

“Imagined Rendering”: Photography, Memory, and Autobiography in Michael
Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* and *The Cat’s Table*

by

Gillian Massel

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For my parents

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the idea of memory as a creative and aesthetic process in *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* – Michael Ondaatje's most autobiographical texts. By paying particular attention to the invocation and representation of photography and visual art, this thesis considers how Ondaatje uses photography and visual art to explore the reliability of memory in order to raise questions about autobiography's claims to absolute referentiality. Drawing on Philippe Lejeune's foundational analysis of autobiography, this thesis demonstrates how Ondaatje invites his reader to interpret *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* as autobiographies while simultaneously frustrating the reader's assumption that memory is an accurate record of a historically verifiable past. Overall, this thesis reveals how Ondaatje foregrounds the constructed and dynamic nature of memory, ultimately emphasizing the fictional structures at the heart of autobiography and the problematic assumptions readers' make when reading autobiographical texts.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

In the poem “Light,” Michael Ondaatje foregrounds the relationship between memory and photography as the poem’s speaker, alone and watching a summer storm outside his house, recalls his relatives as they appear in old photographs. References to several generations of Ondaatje’s own extended family – from shy uncles and perceptive aunts to a “firefly” grandmother – invite an autobiographical reading, but the straightforwardness and reliability of such a reading is called into question by the “complex ambiguous and grainy” pictures on the speaker’s wall (*Cinnamon Peeler* 3). In other words, the speaker suggests that the photographs shape his memories of his family, but ultimately admits that these “fragments” are “all I remember” (5). In this respect, “Light” suggests that memory is photographic; the eye, like a camera lens, registers light and records an action, event, object, or person in the brain, preserving experience in a series of snapshots. Nevertheless, in likening memory to photography, Ondaatje simultaneously foregrounds memory’s unreliability as an official record because the “fragments” of memory only offer an incomplete – and thus unreliable – story of the speaker’s family, leaving the speaker “wanting more knowledge of them” (*CP* 5). In other words, while photographs preserve the speaker’s memories of his relatives, they ultimately sever the moment of their capture from the narrative of history that would render each memory intelligible and meaningful to the speaker. Hence, “Light” suggests that the act of recollection necessarily involves a degree of invention in order for the speaker to complete his retrospective narrative: “expanding stories / connect to the grey grainy pictures on the wall” (*CP* 5). Memory, Ondaatje suggests, is as creative as it is recuperative.

Paying particular attention to the invocation and representation of photography and visual art, this thesis examines the idea of memory as a creative and aesthetic process in *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* – Michael Ondaatje's most autobiographical texts. Like the poem "Light," *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* are repeatedly construed as autobiographical works despite Ondaatje's self-conscious and multifaceted attempts to distance himself from his narrators or protagonists and thus beg questions about the reliability of his narratives. And across his oeuvre, Ondaatje uses photographs and visual art to complicate and frustrate the reader's desire for a correspondence between the writer and his subject, and to examine the limits of memory and the idea that we are fully transparent to ourselves. With this in mind, this thesis considers how Ondaatje uses photography and visual art to explore the reliability of memory in *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* in order to raise questions about autobiography's claims to absolute referentiality. This is not to say that Ondaatje does not engage with the problems of autobiographical writing elsewhere – many have argued that *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* oscillate between fiction, biography, and autobiography (Dow Adams, Kamboureli, Boldrini) while Ondaatje himself recognizes *Coming Through Slaughter* as "my most autobiographical work." But where *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* are primarily concerned with interrogating the production of official histories (Hutcheon), *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* question the assumption that memory is a reliable record of the past or an authentic affirmation of the self. Drawing on Philippe Lejeune's foundational analysis of autobiography, I will demonstrate how Ondaatje invites his reader to interpret *Running in the Family* and *The*

Cat's Table as autobiographies while simultaneously frustrating the reader's assumption that memory is an accurate record of a historically verifiable past. Following this discussion, I will present a close analysis of the photographs in *Running in the Family* in order to reveal how photography's "vexed history of referentiality" (Adams xvi) reinforces autobiography's obviously constructed representation of individual experience. Finally, my thesis will discuss how Ondaatje's invocation of painting and tableaux in *The Cat's Table* foregrounds the aestheticizing impulse of memory. Overall, I hope to demonstrate how Ondaatje's use of photography and visual art as metaphors for memory foregrounds the constructed and dynamic nature of memory and the selves that we form from our recollections of the past, ultimately emphasizing the fictional structures at the heart of autobiography and the problematic assumptions readers' make when reading autobiographical texts.

While scholars have noted Ondaatje's use of visual media to explore the nature of writing and the philosophy of art practices, the relationship between Ondaatje's invocation of photography, painting, and tableaux and the discourses of autobiography has yet to be considered. For the most part, critical opinion suggests that Ondaatje's interest in photography, film, and painting reflects his preoccupation with the tension between stasis and shift that characterizes both writing and visual art. As the final lines of "The Gate in his Head" reveal, Ondaatje understands writing in visual terms when he compares poetry to a blurred photograph of a seagull:

And that is all this writing should be then
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
so they are shapeless, awkward

moving to the clear (CP 17).

Although the photograph is often understood to be an agent of fixity, Ondaatje praises the blurred photograph in “The Gate in his Head” as representative of the kind of aesthetic that merges fixity with flux. As a result, in works such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje attempts to overcome the kind of photographic stasis that inadequately represents the ever-shifting, unpredictable nature of figures such as Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden through a montage of fragmented perspectives, accounts, and representations of Billy or Buddy. In this respect, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* emphasize the limitations of photography rather than its merits insofar as the photograph’s “historical fixity” compromises an accurate representation of Billy or Buddy’s “motion and flux” (York 107). In contrast, Lorraine York argues that works such as *Running in the Family* reflect the “positive associations” photography has with “human memory” (93) because the photographs serve as “a visual testament to memory, and to the continuity of the human family” (115). Similarly, Timothy Dow Adams concludes that “while there is some doubt about the autobiographical nature of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*...*Running in the Family* is clearly autobiographical” in that the speaker attempts to reconcile personal memories – or lack thereof – with “documentary evidence, including photographs” (117). The same observation can be made of *The Cat’s Table*, wherein the narrator compiles “images...from memory” (CT 79) in order to reconstruct his journey aboard the *Oronsay* and recollect his forgotten youth. As a result, both texts are uniquely preoccupied with the relationship between

visual media and individual memory, and their shared autobiographical nature invites a consideration of the relationship between genre, memory, and visual representation.

CHAPTER 2: Autobiography as Genre

Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as “a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). In order to distinguish autobiography from related genres – including memoir, biography, and the novel – Lejeune enumerates four defining features, which constitute *le pacte autobiographique*:

- 1) Form of language: narrative in prose
- 2) Subject: individual life, story of a personality
- 3) Situation of the author: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical
- 4) Situation of the narrator: the narrator and the principal character are identical

Of these four conditions however, Lejeune argues that only two of the conditions – the situation of the author as narrator and the situation of the narrator as principal character – are “a question of all or nothing” (5). In other words, “in order for there to be autobiography, the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical” (Lejeune 5, original emphasis). An autobiographical text may address more than just individual life or include sections that deviate from retrospective prose narration, but in regards to the identity of author, narrator and protagonist, Lejeune concludes that there is “neither transition nor latitude” and “all doubt leads to a negative conclusion” (5). Hence, even if the reader of a text has “all the reasons in the world” to think that the story lived by the character or narrator is the story lived by the author, unless the “*name* attributed to the fictional person *within the book*” matches the “signature” of the author as it appears as his name on the cover of the book, then the text cannot be an autobiography (Lejeune 12). If

the author has “chosen to deny this identity, or at least not affirm it,” then the text is not an autobiography but an “autobiographical novel” – “a fictional text in which the reader has reason to suspect, from the resemblances that he thinks he sees, that there is identity of author and protagonist” (Lejeune 13).

In this respect, it is difficult to categorize *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* as autobiographies according to Lejeune's conditions howsoever Ondaatje encourages an autobiographical reading. As Smaro Kamboureli notes, “the textuality of *Running in the Family* keeps its final intelligibility at bay by practising a deferral of [...] generic definition related to the autobiographical elements of the book...It whimsically insists on inhabiting the terrain of autobiography while at the same time displaying its energy as a text that wants to be ‘other’ of what it declares to be” (80-81). This deferral of generic definition is most clearly seen in what Winfried Siemerling identifies as Ondaatje's signature “final note” that exposes the “fictional, metaphorical nature” (111) of the relationship between narrator, character, and author. Indeed, in the “Acknowledgements” to *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje states:

While all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or “gesture.” And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts. (176).

Following Lejeune's assertion that the author's decision to deny the identification of narrator and author effectively annuls the text's classification as autobiography, Ondaatje's insistence on the “fictional air” of *Running in the Family* suggests that he denies a complete identification with his narrator. Furthermore, Ondaatje's use of the

third person in the preface to *Running in the Family* works to distance the writer of the text from the writer *in* the text. As Kambourelli notes, the preface to *Running in the Family* “posits itself as the place where the author masks himself with the persona of a third person narrator” (83) and purposes to recount the story of the principal character, referred to as “he.” In doing so, Ondaatje suggests that there is no “identity of name” (Lejeune 12) between the author, narrator, and principal character that the autobiographical “I” would normally invite a reader to assume. As a result, despite the “resemblances” (Lejeune 13) between the narrator’s story and the story of Ondaatje’s historically verifiable life, Ondaatje’s decision to complicate the identification of author with narrator and principal character ultimately suggests that *Running in the Family* cannot be an autobiography in the Lejeunian sense because “autobiography does not include degrees: it is all or nothing” (Lejeune 13).

In addition, although *The Cat’s Table* has yet to be considered extensively by critics, Ondaatje’s deferral of generic definition can likewise be observed in *The Cat’s Table*. As initial reviews of the book emphasized (Ross, Marchand), the events of *The Cat’s Table* draw several parallels to Ondaatje’s own life: most obviously, the narrator – a man named Michael who has achieved significant international recognition as a writer – recalls a journey he took by boat from Ceylon to England at the age of eleven in 1954. And although Ondaatje completed a similar voyage at the same age and time as the novel’s young protagonist, *The Cat’s Table* frustrates the conditions of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact just as much as it invites its reader to consider the similarities between the narrative and Ondaatje’s own life. Indeed, like the characteristic final note that appears in *Running in the Family*, the “Author’s Note” at the end of *The Cat’s Table*

declares that “although the novel sometimes uses the colouring and locations of memoir and autobiography, *The Cat’s Table* is fictional – from the captain and crew and all its passengers on the boat down to the narrator himself” (267). Likewise, the preface of *The Cat’s Table* refutes the triangulation of author, narrator, and protagonist by once again invoking the third person to distance the narrator from his subject, and subsequently the author from the narrator. Unnamed and unidentified, the boy in the preface appears as a stranger even to his older self; when the narrator describes the boy’s retreat into his assigned cabin on the *Oronsay*, the speaker acknowledges, “I do not know, even now, why he chose this solitude” (4). Likewise, Ondaatje defers a direct and explicit correlation between himself and the narrator until several pages into the novel, when the young boy admits his name is “Michael” (57). Immediately following this admission, however, Michael slips out of the room and closes the door behind him, complicating the moment of identification with a characteristic “dodge.” As a result, *The Cat’s Table* cannot be considered an autobiography according to Lejeune’s conditions because the text troubles the equivalence of narrator and author that would fulfil the autobiographical pact.

In this respect, *Running in the Family* and *The Cat’s Table* cannot be considered true autobiographies in the Lejeunian sense but must be “autobiographical novels” – “fictional texts in which the reader has reason to suspect, from the resemblances that he thinks he sees, that there is identity of author and *protagonist*, whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least not affirm it” (Lejeune 13 original emphasis). Nevertheless, if Ondaatje is intent on frustrating his reader’s expectations, why does he participate so self-consciously in the act of doing so? In response, I would like to suggest

that Ondaatje's deliberate flirtation with the autobiographical genre raises questions about the assumptions we make when discussing autobiographical texts. In other words, if Lejeune's pact would have readers and critics believe that autobiography offers an unmediated account of a historically verifiable past and a conclusive definition of stable personality or "self," then *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* attempt to demonstrate they are not fictional autobiographies, but rather all autobiography is fiction.

Although autobiography is traditionally understood as a subcategory of non-fiction writing, recent scholarship has emphasized the inherently fictive structure of the autobiographical genre as a result of autobiography's engagement with questions of self-representation (Eakin, Ashley, Gudmundsdottir). Indeed, as much as autobiography purposes to "tell all" about a life lived, it is nevertheless a constructed presentation of that life: a series of significant moments carefully selected from memory to summarize an entire existence. As a result, the autobiographical act suggests an attempt to catalogue and organize memory into a coherent narrative based on the assumption that memory is an accurate record of experience. But as Paul John Eakin observes, "the latest developments in brain science today confirm the extent to which memory, the would be anchor of selves and lives, constructs the materials from the past that an earlier, more innocent view would have us believe it merely stored" (*Making Selves* 106). In other words, psychological or neurological research does not support the assumption that memory "preserves the past intact, allowing the original experience to be repeated in present consciousness" (*Making Selves* 107) but suggests that memory is in fact constructed and plural: "every context will alter the nature of what is recalled" (Rosenfield qtd. *Making Selves* 106). Hence, Eakin concludes, "our representations of

reality – literary, psychological, neurological – are dynamic and constructed rather than static and mimetic in nature” (*Making Selves* 107), ultimately demonstrating that autobiography cannot offer “a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past” (*Making Selves* 106). Instead, Eakin calls for critics and readers of autobiography to recognize that autobiography “expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of a present consciousness” (*Fictions* 5).

Of course, Eakin does not intend to “expel truth from the house of autobiography and...install fiction in its stead” but rather recognize the “fictive structure” that informs what we assume to be the “true self” expressed by an autobiographical narrative (*Fictions* 3-4). In this respect, he argues that it is the “drive toward narration of the self” – wherein memory is altered through narration to serve a present consciousness – that suggests that “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation” (*Fictions* 3). In other words, the autobiographer’s goal is not represent a final, irreducible, essential “self” but rather explore the complexity of self-experience. Eakin attributes this change in critical perspective to twentieth-century autobiographers “[who] readily accept the proposition that fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life” (*Fictions* 5). As a result, Eakin concludes that works such as Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* and *The Cat’s Table* are not peripheral to the study of autobiography but rather “central to the genre” (*Making Selves* 61) because such texts encourage their readers to recognize the constructed nature of memory

and the self. And by raising questions about autobiography's referentiality, Ondaatje's autobiographical novels foreground the challenges of the autobiographical task.

CHAPTER 3: *Running in the Family*

Ondaatje's use of photographs in *Running in the Family* is pertinent to a discussion of autobiography's referentiality because photography shares and augments autobiography's "vexed history of referentiality" (Adams xvi). Indeed, since the twentieth-century rise of the photograph as the "dominant and most 'natural' way of referring to appearances" (Berger 48), photographs have become an almost inseparable part of biographies and autobiographies because the photograph's highly referential nature suggests a special kind of "access to the real" (Berger 48). Unlike a sketch or portrait, the photograph's "built-in feeling of accuracy" (Adams 3) has the effect of reminding the reader that the people, places, and events depicted existed or occurred. In this respect, Timothy Dow Adams notes that photography and autobiography share a "representational aspect" that distinguishes both media from pure fiction (xv) and as a result, photographs are frequently invoked in biography, autobiography, and memoir because they have come to represent a powerful means of recording the past and representing the self. Nevertheless, that power can be misleading. As John Berger argues, "the very 'truthfulness' of [photography] encouraged its deliberate use as a means of propaganda... The Nazis were among the first to use systematic photographic propaganda" (49). Despite the "old notions that photographs never lie" (Adams 3), Adams notes that "from the beginning of photography's history, the inherent truthfulness of photographs has always been challenged" (4): sitters can be posed or artificially lighted; an image can be cropped or reduced in size; and even the words that accompany a photograph as a caption can radically alter a viewer's understanding of the content they witness.

Hence, when Linda Haverty Rugg asks if photographs “are evidence of the existence of things or people in the world” or “constructions, manipulable and manipulative, masquerading as fact?” (1), we might ask the same question of autobiography. If contemporary autobiographies such as *Running in the Family* interrogate their own referentiality, then Rugg suggests that “perhaps one could see the way in which photographs are used in autobiographies as symptomatic of the text’s self-examination and its ‘meta-autobiographical’ quality” (Rugg qtd. in Gudmundsdottir 223) rather than simple illustrations that have the effect of reminding the reader that the autobiographical subject really existed.

Like the meta-fictional autobiographies that informed Eakin’s recognition of the fictive structure of autobiography, Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* uses photography to question the presumed authenticity of the autobiographical genre and the individual life it intends to present. Published in 1982, *Running in the Family* represents Ondaatje’s attempt to recollect – and examine the process of recollecting – memories of his personal and familial history, a “childhood” that “I had slipped past” (*Running* 16). A combination of history, biography, memoir, poetry, travel journal, family saga, gossip, rumour, and myth, *Running in the Family* is a quintessentially Ondaatje-an confusion of genres that attempts to collect and organize an account of Ondaatje’s family history and the speaker’s return to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), thirty years after his departure. While the memoir maintains the pretences of accuracy in its invocation of actual place and historical figures and events, Ondaatje simultaneously undermines the reliability of his claims by drawing attention to narratives – private and public – that are overlooked in the account. And at the centre of the book’s paradoxical ambitions, Ondaatje includes seven

reproduced photographs that reinforce the unreliable nature of the narrative's presumed truth.

On the surface, the photographs in *Running in the Family* appear as official documentation that proves the existence of characters or occurrence of events in the memoir, especially as the photographs appear in contrast to the shifting, unstable, and disordered arrangement of the narrative. The photograph is fixed and precise – a presumably reliable reflection of a real event – whereas the stories Ondaatje collects about his family are received and presented as rumour, gossip, and myth. Indeed, while sitting in a governor's home in Jaffna, Ondaatje notes, “we trade anecdotes and faint memories, trying to swell them with the order of dates and asides, interlocking them all as if assembling the hull of a ship...whether a memory or funny scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgements thrown in. In this way history is organized” (19). Nevertheless, while such tall-tale telling passes for an enjoyable afternoon, Ondaatje ultimately admits a yearning for the “intimate and truthful in all this...I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness” (43). According to Lorraine York, Ondaatje's “hunger for precision quickly turns into a hunger for photographs” (116) as the photograph's clarity and its ability to “fix” a present or past moment contrasts sharply the extravagant tall-tales of the Ondaatje family. Thus, when an aunt retrieves the photograph of Ondaatje's parents posing together on their honeymoon, Ondaatje describes it as “the photograph I have been waiting for my whole life...everything is there...the evidence that I wanted that they were absolutely perfect for each other” (135-136). Similarly, Ondaatje notes how charcoal drawings painted by members of the Insurgency forces during Sri Lanka's civil war are only preserved by ten

photographs – “these drawings were destroyed so that the book is now the only record of them” (71). In other words, the photographs in *Running in the Family* allow for “precious access to a history” – personal or public – “which was neither recorded or evanescent” (York 117), and ultimately reinforce the accepted belief in the photograph’s power as an instrument or extension of personal or collective memory.

Nevertheless, there are several features of the photographs and their relationship to Ondaatje’s narrative that undermine the accepted authenticity of photography as a reliable record of memory. Unlike Ondaatje’s use of photographs in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, the seven photographs in *Running in the Family* are never accompanied by a descriptive caption elucidating the photograph’s contents or situating the photograph in relationship to the text. In some cases, the relationship between the photograph and the proceeding section are apparent – the sections “A Fine Romance” and “What We Think of Married Life” both address the marriage of Mervyn Ondaatje and Doris Gratiaen and are correspondingly prefaced by pictures of the couple – but in other instances, Ondaatje does not offer an explicit link between picture and narrative. In fact, the photograph of the 1947 Nuwara Eliya flood, which prefaces the section “Do Not Talk To Me About Matisse,” seems misplaced as the flood it portrays is only described in a later section called “Eclipse Plumage.” Furthermore, where the source and content of the photograph of the Nuwara Eliya flood is elucidated by Ondaatje’s “Acknowledgements” at the end of the memoir, the photograph that accompanies the section “Eclipse Plumage” receives “no definitive indication within the text...of the actual photographer or the history of the photograph” (Adams 119). Instead, the text suggests three different explanations of the picture’s

contents – the amateur theatrical production of *Camelot* staged in a private garden (134), Aunt Dolly’s family productions of *The Mikado* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (91), or the group photograph of Dolly and Lalla at a fancy dress party (92) – ultimately creating an indeterminacy that foregrounds the interpretive ambiguity of the un-captioned photo.

As Berger suggests, photographs “do not in themselves preserve meaning,” but only “offer appearances – with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances – prised away from their meaning” (51). And by only offering unspecified “appearances” divorced from context, photographs can be used to deceive, as emphasized by Ondaatje’s account of Sir John Kotelawala – a Ceylonese diplomat who becomes the victim of “scandalous photographs” after the Opposition party frames him appearing to condone a “blatantly sexual act” when a young man feigns treating a woman for snake bite by “chewing away on her upper thigh” (*Running* 134). Hence, without language to locate or fix interpretation, the photographs in *Running in the Family* are revealed to be as unreliable as the events they propose to prove true.

Most importantly, the juxtaposition of the two pictures of Ondaatje’s parents problematizes either photograph’s representation of Mervyn and Doris’s marriage. The first images of Ondaatje parents are a strikingly handsome portrait of Mervyn “posing slyly in uniform” (*Running* 24) and a separate image of Doris laughing with a parasol. This idealized vision of the couple is reinforced by the title “A Fine Romance.” Nevertheless, the layout of the page foregrounds the underlying disharmony in the relationship that eventually leads to Mervyn and Doris’s divorce: the pictures are separate from each other and Mervyn and Doris gaze in different directions, ultimately suggesting that their romance is anything but “fine.” Hence, when Ondaatje presents the second

photograph of his parents (fig. 1) in the preface to the section titled “What We Think of Married Life,” the reader anticipates a “true” portrait of Ondaatje’s parents – where “everything is there” (135). Instead, the photograph is another distortion:

My father’s pupils droop to the south-west corner of his sockets. His jaw falls and resettles into a groan that is half idiot, half shock. (All this emphasized by his dark suit and well-combed hair.) My mother in white has twisted her lovely features and stuck out her jaw and upper lip so that her profile is in the posture of a monkey. (135)

The picture of Ondaatje’s parents posing may be the “only photograph...of the two of them together” (136) but it is a farce, an exaggerated caricature of “married life.”

Likewise, in the section that follows and describes Mervyn’s alcoholism and frightening self-destructive behaviour, Mervyn and Doris are once again shown to be anything but “absolutely perfect for each other” (136). Though Ondaatje may present the photographs of his parents as a visual testament to the success of their marriage, he simultaneously undermines the reliability of the photographs as representations of reality. As a result, Ondaatje concludes that his memory of his parent’s relationship is “incomplete” because the photographs that make up the Ondaatje family album only provide “scattered acts and memories with no more clues” (172).



(fig. 1 – “What We Think Of Married Life”)

If Ondaatje intends to recollect the “childhood” that “I had slipped past...had ignored and not understood” (16), then *Running in the Family* reveals that photographs are unreliable transmitters of memory. In contrast, when Ondaatje concludes in the final section of the book that he “must remember everything,” he expresses a desire for the “emptiness of a dark room where I listen and wait” (173). In a text that uses photography to address the unreliable and fragmentary nature of memory, this desire for a “dark room” aligns the act of remembering with the craft of developing photographs, and suggests that

the writer, in his attempt to “remember everything,” longs for the fullness and potentiality before memory becomes limited and distorted by the permanent fixing of light in the photographic image. And it is only in this moment of darkness before “I turn on the light” (173), that Ondaatje finally recalls a memory from the childhood that he had “slipped past and ignored” (16):

“I stood like this in the long mornings of my childhood unable to bear the wait till full daylight when I could go and visit the Peiris family down the road in Boralessgamuwa; the wonderful, long days I spent there with Paul and Lionel and Aunt Peggy who would casually object to my climbing all over her bookcases in my naked and dirty feet. Bookcases I stood under again this week which were full of signed first editions of poems by Neruda and Lawrence and George Keyt” (174)

It is the only memory of Ondaatje’s childhood in the entire novel, but its ability to blur the distinction between past and present contrasts sharply with the photographs that sever experiences from their context and flow of time. Nevertheless, Ondaatje’s desire for “the emptiness of a dark room” suggests that the act of remembering is akin to developing photographic film, where “light” does not illuminate the past but threatens to obscure it. In other words, if there is an authentic way of recollecting the memory of a forgotten past, then photographs – fragments of experience fixed by the light of a camera flash – cannot record anything beyond what they illuminate. Limited by their frame, the photographs in *Running in the Family* only offer the “air of authenticity” and not, as it is commonly understood, accuracy or truth.

According to Jeffery Orr however, Ondaatje's emphasis on photography's unreliability as autobiographical source material encourages his reader to "move from approaching the images included in the text as evidential illustrations of the historical truth value...to approaching them as family photographs with emotional, rather than evidential, value" (31). Although the pictures of Mervyn and Doris ultimately fail to provide any honest insight into the nature of the couple's marriage – they are "acting a part rather than revealing a truth" (Orr 38) – Ondaatje's description of the photograph "performs an interpretive act that is less about accurately describing his parents than fulfilling his own desire for 'the evidence I wanted that they were absolutely perfect for each other'" (Orr 38). In this respect, the verbal description that precedes the photograph is not "redundant" as Linda Hutcheon suggests (305), but indicates the kind of retrospective interpretation of visual memory that contributes to the narrative's climatic convergence of writer, narrator, and subject. Like the photograph of the young Ondaatje in cowboy dress at the end of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the final photograph in *Running in the Family* (fig. 2) – a picture of a young Ondaatje posing with his siblings – invites to reader to identify Ondaatje with the narrator who has remained unnamed throughout. Furthermore, in the section that immediately follows this final photograph, Winfried Siemerling observes the narrator's "identification or superimposition" (110) when he imagines his father – the subject of the section – arriving home after an episode of drinking. Indeed, in response to the sentence, "Scared of the company of the mirror" (161), Siemerling notes that the reader might presume the subject of the sentence to be the father, but "the same may be true for the narrator at this point of the novel because he sees himself in the mirror of his father's life" (111). Finally, the "unsignalled appearance

of the final photograph leads us to ask who took it and, given its generic affiliations as a family snapshot, the answer is likely to point to a family member,” leading Orr to conclude that the picture suggests the possibility that the photographer could be Mervyn Ondaatje (Orr 40). The implication that the photographer may be Ondaatje’s father completes the triangulation of author, narrator, and subject – allowing Ondaatje to look through his father’s eyes at his own, younger self. In other words, the photograph is significant not because it illuminates a moment from Ondaatje’s forgotten childhood, but because it calls attention to Ondaatje’s absent father, watching his children from the darkness beyond the frame. Like the fullness and potential of the “dark room,” the most accurate “portrait” (176) of Mervyn Ondaatje that the text can offer is a picture that invites the reader to look beyond the narrow vision of the camera lens towards a more fulfilling and empathetic engagement with the subject of the text.



(fig. 2 “The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society”)

Orr's reading of the final photograph in *Running in the Family* foregrounds the ways in which Ondaatje uses photographs to interrogate the assumption that the subject of autobiography is singular, autonomous, and individualistic. As Paul John Eakin notes, "because autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination...the myth of autonomy dies hard, and autobiography criticism has not yet fully addressed the extent to which the self is defined by – and lives in terms of – its relations with others" (*Making Selves* 43). Nevertheless, where books such as *Running in the Family* had previously been relegated to the periphery of autobiographical studies as "memoirs," Eakin argues that *Running in the Family* is, in fact an "autobiography proper" (*Making Selves* 61) because it foregrounds the relational nature of selfhood, wherein identity is shaped by relations between individuals rather than occurring independently within the subject. As a result, when critics such as Kamboureli argue that "the writer of *Running in the Family* betrays his autobiographical project" because "he does not discover himself; instead, he finds his father" (85), they do not acknowledge the ways in which Ondaatje uses his father's biography to tell his own life's story. Indeed, as much as *Running in the Family* appears to subordinate the story of the self – the autobiographical "I" – to the story of Ondaatje's father, the narrator's identity is not ancillary even though "its primacy may be partly concealed by the fact that it is constructed through the story told *of* and *by* someone else" (Eakin 58, original emphasis). In other words, Ondaatje tells the story of his "self" by telling the story of his father. Just as Ondaatje's description of Mervyn returning home drunk "increasingly superimposes the points of view and the images of the written father and the writing son to the point of identity" (Siemerling 150), so too does the final photograph suggest the ways in which Ondaatje's father is necessary to Ondaatje's own

autobiographical portraiture. As Siemerling concludes, “the subject thus affects itself in the process of writing the other...the biography is, at the same time, autobiography” (138). Hence, by foregrounding the photograph’s strengths and limitations as a representational object, *Running in the Family* invites the reader to question the assumptions that support autobiography’s ability to represent the self.

CHAPTER 4: *The Cat's Table*

As with the use of photographs in *Running in the Family*, the comparison of memory to visual art in *The Cat's Table* also allows Ondaatje to examine the ways in which autobiography struggles to represent self-experience. Although the novel's principal narrative chronicles a sea journey from Sri Lanka to England taken by a young boy named Michael, the focus of *The Cat's Table* is, in fact, Michael's limited ability to recollect and reconstruct his memories the voyage many years later. As a result, although Ondaatje rejects the possible conflation of the events of the narrative with his own life, *The Cat's Table* is nevertheless concerned with the difficulties of remembering past experience. Indeed, in the opening section of the novel, Michael emphasizes his lack of knowledge about his younger self when he refers to the boy on the ship by the pronoun "he" (3). Unnamed and unidentified, the boy in the preface appears as a stranger even to his older self; when the narrator describes the boy's retreat into his assigned cabin on the *Oronsay*, Michael acknowledges, "I do not know, even now, why he chose this solitude" (4). And by foregrounding the narrator's lack of knowledge of his younger self, Ondaatje positions *The Cat's Table* as the intradigetic author's retrospective "imagined rendering" (267) of his boyhood. Hence, when Michael remarks, "I try to imagine who the boy on the ship was" (4), Ondaatje emphasizes the creativity and invention that necessarily informs Michael's memories of his youth.

Following Ondaatje's emphasis on the imaginative dimension of memory, this section of my thesis explores how Ondaatje uses photography, tableaux, and visual art to call attention to the aesthetic nature of memory and the importance of acknowledging memory's distorting lens. Drawing on Paul Jay's analysis of "visual memory" in

autobiographical writing, my discussion of *The Cat's Table* considers the visual quality of Michael's memories, and suggests that these images from memory require a retrospective consideration in order to be properly understood. Then, by carefully considering how characters in *The Cat's Table* – particularly Michael and Miss Lasqueti – revisit and revise their understanding of past experience, I argue that Ondaatje encourages his reader to approach his own novel with the same interrogative gaze. Hence, if memory proves an unreliable record of the past, then *The Cat's Table* ultimately interrogates the assumption that autobiography can offer an unaltered representation of a historically verifiable past or an individual's experience.

In "Posing: Autobiography and the Subject of Photography," Paul Jay examines the importance of "visual memory" in autobiographical writing and the ways in which it contributes to conceptions of the self. According to Jay, "visual memory – the 'reading' of images from the past – be they fixed in a photograph or fluid in the mind's eye – can often be integral to the construction of identity in autobiographical works" (191).

Drawing on Marguerite Duras's *L'amant* and N. Scott Momaday's *The Names: A Memoir*, Jay demonstrates the specifically visual nature of memory as both Duras's and Momaday's memoirs evolve out of an image – or series of images – rather than following a temporally ordered narrative progression. In both instances, Jay argues, "event and identity unfold in a fragmented, nonchronological way" (202); Duras's memoir evolves out of an image at its centre while Momaday's account emerges through a pastiche of images, "fragmented and confused," "shifting and enlarging" (203). What is required in the autobiographical act is to "retrospectively read the significance" of these visual memories – "to read into this image a meaning and an identity" (Jay 201). As a result, Jay

concludes that autobiography “unfolds as the reading of an image” (203), ultimately demonstrating that the act of interpreting visual memories “becomes integral to the construction of identity in autobiographical works” (191).

Jay’s emphasis on the necessity of reading visual nature of memory is reflected by Ondaatje’s invocation of photographs and tableaux in *The Cat’s Table*. Like Momaday and Duras, Ondaatje’s narrator is propelled by a desire to retrospectively read the significance of images – preserved by the mind’s eye – in order to uncover a forgotten past. As a result, even though Michael acknowledges, “not...one blurred snapshot of my time on the *Oronsay* exists in my possession,” he nevertheless recalls moments from his journey in a series of “images...from memory” (79): “a blurred dive into the swimming pool, a white-sheeted body dropping through air into the sea, a boy searching for himself in a mirror, Miss Lasqueti asleep in a deck chair” (79). Each image, however, suggests a tension between surface appearances and something “underneath” (97). The diver plunging below the surface of the water, a corpse concealed by a white sheet, and the enigmatic Miss Lasqueti, whose “spinsterish” and “cautious” (208) appearance disguises the possibility that she may be a spy. In this respect, the images Michael draws from his memory all invoke the idea of an “underneath” (97), ultimately suggesting that visual memories in *The Cat’s Table* represent merely the “surface” of experience. As a result, when Michael notes, “This journey was to be an innocent story within the small parameter of my youth...with just three or four children at its centre, on a voyage whose clear map and sure destination would suggest nothing to fear or unravel” (243), he foregrounds the importance of looking beyond the “innocent story” of his remembered youth to “unravel” the complexities of seemingly simple narrative. And when Michael

asks, “Did I witness something else below the surface of what happened...?” (CT 243), Ondaatje calls upon his reader to ask the same questions about Michael’s idyllic account of the journey aboard the *Oronsay*.

In particular, Michael’s memories of his cousin Emily and her relationship to the Hyderabad Mind – a stage name used by the travelling performer named Sunil – emphasize how visual memory can distort reality through its tendency to romanticize or aestheticize the past. As three boys “on the verge of pubescence” (30), Michael acknowledges that and his companions Ramadhin and Cassius “were never sure of what we were witnessing...our minds were half grabbing the rigging of adult possibility” (52). As a result, when the boys encounter Emily and Hyderabad Man during one of their midnight strolls, they fail to comprehend the significance of the scene they witness. Instead, Michael recalls the episode in strikingly photographic terms, emphasizing the beauty of the remembered moment:

I recognized him as the performer who dressed up as the Hyderabad Mind, whose name we had been told was Sunil. Somewhat surprisingly, he led us to Emily, who was leaning against a railing, wearing a white dress that seemed to glow as he went closer. The Hyderabad Mind half covered her, and she held his fingers cupped within her hands...I saw the man move the strap of her dress and bring his face down to her shoulder. Her head was back, looking up at the stars, if there were stars. (52)

In the young Michael’s depiction of the event, Emily appears as she does throughout most of the novel – the “glittering public beauty” (77) with an “unreachable face” (117) who poses seductively for her lover in the starlight. Unlike Sunil, however, who actively

removes the strap of Emily's dress and brings his face down to her shoulder in a caress, Emily is a strikingly stationary figure, "fixed" in her pose, a statuesque *objet d'art* desirably positioned for her lover and Ondaatje's reader to appreciate. Nevertheless, to the pre-pubescent boy watching in the darkness, the scene's sexual significance does not register until many years later when Michael, now an adult, watches his wife expose the same part of her shoulder to a stranger at a party: "What was it that made me recognize something in the gesture? [...] all at once [I thought] of Emily in the darkness of the *Oronsay*, leaning back against the railing with her beau" (155). Although unintelligible at first, the significance of visual memory unfolds as it is re-read and interpreted during the autobiographical act, allowing Michael to retrospectively recognize the "sexual knot beginning to form in me...All of eleven years old" (155).

Michael's memories of Emily's relationship to Sunil are further complicated, however, when Michael receives a letter from Miss Lasqueti many years after his journey aboard the *Oronsay*. In contrast to Michael's romantic vision of Emily and Sunil on the deck of the *Oronsay*, Miss Lasqueti describes Emily's relationship to the "Jankla Troupe chap" as "fraught and dangerous" (216) and compares Emily's affair to one of her own. In her letter, Miss Lasqueti recounts her time spent in Italy working for two wealthy American art collectors named Horace and Rose Johnson. Over time, however, she enters into an illicit relationship with Horace, becoming his lover after he offers to paint her picture. What Miss Lasqueti's letter suggests, however, is the distorting effect her adult consciousness has on her memories of the affair. Like the portrait Horace paints of Miss Lasqueti wherein she appears "demure, as if a gauche little provincial heiress, or the innocent daughter of a friend" (223), Miss Lasqueti's depiction of her relationship to

Horace appears is initially “innocent” – a passionate and romantic affair, rendered in highly aesthetic language. Indeed, when Miss Lasqueti relates her first sexual encounter with Horace, she describes the experience as if it were a painting:

It was a stunning country, delirious, shocking, full of tastes to be accepted and fulfilled. I’d move around that well-furnished studio afterwards, my skin, my “tincture,” alive to the air that slipped through the open louvres. (225)

Nevertheless, as Miss Lasqueti revisits her relationship to Horace in her letter to Michael, she acknowledges how the aestheticization of her affair reflects Horace’s power over her. Like the beautiful tapestries in the Grand Rotunda of the Villa Ortensia, Miss Lasqueti – transformed into an art object by Horace’s portrait – becomes another possession that Horace has the exclusive right to control. Indeed, Miss Lasqueti notes that when Horace takes “my elbow carefully, precisely, as if this was the one place on the anatomy which was socially acceptable to touch and therefore take part ownership of” (220), it is with “that same hand [that lifts] the corner of the tapestry, as if it was a servant’s skirt, to reveal the bright underside” (222). The comparison of lifting the corner of a tapestry to the lifting of a servant’s skirt conflates art object with object of desire – both of which Horace maintains an exclusive access to. Thus, when Horace discovers that his son has been touching the tapestry in the grand rotunda, he punishes the boy ruthlessly for his transgression. As a result, when Miss Lasqueti catches sight of herself and Horace in a mirror, she notes how their “reflected tableau” reminds her of an image of Horace standing behind his son, ultimately recognizing her affinity with the boy and Horace’s brutal domination of them both: “we were the same, myself and that boy, under the father’s control” (225). Trapped in Horace’s carefully crafted “tableau,” Miss Lasqueti’s

only recourse is to mar the portrait Horace has transformed her into – represented by the pair of scissors that Horace misdirects to pierce her side.

In this respect, Miss Lasqueti's letter reveals the danger of representing experience as art. Indeed, just as the "humble, background colours" of the tapestries in the Grand Rotunda betray the "brilliant and forceful" patterns underneath (220), Miss Lasqueti's letter foregrounds the importance of interrogating the aestheticizing impulse of memory. Hence, despite her initial romanticization of her affair with Horace, Miss Lasqueti admits, "I see my time in Florence through flawed glass, which confuses the pleasure of those days with irony" (225). By likening memory to a "flawed glass," Miss Lasqueti acknowledges how present consciousness alters her recollection of the past in the same way that Michael observes how "over the years, confusing fragments, lost corners of stories, have a clearer meaning when seen in a new light, a different place" (253). And in response to Miss Lasqueti's letter, Michael revisits his memories of Emily's relationship to Sunil yet again, further altering his understanding of Emily's affair with the mysterious performer. As a result, when Michael and Emily discuss the murder of their shipmate Mr. Perera many years after the event, Michael concludes that Emily was not a wilful accomplice, but was instead drugged and manipulated by Sunil. Hence, just as Miss Lasqueti's retrospective on her time in Florence "confuses the pleasure of those days with irony" (CT 225), Michael's recollection of his journey aboard the *Oronsay* allows him to perceive the dangerous nature of Emily's affair beneath the beautiful visual images preserved by his memory.

Of course, by calling attention to the variability of Michael's memories of his cousin Emily, Ondaatje encourages his reader to question the reliability of the narrator's

account – especially when Michael describes his memories of the *Oronsay* as highly visual, aestheticized tableaux. In particular, when the *Oronsay* passes through the Suez Canal, Michael remarks, “this night turned out to be our most vivid memory of the journey” (127-128), likening his experience of the voyage to “fragmentary tableaux below us – a merchant in his stall of food, engineers talking by a bonfire, the unloading of refuse” (128). Likewise, when Michael visits a presentation of Cassius’s artwork many years later, he recognizes the fifteen abstract paintings as representations of “that night in El Suweis...the sulphur lights above the night activity...the open fires...the ancient looking logbook being filled urgently by the scribe at the table” (131). Yet as much as tableaux and painting capture and preserve Michael’s and Cassius’s memories of their journey through the canal, their aesthetic recollection of the event foregrounds the absences in each account. Although Michael’s memory and Cassius’s paintings emphasize the “pockets of sulphurous light” (127), the *Oronsay* travels through the canal “in darkness...various and full of suggestion” (127-128). Significantly, Michael contrasts the “lit windows of the bridge, with three constant silhouettes” of the Captain and two other officers to the “frenzy of criminality” occurring in the darkness of the unlit deck where “only a few officials oversaw what was going on” (127). The scene creates a tension between light and dark, where the well-lit tableaux of memory – the “official” documentation of what happened during the *Oronsay*’s crossing – disguises the unofficial transactions taking place in the darkness beyond each pocket of light. As a result, when the narrator mentions that his “visibility” is “muted” (129), he not only describes his vision on the night aboard the *Oronsay*, but also his remembered perspective of the events of his youth.

Of course, by foregrounding Michael's "muted" vision of the past, Ondaatje suggests that the reader's vision is equally compromised unless he or she looks beyond the romanticized adventure narrative of Michael's youth. On the surface, *The Cat's Table* – a high seas adventure story filled with exciting characters and exotic locales – recalls the "small Boy's Own" (CT 6) that Michael carries with him during long car trips in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, despite the seeming simplicity of the story, *The Cat's Table* is riddled with absences and unresolved mysteries such as Mr. Mazappa's unexplained disappearance in Port Said or the perplexing nature of Ramadhin's death. Indeed, the most significant absence in *The Cat's Table* is the novel's conspicuous failure to address the politics surrounding an English-owned and England-bound ship travelling through the Suez Canal in the early 1950's. And while critics such as Arun Mukherjee and Leslie Mundwiler have decried such political sidestepping in favour of aesthetics in Ondaatje's work, I believe that Ondaatje deliberately and conspicuously foregrounds the problematic absences in *The Cat's Table* in order to call attention to the impossibility of the autobiographical task. In other words, if memory is an unreliable record of experience – either because it offers an incomplete picture of the past or because it distorts the past through its aestheticizing lens – then the autobiographer's ability to provide an unmediated account of reality events is significantly compromised. Hence, by oscillating between Michael's innocent perception of the events aboard the *Oronsay* and Michael's adult retrospective many years later, Ondaatje foregrounds the difficulty of reconstructing childhood experience without the interference of adult knowledge. Indeed, in an interview with Amitava Kumar, Ondaatje summarizes his experience writing *The Cat's Table* as an encounter with this essential problem:

When I began the book, I thought it was going to be a book mainly and only from the point of view of an eleven-year-old boy who was naïve and innocent and childish...[but] something happens in some odd way, almost unconsciously in the Suez Canal scene...[Michael] goes to see the painting of Cassius...and suddenly you're getting almost a flash forward. And so for the next twenty-five pages or so we witness what Ramadhin is like as an adult...and what Michael's life is like. And then we got back to the ship...and the boys who are eleven years old do not know what is going to happen to them, but we do. You and I know...So when [Michael] talks about Mr. Fonseca, there's an adult point of view in there as well, even though it's from the point of view of a child. (Kumar)

Here, Ondaatje describes Miss Lasqueti's "flawed glass," which "confuses the pleasure" of the past with "irony" (CT 225). Present consciousness unavoidably permeates memory and prevents the autobiographer from accurately representing past experience. As a result, Ondaatje's invocation of tableaux as a metaphor for memory suggests that the closest autobiography can come to an accurate representation of individual experience is a carefully staged and theatrically lit "pose" – one that continually undermines any claims to authenticity howsoever convincing the it might be. Hence, when Michael remarks, "what life there was in the diorama [Mr. Mazappa] constructed for us" (167), Ondaatje reminds his reader that the "life" as it appears in the pages before them is merely a construction and not a faithful representation of its author. As a result, *The Cat's Table* ultimately foregrounds the unreliability of visual memory as an accurate record of the past, calling for its reader to critically interrogate the assumption that autobiography provides a realistic representation of the self and external reality.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Throughout this discussion of photography and visual art in *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table*, this thesis has attempted to demonstrate Ondaatje's interrogation of the assumptions surrounding the autobiographical genre – chiefly that memory provides an unaltered record of the past and reliable knowledge of the self. Nevertheless, while both texts question autobiography's referentiality by likening memory to either photography or tableaux, the invocation of tableaux in *The Cat's Table* suggests a greater acceptance of autobiography's artfulness and artifice. Indeed, as much as a photographer may manipulate a picture using printmaking or digital technologies, or a picture can be staged using actors, lighting, and special effects, photography always gives the impression of “something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or death mask” (Sontag 154). In contrast, a tableaux involves a significantly greater degree of aestheticization – howsoever mimetic, it is always a carefully staged display. As a result, Ondaatje's shift from using photography as a metaphor for memory to representing memory as tableaux suggests a development in Ondaatje's understanding of the autobiographical genre from *Running in the Family* to *The Cat's Table*. In particular, this change suggests an increasing interest on Ondaatje's part in the fictive structures that inform autobiographical practice and a growing recognition of the challenges faced by an autobiography that promises an unmediated, complete, and accurate account of an individual life. Hence, while Ondaatje is content to at least partially recognize the non-fiction status of *Running in the Family* (the publication information for the 1982 edition of *Running in the Family* classifies the book as “biography”), the cover of *The Cat's Table* declares the text a “novel,” ultimately suggesting Ondaatje's self-conscious

recognition of his tendency to aestheticize despite the autobiographical bent of the text. Nevertheless, by using visual art, tableaux, and photography to question the assumption that memory is a “convenient repository in which the past is preserved inviolate” (*Making Selves 5*), *The Cat’s Table* and *Running in Family* encourage their readers to recognize the fictive structure at the heart of all autobiographical narratives.

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