

**'Speaking One's Soul's Truth':**

**Reading**

**Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and  
Harold Brodkey's *This Wild Darkness: The Story of My Death*  
as Fictionalized Memoirs**

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Beyond factual truth, beyond the 'likeness',  
the autobiography has to give that unique truth  
of life as it is seen from inside, and in this respect  
it has no substitute or rival. (Pascal 195)

At first glance, Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and Harold Brodkey's *This Wild Darkness* seem to be very different narratives, quite opposite not only in terms of topic and subject matter, but also as far as their generic forms are concerned. Brodkey "record[s] [his] passage into nonexistence" (169), the story of his dying; Ondaatje narrates the quest for his father, 're-conceptualizing' the past while piecing together a family history. They both create their own forms of 'reality', their own 'truths', challenging boundaries, pushing the borders between fiction and reality with works that evade an easy generic categorization.

Smaro Kamboureli points out that "[t]he generic indeterminacy of *Running in the Family* is reflected in the reviewers' and critics' attempts to define it vis-à-vis the specifications of certain genres" (79f.). I will not try to take sides with any of them or to claim to have found the one and only generic definition. My idea is rather to analyze *Running in the Family* and *This Wild Darkness* comparatively within a framework where they can be seen to speak to each other despite their obvious differences.

This framework is provided by the concept of the fictionalized memoir. An apparent oxymoron that brings together "fiction", writing that is conventionally

understood to be fabricated, and "memoir", writing that is ostensibly based on the real life experiences of an individual, the term is appropriate for these two works, as it accommodates the seemingly paradoxical nature of these texts, in their refusal of generic classification.

Both Brodkey and Ondaatje explicitly play with the tension between fiction – imagined truth – and the factual truth one expects from a memoir. In fact, this tension is the main location of the authenticity of their narratives. It first becomes evident in the narrators' paradoxical introductions of themselves. According to Hampl, the narrator of the memoir is the protagonist, never the hero (cf. 205). In the beginning lines of *Running in the Family* Ondaatje calls himself into existence, putting himself as the writer at the centre when concluding: "Half a page – and the morning is already ancient" (11). The reader then learns in the first chapter that the subject of Ondaatje's/the narrator's story is actually Ondaatje's father, that it is about his father land – about the history of Ceylon as part of his identity. Thus, with his introductory gesture, Ondaatje makes himself the absent protagonist of his narrative.

Brodkey cannot be the hero of his memoir, as he will eventually vanish. His opening sentence, "I have AIDS" (1) bluntly evokes the inevitability of his death and inscribes him, the protagonist, into the centre of the text. While Ondaatje voluntarily departs on a "journey back" to his family in order to "touch them into words" (16) so he would be able to understand them, Brodkey embarks

on a voyage he has not planned: "The trouble with death-at-your-doorstep is that it is happening to you. Also, that you are no longer the hero of your own story, no longer even the narrator. Barry was the hero of my story and Ellen the narrator. The tale was amid others' lives – like a rock in a garden" (68). He places himself between others, defining himself not as a unique entity but rather in terms of significant others – his wife and his doctor.

Ondaatje as well as Brodkey explore the autobiographical self by way of alterity. In Ondaatje's case the quest for his father is a necessary detour in his search for his own self. The discovery of the other requires self-reflexivity. The self tries to explore itself through the other. However, this is a never-ending circle: the category of the other is derived from a notion of the self and of identity, and to find out about the other, the self has to leave its own sphere; while it does so, the self alters and this alteration consequently influences the vision of the other. Thus, the knowledge either of the self or of the other cannot necessarily be completed. While Ondaatje penetrates his family's history seeking to understand his father and himself and to come to terms with the question of who he is and what has shaped his roots, the view of the father shifts from the scandalous figure to the father of a son, and the end of the book reveals a moment of the 'I', the son, in the mirror image of the other, his father. One could certainly claim that the end of the narrative is just the beginning of the discovery of the other (i. e. the father) through the self (i. e. the narrator).

As Marlene Kadar points out, life writing is "the site of the other, and this other is 'autobiographical' in one sense, and not at all in another" (153). Death, for Brodkey, becomes the site of the other, a place "which is not only unknown but which one cannot enter as oneself" (171). He is dying in phases in which his relationship to his self changes. While at the very beginning "[t]he framework of the self wasn't changed by the words, the general feeling of its being [his] body and its having been [his] body all [his] life didn't dissolve", while he then "had no sense of gestating [his] death" (10), Brodkey comes to experience the immediacy of death as something that takes away his self, something that leads to disintegration:

This one [metamorphosis] is a stillness and represents a sifting out of identity and its stories, a breaking off or removal of the self, and a devolution into mere effect and memory, outspread and not tightly bound but scattered among micromotions and as if more windblown than in life. Or this is what I imagine, on the approach. (24)

At the end, death still represents a kind of "erasure" he cannot understand (172). Although Brodkey claims to be incapable to deal with "this inability to have an identity in the face of death", although he feels that his "memories no longer apply to the body in which [his] words are formed" (173), it is indeed this detachment that allows him to enter another self, one that is able to remember. In order to fill silences he is writing from the center of his universe about things that

matter, things and emotions that are beyond him. His productivity lies in the fictionalization: it is the life he has written that matters, not the life he has lived.

To which extent and in which way, then, does the genre of the fictionalized memoir allow the writer to fill in the gaps, the missing pieces of the puzzle of his life? Ondaatje, in *Running in the Family*, seeks to transform reality through the lyrical, suffusing everything with tragedy, warmth and love. Throughout the narrative, he confronts the reader with myth, challenging the borders between fiction and reality. Ondaatje incorporates the public as well as the private, in presenting the intricacies of family connections as a function of the complexity of a colonial inheritance. As Patricia Hampl remarks,

the truth memoir has to offer is not neatly opposite from fiction's truth. Its methods and habits are different, and it is perhaps a more perverse genre than the novel: It *seems* to be about an individual self, but it is revealed as a minion of memory which belongs not only to the personal world but to the public realm. (205)

In Sri Lanka, a complex social network has been created through the interrelationships between the different national and cultural identities that formed the country and are still present. It is this complexity, bound to the colonial mythos and to the native tendency for invention that Ondaatje tries to entangle. The history of his own family is equally charged with the fictions and mythical

elaborations of memory. The narrator chronicles both these histories, as for example in this allusion to Edgar in *King Lear*:

During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. So our job becomes to keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with the 'mercy of distance' write the histories. (179)

There is a certain tension between Ondaatje's wish to reunite himself with his family and his need to keep his family at a distance in order to be able to penetrate his family's history and to view it from different angles. When he runs in his family, he is running both toward it and away from it. The 'running' creates the effect of a complex search in which identity needs to be discovered in all its various forms. The author creates his history while collecting data on both Sri Lankan history and that of his family and, when facts to fill in the gaps are missing, he chooses myth to provide explanations, presents inexact memories as facts and romantic recollections as evidence, giving play to imagination in order to record the more intense 'truths' of the time and of his people. By way of exoticizing his country of birth, he defines it more clearly as 'the other' that he is looking for. He is both insider and outsider, and the authenticity of his story arises from his voice as the expatriate, the exiled voice that is both marginal and central: "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (65).

While Ondaatje's narrative works on the basis of transformation, Brodkey transcends the ugliness of reality with his compulsive, piercing honesty and intellect in a much more directly confessional manner, ultimately revealing details and a certain depth about feelings. Hampl's perception of memoir, i.e. that it is not about the past, that "[i]ts double root is in despair and protest", and that memory belongs to the public as well as the individual realm (204f.) works very well here. Brodkey states in the first part of his memoir:

Not constantly but not inconstantly either, underneath the sentimentality and obstinacy of my attitudes, are, as you might expect, a quite severe rage and a vast, a truly extensive terror, anchored in contempt for you and for life and for everything. I believe that the world is dying, not just me. And fantasy will save no one. The deathly unreality of Utopia, the merchandizing of Utopia is wicked, *deadly* really. (31)

Can Brodkey who watches himself being replaced with silence through death (cf. 173) in fact fill the silence himself? He calls death his "own final silence" (10) and wonders, "Is death other than silence and nothingness?" (23). Initially, in his dying, he loses "all sense of poetry and style, all sense of idea" and feels, for the first time in many years, "alive in a real and complete way, a human way"(11). He "consider[s] death a silence, a silence and a privacy and an untouchability, as no more reactions and opinions, as a relief, a privilege, a lucky and graceful and symmetrical silence to be grateful for" (19). This sense of

'deathly silence' as a relief and way of detachment reflects the power of death's reality. It is directed toward the present. While Ondaatje describes himself as a remnant from earlier generations in need to record the past (cf. 152), Brodkey sees himself as a "remnant of life, homeless psychically," whose history is not of individual importance: "My private code, the actions of my past, what I had done, what had been done to me, all that was a physical pattern now. I grinned inwardly at my nothingness, the nothingness of my life" (68). He may have left his sense of poetry or metaphor, however, his piercing honesty and confessional style record a depth of reality and feeling that are powerful and convincing enough. Ultimately, he cannot fill the gaps as in death "[m]emory, so complete and clear or so evasive, has to be ended, has to be put aside, as if one were leaving a chapel and bringing the prayer to an end in one's head" (172). This theme of death and unfilled silences is structurally reinforced by the question of Brodkey's adoption and childhood abuse. It is the most unspeakable narrative within his memoir.

If memory has the habit of embracing the imagination, what truth, then, does the memoir have to offer? Ondaatje is basically drawing the portrait of a group, writing a family history that obliquely deals with the politics of the time; the political dimension of the work is primarily tied to the aesthetic. For example, a Ceylonese poet is cited: "to our remote / villages the painters come, and our white-washed / mud-huts were splattered with gunfire" (71). He treats his family's aristocracy ironically and thereby undermines and heightens it. A good example

is the description of the house – its progressive decay could be seen as a metaphor of the ‘emptiness’ of this aristocracy. Ondaatje also presents the reader with glimpses of a wider history of immigration and culture, of what it is like to be an immigrant.

As Brodkey makes it clear throughout his memoir, truth and reality are a matter of vision and perspective, memory a matter of what seems to be significant at a certain time. By claiming that “it would be an extraordinary intrusion, a trespass, to describe a real face coldly and what I see written there “ (139), Brodkey tries to create a ‘true’ version of reality, the way he perceives it. Although he refers to his “being part of an endless family story of woe and horror” (95) and to the ‘myth of irresistibility’ among Jews as a childhood drama (cf. 52-55), it is only at the end that he can explicitly insert himself into the Jewish tradition. It almost seems to be a matter of compulsion when he writes himself into social history. Earlier on in the narrative, Brodkey makes a social statement about AIDS comparing it to the death camps:

The separation from society, the political marginalization and the financial thefts, the attacks to see what can be stolen from you, and the indignity – including social indignity – of AIDS suggest a partial, sometimes fluorescent and linoleumed version of the death camps. (44)

While Ondaatje writes from within a community (Ceylon) he does not fully belong to, Brodkey writes as the 'I' outside the community, even though he reflects a strong sense of belonging. In both cases, geography, i.e. the locations are shared and influence each writer's style. Ondaatje's use of exoticism and myth reveals a sense of vagueness and ambiguity and leaves the question of belonging unsolved. Brodkey, with his New Yorker journalistic matter-of-factness, goes outside the American morality system. He makes it clear that 'truth' is not an issue in this place. However, he tells it all as he is dying anyway. His treatment of time evokes an even stronger authenticity: "The only way conscious language can deal with wild variability is by telling a story in reference to real time" (76).

The framework of the fictionalized memoir allows both writers to speak their souls' truths (cf. Hampl 203). Both memoirs are gestures toward truth. As mentioned above, Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* ends with a beginning. Brodkey may have started out his journey with a sense of inescapable end and nothingness. *This Wild Darkness* opens up, however, to a different kind of reality that lets the narrator continue on his journey.

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