq's influence that Bolden begins consciously to resist any form of fixity. As Bolden himself tells us, the photographer instigated a profound change in Bolden's perception of his rapidly growing fame. Through their conversations, Bolden comes to recognise the expectations of his admirers and even his own sense of self-importance as a trap. As Sofie De Smyter explains,

Fame contributed to his vanity and alienated him from the inspiring chaos within. He started to meet the expectations of the audience instead of trespassing them and discharging his drives and emotions. The cornetist derived his whole being from the performer the audience believed him to be and perceived himself as a subject instead of a subject in process. (687)

Having his experience of improvisation so curtailed and his character so defined proves to be intolerable for the musician. In contrast with this demanding audience, Bellocq's lack of interest in Bolden's music causes the photographer to appear to Bolden as "a window to another place, where the audience's temptation to vanity, which he has already derided in others as an implied form of slavery (*CTS* 48), no longer exists" (Barbour 115). Bolden describes how Bellocq opened his eyes to the restrictions of his life of fame: "Him watching me waste myself and wanting me to step back into my body as if into a black room and stumble against whatever was there. . . . He was offering me black empty spaces. . . [W]anted me to become blind to everything but the owned pain in myself" (88). These "empty black spaces" and even the "owned pain" represent to Bolden the unbounded freedom of molecular experience. This freedom arises from the

unconsciousness and forgetfulness of pre-personal perception, which can be experienced only by turning inward to such an extent that one becomes “blind to everything” that is external to the self.

Webb, naturally, does not understand Bolden’s fascination with the photographer. Bolden attempts to explain his friendship with Bellocq, though he also acknowledges the futility of trying to make Webb understand: “Whatever I say about him you will interpret as the working of an enemy and what I loved Webb were the possibilities in his silence” (89). Webb, on the other hand, is always “talking on and on” (80), limiting Bolden’s possibilities by reducing his experiences into a linear narrative with logical progressions and endings. Through this linear narrative, Webb is able to cling to the past and his relationship with Bolden. Because of the significance Webb himself places on the history he shares with the musician, he is appalled to realise “that Bolden had never spoken of his past. . . . He could just as easily be wiping out his past again in a casual gesture, contemptuous” (16). The urgency of Webb’s search arises from his need to preserve not only his image of Bolden but the resulting self-image that arises from his perception of his own role in that relationship. In fact, Bolden himself hardly exists for Webb: “I can’t remember what you look like too well. I’d recognize you but in my mind you’re just an outline and music. Just your bright shirts that have no collars are there. Something sharp” (46).⁵³

This inability to remember Bolden clearly demonstrates that, for Webb, “Bolden scarcely exists as a private person with private needs; he exists only as a musician, as

⁵³ Scobie discusses the significance of spider imagery in Ondaatje’s works, focusing on how Ondaatje puns on Webb’s name; Scobie observes how “[s]piderlike, Webb attempts to trap Buddy” (“Fictional” 11) as the detective reasserts his power over Bolden through his investigation.

someone to perform for an audience” (Scobie, “Coming” 9). More importantly, Bolden functions as a mirror in which Webb is able to see himself. Before Bolden became famous in New Orleans for his music, “it was Webb who was the public figure, Bolden the side-kick, the friend who stayed around. If others spoke to them it was usually with surprise at what Webb could see in Bolden” (30). It is this image of himself—as the dominant character in the relationship—that Webb clings to after Bolden moves to New Orleans, for “[s]ince then it was Bolden the musician that Webb heard stories of. It was Bolden who had jumped up, who had swallowed everything Webb was. Webb left with the roots of Bolden’s character, the old addresses they passed through” (31). This search for Bolden allows Webb a chance to manoeuvre himself once again into the dominant role and re-establish himself as Bolden’s keeper by forcing him to return to Storyville and the life he had left behind.

Ultimately, Webb’s self-definition depends upon the extent to which he can keep his past relationship with Bolden alive in the present. Constance Rooke observes, “Only by returning the Bolden who contains [Webb] to the artist’s path can Webb convince himself of his own continuing existence” (272). Despite his expressions of concern for Bolden, an element of possessiveness and a desire for self-preservation emerges within Webb’s search as he insinuates himself once again into Bolden’s life. Hence, we are told that: “Webb circled, trying to understand not where Buddy was but what he was doing , . . . taking almost two years, entering the character of Bolden through every voice he spoke to” (*CTS* 60). It becomes clear that “Webb is no ordinary detective. . . He is not after just the facts but a kind of possession or identification” (Scobie 1978, 10). In other

words, his intention is to take possession of their “narrative” and rewrite the part that he himself plays in it.

We see this rewriting begin the moment Webb has successfully located the musician. Webb ignores Bolden’s assertion that he does not want to return, telling him, “You want to go back Buddy. You want to go back” (80). In his effort to police the relationship, Webb continues arguing until,

Bolden went underwater away from the noise, opening his eyes to look up through the liquid blur at the vague figure of Webb gazing down at him gesturing, . . . Bolden still holding himself down not wishing to come up gripping the side of the tub with his elbows to stop him to stop him o god jesus leave me alone his eyes staring up aching, if Webb reaches down and tries to pull him up he will never come up he knows that, air! His heart empty overpowers his arms and he breaks up. . . . (80)

Ondaatje captures the intensity of Bolden’s desire to escape from Webb and his endless talking through this shift from third to first person, which draws the reader directly into Bolden’s anguish. Again, Bolden’s perception of the experience registers through the tangle of physical sensation. Emotionally, he prefers the thought of drowning to returning to his past life but he is physically defeated by his “empty” heart; thus Webb is able to draw him back to Storyville.

Bolden’s forced return creates a narrative disjunction between personal desire and communal expectation that is ultimately resolved when he “goes mad while playing with Henry Allen’s Brass Band” (*CTS* 133). There is a brief hiatus between Bolden’s stay at the Brewitts and his return to Storyville, during which Bolden prepares for his musical comeback. As he at last proceeds with his narrative, Bolden articulates his dread of returning and his disgust with his situation. The rhetorical question, “What do you want

to know about me Webb?" (*CTS* 99), signals his exhausted surrender to Webb's demands. At the same time, he identifies the ways in which Webb has attempted to control their relationship: "Our friendship had nothing accidental did it. Even at the start you set out to breed me into something better. Which you did. . . . and I sped away happy and alone in a new town away from you, and now you produce a leash, curl the leather round and round your fist, and walk straight into me. And you pull me home" (*CTS* 86). The differences between the two men's perceptions of their relationship are remarkable: whereas Webb thinks Bolden is unaware of the ways in which the detective has attempted to control him, Bolden's resentment and bitterness are explicitly expressed. However, despite his awareness of Webb's manipulations, Bolden seems helpless to resist Webb's pull on the "leash" of their shared history.

As I mentioned earlier, the sections of text focalised by Bolden's perspective are filled with images of knives, self-harm and suicide—as though his body is merely another boundary that Bolden intends to destroy. As he prepares for his return to Storyville, he describes going to sleep with the "[s]cratch of suicide at the side of [his] brain" (86), echoing earlier images of "[g]oing to sleep while feeling his vein tingle at the near chance it had of almost going free. Ecstasy before death" (76). Bolden speaks not only to his absent nemesis but to his unseen audience as well: "Come with me Webb I want to show you something, no come with me I want to show you something. You come too. Put your hand through this window" (89). In his description of the claustrophobic impulse that motivated his disappearance from both his musical career and his existing relationships, Bolden explains how Robin "drained my body of its fame when I wanted to find that fear of certainties I had when I first began to play, back when

I was unaware that reputation made the room narrower and narrower, till you were crawling on your own back, full of your own echoes, till you were drinking in only your own recycled air” (83). For a man “obsessed with the magic of air” (8), who wishes for every note to be new and of the moment, the idea of returning to a life of “echoes” and “recycled air” seems a living death.

Accordingly, the return to his former life, “[h]ome to nightmare” (*CTS* 104), precipitates Bolden’s breakdown at the end. This return is what Bolden had hoped to avoid from the beginning, when he is described as “scared of everybody. He didn’t want to meet anybody he knew again, ever in his life” (*CTS* 37). His bitterness at his apparent lack of agency is apparent as he observes, “All my life I seemed to be a parcel on a bus. I am the famous fucker. I am the famous barber. I am the famous cornet player. Read the labels. The labels are coming home” (104). Despite his anxiety to reject these labels, Bolden seems to be helpless against Webb’s force of will. The pressure to conform and comply builds in Bolden, who observes that he is “[l]ocked inside the frame, boiled down in love and anger into dynamo that cannot move except on itself” (110).

We sense Bolden’s psyche beginning to “move. . . on itself” in the twisted echoes of earlier descriptions of his employment in the barber shop. Then, he loved the way “his mind became the street” (37) as he listened to his customers’ problems and offered them ludicrous solutions. In this context, however, the disease-riddled mattress whores and the pimping “paraders” with sticks become an analogy for his degraded state of mind as he becomes entrapped in the narrowing space of his return to fame:

me with a brain no better than their sad bodies, so sad they cannot afford to feel sorrow towards themselves, only fear. And my brain atrophied and soaked in the

music I avoid, like milk travelling over the border into cheese. All that masturbation of practice each morning and refusing to play . . . My brain tonight has a mattress strapped to its back. . . . Their bodies murdered and my brain suicided. (177)

Bolden's language is charged with anger and despair, and reveals the extent to which Webb's imposition has transformed the musician's experience. "Pure relationship" has been corrupted into prostitution; the death of the mind has overridden the life of the body; the expression of his music has been reduced to masturbation. Bolden's agonised contemplation of this reduction, which he sees as a form of death, foreshadows the musician's breakdown: as Solecki observes, the "only possible lasting release for Bolden from art and audience lies in madness or suicide" (262).

For four days after his return, Bolden attempts to resume his old life. However, the demands of the relationships he has been forced to resurrect have left him "exhausted. He couldn't hustle for others, he didn't know the needs of others. He was fond of them and wanted them happy and was willing to make them happy and was willing hear their problems but no more" (125). In short, Bolden's pre-personal perception of relationship has come into conflict with the expectations of the people with whom he engages. Bolden does not *relate* to others; he does not understand them as individuals who have needs or desires separate from his own. Nor does he know how to cope when those desires impinge on his own. Overwhelmed and uncomprehending, Bolden drifts through his days while his friends complain that "[he]'d changed. Floating in the ether. They want nothing to have changed" (111). Conflict arises because they want to reassimilate Bolden into their familiar narratives and reattach the labels that he has stripped away; for Bolden, this reassimilation represents a form of living death.

On the fifth morning, we see this conflict come to a head as Bolden plays in the parade that will be his final public appearance. When he sets out, he describes himself in “My new red undershirt and my new white shiny shirt bright under the cornet. New shoes. Back in town” (129). Bolden’s jaunty appearance is belied by the sarcasm of his tone. The preceding years and days have taken their toll, which becomes apparent in his performance: “I just hit notes every 15 seconds or so Henry Allen worrying me eyeing me about keeping the number going and every now and then my note like a bird flying out of the shit and hanging loud and long” (129). Again, his music expresses the emotions that Bolden himself seems unable to articulate: the occasional note “like a bird flying out of the shit” reminds us of Bolden’s feelings of entrapment and despair. It is only when he encounters the dancer that his language regains its energy and he is able literally to lose himself in the performance.

Her appearance is sudden—“where the bitch came from I don’t know” (129)—and Bolden is riveted by her. The change in his playing is immediate, recalling Lewis’ earlier description of how “the weather for instance could change the next series of notes” (32). Bolden performs for the dancer and her partner alone: he has found his “ideal audience” which is “as shifting and spontaneous as his art is,” unlike most audiences that “attempt to fix him in one spot by the power of their rigid expectations” (Scobie 9). Bolden “aim[s] at them and pull[s] them on a string to [him],” and he begins to play at such speed that the rest of the parade falls silent and marches along behind him:

I close my eyes, know the others are silent, throw the notes off the walls of people,
the iron lines, so pure and sure bringing how down to the floor and letting in the

light and the girl is alone now mirroring my throat in her lonely tired dance. . . .
She hitting each note with her body before it is even out so I know what I do
through her. God this is what I wanted to play for, if no one else I always guessed
there would be this, this mirror somewhere. . . (130)

In this moment of mirroring, we see the culmination of Bolden's desire to dissolve into "cruel pure relationship" (85). This is the improvisation he has sought, the blending of life into art without regard for the pain, the movement of the "hand without the brain telling it to move fast, interfering" (26). As the intensity of his playing increases, he observes, "Eyes going dark in the hot bleached street. Get there before it ends, but it's nearly over" (129). The phrase "it's nearly over" not only seems prophetic in terms of Bolden's imminent breakdown, but implies that he is intent on self-destruction: "Where he had previously been unconsciously spontaneous, on his return he self-consciously and relentlessly prods himself into playing an anarchic and elemental music until he breaks" (Solecki, 260).

He continues to play beyond what his body is physically able to sustain, shattering that limit as well, projecting himself into the body of the dancer. Solecki observes that Bolden creates an art "where the continuance and value of life are repeatedly confronted with chaos, madness, and suicide, and with its negation, silence. The rhetoric of suffering becomes the mark of sincerity in the work itself; and, in popular mythology, the madness or suicide of the artist authenticates the *oeuvre*" (247). We see this form of authentication as he pushes himself into madness and physical collapse: Bolden repeats again, "this is what I wanted, always, loss of privacy in the playing, leaving the stage, the rectangle of band on the street, this hearer who can throw me in the direction and the speed she wishes like an angry shadow" (131). He is consumed by "sound and pain in

my heart sure as death. All my body moves to my throat. . . all the desire in me is cramp and hard, cocaine on my cock, eternal, for my heart is at my throat hitting slow pure notes into the shimmy dance of victory” (131). The image continues in a single unbroken stream of consciousness: self and other, past and present become indistinguishable from performance, until he feels “the blood that is real move up bringing fresh energy in its suitcase. . . god can’t stop god can’t stop it can’t stop the air the red force coming up. . . I can’t choke it the music still pouring in a roughness I’ve never hit, watch it *listen* it *listen* it, can’t see I CAN’T SEE” (132).⁵⁴ In these moments, “[t]he tension generated by the contradictory forces within Buddy, as within Billy the Kid, erupts into violence and manifests itself. . . in the last parade where he blows himself into silence” (Van Wart 13). In this moment of climax, Buddy “becomes a part of what he perceives” as we “experience. . . the disintegration of subjectivity into the singularities that compose it, culminating in a symbolic death of the self” (Spinks 73). A friend catches Bolden as he collapses; the musician’s narrative dissolves with the unsettling final words, “What I wanted” (CTS 132).

Throughout the novel, what Bolden himself wants is always in tension with the demands of the people in his life. After his collapse, this conflict is resolved by his absolute withdrawal from his community. The rest of Bolden’s fragmented internal narrative, which comes to us from the East Louisiana State Hospital, shows us how completely Bolden has left the others behind, for he never speaks to any of them again. Ironically, there seems to be a sort of freedom for Bolden once he has been committed and

⁵⁴ There is an echo here of Billy’s death throes, in which his silent cries of “AND I KNOW I KNOW” (95) become “a manic and visionary statement that contains the imagery of his life and death while explaining nothing” (Barbour 66).

allowed to lapse into silence. Critics have argued that, for Bolden, hospitalisation and his ensuing silence represent escape from the impossible demands placed upon him by his society and his art. Rooke argues that, in the hospital,

we know he will be raped again and again by the “ladies in blue pajamas” (148); but Bolden thinks that ‘everyone who touches [him] must be beautiful’ (135), and he doesn’t mind. . . . Bolden in his “white dress” and the “breastless women in blue” ([*CTS*] 139) are beyond gender conflict, and violence is unreal. (290)

Bolden’s attempt to immerse consciousness in pre-personal perception is the source of his torment throughout the novel: his extreme desire “to be the reservoir where engines and people drank” (*CTS* 110) is incompatible with the norms and expectations of his society. The only way to get “[w]hat I wanted” (*CTS* 132), it seems, is to dissolve into madness and silence. Despite the abuses to which he is subjected, Bolden’s apparent contentment implies that he prefers this existence to the one he has left behind.

In order to explain how Bolden can be regarded as “happy in his extremely reduced circumstances,” Barbour argues that “having lived his art of improvisation as fully as possible until he could no longer manage it, Bolden has taken it one step further and then stepped away from it and from everything and from everyone” (133). I would argue that, rather than stepping away from improvisation, Bolden has become fully immersed in it. All that remains of the narrative of his past is found in the description of “Buddy touch[ing] things, there are about twenty things he will touch and he goes from one to the next” (*CTS* 152).⁵⁵ These objects, divorced from their narrative context, become the

⁵⁵ For example, among the things that are described are “the taps on the bath,” which relate back to the moment when Bolden is finally convinced to return and he sat “[h]unched and breathing hard looking at the taps” (80). Mention is also made of the door frame, which recalls Bolden making love to Robin Brewitt when she would not “move away from the door” (58).

ghostly traces of salient events in his past for the reader. Bolden, on the other hand, becomes completely immersed in the present moment: even the arrival of the sun each day contains for Bolden an element of surprise (142). In short, he has at last succeeded in submerging his consciousness in his own pre-personal existence in a way that Billy the Kid was—perhaps rightly—afraid to. Of course, Ondaatje does not allow us to make any comfortable ultimate judgements: Bolden’s sense of peace in his madness is incomprehensible (as well as unsatisfying) for readers whose interpretations are informed by their own sense of historical consciousness and the desire to maintain a sense of their own conscious subjectivity. As Solecki laments, “[t]he irony of the situation is obvious and tragic: in madness [Bolden] has found the peace he never possessed or could possess when sane” (263). In the novel’s closing lines, Ondaatje leaves us with the uncomfortable question of how we can judge what constitutes happiness for another individual. As he desolately observes, “There are no prizes” (160).

Although Ondaatje’s later prose works take a more conventional form of narrative than either *Billy the Kid* or *Coming Through Slaughter*, his approach toward the neutralising voice of history and the role of the artist becomes more unconventional. However, this “movement. . . from relation and contemplation to an immersion in singularities and intensities” (Spinks 72) continues to surface as a form of tension or resistance in the memories of such characters as Almásy in *The English Patient* and Anna in *Divisadero*. As I will discuss in my next chapter, these texts demonstrate how fragmented and non-verbal sensorial memories of intense physical or emotional experiences arise and are subsumed within these characters’ autobiographical narratives. Further, they represent the ways in which art and narrative become a means through

which the artist is able to protect him or herself from the memory of past traumas and loss.

Chapter Three

Beyond Self-Representation: Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Divisadero*

“We have art,” Nietzsche said, “So that we shall not be destroyed by the truth.”
(Michael Ondaatje, *Divisadero* 1)

In Chapter Two, I discussed the ways in which Michael Ondaatje's representations of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden reflect his interest in pre-reflective experience, and in the forfeiture of memory that such experiences entail. I also looked at the ways in which characters who are attracted to such a mode of perception interact with others, how they function within their community, and how pre-personal perception informs the way their experiences are translated into their narratives of self. As Ondaatje's characterisations of these two figures reveal, relationships that are grounded in pre-personal perception blur the distinction between self and other. The consequence is a state of being that is grounded in the life of the senses, in which the external world is experienced as an extension of the self. At the same time, such a self remains relatively *ungrounded* in the linear constructions of time and memory that ordinarily comprise the chronological structuring from birth to death of an individual's autobiographical narrative. Thus we see both Billy and Bolden immersing themselves in their immediate sensory perceptions and bodily experiences in order to fully experience the present moment in a manner that is antithetical to historical consciousness and so frees them from the burden of the past.

However, despite their similar desire to remain focused solely on the present moment, the extent to which each of these two characters is able to sustain such a state of perception is very different. For Billy, the violence and danger inherent in his life as an outlaw create a need for boundaries and self-awareness that molecular perception undermines. Further, the intensity of pre-personal experience frightens him: such intensities threaten his self-control, and so he feels compelled to re-establish his boundaries and reassert his control by creating experiential distance through his narrative. Finally, Billy does not wish to risk being forgotten, as his declaration that he will “be with the world till she dies” (BTK 84) attests. However, Billy has very specific ideas about how he wants to be remembered, as we see when he sheepishly observes “[t]his is doing nothing for my image is it” (BTK 70) when he describes vomiting outside the Chisum home after a night of heavy drinking. As a consequence, self-consciousness is an essential element of self-preservation, both literally and as a living legend.

Bolden, on the other hand, wishes to exist in a state of perpetual “improvisation.” He yearns for consciousness to dissolve into the purely sensual, physical existence that characterises plant and animal life: he imagines being involved in relationships that reflect “the way flowers were still and fed bees” (110). He is a most reluctant narrator, and his attempts to escape narrative enclosure are always foiled by friends, family, and lovers who want to relate to him in a more conventional manner and who expect him to play certain roles in their relationships with him. The impossibility of maintaining such self-dissolution whilst remaining an accepted and functioning member of society causes the breakdown that results in Bolden living out his life in a psychiatric hospital. In the

end, despite their attraction to pre-personal perception, neither Billy nor Bolden is able to sustain the state of self-abnegation that they both regard as the only form of “pure” experience.

In addition to exploring the process through which pre-personal experience is translated into self-narrative, Ondaatje examines the ways in which our relationships with others inform our answers to the question, “Who am I?” He also grapples with what Eakin refers to as “the myth of autonomy” (43), upon which much of our individual identities are based and to which both Billy and Bolden, in their different ways, cling.⁵⁶ As we have seen, despite Billy’s resistance to stories that are told about him “through their eyes” (*BTK* 20), his narrative is inextricably intertwined with the impressions and voices of others—including, as I will discuss below, the voice of Ondaatje’s own narrative persona. Similarly, Bolden is unable to extract himself from the roles that he is expected to perform and labels that have been imposed upon him, nor is he permitted to improvise his own life experiences as fully as he desires except through madness and silence. For both these characters, the web of connections and relationships that evolves throughout their lives proves in the end to be inescapable.

In his later works, Ondaatje becomes increasingly preoccupied with the relational nature of identity as well as with the plethora of identities we assume, often simultaneously, throughout our lives. Furthermore, his interest in the role of art and narrative as a means not only of representing but assisting the evolution of self-

⁵⁶ Eakin argues that the “myth” of autonomy is perpetuated “[b]ecause autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination: I write my story; I say who I am; I create myself” (43). Consequently, he concludes, “the longevity of the myth of autonomy is hardly surprising: in this view, we are conditioned precisely not to recognize the relational dimension of selfhood” (63). In short, “we fail to register the fact of our involvement with others” (63).

understanding—which seems to have become a consuming concern by the time he wrote *Divisadero*—emerges in these early novels.⁵⁷ As I argued in Chapters One and Two, narrative is an essential component of subjectivity: the self is “defined by and transacted in narrative process” as one’s immediate experiences pass into memory and are assimilated into one’s autobiographical memory (Eakin101). It is through this process that we are able to maintain the sense of a constant, however multifaceted and changing, identity. Ondaatje pays particular attention to his characters’ experiences of self-narration for he is aware that narrative is our “only access to what is otherwise inaccessible” (Rimmon-Kenan 21): that is, narrative is the only means through which we can access the past in which our memories reside and upon which our self-definitions rely.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues that “narration opens or constitutes a direct approach to reality and subjectivity,” although “the act of narration does not represent the world directly. Rather, it represents modes of representation, possibilities of doubt and credence, in the worlds the characters inhabit” (*Glance*, 19). The ways in which Ondaatje’s characters represent these “possibilities of doubt and credence” reveal his own sense of how subjectivity evolves from the ideas and values that individuals espouse as well as those they reject. Furthermore, by understanding the ideological and moral foundation upon which these characters’ narratives of self are constructed, we gain deeper insight into their perceptions and representations of (and thereby their relationship with) the world in which they live.

⁵⁷ In this chapter, when I refer to art, I am focusing on primarily on narrative forms; however, an argument can be made that all forms of art can function as a map or mirror for identity as individuals relate to and impose a narrative on them.

Ondaatje's conception of this relationship between the individual subject and his or her world is additionally nuanced by his self-consciousness as an author and an artist. Because the ongoing and mutable process of narrative self-creation includes the appropriation of others' narratives (as well as having one's own narrative appropriated by others), Ondaatje depicts these expanding circles of influence in *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* not only by including multiple focalising perspectives in his works in a form of pastiche but by introducing himself into the texts as a character.⁵⁸ These works can be read as an early manifestation of his growing preoccupation with the process and purpose of artistic creation as the voices of his narrative personas not only intrude in these narratives but, at times, become indistinguishable from the voices of his characters. Although Ondaatje seldom intrudes in his later works of fiction as explicitly as he does in *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, his vision of the role of the artist/author and the creative process becomes increasingly significant.

In these early works, Ondaatje complicates the definition of artistic creation, problematizing the definition of "artist" in the process. For example, Buddy Bolden's chief rival, John Robichaux, is recognised as a skilled musician but never as an artist. Bolden, on the other hand, is identified as the consummate artist despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that he was "never professional in the brain" (8) and left behind no musical recordings. Similarly, Billy the Kid's fame resides in his reputation as an outlaw and a gunslinger, yet he too is characterised with the qualities of an artist and a

⁵⁸ To explicate the significance of the multiple levels upon which narrative can function, Rimmon-Kenan's adaptation of Gerard Genette's narrative model is useful. She explains, "The classical model. . . conceives of the act or process responsible for producing narrative as being, by definition, on a higher logical level than the story it narrates. By the same token, narration within a narrative is above the events it tells, this being the governing principle of Genette's distinction between narrative levels" (23).

poet. Both characters are associated with the process of writing and narration. We are frequently reminded that the poems and anecdotes Billy presents to us are part of his *Collected Works*. We realise, too, that the monologue in which Bolden describes for Webb his exhaustion and despair is also a written one: “Alcohol sweat on these pages. I am tired Webb. I put my forehead down to rest on the booklet on the table. . . . When I lift my head up the paper will be damp, the ink spread” (101). Through their written narratives, each reveals a manner of living and perceiving the world that reflects Ondaatje’s own perception of what it means to be an artist. Stephen Scobie elaborates on this definition, observing that “Ondaatje is clearly working within the Romantic tradition of the artist as outsider. . . . [F]or Ondaatje Billy’s status as an outlaw is intimately connected with the nature of his perception” (“Two Authors” 93). Bolden’s tortured narrative likewise reveals his affinity with the outsider’s manner of perception, as do the English patient’s and Anna’s.⁵⁹

In his later works, Ondaatje’s treatment of the figure of the artist expands to serve as a metaphor for the ways in which we are (at least in part) self-authoring individuals. Through his representations of the ways in which individuals reconstruct in memory the people and events that comprise their quotidian experiences, Ondaatje broadens the traditional definition of art and artistic creation to include the ongoing act of individual self-narration.⁶⁰ For example, as I will discuss later in this chapter, the English patient

⁵⁹ Bolden functions as an outsider in that he does not conform to the expectations of his society; the English patient is outside his society as he is initially a man without a name or a past, and later he is suspected of having Nazi sympathies; and Anna removes herself from her family and community by dissociating herself from the people and places associated with her past.

⁶⁰ By juxtaposing the production of individual autobiographical narratives with various art forms, Ondaatje draws parallels between acts of memory and the production of art. Art is defined in the OED as “5. An acquired ability of any kind; a skill at doing a specified thing, typically acquired through study and

uses his narrative to recreate the past, ultimately with the intention of creating a narrative that transcends both time and mortality. Through this recreation, the English patient is able to mythologize the past even more dramatically and deliberately than we saw, for example, in MacLeod's novel *No Great Mischief*.⁶¹ As he crafts his narrative, the patient too becomes a kind of artist.

Ondaatje explores the process through which the artist uses narrative to reshape and mythologize the past most explicitly in *Divisadero*, in which the main character is a writer who attempts to protect herself from the unresolved conflict in her own turbulent past as she composes stories about the imagined lives of her estranged sister and her former lover. Through these narratives, Anna is able to create distance from events—much as we saw in Billy the Kid's rewritings of the past—since she is unable or unwilling to come to terms with the traumas of the past in any other way. These fictions are juxtaposed with her biography of Lucien Segura, a French author whom she admires. As her biography of the writer unfolds in the final sections of the novel, Anna's interest in Segura is revealed to be far from purely academic: she is drawn to him because he, too, was wounded by and separated from those he loved. By juxtaposing this supposedly academic pursuit with the invented stories of Anna's lost loved ones, Ondaatje draws attention to the permeable nature of the boundary that has been presumed to separate fiction from non-fiction. We are given a glimpse behind the curtain as we see Ondaatje's notion of "the truth of fiction" (*CTS* 163) and his manner of "approaching truth" through

practice; a knack" and "6. Skill in an activity regarded as governed by aesthetic as well as organizational principles." Given the ways in which Ondaatje's characters deliberately revise their narratives of their own experiences, it is fair to consider the production of autobiographical narrative as an art form.

⁶¹ While Alexander MacDonald and the English patient tell their stories in order to mythologize and thereby preserve people whom they love but fear they have failed in the past, the English patient has the added intention of separating himself entirely from that past.

fiction in practice (Jacobs 3): Anna's arrangement and reinterpretation of the archival remains of Segura's life is represented in the novel as part of an artistic process that mirrors Ondaatje's own.

Ondaatje is interested in this process as the means through which we render the chaos of our experiences comprehensible. He remarks in an interview with Smaro Kamboureli that "I am not really interested in inventing a form, as such. . . . I want my form to reflect as fully as possible how we think and imagine. And these keep changing, of course" (241). In her discussion of Ondaatje's works, Linda Hutcheon focuses on what she considers to be the postmodern elements of Ondaatje's writing and his approach toward the mimetic qualities of literature. She observes, "Ondaatje has . . . been described as a writer fascinated with borders, including those between art and reality. But he has combined his challenge to the life/art boundaries with a defiance of the limits of conventional literary genres" (*Canadian* 81). In the case of the novels I have been discussing, he is particularly concerned with boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Further, Ondaatje's work reflects the "art/life slippage" that occurs within a "self reflexive framework," which "marks a new move beyond the modernist novel's need to assert its supreme independence and autonomy as art. Life can now (more or less safely) be let in again" (*Canadian* 76). One of the consequences of letting life "in again" is, as Anna observes in *Divisadero*, that we realise "[e]verything is autobiographical" (16). For Ondaatje, life enters his works as he peers through his characters' eyes; as Hutcheon points out, there are many moments where the boundary between author and narrator or author and character is blurred and we find ourselves wondering, "Whose voice is this?" (*Canadian* 100).

This difficulty of distinction is addressed by Naomi Jacobs in her discussion of the role of the fiction biographer: she argues that this type of biographer “abandons the traditional biographical point of View—that of the omniscient narrator—in favour of multiple narrators or an intimate first person, either of which simultaneously reduces literal belief and increases psychological intensity” (3).⁶² It is in this intensity that the “truth of fiction” (CTS 163) lies for Ondaatje: beyond his need for what he refers to as “emotional or psychological rightness,” he also declares that, “I have to be affected emotionally or in a sensual way before something hits me” (Solecki, 23-4). Thus we see the source of Ondaatje’s inspiration for and sympathy with his characters who are artists—not only Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden but the English patient and Anna as well. In short, the creation of art provides Ondaatje with the opportunity to “push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself” (CTS 135) as he finds himself reflected in characters whose biographies he writes. At the same time, the act of narration becomes a means of “mapping my thinking” (BTK 72) as it allows the author to impose a sense of order on the events and emotions he must think his way through.

As a result, the act of story-telling—remembering how even rumour and gossip become an important window into truth—is of the utmost significance in Ondaatje’s works. Not only does it provide a way to solidify our own histories and identities, but it

⁶² Jacobs goes on to describe, in the words of one such biographer, how the act of adopting such a voice can be so emotionally consuming for the author that it becomes in itself “a form of madness” (4). In Ondaatje’s case, he agrees with Sam Solecki that he has an “obsession” with “the calm surface of a landscape or a person and the dream or surreal aspect which lies underneath” (24). Solecki is referring to Ondaatje’s poetry, but this obsession continues to play out in Ondaatje’s intrusions into *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. For Ondaatje’s narrative persona, these two famous figures seem to hold up a mirror in which the author’s own character is reflected.

also serves as the means through which we reveal ourselves to others and, in the process, become self-aware. Our concerns, values, biases, and secrets are (often unintentionally) exposed as we articulate our impressions of other individuals, relationships, and events. Rimmon-Kenan elaborates on this aspect of narration, arguing that in texts of memory “the narrating characters become subjects by telling about others, or rather ‘living,’ enacting the objects of their narration: You are what you say (performatively) about others” (25). It is through our stories that we gain and allow others to gain insight into the various characters or identities we ourselves possess.

Ondaatje’s sense of the interrelatedness of our narratives and the ability of art to provide us with insight into our own characters has far-reaching consequences in his writing. Again, we are reminded of MacLeod’s miner-narrator’s observation that “the private experience, if articulated with skill, may communicate an appeal that is universal beyond the limitations of time or landscape” (*Island* 196). Sharing our narratives and identifying with another’s story have profound significance in terms of emotional and psychological effect. Jacobs contends that “to learn that one’s own most private or extreme moments have been shared by another is to be encouraged to believe that the boundaries between people, the limits of selfhood, are not as impermeable as we assume” (8). When these limits and boundaries are proven to be permeable, the relational nature of our identities is revealed: the narratives that we share with others function as informing models that we continuously appropriate in order to interpret our own lives. In short, “the project of understanding another becomes equally the project of understanding oneself: one’s present options, one’s potential futures” (Jacobs 8). Even more importantly, however, the individual is given an insight into one’s own behaviours

and motivations—and perhaps even a form of existential comfort as we realise that we are not alone in our feelings and experiences.

To fully appreciate how the creation of art and narrative provide comfort and insight into their own lives for the characters of the English patient and Anna, it is helpful to return to Ondaatje’s examination of his own relationship with art and narrative in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. In these texts, Ondaatje dramatizes the ways in which he is haunted by the characters of both Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden. In the case of Billy the Kid, Ondaatje’s struggles to “write” the outlaw are captured in key lyrics scattered throughout the collection. According to Lee Spinks, in these instances Ondaatje’s image is “superimpose[ed] onto Billy’s own,” leaving the reader struggling to identify the speaker. Spinks describes such a moment, in which “a figure we assume to be Billy reflects upon a landscape of ‘slow moving animals’ and the ‘acute nerves’ that stretch between different kinds of life. Here the figure of the outlaw alone ‘with the range for everything’ is displaced almost imperceptibly into the image of the writer tracing a pencil across a ‘soft blue paper notebook’ ([Ondaatje, *BTK*] 72)” (75). In this poem, the speaker observes,

/ while I’ve been going on
the blood from my wrist
has travelled to my heart
and my fingers touchter
this soft blue paper notebook
control a pencil that shifts up and sideways
mapping my thinking going its own way
like wet glasses drifting on polished wood
(Ondaatje, *BTK* 72)

This digression reflects both Billy's ability to immerse himself in bodily experience and Ondaatje's own claim that he has to be "affected emotionally or in a sensual way before something hits me" (Solecki, 23-4). As we saw in Billy's narratives of Charlie Bowdre's death in Chapter Two, this speaker's minute attention to detail reveals the intensity of the experience as self-awareness is concentrated to pencil-point sharpness and time is stretched out into the space between heartbeats.

During these moments, the speaker's attention to his own experience is complicated by the fact that the experience is shared within the frame of the poem by both the poet and the outlaw; the boundary between the artist and his creation blurs in a moment of "art/life slippage" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 76). This shared moment is embedded in physical experience and is translated onto the "soft blue paper notebook" in an attempt not only to express the outlaw/author's musings on the experience of writing but to illustrate his difficulty articulating those musings. This difficulty is embodied in the movement of the pencil: the ambiguous syntax suggests that the pencil follows or "maps" the speaker's train of thought but also takes its own course. Further, the suggestion that the author's creation has a life or a mind of its own is implicit in this description. Within Ondaatje's artistic appropriation of the outlaw's narrative, then, we find the author creating a paradoxical situation wherein Billy the Kid appears to be simultaneously appropriating Ondaatje's own.

Our attention is thus drawn to Ondaatje's struggle to contain his character within the bounds of his narrative, reminding us of Jacob's description of such writing as a form of all-consuming "madness" (4). In a gruesome image that depicts Billy's corpse being

devoured by insects, the poet elaborates on the increasing difficulty of controlling the outlaw's narrative:

Getting more difficult
things all over crawling
in the way
gotta think through
the wave of ants on him
millions a moving vest up his neck. . .
(40)

For Ondaatje, the “wave of ants” represents not only the devouring of Billy’s physical remains by the passage of time, but of authentic narrative traces as well. Ondaatje’s persona must “think through” this progressing decay, filling in the blanks of a character who, as we have seen, provides a mirror for the artist’s own self-exploration. According to Van Wart, “[Ondaatje’s] meditations on memory and perception merge with the gradually accumulating details of Billy’s death to create a self-reflexive impulse within the poem that determines the aesthetic image of Billy the Kid, one composed of history and legend and infused with personal vision” (24). However, this “self-reflexive impulse” is problematic. The process of filling in the blanks becomes a source of difficulty for this authorial persona, who is no longer simply infusing this image with his own “personal vision” of Billy the Kid. Rather, the poet’s persona has projected his own consciousness into Billy’s character, just as Billy the Kid projects himself into the bodies and minds of others throughout the collection. The poem becomes a site of intense struggle in which the poet’s own self-consciousness must itself be “thought through” in order to separate (and perhaps to preserve) his own autobiographical narrative from that which he has invented for his character.

Van Wart attempts to bring a final resolution to this struggle as she argues, “[i]n the aesthetic image of Billy the Kid, the violence, the chaos, and the tension are brought together and resolved by the poet, Ondaatje” (24). Yet she seems to overlook the way in which questions of authorial control remain: in yet another ambiguous reflection that describes at once the speaker’s poised control and barely contained energy, an unidentified voice observes

Am the dartboard
for your midnight blood
the bones’ moment
of perfect movement
that waits to be thrown
magnetic into combat
a pencil
harnessing my face
goes stumbling into dots
(*BTK* 85)

We are left not only with the image of an ellipsis to conclude Billy’s “portrait” but with the questions of who is being addressed, who is holding the pencil, and why that “pencil . . . goes stumbling.” The implication that Billy is speaking back to his creator is, indeed, unsettling.

This question of authority and control infuses the collection’s final poem, which begins with the statement, “It is now early morning, was a bad night” (*BTK* 105). The line echoes Billy’s earlier observation, “it was a bad night” (71), as he describes the after-effects of the all-night drinking session at the Chisum ranch mentioned earlier. In this final prose poem, the image of a smoke-filled hotel room in the morning light contains further echoes of Billy’s earlier lyrics but could also reflect the author’s own

struggle to bring this narrative to a close; as Spinks notes, the “ambiguous reference to ‘smoke’—is this cigarette or gunsmoke?—elides the two figures once again” (Spinks 75). In the end, there is no single authoritative voice: Billy’s own voice has both resisted and been assimilated into the social structures of historical judgement, popular legend, and contemporary literature. The poet’s voice, merging as it does with Billy’s, has likewise appropriated and seemingly been appropriated by the outlaw’s legend. The final photograph of Ondaatje himself as a child in cowboy costume reveals the complicated and potentially unsettling modes of self-discovery that arise from the projection of the poet’s consciousness into his subject.

In this context, it is interesting to note that Ondaatje discusses with Sam Solecki the disconcerting effect that writing *Billy the Kid* had on him, after which “there was a very real sense of words meaning nothing to me anymore, and I was going around interpreting things into words. If I saw a tree I just found myself saying tree: translating everything into words or metaphors. It was a very dangerous time for me mentally” (14). Once again, we see the ways in which narrative has the power to shape reality and experience, as “the limits of perception are correlated with Ondaatje’s act of writing them” (Van Wart 23), a fact that is reinforced by the way it appears his own personality not only merges with the personalities of his characters but is in fact taken over. As Stephen Scobie concludes, “What results from the title ‘*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje’ is in fact a composite figure: Billy the Kid, outlaw as artist, and Michael Ondaatje, artist as outlaw, meeting in one persona” (“Two Authors” 93).⁶³

⁶³ While it is perhaps tempting to read Ondaatje’s characterisations of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden autobiographically (again, see Jacobs and Van Wart), is prudent to keep in mind Barbour’s qualification of

Ondaatje's treatment of this "identification between subject and author" (Van Wart 23) in *Coming Through Slaughter* elaborates further on the ways in which narrative allows the artist to explore the multifaceted nature of subjectivity. In the process, "Ondaatje moves beyond an aesthetic image of his personal vision to a dramatization of the creation of the aesthetic itself" (Van Wart 25). Toward the end of Book Three, a new "I" emerges—one that is framed to speak with the voice of the author and directly addresses the character of Buddy Bolden. This voice, which can be linked to the relatively detached narrator of the novel's first pages who directs us to "Float by in a car today and see the corner shops" (*CTS* 2), dwells on the changes that the seventy years have wrought in the neighbourhood since Bolden, "his mind on the pinnacle of something collapsed, was arrested, put in the House of D, shipped by train to Baton Rouge, then taken north by cart to the hospital for the insane" (134). The contrast between the tone of this terse and clinical sequence of events and the initial declaration that Bolden's "mind was on the pinnacle of something" points to the narrator's dismay that Bolden's great artistic potential could have been so diminished and then forgotten.

The narrator's dismay is perhaps linked to his sense of affinity with Bolden—a sense that he deliberately draws attention to when he observes, "When he went mad he was the same age as I am now" (*CTS* 134). As he stands in the street looking at the places where Bolden lived and "probably" worked, "the photograph moves and becomes a mirror" for

this aspect of Ondaatje's narrative intrusions: "[A]lthough critics are correct to point out that the author, Ondaatje, seems to insist on being identified with the narrative voice at certain points in the text where it further identifies with Bolden (Kamboureli 1984, 117; Solecki 1985c, 254), this identification is essentially fictional" (106). Brian McHale explains that, in such instances, "the supposedly absolute reality of the author becomes just another level of fiction, and the *real* world retreats to a further remove. . . . [T]o reveal the author's position within the ontological structure is only to introduce the author *into the fiction*; far from abolishing the frame, this gesture merely *widens* it to include the author as a fictional character" (197-98).

the artist's own self-image. Once again, the distinction between character and author is effaced as experience is translated into shared memory: "When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that." This "shock of memory" causes the narrator to "push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself" (135), echoing Bolden's own cry to "put your hands through this window" (89). Again, as we saw in *Billy the Kid*, the author-persona's expressed desire to "think in your brain and body" again conflates the identities of the author with his character as he again projects himself into his character (CTS 135). As Jacobs notes, "[t]he shock of remembering Bolden's activities as his own, and the immediately felt sense of 'we-ness,' seems to have given Ondaatje the freedom to create a Bolden out of 'personal pieces of friends and fathers' [(CTS 163)] and of himself" (8). This explicit conflation continues as the narrator interprets Bolden's actions as he would his own: "Stood and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be." "We" shifts to an unidentified "he:" "He comes into the room, kneels in front of the mirror and sits on his heels. Begins to talk. Holds a blade between his first two fingers and cuts high onto the cheek. . . . This way he brings his enemy to the surface of the skin" (CTS 134-5). The intensity of emotion reflects the extent to which the narrator himself is moved by this description of a man attempting to "bring his enemy to the surface," regardless of whether or not the "he" is meant to be self-referential. The blurring of author/narrator/character identity carries with it the suggestion that Ondaatje (or at least his narrative persona) seeks not only to understand Bolden but himself better.

The result of such explicit identification between author/narrator and character is an uneasy tension between the narrator's perception of the "complete absence of [Bolden]" from Storyville at this point in the novel and the intensity of his invocation of the musician's character. As we saw in the image of Billy the Kid's mortal remains being devoured by ants, the narrator is again struck by the loss of any physical trace of the artist's existence: "even his skeleton has softened, disintegrated, and been lost in the water under the earth of Holtz Cemetery." Such an absolute absence affects the narrator profoundly; as he continues, his close identification with Bolden suggests that the narrative is not only an attempt to remember but to reanimate the long-dead musician. This tension is eased somewhat by the narrator's removal of Bolden—at least through narrative—from his soggy grave in Holtz Cemetery to a new one in First Street. He observes, "They used to bury dogs on First Street. Holes in the road made that easy. . . . So for us you are here, not in Holtz with the plastic flowers in Maxwell House coffee tins or four inch plastic Christs stuck in cement or crosses so full of names they seem like ledgers of a whole generation" (136). For a man whose "mind became the street" (37) and who was himself "a social dog" (52), this seems a far more fitting resting place for Bolden.⁶⁴ Once Bolden's absence has been mitigated by his "reburial" in First Street, the scene is freed of some of its terrible bleakness as it resolves into "a black and white photograph, part of a history book" (136).

The narrator's appropriation of the story of Bolden's burial and (at least somewhat) comforting revision of his absence is not allowed to go unchallenged, however. *Coming*

⁶⁴ Constance Rooke traces Ondaatje's use of canine imagery to represent Bolden's character; this metaphor renders Bolden's "reburial" especially appropriate (see Rooke 286-9 in particular).

Through Slaughter ends in the state hospital, with lines again spoken by an unidentified narrator. Here, the speaker sits in a silent room with “grey walls that darken into corner. And one window with teeth in it. Sit so still you can hear your hair rustle in your shirt. Look away from the window when clouds and other things go by. Thirty-one years old. There are no prizes” (160). The threatening atmosphere is emphasised by the danger of the “window with teeth in it,” which contains yet another allusion to Bolden’s desire to shatter tradition and representation by putting “your hand through this window” (89), a desire which has led him to this place where, at least from this speaker’s perspective, “there are no prizes.”

Although the speaker is unidentified, it is unlikely that these lines are Bolden’s. The tone and sentiments expressed here contrast sharply with Bolden’s own perspective once he has entered the hospital. After he is committed, Bolden deliberately silences himself by retreating into physical and sensorial life. He observes,

The sun comes every day. Save the string. I put it in lines across the room. I watch him creep his body through the grilled windows. When the sun touches the first string wham it is 10 o clock. It is 2 o clock when he touches the second. When the shadow of the first string is under the second string it is 4 o clock. When it reaches the door it will soon be dark. Laughing in my room. As you try to explain me I will spit you, yellow, out of my mouth. (142).

In this fragment, we see how Bolden has scaled his existence down an intense but meaningless engagement with the passing of empty time. There is a degree of wonder in his tone as he observes, “The sun comes every day;” the lack of narrative continuity from one day in Bolden’s life to the next is emphasised by the sudden “wham” that emphasises the unexpectedness of the sun’s repeated passage across his room. Bolden’s absolute rejection of everything in his past, including his own identity, is emphasised by

his complete immersion in his experiences of the present moment. That this is a deliberate rejection is apparent as he can be heard “[l]aughing in [his] room;” any attempt to intrude on his solitude or incorporate him back into a narrative—to “explain [him]”—will result in the offender being “spit... yellow, out of [Bolden’s] mouth.” The task of assembling a coherent narrative is left to Ondaatje’s narrator and to the reader; Buddy Bolden has refused to be a participant any longer.

For the musician, this is the right ending as he is finally becomes immersed in his own pre-personal experience; the fear and claustrophobia that infiltrate the final lines of the novel belong to the author himself. Constance Rooke offers consolation as she writes,

The last paragraph of the novel is for many readers a portrait of misery, signalling enclosure, terror, failure—in short the bankruptcy of extremist art. But it is the right ending, as Bolden has forewarned us: ‘The right ending is an open door you can’t see too far out of. It can mean exactly the opposite of what you are thinking’ [CTS 92]. . . . But say that ‘You come too. Put your hand through this window’ [CTS 89], and I think you would find a place in which the whole, pernicious issue of ‘prizes’ or the contentious ego has simply gone away” (291).

In short, Bolden’s “right ending” does not have to be Ondaatje’s; the inescapable fact that Bolden ended his life in the State hospital pains the narrator even though it is, as Ondaatje’s character asserts, “What I wanted” (CTS 132). This difficulty of reconciling the character one wants to create and in whom one has invested much of oneself with the incontrovertible and inescapable “facts” creates the struggle for authorial control that we find in both *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*.

In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje continues to explore the way these struggles for authorial control shape and reveal the story-teller. Once again, the narrative shifts

between focalising perspectives, developing nuances and relationships that illuminate the complex motivations that underlie each character's desire to remember or forget the past. Set in an Italian villa at the end of World War II, the novel revolves around four survivors—a nurse, her patient, a thief, a sapper—who are brought together by circumstance and coincidence. The patient, whose character is loosely based on the historical desert explorer Count Ladislaus de Almásy, is a man burned beyond recognition and seemingly without memory of his name or nation.⁶⁵ As the novel progresses, Almásy's identity is revealed through his conversations with the other residents, particularly with the thief, David Caravaggio. Through these conversations, the patient “rewrites” his experiences in the Libyan Desert, thereby collapsing time and space as he fills in the blanks of his past for himself and for his audience. Through his revision of the past, the patient attempts to resolve the ill-fated romance that haunts him by immortalising his lover in narrative while simultaneously divorcing himself from his own identity—and so from his role in her death. In the process, the patient comes to recognise himself as a “communal history” (*EP* 261), thereby debunking the myth of individual autonomy through his exploration of relational identity.

The patient's story comes to us in fragments as he “rides the boat of morphine. It races in him, imploding time and geography the way maps compress the world onto a two-dimensional sheet of paper” (*EP* 161). The resulting narrative is chaotic and fragmented, without clear distinctions between fact and fantasy. It is, in Caravaggio's

⁶⁵ As we have seen in his characterisations of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, Ondaatje does not feel compelled to remain faithful to his historical sources. He explains that his intention in the novel was to write about “an enigmatic desert explorer whose role when World War II broke out was to be a betrayer. . . . *The English Patient* is not a history lesson but an interpretation of human emotions—love, desire, betrayals in war and betrayals in peace—in a historical time. . . . It is about forgiveness, how people come out of war” (Tötösy 125).

words, a narrative belonging to “the world of nomads, in any case, an apocryphal story. A mind travelling east and west in the disguise of a sandstorm” (248). Inspired by grief and fuelled by the drug, the patient’s narrative erases the boundaries that delineate past and present, physical and spiritual. His vision is not restricted by his physical confinement, nor limited by time:

In the arbour'd bedroom the burned patient views great distances. The way that dead knight in Ravenna, whose marble body seems alive, almost liquid, has his head raised upon a stone pillow, so it can gaze beyond his feet into vista. Farther than the desired rain of Africa. Towards all their lives in Cairo. Their works and days. (135)

Morphine (and later Caravaggio’s liberal application of the “Brompton cocktail,” a combination of morphine and alcohol) allows the patient not only to “see” the desert but to seemingly relive his experiences in it. As the patient remembers the past, he feels as though “[e]ach swallow of morphine by the body opens a further door, or he leaps back to the cave paintings or to a buried plane or lingers once more with the woman beside him under a fan, her cheek against his stomach” (247). His memories of his affair with this woman, who was married to one of his fellow map-makers, occupy much of the novel. The patient examines this story of his relationship with Katharine Clifton in minute detail as he attempts to map the events that seem to have led inevitably to tragedy—a recurring motif throughout the novel that is reflected in way he and the other members of the “oasis society” (136) had mapped the desert. Rufus Cook unpacks this motif, explaining how works of art and narrative in the novel provide a sense of order for Ondaatje’s characters, and help them “define their identities, their purposes, their relationships with others;” these works provide “the ‘original pattern,’ the paradigm or

model, onto which the tentative, shifting relationship of real life can be mapped, and by which the shifting, evanescent self can be contained or substantiated” (“Being” 36).⁶⁶ Through its ability to substantiate and contain the self, narrative becomes a vehicle for the patient’s attempts to atone for past mistakes and to recreate his lost lover in memory.

It is significant that the narrative of the romance between the patient and Katharine comes to us in two distinct fragments, the second of which grows out of and builds on the events that were outlined in the first. When the patient initially tells Caravaggio about this relationship, he emphasises the ways in which he has been wounded by love. Before meeting Katharine, the patient describes himself as self-contained, “his own invention” (*EP* 246). However, after they meet, this notion of his own autonomy is exploded as he becomes consumed by their relationship. His descriptions of the intensity of their connection and the urgency of their lovemaking underline their mutual desire to possess the other completely: “[t]heir bodies had met in perfumes, in sweat, frantic to get under that thin film with a tongue or a tooth, as if they could grip character there and pull it right off the body of the other” (173). When they are not together, the patient imagines that they are still linked by a synchronicity of experience: “He sweeps his arm across plates and glasses on a restaurant table so she might look up somewhere else in the city hearing this cause of noise” (154-5).⁶⁷ For each of these two characters, “the other provides a map of the self” (Miller 14); through their relationship, they are able to

⁶⁶ Ondaatje makes this metaphor explicit, for example, through the sapper Kip’s perception that “there was no order but for the great maps of art that showed judgement, piety and sacrifice”(70).

⁶⁷ The novel ends with this idea of synchronicity when, in one of his rare direct intrusions, Ondaatje’s narrator describes how Hana’s “shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork” (*EP* 302): this kind of connection, described by the patient and which will become so essential in *Divisadero*, remains between the two lovers despite being separated by time and space.

begin a process of self-discovery that begins on the most fundamental physical and sensorial level.⁶⁸ Before long, the patient becomes unable to conceive of his own identity except in relation to Katharine: Cook characterises this relationship not only by their “readiness. . . to immerse themselves in one another’s experience” (“Being” 40) but by the extent to which they each “submerge their individual identities” in that of the other (“Imploding” 121). Despite his memories of their mutual desire to “submerge their individual identities,” however, the patient reveals that he also felt compelled to preserve the boundaries of his own identity in a manner that calls to mind Billy the Kid’s need for self-preservation. Consequently, despite their great passion, the relationship between the patient and Katharine is also defined by the ways in which they are unsettled by their desire.

The patient describes how conflict arose as a result of fundamental disparities between their temperaments. He explains, for example, that Katharine “had always wanted words, she loved them, grew up on them. Words gave her clarity, brought reason, shape. Whereas I thought words bent emotions like sticks in water” (238).⁶⁹ As a result, Katharine’s displays of temper or passion are frequently met with silence when he ought perhaps to have spoken (see, for examples, 144, 145, 151, 157). When the illicit

⁶⁸ For example, the patient remembers looking at himself in the mirror: “He became curious. . . about the shape of his face. The long eyebrows he had never really noticed before, the beginning of gray in his sandy hair. He had not looked at himself like this in a mirror for years. That was a long eyebrow” (153). This rediscovery of himself as an embodied consciousness arises from his encounter with the “other.”

⁶⁹ Despite their differing attitude towards “words,” literature seems at times to actively determine their actions, as when “Katharine reads aloud the story of Candaules and his queen, she makes it clear that she intends the story as a lesson for her husband concerning his inordinate pride in her beauty;” however, “the story compels her to a ‘first errant step’ down a path she could never have imagined without its subversive suggestion” (Cook 36-37). Almásy, too, is seduced by the words of the story as Katharine reads from *The Histories*, just as he “fell in love with a voice” (*EP* 144) after hearing her read from *Paradise Lost*. Deeply moved by her reading and taking his cue from the content, he observes, “I see her still, always, with the eye of Adam” (144). Thus, they are placed on the path that will ultimately cause them to “find or lose” their souls (238).

nature of their relationship and the differences in their characters become unbearable, Katharine insists they end their relationship and he agrees. Neither really understands the other's reasons for this separation; the patient believes that she leaves him out of fear of her husband, while she blames his hatred of "ownership" and being owned (152) as well as his inability to articulate his emotions. Through the patient's tortured remembrances of this relationship, Ondaatje continues to examine the conflict between the desire to immerse oneself in "pure relationship" (*CTS* 85) while maintaining a sense of oneself as an autonomous individual. However, in his narrative, the patient—who has been destroyed by this conflict—reflects on the illusory nature of autonomy. In the throes of despair, the patient/Almásy loses all sense of his own identity: he laments that "[h]e has been disassembled by her. And if she has brought him to this, what has he brought her to?" (*EP* 155).

It is only after Katharine's husband attempts to kill them both, and Katharine herself lies dying in the desert that Almásy learns that she, too, had been "disassembled" by their relationship. As he relives his final moments with Katharine in memory, he recalls her statement that "I went mad. . . you killed everything in me" (*EP* 173). Thus, the process of immortalising Katharine and "mak[ing] her eternal" (261) begins in the second fragment of the patient's love story, perhaps as a response to this final accusation. This retelling is very different from the first: whereas the first focused on the way he was "disassembled" by her (155), this one focuses on "putting things into place" (255). As we saw with MacLeod, Ondaatje's narrative structure reveals that "[w]hat might register as random contingency in existential encounter, exhibits iterative structure in recall. Knowing this, the narrator must accept opposing senses: of uncertainty in lived

experience and patterned inevitability in narrative reconstruction” (Nicholson, “Tuning” 35). This sense of inevitability is essential to the patient’s immortalization of Katharine in his narrative: when narrative coherence is established, the patient’s memories of Katharine can enter the realm of mythical time and she can thereby transcend mortality.

Genevieve Lloyd argues that the impulse to create such ordering, mythologizing narratives arises from “[t]he desire to preserve, to salvage the transient from the destructive effects of time” (135). As we have seen, Ondaatje’s artistic purpose in *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* was, at least in part, to prevent these two figures from being lost in the mists of time. The patient has a similar “artistic” purpose as he vocalises his narrative. Since memory provides the rememberer with “a fragment of existence withdrawn from time,” art and narrative become ways “of giving permanence to these impressions” (Lloyd 142). The patient, whose work as a mapmaker and archaeologist have caused him to become disillusioned with other forms of permanence, translates his lover into living memory—the only thing that he believes truly lasts.⁷⁰ Cook argues that if “narrative really does have the power to defeat or redeem time, it is not just the power celebrated by the sonneteer perpetuating the memory of the loved one: it is the power actually to suspend or short-circuit linear successive time, actually to collapse the past, present, and future into one simultaneous atemporal instant” (“Imploding” 123). The purpose of such narratives is to “re-create. . . a sense of being ‘situated outside time,’ with ‘no fear of the future, no fear of death’ ([Lloyd] 141)”

⁷⁰ It is interesting that the patient’s transmission of his narrative to the other inhabitants of the villa reflects the ways in which oral societies preserved the past. In such communities, “[t]he oral transmission of the past means that the past is bound to the present for its survival. The past exists only in so far as it continues to be held in living memory, and it is so remembered only as long as it serves present need” (28). The past is always present but its permanence is qualified by the ways in which it is perpetually evolving in narrative to suit the community’s needs.

(Cook, "Being" 48). This sense of transcendence and fearlessness is critical for the English patient, who follows "traditions he had discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them eternal—a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing" (*EP* 248) or a narrative.⁷¹ Lloyd contends that the purpose of such narratives is to preserve "not the thing itself in all its actual ephemeral details, but a transformation, a spiritualization of it—something which. . . becomes common property" (135-6). The patient can only free Katharine from the clutches of time and death by making her part of communal memory; only then can he fade into anonymity and escape the relentless guilt that haunts him.

Like MacLeod's character, Agnes, who unconsciously re-enacts the sorrows of her past, the patient returns again and again to his most troubling—and simultaneously most cherished—memories. Cook discusses the way in which parts of the story are repeated, at times verbatim, calling to mind the ways in which Billy the Kid's narrative "crystallised" (King 25) certain moments because they have had a profound effect on him. Cook identifies two such moments. The first describes how Katharine and her husband were introduced into their midst: a "young man named Geoffrey Clifton had met a friend at Oxford who mentioned what we were doing. He contacted me, got married the next day, and two weeks later flew with his wife to Cairo" (142, 229). The other example to which Cook draws attention is the final words Katharine and her lover Almásy speak to each other after she has ended their affair. "I don't miss you yet,"

⁷¹ In addition to immortalising Katharine in narrative, he attempts to translate her body into a work of art as well. In the moments before he leaves her in the Cave of Swimmers after she has been injured, he describes how he "looked up to the one cave painting and stole the colours from it. The ochre went into her face, he daubed blue around her eyes. . . . Then all her skin. . . . Hoops of colour around her legs so she would be immune to the human" (248). By making Katharine "immune to the human," Almásy hopes to protect her from death.

Almásy tells her. She replies, “You will” (158, 171). Yet another memory that haunts the patient is Katharine’s dying words: “How did you hate me? . . . Stop defending yourself” (173, 258). The verbatim repetition of these memories emphasises their fundamental significance for the patient: the fact that they are reproduced word for word at different points in the narrative suggests the obsessive turnings of memory and creates the impression that these moments belong to a narrative that the patient has repeated to himself many times. While the fragmented nature of the narrative reflects the workings of memory, these verbal repetitions are in keeping with the traumatic nature of these memories.

As I observed in Chapter Two with regard to Billy the Kid, such repetitions occur because “trauma is not locatable in the violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). The ongoing effects of trauma on the patient become clear as he relives the horror of the moments in which his airplane crashes and he realises that he himself is on fire. In this moment, the past and present blend, and the English patient and Almásy coexist under the watchful eye of Caravaggio:

The odour of morphine on his tongue. . . . There is blood somehow all over his face He lifts his legs out of the oil, but they are so heavy. There is no way he can lift them again. He is old. Suddenly. Tired of living without her. He cannot lie back in her arms and trust her to stand guard all day all night while he sleeps. He has no one. He is exhausted not from the desert but from solitude. (Ondaatje 175)

As the past and present converge, the patient relives this traumatic memory and is crushed by the reality of Katharine’s absence. This devastating memory, which contains

both physical trauma and the consciousness of irremediable loss, is made more terrible by his own sense of culpability.

These overwhelming feelings of responsibility and guilt at last cause the patient to abandon his propensity toward silence. While he was in the Italian hospital, the English patient “talks, he talks all the time, he just doesn’t know who he is” (28); later, in the villa, he continues his endless talking while maintaining this pretence that he has forgotten his identity. His narrative circles those moments of error and misunderstanding and loss; these memories lie behind and inform everything he describes. As we saw in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming through Slaughter*, the way in which trauma destabilises narratives and undermines authorial control is an important element of Ondaatje’s representation of his character’s story:

At the core of these stories [of trauma]... is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. These two stories, both incompatible and absolutely inextricable, ultimately define the complexity of what [Caruth] refer[s] to as *history* in the texts. (Caruth 7)

As the English patient faces this crisis of life, he is bound by the incontrovertible facts of his failure to rescue Katharine after she has been injured during her husband’s murder/suicide attempt. He is further bound to endlessly narrate this crisis for, as Caravaggio observes, “the only way to survive [the deepest sorrow] is to excavate everything” (*EP* 44). The patient, who was once reviled by his lover for being “so wordless sometimes, as if the greatest betrayal of yourself would be to reveal one more inch of your character” (174), can do nothing now but talk. Amy Novak argues that “this work of memory produces a tension between the desire to contain the past by

remembering and the return of a past, a specter, that cannot be contained” (213). Novak is correct insofar as there is a spectre within the English patient’s narrative that cannot be contained; however, whereas Novak argues that Katharine Clifton is the disruptive presence or spectre in the narrative (214), I would argue that the restless ghost is, in fact, Almásy himself.

The patient is clearly quite anxious to banish the spectre of Almásy; he takes great pains not only to separate himself from his former self but to forget that self entirely. Cook contends that the English patient is “the most thoroughly negated or nullified character in the novel. He has been stripped of his memory, of his sense of personal identity, of his distinguishing physical features” (“Being” 46). However, I would argue that only the latter aspect of his identity has been genuinely lost. Throughout the novel, the English patient deliberately obscures his identity, claiming “I don’t know. You keep asking me” (5) when the nurse, Hana, questions him about his past. It is only towards the end that he acknowledges the name “Almásy” when he concedes to Caravaggio, “So you have run me to earth” (*EP* 252). Until this moment of admission, the patient has attempted to leave behind the pain of his past and the shame he associates with his identity. Before he acknowledges his identity, we see this agony of mortification reach a climax as he describes dancing with Katharine at a party after their affair had ended:

Almásy was drunk and his dancing seemed to the others a brutal series of movements. . . . He pivoted with her, lifting her up and then fell. Clifton stayed in his seat, half watching them. Almásy lying across her and then slowly trying to get up, smoothing back his blond hair, kneeling over her in the far corner of the room. He had at one time been a man of delicacy. (244-5)

This memory of the desert explorer, who had once been “a man of delicacy,” reflects both Almásy’s torment and the patient’s disgust. Like Billy the Kid, the patient distances himself from his past self by rendering “Almásy” in the third person. However, the patient goes further than Billy in his attempts to create distance. In Billy’s case, self-narration still bridges the gap between the “I” who is presently speaking and the past “I” of whom he speaks, whereas the patient uses his narrative to fracture the connection between these two selves. Almásy’s despair and Katharine’s rage haunt the patient as he remembers Katharine’s accusations as she lay dying in the Cave of Swimmers: “You were terrible to me. That’s when my husband suspected you. I still hate that about you—disappearing into deserts or bars” (173). The pain that his absence—whether physical or emotional—caused her now haunts him and drives him to try to atone for his mistakes too late. His need for atonement is exacerbated by fact that Almásy has other deaths on his conscience as well. He reveals that he feels implicated in the suicide of his friend Madox—as though he had held a sinister influence over his friend. In fact, the burden of his guilt is so great that he imagines he “was a curse upon them” (257): he wonders, “Had I been her demon lover? Had I been Madox’s demon friend? This country—had I charted it and turned it into a place of war?” (260). In this state of anguish, after everything he has “ever loved or valued has been taken away from [him]” (257), the patient compulsively returns to and attempts to eliminate himself from his memories of the past.

Looking back to his time in the desert, the patient is now able to interpret moments and events that did not make sense in the moment of experience. He provides both sides of the arguments, correcting the misapprehensions and filling in the gaps that have led

him to this haunted existence. He mystifies Caravaggio by “giving himself only the voice of the watcher, the listener, the ‘he’” (*EP* 172), explaining that “*Death means you are in the third person*” (247). In the end, the English patient becomes a sort of visionary, able to witness events that occurred long before he met Katharine. Prompted by his memory of Katharine’s vaccination scar, he tells Caravaggio, “I see the instrument scratch and then punch the serum within her and then release itself, free of her skin, years ago, when she was nine years old, in a school gymnasium” (Ondaatje 158). Temporality and planes of existence become scrambled as he describes Katharine and her husband’s first meeting as though he, too, had been there, explaining to her absence that “my early ghost accompanied you, those years before we met” (258-9). He even adopts the omniscient perspective of the mythological jackal “who will guide her [into the after-life] and protect her, who will never deceive her” (258). Stepping outside the ordinary laws of material existence, he adds his voice to that of desert mythology:

I have lived in the desert for years and I have come to believe in such things. It is a place of pockets. The trompe l’oeil of time and water. The jackal with one eye that looks back and one that regards the path you consider taking. In his jaws are the pieces of the past he delivers to you, and when all of that time is fully discovered it will prove to have been already known. (*EP* 259)

By associating himself with the jackal and thereby with death, the patient removes himself from the constraints of his own history. He has abandoned his name, his identity, and his past—all he holds onto is the “owned pain” in himself (*CTS* 88), exemplified by his adoption of his lover’s English nationality and the pain of that association. Through this

process of reclaiming these memories, of circling back again and again to certain ‘timeless’ moments in their relationship, . . . the English patient gradually frees

himself from his specific time-bound identity and comes to identify instead with the self that narrates, the self that incorporates in one simultaneous space all the cumulative experiences of lost time. (Cook, "Being" 48)

By becoming "the self that narrates," the patient adopts the perspective of an omniscient, third person narrator. This perspective allows the patient to ensure that Almásy, the man who betrayed his friends and his lover and whose silence (he believes) caused him to become unintentionally responsible for their deaths, has been laid to rest.

At the end of the novel, the true identity of the nameless, faceless English patient remains unknown to everyone but Caravaggio. The patient has become aware that he is not, as he had imagined and desired himself to be, an autonomous and self-authored being. His understanding of this phenomenon of relational identity is contained in his observation that,

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. (*EP* 261)

In this passage, the patient's sense of a community that transcends all boundaries, including physical ones, and his desire for anonymity and atonement converge. There is a symbolic moment during which the nurse, Hana, perceives that there "is a sense of numerous gazes that flicker onto her for a moment, then shift away like a lighthouse" (118). In this moment, the patient's past and present selves, as well the individuals whose influence and essences he has absorbed, look out through his eyes. Significantly,

whereas Almásy would have been appalled to discover he is not the autonomous being he imagined, the patient finds comfort in this vision of the self as a form of communal “text.”⁷²

Once his story has concluded, the English patient begins to fade from the world of the villa community. Unlike the beginning of the novel, when “the English patient wore his hearing aid so he was alive to everything in the house” (88), the dying man has abandoned his connection to the physical world: “For him now the world is without sound, and even light seems an unneeded thing” (298). His secret, that he is not even English, dies with him.⁷³ The patient does not correct the other characters’ projections and misconceptions of his identity, because such misapprehensions are in accordance with his desire to erase his past. They allow him to exist only in the present moment as the narrator of his lover’s story, or as a nebulous character in the other characters’ stories. By separating himself from his own past, the patient is able to reinvent himself as part of the villa community’s evolving memory: “after his loss of Katharine, the student of Herodotus sees the futility of the hope of permanence. The desert becomes for him a sign of flow rather than of fixity, such as may be found. . . in the shifting winds of

⁷² The patient’s commonplace book serves as a further metaphor for relational identity as a communally authored “text.” This book is the one the patient “brought with him through the fire—a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations—so they are all cradled within the text of Herodotus” (Ondaatje 16). Almásy has transformed the text into his own version of history and truth: he has added maps and pictures, covered over information that he discovered was false, and filled in the spaces with information that is relevant only to him (such as stories about the names of the wind (16-17), and “all [Katharine’s] arguments against him” (172)). This book has been marked and added to so that now it is “almost twice its original thickness” (Ondaatje 94). In this way, *The Histories* has become a work of joint authorship that has moved far beyond its original author’s control. It has also become a physical representation of the ways in which the English patient himself escapes his “bindings.”

⁷³ Caravaggio attempts to reveal the patient’s identity when Kip threatens to shoot the English patient as a result of his newfound hatred for Western society after the atomic bomb has been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In that moment of crisis, however, Caravaggio’s revelation remains unacknowledged by the others.

his commonplace book” (Williams 241). The patient’s malleable identity becomes a mask, shielding him from the truths he cannot face in his past and rewriting history so that the story of his immortalised lover will be all that remains.

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Coming Through Slaughter*, and *The English Patient*, Ondaatje invents fictional biographies for historical characters who, in turn, interpret and revise their own “autobiographical” narratives. Ondaatje’s work becomes increasingly preoccupied with the relationship between subjectivity, memory, and narrative; this concern is reflected in the way his characters become more and more conscious of the process through which autobiographical narratives are perceived, organised, and influenced. Ondaatje extends his exploration of these themes in *Divisadero*. From its opening lines, *Divisadero* reveals itself as a text that is primarily concerned with the creation and function of art and narrative. Like the characters in Ondaatje’s earlier works, the narrator, Anna, “seems drawn by the hope that art can give objective shape or substance to experience” (Cook, “Being” 35). She speaks to us directly as the author of this text, which is composed of a number of stories that she has written. In her prologue, she quotes Nietzsche, who argued that “We have art. . . so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth” (*Divisadero* 1). The significance of this statement becomes clear as we realise that Anna is estranged from the people she loves: furthermore, she quickly reveals the irrevocable nature of this estrangement, for she has made herself untraceable. She explains, “I have taken myself away from who I was with them, and what I used to be. When my name was Anna” (1).⁷⁴ As the novel progresses,

⁷⁴ The significance of changing one’s own name recurs throughout the text—this significance is represent in particular by the thief who “used names like passwords, all of them with a brief lifespan” (182) and

Anna's motivations and concerns are revealed through her artistic process; by extension, Ondaatje's own artistic methods are implicitly represented and examined.

The novel begins with the stories of Anna, Claire, and Coop who were raised together by Anna's father for sixteen years, and depicts their individual lives after their family was torn apart by an unforgivable act of violence. It then turns to the biography of Lucien Segura, a French writer with a history of troubled relationships who was known as much for his eccentric temperament as for his tales of romance and adventure.

Although *Divisadero* initially seems to divide into several different narrative strands, it is in fact an obsessive examination of a single story that has been torn apart and reconstructed again and again in various guises as Anna attempts to understand and come to terms with the trauma in her past.⁷⁵ Despite the lengths to which she has gone to separate herself from her past, the unfolding narratives clearly demonstrate the extent to which she continues to feel trapped by the past as well as her own conflicting desire to preserve some form of connection with the people she has loved.

Thus, *Divisadero* presents its readers with an exploration of the art of writing as Anna, a writer and academic researcher, depicts for the reader a version of her life, invents the possible lives of those she has left behind, and recreates the life of the French writer to whom she most closely relates. Through her rewriting of all these lives, Anna seeks not only to maintain a bond with the past she has otherwise cast off but to find her

whose true name is never revealed, though he bears a haunting resemblance to the thief Caravaggio from *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*. Names come to represent a window into the self, a means of revealing who one truly is; consequently, when Anna changes hers, she not only reinvents her present identity but attempts, like the thief (and the English patient himself), to efface her past self.

⁷⁵ We are reminded of the ways in which Buddy Bolden is said to have been "tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot" (*CTS* 32); however, whereas Bolden sought to shatter the boundaries of certainty and order, Anna seeks to reinforce them.

own place within it—a necessary precursor to understanding her position in the present. By placing Anna so explicitly in the role of the artist and causing her to give expression to her own inner landscape, Ondaatje challenges his readers with the impossible task of disentangling the autobiographical narrative of the “author” from the fictional narratives that she creates. This comingling of fact and fiction is the essence of Anna’s work; she observes, “I work where art meets life in secret” (141). The ambiguity of her syntax causes us to question whether she is suggesting that her work of attempting to express and interpret her own experiences is done in secret, or whether this “meeting” of art and life is itself a secret—or perhaps both. Either way, her observation suggests that the artist is always at work subverting the clear categories that her audience perhaps take for granted. We must also wonder from whom this secret is meant to be kept—from her subjects, her audience, or even the author herself? Such questions cause us to reconsider the implications of Hutcheon’s discussion of “art/life slippage,” in which she contends that “Life can now (more or less safely) be let in again” (*Canadian* 78): whereas my discussion of Ondaatje’s earlier works emphasises the ways in which life informs and is represented in art, my concern is now with the ways in which life can be let into art *safely*.

The novel begins with the section entitled “Anna, Claire, and Coop,” which is openly autobiographical and narrated in the first person. Anna discusses her childhood with her adopted sister Claire and the orphaned boy Coop, whom Anna’s father took in after Coop’s own family was brutally murdered by their deranged hired hand. Anna describes how self-definition and self-discovery evolved through her changing relationships with these two adopted siblings. However, a moment of violence (in which Anna’s father

attacks and beats Coop nearly to death) destroys the tenuous bonds of family, causing Anna to run away from home.

This confrontation between Coop and Anna's father occurs when, at the age of sixteen, Anna becomes Coop's lover. Their romance is the first secret that Anna has kept from Claire, and her concealment of the relationship is the first step in what would become a permanent division between the two sisters. When Anna's father learns of the affair—he discovers his daughter and her lover *in flagrante*—he flies into a murderous rage. Throwing Anna roughly aside, he hits the unresisting Coop in the face with a stool, knocking him through a glass window. Shock and disbelief paralyse both Anna and Coop, for this is the man “who had raised him.” Anna describes how Coop

stood up slowly and turned to look at the man who had raised him, who was now coming towards him again. He didn't move. Another blow on his chest knocked him onto his back. Anna began screaming. . . . Coming out of shock, realizing that her father was not going to stop, that he was going to kill him, Anna ran onto the deck and tried to pull her father away. But she could not separate them. Coop looked unconscious, wasn't moving. The stool came down hard on his chest once more, and blood came out of his mouth. Again she tried to embrace her father and pull him away from the body, but she was nothing against his strength. She turned away from him, lifted a large shard of glass and pierced it into his shoulder, pushing it deeper and deeper into his flesh through the checkered shirt. . . . His strong left arm came up slowly and clutched her neck and began to crush her windpipe. Then everything began darkening and she dropped to her knees and went limp. She was near to Coop, she brought her face beside him and listened for the sound of his breath beneath that of her own frantic breathing, and finally heard a whisper of it. But he was so still. (32)

Yet again we are reminded of Billy the Kid's description of Charlie Bowdre's death as Anna recalls this scene in terrible detail. Her fear and uncertainty magnify these details, and time passes with terrible slowness—marked in the end by the rate of her breathing.

Anna describes falling to the ground, semi-conscious, after which her father releases her long enough to cover her with a blanket before dragging her, screaming, back to their farmhouse. Coop is left for dead. They spend only a few moments at the house, where Anna hastily dresses and grabs a few keepsakes. Then, her father “forced [Anna] into the truck and drove [her] away, . . . as if distance would dilute whatever existed between Coop and [her]” (140). Filled with horror and a deep sense of betrayal, Anna slips away from her father when he stops at a truck stop and hitches a ride south with another driver. Once she has made her escape, Anna “stared and stared [out the window], swallowing everything [she] saw,” hoping that “whatever existed in [her] would be washed away” (146).⁷⁶ The trauma of these events—to be so discovered by her father, her father’s merciless beating of her lover, her own attack on her father with the shard of glass, his attempt to strangle her in return, and the act of running away and attempting to “[wash] away” her past—haunts her, making it impossible for her to ever return to her old life. Anna’s memories of her family come to an end on the afternoon of the attack: the stories we read about Claire’s and Coop’s lives thereafter are entirely constructed from fantasy.

In these narratives, the events of the past “will reverberate indefinitely, conferring significance on a whole succession of subsequent incidents” (Cook, “Being” 39) as they are translated into the fictional lives that Anna imagines for the companions of her youth. She invents stories as a substitute for knowledge: because she cannot bear to imagine that her lover might be dead, she focuses on Coop’s stubborn will to live as

⁷⁶ This image of Anna attempting to wash away the past calls to mind Buddy Bolden, who likewise attempts to “wip[e] out his past” (*CTS* 16).

evidenced by her memories of his adventurous past. Further, she invents a heroic rescue in which Coop is saved by Claire, based on her recollections of her sister's daring and resourceful temperament. Anna's creative reinvention of their lives recalls Ondaatje's own interest "in unfinished stories" (Barbour 99). In her narratives, she is able to preserve and mythologize their characters as she remembers them, as well as control their fates. This preservation and control are essential to her; in order to protect herself from further traumas, she never finds out what really happened to them after she left. In this way, she is able to control the paths of their lives—she is never forced, as Ondaatje himself is in his writing of Billy and Bolden, to accept an ending that she cannot live with. In fact, she is able to imagine a scenario in which there is at least a chance for forgiveness as Claire, Coop, and her father are reunited—though Anna cannot allow herself (even in imagination) to be part of that reunion (164). More importantly, such scenarios allow her to hold her family close in her memory without revealing herself to them in any way.

Clearly, it is vital to Anna that she remains hidden. Because of those interminable reverberations of the past in the present, the memory of that terrible afternoon dominates not only her reflections on the past and all her familial relationships, but on her perceptions of her current experiences and relationships as well. It is only by adopting the voices of others that she is able to articulate the maelstrom of emotions she has carried from that experience. Describing herself in the third person, Anna explains,

There are times when she needs to hide in a stranger's landscape, so that she can look back at the tumult of her youth, to the still-undiminished violence of her bloodied naked self between her father and Coop, the moment of violence that deformed her, all of them. . . . Her past is hidden from everyone. She has never

turned to a lover or friends when they speak about families (and she always inquires of their families) and spoken of her childhood. The terrible beating of Coop, the weapon of glass entering her father's shoulder as she tried to kill him. Even now she cannot enter that afternoon's episode with safety. (75)

Even after all this time, her horror remains "undiminished" to the point that her very identity and sense of self are "deformed" by it. In permanent retreat from both the experience and her resulting self-perception, Anna is incapable of speaking of her past directly and therefore remains bound by it.

Colin Nicholson's observation about the operations of memory in MacLeod's short story "The Boat" sheds light on how Anna's

disconcerting now. . . sets a contextual immediacy for the shaping operations of a preterite existence which everywhere disrupts, infiltrates and defines the parameters of narrative contemporaneity. This is a presented voice so thoroughly imbued by past relationships that it appears inseparable from the recalled experience to which it gives utterance. Memory is everywhere pre-text, as the I which speaks in the now of our reading brings us to participant awareness of a complex, shared formation. ("Tuning" 32)

In short, Anna cannot separate her present from her past experiences, which results in her sense of a "disconcerting" or haunted "now". Nicholson's notion of a "presented voice" relates to the way Anna addresses her readers using voices that are not natural or spontaneous but rather are carefully constructed. The "complex, shared formation" refers to the reader's perception that Anna is at once immersed in the events that she narrates and, at the same time, removed from them. The very title *Divisadero*, which Anna tells us is derived from the Spanish word for "division" or possibly "from the word *divisar*, meaning 'to gaze at something from a distance'" (142), reminds us of the emotional and temporal distance between the immediate experience of trauma and the

later detached recollection required for its reconstruction. The constructed nature of her narratives and the emotional distance (demonstrated in her use of the third person) that such narratives afford are necessary for her to approach the inescapable events of that devastating afternoon with any sense of security.

Ondaatje's characterisations of Billy the Kid through his relationship with Angie D. and the English patient's attempts to immortalise Katharine present a similar dichotomy wherein characters are simultaneously deeply invested in yet estranged from events in their past. Because it is impossible for Anna to comprehend her father's motivations and behaviour, she is unable to deal directly with the event though her life continues to revolve around it. In situations where traumatic events involving a significant or "proximate" other cannot be integrated into an individual's "identity narrative," Eakin tells us that "the story of the proximate other is ultimately unknowable" (Eakin 90). Anna will always be haunted by the memory of her father and what he has done for, as she bitterly demands, "Who recovers from such events?" (141). Because the story itself is too harrowing for her to face, this narrative is "overlaid. . . with the *story* of the story to give it structure, body, substance" (Eakin 90, emphasis added). Throughout the novel, the "story of the story" overwrites this one traumatic event not only through her retreat into the third person but also through the other narratives that she includes as she imagines Claire's and Coop's futures, and Segura's past. She notes,

There is a poem of Henry Vaughan's that describes the way 'care moves in disguise.' I don't know if this is what I am doing, from this distance, imagining the life of my sister, and imagining the future of Coop. I am a person who discovers archival subtexts in history and art, where the spiralling among a handful of strangers tangles into a story. (137)

As the image of spiralling, entangled strangers implies, the multiple strands of narrative that Anna weaves together provide the subtext of her own story, through which her reader is able to gain insight into Anna's character and to excavate the ongoing consequences her traumatic past through her representations of others. Like Billy the Kid and the English patient, Anna retreats into the third person. For her, it functions as a mask, and "there was nothing more assuring than a mask. Under the mask she could rewrite herself into any place, in any form" (142). Anna explains how essential this distancing through narration is to her sense of self-preservation, because "sometimes we enter art to hide within it. It is where we can go to save ourselves, where a third person voice protects us" (142).

Ondaatje creates a complex relationship between Anna and the voices she uses to examine her life and her work in order to illuminate her mindset for his readers. Just as I described the narrator of "The Boat" compulsively reliving his painful experiences in Chapter One, De Smyter suggests that "Anna seems to have been compulsively repeating and trying to give a voice to the traumatic, repressed events of her life. It is significant that she is referred to, or rather refers to herself, as 'a creature of a hundred natures and voices' ([*Divis*] 90)" ("Live" 107). While the narratives that describe the lives of Claire and Coop after Anna's traumatic separation from them are written in an omniscient third person voice, verbal echoes between this section and those more clearly focalized by Anna's first person perceptions suggest that *her* imagination is the creative force behind all of the unfolding stories. Throughout the novel, Ondaatje subtly weaves echoes and clues—such as unexpected acts of violence and disputes between family

members—that remind us that Anna is the creator of the entire text.⁷⁷ As a consequence, these echoes and repetitions “contribute to the feeling that the present is actually only a replica or re-enactment, and that genuine identity or meaning is always to be found elsewhere, in some experience remembered from the past” (Cook, “Being” 38). Problematically, because Anna insists on viewing these remembered events from a distance, the past can never be fully understood or assimilated into her autobiographical narrative; by extension, self and meaning can never be fully realised in the present moment. For Anna, as she explains in her characterisation of Lucien Segura, writing becomes, “a way [she] could enter the world as [her]self” (222). Through this process of displacement, the realisation of the self is always deferred; in a manner that recalls the English patient’s withdrawal from his own narrative, Anna remains a ghostly presence in her own story.

As I observed at the beginning of this chapter, Anna tells us that everything is autobiographical: “What we make, why it is made, how we draw a dog, who it is we are drawn to, why we cannot forget. Everything is collage, even genetics. There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross” (16). Although Anna claims that she is “uncertain, even now, what made [her] fall upon the life of Lucien Segura and wish to write about him” (143), her choice emphasises the unconscious return to and re-enactment of trauma: Anna goes on to describe how her attraction to Segura derived

⁷⁷ The notion that the entire novel is the work of Anna has been argued in reviews by Robert McGill (2007), and Sharon Selby (2008). For an in depth discussion of these echoes and repetitions, see Sofie De Smyter’s article “‘We Live Permanently in the Recurrence of Our Own Stories’: Michael Ondaatje’s *Divisadero*” (2009).

from her impressions that his “wounded voice” and “ruined love” were “familiar” (143). Anna’s preoccupation with lost fathers and separated lovers determines which episodes are included in her biography of Segura; the moments of loss and violence that precipitate the writer’s retreat into art constitute the literary and psychological landscape in which Anna places Segura. It is no coincidence that Segura, like Anna, retreated into his stories and art to protect himself from the painful realities of his life. He, too, becomes “immersed in the lives of others” (*EP* 12), which allows him paradoxically to both avoid and attempt to understand his own tragedies. As De Smyter remarks,

It appears that Anna has not only imagined a future for Coop and Claire, and talked about her past, but also infused her biographical interest in Lucien Segura with autobiographical concerns. By doing so, she has successfully blurred the traditional boundary separating fiction, biography, and autobiography, and the one distinguishing author, narrator and character, making it impossible to formulate neat categories. (“Live” 107)

Anna’s investigations of the tragedies of Segura’s life and his relationship with his own daughters allow her to examine while still avoiding the shattered fragments of her life as she reconstructs his narrative. Such authorial traces provide a “fingerprint” (to return to Saklofske’s image, in this case belonging to Anna) that draws attention to the ways in which authors’ conscious and unconscious concerns and preoccupations inform their writing. As Ondaatje himself tellingly observes, “I guess you always do go back and write the same story. The least you can do is try to make it look like something else” (Solecki, *Spider* 325).⁷⁸ In such a context, Ondaatje’s final image of birds skimming over darkening waters “as close to their reflections as possible” (273) gains poignancy

⁷⁸ W. M. Verhoven presses this point one step further, arguing that because art is “fundamentally inadequate as a representational and communicative medium, the artist is thrown back upon himself and can, in fact only describe himself” (28).

for the artist who seeks to find herself reflected in her works and in the experiences of others.

As Anna observes, “We live permanently in the recurrence of our stories, whatever story we tell” (136). She elaborates, “I find the lives of Coop and my sister and my father everywhere (I draw portraits of them *everywhere*) as they perhaps still concern themselves with my absence, wherever they are” (268). The emphasis on “everywhere” alerts the reader to the ways in which we “read” the world and impose our own narratives and interpretations on it. *Divisadero* illustrates the elements of both autobiography and invention that exist in tension in all fiction writing. Through Anna’s words, Ondaatje represents how art becomes a refuge in which painful memory can be captured and dissected. Consciously or unconsciously, Anna’s memories of the past shape her expectations of the future for both herself and her family, and permeate her reflections on her ongoing experiences. Reshaping the past in the light of her cumulative life experiences, she applies these experiences to her writing in order to interpret the lives of others, the insights from which can then be applied back to her own. There is no such thing as objectivity, and no possibility of a new beginning. There are only degrees of detachment, and the desire to know and be known that might allow one to cast a light on the shifting shadows of the past.

In my discussion of Ondaatje’s works, I have focused on the ways in which he creates (and identifies with) extreme characters who retreat into art as a means of asserting their autonomy and escaping the burden the past places on them. I have also discussed the ways in which Ondaatje reveals the impossibility of such an escape, as well as the illusion of autonomy. In my final two chapters, I will turn to the works of Jane Urquhart.

Urquhart shares MacLeod's and Ondaatje's fascination with memory and the ways in which individuals respond to and react within their communities; however, Urquhart takes a very different approach to the influence of communal memory and societal expectations on the individual. For Urquhart, who declares that she believes in "thinking Canadian" (Wyile, "Confessions" 64), individual identity is explicitly and irresistibly connected to the narratives of national identity. In Chapter 5, therefore, I will begin by discussing the ways in which Urquhart's depictions of landscape and social space in her early works provide insight into her later representations of the uneasy relationship between Canadians and the conflicting narratives of their nation.

Chapter Four

Outside the Frame: Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool* and *Away*

This is what I learned at a very early age. Without a place you do not have a story. Sometimes you do not even have a feeling.

(Jane Urquhart, *Resurgence* 19)

As we have seen, Michael Ondaatje is interested in the development of characters who find patterns in art that will allow them to impose order on the chaos of their experiences and articulate (and so “rewrite”) their traumas in a form of coherent narrative. Narrative, particularly in its written form, becomes the means through which his characters examine their relationships and their roles within those relationships. For example, Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden explore the influence of friends and lovers as well as enemies on their experiences as “living legends.” For both of these characters, this influence includes the lasting repercussions of violence. The English patient and Anna, on the other hand, use narrative to reinvent the past in order to ease the grief that plagues them after traumatic events cause them to lose significant relationships. Of course, this process of self-examination does not provide a smooth path to self-discovery for any of these characters; often the experiences under scrutiny have been so devastating that the characters cannot directly approach the events that they are discussing, as the circular and fragmented structures of these novels demonstrate. Nor

does the telling of those events absolve them of their guilt or provide lasting closure: these are stories that, as we see with Anna (and as we saw with the narrator of MacLeod's short story, "The Boat"), must be told and retold. For the English patient, Billy the Kid, and Buddy Bolden, these events are finally resolved only with the teller's death. Such retellings are in keeping with "the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" that, according to Cathy Caruth, characterises a survivor's attempts to cope with trauma (2). As a consequence, the narrative of the past provides an unavoidable subtext for each character's haunted present.

Like Ondaatje, Jane Urquhart is also concerned in her works with the exploration of the ways in which memory and present perceptions are continuously in play in the subject's recreation of identity, and perpetually exert a reciprocal influence on each other in the individual's autobiographical narrative. However, whereas Ondaatje's characters struggle with memories and experiences that haunt their internal landscapes, Urquhart's characters' struggles are manifested in external landscapes and physical spaces that are "closely associated. . . with the past, which, rewritten, re-imagined, is an essential factor in the attempts at self-recognition of her heroines" (Branach-Kallas, *Environment* 219). For Urquhart, the relationship between the individual and her place provides a mirror for the individual's evolving sense of self. As a result, her novels revolve around the exploration of "multi-layered, interwoven plot lines and how they are connected to the perceived world, the 'environment'" (Daziron-Ventura 17). As Urquhart weaves her plots between present and past, as well as between literal and metaphorical levels of representation, landscape becomes a dynamic space in which memory and narrative are created and recovered, and upon which they are imposed.

This notion of a connection between land- and mindscapes has always been a fundamental characteristic of Canadian literature. In *Survival* (1972), Margaret Atwood declared that representations of landscape in Canadian literature are “seldom just about Nature; [they are] usually about the poet’s attitude toward the external natural universe. That is, landscapes in poems are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind” (Atwood 49). Despite this close identification between humanity and nature, Atwood identifies the attitude toward Nature in English and French Canadian literature as frequently antagonistic. She elaborates, “Canadian writers as a whole do not trust Nature, they are always suspecting some dirty trick” (49). This distrust directly challenges “[t]he prevailing literary mode in nature poetry in the late eighteenth-century,” which was “the cult of the sublime and the picturesque, featuring views and inspirational scenery” (Atwood 49). As a result, there is an implicit tension between sentiments arising from the settler/explorer’s “awe at the grandeur of Nature” (50), the nineteenth century’s shift to “Wordsworthian Romanticism” which meant “you were supposed to feel that Nature was a kind Mother or Nurse who would guide man if only he would listen to her” (50), and the less admiring sentiments that arose as a result of “what you actually encountered when you got [to Canada]—and the resultant sense of being gypped” (50-1).⁷⁹ In Canadian literature, the environment and the natural world were generally perceived as a source of stimulus that could mirror or elicit human emotional responses, inspire action or reflection, and challenge or threaten not only

⁷⁹ The settler’s sense of being “gypped” contains the seeds of a peculiarly Canadian form of double-think for, as Faye Hammill observes, “wilderness” has always been and continues to be an idealised and privileged symbol of Canadian identity *despite* the fact that most Canadians live in urban settings. In fact, “writers and critics are now more likely to acknowledge that [wilderness] is an imaginative or mythical construct, bearing little relationship to the daily experience of ordinary Canadians” (Hammill 65).

human courage but human life. In its encounters with humanity, “Nature [could be] seen as dead, or alive but indifferent, or alive and actively hostile towards man” (*Survival* 54) but seldom as something of which humanity (particularly that section of humanity which was of European descent) was a part. Regardless of the tone of the encounter between humanity and its environment, therefore, the boundary between “civilization” and “nature” always remained intact.⁸⁰

More recently, discussions of this uneasy relationship between humanity and our environment have been expanded and complicated by postmodern discussions of space and its influence on the ways in which Canadian literature envisions landscape. Faye Hammill points in particular to Henri Lefebvre’s text, *The Production of Space* (1974), in which he “argues that space is the product of particular matrices of economic and social relations, while, in turn, these collectively produced spaces shape the lives of those who live within them. Space is therefore a medium through which societies and economies develop, and not simply a backdrop for them” (Hammill 66). Lefebvre draws attention to the fact that a given space and the humans who inhabit it inevitably exert influence on each other, on both physical and metaphysical levels: he asserts that social space is comprised by coterminous characteristics “from mental space (as defined by the philosophers and mathematicians) on the one hand, and physical space (as defined by practico-sensory activity and the perception of nature) on the other” (Lefebvre 27). The presence of even a single human figure in a landscape imposes a dimension of social

⁸⁰ A possible exceptions that blurs this otherwise clear division are the narratives in which characters “go native” (see, for example, Justin D. Edwards’ chapter on “Gothic Travels” and Shelley Kulperger’s article, “Transculturation”). Such narratives (particularly the phrase “going native”) reflect Canada’s colonial history, as these two authors demonstrate.

space on nature; however, that created social space (and by extension the individual) is, in turn, unavoidably affected and shaped by the natural space on which it is inscribed (or in which the individual appears). The recognition of this influence problematizes Atwood's boundary between nature and civilization, and necessitates a reconsideration of humanity's relationship with landscape and wilderness.

In light of Lefebvre's assertion that "*(Social) space is a (social) product,*" it would be naive to regard our representations of landscape as entirely transparent for "the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and action; . . . in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (Lefebvre 26). Erica Carter explains how these narratives of control and power converge with the landscape itself, causing physical space to be inscribed with social space, thereby becoming a place: "How then does space become place? By being named: as the flows of power and negotiations of social relations are rendered in the concrete form of architecture; and also, of course, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investments of a population. Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed" (xii). "Meaning" takes the form of the various historical and personal narratives that a population uses to situate a given place in time and space according to that population's "investments." Place—and by extension any other physical objects to which meaning can be ascribed—becomes a physical representation of those social discourses and narratives.⁸¹ It becomes essential to view the landscape (both of the natural world and the urban) as more than just a blank canvas upon which humanity invents and remembers itself. Rather, the

⁸¹ It is perhaps useful to think of such places and objects as having a fourth dimension, time, which takes the form of that place or object's historical narrative and is an essential aspect of its existence in the world.

landscapes in which we find ourselves play a determining role in the ways in which we imagine ourselves and how we invest value in concrete forms.⁸²

Such struggles are of particular significance to Urquhart, for whom “place” plays an essential role in identity creation. However, rather than the antagonism that Atwood identifies, Urquhart imagines symbiosis between humanity and nature. She illustrates this organic connection through an analogy that compares the way that wine “carries the taste of its natives soil in its flavour” to the way individuals carry “the taste of their native landscape in their blood” (*Resurgence* 22). According to Urquhart, without the unique contextualising aspects of landscape, “neither the narratives nor the characters [that literarily and literally inhabit a particular place] could have fully taken shape” (*Resurgence* 19). Our landscapes shape our narratives by giving concrete form to our ephemeral memories for, as Barbara A. Misztal explains, “our recollections are located with the help of landmarks that we always carry within ourselves” (16). According to Misztal, a group or society’s memories are “linked to places, ruins, landscapes, monuments, and urban architecture, which—as they are overlain with symbolic associations to past events—play an important role in helping to preserve group memory” (16). There is a sense of permanence in these places that derives from our knowledge that such sites existed long before we were born and will continue long after we have died.

Because they serve as repositories for collective memory and social space, natural and urban landscapes play an essential role in the creation of individual identity. Anna

⁸² As I will discuss in Chapter 6, this question of value becomes a particularly fraught issue in the light of Canada’s uneasy status as a postcolonial nation.

Branach-Kallas recognises the significance of such connections in Urquhart's works, arguing that "[i]f Urquhart focuses on the relation between self and place, she does not treat space as an abstract notion but investigates the complex role of a concrete place in the process of identity-construction of her characters" (*Past* 15). In order to negotiate this complex relationship between self and space, Urquhart draws our attention back to the ways in which time and the past are continuously re-inscribed on the present through the valorising of tradition and history. As a consequence, finding one's "place" within these overlying social narratives becomes a driving concern throughout Urquhart's novels. As Linda Warley *et al.* explain,

knowledges, including self-knowledges, are partly a function of our positions in and our relationships to particular spatial environments, including the space of the gendered, sexed, racialized, class-demarcated and medicalized body. In such analyses, place, space, and other geographic concepts are used to contextualize and position social identities and social relations. Crucial here is the foundational premise that what is social has a spatial component; likewise, spaces are socially constituted through language and other symbolic signs. (2-3)

In other words, the quest for self-knowledge inevitably takes place in a space that is already socially inscribed; there is no *tabula rasa* for Urquhart's characters. This remains true whether these characters inhabit a natural or an urban landscape, and whether their presence in that landscape is a consequence of birth or immigration.

However, for many of Urquhart's characters, self-knowledge can only be gained when the physical place and temporal space that they presently occupy and which has been assimilated into their autobiographical narratives are defamiliarized. Georges Letissier argues that "[t]ravelling to shed light on a part of oneself which is already present somewhere, buried deep in the silent mind, is a pattern which Urquhart

inaugurated at an early stage of her fiction-writing” (1). This recognition of such latent qualities of the self is the result of the individual’s encounters with the unfamiliar “other,” who provides a mirror for the self’s heretofore unknown qualities. We see examples of this sort of personal evolution in several of her early short stories such as “John’s Cottage” and “Italian Postcards” in which her characters’ experiences in exotic locations in the Old World allow them to come to a state of greater self-knowledge.⁸³

As Urquhart’s exploration of this subjective evolution progresses, however, even the landscape into which one was born can offer such insights: she recognises the ways in which familiar spaces can contain hidden or unfamiliar narratives, including family secrets, repressed voices, and inauthentic representations of historical events. For Urquhart, the revelation of such narratives can cause a known space to become as uncanny as any foreign landscape. Her characters’ sense of “home” as a place that is known is frequently challenged and so defamiliarized by the stories and perspectives of others. As a consequence, their quest for self-discovery is complicated—and even endangered—by the presence of other narratives that occupy the same social space and are either imposed on or appropriated by these characters. As these narratives are internalized by the characters, the boundary between the literal and the figurative blurs and these competing narratives become an intrinsic part of Urquhart’s physical and psychological landscapes. In this chapter, I will focus on the evolution of Urquhart’s treatment of this relationship between subjectivity, narrative, and landscape in *The Whirlpool* and *Away*. In particular, I will discuss the ways in which these texts depict the tension between her characters’ sense of place (as revealed by the narratives that they

⁸³ Both short stories appear in Urquhart’s collection *Storm Glass*.

inscribe on their spaces) and the influence of those spaces on the individual's own narrative of self. My emphasis, therefore, will be on the ways in which Urquhart's characters negotiate the socially inscribed places in which they find themselves.

Looking back to Urquhart's first novel, *The Whirlpool*, we find vivid representations of her concern with the ways in which narrative, once internalized, can curtail an individual's ability to take action and be "present" in their own lives. Set at Niagara Falls in the summer of 1889, *The Whirlpool* examines the domestic lives of two central female characters, Maud Grady and Fleda McDougal, who "find themselves surrounded by the sublime geological chaos of the Falls and the whirlpool below" (Goldman, "Translating" 23). Both of these characters are in the process of reinventing themselves after facing profound changes in their lives: Maud is mourning the death of her husband and Fleda is preparing to leave hers. Throughout the text, Urquhart juxtaposes this "sublime geographical chaos" with the rigidly ordered community in which Maud and Fleda live. As the novel progresses, these two characters struggle to negotiate the disparity between their individual desires and self-perceptions, and the pre-existing identities and social narratives that their community imposes on them. For example, we see them caricaturised respectively as the undertaker's widow in her "cocoon of crape" (70) and the military historian's "strange young wife who. . . had gone to live in the woods alone" (71). For both of these characters, the process of extracting themselves from social traditions and expectations represents a radical form of self-reinvention for these conventions form the foundation upon which their autobiographical narratives are constructed. Anne Compton observes, "*The Whirlpool* is a novel of integrated characters—memory and imagination fluent, past and present interpolated—and of

characters integrated with space. Whether it is Maud Grady in the gothic structure, Grady and Son (house and business), with its attached embalming room, or Fleda's tent, these domestic spaces are places of thought and dream” (16): these spaces both influence and reflect the types of thoughts and dreams these two characters are initially able to conceive. As Maud and Fleda move within and react against the “narratives” that occupy the social spaces that they inhabit, we are able to observe more clearly the ways in which Urquhart envisions our life stories as being externally influenced and directed.

It is fitting therefore that the central image, for which the novel is named and around which both women’s lives revolve, is the whirlpool that is located downriver from the falls. The novel’s epigraph, “For everyone / The swimmer’s moment at the whirlpool comes” (13), relates to the life-changing crises and decisions that each character must face. For Maud, who has taken over her late husband’s role as undertaker, the whirlpool and the falls are the source of countless corpses for which she becomes responsible. In her narrative, the whirlpool represents stagnation, obsession, and death. For Fleda, the whirlpool initially inspires her Romantic musings and serves as a metaphor through which she is able to interpret her thoughts and experiences. Ultimately, however, Fleda’s attempts to internalize these Romantic conventions and impose them on her autobiographical narrative are likewise revealed as a form of stagnation. Urquhart wastes no time in revealing to her readers the overarching significance of the image of the whirlpool: “In one sense the whirlpool was like memory, like history that stayed in one spot, moving nowhere and endlessly repeating itself” (*Whirlpool* 43). This sense of monotonous repetition is, however, qualified by the narrative’s further reflection that “[a]bove it, stars that appeared stationary traced their path across the sky, actually going

somewhere, changing” (43). The movement of the whirlpool is deceptive; although in one sense it seems to be “moving nowhere,” its perpetual motion serves as a catalyst for change. In order to recognise it as such, however, the characters’ perceptions of their own potential for movement and change must evolve.

Maud, in particular, is constrained by the roles of “[b]ride, wife, widow” (144) that were imposed on her first by her marriage, and then by her husband Charles’ death. Having succeeded her husband as the town’s undertaker, her daily life revolves around the tasks she performs for the bereaved and the deceased. Like the black crape dress she is expected to wear, the funeral home in which she lives and works has become a symbol of confinement for Maud, who has adopted the rituals and traditions of mourning in place of creating her own life. As a consequence, her personal landscape has been diminished until her house and garden comprise her entire world; similarly, her circle of acquaintance is reduced to her employees, her autistic son, and the dead by whom she is haunted. In this constricted and constricting social space, Maud attempts to fulfil the expectations of her community.

The novel introduces Maud “exactly two years after the fatal date, [on] her first [day] of half-mourning” (22). As the undertaker’s widow, Maud feels that she must “set an example” for her community (16), which she does by following the protracted and oppressive protocols of mourning. Such protocols belong to the numerous traditions and customs that, collectively, define a community. Such traditions are essential to its survival and continuity: they allow its members to participate in a shared and consequently unifying historical narrative. Barbara A. Misztal defines “tradition” as the “tacit knowledge that provides presuppositions that we take for granted and helps us to

understand and interpret the world” (96). Inherent in the community’s memory and inscribed in its social space, these presuppositions also provide the basis for the unwritten laws that govern any society. Tradition allows us to evaluate and police the behaviours of members of our community according to our “tacit knowledge” and “presuppositions” because “[m]ost traditions are normative. . . in that they are intended to influence the conduct of the audience to which they are addressed” (94). The individual is influenced most effectively through the promise of his or her inclusion in or exclusion from the group. Through her depiction of Maud’s sense of obligation to her “duty,” Urquhart draws attention to this power of collective memory and tradition to prescribe and regulate the behaviour of a community’s individual members.

Maud’s recurring dreams about her husband reveal the pressure she feels to conform to the unwritten laws of her society, as well as the strong sense of guilt she experiences for having outlived him. In these dreams,

he appeared in the very bedroom where she slept to announce that he had just died and would be busy for the next few days embalming himself and arranging his own funeral. He always had a black band wound around his hat out of respect for his own passing and a look on his face of profound sorrow. Maud would offer him a cape made of crape but he would reject it, outright, as if it had been something intended for the opera. Guiltily, in the dream, after this refusal, Maud would once again drape the heavy material on her own shoulders realizing, as she did so, where it rightfully belonged. (17)

As Charles’ appearance in her bedroom implies, even the most intimate facets of Maud’s life (including her subconscious) have been invaded by the presence of death and the rules of her society. The absurdity of the image of Charles’ “respect for his own passing,” which is reflected in his expression of “profound sorrow” as he prepares for

his own funeral, draws attention to the fact that Maud is perhaps neither as respectful nor as sorrowful as convention demands. Maud's transgression is further emphasised by the sense of guilt with which she resumes her mantle of mourning. Despite the fact that Maud's relationship with her husband is revealed to have been strained and even abusive (85-6), she remains bound to her husband's memory and her sense of duty. We quickly realise that her adherence to tradition reflects her desire to avoid being ostracized by her community rather than a sincere demonstration of mourning.

Maud's anxiety to conform is reflected in her commitment to the social etiquette of mourning. Urquhart dedicates a large part of Maud's narrative to the costumes and rituals associated with death, particularly as they apply to females of all ages.⁸⁴ According to Paul Connerton, this emphasis reminds us that such rituals "communicate shared values within a group" and "reduce internal dissention." He explains that "what rituals tell us. . . is how social stability and equilibrium are constituted. They show us what a culture's ethos and the sensibility shaped by that ethos look like when spelled out externally, articulated in the symbolism of something like a single collective text" (Connerton 50). As a consequence, the narrative of this "collective text" is also inscribed on the objects associated with these rituals. Connerton illustrates this inscription through the ways in which nineteenth-century clothing "signalled to the world the role the wearers were expected to play and reminded them of the responsibilities and constraints of their role. . . . The apparel of Victorian women not only conveyed *decodable* messages; it helped to *mould* female behaviour. Clothes were signs" (33). In short, for

⁸⁴ Urquhart draws attention to the differences between the burial rituals for little boys as opposed to little girls, reminding us that women's lives are shaped by social narratives and expectations from the earliest age.

Maud's society, "the Victorian clothing system did not only signal the existence of categories of behaviour, it also produced the existence of those categories of behaviour and kept them habitually in being by moulding bodily configuration and movement" (Connerton 34). Urquhart's laundry list of "the paraphernalia of bereavement" for women illustrates this dual function. She describes at length the "black parasol, black stockings, underwear edged in black ribbon, black-framed stationery, black ink making black words, black sealing wax, black veil, black bonnet tied under the chin in a menacing black bow" (16), thereby drawing attention to the extraordinary extent to which women's lives were controlled by social expectations. Urquhart emphasises the inequality of these expectations as the narrator observes ironically that, for men, "[t]he same black hat-band did well for each bereavement" (15); this double standard implicitly demonstrates where power lies.

Unlike the hat-band, which signals grief without impinging on the wearer's freedom, Maud's widow's weeds are compared to "crumpled armour, tarnished to a dull black. It scraped at the neck and dug at the armpits. It clung to the limbs and rasped at the shoulder blades. It lacerated the spine if that series of bones ever dared to relax. And it smelled, always, of grave mud and sorrow" (16). Urquhart elaborates on the ways in which Maud's mourning clothes function as signs of the rituals and history of mourning in her community by emphasizing the ways in which widows were expected to suffer physical as well as emotional pains as a sign of genuine grief. In keeping with Connerton's observations, these mourning clothes not only conveyed the widow's grief but added to it. The community's subsequent judgement or approval of the extent to which she suffered is reflected in their judgement of Maud's character. Through such

readings, Maud's funereal garb becomes a symbolic "textual" representation of the discourses of mourning of her society.

Within this discourse of mourning, even the widow's body becomes a text to represent her grief and the space (to recall Warley) in which it is embodied. In addition to the physical discomfort, the narrator describes how the dye from the crape bleeds into the skin causing the wearer's body to look "as if it had been the victim of a severe beating" (*Whirlpool* 16). Maud is not allowed to forget for an instant her obligations: even when not wearing the crape clothes, her stained skin is a constant reminder of her loss and what is expected of her. The fact that these stains resemble bruises reinforces the sense that Maud is in some way being punished, possibly for surviving the loss of her husband and certainly for not feeling sufficient grief. Laura Hancu perceives Maud as having been "victimized by the prevailing cultural code which dictates that she encase herself for a period of two years in traditional Courtauld crape" (46); this perception of Maud as the victim of an inherently misogynistic system is supported and also complicated by Urquhart's depiction of Maud's increasingly claustrophobic existence, in the creation of which Maud herself is complicit.

This intense feeling of physical and psychological constraint is also present in Maud's feelings toward her home in the rooms above the funeral parlour. While her husband was alive, she often felt "as if, in her own life, emotion had been held in suspense, so that the rest of the world could live and love and, more importantly, die" (37). Later, marginalised in her community by her profession as well as by her mourning, this existence of suspended animation continues. Entirely defined by her dual roles of undertaker and widow, the appropriateness of every decision or potential course

of action in Maud's life is carefully considered in light of her fear of the judgements of the town matrons, who would accuse her of "[l]ooking for business" should she "be seen in the company of someone whose relative might have taken a turn for the worst" (108). Her desire to avoid such judgements reinforces her own sense of what is required of her until it seems that there is no place for her among the living.

Shrouded in black, entombed in the funeral home, and haunted by the ubiquitous presence of death, Maud remains faithful to the narratives that have been imposed upon her by the expectations of her community. Urquhart uses the motif of the collector, exemplified in Maud's late husband's passion for collecting spiders, as an analogy of ways in which tradition and communal memory allow a society to classify and contain its members. Charles, as a representative of the patriarchal authority in the community to which Maud belongs, is characterised as being particularly single minded in his interests: "Apart from the art of embalming, his only interest had been in the habits of spiders" (17). In fact, his feelings go beyond mere interest, for "Charles adored spiders. He admired them. . . . The spiders in his collection had been silenced and stilled in the most humane way possible and not, even then, without a generous amount of guilt on the young undertaker's part" (83). As "a man who feels compelled to capture, preserve, and categorize each new species of spiders he discovers" (Hancu 47), Charles applied the principles of the collector to his marriage and his wife as we have already seen from the narrator's description of the way Maud too has been silenced and stilled, living with all "emotion. . . held in suspense" (*Whirlpool* 37).

Maud's reflections on her husband's collection intensify our sense that she, too, has been collected by Charles. The narrator explains to us that Maud "secretly admired the

black widow [spider]. She knew that the female ate the male after mating which only seemed fair since there existed male spiders who actually wrapped females up and tied them before impregnating them. A shocking variety of insect rape!” (85). Her admiration for a creature that cannibalizes its mate speaks volumes about Maud’s feelings toward marriage and her husband, particularly in the context of her feelings of commiseration with the female spiders who are bound and raped by *their* mates. The extended imagery of the male spiders’ binding of the females represents the ways in which Maud has become ensnared first in the web of her marriage, and then in communal narratives and expectations. Urquhart drives this identification home with Maud’s further reminiscence that when she became pregnant with her son, “she had dreamed about spiders, egg sacs, and webs, and. . . nine months later the child had been born” (90).

This grotesque affinity between Maud and the spiders that her husband collected creates an unpalatable connection between Charles’ roles as collector and husband. Captured and categorized, Maud continues on in the roles first of wife then as widow without ever escaping her husband’s influence—as state symbolised by the hideous broach she has made with a lock of Charles’ hair:

an oval frame of gold would surround two desolate hairy willows which would, in turn, flank a hairy tombstone with his initials on it. All of this was to be placed under a bubble of thin glass; a sort of transparent barrier between that tiny hairy world of graves and weeping and the one that Maud walked around in every day. A barrier, but one that was easy enough to see through nonetheless. (17)

Urquhart’s sardonic tone and the grotesque images of the broach’s hairy decoration alert the reader to her disapproval of such tokens of remembrance, which serve to paralyse the

rememberer in the past rather than allowing her to move on with her life. In the context of the narrator's disapproval of Maud's demeaning marital relationship, her "tender reminiscences of her life with her husband appear absurd to the reader. Having disposed of her own individuality, Maud is lost in remembering and identifies with the memory of the past which becomes an obsession" (Branach-Kallas, *Past* 22).

Obsessed by the past, Maud becomes a collector in her own right. A substantial part of her work as a funeral director involves identifying and recording the fragmented bodies and belongings of people who have drowned in the falls and been collected from the whirlpool by her employees. The bodies themselves do not affect her, for in Maud's eyes the bits of flesh have lost their connection with humanity. Rather, she is moved by

the objects and bits of apparel that this flesh had attached to itself on the last day of its existence that both disturbed and fascinated her. . . . When she examined, and then began to list the contents of pockets, she was forced to remember that the thing before her, packed in ice had been human. . . stupid, self-deluding, vain, tender. Then the questions would enter her mind and a relationship would form between her and the drowned flesh. A personality would develop behind the words, a life would take shape. (159)

As she records the details of the things that have been found, she becomes more and more emotionally attached to the objects themselves. She begins to find "something tragic" in these "sad relics" of other people's lives and desires to become a "keeper of [their] memories" (89). All these found items are placed together in a cupboard that she begins to think of as "her museum" (90): in it, she preserves a "collection of private legends, stored verbally in her notebook and concretely in her cupboard at the end of the hall. This was how she maintained order, how she gathered together some sense out of the chaos of the deaths around her" (160).

In her loneliness and isolation, Maud—like Ondaatje’s characters Billy the Kid and Anna, and MacLeod’s narrator in “The Boat”—attempts to impose meaning on what is otherwise inexplicable and therefore unbearable. Hancu explains, “Maud paradoxically emulates her husband; she becomes a collector of dead objects and, like Charles, becomes obsessed with categorizing. . . . This activity becomes an obsession driven by the need to create the illusion of an ordered universe” (47). Maud transforms found objects into relics by imposing an explanatory narrative onto them; through this process, she is able to create a meaningful role for herself in which she is able to “enclose and protect the fragmented evidence of these smothered lives, to hold memories of their memories” (90). Ironically, of course, her own identity is once again subsumed in the role that she has adopted; her autobiographical narrative has ceased to evolve as she becomes consumed by the narratives she imposes on her collection. Furthermore, this collection reminds us that Maud has been unable to escape from the classifications of “[b]ride, wife, widow” (144); rather than freeing herself from Charles’ influence, her attempts to keep “her morbid collection in order” cause her to become “even more entangled in the web of memories of the deathly past” (Branach-Kallas, *Whirlpool of the Past* 22).

For Maud, who has been entangled by the past and whose enclosing walls are literal as well as metaphorical, the process of escape is an arduous one. Unexpectedly it is her child who sets Maud free of these enclosures when he destroys the museum she has so carefully constructed. The destruction occurs when, the narrator dryly observes, “Order attacked the child as suddenly, as unpredictably as any other form of disease, and he began to sort, to classify” (198). As Maud walks through her house trying to decipher

the curious and at times unintelligible system of classification the child has used to group a variety of everyday objects, the realisation that some of these objects belong to her collection “came to her. . . very slowly at first. Then, the knowledge exploding in her head like fireworks, she turned and ran from the room. The child, she suddenly knew, had invaded her cupboard, her museum” (201). Urquhart’s language depicts the explosive shock of change and the overwhelming sense of violation that Maud experiences as the ordering narratives that she has so carefully constructed are dismantled. As she looks at the items she has collected outside the narrative of classification, however, we realise that the child has “demystifie[d] rituals of repetition and [broken] the logic of mourning” (Lanone 40). Shock is replaced by revulsion as Maud notices “how spider-like they were, lying piled together with their legs entangled” (209). Removed from the ordering and familiar context of her museum of memory, Maud’s imagination links the objects with the spiders Charles had collected. Defamiliarized in this new context, the objects are rendered meaningless and lose their power over her.

As a result of this shocking revelation, Maud realises that in “escaping from chaos, fear and pain she has locked herself in the world of death” (Branach-Kallas 24). As she disentangles herself from the power of her collection, Maud also begins to break free of the rituals of mourning as well. In the process, she begins to see her son in a different light. Throughout the novel, he is a source of resentment and frustration for Maud, who perhaps sees in him a physical manifestation of her entrapment for he is both a source of stress and a symbol of “the legacy of her husband” (Rae 50). When he becomes her rescuer, however, Maud’s perception of the boy’s role in her life is changed. Urquhart

uses images of a dark and confining wall to emphasise both the extent to which Maud has been trapped by her own adherence to communal narratives and the ways in which those narratives can be disassembled by a change in perspective:

Maud perceived that [her son] was the possessor of all the light and that it was she, not he, that had been the dark wall. She had never, since her husband's death, allowed the child access to the other, brighter side of that masonry, she had never allowed him to try to pull it down. Now the child had caused all the objects that surrounded her, all the relics she had catalogued, to lose their dreadful power. He had shown her what they really were: buttons, brooches, tie clips, garters. . . merely objects. (210)

In this moment, Maud rewrites the history of her relationship with her son and re-evaluates her role in her own life. In doing so, she frees herself from the rituals and narratives of mourning that, like the whirlpool, “[move] nowhere and endlessly [repeat themselves]” (43) and that have prevented her engaging with the world and experiencing life.

Urquhart's investigation of social space encompasses the natural landscape as well as rural and urban settings. In contrast with Maud's struggle to escape the roles that have been imposed on her, our first glimpses of Fleda McDougal reveal that she has already begun to step outside the ensnaring communal narratives that dictate expectations for proper wifely behaviour. Unlike Maud who “lived, worked, and slept in the same series of rooms” and “was only dimly aware of the transitional seasons of spring and fall” (36), Fleda's life revolves around her immersion in the forces of nature. Inspired by the poetry and sentiments of the Romantic poets toward the natural world, Fleda has begun to “let go of the familiar articles of domesticity” (135) by asking her husband David to build her a house in the forest, in an idyllic clearing a short distance from the whirlpool. To

David's consternation, Fleda has decided that they must spend the summer on the site in a tent borrowed from David's military connections rather than in the hotel in town while the house is under construction. Equipped with only the most rudimentary supplies and her books, Fleda writes in her journal that "I can almost count myself an ex-prisoner of the hotel. . . . Even if I do feel somewhat like a gypsy it will be better than suffering through another summer in town" (30). She too has felt the imprisoning effects of social expectations, represented in both Maud's and Fleda's cases by the physical buildings they inhabit and the roles that they have played in their society.⁸⁵

As a result of her unconventional behaviour, Fleda has been branded by the townsfolk with the sort of notoriety that Maud has sought to avoid: "The women of the area became suspicious and, as she became more aloof from them, finally angry and cruel. The men were simply frightened. In another era she might have been burned at the stake" (*Whirlpool* 136). Urquhart draws attention to the ways in which societies seek to enforce conformity as Fleda's behaviour is regarded as worse than eccentric, particularly by the other women. Ironically, these women police each other mercilessly despite the inequality and oppression inherent in the system they are enforcing. In the words of one of the town matrons, "It's shameful. . . her living in the woods out there. . . . She should be having babies and minding house" (65). It is the absence of the visible structures of decorum that particularly upsets the women of the town: because she does not have a house, she cannot be a proper housewife. Because she cannot be classified according to

⁸⁵ The symbolic significance of physical architecture is further emphasised by the contrast between Fleda's "dream" home and the house her husband is having built for her. The first, "a piece of imaginary architecture whose walls and windows existed in the mind and therefore could be rearranged at will" (136), represents her need for freedom and change. The latter, she feels, "if laboured into permanence, would produce a . . . fortress and the feeling of caged torpor she was now beginning to associate with her last dwelling" (137).

the usual categories that are an inherent part of the “communal text,” Fleda is rendered unreadable and consequently dangerous. By invoking the stigmas of the gypsy or the witch, the community attempts to impose a narrative that will allow them to classify and safely contain her—a situation that calls to mind Buddy Bolden’s conflict with his community in Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter* (7, 104).

Fleda’s husband is equally concerned by his wife’s proclivities; he has given her a copy of Patmore’s “Angel in the House” as a remedy for her unconventional attitudes (28). Fearing that she “is dangerously infatuated with the strange passions of Mr. Browning” (28), David hopes that Patmore’s poetry, which “celebrates an idealized marriage in which his wife assumes the role of caged domestic angel” (Hancu 53), will have a steadying influence on her.⁸⁶ There is an element of comedy in David’s hope to influence his wife through her love of poetry, particularly since Fleda is well aware of David’s ulterior motives and privately vows that she is “Nobody’s angel” (100) and never will be. Oblivious of Fleda’s disgust with the idea of the domesticated angel, David further tries to influence his wife through his edifying narratives about Laura Secord’s heroic acts. Again, however, his attempts at moralising are comedically undermined as they culminate in the re-enactment of David’s favourite sexual fantasy, in which Fleda is forced to wear a “muddy calico dress” (44) as she plays out Secord’s historic journey to warn the British army of an impending American attack. Urquhart draws attention once more to feminine clothing in order to emphasise the ways in which narratives dictating proper female comportment can be put on and shed as easily as a

⁸⁶ David’s attempts to undermine her interest in Browning by labelling it as obsession fail; Fleda responds to his accusation of such infatuation by acknowledging “I suppose, I am” (28).

dress—if a woman is able to change the way she values the narratives and rules of her membership in her community. Furthermore, Urquhart begins to hint at the dangers of imposing such narratives on others: by imposing the narratives of Patmore’s angel and of Laura Secord on his wife, David substitutes genuine knowledge of Fleda for a fantasy. His lack of understanding of his wife, while initially humorous, gains darker significance as the novel reveals the ways in which such misunderstandings leave individuals vulnerable to hurt and disillusionment.

The arrival of Patrick, a poet who is also drawn by the power of the whirlpool, serves as a catalyst for this disillusionment. He is an outsider from “the capitol city” who has come to Niagara at his doctor’s recommendation after a life-threatening bout of pneumonia. Although Patrick is married, he appears to have little connection with his “disappointed wife, who hovered in his mind as a constant reminder of his inability to provide, either physically or emotionally.” These inadequacies are coupled with his tendency disappear every night “into the old-world landscape with Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Browning,” causing him to become estranged from his wife who bitterly remarks, “You’re never going to find Wordsworth’s daffodils here” (63). After his illness, Patrick is able to escape the pressures of his dissatisfying marriage and job while he recuperates at his uncle’s farm. There, he is able to enjoy “the comfort of company without the responsibility for conversation or action attached to that comfort” (64). This passive form of engagement with others is not merely a consequence of his illness; it represents a permanent state of mind that is reflected in his landscape poetry, in which “[t]here are no people. . . , no emotion. Just acres of forest, acres of rock and unrelenting winter” (192).

This desire to avoid all forms of personal connection defines his encounters with Fleda as well. Patrick first stumbles upon her unexpectedly while walking in the woods; absorbed in her reading, Fleda remains unaware of his presence and he is able to observe her without being observed. He is captivated as he watches her: “In this setting, surrounded by the yellow-green foliage of late spring and seated in blue shadow, she looked to him like a woman in a painting, as though she had been dropped into the middle of the scene for decorative purposes, or to play a part in a legend” (33). By reducing Fleda to an aspect of the landscape or a figure in a painting, Patrick is able to distance himself from his attraction to her: he becomes enraptured with the narrative he creates around her.

He becomes even more enthralled as he notices that she is reading *The Ring and the Book* by Robert Browning; he imagines in her a kindred spirit who would never dismiss with contempt his search for Wordsworth’s daffodils. Rather than speak to her, however, Patrick contrives to meet her husband in order to more learn about her. He attempts to steer the conversation toward the mysterious woman he has seen in the woods, but David is much more concerned with the exploits of Laura Secord and the dangerous lack of patriotism exhibited by most Canadians. In fact, to Patrick’s chagrin, rather than giving the poet a detailed description of Fleda, David invites him to the camp to meet her.⁸⁷ Patrick prefers his voyeurism to an actual meeting, for he “understood that, like a child at play, observed, but not conscious of observation, the woman would reveal sides of herself to him that she had revealed to no one else. He would experience her when she

⁸⁷ Ironically, David is quite anxious for Patrick to meet Fleda for he hopes that a meeting with a Canadian poet will distract her from her obsession with the English Romantic poets and lead her to a more patriotic disposition—like that of Laura Secord.

was whole, not fragmented into considerations of self and other” (102). He has no desire to know her as a romantic partner or even as an individual: to know her in such a way would force self-consciousness on them both, and Patrick seeks to escape self-awareness. As we saw in her descriptions of Maud’s claustrophobic existence, Urquhart uses the language of confinement and imprisonment to describe the way Fleda becomes “chained, in his mind, to the whirlpool, to the woods. To the tent and to the fire” (103). He cannot and will not conceive of her having genuine substance or an existence of her own; through his mythical narratives, he reduces her to an image of one of the “faceless women, shadows of leaves moving on their white skin” who, in his dreams, become part of the landscape (49).

Fleda likewise interprets her relationship with Patrick according to her poetic ideals rather than reality. However, whereas Patrick is anxious to prevent any form of genuine communication or self-revelation, Fleda seeks it. Problematically, of course, Patrick refuses to participate in any such communication; she must rewrite the script of their interaction according to “her terrible urge to interpret, until even the most ordinary conversation became allegorical” (152-3). She invests her image of the poet with mythic resonance and allegory, just as he had done to his vision of her: she pictures him as a “demon lover” who would “leave the maelstrom and enter [her] house, through some window while she slept,” to lead her “God knows where. . . away from home” (170). Her thoughts and observations about him are framed in her journal by extracts of poems by Browning, which she uses to shed light on her own musings: “I am listening and reading, my attention shifting from Browning to the outdoors, to a glimmer of Patrick, back to Browning.” In short, she feels that she is “Reading Browning. Learning Patrick”

(147). Throughout her fantasies, the symbol of the whirlpool allows her to imagine change and romance, in the same way that the Romantic poetry she reads so voraciously opens a door to an exotic world beyond the confines of her daily life.

Before Patrick enters their lives, Fleda is able to submerge her desire to escape the banal existence she shares with her husband in her love of nature and poetry, believing that “she puts into practice her beloved Romantic poets’ dream of communion with nature” (Branach-Kallas, *Past* 74). However, after meeting the poet, Fleda abandons the dream of living near the whirlpool in the house that David has commissioned. She realises that “for her, there would be no actual house, not soon, not ever. The stakes marked out a dream, an illusion, which if laboured into permanence, would produce a similar fortress and the feeling of caged torpor she was now beginning to associate with her last dwelling” (137). Released from the past by her rejection of the literal and psychological architecture that had previously held her, Fleda imposes an almost mystical significance on her meeting with Patrick: “she felt free to allow him access, whatever form that might access might take. Every cell in her body, every synapse in her brain, demanded the presence of the poet in her life. As if all the reading, all the dreaming, had been one long preparation for his arrival” (137). This romantic narrative, based on her interpretations of their few conversations, is sustained by the fact that his presence in her life is entirely imagined. Because he is absent in every material way, Fleda is able to become immersed in her fantasy.

When she discovers that Patrick has been secretly watching her, Fleda is delighted. She embellishes her fantasy, allowing herself to feel

haunted, almost constantly now, by the idea of the poet watching her. She was

fascinated, and as her fascination grew it began to surround her like a bubble, a bubble she couldn't break. . . . Whole scenes in which the poet had played a part would superimpose themselves over her present landscape until Fleda felt she could only really reach her husband by swimming through a foggy dream of Patrick. (152-3)

This unbreakable bubble, which echoes the remembrance brooch that Maud wears, represents Fleda's psychological and emotional withdrawal from her husband. Already alienated from her husband and her community by temperament and inclination, Fleda regards her meeting with Patrick as a profoundly important event. Like Patrick, she imagines that she has discovered a kindred spirit. He provides "an element of romance that she has been longing for," which in turn allows her to regard herself in a different light: "[s]ince she adopts the Romantic credo according to which communion with nature generates poetry in the human mind, Patrick makes her feel like the heroine of some Romantic legend" (Branach-Kallas, *Past* 76). As we have seen from the way she transforms the vapid Patrick into a "demon lover" in her imagination, Fleda requires this narrative to bolster her courage and motivate action: she has not yet gained the power to reject her community's expectations entirely and take responsibility for her desire to leave David on her own.

Disillusionment comes abruptly to Fleda when the contradictions between her narrative of their relationship and the poet's are exposed. Because she has not yet realised that "[t]he woman he wanted remained completely still while everything moved around her, toward her and away from her, while he controlled the distance," she does not suspect that Patrick was deeply disappointed by his meeting with her. Nor is she aware that, after leaving her, he had "disregarded all that he had seen and heard, and

allowed the woman and the whirlpool to combine. By the time he reached his room he had completely reinvented her. He could hardly wait to return to the woods where, hiding once again, he could watch her in the pure and uncorrupted state he had carefully constructed for her” (123). When Fleda attempts to initiate a deeper sense of intimacy and friendship between them, Patrick responds with horror and rage. “Learn this,” he shouts at her, “I don’t want to be this close to you. Not now, not ever. Look what happens. . . . When we’re this close we can’t see each other at all. . . This close, you’re a blur. . . and I’m nothing” (176). Bewildered by his response, Fleda confesses that she knows he has been watching her. When Patrick realises that she has been aware of his presence almost from the beginning, he is appalled by the thought that he has been unwittingly observing a form of performance. Even more appalling is the realisation that his sense of distance has been an illusion.

The loss of the solitude and emotional distance upon which his fantasies depend causes Patrick to feel, irrationally, “that his privacy, his self had been completely invaded. He was like a walled village that had been sacked and burned, just when it was feeling most secure. . . . How *dare* she? he thought, as if she, not he, had been the voyeur.” Urquhart uses the same language of invasion used by Maud to reflect the extent to which he, too, feels he has been violated. In this moment of crisis, he re-establishes his distance: he “did not look at her, would never look at her again” for she has committed an unforgivable offense by “pull[ing] his fantasy into the mundane architecture of fact” (177). As Branach-Kallas argues, he “is not interested in Fleda as a woman of flesh and blood, but as an aesthetic object. He wants only to watch her, to keep her under control reflected in his lenses, as if he were a scientist for whom distance

from the object of study was essential” (*Past* 82). Because she has broken free of the landscape in which he had imprisoned her, Patrick must reinvent a new narrative in which to contain her. He can no longer see her as “a legend in a forest;” rather, he reduces her to “this ordinary woman, this housewife” and in his mind confines her in the metaphorical architecture from which, ironically, she had expected him to help her escape (Urquhart, *Whirlpool* 177).

This confrontation is devastating for Fleda, leaving her “flat and empty, and the life she had lived before became impossible to re-enter” (189). When Patrick continues to visit the camp in the evenings with the conscious intention of reducing his relationship with her to the most banal of acquaintances, Fleda responds in kind. She rewrites his character, separating her Romantic vision from the reality: “the man who visited had nothing to do with the other, the one in her dreams, the absent one. She was able, within days, to speak pleasantly to the man who visited, while mourning steadily for the one who had, as she perceived it now, completely abandoned her. This visitor was David’s friend, a man she could talk with but one she was closed to” (191). Earlier, Fleda had felt that she had “broken out of corners and into the organic in a way that even her beloved poets in their cottages and villas hadn’t the power to do, and the acre had become her house. The acre and the whirlpool” (137). Now, after this disillusionment, she is able to leave even this familiar (and hence domesticated) Romantic landscape behind. Like MacLeod and Ondaatje, Urquhart provides another example of a character who attempts to reinvent herself by removing herself from her community, thereby escaping its framing narratives. Fleda continues the process of shedding the confining narratives her society has imposed, including the Romantic but likewise fundamentally

patriarchal narratives that she has cherished.

When she walks away in the end, Fleda's mind is occupied (rather ironically) by thoughts of Laura Secord. Fleda imagines the woman "living for sixty more years in the same house, dreaming of one long walk she took in the wilderness, telling the story, over and over to herself, to anyone else who would listen. Nobody understood. It wasn't the message that was important. It was the walk. The journey. Setting forth" (214). Fleda's juxtaposition of the sixty years Secord spent in the same house and her own abandonment of the home her husband was building reflect her rejection of the "claustrophobic and stultifying" social space she has inhabited (Goldman, "Translating" 27). Refusing to spend the rest of her life gripped by a dream and imprisoned by others' lack of understanding, Fleda abandons her past in search of the self-knowledge that only "comes at the moment of departure" (170-1). As she concludes her discussion of *The Whirlpool*, Hancu seems preoccupied by the fact that "Urquhart does not. . . suggest how Fleda will survive once she embarks on her walk through the woods" (60); however, this omission seems to reinforce both the significance of Fleda's departure as it is not diluted by the mundane details of her journey and the fact that she has abandoned absolutely all ties to the past.

Throughout the novel, Patrick serves as a foil for both Fleda and Maud as he is depicted as one who is displaced in his life, completely out of touch with his society and unable to relate to others. After his confrontation with Fleda and his subsequent disillusionment, Patrick decides to put his plan to swim the whirlpool into action. His decision to challenge the whirlpool is motivated by his desire to "[s]ubmerge. To place oneself below and lose character, identity, inside another element" (Urquhart, *Whirlpool*

75) and thereby merge with his beloved landscapes. All that he desires is to lose himself in the landscape: “Intimate with immensity (the landscape), he is poised on a precipice (the whirlpool) from which, if he enters its mystery, there will be no return” (Compton 10). Unable to conform to the expectations of his society and equally unable to escape them, he chooses self-annihilation.

In the end, Patrick’s suicidal swim across the whirlpool brings us back to Maud as his body is dragged from the pool and taken to funeral home for identification (or at least recording) and burial. He and Maud had never met; now, as one of Maud’s “floaters,” Patrick’s identity has been subsumed in his status of a victim of the whirlpool. She observes that “[t]he young man was beautiful. . . . The drowning had hardly affected him except to place a thin, hardly noticeable film across his eyes. But that was merely death. The rest of him was undamaged, perfect. He was like a dead child” (226). Whereas earlier in the novel Maud would have been enchanted by this perfect corpse and spent mournful hours cataloguing his possessions and inventing a narrative to explain his untimely end, she now turns from him to the living child at her side, whom she “pulled. . . closer to her own warm body” (227). This shift in her attention from death to life represents a profound change in the extent to which Maud is prepared to conform to fit her society’s expectations. Urquhart reveals this change once more through Maud’s costume: she is “no longer in mourning. She had dressed today for the first time in bright yellow. . . . She had discarded everything, all the crape, all the mauve and black and white cotton, all the kept things connected with death (227). This change of dress represents the extent to which Maud has begun to reinvent herself; finally “liberated from her obsession, [Maud] discards all her bereavement clothes and becomes ready to

redefine her identity outside the roles determined by convention” (Branach-Kallas, *Past* 21). As we saw in Fleda’s narrative, Urquhart ends Maud’s story in the moment of transition, not only reinforcing the significance of such moments of deliberate change and conscious departure from the previously known and familiar land- and mindscapes, but also reminding us that such change is possible only when we are able to dismantle the boundaries that we ourselves internalise and enforce.

Urquhart’s concern with the influence of place and narrative on individual subjectivity continues to inform her later works; however, she represents this interest most dramatically in her third novel, *Away*. Here, Urquhart continues to elaborate on the process through which tradition and ritual are inscribed on physical spaces, and the way these inscriptions create “frames of meaning” that determine how we remember the past and think about the present. As we saw in *The Whirlpool*, these frames “are generated in the present and usually match the group’s common map of the world. . . . We rely on them to supply us with what we should remember and what is taboo, and therefore must be forgotten” (Misztal 82). Misztal’s use of the metaphor of the map further reinforces our sense of the connection between physical and social or psychological spaces. Through her representations of these communal frames or common “maps,” Urquhart reveals how her characters internalise these social narratives in order to contextualise their personal narratives and so understand their roles within their community. However, whereas *The Whirlpool* focus on the ways in which characters become aware of and attempt to resist these communal narrative frames, *Away* focuses on characters who become so deeply entrenched in the past that it becomes more real to them than the present. Through the intergenerational transmission of family narrative, the main

characters in *Away* rewrite and reinterpret their present experiences according to their inherited framing narratives. By doing so, they are not only able to reinforce their positions within the larger family history but to tangibly draw the past into the present in a manner that recalls the narratives of MacLeod's Gaelic-Canadian community and Ondaatje's English patient.

Like *The Whirlpool*, *Away* begins with an epigraph that establishes the relationship between individual and communal identity throughout the novel. Identified only as an Irish triad, the epigraph reads, "The three most short-lived traces: the trace of a bird on a branch, the trace of a fish on a pool, and the trace of a man on a woman" (n.p.). While both epigraphs refer to the inevitability of change, this triad nostalgically laments transience and impermanence rather than embracing the moment of crisis and decision as does the epigraph to *The Whirlpool*. This preoccupation with the fleeting nature of life and love haunts *Away* for, unlike Maud and Fleda who sought to escape the cyclical pull of the past, the main female characters of this novel remain caught in the current of memory as they attempt to hang on to traces of what has been.

The novel proper begins on Esther O'Malley Robertson's final night in her family home on the shore of Lake Ontario. Throughout this night, she tells a story tracing her family's history from the Old World to the New, focusing in particular on the lives of her grandmother and great-grandmother. From the novel's first line, Esther is situated within a narrative tradition that is anchored by the temperaments and characters of the women in her family, of which she is "the last and the most subdued" (3). As the narrator explains,

The women of this family leaned towards extremes. . . . They inhabited northern

latitudes near icy waters. They were plagued by revenants. Men, landscapes, states of mind went away and came back again. Over the years, over the decades. There was always water involved, exaggerated youth or exaggerated age. Afterwards there was absence. That is the way it was for the women of this family. It was part of their destiny. (*Away* 3)

There is a strong sense of foreshadowing in these opening lines as they clearly establish the frames of meaning that have shaped the lives of the O'Malley-Robertson women. In particular, the ensuing narrative is concerned with cycles of absence and return (including from the dead) in terms of lovers but also, more importantly, in terms of the individual's consciousness of herself as a "present" or active force in her own life. For each woman, who is herself a revenant of the previous generation, the notion of destiny is grounded in the recurring events and attitudes preserved in the family history, as well in as the physical landscape that these characters inhabit. The reference to revenants also draws attention to the supernatural, which bridges temporal and metaphysical boundaries as supernatural occurrences are accepted without question by the main characters. As Herb Wyile observes, "the ostensibly realistic and the ostensibly fantastic coexist in the same narrative space, not only showing the way the two often blend in folklore and in popular consciousness, but providing a vehicle for sophisticated commentary about social, political, and cultural assumptions and artistic conventions" (24). By linking the natural with the unnatural, this description not only serves to introduce these women but to invoke a prophecy that both determines their character and establishes the conditions for its own fulfilment. In other words, this opening description does more than merely foreshadow the narratives that are to come: it establishes a template for the personalities as well as the lives of the women upon whom it focuses.

By drawing attention to the fact that Esther is one of these women who “inhabited northern latitudes near icy waters,” Urquhart establishes the affinity between Esther and her landscape. Furthermore, we quickly become aware of her isolation within that landscape as we discover that “as an old woman, [Esther] wants to tell this story to herself and the Great Lake, there being no one to listen” (3). This personification of the Great Lake as Esther’s intended audience introduces a note of mystery as the reader becomes attuned to both the significance of the lake in Esther’s life and her solitude as the last of the family line. The sense of mystery intensifies as we discover that the lake is, in fact, the only appropriate recipient of the narrative because “[e]ven had there been an audience of listeners, the wrong questions might have been asked. ‘How could you possibly know that?’ Or, ‘Do you have proof?’ Esther is too mature, has always been too mature, for considerations such as these” (3).⁸⁸ We are told that Esther’s acceptance of this narrative’s authority has always been absolute, as is her acceptance of its authenticity. There is a sense of ritual in the telling, for “Esther knows exactly what she is doing as she lies awake in the night. She is recomposing, reaffirming a lengthy, told story, recalling it; calling it back” (133). This narrative does not change and evolve with the each narrator’s telling; rather, in Esther’s mind, its existence is independent of her own. She does not merely remember it but must, in fact, “call it back” so that it can return to her and be “recomposed” in its entirety. This narrative that she recalls/calls back was originally passed on to her by her grandmother, Old Eileen, when Esther herself was twelve; according to Old Eileen, its purpose was to “[calm] her down and

⁸⁸ It is interesting that Esther’s treatment of her grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s stories reflects Naomi Jacob’s discussion of fictional biographies that, as we saw with Ondaatje and MacLeod, provide their author with a means of “approaching truth” through their works of fiction (3).

put her in her place” (3). The significance of this phrase, “put her in her place,” contributes to both the sense of authority and of ritual as it resonates throughout the novel on both literal and metaphorical levels.

In the most literal sense, Esther’s “place” is represented by the family farm on the shores of Lake Ontario. Old Eileen nurtures Esther’s attachment to this farm, and warns her against straying from her place: “By the time I finish this story you will have decided to hug the land—the *real* earth—the trees in the orchard, the timbers of this house. You will have decided never to go away” (9). This attachment is perpetuated by her parents’ inability to permanently leave the farm. When Esther was a child, she and her parents lived away from the Loughbreeze Beach farm for a few years. They were forced back, however, when their houses were destroyed. The first was struck by lightning; the second was buried in sand. According to Old Eileen, the landscape rose up and drove them back to the place where Esther belongs. She interprets events for her granddaughter, explaining, “You have lived in cataclysmic houses. I think those houses were trying to push you out—to push you out towards the lake. . . . The likes of you has to be *on* the beach, *on* the lake” (349). Thus we see from the age of twelve, Esther is made to feel that the defining aspects of her life—represented by her presence in the family home and her role within it—are the consequence of fate rather than choice.

By adding this element of fate to the narrative, Old Eileen ensures that Esther is metaphorically fixed in her “place” as well. Reinforced by such supernatural elements, Esther’s position within the family narrative becomes fixed as history is entwined with mythology. In a manner reminiscent of MacLeod’s concern with Gaelic culture and tradition, this family mythology provides a means of connecting with the past and

thereby transcending time as it allows the family members to participate in a larger, unchanging communal narrative. Both authors' characters take comfort in the feeling that they are part of a larger picture; however, Urquhart deliberately instills in her characters a nostalgic investment in the past and then problematizes it by demonstrating the ways in which such affirmations of one's "place" can stifle rather than support an individual's sense of self.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines nostalgia as a "[s]entimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past." The dangers of such a longing for times past are implicit in the rememberer's attachment to specific but decontextualized times or events. Susan Stewart elaborates on these dangers:

Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. . . . [N]ostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which only has ideological reality. (22)

Paradoxically, the key element of Stewart's discussion of nostalgia is the essential presence of lack or absence; furthermore, the memory of what has been lost is itself a simulacrum because the experience for which the rememberer longs was never really hers. Stewart's definition of nostalgia is particularly relevant to my discussion of *Away* as the narratives of Esther's family revolve around absence and inherited or appropriated memories. Because nostalgic longings for the past are an essential element of the framing family narrative, it is only in relation to absence that the presence of these women can be affirmed.

Urquhart represents these women's search for affirmation and continuity in the face of absence and transience through her play on the dichotomy of being present as opposed to being "away." As Flea demonstrates in *The Whirlpool*, it is possible for Urquhart's characters to be physically present in a situation while being simultaneously psychologically absent. Old Eileen is not merely attempting to ensure that her granddaughter remains geographically fixed; she is also trying to prevent Esther from being absent in a psychological sense. However, Eileen's task is complicated by the fact that in this family history, the notion of going "away" is steeped in myth and superstition, and so valorised. The narrative that Esther will whisper "all night. . . in the dark" (5) begins with the legend of Esther's great-grandmother Mary, Old Eileen's mother, who was thought for a time to be "away" with a demon lover. Urquhart appropriates Irish folk tradition as Old Eileen explains that to be "away" means to have been taken by "the Formoire, the ones from the sea, the others" (*Away* 12). This was Mary's fate: to have her essence or true self stolen by a "faery-daemon lover" and have "merely a flimsy replica" (13-4) of herself left behind. The consequence of being away is that

You are never present where you stand. You see the polished dishes in your cupboard throwing back the hearth light, but they know neither you nor the meals you have taken from their surfaces. Your flagstones are a series of dark lakes that you scour, and the light that touches and alters them sends you unspeakable messages. Waves arch like mantles over everything that burns. Each corner is a secret and your history is a lie. (345)

This form of psychological and spiritual absence, represented here as the absolute disjunction between the internal and external landscapes, comes to represent a nostalgic enslavement to the past. Despite the tragedies associated with being away, this absence

is likewise a foreordained aspect of character of these “extreme” women.

By literalizing the demon lover and the absence created by being psychologically away, Urquhart reverses the conventions of the literal and the metaphorical that were established in *The Whirlpool*. In that novel, Fleda’s demon lover was a fantasy that allowed her to be psychologically absent in her relationship with her husband. In *Away*, the demon lover becomes a literal reality that steals Mary’s soul and causes her to become essentially absent in her all her relationships and interactions. Through this literalization, Urquhart “sutures historical realism with the fantastic, the mythic, and the poetic” (Wyile 25). Although Mary eventually seems to return to the world when she marries Brian O’Malley, she is forever changed by her encounter with “the others.” For the rest of her life, Mary remains bound to the past and the memory of the man she believes to have been her demon lover; even when she immigrates to Canada with her husband, she has “some hope in her mind that the beloved other would follow her there” (126). Ultimately, her nostalgic attachment to this narrative has tragic consequences: her memory of her demon lover causes Mary to abandon her family in the New World to go in search of him, and eventually leads to her death on the shores of Moira Lake.⁸⁹

Haunted by her mother’s story, Eileen unconsciously rewrites her own autobiographical narrative and patterns it after Mary’s.⁹⁰ She, too, abandons her home in order to follow a lover, albeit a much more conventional one than her mother’s. The man

⁸⁹ It is important to remember that neither Eileen nor Esther question the fact that Mary left her family to live in the woods along Moira Lake to be reunited with her demon lover who had taken up residence there; as mentioned above, the unconditional acceptance of such supernatural reunions is a defining characteristic of this family narrative.

⁹⁰ The fact that Eileen is haunted by her mother’s story rather than her memory has far-reaching consequences in her narrative, for Eileen has no memory of her mother except as a corpse; the rest of the narrative has been appropriated from the stories and the memories of others. These are the “memories” that are passed on to Esther and that she, herself, appropriates.

she follows is a seeming Fenian revolutionary named Aidan Lanighan, who captures her heart when she sees him dance:

In a miracle of tone, stress, time, pause, tempo, silence, and thrust, the histories of courtship, marriage, the funeral, famine, and harvest were present in the inn. . . . An Irish phrase *Rian fir ar mhnaoi* rattled in her head, the sound of it in the gestures of the man before her; her father's lost language, alive and leaping, miming its own story in a new world by a Great Lake. The Fianna, the Children Turireann, desperate departures, centuries of reunion, her mother's withdrawal, and every wicked manifestation of Great Lake weather was in this dance. (248)

Eileen interprets his dance in a way that allows her to imagine that he represents not only the struggles of the Irish people but her own personal sorrows as well. She is well-versed in the historical sorrows of the Irish for, since her childhood, Eileen has spent her time “translating from myth to life the songs her father had taught her” (296). Just as Fleda shaped her world-view according to the Romantic poetry she admired, Eileen “had ingested [her father's] stories, their darkness—the twist in voice of the song, the sadness of the broken country—and had therefore carried, in her body and her brain, some of that country's clay. She who was born into a raw, bright new world would always look back towards lost landscapes and inward towards inherited souvenirs” (207-8). In her anxiety to find traces of the past in her present experiences, Eileen translates Aidan from an individual into one of the heroes her father had taught her to celebrate in patriotic songs.

At the same time, she also sees him as a revenant of the spirit who haunted her mother: he has the same green eyes (253) and black curls (258) that characterised the dying sailor who so enchanted Mary (6-7). As Aidan makes love to her, Eileen tells herself “the brief, brutal story of his life, composed partly of the things the captains had

said to her and partly of the songs she had sung, innocently, as a child” (259). She turns this fleeting encounter—which Aidan himself will hardly remember—into an event laden with almost sacred significance as she imagines herself “assaulted, stolen, by a learned mythology” (259). As Branach-Kallas observes, Eileen’s “attitude toward her lover is not realistic. . . . [S]he is naive and idealises the man she loves. Eileen imagines a passionate and tender Aidan who is very different from the cunning and indifferent person the reader perceives Lanighan to be” (*Past* 43). Lanighan’s true character is revealed on the night of D’Arcy McGee’s assassination. Eileen had accompanied Lanighan and the other Fenians to hear McGee speak; because she is a woman and would not be searched for a weapon, Eileen carries Lanighan’s gun on this journey. When she gives the gun to one of Lanighan’s friends and unwittingly causes the politician’s death, Lanighan reveals not only that he is in fact a McGee supporter but that he feels nothing but hatred and contempt for Eileen herself. Doubly disillusioned by the discovery that Lanighan is a spy and the realisation that she means nothing to him, Eileen returns in defeat and disgrace to her brother’s home. The memory of her disillusioned return and her regret for venturing out into the world provide the foundation of her desire to instil a sense of identity in her granddaughter in which subjectivity and physical place are conflated.

After she has been spurned by her lover and her illusions have been shattered, Eileen retreats into self-imposed exile where she relives the failed romance in memory and mourns what she perceives as her terrible loss. When she gives birth to a daughter, who will grow up to become Esther’s mother, Eileen distances herself from her child and her disillusionment by giving the infant to her brother and his wife to raise. Eileen explains

that, like her mother, her fate has been to be “away all my life. . . . I can’t, you see, get the face of a certain young man out of my mind” (351). It is telling that Eileen has interpreted this relationship between herself and Aidan in such a way that it contains traces and echoes of the story of Mary’s relationship with her demon lover: this propensity for looking back becomes both the root cause for being “away” and the overarching theme that links Esther to her grandmother and great-grandmother through the narratives that she inherits from them.

At the same time, Eileen is aware of the destructive influence that looking back and subsequently being “away” has had on her life as well as on her mother’s. Her concern that her granddaughter engage only with what is real and present is emphasised as she yells at the girl, “For God’s sake. . . stay where you are. . . . Try to understand, but try not to interpret.” Despite her own propensity for interpretation, she further insists, “Any interpretation is a misinterpretation. . . . Remember that” (12). Eileen seeks to instil in Esther a deep and abiding tie with her home that she hopes will protect her from the tragedies that inevitably arise from such absences of heart and mind, and hopes that the lesson will instead allow her always to be present in her own life. Old Eileen’s narrative has evolved as a romantic but cautionary tale, intended as an antidote to the restless blood that apparently characterises the women of her family.

Eileen succeeds to the extent that Esther’s own autobiographical narrative is fundamentally influenced by Eileen’s warnings and stories. As Esther reflects on these inherited narratives during this final night in the white house on the beach, she “sees herself as a child recognizing the strength of memory, putting aside ephemeral, destroyable books as old Eileen’s voice build a story within the closed rectangle of a

room” (135). In this image, Eileen “builds” her story in a manner that reflects the construction of a house or a wall. Esther has been enclosed by the walls of this story, and shaped by the haunted landscape of the past—she has become a revenant without an autonomous identity. Groomed in the image of Mary and Eileen, Esther becomes absorbed into the family mythology, which claims that “[i]n this family all young girls are the same young girl and all old ladies are the same old lady” (325). Unlike the symbol of the whirlpool, which allowed for motion and change, the framing narratives of this story, represented by the walls of the family home, remain fixed.

Notably, Esther’s mother, Deirdre, has almost no place in this story. Raised by Eileen’s brother Liam and his wife Molly, she is incidental to the narrative from Eileen’s (and even Esther’s) perspective. She is not part of the mythology because she has neither the red hair nor the unrequitable longings that characterise her mother, her grandmother, and eventually her daughter. Eileen explains, “There is a calmness in her; she does not lean towards extremes. . . . Her life is clean, I thought, clear of it all. . . . Then her houses were destroyed and she came home. . . . back to the beach. And even then, nothing of the young woman I was was present in her, and nothing of Aidan either” (355). Deirdre, who is named “because of the sorrows” (351), is never even told the truth about her parentage. Because she does not fit the narrative frame of the extreme women, she represents the “need to forget events that represent a threat to unity” (Misztal 17). Distinct from the other women in her family because of her physical as well as her emotional qualities, she is virtually written out of the story.

There is a moment in the novel when it seems possible that Esther may have escaped the fate of her foremothers for she does “hug the land—the real earth” (9). The

connection Old Eileen initiated between Esther and her home not only continues but actually intensifies after the old woman's death, when she inherits her grandmother's house and land:

Esther was left alone to run the farm as Eileen's will had determined she should. Esther had watched her parents depart, had turned and walked into the fields, dug her hands into the earth, examined the leaves of each crop. Later she ran her fingers over the bark of the orchard trees, strolled through the flickering woods. She was less staking out her territory than she was being claimed by something that was destined to be hers; the centre of the world, the ground on which she stood. She was, by then, thirty years old, tall and angular; with a banner of red-gold hair which she kept out of her way, bundled at the back of her neck. (353)

For a moment, it appears possible that Eileen's warning to Esther to remain firmly grounded has succeeded. At the age of thirty, she seems past the age of dreaming and reckless abandon that had characterised both Eileen and Mary. The stability of her personality is implied by the way she keeps the "banner of red-gold hair," which has been the symbol of her grandmothers' beauty and sets them apart from Esther's own mother, "out of her way, bundled at the back of her neck" (353). For a moment, the reader can believe that Esther might follow her mother's quiet path.

In the next paragraph, however, we discover that Esther does not follow her mother, nor does she escape the fate that claimed Eileen and Mary. Further evidence of the extent to which Esther has become enmeshed in Mary and Eileen's mythology arrives in the form of a young sailor who "was drawn to her shore by the threat of a storm only eight months [after Esther takes over the farm]. He anchored his boat in the relative calm of her bay with a gale coming up and waves slamming against the jetty to which he swam" (353). Just as the elements conspired to drive Esther and her family back to the

white house where Esther “belongs,” they act together once again to bring this young man into the sphere of Esther’s life. The meeting between Esther and the sailor contains echoes of both Mary’s experience with the drowned sailor and Eileen’s with Aidan. Caught in a series of repetitions that seem inevitable to Mary’s great-granddaughter, Esther “was unsurprised by his dark curls, his pale hand and his bright green eye” (354). She recognises this revenant and, as history repeats itself in these echoes, the boundary between myth and reality is once again blurred by the uncanny reappearance of Mary’s demon lover. Because the young man’s appearance has such an uncanny resonance for her, Esther is not concerned with the conventional details of her lover’s history or their relationship. Rather, she interprets his arrival to fit the frame of the other women’s stories: “[i]t was his swimming to her land, the storm, his journey over beach stones that mattered. The unpredictability of his arrivals and the certainty of his departures. Between his visits, when she found herself waiting, she knew it was for a kind of completion—his absence from, not his presence in her life” (354). When he no longer appears, Esther is content with his absence: he is perfected in her memory and falls into his ordained place in the story as had the men who had briefly swam or danced into the lives of her grandmothers.⁹¹

Urquhart, however, is not content to allow this romanticized narrative to go unchallenged: she demonstrates how such frames create “an inner theatre where a girl could build a prison” (296). The power of Eileen’s narrative is such that Esther’s

⁹¹ Again, there are echoes of the way in which Fleeta had thought to preserve and perfect Patrick in her memory; however, because he remains a daily presence in her life she is unable to achieve the degree of detachment that is required for her to rewrite their encounter. In this case, too, we see the ways in which absence is essential to the invention of presence through narrative.

interpretation of the events in her own life is shaped by this story; they have neither momentum nor meaning of their own. Like Eileen, Esther too has been away all her life, grounded in her place and trapped within the frame of her inherited memories. Consequently, her lack of surprise when the sailor appears at her door takes on ominous rather than romantic resonance. Furthermore, this ominous resonance underlies the entire narrative. As Stewart explains, “By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narration” (23). Eileen gives authenticity to the past and denies the present by remaining trapped in her memories; further, she causes Esther to become likewise ensnared in this narrative, and thereby prevents her from inventing an identity of her own. Though she weaves her tale with the seeming intention of helping Esther escape the fates of the women who came before her, Eileen’s nostalgic remembrances condemn her granddaughter to repeat the past.

Unlike *The Whirlpool*, *Away* ends without any of the characters gaining self-knowledge. On her last night, Esther “stands on one of the house’s creaking verandahs and looks towards the jetty where everything had, at one time or another, moved away from her. A man, a few beloved horses, the possibility of children” (9). As she reflects on the past, it becomes clear exactly how much she has relinquished in order to fit the pattern of the archetypal figures that dominate the family narrative. It is significant that the final words of Esther’s narrative are not her own. Rather, they are Eileen’s, compelling and advising and reminding: “If I were you I would be where I stand” (355). Ironically, Esther has combined her grandfather Aidan Lanighan’s ability to “always be there, where he stood” with her grandmother’s ability to “drift away” (355), causing her

to be present in her place, while ensuring that place is itself metaphorically absent from the rest of the world. It is also significant, therefore, that the house in which Esther is reminiscing will be destroyed when the narrative ends.

While Esther's part of the story ends with Eileen's words, the novel itself ends with the "scream of machinery" (356) as the mining company (which has somehow taken possession of the farm) moves ahead in its inexorable exploitation of the land's resources. There is no indication that Esther has made any attempt to resist this seemingly inevitable annihilation; her assumption that this fate is inescapable has, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, been predetermined by Eileen's prophecy that the "curse of the mines" (12) will be visited upon their family. The destruction of the family home, which serves as a metaphor for the family's framing narratives, parallels the end of Esther's life. When there is no longer any "place" for her, when her home and her memories face imminent destruction, Esther vanishes from the novel: despite the assertions of critics such as Branach-Kallas (*Past* 48) and Wyile (42) that she is dead, Urquhart makes no definitive declaration of where Esther has gone. However, whether dead or waiting in the dark or simply removed from the threat of danger, she—like the women in her family before her—has gone "away."⁹²

In Urquhart's fiction, all stories begin with a place. Her landscapes always illuminate the social spaces and framing narratives that influence her characters, often in ways unbeknownst to those characters. Because landscape and place are also closely associated with the past for Urquhart, the movements of her characters within those

⁹² The ambiguity of this ending recalls the disappearance of Agnes MacPhedran at the end of MacLeod's short story, "Island." In both cases, the disappearance of the focalising character is determined by their family's framing narratives.

spaces reflect their relationships with both their personal and their communal histories. Her use of tropes depicting the destruction or the commemoration of such spaces has particular resonance in terms of her preoccupation with our relationship with the past. I will continue my investigation of Urquhart's evolving sense of this relationship in Chapter 6, particularly in terms of the ways in which she imagines in her later works the impact of conflicting frames of meaning on Canada's national narrative.

Chapter Five

Speaking for a Nation's People: Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* and *Sanctuary Line*

Lord, thought Fleda, these theories. . . no humans there at all. No actual people in these landscapes. What about the pain?

(Urquhart, *Whirlpool* 206)

As we saw in Chapter 4, Jane Urquhart's preoccupation with landscape and the ways in which we respond to the narratives invested in the places we inhabit surfaces again and again throughout her works. This relationship between individuals and their place, which manifests in the form of intricately nuanced social spaces, is of particular importance to her. Whether they are urban, rural, or natural, the settings of her stories provide more than a mere background for the development of her characters and their experiences. As part of a dynamic social space, Urquhart's landscapes are inscribed with the socially determined frames of meaning that influence her characters' interpretations of the world and their place in it, as well as their private self-definitions.

For Urquhart, part of the magic of landscape resides in the ways in which places and objects within those places provide her characters with a physical connection to their history and their society. As these places and objects are inscribed with an historical narrative, they function as repositories of memory that contain the clues that can lead her

characters toward (or, as we see in *Away*, away from) self-discovery. Such clues take the form of internal “landmarks” (Misztal 16) that allow them to establish their “place,” both literally and metaphorically in the context of their personal and communal narratives. Her works reminded us of the ways in which our autobiographical narratives are influenced by the framing narratives of our communities, which are in turn contained and informed by our landscapes and social spaces. Of course, as Urquhart illustrates, establishing one’s “place” means different things for different people. For Maud and Fleda in *The Whirlpool*, the central image of the whirlpool comes to represent both the temptation to immerse oneself in the past according to the framing narratives of one’s society, and the desire to reinvent oneself according to a self-constructed ideal. For Esther in *Away*, on the other hand, the central image of the white house on the beach becomes a symbol of the ways in which such framing narratives can become so overpowering that the individual feels compelled to rewrite herself to fit the frame, rather than vice versa. Because these characters’ “identities are shaped by embodied and embedded narratives, located in particular places and times” (Carter x), navigating between conflicting narratives presents a particular challenge as they attempt to reconcile their private autobiographical narratives with narratives that have been imposed on them by the expectations of others.⁹³

In my previous chapter, I focused on Urquhart’s representation of the ways in which these often-conflicting framing narratives influence the individual’s sense of self, and the ways in which we can be burdened and stifled by the past. However, her interest in

⁹³ This conflict between narratives is, as we have seen, of particular interest to MacLeod’s narrator in *No Great Mischief* and Ondaatje’s focalising characters, particularly Buddy Bolden, as well.

such narratives is not limited to the level of personal identity. Rather, she is deeply concerned throughout her works with the notion of a Canadian national identity, particularly in terms of the ways in which a unified national narrative is conceived and fostered. Writing at a time during which philosophers such as Pierre Nora believe our communal memory has become “nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces” (8), Urquhart draws attention to the manner in which communities, like individuals, contextualise the present moment in terms of historical narratives and discourses that present a selectively framed perspective on the past.⁹⁴ Because “[t]he recollection of the past . . . focuses on the central products of narrative activity—namely on the construction of a narrative identity, both at the level of history (e.g. identity as a nation) and at the level of the individual” (Misztal 70), national narratives are problematized by the same process of selective remembering and forgetting that complicates personal narratives.

Narrative identity lies at the heart of the concept of national identity, because nations “turn therefore to the past in order to search for a sense of community. The master narrative of history, i.e. the official historiographic records, legitimises certain events and obliterates others, providing the nation with a shared experience of the past, which helps national identity, Canadian uniqueness, emerge” (Branach-Kallas *Whirlpool* 14). The power of master narratives to either legitimise or obliterate events is problematic for Urquhart, who recognises that the unifying voice of history silences the heteroglossic

⁹⁴ Nora claims that the “irrevocable break marked by the disappearance of peasant culture, that quintessential repository of collective memory” (7) and the loss of that culture’s “unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing” form of memory has created a deficit of memory, which has led us to become obsessed by “*les lieux de mémoire*” or “sites” of memory (8).

nature of experience.⁹⁵ Consequently, she seeks in her writing to shatter the illusion of an authoritative historical perspective and remind her audience of the price of such uniformity.

To understand the means through which conflicting narratives are reconciled in order to present a unified national identity, Homi Bhabha's theories of displacement and the doubling of time in the creation of national narratives are useful. Bhabha argues that, in our conception of history, we need to become aware of the "complex time of the national narrative" (143), which requires that a "nation's people must be thought of in double time" (Bhabha 145). Bhabha refers to the pedagogical discourse of time, a linear or progressive sense of time communicated to citizens that possesses an "authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*" (145). This discourse exists in tension with a performative discourse, in which "the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of people as contemporaneity" (145). The performative discourse allows our perception of a nation and its people to remain frozen in the eternal present; because it is both homogeneous and static, the performative discourse is ultimately an empty conception of time and history.⁹⁶

Bhabha's performative discourse is both static and homogenous in the sense that it allows for a sense of connection with the past through the inaccurate assumption that the

⁹⁵ My interpretation of heteroglossia is informed by the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as "the conflict between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal,' 'official' and 'unofficial' discourses within the same national language." Further, he suggests that "[t]he discursive site in which the conflict between different voices is at its most concentrated is the modern novel" (Morris 248-9).

⁹⁶ Bhabha's concept of the performative discourse and the eternal present is consistent with Genevieve Lloyd's notion of narrative time, which I discussed in relation to Ondaatje's works in Chapter 3.

values of the forefathers were the same as those currently held by modern citizens.⁹⁷ The tension between the pedagogical and performative discourses exists in the presence (and suppression) of “the ghostly time of repetitions.” Awareness of the disjunction between the experiences, values, and sentiments of past and present generations arises as “a liminal, uncertain state of cultural belief when the archaic emerges in the midst of margins of modernity as a result of some psychic ambivalence or intellectual uncertainty” (Bhabha 143). In other words, despite its best efforts to displace (or rewrite) the unsavoury moments of its history, a nation is unavoidably haunted by its past. Urquhart represents this tension in her works through the ways in which, even as memories are effaced by new narratives, traces of past events remain to haunt individuals—or nations—who would prefer not to remember them.

Questions of ethics arise throughout Urquhart’s works as a result of the tension that exists between the pedagogical and performative discourses. For example, the Canadian tendency to valorise Eurocentric perspectives—such as the notion that Canadian history began with the arrival of the French and the English on its shores—has caused the voices of other groups, particularly Canada’s First Nations, to be ignored and silenced. Because this silencing of Canada’s aboriginal voices and the devaluing of their culture is implicit even in the designation of Canada as a “new” land, which privileges European definitions of political nations, there is an implicit discrepancy in any attempt to create a

⁹⁷ We experience the performative discourse during such events as the singing of the national anthem, in celebrations of confederation, etc. where a people’s sense of patriotism and nationalism is grounded in an imaginary communion with the past. A similar sense of timelessness is created at the communal level by an event such as a local or familial celebration or ritual, and at the individual level by the experience of expressing one’s own stories.

unified Canadian narrative. Smaro Kamboureli elaborates on the ways in which
Canada's historical narrative

speaks of arrivals and departures, trajectories whose starting points contain, more often than not, conflict. It is a history of the legacy of colonization, but also a history of the 'discovery' of Canada as a new home whose 'newness' constantly calls forth the spectre of the past, the nostalgic replay of other geographies. It is also a history of persistent attempts to compose a unified vision of Canadian culture against the reality and cultural understanding of many Canadians, a history that bursts its seams. It is, in other words, a history haunted by dissonance.
(*Difference* 1)

This "nostalgic replay of other geographies" manifests in the names of places across Canada—for example, in the names of the province of Nova Scotia and cities of London and New Hamburg and so on. These names stand in tension with other places—such as Ottawa or Winnipeg or Manitou—that are derived from aboriginal languages. As these names are appropriated and used by succeeding generations of Canadians, they are naturalised in their new context but the ghosts of their nearly-forgotten history remains. Brian Jarvis emphasises the complexity of this relationship between place and history and its consequences for national identity in *Postmodern Cartographies* in which he states, "Given the structural inseparability of space/place/landscape and social relations there can be no geographical knowledge without historical narrative. In other words, all spaces contain stories and must be recognised as the sites of an ongoing struggle over meaning and value" (Hammill 66).

This struggle over meaning and value takes on particular significance in terms of contemporary postcolonial perspectives. Interpretations of Canadian literary representations of human society and its place in nature have become particularly

fraught as a result of Canada's colonial past and the privileging of Eurocentric discourse in our national narratives and literatures. Kamboureli explains,

In Canada's colonial history, 'the encounter with cultural difference' was, for all intents and purposes, a non-encounter. The British and French colonizers saw themselves as settlers, as arriving in a land that was taken to be more or less empty. The presence, cultural differences, spirituality, and languages of the Aboriginal peoples, the people who lived in what we now call Canada, were not seen as having any inherent value. The land they inhabited, and which they continue to inhabit, was deemed to be ready for the taking. . . . The myth that Canada was 'discovered' was intended to hide the fact that what we now call Canada has always belonged to other peoples, peoples with their own distinct languages and cultures. (*Difference* 7)

Now, as the histories and narratives of Aboriginal peoples are beginning to be heard and the devastating effects of first contact are being recognised, the position of Canadians of European descent becomes precarious as they react to discourses in which their legitimacy of place is challenged. Consequently, settler-invader narratives that have been privileged in the past are haunted, as Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte succinctly describe in their discussion of postcolonial Gothic literature, by "fears of territorial illegitimacy, anxiety about forgotten or occluded histories, resentment toward flawed or complicit ancestors, assertions of Aboriginal priority, explorations of hybrid cultural forms, and interrogations of national belonging and citizenship" (ix).

Immigrant narratives, too, tend to be subsumed under the umbrella of Canada's two "official" cultures: the French and the English. In *Survival*, Atwood's initial disclaimer—that the text "is not an exhaustive, extensive or all inclusive treatise on Canadian literature" (11)—acknowledges her awareness of the narrowness of her focus. At the same time, however, her editorial decisions in terms of content are telling in terms

of prevailing attitudes at that time toward the question of whose voices were heard in Canadian literature. Nearly forty years later, other voices are at last being heard, though the process of integrating these voices remains complicated. Kamboureli reflects on the need to acknowledge the distinct ethnicities that comprise Canada's history, while drawing attention to the further diversification that exists within that diversity:

The tendency to read multicultural literature through the racial or ethnic labels affixed to its authors more often than not reinforces stereotypical images of the authors themselves and of their cultural communities. Labels are vexing and sneaky things because they are intended to express a stable and universal representation of both communities and individuals. By implying that there is a specific essence, say, to the writing of First Nations authors, labels prematurely foreclose our understanding not only of the complexity inherent in individual communities but also of the various ways in which authors position themselves within their cultural group and the Canadian society at large. (*Difference* 3-4)⁹⁸

She draws attention to the fact that “[m]inority literature, then, is nothing other than a construct, an expression of the power and literary politics of any given time” (3). At the same time, she acknowledges the difficulties of integrating multicultural voices into the Canadian national narrative: because it undermines the traditional definition of Canada as being divided between the French and the English, multiculturalism is both desired and feared. In Robert Kroetsch's words, “To make a long story disunited, let me assert. . . that Canadians cannot agree on what their metanarrative is. I am also suggesting that, in some perverse way, this very falling-apart of our story is what holds our story together” (355). This inability to agree reflects the complexity of Canada's disputed history, in which differences between diverse cultural and individual perspectives have,

⁹⁸ We have seen a similar attitude toward labels in Ondaatje's characterisation of Buddy Bolden, who was violently opposed to all forms of unifying narratives.

at times, resulted in violent opposition between irreconcilable factions. In fact, as Kroetsch suggests, this opposition is perhaps the closest thing to a metanarrative on which Canadians can agree. As a consequence, it becomes apparent that not only is Canada disunited in its narratives, but as a nation it is still in the process of coming to terms with its past.

Urquhart seems to be particularly concerned with this process of a nation coming to terms with the past as she challenges traditional notions and contemporary constructions of Canadian national identity. As Branach-Kallas explains, Urquhart “undermines the stereotypical patterns imposed on Canadian fiction by the nationalist literary criticism of the 1960s and 1970s,” including Atwood’s *Survival*, because in “[a]ttempting to tell Canadians who they are, thematic criticism has created stereotypes of Canadian consciousness and imposed fixity on the variety of human experience” (14-5). Urquhart continues to engage with contemporary notions of national identity, representing in her novels the framing narratives that continue to dominate our sense of what it means to be Canadian and the ghosts that haunt us. As I will discuss below, it is useful to read Urquhart’s latest novel, *Sanctuary Line*, in the context of her earlier works, particularly *The Whirlpool*, *Away*, and *The Stone Carvers*. Urquhart interrogates in each of these novels the process through which national narratives are conceived by drawing attention to the silencing of conflicting perspectives through the dehumanizing effects of stereotypes, abstractions, and forgetfulness. In this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which the themes established in *The Whirlpool* and *Away*, specifically in relation to her characters’ relationships with time and obsessive memory, continue to inform her later novels on the level of nation and national narrative. I will also discuss how framing

narratives of meaning continue to be a present and evolving concern in Urquhart's examination of the ways in which "Canada" is conceived and remembered. Finally, I will discuss the ways which Urquhart's depiction of these dynamics has implications for Canada's national identity by drawing attention to the unethical treatment of narratives of place.

Forgetfulness is perhaps the most prominent of Urquhart's ethical concerns. In the midst of the contemporary preoccupation with commemoration and remembrance, there is always the lurking problem of what should be remembered and how. However, this problem is further complicated by the question of what is forgotten and why. Paul Connerton shares this uneasiness with the process that determines what will be remembered for, although he assures us that "while forgetting has not in fact descended like an all-enveloping blanket on the contemporary world," he also warns us that "it remains the case that there are types of structural forgetting which are *specific* to the culture of modernity" (2). Connerton associates these structures with

processes that separate social life from locality and from human dimensions: superhuman speed, megacities that are so enormous as to be unmemorable, consumerism disconnected from the labour process, the short lifespan of urban architecture, the disappearance of walkable cities. What is being forgotten in modernity is profound, the human-scale-ness of life, the experience of living and working in a world of social relationships. There is some kind of deep transformation in what might be described as the meaning of life based on shared memories, and that meaning is eroded by a structural transformation in the life-spaces of modernity. (5)

It is perhaps a desire to reinstate this connection to the "human-scale-ness" of life that inspires Urquhart's frequent returns to the past in her works. Even when grappling with issues of nationhood, she never allows us to lose sight of the individual and his/her role

in the perceived “great” events of history, nor does she allow us to forget the significance of shared Canadian memories and experiences—particularly in terms of their impact on the individual citizens of that nation.

Urquhart is less concerned with amnesiac forms of forgetting wherein all traces of the past seem to be lost than with inaccurate forms of remembering that cause certain perspectives of the past to be suppressed, marginalised, or reinterpreted. As we have seen in *The Whirlpool* and *Away*, the past remains inscribed in physical bodies and landscapes; as a consequence, suppressed narratives of the past can never be entirely silenced but return to haunt her characters as revenants in various forms. In the historical narratives of a nation, such revenants function as “ghostly repetitions” that undermine and challenge the master narratives of collective memory and history. Like many contemporary writers (including Michael Ondaatje, Alistair MacLeod, Timothy Findley, Wayne Johnston, Eden Robinson, Joyce Kogawa, Rohinton Mistry, etc), Urquhart is “concerned to interrogate history, and raise questions as to who has the authority to write it, what alternative versions are being suppressed and indeed whether it is possible to know the past at all” (Hammill 134). In *The Whirlpool*, Urquhart begins to address these questions through the character of David McDougal, who seeks to write an authoritative history of the War of 1812. Her characterisation of the often absurd military historian and his single-minded desire to create a national Canadian identity remind us not only of the difficulty but the cost of creating such a unifying narrative.

Our first glimpse of McDougal is focalised through his wife Fleda’s perspective. When he appears, she has been waiting for him in the woods near the whirlpool at the place where they intend to build their new home. Fleda takes stock of her husband when

he finally arrives and describes him as being “mounted on a handsome horse and looking proud and slightly pugnacious in his military attire. His face, however, carried an expression of warmth and tenderness, the object of which was his horse to whom he was speaking quietly” (31). McDougal’s sentimental attachment to his horse, his “pugnacious” appearance, and his valorisation of tradition (as demonstrated, for example, by his gift to Fleda of Patmore’s *Angel in the House*) cause him to appear as a comedic character and thereby undermine his credibility as an historian. His desire “to furnish Canada with an orderly past of its own” (Goldman 27) is likewise undermined, which forces us to further question his desperate desire for “a *pure* museum. . . one where he could place the relics of the thin history of the country where he lived” (*Whirlpool* 166, emphasis added). As Urquhart’s ironic emphasis on purity and holy artefacts (which include the cannon balls and spent bullets that Maud finds in her garden) makes clear, the idea of the museum is itself problematic. Andreas Huyssen explicates this problem, observing that museums

inevitably will construct the past in light of the discourses of the present and in terms of present-day interest. Fundamentally dialectical, the museum serves both as burial chamber of the past—with all that entails in terms of decay, erosion, forgetting—and as a site of possible resurrections, however mediated and contaminated, in the eyes of the beholder. No matter how much the museum, consciously or unconsciously, produces and affirms the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory. (15)

As history is reconstituted according to contemporary values, this “surplus of meaning” refers to alternative versions of the past that are informed by silenced or repressed memories and voices. The subtleties that Huyssen identifies in this dialectic are reflected

in the question that haunts *The Whirlpool* (as well as Urquhart's later works): that is how we, not only as individuals but as a nation, can authentically sustain our relationship with the past without becoming entombed within it.

Urquhart's use of the trope of the collection in *The Whirlpool* has implications as an allegory for the creation of national narratives, including the role of the museum within that creation. Urquhart demonstrates how national narratives can be perceived as a form of metaphorical collection by creating connections between the idea of history as a collection of narratives and the historian as collector. Significantly, collections are selective rather than representative and reflect a subjective rather than objective narrative that has been predetermined by the collector. In her definition of "collection" and its function, Susan Stewart explains that

the past lends authenticity to the collection. The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism. The collection replaces history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection's world. . . . The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. (151)

In other words, a collection functions in much the same way as Bhabha's performative discourse: a collection is selective in terms of what objects are displayed, and it disconnects those objects from their original context by creating a timeless narrative that transcends past, present, and future. Stewart's definition can be used to illustrate Urquhart's metaphor of the national narrative as a form of collection: certain voices are valorised and so included in official histories, while others are marginalised and so excluded. Both collections and narratives can be regarded as a means of creating

meaning from the chaotic and random events that comprise the individual's ongoing quotidian experiences. By extension, both collection and narrative can serve as a "means by which the collector/author can order and control historical artefacts and information, respectively, as s/he desires" (Bruce 112), thereby allowing the collector/author to impose a meaning or interpretation onto the events of the past.

The most obvious collectors in *The Whirlpool* are, as I discussed in Chapter 4, Charles Grady who collected spiders and his wife Maud who created her own private reliquary in her funeral home for the "floaters" who were dragged from the Niagara River. David McDougal is also a collector, though his collection is much less tangible: he collects narratives about heroic Canadians who were involved in the War of 1812. He is specifically interested in writing a history of the war that will unite Canadians through a sense of shared pride in their defeat of the Americans. He also intends to use his research not only to correct but to replace American and British narratives about the war, since each of these nations also claim to have been the sole victors in the conflict (*Whirlpool* 78). Branach-Kallas draws attention to the malleable nature of historical record, arguing that "David's questioning of British and American sources demonstrates that history is always a relative interpretation, completely dependent on its author who transforms *events* that occurred in the past into historical *facts*, granting them a selected meaning" (121). By emphasising the subjective nature not only of this process of selecting so-called "facts" but of their interpretation and meaning, Urquhart reminds us that the silencing of voices and perspectives that are not in accordance with the authorial perspective and values is implicit in historical narratives.

Urquhart also reminds us of the dangers of accepting as given the authority and credibility of our national historians. She pokes fun at McDougal, who views his duty as an historian as being virtually divinely inspired. He explains to Patrick that Laura Secord appeared to him in a dream, demanding that he “*Remind them, remind them*” of the significance of Canada’s historic battle (77). This ghostly visitation is undermined by the reader’s knowledge of McDougal’s elaborate sexual fantasies (which include a fetishized muddy calico dress) about Secord, which his wife dutifully re-enacts with him. The memory of the historian’s passionate rhetoric when he speaks of Laura Secord stays with the reader, and inevitably and comedically undermines his vision of the Battle of 1812. In this vision, McDougal imposes a narrative on the intentions of everyone who participated in the battle: “I believe they were fighting for their own country, the Canadian militia, the Indians. . . . They may not have known this at the beginning of the conflict, but by the time it was over they knew. They knew they had a country. It was all vague before that, but after. . . after , they became a race!” (205). Through this narrative, which conspicuously ignores the consequences of the battle for the British army’s First Nations allies, McDougal metaphorically “collects” the soldiers by unifying their motivations and then “displays” them under the label of “Canadian.”

Such an imposition not only artificially assumes, as Bhabha warns, that all Canadians, past and present, share the same values and motivations but ignores the issues that Kamboureli raises, particularly concerning the recognition of diversity within diversity. McDougal’s passion for preserving a specific, singular narrative of Canadian history is problematized even further by the fact that the poet Patrick, too, is “confused by the word. History, his story, whose story? Collections of facts that were really only

documented rumours. When he thought hard about them, thought hard about facts, they evaporated under his scrutiny” (66). By drawing attention to the selective and ephemeral qualities of such collections of historical “fact,” Urquhart reminds us, as we have seen in both Ondaatje’s and MacLeod’s works as well, the boundaries between fact and fiction are permeable. McDougal’s narrative not only privileges a specific attitude toward the War but openly overwrites the multiplicity of stories by reducing the plethora of individual motivations and intentions into a single patriotic purpose; thus is the chaos of diversity tamed.

According to Barbara Bruce, Urquhart uses the trope of the collection to “[r]epresent synecdochically the means through which the dominant culture attempts to impose unity, but which actually effect the fragmentation and destabilization of the nation” (Bruce 110). This fragmentation results when experiences of a substantial portion of the nation’s cultures and groups are marginalised and so excluded from such unifying narratives; as these groups regain their voices and are able to contradict the imposed narrative, that narrative is further destabilized. McDougal’s deeply romanticized yet dangerously abstracted version of the national narrative exemplifies these threats of fragmentation and destabilization. For example, McDougal is fascinated by the Canadian hero, Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, who was in fact *not* Canadian. McDougal is unperturbed by the historical inconvenience of the facts of Brock’s birth, however: he observes that Brock was English “[o]nly while he was alive. After that, he became entirely Canadian. Not that he ever wanted to be, Lord knows. . . . but that’s of little consequence. Canada claimed him and nothing will ever change that” (204). As the

facts of Brock's true national identity are suppressed by his status as a Canadian hero, both his personal history and the memory of Canada's colonial history are forgotten.

McDougal performs a similar act of forgetting and appropriation as he discusses the human cost of war.⁹⁹ Again, he thinks in terms of abstract concepts rather than of human consequences. He argues that "the whole thing was so wonderful. A young country like ours needs dead heroes. Someone to mourn. Someone to make a monument for" (204). McDougal takes particular umbrage against his fellow-Canadians who, he feels, are seriously lacking in national pride. Urquhart juxtaposes his concern that "[t]his country buries its history so fast people with memories are considered insane" (77) with other perspectives, including Patrick's uncle's observation that "If I were interested in history. . . I'd have no time for progress. I don't want to remember the way it was. All stumps and mud was the way that it was. What kind of fool wants to remember that?" In Patrick's uncle's mind, history and progress are mutually exclusive concepts. In contrast with McDougal's delight in the heroics of Brock and Secord, Patrick's uncle further observes, "My grandfather fought in that war, lost the use of one arm, and was never given a stipend. It's nothing you'd want to remember. Let it go, that's my opinion" (65). Such seemingly inglorious references to stipends and regret for personal loss have no place in McDougal's romanticised narrative about glorious battles and noble sacrifice; in order to maintain this air of romance, McDougal ignores all voices that speak from the

⁹⁹ As I discussed in Chapter 2, Nietzsche argues that actively forgetting/selectively remembering are "essential to action" lest the individual become paralysed by the weight of historical consciousness (*Untimely* 62). Urquhart recognises the necessity of such forgetfulness, but she also problematizes it by drawing attention to the way selective remembering creates bias and distortion in historical narratives as certain persons or events or motives (etc.) are forgotten while others are remembered.

perspective of intimate proximity and replaces them with his own perspective of aesthetic distance.

In contrast with McDougal's desire for a normative and authoritative version of history, Fleda succinctly draws attention to the theoretical abstraction of her husband's narratives and reminds us of what is missing: "Lord, thought Fleda, these theories. . . no humans there at all. No actual people in these landscapes. What about the pain?" (*Whirlpool* 206). As we saw with Patrick's poetry in Chapter 4, McDougal's historical narrative seeks to view everything from an emotionally detached and consequently safe distance in an attempt to "transform death into an abstraction" in order to "[defend] the self against the chaotic emotions associated with mortality" (Goldman, *Paths* 184). Throughout her novels, Urquhart insists again and again that the recognition of this pain of the individual is essential in the composition of a truly representative national narrative (as opposed to an artificially unifying one). Ironically, though appropriately given what we know of his character, McDougal goes to the Niagara Falls' local museum when his wife has left him and he is left struggling to understand and cope with her departure:

There was peace here, and the major knew it. Emptied of drama and emotions these artifacts would not be making any further statements, any further journeys. They would remain here now, stunningly innocent and clear, years after their complicated performances involving death and pain. They had become three-dimensional documents locked away in rooms. / MacDougal was comforted by the sight of these objects carefully arranged on fabric, safely catalogued and housed. (225)

His appreciation of the museum in this instance is based on the fact that the objects on display have become nothing more than the impersonal elements of another's collection,

detached from their role in history and their association with intensely personal experiences of pain and death. The collection disarms the artefacts and renders them harmless; to reiterate Stewart's argument, "[t]he collection replaces history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality" (151). In his moment of pain and confusion, McDougal seeks out and finds comfort in the emotional neutrality of these objects.

McDougal's attraction to this neutrality is apparent throughout the novel. Once these artefacts have been made safe and become a part of public record, they can be appropriated to support McDougal's own historical narrative of patriotism and national glory, while the people who made these artefacts or used them or were wounded by them become irrelevant and are forgotten. As Patrick points out, "David's battles, like his own, would always take place privately, in the confines of his own mind or in the form of black marks on white paper. No mutilated bodies littering the landscape afterwards. Death would always appear in the form of a sentence for vast numbers of soldiers or as a paragraph for a particular hero" (120). In a single sentence, the voices and individual identities of all those soldiers are collected, reinterpreted as their deaths are turned into a glorious and "wonderful" (204) symbol, and are thereby silenced. As Margaret E. Turner points out, McDougal "insists on a closed narrative: he will not honour fragmentariness and confusion, nor admit the subjectivity of his records. More importantly, though, neither will he allow that the construction of history. . . is a human activity that gains its meaning from its awareness of itself as a human construct" (98). Urquhart intends McDougal's version of history to cause us to question the ways in which a national narrative can be seen to devour its own citizens; this version of history

stands in sharp contrast with Urquhart's own concern with the loss of the individual voice.¹⁰⁰

Urquhart's preoccupation with the ways in which the Canadian national narrative devours its people and their experiences, resulting in a homogenised and often sanitised version of history, is dramatically depicted in her second novel, *Away*. In many ways, *Away* can be read as a response to authoritative historical discourses, such as those represented by McDougal's rewriting of the War of 1812. In this novel, Urquhart gives voice to the sorts of narratives that McDougal seems to be attempting to suppress. Urquhart is particularly intent on drawing attention to the ways in which the voices of immigrants and the First Nations are silenced in traditional versions of Canadian history. As she does so, Urquhart continues to question the ways in which decisions about what must be remembered and what must be forgotten by a nation are made.

The characters of Osbert and Granville Sedgewick demonstrate even more explicitly than McDougal the relationship between memory and forgetfulness in the creation of national narratives. As members of the "Anglo-Irish landed gentry" (*Away* 39), the Sedgewick brothers participate in an "exploitative, if well-intentioned, relationship with [their] tenants" (Wyile 28). They, too, are collectors: as Barbara Bruce neatly summarises, Osbert is a naturalist who "collects by sketching and painting the views around their estate and creatures he finds in the landscape, while Granville collects the Irish people, history, and mythology in poetic laments" (112). Because of their love of

¹⁰⁰ Urquhart is not alone in her sense of the imperative to remember the individual experience of war in order to protest the way war is represented in literature. Other Canadian novels that seek to recover the voice of the individual soldier and protest war include Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed*, Timothy Findlay's *The Wars*, and more recently Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*.

Irish folklore and custom, and their desire to see Irish culture preserved through their respective collections, the two brothers believe that they are quite unlike the absentee landlords. In fact, they imagine themselves as friends of the people to whom they rent their lands. However, after a conversation between Osbert and Mary about her efforts to save her family's potato crops, the reader (along with Mary) realises that "this man had been blind to them, [Mary's] people" (87). The image of the Sedgewick brothers as blind to the plight of their tenants is a telling one; as Bruce observes, "The Sedgewicks may believe they are innocent because of their appreciation for the culture they collect, and they collect because of their appreciation, but the novel consciously shows that collection is violent and disruptive, not at all innocent" (114). Like McDougal's treatment of the soldiers who participated in the War of 1812, the brothers' perception of their tenants is abstracted and aestheticized through emotional and psychological distance.

In a manner that recalls the ways in which the soldiers' individuality was lost in McDougal's representation of their group identity, "colonisation results in a kind of dehumanisation of the colonised, which appears particularly striking when Osbert and Granville discuss the possibility of famine in their country in purely abstract terms, letting their thoughts meander from the tangible danger to irrelevant theoretical discussions" (Branach-Kallas 135). They simply cannot comprehend that the problems visiting the rest of Ireland have serious implications for their own tenants. This lack of care is compounded by the way they classify "these people" (*Away* 88) according to both cultural stereotypes and socioeconomic class: such methods of classification allow them to dismiss the signs and symptoms of real distress as either defects of character or

natural elements in the cycle of peasant life. Their dismissive attitudes reveal the brothers' culpability in their tenants' plight, a guilt that is unmitigated by their self-congratulatory perceptions of their benevolent intentions and kindly stewardship.

Because they do not really see the Irish people as individuals but rather as specimens in their collection, the brothers fail to respond to their tenants' increasingly desperate situation as their potato crops fail. Snug and well-fed in their ancestral home, the brothers' privileged position allows them to remain oblivious "to the lives and suffering of the Irish peasantry" (Wylie 28). Like McDougal, they are not actually malicious in their obliviousness, but the consequences of the Sedgewicks' insensibility are abject poverty and ultimately death for many of Mary's people. Their lack of malice does not absolve them in Urquhart's judgement: because they have failed to recognise either the people or their pain, they are guilty of being "possessive and controlling colonizers, which is revealed by their insatiable need to collect everything in their demesne" (Bruce 112). Here, Urquhart's use of the trope of the collection suggests that "the imposition of the colonizer's desire to order, control, and exploit Ireland and its inhabitants is detrimental to both colonized and colonizer in ways that cannot be undone or repressed and that resurge in a developing Canadian nationalism" (Bruce 112). In other words, the detrimental consequences of colonisation are manifested in the deaths and forced immigration (which many of the Irish regard as a sort of death) of the landlords' tenants; in the collapse of the landlords' own fortunes and the denouncing of their position; and in the perpetuation of colonization as those immigrants themselves become colonisers in the new world.

Urquhart also draws attention to the complexities of the immigrant experience and the settler-invader dichotomy with the introduction of Exodus Crow, an Ojibwa man who returns Mary's corpse to her family several years after she has abandoned them to live on the shores of the lake she believes is inhabited by her demon lover. Exodus brings more than her body, however, for he explains that Mary asked him "to go to her children and tell them her story, for they were small, she said, when she was forced to leave them" (175). Although it is important that all members of Mary's family hear her narrative, he is particularly adamant that her son Liam, "who will move forward and make the change, *must* hear the story" (175). Crow's cryptic remark foreshadows Liam's later decision to sell his father's plot in the forest in order to become a successful farmer further south; however, because Liam is initially too angry with his mother for leaving them to genuinely hear the warning in Crow's story and then later too consumed with his capitalist dreams, the lesson that he was meant to learn is lost.

The lesson that Mary intended to have passed on to her son is, once again, about the dangers of forgetfulness and the importance of giving voice to those whose stories have been silenced or repressed. In his narrative, Crow describes an exchange of stories between Mary, an Irish woman, and himself, an Ojibwa man. Despite the great differences in their cultures, they listen closely and respectfully to each other. When Mary tells him about English landlords and their exploitation of Ireland (184), Crow replies that "some white men had seized my people's land and killed many animals for sport and abused our women" (184-5). The climax of this exchange occurs in Mary's response to this statement: as Exodus explains, "She embraced me and said that the same

trouble stayed in the hearts of both our peoples” (185).¹⁰¹ Urquhart’s intention in this exchange is to create empathy between cultures in order to create an awareness of oppression and thereby prevent it from being repeated, rather than establish the settlers’ victim status in order to excuse further acts of colonisation.

As the one who would “move forward and make the change” (*Away* 175), Liam is in great need of such lessons of the past. Ironically, however, despite both his parents’ stories about the ways in which Ireland was destroyed by its colonizing English landlords and the need to remember its culture, as well as the implicit warning against colonization contained in Mary’s meeting with Exodus Crow, Liam abandons his heritage and becomes a landlord in his own right. When Osbert Sedgewick finds his way to the O’Malley homestead in Canada, he brings with him the desire for progress and domination that characterised the colonial relationship between England and Ireland. Liam, who dreams only of “the forward momentum of change and growth, the axe in the flesh of the tree, the blade breaking open new soil” (208), admires and wishes to emulate Osbert.¹⁰² As a result, Liam also forgets about the lesson passed on to him by Exodus Crow. His memory is tested when Liam learns that there are squatters, Molly Doherty and her father, living on his land. When Liam speaks to Doherty, Doherty refuses to

¹⁰¹ This exchange between Mary and Exodus Crow has been the subject of much critical debate in terms of whether or not Urquhart is challenging or reinforcing the values of colonisation. To investigate this debate more fully, see articles on postcolonialism perspectives in *Away* by Sugars (2003), Omhové (2007), and Kulperger (2007).

¹⁰² Although Osbert’s efforts to help Liam achieve his dream of becoming a landowner seem well-intentioned, we are reminded of the failure of brothers’ weak good intentions toward their Irish tenants. Although he seems to have, to use Bruce’s term, “decollected” Liam’s parents, Osbert continues to perpetuate the dreams of colonisation. As Bruce concludes, “the act of decollection cannot undo the damage done over centuries of imperial and colonial oppression. The shift to the ‘New World’ in the latter part of the novel does not represent a new beginning, but rather the resurgence of past wrongs and continued hauntings” (121).

leave, observing mildly that the previous owner had allowed them to stay in appreciation of services rendered; he then offers his help to Liam, whose property had recently become infested with skunks. Liam is infuriated and attempts “in his new, landowner’s voice” to evict them (277). Eileen, who has become friends with the Dohertys, speaks up in their defence:

I think the English took the land from the Indians same as they took it from the Irish. Then they just starve everybody out, or. . . they evict them, or both. . . . So now you’re going to evict some people from land you never would have had in the first place if the English hadn’t stolen it. . . and if they hadn’t stolen Ireland” (279).

Eventually, Liam relents and allows the Dohertys to stay. He turns to Doherty, who happens to be a skunk charmer, for help with his infestation and shortly thereafter marries Molly who is Métis. In his change of heart and his ensuing union with Molly, it seems for a moment that the lessons of the past may yet be learned.

We quickly discover that this is not the case. Because her mother was Ojibway and her father is Irish, Molly’s presence in the novel serves as a reminder of both those culture’s histories of oppression; however, her marriage to Liam represents neither an equating of experiences nor a righting of wrongs.¹⁰³ Rather, their marriage comes to represent one more example of colonisation. As Omhovère sardonically observes, “the stone-throwing ritual [performed by Molly’s father to get rid of the skunks] works wonders. The skunks vacate the premises, Liam marries Molly, the exploitation of the

¹⁰³ Again, the ethics of this representation equating the Irish and Native experiences is hotly contested for, as Cynthia Sugars asserts, “Natives were displaced by the very settlers Urquhart is writing about. And Irish settlers were able to contribute to the national figuration of Canada in a way that Native peoples were never allowed to do” (20). However, Sugars does not take into consideration the narrator’s sardonic tone and the ultimate destruction (which I will discuss below) of all that Liam has wrought.

land proceeds, and subsequent generations forget about the incident” (186).¹⁰⁴ Once he has served his purpose of clearing Liam’s land of pests, Doherty (who represents the Irish half of Molly’s heritage) more or less disappears from the novel as he is no longer useful to Liam. Molly’s heritage on her mother’s side is also forgotten, subsumed in Liam’s vision of her as the ideal pioneer wife. She is depicted instead as the one who “made the farm pulse with energy so the barns would seem more substantial, the fields richer, the crops thicker; she who carried the cells of both the old world and the new in the construction of her bones and blood. As an old man, Liam would recall and then list all her accomplishments” (302), all of which involved remarkable feats of strength and domestic achievement but which reveal not a single personal quality. She, too, has been collected and so removed from her own history. Liam’s tendency of looking forward instead of remembering the past recalls Patrick’s uncle’s attitude toward progress in *The Whirlpool*; however, just as she warned against always looking back to an idealised vision of history, Urquhart issues a similar warning about building a future that is not firmly grounded in an ethical regard for the past.

In the end, Urquhart refuses to let her characters off the hook by providing a neat or clichéd solution to the problem of forgetfulness. Through the narrator’s satirical characterisation of Liam as the “ludicrous lord of the land and founder of a dynasty of cows” (Omhovère 183) and her repeated references to the impending destruction of Liam’s beloved farm, we become aware of the consequences of the O’Malley’s forgetful short-sightedness. As Liam comes full circle from oppressed tenant to oppressive

¹⁰⁴ Omhovère further elaborates on the significance of the skunk charming episode, which contains “strong racial overtones” and “uncomfortably recall[s] 19th-century views on the eviction of other native populations” (“Copies” 186).

landlord, Urquhart's narrator emphasises the importance of remembering the past not only to validate the experiences of otherwise marginalised groups but to prevent such marginalisation and silencing in the future. As a result, "Liam's attempt to slough off his Irish heritage comes across as a distorted, extreme assimilation, a form of colonial cringe" (Wyle 38). His vision of the future is so short-sighted that he cannot see the looming dangers; ultimately, he learns nothing. A collector like the Sedgewicks, Liam remains oblivious of the narratives that he has appropriated and silenced, and ultimately brings the "curse of the mines" on his family.

Liam's farm, Eileen's family line, and Esther's story all come to an end at the same moment. Branach-Kallas sees the ending of *Away* as "apocalyptic" (*Whirlpool* 47): she argues that "[i]t is no coincidence that the novel ends when the Canadian space is 'consumed', so completely invaded by technology that its magic component must disappear" (48). This sense of Canadian space being consumed by oblivious technology is represented symbolically by Esther's sudden memory of "the collection of schoolbooks she had brought into the parlour the day her grandmother had finished the story. . . . *The Dominion Workbook, The Canadian Speller*, the beavers and maple leaves embossed on their covers. All that, she thinks, is lost now; dynamited, gone" (*Away* 353). This loss of Canadian symbols represents a greater loss that is taking place. There is a striking juxtaposition between the world of nature and that of men as "[u]nthinkably bright floodlights are switched on causing the lines in the men's dusty faces to look exaggerated and exposing the torn rock, the scars, the fractures" (356). Under this unnatural spotlight, these men become "figures of violence and historical ignorance,

working in darkness” (Wyile 42) and the terrible wounds they have inflicted on the landscape are exposed.

Urquhart depicts this wide-scale destruction as the ultimate end of Liam’s unthinking passion for progress and capitalism, this curse that “has to do with the landlord. . . and some furious digging in the ground” (*Away* 351). The novel closes with images of violence, as “[t]he men at the quarry, angered by something they don’t quite understand, set their jaws and shift the gears of their equipment with grim forcefulness. Under the glare of artificial light the fossilized narratives of ancient migrations are crushed into powder. The scream of the machinery intensifies” (356). Esther has vanished from the narrative and her protective presence has been usurped by the destructive quarrymen. The “curse of the mines” descends on the house, and “the fossilized narratives of ancient migrations”—a play on words that refers to the literal fossils in the limestone, the family mythology Esther has narrated, and the larger history of Canada that includes Aboriginal, immigrant, and settler-invader narratives—“are crushed into powder” (356). In this final image, the representatives of progress mindlessly destroy these narratives of the past, and the plurality of narrative voices is silenced and replaced by a single mechanical scream. Urquhart is protesting this silencing, a protest which paves the way for her later discussions of the metanarratives of Canadian identity.¹⁰⁵

Urquhart continues to examine the ways in which a society’s metanarratives function as a sort of collection in *The Stone Carvers*. In this novel, she returns to the themes of

¹⁰⁵ Omhové identifies a similar concern with achieving a balance between tradition and progress in MacLeod’s fiction, wherein “[t]he characters’ individual present is enfolded in the clan’s collective past—the Highland Clearances which, at the end of the eighteenth century, forced them away from their home to Nova Scotia. Six generations later the ancestral culture that was transplanted into the New World is withering under the joint pressures of poverty and progress” (51).

the ethics of representations of war; however, rather than relying on irony and narrative distance to reveal the ways in which certain perspectives are marginalised as she has in earlier texts, Urquhart actually gives voices to those perspectives. As she focuses on the construction of the Vimy Memorial, she asks her readers to reconsider the questions of who this monument asks us to remember and how, as well as whom it causes us to forget and why. In *Art or Memorial*, Laura Brandon describes the Memorial as “a magnificent testimonial to sacrifice—the prevailing Canadian war memory of the First World War.” She explains that the monument was inspired by the fact that “[o]n the Western Front, one in seven Canadians who served was killed; 16,000 have no known grave.” The creation of such memorials was part of the Imperial War Graves Commission’s objective to “bury the dead properly, establish permanent cemeteries, and determine how to memorialize the dead and missing;” it was also determined that such memorials were to be “both public and permanent” (Brandon 8). Such a permanent public memorial would have been intended to serve the purpose of commemorating the lost and thereby assuaging the nation’s grief.

In order to understand the complexities that underlie the purpose of public memorials, one must also understand the relationship between individual and communal mourning. Jay Winter explains that “[c]ommemoration was a universal preoccupation after the 1914-18 war. The need to bring the dead home, to put the dead to rest, symbolically or physically, was pervasive” (28). The overwhelming death toll of the war, which includes a devastating number of men whose bodies were either never found or could not be identified, meant that for many families and friends there was no possibility of claiming the remains of their dead. Monuments such as the one constructed at Vimy Ridge

became a substitute for individual gravesites, and served as “places where people could mourn. And be seen to mourn. . . . At the time, communal commemorative art provided first and foremost a framework for and legitimation of individual and family grief” (Winter 93). The very existence of a space for public mourning that not only acknowledged but condoned expressions of loss and grief allowed survivors and the bereaved to experience closure as well as to connect and form emotional, spiritual, and material support networks for each other.¹⁰⁶

On a national scale, such memorials serve a similar purpose by generating shared experiences and bringing people together; as a consequence, they serve as focal points for national frames of meaning. For example, Bölling’s discussion of the Canadian response to the Battle of Vimy Ridge demonstrates the ways in which such frames evolve:

Canadians bestow special importance upon the Battle of Vimy Ridge. . . because Canadian troops were successful where British and French forces had failed before them. Through this major achievement, the Canadian troops won the recognition of their allies. . . . The significance of the Battle of Vimy Ridge is further elevated by the fact that the four divisions that made up the Canadian Corps for the first time fought on the same battlefield. The successful outcome of the battle was retrospectively interpreted as a symbol of the strength of Canada as a unified nation” (306).

This retrospective framing of the event creates a template that will affect the way Canadians continue to interpret not only the battle of Vimy Ridge but future battles, as well as Canada’s own status as a nation. Significantly for Canada’s national identity, it is not this military victory that Vimy Memorial celebrates. Rather, it is a monument that

¹⁰⁶ This form of support was essential to “compensate for official parsimony” (Winter 48). As Winter explains and Urquhart illustrates in her novel, “[w]hile state support was given to those victims of war, it was almost always inadequate to cover the hidden (and not so hidden) costs of rehabilitation” (44).

expresses the devastating loss and the futility of war, for “[t]he prominently placed figure of the Spirit of Canada and figures such as the Male and Female mourner rather emphasize Canada’s grief over the great number of soldiers killed in battle” (Bölling 309). This shared experience of “Canada’s grief” reinforces national identity for “commemoration was an act of citizenship. To remember was to affirm community, to assert its moral character, and to exclude from it those values, groups, or individuals that placed it under threat” (Winter 80). Monuments and memorials therefore promote patriotism by creating frames of meaning that provide a narrative about how people interpret and respond to certain situations as a nation. Further, such frames of meanings reinforce the notion of national identity and patriotism through the power of exclusion, which provides a means not only of defining group identity but enforcing conformity amongst its members.¹⁰⁷ The function of such memorials is to bring solace by assuring survivors that their loved ones will not be forgotten and to create a sense of community and nationhood in a population that has suffered excruciating loss.

However, Paul Connerton complicates the relationship between such forms of commemoration and remembrance. His argument recalls Huyssen’s sense of the dialectic of the burial and resurrection of our communal memories that is in play in contemporary manifestations of the museum (Huyssen 15). As Connerton explains, “[t]he relationship between memorials and forgetting is reciprocal: the threat of forgetting begets memorials and the construction of memorials begets forgetting. If

¹⁰⁷ Foucault discusses this “system of exclusion” in *The Discourse on Language* (218). Such systems exist because “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role it is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (216). In short, it establishes and reinforces its norms by identifying and punishing what it considers *abnormal*.

giving monumental shape to what we remember is to discard the obligation to remember, that is because memorials permit only some things to be remembered and, by extension, cause others to be forgotten” (*Modernity* 29). Connerton declares that the very act of representing memory relieves us of the responsibility of holding on to it; by allowing us to release that memory, such representations engender forgetfulness. Consequently, the notion of the “permanence” of such monuments is problematic because, even though the site of memory remains, its meaning and the pain it is meant to commemorate are forgotten.

In *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart’s exploration of the interplay between public and private memories and expressions of grief becomes a vehicle through which she expresses her own unease with the way that monuments inspire the public to forget certain narratives in the same moment that they inspire it to remember others. At the heart of Urquhart’s investigation of this relationship between commemoration and forgetfulness is Walter Allward, whose character is based on the sculptor “responsible for the huge Canadian monument in France” (*Carvers* 263). Although he is obsessed by the need to commemorate the young men who died in the war, Allward did not personally participate in it nor did his children: as the narrator explains, when the call to arms came, he was “still young, and yet too old to go overseas. [His] children were, thankfully, simply too young to think about the war at all” (266). His desire to remember the fallen does not stem from any private loss, for he has not lost anything or anyone in whom he had a personal investment. Rather, the narrator explains,

Who knows who or what shattered his indifference, or why, but the last years of the war came to him as a great awakening that let all the horror in, and he dreamed

of the Great Memorial well before the government competition was announced. He saw the huge twin pillars commemorating those who spoke French and those who spoke English, the allegorical figures with downcast or uplifted faces, and in the valley beneath the work of art, the flesh and bones and blood of the dead stirring in the mud. And then the dead themselves emerged. . . pleading for a memorial to the disappeared, the vanished ones. (267)

Allward's desire to commemorate these "vanished ones" arises from feelings of pity and horror, which in turn inspire his vision of a great work of art. In "Beautiful Mourning," Allan Hepburn uses similar language as he commends Allward's vision, describing the monument as "consecrated to the memory of those soldiers who went missing in battle. Although their bodies were blown up and scattered throughout northern France, they live on as names inscribed on the monument. Art gives these anonymous disappeared men a portal to posterity" (49). Both descriptions juxtapose the permanence of art with the terrible frailty of the human body, and enthusiastically endorse the ability of art to translate that transience into something eternal. These sentiments are neither radical nor surprising: it is for these reasons that we construct memorials in the first place.

The seeming obviousness of the purpose of memorials such as the Vimy Memorial—that is, to commemorate the noble sacrifice of those who died—obfuscates the significance of the agendas of those who design them. In her depiction of Allward, Urquhart draws attention "to the artist whose work derives from the experiences of others" (Gordon 61). As Neta Gordon explains, there is a school of thought that questions the reliability of "antiwar tract[s] written by war insiders" and that privileges instead texts written by war outsiders whose "experiential distance from the war itself keeps [them] from unwittingly diluting the novel's ideological position in an attempt to

exonerate the combatant” (60).¹⁰⁸ It follows, then, that an artist like Allward is an appropriate choice for a guardian of memory in this case not only because of his skill as a sculptor but because his perspective is untainted by the personal need for vindication that is thought to characterise the work of war insiders.

However, while the privileging of experiential distance may prevent the artist’s philosophical or ethical stance from being compromised by emotional involvement in the subject, the artist runs the risk of a different sort of danger. There is the potential, as Gordon points out, for “exploitation and erasure” as the artist becomes “guilty of erasing horror by transforming the particular into the allegorical” (67). Allward’s artistic vision of the purity of this Great Memorial stands in stark contrast with his horrific though equally artistic vision of “the flesh and bones and blood of the dead stirring in the mud.” There is an uneasy tension between these two images, for Allward’s desire to commemorate these unnamed “boys with their clear eyes and their long bones, their unscarred skin and their educated muscles” (267) is compromised by his obvious relish for the gruesome details of their corporeal decay as he turns their physical reality into an idealised work of art.¹⁰⁹

Because he has no personal connection to any of these anonymous “boys” in life, his reaction to their death and decay is equally impersonal. By creating this monument to represent the allegorical Unknown Soldier, Allward erases the individuality of the soldiers who died—much as McDougal does with his historical narrative when he

¹⁰⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the history of this debate, Gordon’s article, “The Artist and the Witness,” fully explicates and positions Urquhart’s own stance in the context of Canadian war literature.

¹⁰⁹ Allward’s vision of these patriotic, clear-eyed innocents is held in tension with Urquhart’s depiction of men such as Tilman, a former hobo, who enlisted immediately purely out of economic desperation, and those from Shoneval, who took an agricultural exemption because they were already aware of the horrors that awaited them.

retrospectively attributes a single motive to all the soldiers or records their deaths in a single sentence. Even the act of recording the thousands of names ultimately has the effect of emptying them of “drama and emotions” and gives them permanence, allowing them to remain “stunningly innocent and clear” like the artefacts in McDougal’s beloved museum (Urquhart, *Whirlpool* 225). As Huyssen and Connerton warn, Allward’s monument runs the same risk of becoming a source of forgetfulness as McDougal’s museum; as a consequence, like David McDougal, the Sedgewick brothers, and Liam O’Malley, the sculptor himself is another to whom the symbolic appellation of the collector—however sympathetic he might be to those he collects—can ultimately be applied.

Urquhart sets Allward’s idealism and obsession against the narratives of three of the stone carvers who are hired to work on the monument and whose narratives are in danger of being forgotten. The first is Klara Becker, a woman of German heritage who, at the beginning of the novel, had lived the first thirty-eight years of her life in the tiny village of Shoneval. Known as “the spinster” (6), Klara is a figure of mystery to those around her for, unlike the other unmarried women in the village, she “had the possession of something that only a very few spinsters have: independence and a past” (30). Klara’s independence arises from the fact that she is an extremely talented tailor and an exceptional wood carver, skills that set her apart from the other women as neither is considered appropriately feminine. Her possession of a “past” is the consequence of her youthful experience of romance and tragedy: her young lover, Eamon O’Sullivan, was one of the Canadian soldiers who went to Europe to fight in the Great War and was lost. This loss, combined with the early deaths of all her family members (excluding her

brother who ran away when they were children and had not been seen again), causes the other villagers to consider her “geist-ridden” (29). Because she is recognised as one who is haunted, Klara is allowed to foster her extraordinary independence in ways that other women in Shoneval are not. This independence is both a blessing and a curse: she is left alone to do as she wills, which ultimately allows her to travel to France to work on the memorial. However, the price is that she *is* left alone, with only the ghosts of her past for company.

Isolated from her community and even from the rest of life by her grief, Klara feels that “[h]er own connections slipped downstream, against the current, toward the swiftly disappearing past. What, beyond the most cursory, practical knowledge of fashion, had the present to do with her?” (168).¹¹⁰ She remains trapped in this way until, in the autumn of 1934, a stranger who is clearly a war veteran not only appears at Klara’s door but enters her home and seats himself at her table as though he has a perfect right to be there. For one terrible moment, she wonders if Eamon has returned; in the next equally devastating moment she realises that “[t]his man was not Eamon. Eamon was dead” (229) and that this “vaguely familiar stranger” (228) is in fact her brother, Tilman. Overwhelmed by her warring emotions of shock and renewed grief, she responds by “[flying] at her brother with her fists” (230). Urquhart uses Klara’s confusion to serve two purposes beyond the dramatic reintroduction of her long lost brother. First, Klara’s uncertainty and her passionate response to his reappearance emphasise the power of memory and grief over those individuals who are unable to find a form of resolution or

¹¹⁰ We see a similar paralysis arising from an obsession with the past in Ondaatje’s characterisation of the English patient and Anna; MacLeod’s narrator Alexander MacDonald in *No Great Mischief* has a twin sister who is equally caught up in nostalgic memories of the clan’s history (NGM 150).

closure or absolution. Second, the blurring of the identities of a soldier who represents those who survived with one who represents those who did not emphasises the fact that there is a need to remember both groups—that in many ways, the need to remember those who *did* survive is just as great simply because they are often in danger of becoming ghosts in their own lives.

Urquhart dedicates very little of the novel to Tilman's experiences in the trenches. The shock and horror of the war itself are briefly mentioned, as is "the unimaginable amount of death" that "had come into Tilman's line of vision" (321-3). Rather, Urquhart focuses the narrative on Tilman's experiences after the war once he has been "wounded out" (323), emphasising the war's ongoing emotional, psychological and physical effects on the men who participated in it. The narrator invokes purgatorial imagery to describe the existence for these men after the war:

Like Tilman, most of the other men in the factory had nowhere else to go. Wives, girlfriends, in some cases even mothers and fathers had withdrawn in horror at their physical condition. If men had worked in offices before the war, old employers had claimed they were not able to find a position for them. Physical labour was out of the question. Most of the men were too broken in spirit to re-engage in anything that predated 1914, could hardly remember who they had been before the catastrophe, as if from now on they were to be stalled in a peculiar atmosphere of both stasis and transition. (234)

In other words, Tilman and the veterans with whom he works remain trapped in a civilian version of no man's land, unable to return to their former lives or to move forward into a new life not only because of the ongoing trauma of their past experiences but because there seems to be no place for them.

In striking contrast with her own empathy for the struggles and pain of these survivors, Urquhart includes a depiction of the government's coldly analytical attitude toward the men who came back from the war. As the narrator observes, "Thousands of wounded veterans were returning, many missing limbs. The government was in a state of mild panic. Various opinions were offered about what was to be done with these mutilated young men, the most common being that they should not be permitted to sink into shiftlessness, sloth, and self-pity" (231-2). The self-righteousness and hypocrisy implicit in the "most common" opinion again reflects the ways in which the individual characters of these veterans are overwritten and so erased by a single sentence; this sentiment creates a narrative that is intended to justify the way the government deals with them. With terrible irony, Urquhart relates how "an otherwise dull and unpromising civil servant made a name for himself by suggesting that as most of the boys were still on crutches with one hollow pant leg blowing in the breeze, some of them at least might be gainfully employed making wooden legs for themselves and others like themselves in a factory designed for this purpose" (233). The irony continues as Urquhart depicts the way the government implements this strategy, congratulates itself for its humanitarianism, and expects the men to be grateful for such gainful employment.

This solution is, of course, short-lived—though it lasts long enough for people's immediate memories of the war and the veterans' role in it to fade. As memory fades, Urquhart implies, insidious phrases like "sloth" and "self-pity" infiltrate public consciousness, which in turn mark the contrast between respectable work ethics and the incorrigible laziness in these damaged young men. Once the demand for prosthetic limbs has been met, the narrator describes the cynicism with which the government closes the

factory: “Satisfied that they had done all that they could to rehabilitate Tilman and his colleagues, the same government that had called these young men so earnestly to arms now cast them unceremoniously out into the streets” (235). The word “rehabilitate” is a similarly loaded phrase, with its connotations that the veterans’ inability to reassimilate into society is self-inflicted or even perhaps somehow criminal, and that they are simply refusing to cooperate. Further, the use of “colleagues” is laden with sarcasm, intended to express a sense of the government’s derision for these supposed ne’er-do-wells. The hypocrisy of this position is laid bare in the contrast between the government’s “earnest” call to arms and the “unceremonious” way the men are cast out. Connerton elaborates on this hypocrisy, observing that although “[t]he war dead were annually commemorated[,] the maimed and mutilated were forgotten as far as possible. The war-wounded and war widows were routinely neglected because they provided the wrong kind of memory” (Connerton, *Modernity* 29). Tilman’s story is harsh criticism of the ways in which veterans of war can be forgotten through the simple expedient of being written out of society’s larger narrative.

The turning point in the novel for these characters is signalled by a letter sent to Tilman from his friend, Giorgio Vigamonti, another survivor of the Great War and the third stone carver whose story Urquhart depicts. Giorgio’s letter describes his employment as a stone carver at the Vimy Memorial and suggests that Tilman—who, like Klara, was trained in wood-carving by his grandfather when he was a child—might wish to return to France to work on the monument himself. The thought of returning to Europe is of no interest whatsoever to Tilman: “To him, France was a place of carnage, claustrophobia, and continuous bad weather” (249). His reluctance to work on the

memorial is further exacerbated by the treatment he has received at the hands of both government and civilians when he returned from the war, wounded and battle weary and unable to work. Like Patrick's uncle in *The Whirlpool* who frankly wonders why McDougal would wish to memorialise the atrocities of war in his narrative, Tilman has no desire to remember his experiences in France.

Tilman's desire to forget his wartime experiences is reflected in the fact that the memorial is not there to commemorate *his* struggles, suffering, or sacrifice. For the former soldiers such as Tilman who survived and who were not able to re-assimilate into their earlier lives, the memorial represents concealment rather than remembrance. As Connerton asserts,

Memorials conceal the past as much as they cause us to remember it. This is evidently so with war memorials. They conceal the way people lived: where soldiers are directly represented in war memorials, their image is designed specifically to deny acts of violence and aggression. They conceal the way they died: the blood, the bits of body flying through the air, the stinking corpses lying unburied for months, all are omitted. They conceal the accidents of war: the need to make past actions seem consolingly necessary impels people to make sense of much that was without sense. And they conceal the way people survive. . . . Care of the war wounded went unrewarded, often unnoticed, in millions of households who rarely received the material assistance they needed. (*Modernity* 29)

Survival has little place in the memories of post-war society; it is not romantic and it raises difficult (and often unanswerable) questions. For example, the story of Tilman's friend Giorgio, who returns from the war physically unscathed, is in danger of being lost entirely. In his interview with Allward at the construction site, where many Italian carvers have been hired, he explains, "I *am* Italian. . . but from Canada. I fought in this war. I fought with the men you are honouring here" (286). The significance of this

observation is lost on Allward, who cares only about the skill of his carvers rather than their histories. Later, Allward asks Giorgio about his promotion from the rank of private to that of corporeal. Giorgio confesses, “I think I was made a corporal because I was neither missing nor dead, and almost everyone else in my battalion was. So I suppose I was promoted for staying alive” (288). Again, Allward fails to understand the painful nature of Giorgio’s experience; unmoved, he remarks callously, “When we first started working here, the whole vicinity still stank of death.” This observation sparks further painful memories for Giorgio, who agrees, “I remember that. I remember that, during the war, even the few flowers we saw smelled of decay, like they were rotting.” “Ah yes,” Allward responds with terrible absent-mindedness, “during the war they would have, I suppose” (288). As Gordon observes, Allward’s response is that of a “privileged war outsider not burdened by ‘an emotional reaction to the war’ (Cobley 107)” (68).¹¹¹ He is able to dismiss the realities of the war and its lasting consequences, and remain focused instead on the artistic elements of the work. Again, Urquhart contrasts the “purity” of the monument and the quality of the stone which is “so clean, so clean” (Urquhart 289) with the carnage that took place on the battlefield upon which they are building, further emphasising Allward’s emotional distance from the actual events and human suffering.¹¹² Because the effects of the war on Giorgio are not immediately physically apparent, the fact of their existence is easily forgotten by the preoccupied artist.

¹¹¹ Cobley’s discussion privileges the position of the war outsider, a position with which Gordon takes issue in her article.

¹¹² A further contrast occurs when Giorgio explores the trenches that remained preserved near the monument. As he walks through these trenches, “[t]he rusting military detritus underfoot and the names and images scratched into the chalky walls recalled so vividly the human activity that had taken place there they caused his eyes to fill with tears” (282). This human element is exactly what Allward seeks to replace with allegory in his monument.

Urquhart brings together the various individual narratives of those involved in the creation of the memorial, and illustrates the difficulty of negotiating the boundary between the responsibility to remember and the desire to forget. Whereas Giorgio goes to France simply for the employment it affords, Tilman initially refuses to return to the battlefield for any reason. Klara, on the other hand, is desperate to go: she sees in this journey an opportunity to come to terms with her grief and see her lost lover commemorated in stone. It is also an opportunity for her to break from the imprisoning grasp of the past. To not go would mean “staying put, trapped in her constant place, the view from the window never changing except on those occasions when it framed a picture of someone walking away from her” (251). Despite the problematic nature of the sort of remembering and forgetting that such memorials inspire, Urquhart makes a case for the necessity of such acts of commemoration through Klara’s passionate protestations, “If they won’t let me carve I’ll do some other kind of work. I want to be near it. I’ll do anything” (250). For the woman who has no other keepsake or aide-mémoire, the monument that commemorates her lover’s name becomes a personal memorial; the journey to that memorial gains the significance of a pilgrimage.

When they reach the monument, Klara is given a job polishing the carved stone of the sculptures. As the carving progresses, Klara becomes possessed by a sense of the wrongness of the face of the sculpture that corresponds to the “Spirit of Sacrifice” on the actual monument (Bölling 313). Unable to bear this wrongness, Klara sets out to give the sculpture what she feels is its true face: not the blank visage of Allward’s allegorical figure but “the eyes and mouth and expressions of a beloved farmboy’s face” (333). Even as she recalls the “the bones under the skin, the scar on his left temple” (332) and

all the other details of his physical being and the way it was enlivened by his character, there is a sense that these memories are being exorcised into the stone. As the narrator muses, “No matter how much it is cherished, an absent face that is a fixed point of reference becomes tyrannical, and tyranny eventually demands revolt, escape” (332). This act of exorcism or escape is completed as, with Giorgio’s help, Klara carves the letters of Eamon’s name in the base of the memorial. As she placed the chisel against the stone, “Klara knew this would be the last time she touched Eamon, that when they finished carving his name all the confusion and regret of his absence would unravel, just as surely as if she had embraced him with forgiving arms” (378). Through these two acts, Klara finds a way to transcend the joint tyrannies of time and forgetfulness: as he is publically and permanently commemorated, she is relieved of the responsibility of holding in her memory all that remains of Eamon O’Sullivan.

As she is relieved of this burden, the trap of the past opens and she is able to turn from it toward the future. This freedom comes, of course, with a price: “Klara finds a means to heal herself by bearing witness, though. . . this healing is bound up with forgetting” (Gordon 70). Although Urquhart is deeply concerned in her writing that those who participated in the Great War should be remembered, she also suggests there are times when forgetfulness is equally important lest, as we have seen, the past becomes a tomb. While she may not agree wholeheartedly with Winter’s argument that the purpose of commemorating such events is to attempt “to understand and ultimately to put behind us the cataclysmic record of European history in this century” (1), Urquhart does seem to strive for a sort of balance between the burden of remembering and the relief of forgetfulness. Neta Gordon’s analysis of this balance is half right:

Urquhart does seem to suggest that such “mythic memorials” have “the potential to eliminate any need for the war insider’s act of bearing witness.” However, rather than eliminating “any obligation the greater populace has to recall the precise origins of their sites of grieving and remembrance” (72), Urquhart’s reclaiming of these narratives suggests precisely the opposite, laying the responsibility of remembering on the shoulders of those who can bear it.

Although this notion of balance seems to be Urquhart’s underlying message, the novel does not end with a sense that this balance has been achieved. Although Allward accepts the changes that Klara has made to his sculpture with relative good humour, his acceptance is not based on a genuine recognition of her pain or of the significance of the loss of a single individual. Instead, he immediately begins to allegorise Eamon from another perspective:

The face was becoming a portrait, he could see that, but beyond that the expression had about it the trustfulness of someone who did not know he would ever be missing, lost from the earth. This woman. . . had carved the uncomplicated face of prewar youth, children who were unaware they would be made extinct by the war. No subsequent generation, Allward suddenly knew, would ever achieve such innocence. Their kind would never come again. (340)

Once again, the sculpture of the Spirit of Sacrifice is able to stand for more than the individual in Allward’s mind; he has effectively erased Eamon from the monument. Ironically, Klara, who is unaware of the way her narrative has been appropriated as part of Allward’s artistic vision, thanks him “for giving me my voice back” (340). The tension between their perspectives remains unresolved; as with Urquhart’s earlier works, the question of whether such collections allow for resurrection or burial (Huysen 15) of that which is commemorated remains with the reader.

In many ways, Urquhart's most recent novel *Sanctuary Line* reads like an attempt to answer the ethical questions surrounding the construction of personal and national narratives that have haunted her earlier texts. Urquhart continues to challenge the way unifying narratives attempt to create a clear path that connects our past with our present by providing us with a series of shared communal memories or experiences, and by establishing clear boundaries between potentially ambiguous categories such as "right" and "wrong," or "us" and "them." At the same, however, she demonstrates the ethical impossibilities of such narratives, for these absolutes are dangerously reductive and designed to exclude any point of view that does not conform to the dominant perspective. Ultimately, through the narrator Liz Crane's struggles to come to terms with the ghosts of her past, Urquhart suggests an alternative means of remembering our histories and constructing identity.

Liz Crane is an entomologist who specialises in the study of the migratory patterns of monarch butterflies. After living away for years, Liz returns to her uncle's farm where she and her mother spent their summers and holidays throughout her childhood and adolescence, to take up a research position at the bird and butterfly sanctuary nearby. Like Esther in *Away*, Liz lives alone on this ancestral family farm, which is falling into ruin. Also like Esther, she is the keeper of her family's memories for everyone else is either dead or has left and moved on. Although the life she leads on the farm is one of solitude, Liz finds that she is not lonely. Looking out at the landscape that surrounds her, she finds the "flat opaque wash covering the seemingly empty distant townships mildly comforting, as if it were a painting of my own character." She explains, "I am a solitary. . . . I cannot attend fringe festivals, protest marches, council meetings, or engage in any

kind of team sport without feeling herded, trapped, and forced to perform. This was where I belong” (35). It is significant that Liz has found her “place” in this landscape, a task with which the female characters in both *Away* and *The Whirlpool* struggled.

It is likewise significant that Liz does not adopt a nostalgic or romantic attitude toward the generations of ancestors who lived on the farm before her, nor does she feel compelled to break with the traditions of the past in order to escape their framing narratives. In the creation of this character, Urquhart has found an alternative means of approaching the past that draws on the tension between the “insider” and “outsider” perspectives depicted in *The Stone Carvers*. As Liz collects and reassembles each strand of the family narrative, she frequently recontextualises her memories within and interprets them through her studies of the monarchs’ life cycle and migratory patterns in order to impose a similar order on the chaos of the past. Her purpose is to dissect and catalogue in an objective manner these very personal narratives in order to better understand them and their influence on the shape of the present. Through the imposition of order and meaning, Liz hopes to detach from her “insider” perspective in order to resolve the guilt and grief that threaten to “eat [her] alive” (97).

Although Liz’s methods are primarily those of a scientist, she is also a collector. Like the Sedgewick brothers, David McDougal, Liam O’Malley, and Walter Allward, she collects things that are not tangible: she, too, collects information and stories about the past. However, Urquhart’s characterisation of Liz as a scientist means that Liz takes an approach to the past that is very different from the folklorists, historian, capitalist, and artist of the earlier novels that I have discussed. As she contemplates the purpose of her work, Liz relates her scientific method to her examination of the past:

When I was in graduate school and was first told about the tagging of the monarchs, I considered the whole notion of fixing adhesive to something as fragile as a butterfly's wing to be barbarous. But now I myself am a tagger, a labeller, one who is driven to track down the last mysterious fact until there is no mystery left. Yet I cannot explain how something as real and as settled as my uncle's world—which was also our world—could shatter in one night. (12)

This drive to “track down the last mysterious fact” that characterises her research is also implicit in her approach toward her family narratives. Through her investigation of these narratives, Liz seeks to solve the greatest mystery of her life by identifying the cause of her uncle's extra-marital affair, which served as a catalyst for the chain of tragedies that followed. In her museum-like house, filled with its “collection of cold artifacts” (3), Liz collects and transcribes the various stories and memories—complete with their contradictions—in the form of the narrative that is addressed to an initially unidentified reader. Through this process of transcription, she attempts to bear witness to the dead and give voice to narratives that have not been heard before.

Liz, like so many of Urquhart's female characters, is haunted by revenants of her past. As we saw with Klara, these “ghosts” give the solitary Liz “enough spiritual company to make her life quite full” (*Carvers* 30) as she attempts to recover each one's voice and character. There are three ghosts in particular that haunt the entomologist, although she includes the interconnected stories of many more. The first is her charismatic but unpredictable and ultimately self-destructive uncle Stanley, whose adulterous affair with one of the migrant farm workers from Mexico results in the crisis that shattered their family. The second ghost is that of Stanley's daughter, Mandy. Devastated by her father's betrayal and subsequent disappearance, Mandy becomes a peace-keeper in Afghanistan and is killed on a tour of duty. The final ghost is that of

Teo. Killed in a car accident on the night Stanley's affair is discovered, Teo is the son of Stanley's mistress and the boy with whom Liz had just entered the tentative phases of a first romance. She later discovers that he is also Stanley's son. In each instance, Liz is haunted by feelings of unresolved guilt and grief that arise at least in part because of her regret that she did not understand them better, as well as her fear that she could have done something to prevent her uncle's disappearance and thereby prevented their deaths. Through her narrative, Liz seeks to commemorate the histories of these lost loved ones for her reader. Because of her ability to experience the emotions of her remembered history without becoming hopelessly ensnared by them, Liz is able to examine them in a way that allows reflection and analysis. Consequently, each of Liz's three ghosts and their associated narratives serve a specific purpose in Urquhart's ruminations on the joint blessing and curse of memory.

As Liz seeks to unravel the mystery of "how something as real and as settled as my uncle's world—which was also our world—could shatter in one night" (12), she finds herself examining the events from the dual perspective of the child she was and the adult she has become, a perspective that we have seen characterises many of MacLeod's narratives. Because Stanley's actions seem to be the catalyst for all the tragedies that follow, much of Liz's narrative is dedicated to analysing his character. She suggests that Stanley's fate is, ironically, predicted in one of the stories her uncle used to tell. The story is about one of their "great-great" ancestors, a lighthouse keeper, who failed in his duty and caused the wreck of a ship and the deaths of some of its sailors. "He failed to provide sanctuary," she recalls Stanley explaining, "and so there could be no real sanctuary for him. . . . [H]e walked down the curved stairs filled with grief and guilt.

Then he locked the tower door behind him and stepped into the waves” (*Sanctuary* 149). Stanley, “who would himself eventually reveal his own ‘abhorrent mildness’ with an inability to take action at a moment when everything was at stake” (150), likewise fails in every possible way to provide sanctuary or rescue (“those are two important words,” he assured them) to those who look to him for protection. Unable to find any sanctuary of his own, he disappears as thoroughly as if he, too, had “stepped into the waves” (149). The abruptness of his departure and totality of his disappearance connects him with characters such as Eamon, Fleda, and to an extent Tilman, who leave their families and their pasts behind; in their absence, their lives and the question of their deaths remain shrouded in impenetrable mystery. Through Stanley, Urquhart once again investigates the profound effects of such disappearances on those left behind, including their never ending search for an impossible resolution.

We see such effects in Urquhart’s portrayal of Liz’s cousin and her unconscious re-enactment of the trauma caused by her father’s disappearance. Mandy, whose temperament is much more romantic than Liz’s own, intends to transcend the past entirely—an intention which is literally represented when, while flying over the family farm during her military training, she refuses to look down (26). However, despite her assertions that she hates her father and her attempts to dissociate herself from her past, Mandy’s entire life is spent in search-and-rescue missions, which Liz recognises as a displaced attempt to find her father. Even the romantic relationship with which Mandy becomes obsessed has traces of this theme of discovery and rescue: she incorrectly attributes her lover’s lack of commitment to the same lack of emotional resources that characterised her father. Unlike Mandy, who seeks to break free of the past but

unconsciously repeats it for the rest of her short life, Liz recognises the futility of trying to escape it and so she seeks to understand it.

The ghost of Teo, on the other hand, is problematic for Liz on multiple levels. During their last summer together on the farm, the young Mexican boy professes that he is “sick with love” for her (173). She is both touched and angered by this confession in a manner that is reminiscent of Klara’s initial response to Eamon; Liz’s later reflections shed light on both narratives as she observes that “Had it been simpler for me, less sudden, with the daily-ness of ordinary events to ground it, I might have been able to remain present in my own life. . . . I both resented this and was astonished and awakened by it. . . . My self, as I had believed that I had known her, was never going to be available to me again” (175). As Teo’s expression of desire intrudes on Liz’s own sense of autonomy, her resultant surprise and confusion cause her to feel absent in her own life. This intrusion has a lasting effect as she is no longer able to think of herself in the self-centred manner of a child; her own awakening desire causes her to become aware in ways she had not been before of the division between self and other.

At the same time, as she grows more self-aware, Teo grows more remote. Much of love, Liz observes, “is developed in isolation and absence. You could completely remove one of the players from the table and nothing would shift, imagination being what it is” (175). Consequently, Teo never fully evolves as an individual even to Liz for, she remembers,

never once during that last summer, did I ask him to tell me the name of the town he came from, never once, in spite of the way I was drawn to him, did I ever ask his last name. . . . No, I never requested the simplest details of his life because, as

far as I was concerned at the time, it was as if Teo was born anew each summer, like the blossoms, like the fruit, and, yes, you're right, like the butterflies. (157)

We are reminded of Esther's lover in *Away*, who is always loved in absence and has no identity beyond the role he fulfills in the family mythology. Like Esther, Liz remains attached to this ghost of the past. In fact, her observation that "[t]here have been a few men in the intervening decades, . . . but the ghost of Teo—a boy I was just beginning to know—has always stood between those men and me in any room we entered" (229) echoes Eileen's observation, "I've been away all my life. . . . I can't, you see, get the face of a certain young man out of my mind" (*Away* 351). Frozen in the past and perfected in memory, Teo represents the one ghost that Liz is not able to dissect or deal with objectively.

Her reflections on her relationship with Teo lead to a broader consideration of immigration and multiculturalism in Canada. The complexity of this teenage romance arises from her tacit awareness of what she later expresses as his cultural "otherness;" it is through Liz's examination of her own reaction to Teo that Urquhart expands her focus to examine yet another aspect of Canada's identity as a multicultural nation. Through Liz's encounter with Teo's "otherness," Urquhart seeks to draw attention to the untold stories of these migrant workers, who experience "radical gaps of perception, understanding and knowledge, where inner and outer, personal and public reality do not cohere, the very possibility and conditions of subjective presence itself are challenged" (Sturgess 54). Liz shamefully admits that "my cousins and I paid little attention to the Mexicans, with the exception of Teo, of course, who had been thrust into our midst by my uncle" (155). Although Teo comes closer than any of the other Mexicans to being

accepted by Liz's family, even he is not entirely successful. Despite the fact that their uncle insists that Liz and her cousins include Teo in their games, he is still subjected to malicious jokes and pranks by the other boys because, as he tearfully confesses to Liz, "*Me aparté*" (135).

The extent to which the tiny Mexican community remains apart becomes clear as Liz remembers the way in which their "otherness" became even more apparent when they were removed from the context of the farm: "We would see the Mexicans on weekends in town. . . . [T] seemed much more foreign than they did on the farm. We children stared in a way we never did when they were in the fields or orchards" (156). As she recalls them waiting in line to post letters or use the telephone booth or attend their "special" masses, she now interprets the scene differently than she did as a child. With hindsight, she realises that there were many things that she and her cousins failed to understand, particularly the workers' experience of finding themselves "between worlds" as immigrants (Turner 18), living one life in Canada and another at home in Mexico.¹¹³ Because Liz and her cousins had viewed the Mexican workers with the short-sightedness of childhood, "[w]e did not think about the possibility that the special mass meant they were not made to feel welcome to join the local congregation. We also did not think about their yearning to hear a farway voice in that phone booth, their need, perhaps, to whisper endearments to a lover or seek assurances concerning the well-being of a child" (156-7). To the children, they are always simply "the Mexicans,"

¹¹³ In *No Great Mischief*, MacLeod likewise draws attention to the often-overlooked narratives of migrant workers in Canada, drawing parallels between their experience and the experiences of earlier immigrants who came to Canada from the Old World (e.g. 1, 66, 181-3). Ondaatje, too, examines the plight of migrant and immigrant workers in *In the Skin of a Lion* (e.g. 43-8, 129-133).

indistinguishable from one another, lacking individual character or motivation, arriving every year in the cargo area of the airport, always part of the summer background.

Through her depiction of the children's attitude toward the Mexican workers, an attitude which they have learned from the adults in their lives, Urquhart "addresses issues of race and class in a country which prides itself on its tolerance" (Sturgess 54).¹¹⁴

As her reflections on the lives of the Mexican workers suggest, Liz's attempts to "track down the last mysterious fact until there is no mystery left" (12) in order to put the ghosts of the past to rest moves beyond the personal realm and into the national.

Rather than seeing the past as something to be nostalgically preserved or utterly transcended, or even translated into a well-ordered narrative for future generations, Liz embraces the cacophony of voices that comprise her family history. Again, her work provides a metaphor by which she is able to understand the myriad changes and accidents and influences that alter our histories, and which make our communal and personal narratives inseparable:

All the tough evolutions, the shedding of various skins, followed by those difficult migrations, over great stretches of open water, and across vast tracts of land, to and from Mexico, or America, or Kandahar. That longing we have to bring it all together into one well-organized cellular structure, and then the heartbreaking suspicion that, with the best of intentions, we never really can. (271)

¹¹⁴ Hammill elaborates on Canada's complicated attitude toward multiculturalism, noting that it "has been criticised, in Canada and worldwide, for being a divisive force which reduces national unity and encourages ghettoisation and stereotyping; for tacitly consenting to the discrimination against women which occurs in some minority cultures; and for propounding a concept of human identity as wholly determined by race or ethnicity. . . . Yet. . . its core values of respect and tolerance are, on the whole, widely accepted in Canada" (28). Kamboureli, however, qualifies even further the extent to which this notion of tolerance is accepted, observing "For some Canadians. . . the tolerance they see multiculturalism advocating threatens their understanding of Canadian history and augurs against the development of a cohesive Canadian identity, which they think should be the goal of the nation. For others, it is the very notion of tolerance to which they object, for tolerance alone does not promise that those who have traditionally been constructed as 'others' will be able to fully practise who they are as individual subjects" (*Difference* 11).

Through Liz's treatment of this collection of narratives, Urquhart imagines a version of history that gives voice to the competing and conflicting narratives of which it is comprised, and that both accommodates and acknowledges difference and change. Further, she envisions a manner of constructing national identity that "is no longer to be seen, or theorized, as an unmediated, fixed link between nation and individual, but as a negotiation of subject positions within a network of material forces affected and inflected by class, gender, and race" (Sturges 12-3). Through such a national identity, Urquhart suggests, the heteroglossic nature of history can be restored as marginalised voices are given the opportunity to be heard, and an ethical balance between what we remember and what we forget about our nation's histories can perhaps be achieved.

Conclusion: Embracing Disunity

“We live permanently in the recurrence of our stories, whatever story we tell.”

(Ondaatje, *Divisadero* 136)

When setting out to investigate memory, one is immediately confronted by the vast scope of writing dedicated to its study. One finds texts of philosophy, sociology, history, psychology, literature. . . Delving into this body of writing, I quickly became convinced that the reason for such extensive interest is that, without memory, there is nothing: no theory, no structure, no understanding, no expression, no art. Memory forms the basis of our cognition—not merely as a means of reflecting on the past (at least, the bits of the past that we have not forgotten) but as a determining factor in how we function in the present moment, as well as how we envision and move into the future. If memory is the basis of our cognition, however, autobiographical memory is the basis of selfhood, which as I have discussed throughout this dissertation is itself a form of remembered narrative.

As my discussion of the works of Alistair MacLeod, Michael Ondaatje, and Jane Urquhart demonstrates, a significant consequence of this form of self-narration is that our stories allow us to create our own meaningful (rather than absolute) versions of

truth. Like our personal memories, our society's communal memories are likewise perpetually evolving as they are subject to perception, interpretation, reinterpretation, repression, and even outright denial. In short, it is not necessary for memory (and by extension our narratives) to bear any genuine resemblance to historical reality and "what really happened." Absolute truth becomes unnecessary—the ways in which we imagine ourselves in our world as we perceive it determine how we function in our daily lives. Once a moment is gone, what we (choose to) remember becomes our reality: as we see in the works of MacLeod, Ondaatje, and Urquhart, our stories depend largely on reality as we remember it.

This dissertation is not, of course, advocating solipsism; it is rather an examination of the ways in which we perceive, remember, and engage with external reality. We are inescapably influenced by external forces, and our responses are dependent on our remembered experiences and the cultural frames of meaning that we have internalized. We have seen the ways in which trauma and desire interrupt and distort our perceptions; more mundane occasions of hindsight also cause us to revise our narratives and reinterpret our memories. As a consequence, our memories and our narratives exist in a state of perpetual evolution. Because our narratives remain in this state of flux, we depend on what Ondaatje refers to as "the truth of fiction" (*CTS* 163) and what MacLeod and Urquhart would consider "emotional truth" (Urquhart, "Vision" 39), in which the subjective conception of time, event, place, and other is rendered at least as important to the individual as its objective reality. As one of MacLeod's narrators observes when she comes across two very different interpretations of a single story, "I guess when you look at it now, one meaning can be true and the other can be accurate" (*NGM* 91).

In a broader cultural context, the works of each of these writers have both constituted and dissected our nation's traditional frameworks of meaning through their different approaches to the relationship between communal and individual narratives, including investigations of the ethics of reconstructing and revaluing traditional interpretations of historical and cultural memory. No longer can Atwood's argument that "every culture or country has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core" (31)—which Atwood described as "undoubtedly Survival, *la Survivance*" (32) for Canada—be considered an adequate expression of what it means to be "Canadian." MacLeod's concern with preserving the past is problematized by his realization that "[t]he commemorated past is quite uninhabitable and offers little, if any, refuge against the economic uncertainties of the present" (Omhovere, *Roots* 50): nostalgia and an enslavement to the values of the past are as dangerous for the individual as abandoning tradition entirely. Urquhart, too, seeks a balance between what is remembered and what is forgotten—a balance which can only be achieved when we question what it is we are choosing to remember and why. Ondaatje's concern with the ways in which we rewrite—consciously and unconsciously—the difficult narratives of the past and the devastating realization that our traumas cannot be silenced no matter how we rewrite them reminds us of the importance examining our narratives, however we represent them and whatever form they take. Through their examinations of the ongoing influence of memory on personal and by extension communal narratives, each of these authors seeks to reopen and thereby reconsider the traditional narratives of Canadian history. By causing us to reconsider our historical narratives, these authors signal the need to acknowledge the plethora of voices that transcends traditional representations of Canada as a nation built

by the French and the English, and goes further to capture the diversity within that diversity of voices.

Each of my chosen authors approaches history, memory, and the questions of existence in their narratives in ways that open up transcultural considerations of documentary history and experiential time. All three are concerned with the impact of immigration on constructs of Canadian identity. Not only do they examine this identity in terms of the original waves of settlers who came to Canada with the intention of taming the New World, but they also consider the effects of contemporary immigration and migrancy on the framing of Canada's cultural "mosaic." Through their representations of past and contemporary immigrants as well as of migrant workers, these writers bring to narrative realization the specificities of Canada's diverse patterns of evolving experience. By giving voice to those who occupy forgotten or marginalized positions in Canadian society, MacLeod, Urquhart, and Ondaatje draw attention to the ways in which these groups inevitably influence and contribute to our evolving identity as Canadians: an identity which has never been adequately expressed by the traditional voice of Canadian history.

In other words, there is something in the notion of "Canadian-ness" that requires a postmodern "turning from the expectation of sure and single meaning to a recognition of the value of difference and multiplicity" (Hutcheon 23). For the individual as for the nation, there is no single voice, no stable identity, no overarching narrative. What we are left with, then, is the "complex cross-cultural subjectivity at the core of Canadian nationhood and of its literary production" which "informs a critical reflection on the construction of unified discourses, providing a model of the complex, and ultimately

unstable institutional, social, and cultural codes we all participate in and are ‘invented’ by” (Sturgess 145). Consequently, to cope with the trauma of abandoning the old stabilizing regimes, there is a need for the invention of new mythologies that will return attention and power to the subjective human self in the diversity of her experience. And that, I submit, is the task of the storyteller.

Works Cited

- Armstrong, Karen. *A Short History of Myth*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2005.
- “Art.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Online ed. 2011.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- Baddeley, Alan D. *The Psychology of Memory*. London: Harper & Row Publishing, 1976.
- Baer, William. “A Lesson in the Art of Storytelling: An Interview with Alistair MacLeod.” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44:2 (2005) : 334-52.
- Barbour, Douglas. *Michael Ondaatje*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993.
- Beeler, Karin, and Dee Horne, eds. *Diverse Landscapes : Re-Reading Place Across Cultures in Contemporary Canadian Writing*. Prince George: UNBC, 1996.
- Berces, Francis. “Existential maritimer: Alistair MacLeod’s *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*.” *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 16:1 (1991): 114-28.
- Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1911.
- Bethell, Kathleen I. “Reading Billy: Memory, Time, and Subjectivity in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid.” *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Litterature Canadienne* 28:1 (2003): 71-89.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Birch, Libby. “The Irish Female Presence in Jane Urquhart’s Fiction.” *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 17:3 (1997): 115.

- Bölling, Gordon. "Acts of (Re-)Construction: Traces of Germany in Jane Urquhart's Novel *The Stone Carvers*." *Refractions of Germany in Canadian Literature and Culture*. Ed. Heinz (ed.) Antor et al. Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter, 2003. 295-317.
- Bowen, Barbara. "A Multi-Genre Approach to the Art of the Biographer." *The English Journal* 80.4 (1991) : 53-54.
- Branach-Kallas, Anna. *In the Whirlpool of the Past: Memory, Intertextuality and History in the Fiction of Jane Urquhart*. Toruń : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2003.
- . "Old Environment or New Environment? Place and Self in Jane Urquhart's Changing Heaven." *Literary Environments: Canada and the Old World*. Ed. Britta (ed. and introd.) Olinder. Brussels, Belgium: Peter Lang, 2006. 219-225.
- Brandon, Laura. *Art or Memorial: The Forgotten History Behind Canada's War Art*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006.
- Bruce, Barbara. "Collection, Canadian Nationalism, and Colonial Resurgences in Jane Urquhart's *Away*." *Resurgence in Jane Urquhart's Oeuvre*. Eds. Héliane Daziron-Ventura and Marta Dvořák. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2010. 109-128.
- Burns, Walter Noble. *Billy the Kid*. London: Richard Clay & Sons, Ltd., 1926.
- Byrne, Patrick. "Past, Present, and Memory: The Ambivalence of Tradition in the Short Stories of Alistair MacLeod." *Ethnologies* 30.2 (2008): 201-13.
- Carter, Erica, James Donald, and Judith Squires, eds. *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience : Trauma, Narrative, and History*. London: Johns

- Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Compton, Anne. "Meditations on the House: The Poetics of Space in Jane Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* and *The Whirlpool*." *Canadian Literature/Littérature canadienne* (1996): 10-21.
- . "Romancing the Landscape: Jane Urquhart's Fiction." *Jane Urquhart: Essays on Her Works*. Ed. Laura Ferri. Toronto, ON: Guernica, 2005. 115-43.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Modernity Forgets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- . *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Cook, Rufus. "Being and Representation in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 30:4 (1999): 35-49.
- . "'Imploding Time and Geography': Narrative Compressions in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33.2 (1998): 108-25.
- Colebrook, Claire. *Gilles Deleuze*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Cooley, Dennis. "I am Here on the Edge: Modern Hero/Postmodern Poetics in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid." *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*. Ed. Sam Solecki. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1995. 211-39.
- Creelman, David. "'Hoping to Strike Some Sort of Solidity': The Shifting Fictions of Alistair MacLeod." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Litterature Canadienne* 24.2 (1999): 79-99.
- Curran, Beverley. "Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Altered States of Narrative." *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*. Ed. Steven Totosy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 2005. 16-26.

- Dawson, Carrie. "Calling People Names: Reading Imposture, Confession, and Testimony in and after Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 25:2 (2000): 50-73.
- Daziron-Ventura, Héliane, and Marta Dvořák, eds. *Resurgence in Jane Urquhart's Oeuvre*. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2010.
- De Smyter, Sofie. "Michael Ondaatje's Coming through Slaughter: Disrupting Boundaries of Self and Language." *English Studies* 88:6 (2007): 682-98.
- . "'We live permanently in the recurrence of our own stories': Michael Ondaatje's *Divisadero*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* (34:1) 2009: 99-119.
- Dvořák, Marta. "When the Underpainting Shows Through: Jane Urquhart's Resurgent Transmutations." *Resurgence in Jane Urquhart's Oeuvre*. Eds. Héliane Daziron-Ventura and Marta Dvořák. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2010. 91-107.
- Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories : Making Selves*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Edwards, Justin D. *Gothic Canada*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005.
- Falck, Colin. *Myth, Truth, Literature: Towards a True Post-Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Ferri, Laura. "A Conversation with Jane Urquhart." *Jane Urquhart: Essays on Her Works*. Ed. Laura Ferri. Toronto, ON: Guernica, 2005.15-41.
- . *Jane Urquhart: Essays on Her Works*. Toronto, ON: Guernica, 2005.
- Findley, Timothy. *The Wars*. Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1977.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

- Francis, Daniel. *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997.
- Freeman, Mark. *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*. London : Routledge, 1993.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Goldman, Marlene. *Paths of Desire : Images of Exploration and Mapping in Canadian Women's Writing*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- . "Translating the Sublime: Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*." *Canadian Literature* 150 (1996): 23-42.
- Gordon, Neta. "The Artist and the Witness: Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter and The Stone Carvers*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Littérature Canadienne* 28.2 (2003): 59-73.
- Guilford, Irene, ed. *Alistair MacLeod: Essays on His Works*. Toronto: Guernica, 2001.
- Gunnarsdóttir Champion, Margrét. "The Consolations of Tradition in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*." *Literary Environments: Canada and the Old World*. Brussels, Belgium: Peter Lang, 2006. 227-233.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Hammill, Faye. *Canadian Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Hancu, Laura. "Escaping the Frame: Circumscribing the Narrative in *The Whirlpool*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Litterature Canadienne* 20.1 (1995): 45-64.

- Hepburn, Allan. "Beautiful Mourning: The Stone Carvers." *Jane Urquhart: Essays on Her Works*. Ed. Laura Ferri. Toronto, ON: Guernica, 2005. 45-50.
- Hiscock, Andrew. "This Inherited Life: Alistair MacLeod and the Ends of History." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.2: 51-70.
- Hodd, Thomas. "Shoring against Our Ruin: Sheldon Currie, Alistair MacLeod, and the Heritage Preservation Narrative." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en Littérature Canadienne* 33.2 (2008): 191-209.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- . *The Canadian Postmodern*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Huysen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Jacobs, Naomi. "Michael Ondaatje and the New Fiction Biographies." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 11:1 (1986): 2-18.
- Jarvis, Brian. *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Literature*. London: Pluto, 1998.
- Jirgens, Karl E. "Lighthouse, Ring and Fountain." *Alistair MacLeod: Essays on His Works*. Ed. Irene Guilford. Toronto: Guernica, 2001. 84-94.
- . "Time and Place: Interview with Alistair MacLeod." *Rampike* (14:2) 2006, 10-19.
- Johnston, Wayne. *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Toronto: A. A. Knopf Canada, 1998.
- Kamboureli, Smaro, ed. *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- . *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*. Toronto:

- University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- Kasabova, Anita. *On Autobiographical Memory*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
- Keefer, Janice Kulyk. "Loved Labour Lost." *Alistair MacLeod: Essays on His Works*. Ed. Irene Guilford. Toronto: Guernica, 2001. 72-83.
- . *Under Eastern Eyes : A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.
- Kertzer, J. M. "On Death and Dying: The Collected Works of Billy the Kid." *English Studies in Canada* 1 (1975): 86-96.
- King, Nicola. *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000.
- Kogawa, Joyce. *Obasan*. Boston: D. R. Godine, 1982.
- Kroetsch, Robert. "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy." *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. Eds. Ajay Heble, Donna Palmateer Pennee & J.R. (Tim) Struthers. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997. 355-65.
- Kulperger, Shelley. "Transculturation and Cultural Exchange in Jane Urquhart's *Away* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*." *Canadian Cultural Exchange: Translation and Transculturation: Echanges culturels au Canada: Traduction et transculturation*. Ed. Norman Cheadle & Lucien Pelletier. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007. 75-98.
- Lanone, Catherine and Claire Omhové. "Mourning/Mocking Browning: The Resurgence of a Romantic Aesthetics in Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*." *Resurgence in Jane Urquhart's Oeuvre*. Eds. Héliane Daziron-Ventura and Marta

- Dvořák. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2010. 27-41.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
- Lepaludier, Laurent. "The Everyday in 'The Closing Down of Summer' by Alistair McLeod." *Journal of the Short Story in English* 38 (2002): 39-55.
- Letissier, Georges. "Away: the sense of place and the voices of the self." *Journal of the Short Story in English/Les Cahiers de la Nouvelle* (1997): 131-149.
- Lloyd, Genevieve. *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Lobnik, Mirja. "Echoes of the Past: Nomad Memory in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *South Atlantic Review* 72:4 (2007): 72-108.
- MacLeod, Alistair. *Island*. London: Vintage, 2002.
- . *No Great Mischief*. London: Vintage, 2001.
- Macquarrie, John. *Existentialism*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.
- Marquis, Donald M. *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.
- Mcgill, Robert. "Don't Try This at Home: A Puzzle of a Novel gets Away with Taking Risks." *Literary Review of Canada* 15.6 (2007): 90
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen Inc., 1987.
- Middleton, Peter, and Tim Woods. *Literatures of Memory*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.
- Miller, Karl. "From the Lone Shieling: Alistair MacLeod." *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 21:4 (2002): 149-161.

- Miller, Nancy K. "Facts, Pacts, Acts." *Profession* 92:1 (1992): 10-14.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- Misztal, Barbara A. *Theories of Social Remembering*. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003.
- Morris, Pam, ed. *The Bakhtin Reader*. London: Edward Arnold, 1994.
- Moss, John. "How Fiction Works: The Whirlpool." *Jane Urquhart: Essays on Her Works*. Ed. Laura Ferri. Toronto, ON: Guernica, 2005. 78-82.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. London: Lowe & Brydone, (1968).
- . *Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Nicholson, Colin. "Alistair MacLeod." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 21:1 (1986): 188-200.
- . "Decline and Fall: The Fate of Gaeldom in Postcolonial Space." *Dialogues des traditions dans les literatures du Canada* (2005): 41-53.
- . "Regions of memory: Alistair MacLeod's fiction." *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 7:1 (1992): 128-37.
- . "Re-Sourcing the Historical Present." *Alistair MacLeod: Essays on His Works*. Ed. Irene Guilford. Toronto: Guernica, 2001. 95-111.
- . "Signatures of time: Alistair MacLeod and His Short Stories." *Canadian Literature/Littérature canadienne* 107 (1985): 90-101.
- . "'The Tuning of Memory': Alistair Macleod's Short Stories." *Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines* 20 (1987): 85-93.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.

- “Nostalgia.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Online ed. 2011.
- Novak, Amy. “Textual Hauntings: Narrating History, Memory, and Silence in The English Patient.” *Studies in the Novel* 36:2 (2004): 206-31.
- O’Brien, Kathleen. “Contemporary Caoineadh: Talking Straight through the Dead.” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 32.1 (2006): 56-63.
- Omhovère, Claire. “Copies and (Ab)Originals: The Problem of Authenticity in Jane Urquhart’s *Away* (1993).” *Anglophonia: French Journal of English Studies* 21 (2007): 179-188.
- . “The Replication of Romance in Jane Urquhart’s *Away*.” *Reading(s) from a Distance: European Perspectives on Canadian Women’s Writing*. Ed. Charlotte Sturges & Martin Kuester. Augsburg, Germany: Wißner, 2008. 54-65.
- . “Roots and Routes in a Selection of Stories by Alistair MacLeod.” *Canadian Literature* 189.Summer (2006): 50-67.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The Cat’s Table*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2011.
- . *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Toronto: Anansi, 1970.
- . *Coming Through Slaughter*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998.
- . *Divisadero*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007.
- . *The English Patient*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1993.
- . *In the Skin of a Lion*. London: Picador, 1987.
- Owens, Judith. “‘I Send You a Picture’: Ondaatje’s Portrait of Billy the Kid.” *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 8 (1983): 117-39.
- “Personal.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Online ed. 2011.
- Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time Vol. 1*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1992.

- Provencal, Vernon. "Sleeping with Herodotus in *The English Patient*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 27:2 (2002): 140-59.
- . "The Story of Candaules in Herodotus and *The English Patient*." *Classical and Modern Literature: A Quarterly* 23:1 (2003): 49-64.
- Rae, Ian. "The Resurgence of Poetry in Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*." *Resurgence in Jane Urquhart's Oeuvre*. Ed. Héliane Daziron-Ventura & Marta Dvorák. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2010. 43-62.
- Ramsey, Frederic, and Charles Edward Smith, eds. *Jazzmen: The Early Growth of Jazz, Its Personalities, and Its Fables*. London, 1957.
- Ricciardi, Caterina. "Away and the meanings of colonization." *Jane Urquhart: Essays on Her Works*. Ed. Laura Ferri. Lancaster: Guernica, 2005. 65-77.
- Riegel, Christian. "Elegy and Mourning in Alistair MacLeod's 'The Boat'." *Studies in Short Fiction* 35:3.Summer (1998): 233-40.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *A Glance Beyond Doubt : Narration, Representation, Subjectivity*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996.
- . *Narrative Fiction : Contemporary poetics*. London: Methuen, 1983.
- Robinson, Eden. *Monkey Beach*. London: Abacus, 2000.
- Rogers, Shelagh. "An Interview with Alistair MacLeod." *Alistair MacLeod: Essays on His Works*. Ed. Irene Guilford. Toronto: Guernica, 2001. 11-35.
- Rooke, Constance. "Dog in a Grey Room: The Happy Ending of Coming Through Slaughter." *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*. Ed. Sam Solecki. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985. 268-92.
- Rossington, Michael, and Anne Whitehead, eds. *Theories of Memory: A Reader*.

- Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007.
- Sadashige, Jacqui. "Sweeping the Sands: Geographies of Desire in *The English Patient*." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26.4 (1998): 242-55.
- Saklofske, Jon. "The Motif of the Collector and Implications of Historical Appropriation in Ondaatje's Novels." *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*. Ed. Steven Totosy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 2005. 73-82.
- Schumacher, Rod. "Patrick's Quest: Narration and Subjectivity in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 21:2 (1996): 1-21.
- Scobie, Stephen. "*Coming through Slaughter*: Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webbs." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 12 (1978): 5-22.
- . "The Reading Lesson: Michael Ondaatje and the Patients of Desire." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53.Summer (1994): 92-106.
- . "Two Authors in Search of a Character." *Canadian Literature/Littérature canadienne* 54 (1972): 37-55.
- "Seanaichie." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Online ed. 2011.
- Sharrad, Paul. "Memory, Childhood and Exile: Self-Representation in Post-Colonial Writing." *World Englishes* 9:2 (1990): 137-53.
- Smart, Patricia. "Weighing the Claims of Memory: the Poetry and Politics of the Irish-Canadian Experience in Urquhart's *Away*." *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 10 (1994): 63-70.
- Selby, Sharon. *Divisadero* Book Review. *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 21:2

(2008): 31.

Solecki, Sam. "Making and Destroying: Coming Through Slaughter and Extremist Art."

Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje. Ed. Sam Solecki. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985. 246-67.

Solecki, Sam, ed. *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985.

Spinks, Lee. *Michael Ondaatje*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009.

---. "Sense and Singularity: Reading Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*."

Canadian Literature 197. Summer (2008): 62-78.

Stevenson, Randall. *Modernist Fiction*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1996.

Sturgess, Charlotte. *Refining the Subject: Sites of Play in Canadian Women's Writing*.

Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003.

Sugars, Cynthia. "Haunted by (a Lack of) Postcolonial Ghosts: Settler Nationalism in

Jane Urquhart's *Away*." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 79 (2003) : 1-32.

---. "Repetition with a Difference: The Paradox of Origins in Alistair MacLeod's No

Great Mischief." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Litterature*

Canadienne 33:2 (2008): 133-150.

Sugars, Cynthia, and Gerry Turcotte, eds. *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic*. Waterloo ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009.

Terdiman, Richard. *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*. Ithaca:

Cornell University Press, 1993.

- Tonkin, Elizabeth. *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Totosy de Zepetnek, Steven, ed. *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2005.
- Turnbull, Ronald, ed. *Alistair MacLeod*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Review, 2004.
- Turner, Margaret E. *Imagining Culture: New World Narrative and the Writing of Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995.
- Urquhart, Jane. *Away*. London: Penguin Books, 1993.
- . *Sanctuary Line*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2010.
- . *Storm Glass*. Erin, Ontario: Porcupine's Quill, 1987.
- . *The Stone Carvers*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002.
- . "The Vision of Alistair MacLeod." *Alistair MacLeod: Essays on His Works*. Ed. Irene Guilford. Toronto: Guernica, 2001. 36-42.
- . *The Whirlpool*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1986.
- Van Wart, Alice. "The evolution of form in Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming through Slaughter*." *Canadian Poetry* 17 (1985): 1-28.
- Vauthier, Simone. "Mapping Alistair MacLeod's 'Vision'." "*Union in partition*": essays in honour of Jeanne Delbaere. Ed. Gilbert Debusscher & Marc Maufort. Liège: Univ. de Liège, 1997. 161-72.
- Verhoeven, W. M. "Playing Hide and Seek in Language: Michael Ondaatje's Historiography of the Self." *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 24.1 (1994): 21-7.
- Wallis, Michael. *Billy the Kid: The Endless Ride*. London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2007.

- Warley, Linda, John Clement-Ball, and Robert Viau. "Introduction: Mapping the Ground." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 23:1 (1998): 1-8.
- Wertsch, James V. *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Whetter, Darryl. "Michael Ondaatje's 'International Bastards' and Their 'Best Selves': An Analysis of The English Patient as Travel Literature." *English Studies in Canada* 23:4 (1997): 443-58.
- Whitehead, Anne. *Memory*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Williams, David. *Imagined Nations: Reflections on Media in Canadian Fiction*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.
- Winter, J. M. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.
- Wood, David. *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Worthington, Kim L. *Self as Narrative*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
- Wyile, Herb. "Jane Urquhart: Confessions of a Historical Geographer." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 81. Winter (2004): 58-83.
- . "'The Opposite of History Is Forgetfulness': Myth, History, and the New Dominion in Jane Urquhart's *Away*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Littérature Canadienne* 24.1 (1999): 20-45.
- Zagratzki, Uwe. "Sea, Land, Earth: The Experience of Dislocation in Alistair MacLeod's Short Stories." In Liselotte Glage ed., *Being/s in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation*: 205-213. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 205-13.
- Zepetnek, Steven Tötösy de, ed. *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's*

Writing. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2005.