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“FADING INTO UNBORN PHOTOGRAPHS”

*Narrativizing/Allegorizing the Historical Object
in Michael Ondaatje’s Fiction*

ABSTRACT: Photography features prominently in the works of Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje. Its presence is to be found at a thematic level, as a key to the advancement of the plot(s), and at the level of the writer’s idiosyncratic style. Photography often conveys odd elements and portrays the historically disempowered, who may, at certain moments, take on a voice that echoes their history of silence. In visual terms, historical objects, often immersed in darkness and oblivion, sporadically emerge into the light; in Ondaatje’s fiction, such an emersion interrupts and then re-channels, in crucial moments, the flow of history in alternative directions, re-imagining history against the grain. Despite its intense relation with its referent(s), photography is characterized by a series of distances and ruptures—both between the instant it portrays and the flow of time, and between its “thingness” and its possible uses and interpretations. In a somewhat paradoxical analogy between photography and allegory, it may be observed that allegorical modes of reading and writing are also grounded in distances and ruptures, especially in the acknowledgment of a temporal gap between the allegorical sign and its meaning(s). I suggest that Ondaatje’s literary engagement with photography—reread through Benjamin—may reconcile an allegorical tension with a historically materialist conception of art; this materialism emerges both in the attention devoted to the “small things” traversing history and in a consideration of art (informed by photography) as a historical agent in the material world. Ondaatje redeploys photography at the service of a “Benjaminian” conception of history—which is, in turn, substantially informed by Benjamin’s own reflections on the invention of photography and its consequences.

KEYWORDS: Photography, Literature, History, Materialism, Allegory.

Photos Surrounded by Silence

One among an impressive array of different arts and codes, photography features prominently in the works of Sri Lankan Canadian contemporary writer Michael Ondaatje. It is present at a thematic level, at the level of the writer’s idiosyncratic style, and (in the novels) as a key to plot advancement. In this essay, I shall discuss the presence of photography in the three novels *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *The English Patient* (1992), and *Divisadero* (2007), devoting special attention to the last one. I wish to maintain that *Divisadero* interestingly expands, and to an extent modifies, Ondaatje’s long-term literary engagement with photography. Moreover, *Divisadero* also develops, and partly transforms, another consolidated interest of Ondaatje’s: the relevance of the historical past to the present and future. In Ondaatje’s oeuvre, the illuminated thread of history is

interspersed with darkened zones. History is equally composed of an urge to move forward and of a “stilled” quality, a recurrence and reemergence of trauma and loss.

Generally speaking, Ondaatje’s interest in photography brings out several of the themes and motifs historically associated with it in literary writing, cultural practice, and theoretical reflection. Family is one of these. As noted by Silvia Albertazzi, starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, collecting and displaying photographs in family albums became a consolidated practice, through which the middle class represented and established itself (Albertazzi 2017, 48). While the historical practice of photography has had a role in institutionalizing the “traditional” bourgeois family, Ondaatje’s literary work is populated by several “non-traditional families”, whose coming together, and whose often painful coming apart, is accompanied by photography—existing photos or missing ones; discussed images or, frequently, images surrounded by silence.

The (chronologically speaking) first novel under consideration, *In the Skin of a Lion*, centers on Eastern Ontario native Patrick Lewis. A young man in the 1920s, Patrick moves to Toronto in search of work and makes friends among the city’s growing population of immigrant workers. Among events including revolutionary activism, violence, death, and love, a makeshift extended family is constructed: Patrick, the actress/activist Alice Gull, her actress friend Clara, Alice’s daughter Hana, baker Nicholas Temelcoff, Italian thief David Caravaggio, and his wife Giannetta. Patrick falls in love, in succession, with both Clara and Alice. Much of the novel’s interest revolves around the hasty construction of the Bloor Viaduct Bridge, connecting the western and eastern parts of Toronto—an enterprise realized at the cost of many workers’ lives.

Patrick, who in the course of the novel becomes Hana’s surrogate father, comes to learn about Cato, Hana’s deceased biological father, discussing some “mementoes” (Ondaatje 1988, 139) that the girl keeps in a suitcase, including three photographs—among which, significantly, *not* a photo of Cato. Another key character whose photograph is evoked but missing is a nun who falls off the Bloor Viaduct Bridge before its inauguration: her body is never found and it is speculated (and never fully confirmed) that Alice once was this nun. Photography thus triggers expectations, both affective and narrative: missing images create an emptiness to be filled by research and imagination. Photography oscillates between tie and void, presence and absence.

Broadly speaking, other themes accompanying the presence of photography in Ondaatje include affect, desire, eroticism, social class, power, spying, truth, detection, identity, time, and art. As part of this complex network, the archival value of photography is underlined in all three novels under consideration. *In the Skin of a Lion* thematizes the way in which—elaborating on Pierre Bourdieu’s idea—*reality is validated* through the sanction of photography. The photographic validation of reality is granted credibility by—and, correspondingly, grants credibility to—a given social order: “[Photography is] a representation of the real that owes its objective appearance not to its agreement with the very reality of

things [...] but rather to conformity with rules which define its syntax within its social use, to the social definition of the objective vision of the world" (Bourdieu 1990, 77). Patrick researches the history of the construction of the Bloor Viaduct Bridge, documented by photographs taken during various phases: "There are over 4,000 photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time-lapse evolution" (Ondaatje 1988, 26). "It had taken only two years to build. [...] Commissioner Harris' determination forcing it through. He [Patrick] looked at the various photographs: the shells of wood structure into which concrete was poured, and then the wood removed like hardened bandages to reveal the piers" (143). According to the records, the bridge is Commissioner Harris' dream come true, propelled by his indefatigable entrepreneurial will; the deaths of many workers appear negligible, only "fleetingly mentioned" (144).

On the other hand, the novel suggests that photography can also serve to re-imagine history, capturing elements on the fringes of its institutionalized quality, like the blurred figure of an anonymous cyclist on the day of the inauguration of the bridge:

During the political ceremonies a figure escaped by bicycle through the police barriers. [...] Not the expected show car containing officials, but this one anonymous and cycling like hell to the east end of the city. In the photographs he is a blur of intent. He wants the virginity of it, the luxury of such space. (27).

This "non-official" image is actually a sort of middle layer, in-between official visual documents and no visual documents at all. The anonymous cyclist, who believed he was the first to cross the bridge, was actually not the first. Completely undocumented, a group of people had already made the crossing, in order to commemorate those dead during the construction: "The previous midnight the workers had arrived and brushed away officials who guarded the bridge in preparation for the ceremonies the next day, moved with their own flickering lights—their candles for the bridge dead—like a wave of civilization, a net of summer insects over the valley" (27).

Those who inhabit the fringes of history, as Gayatri Spivak (1988) has famously discussed, are often structurally hindered from making their voices heard. In narrative terms, the historically silenced, the subaltern, may, at certain moments, take on a voice, and tell their story. This voice is, however, not necessarily their own: for better or for worse, it often belongs to someone else attempting to tell their story on their behalf. (If one wanted to offer a parallel in visual terms, one might suggest that historical objects, often immersed in darkness and oblivion, intermittently emerge into the light.) Reflecting on photography can offer a way to approach the historically subaltern, the "historical objects" deprived of subjectivity. As a representational technology and practice, photography can objectify its subjects; it can reproduce power unbalances and ideologically validate the status quo—i.e., it can lend credibility to a version of reality purported to be reality per se. By contrast, several visual theorists have associated photography with an active, productive, even revolutionary potential. Mieke Bal, for instance,

has proposed to regard visual art specimens—photographs included—as *thinking*: “art, too, thinks: it is thought. Not the thought about it, or the thought expressed in it, but visual thought, the thought embodied in form” (Bal 1999, 117). In *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), W.J.T. Mitchell’s disrupts the idea of images as inherently passive and analyzes them as having lives, loves, needs, and desires. Desire plays a crucial role: images stir desire in their viewers; correspondingly, they can be regarded as active subjects of desire on their part. If—to paraphrase Mitchell—photos “want” something, they can offer a space of articulated silence to be filled with the possibility of dialogue; it should be, though, a dialogue that offers the possibility to rethink language as we know it, making room for silence to resound within language itself.

The entwinement of power, representation, and history is clearly present in Ondaatje’s 1992 novel *The English Patient*, possibly his most widely known work to date, dealing with the preparation as well as with the slow, painful unraveling—and conclusion—of WWII. In *The English Patient*, Geoffrey Clifton, husband to Katharine—a young woman with whom the mysterious eponymous “patient” has an affair—is an aerial photographer. In the course of the novel, Clifton is revealed to be an agent with the British Intelligence service, complicit in turning the North African desert into a theater of war. David Caravaggio, the Italian Canadian thief of *In the Skin of a Lion*, has become an Allied spy in *The English Patient*. He is captured, and his thumbs are horribly cut off during a torture session, because he was accidentally photographed and failed to retrieve and destroy the camera containing the film (Ondaatje 1996, 34-39). While, in these examples, photography is associated with war, exploitation, imprisonment, and violence, *The English Patient* also uses a photograph as an emotional catalyst for a key event in the text. After hearing on the radio that Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been bombed, the Sikh sapper Kirpal Singh, nicknamed Kip, threatens to kill the “patient”—whom he sees as an embodiment of all the lures and betrayals of the West—and eventually leaves Villa San Girolamo, the ruined villa in the Tuscan hills where he had been living in the company of the “patient” (who turns out to be not an Englishman but, instead, a former Hungarian desert explorer and former agent for the Germans) and two Canadians: the already mentioned Caravaggio and young nurse Hana, with whom he is having a romance. (Hana, Alice’s daughter, was also a character in *In the Skin of a Lion*.) Kip’s departure is a gesture of rebellion that re-aligns him, in his own words, with “the brown races of the world” (286). With this gesture, Kip seems to be claiming a pan-Asian and/or “colored” identity for himself, while he radically takes distance from the other inhabitants of the villa:

He feels all the winds of the world have been sucked into Asia. [...] All he knows is, he feels he can no longer let anything approach him, cannot eat the food or even drink from a puddle on a stone bench on the terrace. [...] In the tent, before the light evaporated, he had brought out the photograph of his family and gazed at it. His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here. (287).

The family picture is a token of Kip's belated identification with his past and his Sikh identity, marking his estrangement from the white/Anglo/militarized world he has lived in up to that moment. When Kip leaves, he discards most of his possessions, including the photo, which is found and observed by Hana:

From within the collapsed tent she unearthed a portrait that must have been of his family. She held the photograph in her palm. A Sikh and his family.

An older brother who was only eleven in this picture. Kip beside him, eight years old. "When the war came my brother sided with whoever was against the English". (291).

In a way—as we will presently see, reprised in *Divisadero*—the family photo underlines the painful rift between two brothers, one serving in the British Army (Kip) and the other, the eldest, fighting against the colonial power. Separated by an unbridgeable divide because of the war, the two brothers seem to come prospectively closer after Kip's renunciation of the British and the awakening of his postcolonial consciousness. At the same time, *The English Patient* as a whole does not work in the direction of an easy recuperation of the past: Kip's moving forward—and, overall, the novel's moving forward—comes at the price of suffering and recognizing losses that cannot be easily integrated, neither in the characters' lives nor in the ravaged post-war world.

According to Roland Barthes in *La Chambre claire* (1980), one of the consequences of the invention of photography is that we cannot deny the pastness of the past anymore. Photography is a token from another time that remains irredeemably real *in its being past*, both (almost tangibly) "here" and radically separated from the present of the onlooker. After the invention of photography history cannot be mythicized anymore (Barthes 1980, 87-89). As underlined by Barthes—and as also testified by the ambivalent function of Kip's family picture—, despite its intense relation with its referent(s), photography is actually characterized by a series of distances and ruptures: ruptures, for instance, between the instant it portrays and the flow of time, and between its "thingness" and its possible uses and interpretations.

Photography, Allegory, and Historical Materialism

Steve Edwards (2007) has observed that everyday details in a photographic image, brought out by photography's apparently non-selective, "democratic" realism, can be regarded as allegorical in their evocative, "silent" quality. Odd details in a photograph can be perceived as enigmatic, awaiting interpretation, requiring a pre-existing "encyclopedia" in order to be read. As is well known, allegory and photography are both key concepts in the highly influential philosophical work of Walter Benjamin. In a somewhat paradoxical analogy between photography and allegory, it may be observed that allegorical modes of reading and writing are, for Benjamin, as well as in Paul De Man's authoritative

reprise of Benjamin's argument, also grounded in distances and ruptures, especially because of a temporal gap between the allegorical sign and its meaning(s). In De Man's terms: "[the] relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* [...] of a previous sign with which it can never coincide" (De Man 1983, 207; emphasis in the original).

In reading Benjamin's conception of photography, Jae Emerling (2012) attempts to follow a non-allegorical trajectory. Emerling criticizes (what he sees as) the prevalence of a theoretical line informed by deconstruction (De Man but also Jacques Derrida and, in the field of art history, Craig Owens) that tends to equate the innovative quality of Benjamin's thought with a celebration of both the emptiness/fluidity of language *and* the disentanglement of the (photographic) image from both its referent and its *hic et nunc*, its aura. Thinking differently, Emerling maintains:

Rather than merely privileging the allegorical or celebrating the indeterminacy of meaning, Benjamin's interest in language as such *and* images interrupts the allegorical movement of human language with the "expressionless power" immanent within each and every signifying endeavor. The "expressionless" (das *Ausdruckslose*) is the "truth content" that both originates and impedes representation, what he calls the "material content" [...]. (Emerling 2012, 43; emphasis in the original).

Emerling argues—rightfully, I believe—that, for the German philosopher, photography has the potential of transforming art itself into "a fragment of the true world"; due to this transformation, art can function as an agent within a historically materialist conception of history, one that values the future as the (messianic) actualization of a silenced past—"the actualization of the as yet un-lived, the potentiality of the what-has-been that dislocates the past. [...] [T]o recollect is to grasp oblivion, the *agrapha* [...] within the present" (Emerling 2012, 46).

In his "Short History of Photography", Benjamin maintains that "the accents change completely, if one turns from photography as art to *art as photography*" (Benjamin 1972, 23; emphasis added). Following Benjamin and inspired by Emerling's reading of him, I would emphasize that the invention of photography urges all art to face both its truth value and its material quality, which is *not* tantamount to denying it the status of art; to the contrary, it is, I would suggest, tantamount to opening up a space where art and reality can dialogue without one becoming the touchstone of the other: "there remains something that does not merely testify to the art of [...] the photographer, but something that cannot be silenced, that impudently demands the name of the person who lived at the time and who, remaining real even now, will never yield herself up entirely into *art*" (Benjamin 1972, 7; emphasis in the original).

In Benjamin's historical materialism, it is on the leftovers and ruins of (to paraphrase the philosopher) the "tempest we call progress" that one must build a

sense of the future and of revolution. Benjamin’s interest in photography is part of a related effort to politicize art. Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* celebrates the revolutionary potential of photography exactly in the sense that it invests in the mobilization of the aura, in the intervention of temporal distance between the production and the reception of art: “Patrick would never see the great photographs of [Lewis] Hine, as he would never read the letters of Joseph Conrad. Official histories, news stories surround us daily, but the events of art reach us too late, travel languorously like messages in a bottle” (Ondaatje 1988, 145-146). In *In the Skin of a Lion*, art, including photography—or maybe, one might suggest, photographically informed art, “art as photography”—is made of floating objects from another time, objects that may become, in some way and some time, historical agents: “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (Benjamin 1969, 254). Nonetheless, (photographic) art crucially preserves a component of silence, darkness, and enigmatic quality. In this respect, the most significant photo is perhaps the photo *not taken*: “A chain was pulled that forced wet steam into the room so that their bodies [bodies of workers from the abattoir and tannery on Cypress Street in Toronto] were separated by whiteness coming up through the gridded floors, tattoos and hard muscles *fading into unborn photographs*” (Ondaatje 1988, 136; emphasis added).

This tension, within photography, between presence and absence, between the importance of the photos that were indeed taken and the effort, it seems to me, to conceive of the darkness surrounding the photo, and even of photos that were never taken, is a key feature of Ondaatje’s work. Ondaatje pays attention to the dark spaces that inevitably surround the momentariness of the image: this is where the pan-artistic—or intermedial—quality of Ondaatje’s writing is most evident (see Fusco 2017). Literature and words constitute the other side of the visual image, attempting a contrapuntal presence while preserving the fragmentary, silent, mysterious, somewhat stillborn quality of photography, as the previous quotation emphasizes.

Both Beverley Curran and Marlene Goldman have noted echoes of Benjamin in Ondaatje. Goldman remarks how Ondaatje redeploys Benjamin’s idea of the “fragmented character of human history” (Goldman 2001, 903), paying attention to the debris left in the wake of “progress”, as in Benjamin’s famous description of Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*. Goldman suggests that Benjamin’s angel is evoked in *The English Patient*—for instance, in the way the novel’s characters direct their gaze towards the past (Goldman 2001, 910), as well as in Kip’s encounter with a sculpted angel in the Neapolitan church of San Giovanni a Carbonara (Ondaatje 1996, 279-281; Goldman 2001, 913-914). Both thematically and stylistically, Ondaatje pairs a structural and idiosyncratic interest in photography with a “Benjaminian” interest in history—which is itself, in turn, substantially informed by Benjamin’s own reflections on the invention of photography and its consequences.

While Emerling tends to see allegory and historical materialism as mutually exclusive, and situates Benjamin’s interest in photography on the side of the latter,

I would suggest that allegory and historical materialism are not necessarily at odds. Firstly, in a way remindful of De Man's discourse, it is a fundamentally temporal in/commensurability—the suspended/projected moment of interruption/reprise in a chain of signification, in which one brushes expressionlessness—which opens up a “corridor” for objects from the past, so that they can later resurface, like a message in a bottle through the dark waters of history, at another time. Secondly, I would suggest that allegory is as much reliant on the power of the incorporeal linguistic sign as on physicality. As noted by scholars such as Sharon Cameron and Cindy Weinstein, who have written on American post-Romantic allegory, from the nineteenth century onwards the allegorical mode of writing has been predicated on the “bifurcation between the palpable body and the meaning ascribed to it in some non-bodily sphere” (Cameron 1981, 79). As such, allegory especially reveals its ambivalence when confronted with the human body; in Hawthorne's allegories, for instance, “the unique synecdochic relationship of tenor and vehicle—with part made of the same bodily substance as the corporeality for which it stands—throws the double level of allegory into question. In Hawthorne's allegories, what (part of) the human body stands for is the human body” (Cameron 1981, 79-80).¹ Moreover, as Benjamin himself has noted, the tension towards sacrality and abstraction in allegorical writing finds its counterpart in a problematic proliferation of signifying objects: “it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis, that all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things [...]. Considered in allegorical terms, [...] the profane world is both elevated and devalued” (Benjamin 1998, 175). What I especially wish to underline is that if, in allegory, there is—to use a deconstructivist term—a reiterated *différance* of meaning, and full meaning remains elusive, the visible/physical emblem(s) whose meaning remains elusive acquire a physical translucence that marks them, in their in-between state, as presence and absence at the same time. If, as Barthes famously maintains, photography, in its unprecedented entanglement with reality, is nonetheless haunted by an unbridgeable distance from what it is supposed to represent, photography appears to be the means of expression that most epitomizes the “absent presence” of meaning and materiality, the tension of tenor and vehicle, that characterizes allegory.

Small Seeds: Visual/Literary Blow-up in *Divisadero*

I shall now proceed to discuss *Divisadero*, originally published in 2007, in order to explore how Ondaatje further expands his literary use of photography. I

¹ As Sharon Cameron has argued, in Hawthorne's allegories the truth of a character is often distilled in a single bodily part; accordingly, the reading process entails dissection as well as zooming-in.

shall especially pay attention to how the presence of photography in *Divisadero* matches a thematization and presence of history that is—when compared with the thematization and presence of history in *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*—“smaller” in scale, as well as less dependent on the human element. Small things, objects, and natural elements open up temporal lines next to, sometimes even independently from a human presence.

Divisadero is divided in three parts of uneven length. Part One, titled “Anna, Claire, and Coop”, narrates the entwined lives of the three eponymous characters. When Anna’s mother, Chicana Lydia Mendez, dies in childbirth, her father brings the infant home together with another baby girl, Claire, born to another deceased mother in the same hospital during the same week. The girls grow up like twins on their father’s farm near Petaluma, California. On the farm also lives Cooper, nicknamed Coop, the slightly older orphaned son of the neighbor farmers, who were murdered. The girls’ father treats Coop as a farmhand rather than an adopted son. When the girls are sixteen, Anna and Coop begin a secret romance. They are discovered by Anna’s father, who attempts to kill Coop and is wounded by Anna in a counter-attempt to protect her lover. Anna flees the farm, never to come back, while Claire saves an injured and temporarily blind Coop from freezing to death.

Years later, Anna, Claire, and Coop are leading separate lives. Anna is a literary historian, living in France while researching the obscure French writer Lucien Segura. Of all places, she is renting and living in Segura’s former house in the countryside near Dému, Gascony. Claire has become the assistant of a public defense attorney in San Francisco. Coop, who makes a living as a professional cardsharp, becomes a partner in a successful sting and is later lured into a trap by other cardsharps with the help of Bridget, a drug addict Coop has fallen for. Claire and Coop are brought together again by a fortuitous turn of events. Claire eventually takes care of Coop, who suffers from amnesia after having been badly beaten. Part One also narrates Anna’s romance with Rafael, a French-Romani guitarist who personally knew Segura when he was a child.

Part Two and Three move back in time and narrate two chunks of the life of Lucien Segura. Part Two focuses on his meeting Rafael’s nomad family in his old age. Part Three goes all the way back to his childhood, starting with the death of his father, narrating his life with his mother, marriage, fatherhood, and role in WWI. The core of Part Three is probably the love triangle involving Lucien as well as Roman and Marie-Neige, a married couple of neighbor farmers he has known since youth. After Marie-Neige dies during the final months of the Great War, Lucien brings her back to life in his adventurous novels, written under a pseudonym, in the guise of several female characters.

In Part Three, it becomes evident that Anna herself is the narrator of Lucien’s (imagined? reconstructed?) life. Anna, who has the role of first-person narrator at the beginning of the text and for several sections of it, has changed her name after experiencing trauma and fleeing her family. We never learn her new name.

The initial pages of the novel immediately reveal the importance of photography. Anna narrates her father’s yearly ritual of taking a photo of herself

and Claire:

Between Christmas and New Year's—the picture was always taken at that time—we'd be herded onto the pasture beside the outcrop of rock (where our mother was buried) and captured in a black-and-white photograph [...].

We would study ourselves in this evolving portrait. [...] We were revealed and betrayed by our poses. [...] In spite of having been almost inseparable, we were diverging, pacing ourselves privately into our own version of ourselves. And then there was the last photograph, when we were both sixteen, where our faces gazed out nakedly. (Ondaatje 2010, 10-11).

As this quotation makes clear, this photo series works as a token/process of identification and, eventually, dis/identification between the sisters. In a way that is reminiscent of *The English Patient*, a photograph stands for both the past and the unbridgeable distance from it. Not casually, when Anna leaves the family, she rips out the last photo of herself and Claire from the album and takes it with her (134).

In diegetic as well as meta-narrative terms, after the forced separation, the two sisters keep thinking of each other, imagining each other's lifeline and—less explicitly in the case of Claire, and quite overtly in the case of Anna, who is a narrator and a historian—inventing stories about each other. I wish to underline that each sister is, to an extent, “stilled” in her narrative development from the perspective of the other, because she's gone from sight and excluded from contact. On the other hand, the “stilled” one takes on a new shape in the other sister's creative imagination, becoming larger-than-life. This creative act also entails the possibility to live with the consequences of trauma:

“We have art”, Nietzsche says, “so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth”. For the raw truth of an episode never ends, just as the terrain of my sister's life and the story of my time with Coop are endless to me. They are the possibilities every time I pick up the telephone when it rings suddenly, some late hour after midnight, and I hear the beeps and whirrs that suggest a transatlantic call, and I wait for that deep breath before Claire will announce herself. I will be for her an almost unrecognizable girl save for an image in a picture. (261).

The “mitosis” of the twins—which may be identified as the event that allows Anna to take on her narratorial role—is accompanied by a passage suggesting that Anna has grown up absorbing Claire, and has retained particles of Claire within herself. Significantly, it is also suggested that the absorption may actually have worked the other way round, and that Anna the narrator may be the product of Claire's imagination, brought back to life by Claire:

One fetal twin may absorb the other without malice, and retain in its body a loose relic or two of one of the absorbed twin's femurs. [...] That marvel, Annie Dillard, wrote that. And perhaps this is the story of twinship. I have smuggled myself from who I was, and what I was. But am I the living twin in the story of our family? Or is it Claire? Who is the stilled one? (135)

It is important at this point to consider the peculiar structure of correspondences offered by the novel. The novel's title is thus motivated by Anna:

I come from Divisadero Street. Divisadero, from the Spanish word for “division”, the street that at one time was the dividing line between San Francisco and the fields of the Presidio. Or it might derive from the word *divisar*, meaning “to gaze at something from a distance”. [...] It is what I do with my work, I suppose. I look into the distance for those I have lost, so that I see them everywhere. (136)

In Sofie de Smyter’s opinion, this word choice “foregrounds that both sign and subject are always already divided, split, double, and in the process of becoming” (2009, 99). The novel itself is a two-faced mirror, connecting/separating distant places, times, and beings. Events and characters echo each other, showing difference in similarity; they repeat themselves, while displaying variations in this pattern of repetitions. Among the many occurrences, I shall only mention two: both Coop (in Part One) and Lucien (in Part Three) are involved in an aggression during which a window shatters and glass shards cut them; and, in Part One, Coop is twice beaten within inches of his life—the first time by Anna and Claire’s father, the second time by a gang of cardsharps attempting to blackmail him (“[...] say you will work with us, or we’ll beat the hell out of you’. ‘I’ve been there’, Cooper said quietly”, Ondaatje 2010, 125).

Photography has a structural role as a porous thematic and stylistic boundary. The presence of photography underlines that reality and representation, history and fiction, life and art, are located on the two sides of a mirror that can be imperceptibly, electrically brushed against, but not really touched nor traversed. In Anna’s terms: “I work where art meets life in secret” (135). At the end of Part One, Claire wants to “fold the two halves of her life together like a map” (158), but this perfect correspondence, like the full redressal of past trauma, is impossible—as stressed by the image at the novel’s closure: “Some birds in the almost-dark are flying as close to their reflections as possible” (268).

Let us now consider the much-quoted chapter titled “Two Photographs”, which closes Part Two. “‘Two Photographs’ is the threshold chapter that connects/separates the first part of the novel about Anna, Claire, Coop and their father, as well as about Lucien Segura, the thief, Aria and Raphael, from the second one, or better from the last eighty pages or so, that correspond to the biography of Lucien Segura” (Concilio 2009, 20). In this short chapter, an external focalizer zooms in, one at a time, on two photographs hanging side by side on a wall of the house in Dému. The two photos are ekphrastically described by a third-person external narrator. The first photo portrays Lucien Segura “in this last phase of his life” (Ondaatje 2010, 181); while Lucien is the central subject of the picture, “[o]n the righthand side [...] is a dark blur [...] the only photographic capturing of Lucien’s friend Liébard, or Astolphe” (*ibid.*). (“Liébard” and “Astolphe” are two of the temporary, self-given names of Rafael’s father, a thief who has fallen in love with Aria, a Romani woman; thanks to some clues, he can be *a posteriori* identified with David Caravaggio from the other two novels.) The second photo is of Anna “naked from the waist up [...] she has woven the roots of two small muddy plants into her blond hair, so it appears as if mullein and rosemary are growing [...] on

her head” (Ondaatje 2010, 182).² The picture was taken by Rafael: “He used her camera, and the image has been blown up to be the same size as the other, so it is, in a way, a partner to it” (181).

Above I used Mieke Bal’s narratological concept of the “external focalizer” to render the idea of two lenses positioned in line with each other, thus constructing this chapter as meta-visual: the lens of the external focalizer frames the implied lens(es) of the photographic devices that have produced the pictures. On the other hand, this chapter is also meta-narrative and broadly meta-textual. The fact that one of the images—Anna’s—has been blown up to match the other—Lucien’s—is, Julia Breitbach (2012, 185) suggests, the stylistic metaphor that reveals the artistic intention behind the whole book. With the help of this photographic threshold, Ondaatje literally turns the novel on its head, enlarging one component of Anna’s life—her interest in the life and work of Segura—into a full-scaled presence of its own. As the novel moves on from the life stories of Anna, Claire, and Coop to Lucien Segura’s story, the focus shifts to “the other side” of the book, which becomes visible beneath/next to the other one. If, for Breitbach, Ondaatje realizes “the superimposition of two life stories to create beautiful art” (2012, 194), the choice of a “blow-up” (i.e. photographic enlargement) technique reveals that the matter of the reciprocal relations of the two (or three) parts of the novel—as well as of their mutual proportions, determined by an act of zooming in and out of them—is highly significant. In my view, the most conspicuously “photographic” novelty in *Divisadero*, when compared to other uses of photography in Ondaatje, is exactly this “blow-up” technique at work; this is, besides, a more “specifically photographic” technique, perhaps, than other visual stylistic devices at work in Ondaatje’s oeuvre.³ The act of zooming in on a detail / blowing up an image finds a correspondence in Anna’s research interest in the obscured zones of cultural history. She excavates ancillary characters and makes them central: “My career exhumes mostly unknown corners of European culture. My best-known study is of Auguste Maquet, one of Alexandre Dumas’ collaborators and plot researchers. Another is a portrait of Georges Wague, the professional mime who gave Colette lessons in 1906 to prepare her for music-hall melodramas” (Ondaatje 2010, 135).

I would also suggest that this matching act, in which a portion of a visual text is enlarged to be read side by side with / superimposed on another one, can be regarded as *meta-allegorical*. I would remark that, as a signifying structure, allegory works *both horizontally and vertically*: while it is predicated on the vertical impulse of excavating meaning under a surface, each layer of signification has a horizontal pull, an existence of its own. While the two layers can be

² Anna’s photo is, once again, a token of dis/identification: “This person who is barely Anna” (182). The adverb “barely” suggests that this person is not “fully” Anna; or, to the contrary, it might suggest a sense of nakedness and authenticity, with the photographic image “laying bare” the truth of Anna.

³ Among these other visual techniques is, for instance, the constant dialogue between light and darkness, black and white, which can be regarded as photographic but also pictorial. See Fusco 2017. On Ondaatje’s “Caravaggesque” style, see Ingelbien 1995.

"stretched" and read side by side, their reciprocal scale relation also matters: a "blown-up" detail can set forth a new, diverging signifying chain, its specific value becoming enlarged when compared to the other details situated, so to speak, within its purview. This coexistence of horizontality and verticality is beautifully evoked at the end of Part One, with Anna and Rafael walking along a river and coming upon a road: "Eventually we come to a ford where our river meets a road and covers it, or from another perspective, where the road has come upon the river and sunk below its surface, as if from a life lived to a life imagined. [...] They merge, the river and the road, like two lives, a tale told backwards and a tale told first" (162).

I shall now go back to the problem of the "historical object", focused from a slightly modified perspective. Compared to *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*, *Divisadero* places more emphasis on the connective, historical quality of material objects, especially small things. Among these "small things" are photos themselves, both remnants of a bygone past and agents, materials that can re-direct the flow of the present: the "suspension of photography between objecthood and thingness: [...] the photo-as-thing, resonating with an unruly resistance to [...] discursive domination" (Breitbach 2012, 170).

The emergence of history as one of the text's components is specifically related to the text's "blown-up", materialist/allegorical aesthetics. History with a capital "H", historically meaningful events—WWI, WWII, and the 2003 U.S. attack on Iraq among else—form a background for the smaller-scale events that characterize the life of the characters. At the same time, it is precisely these smaller-scale events that, as if in counterpoint, carry and scatter, so to speak, the seeds of history: "The past is always carried into the present by small things. So a lily is bent with the weight of its permanence. Richard the Lion-Heart may have stepped up to this same flower on his journey to a Crusade and inhaled the same presence Anna does before he rode south into the Luberon" (Ondaatje 2010, 70-71).

While the relationship between reality and imagination, art and truth, is openly tacked in Ondaatje's broader oeuvre, it seems to me that *Divisadero* further develops a line of signification that valorizes unpredictable events, unexpected divergences, the products of small seeds brought and carried over by winds as well as animals' intestines (4), birds, and insects, in an "awkward moral balance of nature" (175) that seems to be only peripherally influenced by human intentions. Caravaggio/Liébard/Astolphe "was as much of a traveller in some ways as a blown seed or a bee" (174). (In this respect, the photo itself can be regarded as a paradoxical agent, a subject—and Kip, for instance, in the previously quoted passage from *The English Patient*, as the "historical object" of the photo-agent.) Again in Benjamin's terms: "It is by virtue of a strange combination of nature and history that the allegorical mode of expression is born" (Benjamin 1998, 167). This is especially hard to reconcile with a view of history as an encompassing, rational totality. One may suggest that *Divisadero* reveals a lesser degree of investment in history and historicity than *In the Skin of a Lion* or *The English Patient*; or, to the contrary, that *Divisadero* refines Ondaatje's long-term interest in history by means

of a subtler depiction of the small dramas that both accompany and feed it, illuminating it against the grain. History emerges in *Divisadero* not only—as elsewhere in Ondaatje, in a classically postmodern fashion—as textuality and fiction; it also emerges as family rituals, consumerism, broadcast news, grassroots activism, festivals in costumes, California landmark bars and diners, and other everyday habits and objects.

From *In the Skin of a Lion*, through *The English Patient*, to *Divisadero*, Ondaatje explores the implications of photography for art, literature, life, and history, making increasing room for the camera's and the picture's "thingness". The very idea of photography—in William Henry Fox Talbot's terms—as the "pencil of nature", as a technology assisting nature in reproducing itself, finds an interesting, belated expression in *Divisadero*. On the other hand, photographs, like things, brush against the lives of people and open up unexpected paths in them. We have already observed that Benjamin sees the invention of photography as an opportunity—perhaps a paradoxical one—to advance a materialist conception of history, and a historically materialist conception of art. If Ondaatje's use of photography echoes Benjamin's conception, *Divisadero* shows historical materialism as inevitably blended with both the human and the natural element in subtle, understated ways.

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