

WHERE THE TRUTH LIES

**Where the Truth Lies:
Narrative Ambiguity in Postmodern Fiction**

**By
Steven Hill, B.A.**

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AUTHOR : Steven Hill, B.A. (Mcmaster University)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to address the notion of unreliable narration and its treatment in the postmodern novel. More specifically, it seeks to identify a number of characteristics shared by novels which offer fictional treatments of historical biographies and autobiographies. These characteristics include the use of dual ontological narrative structures, self-reflexivity, the deconstruction of authority and the genre in question, and finally, the existence of psychological truth in the narrators.

Chapter One briefly addresses the historical development of unreliable narration, examining works from Henry Fielding through to postmodernism. Chapter Two begins the inquiry into specific works by examining Michael Ondaatje's autobiographical novel, Running in the Family, and the way that the narrator fabricates a relationship with the father he has barely known in order to cope with the experience of loss. Chapter Three concerns Timothy Findley's The Wars, and the deconstruction of authority in the portrayal of history through a narrator who, because of emotional involvement with his/her subject, actively fictionalizes what is ostensibly intended to be a faithful historical account. Finally, Chapter Four examines Carol Shields' The Stone Diaries, and its narrator's active invention of emotional experience in order to impose meaning on what she perceives as a meaningless existence.

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Introduction

**“All I have written here...is true; except the lies.”
(Findley, Famous Last Words, 59)**

This is the inauspicious beginning to Hugh Selwyn Mauberly’s narrative in Famous Last Words. Ordinarily, speakers seek to establish an immediate rapport with their listeners, to create a relationship of trust and to build upon this foundation for the remainder of their narrative. However, Mauberly’s utterance has the opposite effect, immediately placing readers of his story at an outside remove, examining the possible truth value (or lack thereof) of his statements for the duration of his account. When the readers’ view into a text is marred by uncertainty, wherein lies its continued appeal? How does one extract meaning from a maelstrom of deceit?

This thesis addresses the role and function of unreliable narration in fiction by postmodern authors. More specifically, it examines the metafictional role that unreliable narratives have fulfilled since their early beginnings, and the way that postmodernism dramatizes metafictional issues at extreme levels of complication. In unreliable discourse, the reader’s attention is necessarily drawn away from the story itself, which, due to the narrator’s propensity for inconsistency, may be entirely false, and towards the teller him/herself and the possible

psychological causes of his/her unreliability. In this sense, the narrative's accuracy or inaccuracy becomes irrelevant to the psychological factors which motivate the narrator in his/her manipulation of truth. This reading strategy emphasizes the act of telling, and the strategies by which a speaking voice may distort the 'facts' and mislead the readers.

As a proper starting point to any study of this nature, one must afford due consideration to the precursors of one's chosen time period. For this reason, it is necessary to spend some time outlining certain specific types of unreliability throughout literary history- and especially the literature of the modernist period, which stimulated the growth of postmodernism. The first chapter of this study will examine certain fundamental aspects of narrative, as well as the types of narration from which unreliability originates, in works that span from Fielding to Faulkner.

By engaging in close readings of Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family, Timothy Findley's The Wars, and Carol Shields' The Stone Diaries, this study attempts to identify a common narrative pattern which involves the authors' use of dual ontologies, two separate modes of being which come into contact, that is, within the text. Moreover, these dual ontologies are the means by which narrative unreliability is revealed, as one ontological state deconstructs the other's rhetoric. For instance, The Wars consists of the biographical history of Robert Ross, a soldier in the First World War. This historical narrative is

framed by the narrator/researcher's endeavours to reconstruct the life of Ross. The narrator's ontology, which exists 'outside' of the history, deconstructs the authority of the researcher's account, and the authority of historical

narrative in general. The narration in Running in the Family and The Stone Diaries is similarly comprised of a duality of narrative voices which contradict the authority of their accounts.

And yet, these narratives are none the worse for their epistemological instability. Meaning exists beyond the narrative itself and within the narrators, whose unreliability is grounded in some form of fundamental psychological truth. In this sense, their narratives are a version of the truth, because they comprise the only perspective that the narrator is capable of producing.

**Chapter One:
Unreliable narration from Fielding to Findley**

**“The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple.”
(Oscar Wilde)**

In any work of fiction, “The identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character” (Bal 120). Stated simply, the narrational style of any given work is an indication of the manner in which an author wishes his/her readers to approach the story. The reading experience itself is

an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical.
(Booth 155)

As Booth describes it, this multi-faceted dialogue is suggestive of a form of relationship between readers and the text. If this relationship is deficient in any one of its many elements, then it can have a profound effect on the way a reader will approach the reading of the work. Many accomplished authors are aware of, and exploit this relationship as a means of directing the reader’s attention to a certain aspect of the reading experience. For example, Henry Fielding utilizes an omniscient authorial persona in Tom Jones, a narrator who, in addition to telling

the story of Tom and Sophia's love is also given to frequent digressions and interruptions of the story proper to comment on topics as various as politics, morality, and most importantly, the art of storytelling itself. In this manner, his presence as the teller is emphasized throughout the work, and his tendency to break the frame of the action effectively disrupts the suspension of disbelief by the reader. This is Fielding's way of guiding the reader to the conclusion that the art of storytelling is extremely difficult to master. Thus, his narrator agonizes over the way readers will respond to him, invokes the Muses for assistance in his mammoth task, and deliberately skips over parts of the story that he feels will be too boring for readers to hear:

The reader will be pleased to remember, that, at the beginning of the second book of this history, we gave him a hint of our intention to pass over several large periods of time, in which nothing happened worthy of being recorded in a chronicle of this kind. (121)

Thus, Tom Jones becomes more than simply the story of the title character— it is also a self-aggrandizing celebration of the narrator's (and by proxy, the author's) achievement as storyteller.

Although Fielding's narrator is faithful in the act of telling the story, his tendency towards digression, omission and abstraction associates him with a certain degree of unreliability. Fielding uses this unreliability as a means of drawing the focus away from the plot, but maintains the appearance of reliability because of Fielding's use of what Wayne C. Booth calls "Direct authoritative rhetoric"(6), an oratory style that

implies inflexible certainty in regards to one's subject. Because the narrator of Tom Jones is unambiguously certain about the story's chain of events, the consequences of these events, and their ultimate conclusions, the reader accordingly does not doubt the validity of what is being said. Indeed, there is no reason not to believe in the narrator's perspective; he never contradicts himself, never expresses uncertainty in relation to events, never offers alternative versions of the action, and the action itself does not contradict his version. By these standards, he is certainly reliable because "He speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work" (Booth 158). The extent of his unreliability is grounded in his periodical desire to suspend the plot temporarily as a means of controlling the readers' attention. In effect, he is taking advantage of the fact that the reader is his 'captive audience' and abuses their desire for narrative as a means of expressing his personal views on subjects such as politics, morality, and his esteem for the art of storytelling. The same can be said of the first person narration of Ishmael in Herman Melville's Moby Dick, who often diverges from the action of the story to communicate his personal philosophies.

In these types of novels, then, it is not the narrator's reliability that is questioned; rather, it is their potential for unreliability. On a figurative level, the teller of a story can always potentially deceive his/her listeners, who take for granted the fact that what they are hearing is true. Authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

infuse this potential for unreliability into their narrators as an esoteric device that heightens readers' awareness of the craft and artistic ingenuity involved in the act of writing:

George Eliot, for example, involves us constantly in her battle to deal with the truth, even at the expense of beauty or pleasure [in artistic invention]...[An] important effect is to involve us on the side of the honest, perceptive, perhaps somewhat inept, but certainly uncompromising author in the almost overwhelming effort to avoid falsehood. (Booth 214-15)

These self-reflexive techniques add a metafictional dimension to the novel, as the narrator reminds his/her readers that they are indeed engaged in the act of reading, and that the act of representing the truth objectively requires great effort and ingenuity, but ultimately, the narrator succeeds in this endeavour, testifying to his/her proficiency and skill in the act of storytelling.

This type of unreliable narration is not to be confused with narrators whose perspective on the events of a story is fallible and therefore not connected with an authoritative version of events. These narratives are commonly associated with the general theme of truth and its inherent subjectivity in the hands of human beings— the narrator is unreliable because his/her information is either misguided or entirely inaccurate, and this is due to the negative influences of others or his/her own biased and occasionally incorrect perspective. When the narrative perspective of a work shows a certain amount of fallibility, or “Is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays is transformed” (Booth 158).

These notions of fallibility are often used by authors such as Dickens and Defoe, who incorporate the use of first person narration in their novels, wherein the narrator is either a character who observes the protagonist in action, or is the protagonist him/herself. Here, the issue of perception comes into play, because the reader's view into the fictional world is mediated by a non-omniscient being who is capable of inaccuracy. Thus, Defoe's narrator in Robinson Crusoe makes frequent errors in judgment; early in the novel, for example, Crusoe perceives the 'cannibal' societies he comes into contact with as 'savages,' but later amends his earlier opinion by stating, "these people were not murderers in the sense that I had before condemn'd them in my thought; any more than those Christians were murderers who often put to death the prisoners taken in battle"(139). Similarly, in Dickens' Great Expectations, Pip often misjudges the inherent worth of the people he encounters, and is convinced for much of the narrative that his unknown benefactor is Miss Havisham. As the narrative progresses, however, so too does Pip's awareness of his surroundings as he learns more and more about the world. The movement in the first person narratives of both Dickens and Defoe, then, is from a condition of ignorance to knowledge, from unreliability to greater reliability. Thus, these narratives place the quest for knowledge and self-fulfilment as a major thematic device, and the journey of the narrators requires a condition of ignorance at its beginning, so that knowledge is a tangible

destination by the narrative's end.

The notion of first-person unreliability is even more tangible in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose Underground man is recognized by most scholars in the field as the prototype of the modern unreliable narrator. In Notes from Underground, the protagonist is an individual whose sentiments are dominated by resentment and misanthropy, and for this reason, his opinions of others tend to be both biased and inaccurate. Moreover, the Underground Man is self-consciously aware of his fallibility, but unapologetically continues to undermine the position of others, and maintains his essential feelings of righteousness.

This type of first person narrative becomes more widespread in the early twentieth century, when artists and thinkers began to question the validity and (indeed) feasibility of an objective point-of-view: "That which is as the objective is swallowed up into the immanence of subjectivity. The horizon no longer emits light of itself. It is now nothing but the point-of-view positing of the will to power" (Heidegger 67).

The discursive pattern in modernist fiction shifts from authoritative to doubtful or dubious rhetoric, and becomes thematically concerned with issues of epistemology:

The dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as..."How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?...What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it and with what degree of certainty? How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of certainty? (McHale 9).

It is useful in this context to think of literature in terms of message transmission. Within the fictional world of a work of literature, the author can be considered the sender of information, the reader the receiver, and the narrator the transmitter through which the message is sent. Prior to transmission (or the writing of the novel), an uncorrupted version of the story presumably exists in the mind of the sender, but when the narrator relays his/her transmission, the message begins to change and suffer distortion. This can be attributed to the limitations, whether emotional, psychological, physiological or epistemological, of the narrator him/herself. In effect, the narrator may not know or does not wish us to know the true version of the story which occurs in an author's fictional universe. As a result, the readers of modernist fiction never receive the message in its uncorrupted form, and must therefore infer the truth on the basis of their intimate knowledge of the narrator's unreliability, knowledge that is gained when the latter indicates a certain pattern of predispositions, verbal tendencies and moral judgments.

The above mentioned analogy is both useful and important because it is indicative of the fact that the modernist position on truth is such that it does not deny the existence of a transcendental signified (truth that has an *a priori* existence beyond the reach of corruption by human hands) *per se*, but does deny humanity the capability of discovering it. Thus, unreliable narrators in modernist fiction are perpetually in search of knowledge, or however insignificant, some sort of truth that

legitimizes their existence. This quest is destined to fail before it begins, and it ends at much the same type of impasse in which it began. This type of fiction “Deeply implicates the reader in its own preoccupations, transferring to him or her...the same problems of reconstructing a coherent story from a radically indefinite and doubtful text” (McHale 9). In a manner of speaking, readers of modernist fiction approach the work by assuming the role of detective, analyzing those aspects of the narration that are highly questionable, and inferring the truth on the basis of their analysis:

In “unreliable narration” the narrator’s account is at odds with the implied reader’s surmises about the story’s real intentions. The story undermines the discourse. We conclude, by “reading out,” between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been “like that,” and so we hold the narrator suspect. Unreliable narration is thus an ironic form...The implied reader senses a discrepancy between a reasonable reconstruction of the story and the account given by the narrator. (Chatman 233)

When the reader is obligated to perform under these circumstances, the implied author succeeds in diverting attention from the the story proper (which remains unknown in its true version), and towards the narrator and his/her faulty transmission of the truth. From a position of critical remove, the reader’s consciousness is first and foremost occupied by the act of telling or narrating a story, and in this sense, the reliability or potential unreliability of the teller is the text’s fundamental challenge.

In William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, for example, the heart of the novel’s subject matter is Caddy Compson and her story, which is extra-diegetic and can only be learned in isolated fragments

through the stream-of-consciousness narration of three hopelessly unreliable characters— Benji Compson is mentally handicapped and views the world through a limited and highly undeveloped mind, Quentin Compson is mildly insane and preoccupied with certain ideas that range beyond Caddy herself, and Jason Compson views the world through racist and highly misogynist eyes. All three perspectives on Caddy, then, are embedded in the highly subjective and often inaccurate impressions of her brothers, and therefore the ‘true’ version of her story is irretrievably distorted, never to be recovered. Faulkner’s story, then, addresses the limits of knowledge and truth itself when it is confronted by subjective human beings who are each in their own way handicapped by their own experiences and world view. This epistemological conundrum is the all-encompassing point of the novel, which, like Tom Jones, is concerned with the art of telling one’s story, but differs in relation to issues surrounding the limitations of the individual teller. As in Fielding’s work, the teller is shown by Faulkner to possess a position of power in the reader-narrator relationship; however, whereas Fielding’s narrator would not think of distorting the truth, Faulkner’s narrators can and will impose their limited perceptions upon the truth, whether consciously or not, as in the case of Jason Compson, who reduces Caddy’s story to the single statement, “Once a bitch, always a bitch, what I say” (113). When the reader is in some manner opposed to the moral or intellectual universe of the narrator, the former’s

perspective on the latter becomes more important than the story itself. Because it is impossible to unconditionally believe in Jason's version of events, the reader disconnects from the story proper and assumes a skeptical and more importantly analytical position towards what is being said, focusing on the significance of the teller's words as opposed to what they actually describe. This is the point at which unreliable narration becomes a self-reflexive technique employed by the author as a means of asserting the dominance of the teller in the reading relationship.

Self-reflexivity is even more pronounced in those modern novels whose authors establish self-consciousness in their unreliable narrators. In Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier, for example, the narrator Dowell discovers that the life he thought he has led with his wife and their friends the Ashburnhams, "The version on which he has operated and on which he has predicated all possibility of meaning and value in life-varies radically from certain facts...as he has lately been made to see them" (Hessler 53). In the opening pages of the novel, Dowell admits the fallibility of his own perspective and claims ignorance of what actually happened even as he relates the truth as he has learned it to the reader: "These delusions are necessary to keep us going— so did I and, as I believed, Leonora, imagine that the whole world ought to be arranged" (49). His role in the novel, besides that of participant, is to be the scribe or recorder, setting the truth down on paper exactly as he has learned it after the fact. Thus, he is the inscribed author of the text, and controls

the very nature of the telling— as writer, he is entirely in control of what is said, determines when it is said, and most importantly, he determines what is **not** said. Once again, unreliability serves as a means of foregrounding the fact that the narrator is the inscribed author of the text, and this very unreliability is the means by which an implied author's work becomes about the act of writing fiction itself.

The full extent of Dowell's unreliability is to be found in the very ignorance which he claims. Even as he reports his descriptions of the truth, he claims not to have known what was actually happening at the time. As the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that Dowell is possibly inventing the truth, and could have been more aware of his wife's adultery than he claims: "The emotional gain here is clear...By positing himself as detached, ironic observer, he avoids the necessity of seeing himself as enmeshed participant"(Hessler 57). As the assumed author of the work, Dowell can distort the truth by using the narrative discourse as a means to represent himself as he wishes to be perceived. However, "Discourse also gives us [the readers] clues to habitual ways of thinking or of framing thoughts about the world of the story that might indicate biases or predispositions"(Wall 19). These same verbal habits in Dowell are what ultimately communicate his unreliability to the reader. As Hessler points out, the narrator uses metaphors, catch phrases and certain expressions as psychological defence mechanisms which insulate him from the world and the pain behind what (if any) of the truth

he is hiding. Once again, the reader must disengage from the story proper to analyze the content of the narrator's assertions: "The text of The Good Soldier teases us endlessly with outrageous detail. It is a mine for speculation" (Hessler 53). Careful analysis of these "outrageous" details is what ultimately causes the epistemological house of cards that Dowell constructs around himself to implode, leaving nothing in both reader and narrator but glaring uncertainty. In any case, Dowell's function as the assumed author of Ford's work, as well as his concurrent unreliability in this function serves to destabilize the notion of authorial integrity as set forth by Eliot, Fielding and others. Instead, the author's potential for falsehood is actualized in the works of modernism, and can be seen as a reaction to the previous movement's trend:

Modernity can be linked to a desire to wipe out the past, thus allowing for new departures, and modern writing struggles to displace the history without which its struggle could not be conceived. The situation is afflictive, for such writing both affirms and negates its own authority. (Flores 27)

The character of unreliable narration in the postmodern period is essentially similar to that of all literary movements. As in previous periods, unreliability is still concerned with the role of the teller and his/her potential to distort the truth and abuse the intimacy of the listener. To state the matter simply, all unreliable narration is metafictional, because it addresses the functional elements of fiction itself, highlighting the roles that authors, narrators and readers play in fictional discourse. All literary movements achieve their distinctive

character through their characteristic treatment of basic structural devices, and postmodernism is no exception. If the modern sensibility strains against what came before, postmodernism reacts to modernism by taking the epistemological dominant to the extreme. As Brian McHale points out, the literature of postmodernism tends to project absolute epistemological uncertainty. The natural offspring of the impossibility of certainty where knowledge is concerned naturally raises questions in regards to certainty where being is concerned. Thus, the dominant concern of postmodernism is described by McHale as primarily ontological, in that artists and thinkers alike begin to recognize the possibility of not one truth, but several, and not one world, but several worlds.

Works of realism use the potential unreliability of their narrator to emphasize the integrity of the storyteller. Modernism deploys unreliability in order to systematically destroy this self same integrity, as narrators distort or hide the truth and withhold crucial information from readers. Postmodernism introduces ontological issues as a means of extending the debate, emphasizing the subjectivity and fictionality of truth through the use of narrators who actively fabricate and create it. Whereas modernism does not deny the possibility of objective truth, postmodernism declares the death of a transcendental signified:

At its philosophical core post-modernism is an attack on truth. It is an attack that originates not so much in an awareness of alternative perspectives as in a critique of the very possibility of objectivity...All our truths are, in a sense, fictions— they are the stories we choose to believe. (Lawson xi)

In the literature of postmodernism, these notions are represented by authors who emphasize the fictionality of truth, as unreliable narrators attempt to deceive the readers (and themselves) with elaborate fabrications whose ultimate purpose is to impersonate objective truth, to become the truth in its own right, a "story" the narrator "chooses to believe." This is further emphasized through postmodern authors' consistent use of self-conscious statements as made by their narrators, which categorically deny the objectivity of their own perspective, and also through the incorporation of self-reflexivity, devices which denote the fictionality of the written product: "Recent writers especially seem to write about writing; novelists...perform a laying bare of devices, a display of backstage machinery, an insistence that telling is, quintessentially, about telling itself" (Flores 26). When epistemological uncertainty is absolute and the truth cannot be found, it can surely be invented and given a reality status of its own.

As in modernist fiction, the central element in the plot of postmodern narratives of unreliability is a first-person narrator who embarks on a quasi-mythical quest for a particular kind of knowledge, knowledge which will, upon discovery, lend some meaning and significance to the life of the narrator. The beginning of these works, then, is characterized by a condition of epistemological uncertainty and a desire for truth. The quest itself begins when the narrator undertakes the task of discovering the knowledge which will resolve this condition of uncertainty. However,

as the narrative progresses, this quest is corrupted by gaps and silences in crucial elements of the information that the narrator wishes to uncover. It may be insufficient data, testimony from dubious or untrustworthy sources, or that which is simply unknowable, information that is irrecoverably lost due to destruction or the death of its possessors. In this type of fiction, it is at this point that the narrator's full potential for unreliability is realized, as the latter sabotages his/her own quest by fabricating the unknowable elements of the story through an elaborate fictionalization of the truth. What cannot be known is ultimately created.

This plot structure is most commonly found in two distinctive postmodern fictional genres: the 'autobiography,' in which narrators tell a part or the whole of their life story, seeking to impose a certain structure on their existence by ascribing meaning to certain significant events, and the 'historical biography', in which the narrator attempts to reconstruct the life of another person through the use of artifacts, diaries, eyewitness testimonies and photographs. These two genres are similar in that they initially seem to promise enlightened and reliable accounts, but ultimately fail to do so because of the unreliability of the narrator and/or the sources of his/her information. Moreover, the genres themselves are traditionally associated with authority, but postmodernism deconstructs this authority by emphasizing the fallacy of claiming that history is truth, and that one can present oneself

objectively. In reality, they are shown in these works to be nothing more than a different kind of fiction.

Since fiction itself is categorically defined as a form of deception created by an author or perceiver, much of the narrative strategy in fictional autobiography and historical fiction is based on various levels of deception, designed to play on the reader's assumptions concerning authoritative techniques in the act of writing. For instance, narrative misattribution is common in these works, and involves the reader being deceived into thinking that the narration is deriving from one source, when it is actually coming from another. Also, historical fiction tends to organize its account of lives 'in time' through the supposed use of primary materials such as photographs and documents, but then systematically deconstructs their ability to communicate any information whatsoever.

The reader's position in this style of narrative is similar to the one described in relation to earlier literary movements. Despite the fact that the dominant thematic principle of postmodernism is ontological, the reader's interaction with the text remains on an epistemological level, because he/she must always interpret that which is read. Postmodern unreliability combines narratory self-consciousness with his/her fabrication of scenes or perspectives that he/she cannot possibly know to produce the usual condition of epistemological uncertainty in the reader. Knowing that "Characters in fictional worlds are...capable of

sustaining propositional attitudes and creating possible worlds” (McHale 19), the readers must necessarily place themselves in the position of skeptical listeners who possess resistance to what they are told. Contradictions or gaps and silences in the transmission of information must inevitably produce uncertainties about the authority of the speaker. In this sense, there is valid reason on the part of the reader to believe in nothing that is read, to allow for the possibility that if one element of the story is clearly constructed on the basis of the narrator’s predispositions, then the entire story could be a fabrication as well. In effect, we could be reading a narrator’s fictions within an author’s fictional work. When these considerations come to dominate our intercourse with the text, and our attention is drawn progressively away from the story itself and towards its possible invalidity, we approach the text’s narration in an entirely different way. Under such circumstances, the significance of the literary work does not lie in the story proper, because nothing we are reading is indisputably true. Instead, the text’s meaning lies in our perception of the narrator. Because he/she is our window into the text, we are inherently exposed to a biased and subjective account of events. And yet, these very gaps, silences and omissions, which invalidate the fictional ‘truth’ of the story itself, are revelatory in regards to certain fundamental psychological truths in the narrator, and it is herein that the overall significance of these works lie.

When the possibility of complete narrational falsehood arises, an

experiential void or state of perpetual uncertainty is created in the reader, necessitating the latter's adoption of alternative reading strategies. He/she no longer reads for the suspension of disbelief that accompanies total engagement with the plot. In fact, the experiential void that disrupts the suspension of disbelief is exactly the author's intention, because it draws attention away from the plot and into the psychological microcosm of the narrative perspective. As is the case in the unreliable narratives of modernism, the postmodern reader first assumes the role of epistemological detective, identifying the gaps, omissions and fabrications of the story's telling and attempting to place them in a certain pattern of consistency. This pattern will reveal the only truth that is to be found in postmodern narratives: psychological truth. In order to solve the problem of narrative unreliability, the reader must learn the psychological motivations which govern the extent of the narrator's fabrications. When this act is fulfilled, the story's meaning is reinstated for what it reveals about the teller, the way in which it delineates the teller's consciousness, and reveals the psychological truth that determines his/her desire to actively fictionalize certain elements of their narrative. In this sense, postmodern unreliability is firmly rooted in the metafictional, as narratives foreground the ability of the tellers to create their own fictions and, essentially, their own truth.

Chapter Two
“The Bone” of Contention: Narrative Unreliability
In Ondaatje’s Running in the Family

“If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton,
you may as well make it dance.”
(George Bernard Shaw)

On a general level, postmodern fiction is comfortable with the conventions of unreliable narration because “The postmodern moment resists totalizations, absolute Identity, absolute Truths. It does, however, believe in the use-value of identities and local and contingent truths” (Marshall, Teaching 6). For this reason, postmodern writers tend to create texts whose governing principle, so to speak, is a high degree of uncertainty surrounding the subject being addressed. Destabilized subjectivity, multitudinous narrative perspectives, the blurring of distinction between literary genres, and the deconstruction of the ontological boundary between fact and fiction are the tools at the postmodernist’s disposal, and all (and more) are used to contribute to the degree of uncertainty that a text is capable of raising in the minds of readers. It is not uncommon, then, to encounter unreliable narration in postmodern novels because it is a narrative device which revels in its own uncertainty, and by its very definition rejects the notion of absolute truth and absolute certainty. Marshall’s use of the word “contingent” is apt and appropriate in this context, because the reader’s view into the author’s world of fiction is contingent upon the narrative perspective

and therefore we are exposed to contingent truths, as well as contingent falsehoods. Most importantly, postmodern unreliability forces the reader to participate in resistance to absolute truth because it is a narrative form that destabilizes epistemological certainty and therefore naturally stimulates a certain degree of skepticism. The more elusive and convoluted the subject matter of a text is, the more the reader positions him/herself at a critical remove from the text, and, paradoxically, the more interesting a text becomes.

Such is the case in Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family, a novel which resists even the simple distinction between fiction and non-fiction, an issue which has tended to divide scholars in discussion of the work. According to John Russell, Running in the Family is "A literary artifact of great stylistic range, developing a unique structure that carries it beyond the boundaries of the travel genre, into those of the nonfiction novel" (23). Rocio G. Davis prefers to think that the novel "straddles [both] fiction and autobiography"(267), and Linda Hutcheon argues that Ondaatje is endeavouring "to represent a reality outside of literature"(303), one that is beyond both autobiography and fiction. However, given the fact that the novel is comprised of a virtual cacophony of narrative perspectives, and inspired by a multitude of literary traditions, I would tend to classify Ondaatje's work in the realm of fiction, despite the fact that much of the material is drawn from historical sources, and his own personal family history, given him in bits

and pieces through dialogue with various family members and friends. It is important to remember that at crucial points in the novel, Ondaatje actively fictionalizes the perspectives of his grandmother Lalla and his father Mervyn as a means of filling an experiential void that would otherwise leave his journey of rediscovery incomplete. These sequences expose a certain degree of fictionality in the text, and in the "Acknowledgements," Ondaatje himself stresses the fact that his account is a facsimile of the real, a visibly made thing:

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)

This is not Ondaatje's admission that none of the events recounted in the novel actually happened, that they are not 'true' in a basic sense of the word; rather, the author fictionalizes these events as a means of representing them or providing an alternate version of the truth. The important question is not the essential validity of elements of the Ondaatje family history; instead, it is how we are to classify the novel as a whole, and the answer to this question leads inevitably to its status as primarily a work of fiction.

The fictionalization of actual personages is a device that is commonly used in postmodern fiction, because it is a means of destabilizing reader perceptions in regards to the ontological status of the work. Did this happen or not? The characters are or have been real people but the story

itself is pure fiction, the invention of the author. Moreover, Running in the Family is actually a conglomeration of two journeys to Sri Lanka, made by the author in 1978 and 1980, but the novel is structured in such a way as to appear to be one journey, in which the author and his family depart from Canada in the beginning, and leave Sri Lanka in the conclusion. This structure adds to the tantalizingly deceptive quality of the novel, which seeks to reinforce the readers' belief in its own truth at some points, only to deconstruct this belief in others.

Furthermore, Running in the Family is also a composite of several literary genres and themes, and becomes a chaotic representation which reproduces the appearance of impressionistic writing, but is actually a highly organized oscillation between often wholly disparate literary conventions. At various points in the novel, Ondaatje writes his work as travel memoir, autobiography, biography, history, myth, invented narrative, diary, archetypal journey, and finally as a mythic quest. Combined as they are, these elements result in the novel's rigid refusal to be classified in any definitive way. In the absence of such classification, then, this act of multiple literary fusions leads to the novel's inevitable categorization as a work of fiction, and more specifically, as a postmodern autobiography, which incorporates fiction in order to contest "various concepts of traditional autobiography, such as the notion of an individual and continuous identity, [and] the idea of the general accessibility of history or the past" (Lonnecke, 39).

Finally, the novel's opening page is an indicator of how the novel is to be read. Written in italicized script, Ondaatje refers to himself in third person, thus distinguishing between his role as both the author, the 'master' consciousness of the text, and as the narrator, who is a character within the novel: "He snaps on the electricity just before daybreak. For twenty five years he has not lived in this country, though up to the age of eleven he slept in rooms like this...Half a page— and the morning is already ancient"(14). Here, Ondaatje artificially reproduces "the central contradiction that plagues any autobiographical text: the ever present ontological gap between the self who is writing and and the self-reflexive protagonist of the work" (Jay 29). Because the author self-consciously inserts this contradiction into his narrative, he has created a structure of dual ontology that distinguishes the written product from its author, Ondaatje the narrator from Ondaatje the actual person, who is the writer of the text. In the opening page, then, the author warns his readers not to make an "assumption of identity between writer and subject...[which would] break the fictional contract and require us to think of the author as a person who acts in a real, timebound world" (Gordon 107). Thus, although much of the material in the novel is inspired by actual persons and occurrences, we must treat Running in the Family as primarily a work of fiction which is subject to the same analysis as any other wholly invented narrative.

The passage cited above is also characteristic of the novel's self-

reflexivity, which tends to emphasize the notion that it is the written product of an author's imagination. Thus, when Ondaatje writes "Half a page- and the morning is already ancient," he disrupts the suspension of disbelief that accompanies a reader's wholesale involvement in a purely fictional world, as is to be found in the work of Dickens. Here, the author once again establishes the dual ontology of his work, placing it in the context of written as opposed to oral discourse, reminding readers of the presence of a master consciousness, an author who uses his imagination to actively create the written world of the novel. This form of discourse offsets the narrator's, the tourist in Sri Lanka who is the experiencer in the text.

The same dual ontology and distance between author and narrator is to be found in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior, which creates a distinction between Maxine, the child whose perceptions of her mother are flawed and represent the workings of an immature mind, and the older, wiser authorial persona who reveals herself within the narrative from time to time. Similar to Ondaatje's work, critics and reviewers alike have had difficulties in classifying Kingston's novel as either fiction or non-fiction, because the sources of her narrative are also drawn from actual experience and use actual family members as characters. And yet, the key to this equation is once again the novel's dual ontological structure, which is "marked by a decentering of the author as protagonist and by the mediating effects of framing narratives,

[and] it is informed by an aesthetics of artifice and ambiguity, and ultimately, it presents an exemplum of possibility” (Yalom 09). The dual ontology of the work, then, serves the author as a means of freeing her subject matter from the real, timebound world and allows her to shape the story as a fictional product.

The fallibility of the younger Maxine’s perspective provides the impetus for much of the generational conflict between mother and daughter in the novel. In one crucial scene near the end of the novel, the younger Maxine confronts her mother and, significantly, asserts her independence as an individual:

I’m getting out of here. I can’t stand living here anymore. Its your fault I talk weird. The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn’t teach me English, and you gave me a zero I.Q...I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won’t tell me a story and then say ‘this is a true story’ or ‘This is just a story.’ I can’t tell the difference. (201-2)

However, the scene itself is ambiguous when one considers that the problem is that of interpretation on Maxine’s part, that learning to privilege the values of the dominant culture has disconnected her from the culture of her parents. As Brave Orchid states, “Chinese say the opposite” of what they mean out of superstition that the gods are listening. In this sense, the younger Maxine’s tirade is informed by the author’s retrospective view of herself as partially misguided in her anger. She holds her mother responsible for her zero I.Q. in kindergarten, an aspect of her upbringing which is rightly the responsibility of the dominant culture’s educational system. Despite this misdirection,

however, the event is crucial to Maxine's development because she finally manages to vocalize her anger at the various pressures which have marred her childhood, and it also serves as a violent means of asserting her individuality and establishing distance between her and her mother, who is the significant 'other' whose esteem the daughter both values and rejects.

The younger Maxine's erroneous perceptions and misdirected anger is not to be taken as a literal autobiographical event which actually happened. In fact, it is important to note that "There is no greater index of the disparity between the narrator's pronouncements and the author's strategies [in writing her novel]" (Cheung 97). Maxine's irreversible act of autonomy is the catalyst in her subsequent re-evaluation of the world, one that ultimately leads to the development of her own voice as a writer: "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation" (Kingston 204). It is at this point that the older, more mature and well-adjusted authorial voice emerges completely from the shadows of the narrative, and the younger Maxine fades into obscurity. Thus, The Woman Warrior operates on two distinct levels of meaning: first, it is primarily a fictional account of actual events that problematizes the notion of Chinese American identity, but it is also a bildungsroman, which chronicles the birth of a writer and symbolizes the development of her eventual writing voice. The novel's dual ontological structure frees

the autobiographical subject from the constraints of faithfulness, and enables the author to fictionalize, create abstractions and diverge from the 'truth' for artistic purposes.

Unreliability is similarly used to different purposes in Running in the Family. As in Kingston's work, Ondaatje inserts himself as character into his work and establishes the resultant dual ontology for the purpose of freeing himself artistically. His active fictionalization of the subject matter removes the constraints imposed by non-fiction and allows him to create his "portrait or "gesture" (Ondaatje 176). As was mentioned, the novel is constructed to resemble a collage of many different literary traditions, all of which contribute to the episodic and disjointed effect that the author seeks to maintain. And yet, the various genres represented within the text are united by one single endeavour which weaves the work together into a coherent wholeness, in which "he is in a process of recovering a lost world and, in doing so, healing an old rupture, recovering a lost self" (Llarena-Ascanio 12). The notion of a "lost self" is particularly important to the work, because his literary endeavour is ostensibly based on personal motives, because "Not to know and belong to a family or have a role in history is to be denied the very basis of identity; hence the author's yearning to establish a niche for himself in Sri Lanka, and to recreate his family's story" (Davis 267). More specifically, he seeks to reclaim the father he left behind, who exists for him only through faint memories and distant impressions.

Consequently, he must rely on and claim the anecdotes and memories of other people as his own as a means of filling the experiential void that he has lately become aware of: "In my mid-thirties I realized that I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood"(16).

This is the germ of the novel, the purpose of its inception, and at its beginning, there is a unity of purpose shared by both author and author-narrator in that both are in pursuit of lost knowledge. This theme encapsulates the quest motif which is to be found in the narrative, as the narrator adopts the persona of the investigator or historian, obtaining eyewitness accounts, digging up old records, and visiting the places which still possess a sense of the past. However, there is a sense even in the novel's beginning that this pursuit will ultimately end in a version of the past that relies heavily on invention as a means of achieving fruition:

In the heart of this 250-year-old fort we will 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. No story is told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way, history is organized. (19)

Clearly, Ondaatje recognizes the apparent distinction between history itself, the lost truth of what really happened, and representational history, which is the means by which history is retold in the present, and is therefore more a reflection of the 'now' than it is of the 'then', as historians unconsciously evaluate the past with the eyes of the present.

Ultimately, what the narrator discovers is the presence of gaps and silences in the family history which he seeks to reclaim. Moreover, "The Ondaatje family history is...equally laden with... fictions and mythical elaborations"(Davis 268), as it is with facts, and Michael finds that he must often contend with gossip and conjecture in the absence of concrete information. In "The Courtship," for example, Michael notes that during his father Mervyn's stay at Oxford "He had a good time, becoming briefly engaged to a Russian countess, even taking a short trip to Ireland supposedly to fight against the rebels" (23). He then remarks that there is a photograph "of him slyly posing in uniform"(24). The dominant tone in the recording of this information is that of epistemological uncertainty—he is not sure that his father actually fought for the rebels, and the photograph itself does not provide proof that is conclusive enough to eliminate conjecture and speculation. The gossip that Michael receives becomes even more pronounced when he attempts to recount the adventures of his parents and their circle of friends in the 1920's. In the midst of all the stories of unrequited love and legendary drinking exploits, Michael is unable to discover the information that he actually desires—the romantic history of his parents, and how much they loved one another during the time of their marriage:

Truth disappears with history and gossip in the end tells us nothing of personal relationships. There are stories of elopements, unrequited love, family feuds and exhausting vendettas, which everyone was drawn into, had to be involved with. But nothing is said of the closeness of two people, how

they grew in the shade of each other's presence. (42)

In "April 11, 1932" and "Honeymoon," the extent of his failure to recover the past becomes conspicuously apparent. The first chapter is named after the date of his parents' marriage, so the reader expects to be given elaborate descriptions of the ceremony and the reception. Instead, we are given an anecdote of another person's individual experience on the way to the ceremony; the wedding itself is not spoken of directly in the text. In "Honeymoon" the reader similarly expects to hear details of the young couple's vacation, but instead is given a list of historical events that move beyond the realm of private memory and into the public domain: "The Nuwara Eliya Tennis Championships had ended and there were monsoons in Colombo. The headlines in the local papers said, "Lindberg's baby found— A Corpse!"(29).

This is the elusive and deceptive quality of the narration, which ostensibly promises the delivery of certain information in the chapter headings, but ultimately delivers something entirely different. Here, the reader is included in the frustrations and failures that plague the narrator's quest; the names of the chapters and the resultant discrepancy in their content both communicate and create the same experiential void of which the narrator is all too aware. Later, Michael attempts to fill this void with the only evidence of his parents' marital bliss that he can find— a photograph, in which both Mervyn and Doris pull faces at the camera: "Everything is there, of course...The evidence I

wanted that they were absolutely perfect for each other...It is the only photograph I have found of the two of them together"(136). The last sentence in this passage is indicative of Michael's overall dissatisfaction with the information (or lack thereof) that he has been able to uncover. He is well aware that one photograph is wholly insufficient as an indicator of his parent's love, and yet he attempts to deceive himself into believing that "they were absolutely perfect for each other." In the chapter that follows, Michael's self-deception crumbles under the weight of its own contradictions, as he comments upon the eerie silence of the landscape: "Such precision would be jungle in five years if left alone...The sun, invisible, struggles up somewhere. This is the colour of landscape, this is the silence, that surrounded my parent's marriage" (141). This passage is a statement of self-consciousness, in which the narrator disengages from the lie that he has told himself and laments the means by which desired information is irretrievably lost. The "invisible" sun and the image of nature reclaiming the marks of human civilization is emblematic of the sense of loss that pervades Michael's quest. The idea of nature as a force that is consumptive of human life recurs throughout the text, as for example, when the narrator identifies silverfish "eating their way through portraits and wedding pictures" and remarks on the "images of family life they consumed in their minute jaws" (112). Time and nature itself is an enemy to his search for information, and the narrative implies that much of the truth or evidence that he wishes to

recover has already been destroyed. Thus, the purpose behind Michael's return to Sri Lanka is riddled with indeterminacy, and is characterized by frustration and failure. The overall effect that the author wishes to achieve is the impossibility of recovering the past in its coherent wholeness, as "The writer recognizes that the only perspectives he can offer are partial...[and are therefore] incapable of rendering the truth" (Llarena-Ascanio 25-6).

Another crucial aspect of unreliability in Running in the Family concerns the outright fallibility of memory as a source of information. Having no tangible memories from his childhood that can satisfy his adult understanding, Michael enlists the assistance of his many relatives, adopting their memories as his own in order to make his parents live again through the act of writing: "How I have used them...They knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong"(90). And yet, memory itself is both a selective and subjective receptacle of data, and it is entirely dependent on the point of view of the receiver. In "How I was Bathed," Michael is told of his own experiences, and yet he himself cannot remember them. His sister Gillian tells him the story, but it is not her memory; it is the memory of Yasmine Gooneratne, a former prefect at Bishop's College. Nevertheless, Gillian adopts the story as her own, and is "no doubt exaggerating Yasmine's account in her usual style, her long arms capturing and miming the capture and scrub of five-year-olds"(115). Having received a third-hand

account of his own supposed memory, it is not surprising that he has no recollection of the event, and is left “Dreaming and wondering why this is never to be traumatically remembered.” Having passed through the hands of two other receivers, the original memory itself is irrevocably altered, and is likely not the same as it was at the time of its experience. This section of the book, then, serves a didactic purpose by exhibiting in miniature the futility of Michael's entire effort.

Inevitably, memory is a retrospective faculty made palpable by nostalgia, exaggeration, and possible distortion due to the effects of time and prolonged forgetfulness. This is made even more apparent in “Lunch Conversation,” a chapter written in dialogue which attempts to relive the past. As the recorder/historian, Michael must sort out events and try “to get it straight”(85), and his disorientation is shared by the reader. To add to the confusion, Ondaatje writes much of the the scene without ascribing dialogue to its speakers:

Wait a minute, wait a minute, *when* is this happening?...
 You were in love with a nine-year-old?
 Neither Hilden nor Trevor were *ever* in love with our mother,
 Gillian whispers to me. People always get that way at
 weddings, always remembering the past in a sentimental way,
 pretending great secret passions which went unsaid....
 No No No. Trevor *was* in love with your mother.
 Rot! (87)

Because the attempt to reproduce the past through memory is defined by its own contradictions, inconsistencies and errors of perception, Michael's view into history is skewed, and therefore history in its true form is not to be recovered. It is in this aspect of the novel that the

divergence between author and narrator is most pronounced. As was mentioned, both author and narrator share the intention of recovering family history, but the product of this endeavour sets them apart. Whereas Ondaatje the narrator ostensibly maintains this purpose through the course of the novel, Ondaatje the author inserts self-consciousness into the text which then belies and deconstructs its own purpose.

This aspect of the novel is made even more apparent when Michael focuses his attention on the work's most important Ondaatje, and arguably, the principal subject of the novel: Mervyn, the author's father and a man surrounded by mystery and inscrutability. Once again, Michael's own memories of his father are sparse and insufficient, and he is overwhelmed by a need to both recover and explain the enigma which surrounds Mervyn. However, the information which Michael receives is the product of rumour and gossip, food for speculation that does not effectively answer his needs. The frustration of these desires manifests itself at certain points in the text, when the narrator disengages from his subject and expresses his frustration:

Where is the intimate and truthful in all this? Teenager and Uncle. Husband and lover. A lost father in his solace. And why do I want to know of this privacy? After the cups of tea, coffee, public conversations...I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover. (43)

It is the private, intimate side of Mervyn that Michael needs to recover, but his father's public persona is what he finds instead, the external

aspects of his character that reveal nothing of his thoughts and feelings: “There is so much to know and we can only guess. Guess around him. To know him from these stray actions I am told about by those who loved him” (171). Michael learns of his father’s public feud with Mr. Bandaranaike, of alcoholic incidents on trains, of quasi-legendary social adventures, and mildly delusional fits of paranoia, such as Mervyn’s discovery of several ‘bombs’ on the train, and his certainty that the Japanese would attack by boat in World War II. These incidents are somewhat revealing in and of themselves, but do not provide a glimpse of the father whose “actions were minimal and more private...and almost secretly valued the elements of honour and gentleness”(143). This is the side of the truth that resists him, because only Mervyn himself could speak of it. Thus, Michael’s subject eludes him despite his efforts:

He is not imprisoned by his subject. In fact, his subject is constantly escaping him, because Ondaatje, who is now from somewhere else (Toronto), is far from knowing the truth, the real story. Therefore he must not only take into account others’ narratives, but also take his time... (Brossard 181)

The epistemological void that pervades Michael’s quest for knowledge becomes even more pronounced in “Final Days, Father Tongue,” when Michael relies on the accounts of three people to reconstruct the latter part of Mervyn’s life. Although some valuable insights are provided by Jennifer, V.C. de Silva, and Archer Jayawardene, each of them is concerned with their own relationship to Mervyn, and how he behaved in their presence. The essence of their accounts involve particularity, and

they do not speak generally of the man. For instance, V.C. de Silva describes their mutual interest in chickens, Archer relates their social life together and Mervyn's funeral, and Jennifer describes his parental treatment of her as a child. None of their perspectives can be said to bring Michael any closer to establishing intimacy with his departed father. In fact, even their knowledge of him is incomplete, as becomes apparent when Archer describes Mervyn's bout with depression and the latter "wouldn't speak to us. We were his closest friends and he ignored us. Just sat there completely still"(168).

Within the constraints of such glaring epistemological uncertainty, Michael is forced to engage in an act that solidifies his unreliability as narrator; in the absence of salient information, he is forced to recreate his father through a process of fictionalization and narrative invention. "Thanikama" adopts the perspective of Mervyn through an omniscient third person narrator who is actually Michael himself, who, unable to discover the substance of his father's motivations and thereby discover a connection between them, is forced to depend upon his own imagination to fill in the experiential void. In the narrative within "Thanikama," both author and narrator create a Mervyn who, like them, is preoccupied with the past and struggles to reunite his family: "He could hardly remember where the children were now. Two in school in England, one in Kegalle, one in Colombo...He recalled everyone. Their crowd...The memory of his friends was with him in the sun"(157). On the way home, Mervyn gives a

cinnamon peeler a ride and is enchanted with the smell that comes off the man, just as Michael's poem "The Cinnamon Peeler's Wife" describes earlier in the text. Thus, this section of the novel encapsulates Michael's desire to relate to a man that he does not and cannot possibly know, and must invent the connections between them, however trivial they may appear. This in turn enables him to find a resolution to his quest, and conclude his endeavour. Once completed, he is self-consciously aware of its overall insufficiency, but he has nevertheless obtained a form of closure to his personal crisis, as he is able to address his father and make his declaration of love:

But the book again is incomplete. In the end your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we thought we would be able to fully understand you. Love is often, towards your stadium of small things. Whatever brought you solace we would have applauded. Whatever controlled the fear we would have embraced. (172)

Given the fact that the postmodern autobiography reveals the way in which the truth is crushed beneath the weight of inaccuracies, lost information and even wholesale invention by the narrator, how then does the text retain the engagement of the reader? Running in the Family is a narrative of displaced subjectivity, in which a narrator feels a loss of centre in early middle age because of the father he lost and barely knew, and the narrative is the means of enabling this recovery through the rediscovery of the previous generations of the Ondaatje family line. And yet, he is not able to recover the unknown father at all, at least not through conventional and external sources of biographical information,

all of which convey a sense of insufficiency. The answer to this dilemma, which threatens the essential purpose of his journey to Sri Lanka is a turn inward, in which the narrator reaches into the self and provides a personal vision of Mervyn, one that is indeed a portrait or gesture.

The importance of the work, then, is not the text's subject matter, which is filled with uncertainties and coloured by the perspective of a narrator who must by all means succeed, but the narrator himself, the perceiver of the work into whose mind the reader is given a privileged view. In its essence, Running in the Family is not about the story that is told; rather, it is the story that is hidden and glossed over by the unreliability of its teller. It is here that the novel's dual ontological structure is essential; as was mentioned, there are two Michael Ondaatjes to be found in this text. One (the narrator) presents a discourse that relates in process the journey to Sri Lanka, and the other (the author) inserts self-conscious awareness of unreliability into the narrator's discourse. Essentially, Ondaatje the author, the one who has returned from Sri Lanka and learned from the journey, writes the story of the previous (and inexperienced) incarnation of himself, who is in the process of learning the lesson already known by the author. In this way, Ondaatje the author is able to create himself as character and reveal the fallacies of his own discourse, and in doing so, he deconstructs the autobiographical genre. Thus, the novel is just as concerned with the act of telling as it is with the thing being told, and by extension, with the

teller himself, and the psychological implications of his own unreliability.

To illustrate, the novel's most powerful and disturbing image is also a clear indication of narrative unreliability. The narrative begins in Canada with the description of a nightmare, in which Michael sees his father, "chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were screaming and barking into the tropical landscape" (15). Clearly, the author is ominously foreshadowing "The Bone," which appears later in the novel, and also implies that the image is the product of Michael's imagination. And yet, "The Bone" begins by suggesting otherwise: "There is a story about my father I cannot come to terms with. It is one of the versions of the train escapade" (153). The story that follows is an enlargement of Michael's earlier vision, and yet this chapter suggests that this is a story told to Michael by Arthur, who supposedly witnesses the event, in which

My father is walking towards him, huge and naked. In one hand he holds five ropes, and dangling on the end of each of them is a black dog. None of the five are touching the ground. He is holding his arm outstretched, holding them with one arm as if he has supernatural strength. Terrible noises are coming from him and the dogs as if there is a conversation between them...
(153)

Here, Mervyn is described with the use of terms that imply an inhuman quality. He is "huge," emits "terrible noises" and seems to have "supernatural" strength, a description which makes him seem more like a monster than a human being. These qualities suggest that the incident may not actually have happened, and when one considers the symbolic

content of the image, it becomes clear that "The Bone" is actually an enlargement of Michael's earlier dream, and analysis of this dream proves to be revealing of the psychological state of the teller. There are five dogs at the ends of the ropes; there are five other people in Mervyn's family, which include Doris, Michael and his three siblings. He notes that "The dogs were too powerful to be in danger of being strangled. The danger was to the naked man who held them at arm's length", which represents Michael's personal fear that he and his family are somehow responsible for both Mervyn's alcoholism and his later depression (the dogs are black, and a black dog is the symbol of depression). When the ropes are cut and the dogs set loose, Mervyn is left with "the lengths of rope [dangling] from his fist" (154), signifying the way that Mervyn is left when his own family eludes his grasp through Doris's filing for divorce, and addresses Michael's personal feeling of guilt that he and his family deserted Mervyn, leaving him alone, and 'holding' only their memories.

The overall tone of this scene is tragic, and the reason it is so distinct from the rest of the novel is that it is the only scene which explicitly deals with the ominous, darker side of the Ondaatje family. Moreover, it is written in a manner that deviates from the pattern which dominates the rest of the book. Earlier in the novel, the personal tragedies of the Ondaatje family are counteracted by the narrator's discourse, which involves the use of a comic and ironic tone which detracts from the emotional pain which would ordinarily accompany such incidents. For

example, Michael's detailed account of Mervyn's last train ride is littered with comic elements, such as the passengers' agreement to cross the rail car filled with sleeping British soldiers by tip-toeing on the roof of the train, the drunk engineer, and Mervyn's mistaken assumption that pots of food are actually bombs. The comic effect is enhanced through the narrator's use of irony; thus, Mervyn drops the pots into the river and witnesses "huge explosions as they smashed into the water" (130). In this manner, the narrator's ironic voice insulates him from revealing the pathetic delusional nature of his father's drinking bouts, and serves as a psychological defence mechanism which uses laughter to avoid pain, comedy that disguises the tragedy within.

In "Blind Faith," Michael points out that the task of younger generations is to "keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with "the mercy of distance" write the histories"(152). Indeed, Nicole Brossard distinguishes Ondaatje by stating that "Rain and writing wash away the darkness of what might, under another pen, have been lamentation, bitterness, or sorrow" (180). And yet, Michael himself is not capable of the impartiality both he and Brossard describe. Because he is emotionally and psychologically involved with his subject, the thin veneer of humour and the act of creating larger-than-life characters occasionally falls away, revealing the the pathos and tragedy that lies within. This is especially true near the end of the novel, when Michael addresses his father directly in "Blind

Faith." Even as he reaches out to embrace his departed father, he simultaneously reveals a certain degree of thinly concealed resentment: "And why of Shakespeare's cast of characters do I remain most curious about Edgar? Who if I look deeper into the metaphor, torments his father over an imaginary cliff?"(152). This oblique passage is crucial to the work, because it is indicative of one of the rare moments in which the author disrupts the "distance" that, as biographer, he seeks to maintain, and depicts himself as a son who is lost, angry, and confused by the inscrutability his father represents. They reveal his desire for impartiality to be a superficial mode of psychological protection.

This defensive system is used by the narrator throughout the text, and would be undetectable were it not for the anomaly that "The Bone" represents, an abrupt change in narrative style so radical that it forces the reader to reexamine all that came before. At this point it becomes clear that, at certain points, Michael's traumatic childhood makes an appearance in the text, a periodic return of the repressed:

One frail memory dragged up out of the past- going to the harbour to say goodbye to a sister or mother, dusk. For years I loved the song, "Harbour lights," and later in my teens danced disgracefully with girls, humming "Sea of Heartbreak." (111)

This passage is indicative of the way tragedy hides behind Michael's words; in this case, his memory of the separation of his family and the emotion attached to it is trivialized through the incorporation of song titles and the image of Michael dancing "disgracefully." And yet, it is also a clever means of indicating that the moment stayed with him as he

matured, and that he associates it with "Heartbreak" as the song's title suggests.

Running in the Family, then, operates on two radically opposing levels. On the surface, Michael turns a comic eye on his family members and displays his mother's "sense of the dramatic," as he paints his family portrait in broad, grandiose strokes. Beneath this exterior, however, lies the subtextual grief and pain of a son struggling to understand his father's actions, representing his father's "sense of secrecy, the desire to be reclusive" (142). Just as the true Mervyn Ondaatje hides from Michael, so too does Michael hide from the readers. In this way, the style of the novel is actually a representation of inherited traits that 'run' in the family. Even as he recaptures his family in writing and assures their permanence, he is also protective of the purpose of this grand venture, the semi-subconscious desire to disclose the emotional effects that his family life has had on him, or in his own words, "I think all of our lives have been terribly shaped by what went on before us"(152). This type of disclosure serves the narrator as a means of resolving the trauma of his own contrasting emotions, and ultimately enables him to embrace his family in the end.

Chapter Three
Time In-Memorial: Historical Uncertainty
in Findley's The Wars

"Get your facts first, and then you can distort them
as much as you please."

(Mark Twain)

One of the dominant strains of postmodern discourse involves the deconstruction of historical objectivity, the idea that history can be discovered through the use of primary sources and re-presented without the tainting influence of bias or predispositions in its presenter. The postmodern sensibility recognizes the fact that history must necessarily take the form of narrative in order to retain both clarity and chronology in its portrayal, and is therefore subject to the same rules which govern fictional narratives, and may also involve a degree of fictional content in its interpretation by a researcher. In the words of Linda Hutcheon,

We only have access to the past today through its traces- its documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials. In other words, we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narratives or explanations.
(“Telling,” 239)

The historian is inevitably confronted with certain obstacles, because the fragments of the past reveal only a part of the whole, and there are numerous gaps in information which must be filled in through an active process of interpretation and speculation. For instance, any account of the Ripper slayings would be incomplete without the speculation or

theories surrounding the identity of the notorious killer, despite the fact that it is impossible to verify the basis of truth for any one of these theories. This is the grey area of historical narrative, and the source of history's potential for fictionalization. As a result, historical discourse is invariably grounded in the epistemological, because it raises the issue of how the past is to be known and discovered in the present, and how the readers are to know the factual basis of any given representation.

Postmodern fiction seeks to emphasize the precarious balance between history and fiction, and establishes a complex interrelation between the two. Here, the presupposed relationship between history and fact is destabilized in favour of "a recognition of the subjectivity, the uncertainty, the multiplicity of truths inherent in any account of past events, and [features] a disjunctive, self-conscious narrative" (Tuck Rozett 146). This is especially the case in works of what Linda Hutcheon has called "historiographic metafiction," which recognizes and focusses on

important parallels between the processes of history-writing and fiction-writing...The postmodern situation is that a 'truth is being told...but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts... Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole. (239)

By its very definition, then, this literary 'genre' is well-suited to unreliable narrators, who provide the skewed perspectives which emphasize these thematic elements.

This is especially the case in Timothy Findley's The Wars, which is

narrated from the perspective of a nameless researcher who is attempting to sort out and reconstruct the maelstrom surrounding Robert Ross, a young lieutenant in the First World War who deserted in the midst of a battle. His/her task is complicated by the sparseness of documents and artifacts which deal with both the incident and Ross himself. Relying on this evidence and the eyewitness testimony of Marian Turner and Lady Juliet d'Orsey, the researcher nevertheless constructs a relatively coherent biography of Ross, which is presented within the text in a supposedly third-person omniscient format, and also through the narrator's reproduction of eyewitness testimony by the two women.

In this sense, Ross's story is consistent with the genre of actual war narratives, which "conventionally resort to documentary sources in order to reinforce their sense of reality...to reassure readers that the narrative can be trusted" (Cobley 107). By the same token, certain elements of the narrative also obliquely refer to historical personages, such as Virginia Woolf, Kaiser Wilhelm, Robert Owen, and D.H. Lawrence, among others. These persons, "as is often the case in the historical novel, are kept in the background where they serve purposes of authentication" (Vauthier, 12). Moreover, the mention of such persons in a fictional novel also creates a dual ontology within the text, one that is characterized by a mixture of the 'inner' world of fiction, and the 'outer' timebound world of experience.

As in Ondaatje's Running in the Family, The Wars is additionally

endowed with a dual ontological structure which allows the reader to enter the fictional discourse from two separate points of origin. In one, we are allowed access to the narrator as he/she researches Robert Ross, sifting through a various array of photographs and documents, and recording the testimony of witnesses. This aspect of the text can be called the 'outer' narrative, because it signifies a detachment from the subject proper and details the learning process itself as opposed to the knowledge that is gained. In the other, the 'inner narrative,' we observe the fruits of the researcher's labours, as we are presented with the narrator's 'historical' account of Robert Ross, and experiences which lead to and partially explain the desperate acts that he commits late in his life.

This does not even begin to address the text's complexity, however; the novel's dual ontology is the means by which the implied author raises questions concerning the multi-layered act of recounting history, and the way in which it is largely an interpretative medium. To accomplish this aim, Findley inserts a high degree of self-consciousness in his narrator, who (often inadvertently) in the outer narrative raises doubts as to the veracity of his/her account in the inner narrative, as well as the overall unreliability of documents, photographs and testimony as the tools of reconstructing the past. For example, he/she describes the act of seeking out testimony from Robert Ross's contemporaries, only to reveal the failure inherent in this self same

method of research:

Ask what happened, they say "I don't know." Mention Robert Ross- they look away...Sometimes, they weep at this. Other times they say: "that bastard!" Then the nurses nod at you, much as to say- you see? It's best to go away and find your information somewhere else. In the end, the only facts you have are public. Out of these you make what you can, knowing that one thing leads to another. (10)

The last statement in this passage has ominous overtones, and seems to imply or at least admit the possibility of invention on the narrator's part. Indeed, in the absence of tangible sources of information, the researcher is left with no other alternative but failure. The above statement, which is made early in the text, also (and more importantly) serves the author as a distancing effect that is used on the readers, one which disengages suspension of disbelief and diverts their attention away from the story and towards its teller. At a critical remove from the story, the readers are then in a position to assess the truth value of the narrator's account, searching for inconsistencies which indicate the possibility of fabrications by the researcher:

The reader is empowered to suspect the narrator's capacity to trace and interpret the past. Instead of focussing events through a central consciousness, Findley offers conflicting views through a variety of witnesses and readers. We are not treated to "facts" (or experiences) but to interpretations. (Cobley 115)

The narrative, then, while remaining consistent with a traditional war genre also "foregrounds its mediated status as a retrospective reconstruction"(Cobley 99), and consequently raises doubts as to the very authority the text seeks to establish, often revealing this authority to be nothing more than an illusion. The unreliability of the researcher's

version of Ross's life story has the effect of laying bare the devices of its own construction, and the resultant epistemological uncertainty affords the text its metafictional status, which emphasizes the relationship between sender and receiver, between readers and their author. These notions are further complicated when one considers that Findley's narrative also implicates the readers in the researcher's active construction of Robert Ross, through the periodic use of second person pronouns by the narrator: "You begin at the archives with photographs" (10). In this sense, "The I looking over the You's shoulder narrates what the researcher is doing in the archives, as, from the scanty documents, he reconstructs some of the main events of Robert Ross's life." (Vauthier 17). This adds yet another ontological level to the text, one which incorporates the reader into the text's unreliability. It serves the author as a means of shifting the onus of responsibility from the narrator and placing it squarely on the reader's shoulder, implying that the researcher's biased presentation of Ross is not simply a function of his/her subjective personality, but universal to historical narrative itself: "You hold your breath. As the past moves under your fingertips, part of it crumbles. Other parts, you know you'll never find, This is what you have" (Findley 10). The use of second-person pronouns adds a 'hypothetical' element which seems to ask of the reader: what would you do in the researcher's position? How can one be true to the past with such limited information? These questions are in themselves hypothetical, but they

nonetheless serve the purpose of placing historical discourse under intense scrutiny.

Historical narratives are by definition a retrospective device, in which the past is re-examined through the eyes of the present time, which naturally differs from the past in terms of certain fundamental viewpoints, concerns, moral standards and predispositions. The postmodernist recognizes that, since history is written through the eyes of the ever-changing present, the historical account itself will unavoidably be tainted by present concerns. This is the extent of the unreliability to be found in The Wars, whose narrator is preoccupied with an agenda that does not simply wish to make the past known, but also wishes to fulfil a didactic purpose as well, thereby compromising the objectivity of the account. Confronted with a noticeable absence of information surrounding the whys and wherefores of Robert Ross's desperate actions, the researcher fabricates elements of the narrative which he/she cannot possibly know, sabotaging the historical accuracy of his/her account in order to ensure the success of the narrative's didactic content. Stated simply, the researcher is unreliable as narrator because he/she is emotionally involved with his/her project, selects the story of Robert Ross as a means of creating an elaborate anti-war statement, and refuses to accept failure as a viable alternative in his/her endeavour.

To illustrate, we must examine the text and the epistemological

uncertainty that it inspires in the reader. Many scholars point out the emotional involvement of narrator with subject in The Wars, noting that “It is not the story as such, but how it is told that matters. The order of the telling is emotional rather than chronological, and we are entirely dependent for the telling on the teller” (Brydon 65). As was mentioned, most of Robert Ross’s story is told in a third person omniscient format, a method of narration which tends to imply an authoritative perspective, a privileged view into the thoughts and actions of characters that is not possible in first-person accounts. However, this narrative method is deceptive and illusory in The Wars, because we are actually told the story by the researcher, who is ever-present during Ross’s account, but hides from the reader in the third-person omniscient format. This element of the text would remain unnoticed by the reader if not for periodic disruptions of the narrative flow which indicate personality in the narrative voice, and therefore violate the ‘rules’ of omniscience. For example, at one point the statement, “So far, you have read of the deaths of 557,017 people- one of whom was killed by a streetcar, one of whom died of bronchitis, and one of whom died in a barn with her rabbits” (158), disrupts the impersonal voice that is affected throughout other parts of the narrative, and therefore stands on its own as an aberrant statement which is a clear indication of the researcher’s emotional investment in his/her project. At other points, he/she will break away from the narrative proper and engage in

explanations of certain technical advancements in warfare, only to once again reveal his/her persona through an emotionally charged statement. For example, when discussing the introduction of flame throwers to the front by German forces and describing the apparent disbelief of the Allied commanders, he/she inserts a parenthetical statement that positively drips with irony: "(Dynamite and tanks and gas and aeroplanes had all been dismissed with the same rebuttal. A: men would not do such things and B: they could not. Then they did.) The flame throwers made their first appearance..."(132). Clearly, there are two distinctive tones in the narration: one which attempts to relate events with emotional detachment and impartiality, and another, which cannot avoid feeling the psychological effects of violence and war, and uses irony to react against the establishment. Outbursts such as these are significant for two reasons: First, they are an indication of the narrator's emotional involvement with his/her subject, revealing his/her strong anti-war sentiments; second, it is a clear indication of the narrator's character and the fact that he/she identifies with Ross's actions, and therefore signifies the lack of impartiality on the researcher's part.

The narrative also contributes to epistemological uncertainty in its over-reliance on eyewitness accounts as a source of authority within the text, one which is ostensibly intended to increase the authenticity of the narrative, but ultimately has flaws of its own. When introducing Lady Juliet d'Orsey to the readers, the researcher notes that "At the time of

the events she describes, she was twelve years old. She is now in her seventies” (98). This statement inadvertently comments on the possible unreliability of the researcher’s source, because he/she is essentially relying on the memories of a witness not mature enough to fully understand her surroundings at the time. Also, he/she relies on Lady Juliet’s memory sixty years after the fact, which may or may not be fallible. Moreover, both Lady Juliet and Marian Turner are sympathetic to Robert Ross, and tend to think of him as a hero, and yet the researcher is unable to offer his/her readers the other side of the story. Most notably, it is pointed out in conversation with Lady Juliet that Stuart Ross, Robert’s brother, has refused to speak of Robert to the researcher:

‘I don’t understand. It’s as if Robert did something evil’
 ‘Some say he did’
 ‘Some maniacs. Oh yes— I’ve heard that too’ (100)

Whether intentionally or not, the inclusion of this segment of their conversation is the researcher’s subtle means of dismissing Robert Ross’s detractors, denying them a place in the text which would ensure impartiality in the researcher’s account. Instead, it becomes clear that “the narrator has **selected** whatever he wanted to transcribe” (Vauthier 19), and in doing so preserves the integrity of Robert Ross as the ‘hero’ of the story, choosing to present him as a preserver of life in the midst of mass carnage and unspeakable destruction.

By denying Ross’s critics their proper place within the history, the

researcher unconsciously reveals the flaws of his/her account, the deafening silences within the presentation, the most notable of which is the transcripts of Ross's court martial hearing and the eyewitness accounts therein. Instead, we are given an elaborate mythologization of Robert's desertion and his rescue of the horses: "Here is where the mythology is muddled. There are stories of immediate pursuit. But these are doubtful. Some versions have it that Robert rode through La Chodrelle at a gallop" (183). Here, the narrator uses epistemological uncertainty as a means of rescuing his subject from concrete actions, the type that would have been heard in the court martial hearing, choosing alternatively to forge a new, 'more likely' version that is based on his/her interpretation of so-called conflicting accounts, saying "Far more likely is the version that describes the horses making a detour out around the woods lying west of La Chodrelle"(183). In this particular case, the narrator is simulating the traditional function of the historian, whose job is to interpret conflicting sources and propose the most feasible version of the truth. However, as Simone Vauthier points out, "if, on some points, he may set the record straight...he is nonetheless impelled by his own mythological needs." (Vauthier 16)

Another aspect of the text which promotes a sense of epistemological uncertainty in the reader is those points at which the narrator is either contradicting him/herself, or lies outright, highlighting the text's status as a constructed apparatus, a visibly made thing. When the researcher

introduces Robert's journey to the front, he/she begins with the statement, "There is no good picture of this except the one you can make in your mind"(71), and in doing so, he/she is providing a clear indication of the imaginative function of the text. This statement alerts the reader to the possibility of fabrication on the narrator's part, and consequently, the reader's function is that of 'detective,' analyzing the utterances of the researcher for indications of falsity in the account. One such example is pointed out by Evelyn Cobley, who notes that the first photograph of Ross that is depicted by the researcher is of Robert "riding straight towards the camera" (Findley 12), and yet this cannot be an actual photograph because "shutter speeds were too slow to allow such a "fiery image" to be captured without significant blurring" (Cobley 110). Moreover, there are other incidents in Ross's life that can be considered private, that the researcher cannot possibly know, such as the rape at Desole, his experience in the brothel near the beginning of the novel. and his conversations with his mother. As was mentioned, the researcher complains that "the only facts you have are public" (10), so it is clear that he has no outside sources for these largely internal events. The logical conclusion, then, is that much of the 'history' of Ross is imaginatively constructed by the narrator. This notion is solidified when one considers that the life of Robert Ross as told by the researcher is organized around certain general patterns that appear and reappear throughout the text. For example, Robert is constantly thrown into the

company of horses and dogs, whether it is retrieving lost horses on the prairies, only to meet Taffler and his dog, assisting horses on the troop ship, or the herd which he liberates in the end, and the dog and horse who assist him. These incidents and a multitude of others which are similarly organized create the impression of one small story that is repeated with differences throughout the text. Another example is the importance of the four elements throughout the narrative. On the home front, fire, earth, air and water are generally positive to Robert, as when the coyote leads him to a water hole to drink. But on the front, these elements conspire against him, as he undergoes a trial by air in a gas attack, by earth when he is trapped in a landslide, by water when he nearly drowns in a dike, and finally, by fire when when he is trapped in the burning barn with the horses. Each of these experiences are likely to have been faced by many soldiers during the war, but the question is whether or not Robert actually had these experiences. Once again, this is the grey area of the narrator's account, because the reader is not privy to the sources of the researcher, and therefore (on a figurative level) cannot verify the truth value of these incidents. However, since the epitaph on Ross's tombstone reads "EARTH AND AIR AND FIRE AND WATER" (190), and epitaphs are ostensibly intended to summarize the occupant of the grave, it is possible that the narrator imaginatively organizes his/her account to resemble this inscription, and in doing so, creates a pattern that becomes an organizing principle of the text. In any case,

these patterns lend the text its stilted effect, and emphasize its constructed quality.

In a novel such as The Wars, where epistemological uncertainty runs rampant as a direct result of narrative unreliability, the story proper becomes extraneous to the teller; the importance of the novel is not that either truth or lies are being told. In this case, the unreliability of the researcher is offset by the truth that is contained within the narrator's internalized vision of truth. In a sense, the narrator has presented the only truth he/she knows, and the overall purpose of the researcher in telling Ross's story is his/her emotional involvement with, and reaction against large scale violence. To the narrator, Robert's crimes against the military are emblematic of the redemption of the human spirit, as one individual goes against society and personal safety in order to preserve the lives of others, and this is certainly one interpretive vision of the truth. It is clear at several points in the novel that the researcher identifies with Ross emotionally, and the extent of his/her fabrication is rooted in presenting Robert sympathetically. This unreliability is used by the implied author as a means of indicating the subjectivity of historical narrative as one version of the truth, as one vision of what actually happened, one possible interpretation that suits the particular needs of the narrative persona. According to Findley himself, lies in his novels are used as a means of presenting a higher truth:

in order to tell the thing that I wanted to tell— which was true—the only way to tell it was to lie in minor ways, which is to say that you would telescope events, you would bridge events with

the nature of a meeting as opposed to the real meeting itself.
(Mellor, "Timothy Findley's..."82)

Such is the case in Famous Last Words, which uses actual historical personages in the narrative, and is thus indicative of the same ontological implications as The Wars. For the purposes of this discussion, it is useful to briefly discuss Famous Last Words as a means of further illustrating the way that, as in The Wars, unreliable narration is paradoxically used as a means of gaining truth. In this case, Hugh Selwyn Mauberly scrawls an account of his experiences with pro-fascists prior to and during the war on the walls of a hotel. His narrative ominously begins with the statement, "All I have written here...is true, except for the lies" (59), and as in The Wars, the reader is immediately alerted to the possibility of fabrication on the narrator's part. Moreover, the novel also has a dual ontological structure that essentially recreates the relationship between readers and text. Here, an outer narrative, which is omniscient and primarily traces the experience of Lieutenant Quinn after he and his fellow soldiers have discovered Mauberly's corpse, frames Mauberly's inner narrative, and the reactions of both Quinn and Captain Freyburg to what is written on the walls is emblematic of the reactions of us, the readers, to the text as a whole: "the power wielded by the narrator-author (represented by Mauberly) is concurrently thrust upon and shared by the inscribed readers...[[Quinn and Freyburg]] who together must determine the meaning of the text." This is the metafictional aspect of the text, which is deployed by the implied author

in order to demonstrate the way “history...[is] something that is manipulated first by the teller, and then by the receiver” (Marshall 18). Moreover, the dual ontology of Famous Last Words also exhibits the way history is both sent and received as narrative. The debates between Quinn and Freyburg during the reading of the walls serve to reinforce these philosophical implications, as well as mirroring the reader’s reaction to Mauberly’s narrative. Freyburg plays the role of skeptic, dogmatically condemning all fascists for their contribution to the Holocaust, while Quinn is the aesthete who respects Mauberly as an artist, and hopes that the walls redeem him of his fascist sympathies.

From a purely structural point of view, Mauberly’s narrative is similar to the one told by the researcher in The Wars. In the latter text, Robert Ross’s narrative is presented as a conventional history in third-person omniscient format, but at certain points, the reader is aware of the personality of the researcher and his/her emotional involvement with the subject. In Famous Last Words, we are given a first-hand account of what is supposed to be the actual experience of Mauberly, and yet at times, he relates conversations he could not have heard and meetings which he could not possibly have witnessed, such as the confrontations between Von Ribbentrop and Schellenberg. These segments are presented by a seemingly omniscient third person-narrator, who is able to penetrate the thoughts of the participants, and yet the reader is always aware that Hugh Selwyn Mauberly is the central consciousness of the

account, the writer of the walls. Nevertheless, the omniscient narration creates the illusion of authority, of Mauberly as one who 'knows,' even though these scenes are obviously the product of his imagination, constructed in order to effectively characterize the workings of the cabal.

In general, Mauberly's narrative reveals the way in which the truth is subjected to the greater needs of the teller, and that omissions or alterations of the truth are inevitable if a definite purpose or overall agenda is satisfied. Various aspects of Mauberly's narration often unconsciously reveal this notion, even when he observes others:

One night, Wallis told the story of her life and left out China. I was very hurt. Then the Duke told the story of his life and left out having abdicated. Wallis was very pleased. Nonetheless these stories told the temper of the times and the motto we had adopted: *the truth is in our hands now*. (177).

Here, Mauberly unconsciously introduces the notion that truth itself is in his hands as the teller of his story, and that he may be using it to acquit himself of wrongdoing. For the most part, he presents himself as the unwitting messenger of the cabal, and yet the reader is left questioning the extent of his knowledge, and the possible omission of his own participation.

Moreover, there are further instances which indicate the fallibility of Mauberly's memory as a witness to events, and introduces the possibility of psychological supplementation:

The dining room I see in my mind was blue. I cannot recall precisely who was there...What I see is perhaps a frieze of ten or a dozen faces...I don't know why the women all wore blue; they did, that's all; or they do in my mind. (364).

And yet, despite the inaccuracies and epistemological uncertainties that Mauberly's account inspires, the 'truth' in its purest form is not the essential aspect of the narrative. Even if Mauberly's narrative is often invented and is perhaps intended to exonerate him in the eyes of history, he is attempting to capture the 'moment' in time. Historical narrative tends to see large scale conflict in shades of black and white, as a collision between the opposing philosophies of nations. What Mauberly is ostensibly trying to create (accurate or not) is the grey area in which both black and white meet, serving their own interests toward a common goal. In this sense, Mauberly's narrative, in all its fictionality, is perhaps closer to 'true' history than the retrospective accounts of historians:

So this is history as she is never writ, I thought. Some day far in the future, some dread academic, much too careful of his research, looking back through the biased glasses of a dozen other "historians," will set this moment down on paper. And will get it wrong. (180)

Thus, Famous Last Words and The Wars complement one another in their common approach to history, as both novels mutually understand the role of narrative in creating history, the essential unreliability of historians who interpret information according to their own needs, and the way that readers respond to historical narrative according to their own predisposed beliefs.

Chapter Four
Double Agency: Shields's The Stone Diaries

"Of course it happened. Of course it didn't happen"
(Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow)

In Running in the Family, the autobiographical genre is revealed as a discourse whose authority and likeness to truth is compromised by the "I" subject, the inscribed author who is concerned with presenting the self in a fictional manner that may not necessarily reflect the truth behind his experiences. Because autobiography is a retrospective discourse which views the past from a historical remove, one can potentially invent emotional experience, as is the case with Ondaatje's speaking subject, Michael, an extension of himself who conceals the emotional pain that lurks behind the whimsical portraits of family life that the narration provides. Ondaatje's memoir is indicative of the fact that an autobiographical identity is not so much revealed as constructed, and is subject to the inevitable process of fictionalization. The same can be said of Carol Shields' The Stone Diaries, which, unlike Running in the Family, is an entirely fictional narrative which dramatizes the way the self is constructed in the eyes of the perceiver, despite the subject's desire to both learn and communicate some form of truth.

As in Running in the Family and The Wars, The Stone Diaries is a

mixture of various narrative styles which play upon the nature of authority in the minds of readers. Shields' narrative begins with the first-person narration of Daisy Goodwill, who recounts the circumstances of both her birth and the mother who died delivering her. Immediately, the issue of authority can be raised, because Daisy is speaking confidently of events which occurred prior to her conception, and the birth itself, which she cannot possibly remember. Moreover, the tone of the narration tends to suggest that Daisy speaks of events as though she is present, witnessing them as they unfold. For instance, as she relates her birth, she speaks of the "temptation to rush to the bloodied bundle pushing out between my mother's legs, and to place my hand on my own beating heart" (23). Later, her status as witness is further foregrounded as she struggles to accurately perceive the visual stimulus before her: "I am swaddled in- what? - a kitchen towel. Or something, perhaps, yanked from Clarentine Flett's clothesline" (39). This passage is also suggestive of the possibility that Daisy invents her birth as she goes along, constructing her account on the basis of what seems to be logical, thereby contributing to the text's epistemological uncertainty. In fact, it seems clear, as the text later suggests, that Daisy "has given birth to her mother, and not the other way around." (191).

Moreover, at a certain point in the first chapter, the narrative format of The Stone Diaries appears to shift from first-person to third-person omniscient, a narrative voice traditionally associated with authority, and

more importantly, the ability to penetrate the minds of characters other than the protagonist. Thus, we are given a third-person omniscient account of Cuyler Goodwill's courting of and eventual marriage to Mercy Stone, and a narrative format that engages in periodic excursions into the experience of characters other than Daisy throughout the text. In its final effect, the novel creates a condition of protracted oscillation between first and third-person narration, which, in turn, stimulates epistemological uncertainty within the text that challenges "The reader's traditional expectations of a speaking subject" (103) within the autobiographical genre.

More significantly, the third-person format is often the means by which the metafictional dimension of the text is emphasized, through the author's constant incorporation of self-reflexive statements which belie the reliability of the first person-form. Postmodern conceptions of autobiography recognize the speaking subject's potential to engage in the conscious omission of information that may be relevant to the reader's perception of him/her as autobiographical subject. Thus, Daisy will mention a "doctor- whom I am unable, or unwilling to supply with a name...."(74), and it is a reminder that the narrator (as inscribed author) is in a position of power over her readers; if she does not wish to supply us with information, she has the option of not doing so. The third person format of the novel adds a self-reflexive dimension to the narrative, in which a separate consciousness seems to warn the readers

of the inherent dangers which accompany the writing of autobiography:

Maybe now is the time to tell you that Daisy Goodwill has a little trouble with getting things straight; with the truth, that is...Well, a childhood is what anyone wants to remember of it. It leaves behind no fossils, except perhaps in fiction. Which is why you want to take Daisy's representations with a grain of salt, a bushel of salt. (148)

The third-person references to Daisy disengage the reader from the story and highlight the unreliability of her account, only to return to the first-person format. However, the reader now experiences epistemological uncertainty as to the truth value of Daisy's narrative, and assumes a skeptical attitude towards her account. Moreover, this reading strategy is reinforced throughout the duration of the text by a steady stream of statements which destabilize the verisimilitude of the text, and provide general explanations for the motives behind Daisy's propensity to falsehood:

She understood that if she was going to hold on to her life at all, she would have to rescue it by a primary act of imagination, supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections...even dreaming a limestone tower into existence, getting the details wrong occasionally, inventing letters or conversations of impossible gentility, or casting conjecture in a pretty light. (76-77).

Although this narrative style is an effective means of alerting the reader to the unreliability of the first-person consciousness, it also contributes to epistemological uncertainty in the text because of the ambiguity surrounding the identity of the third-person narrator. To add to the confusion, there are periodic indications that the third-person narrator is not omniscient at all, and that there are things which he/she does not

know, as when he/she notes that "Daisy Goodwill's own thoughts on her marriage are not recorded, for she has given up the practice of keeping a private journal" (156). If the third-person narrator were omniscient, he/she would be able to speak of Daisy's thoughts, just as she/she is able to enter into the experience of other characters.

Furthermore, the seeming omniscience of the third-person narrator is compromised through periodic indications of emotional involvement with his/her subject, and this is a crucial aspect of the novel. Who is he/she, and what is his/her personal interest in Daisy's story? For example, his/her description of a stone dwarf fashioned by Cuyler Goodwill as wedding present for the Hoad-Goodwill marriage is tinged with emotion, speaking indirectly of the bitterness that Daisy herself must associate with the entire experience, given its disastrous conclusion: "Neither imagination nor freshness touch this ludicrous little garden sprite. It grins puckishly..."(114). Further indications of the third-person narrator's emotional involvement with the story can be found in descriptions of the marriage between Cuyler Goodwill and the Italian immigrant Maria, and the odd way in which their marital bliss is perceived as absurd behaviour; "and what does he do on these occasions but go on smiling and smiling, as if this were normal behaviour between husbands and wives"(129). In this passage it appears that the narrator is experiencing a mixture of emotions, including cynicism and bitterness, and the tone of this statement once again raises questions as to the

identity of this narrative consciousness. Moreover, there appears to be some sort of vicarious identification taking place between the two narrative voices in the text, as when Daisy's perceptions are affected by her old age near the end of the novel, and the third-person narrator observes that Daisy is "not sure. She's lost track of what's real and what isn't, and so, at this age, have I" (329).

The narrational style of the novel, then, can be viewed as somewhat problematic. The title infers that the work is an autobiographical diary, the private perceptions of a single character. However, this does not appear to be the case, as in addition to the alternation between first and third person formats, the viewpoints of a multiplicity of characters are offered, each proposing their own subjective views on a number of events in Daisy's life, as in the chapter titled "Sorrow, 1965," when a number of characters offer numerous alternative explanations for Daisy's protracted experience with depression, and yet no explanation is offered by Daisy herself. In her article, Winifred M. Mellor points out that these periodic shifts in perspective, together with the ambiguity surrounding the identity of the third-person narrator, serve to exclude Daisy's voice from the text, signifying her lack of identity in a patriarchal society. However, although the latter part of Mellor's statement provides a useful thematic framework for considering the novel, a closer look at the text reveals that the identity of the narrator does not change at all; it is in fact Daisy referring to herself in the third person, and the author provides several

indications of this in the novel.

Mellor herself goes on to suggest that the third-person narrator "is still somehow Daisy...seeing her life from an inexplicable timeless remove," but also maintains that the narrative identity is ambiguous and that the narration is a means of metaphorically writing Daisy out of her own story, denying her of her feminine voice. And yet, it is possible to carry the implications of Mellor's statement even further and resolve the inconsistency of voice within the text by unequivocally stating that the third-person narrator and Daisy are in fact one person, and that the "timeless remove" that Mellor refers to is death. In effect, The Stone Diaries is an autobiography that is told from some form of the afterlife, and the two narrative streams are indicative of a dual ontological structure within the text, two radically different modes of existence that come into contact within the novel. There is the world of experience that is happening in the present, characterized by the first-person narration, and the retrospective view of events that is signified by the third-person narrative, observing events through the eyes of one who is aware of the ultimate ends of actions as they simultaneously occur. In this way, "she lives outside her story as well as inside" (Shields 123).

Thus, many of the inconsistencies and contradictions in the text are resolved with the inscription of a single narrative voice that alters the format of speech in order to provide a false impression of authority. A crucial statement in the narrative reveals the unity of perspective

throughout the text. When the third-person persona mentions that Daisy has invented “a limestone tower into existence” (77), (the one that Cuyler Goodwill erects over Mercy Stone’s grave), it is important to remember that this incident is actually narrated in the third-person omniscient style, and is not the first hand account of Daisy. Therefore, the third-person apparently accuses his/her own narrative of unreliability; unless, of course, this third person is Daisy herself. By the same token, the narration will continue for quite some time in the third person format, until it is interrupted by a first-person statement:

“(Daisy is not a name he would have chosen, but the child had to be called something, and he was in no fit state after my birth to turn his mind to names.)” (Shields, 61). Here, the two narrational styles of the text briefly converge, as the narrator refers to “the child” and simultaneously mentions “my birth.” Similarly, the third-person format is periodically disrupted by mention of “my father” (65), and “the fever that disoriented me” (65), revealing that the master consciousness of the text is clearly Daisy herself:

Daisy Goodwill’s perspective is off. Furthermore, **she imposes the voice of the future on the events of the past**, causing all manner of wavy distortion. She takes great jumps in time, leaving out important manners...Sometimes she looks at things close up and sometimes from a distance, and she does insist on showing herself in a sunny light...Still, hers is the only account there is, written on air, written with imagination’s invisible ink.
(149, my emphasis)

This passage is indicative of the text’s dual ontological narrative structure, but it also indicates that Daisy’s post-mortem view is no less

unreliable; much of the substance of her autobiographical account is false, affected by gaps in the narrative which are created by her own omission.

Having ascertained the fact that the narrative in The Stone Diaries is the product of one master consciousness as opposed to the polyphony of assorted voices that it appears to be, the implications surrounding the text's epistemological uncertainty become even more pronounced. In effect, when the narrative extensively adopts either the perspective or the voice of other characters such as Fraidy Hoyt, Cuyler Goodwill or Magnus Flett, they make their appearance entirely on the basis of the fact that Daisy Goodwill has invented them, usurping their supposed thoughts and voices, and actively inventing them on the basis of **her impression** of their character. Under such circumstances, the epistemological uncertainty of the text becomes total, in the sense that the entire narrative, for all its supposed documents, letters, and multiplicity of characters, may be entirely the act of the narrator's imagination. Indeed, Daisy herself points out that she has engaged in a "primary act of imagination... getting the details wrong occasionally, [and] inventing letters or conversations"(76-7). Daisy herself is all too aware of her own constructions; The Stone Diaries is an autobiography which attempts the logical reconstruction of Daisy's life as she experienced it, and she conducts this process in the hopes of gaining a perspective on her identity, "to bring symmetry to the various discordant

elements" (23) of her life. However, the implied author undercuts the entire process by allowing her protagonist to be cognizant of the flaws which are inherent in autobiographies, that the subjective and interpersonal nature of interpretation distorts the truth:

The recounting of a life is a cheat, of course; I admit the truth of this; even our own stories are obscenely distorted; it is a wonder that we keep faith with the simple container of our existence.
(28)

In my earlier discussion of Timothy Findley and The Wars, I raised the possibility of absolute historical fabrication by the researcher/narrator through an examination of the pattern established in the story of Robert Ross, the way that the historical account was organized around certain repetitive motifs (anecdotes surrounding Robert's various encounters with the four elements, horses, and dogs), stimulated by the existence of certain basic information in the mind of the researcher. The same can be said of The Stone Diaries, as Daisy constructs the perspectives of other crucial characters on the basis of her limited knowledge about them. To illustrate, Daisy re-enacts her own birth, complete with a personality profile of her mother, and a portrait of the married life of her parents. This is anomalous in the sense that Daisy herself cannot possibly have drawn these experiences from her own memory, since for much of that time she was not even born. However, it is later revealed that her father recounts his entire life story to Daisy on the train to Indiana, including some details about his marriage to Mercy Stone, which Daisy apparently recalls: "He was talking now about his

dead wife, the child's mother; her name was Mercy- Mercy Goodwill, a young woman uniquely skilled with pies and preserves and household management."(89). Daisy is provided with minimal information, and in the absence of real facts she is forced to fabricate a portrait of her dead mother, her own birth, and the married life of her parents. It is a means of filling a void which exists where memories of her mother should be.

By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that these elements of the narrative are based on the retrospective rationalizations of Daisy as a means of providing explanations for elements of her life that would otherwise remain unexplained. In essence, she projects psychological manifestations of her own experiences and perceptions onto people and events from her past. Consequently, Mercy and Daisy Goodwill share similarly unfulfilled lives, from their unsatisfying sexual experiences, to their domestic functions, and finally a pronounced inability to experience spiritual love with the opposite sex. Since Daisy feels the utter lack of a significant maternal relationship, she is forced to invent one to compensate for her loss.

This process can be applied to all of the other events in the novel. Even when the narration appears to be omnisciently describing the thoughts of other individuals, the actual perceiver is Daisy herself, attempting to understand her own emotions as they relate to other people. For instance, she recalls a repressed memory from her early childhood in which she was the subject of a long sexual stare from

Barker Flett. She later rationalizes (through the fictionalized perspective of her future husband) that this event became the beginnings of Barker's love for her, thus providing an explanation for their hasty marriage later on in the narrative. In this way, Daisy finds a method for coping with experiences which might otherwise be traumatic.

Because Daisy's autobiography is based largely on her subjective perceptions, the author constantly draws attention to the fact that the recollection of many of these experiences is deeply flawed. First and foremost, certain statements and assertions made by the narrator are inaccurate, and particularly in her old age, a time when her faculties are beginning to fail her. For instance, she imagines that her daughter Alice marries and moves to Jamaica with her doctor, and for a moment believes that this fantasy is real, only to immediately retract this statement: "No, none of this is true. Old Mrs. Flett is dreaming again. How do these spurious versions arise?"(341). Secondly, many of Daisy's perceptions are extremely biased and are therefore distorted versions of the truth. The primary example of this can be found in the way Daisy characterizes the people in her life in such a way that makes them appear to be single-minded and absurd. For example, Mrs. Hoad is seen as a woman who is obsessive about her son, and her luncheon with Daisy indicates this to an extreme degree. Later, Daisy points out to readers that the way she characterizes her mother-in-law is not entirely accurate: "You will probably have realized that no person in this world

could possibly be as insensitive, as her mother-in-law, Mrs. Arthur Hoad, is made out to be.”(148). Similarly, both Cuyler Goodwill and Barker Flett are characterized as men who are entirely defined by the substances that have given them careers (limestone and plants), and Fraidy Hoyt is equally as singular about sex and pleasure. These characters are not to be taken as literal representations of actual people, but rather as the way Daisy perceives them by projecting manifestations of her own hopes, desires, impressions, and deficiencies upon them, for, as the narrative itself points out, “We see what we want to see. Our perceptions fly straight out of our deepest needs.”(232)

The inevitable dilemma that surfaces again and again in postmodern fiction’s narratives of unreliability concerns the inherent value of narratives which promote feelings of total epistemological uncertainty in the minds of readers. Knowing that the postmodern narrative subject is both potentially and actually incapable of rendering the ‘truth’ in narration, and in certain cases is unwilling to render the truth, how then is the postmodern reader to extrapolate meaning from the text? The postmodern project systematically deconstructs the authority of the teller as well as the genre within which the teller operates, and this is accomplished through metafictional devices such as self-reflexivity. Since metafiction operates within a text as a means of laying bare the devices which sustain the fictional contract or suspension of disbelief between sender and receiver, attention is drawn away from the content of the

story itself, and the reader is more aware of the teller's relationship to the story. More specifically, the reader's attention is drawn towards the individual consciousness that provides our view into the text, and the possible causes of their unreliability in relation to the story.

The Stone Diaries is Daisy's autobiography, and the text's dual ontology allows Daisy to view her story as both an inside participant and an outside observer. The nature of her endeavour is concerned with discovering a tangible purpose to her existence, an index of accomplishments and experiences which would define her identity. However, this endeavour is doomed to failure from its very beginning, because Daisy herself, having already experienced her life, is aware that she regards her place in the world as inconsequential, and her agency in it as non-existent:

I know before I begin that my efforts will seem a form of pleading. Blood and ignorance, what can be shaped from blood and ignorance? - and the pulsing, mindless, leaking jelly of my own just-hatched flesh, which I feel compelled to transform into something clean and whole... (23)

Thus, the dual ontological narration of the text allows two distinct levels of autobiographical awareness; in one, Daisy hopes to fulfil the autobiographical project, while in the other, Daisy knows that she will fail (and in fact, already has failed) in this endeavour. Similarly, as one Daisy continues to relate her life story, the other deconstructs her efforts, In this way, the narrator invalidates her own experience by attracting attention to her own propensity for falsehood, as well as the

unreliability of her memory, and “when we challenge others as competent rememberers, our intent is to undermine them as persons...by calling into question how well they can function cognitively” (Campbell 53). The same holds true for criticisms levelled against the self; by ironically deconstructing her own authority and exposing her lack of identity as she tells her story, Daisy is perpetuating the invalidation of her self-hood, and is therefore trapped within a vicious circle of a low sense of self-worth:

She has a talent for self-obliteration. It's been nine years now, nine years since “it” happened, and she's becoming more and more detached from her story's ripples and echoes and variations. (124).

In order to more fully understand this movement within the text and the reasons for its operation, it is necessary to return to Daisy's presentation of her existence, and the pattern it creates. Her overall impression of her experiences throughout the narrative tends to impart her general sense of dissatisfaction, as she perceives that she is “powerless, anchorless, soft-tissued- a woman” (150), “feels her own terrifying inauthenticity” (267), and “wants to want something but does not know that she is allowed” (117). These statements are indicators of the way in which Daisy has been conditioned to feel a low sense of self-worth by her society. Because she is a woman, she is continually defined by others, and the fact that “She just let her life happen to her”(356), has prevented her from asserting her agency in a world that continually strips her of her individuality. She senses that “The real troubles in this

world tend to settle on the misalignment between men and women” (121), but ultimately is unable to transcend her position of inferiority.

In addition, the narrative style coincides with the emotional state of Daisy as a character, and more specifically, it addresses the status of her feelings of self-worth and placement in the world at the time of events in the narration. For instance, her marriage to Barker Flett begins a long period in her life in which her personality and her identity are defined by the role she plays for others, and in this period she is referred to as “Mrs. Flett”, “Aunt Daisy”, and “Grandma Flett”. Also, the narration during these periods is conducted almost entirely in the third person, symbolic of the fact that she is not allowed a personal identity at this time; it feels to her as if Daisy is someone even she herself does not know. As a woman she must adopt a persona which accommodates others, whether it is as wife, grandmother, or aunt. The aura of detachment which is suggested by the third-person narration sets the tone for establishing Daisy’s hidden agenda in relating her life story; she is struggling to find herself in order to legitimize her existence. By contrast, when her character is referred to as “Daisy Goodwill” or simply “Daisy”, there are more frequent references in the first-person, and she associates her name with who she perceives herself to be: “She cherishes it. More and more she thinks of it as the outward sign of her soul.”(320).

The ostensible purpose, then, of Daisy’s unreliability is encapsulated within her desperate attempt to retain some form of individuality. The

other characters in the text are constructed by Daisy in a way that makes them appear as individuals with a clear sense of purpose. Cuyler Goodwill, Barker Flett, and Daisy's daughter Alice are defined by their careers, and even Fraidy Hoyt is defined by her well-developed sense of sexuality. However, Daisy notably lacks such fulfilment, and the resulting void she perceives destabilizes her sense of self. According to Sue Campbell,

"Sense of self" is a vague notion, but having a sense of self seems to require at least the following: opportunities to understand the self in relation to the past, opportunities to plan and act on intentions, and some self regarding emotions or attitudes. (55)

Daisy lacks each of these qualities in a way that is significant enough for her to experience a loss of centre throughout the novel. She is unable to understand her past because she has never known her mother; in order to compensate for this experiential void she 'gives birth' to Mercy Stone, and uses the fictional process to fabricate a version of her own birth. However, this process is clearly an insufficient substitute for actual experience: "however hard I try I can be sure of nothing else in the world but this- the fact of her final breath" (40). She is not able to "plan and act on her intentions"; rather, she is acted upon. Throughout her life she presents herself as one who becomes the responsibility of others, passed on from her father, to her husband, and finally to her children in the illness shortly before her death. She associates her agency in the world with the independence that accompanies a career, but nothing in her life is tangible enough to be called a career. Her brief experience as "Mrs.

Greenthumb” and her carefully manicured garden encompass the closest available avenue for Daisy’s experience with employment and creativity, just as Mercy Stone’s dexterity in the kitchen amounts to, but is a poor substitute for, a career. Sadly, Daisy’s experience as weekly columnist does not last long enough for her to gain her sense of purpose. Finally, the narrative structure of the novel is a testament to the low value she places on herself; by ironically deconstructing her own voice in her autobiography, Daisy is finding the means of expressing her self-contempt.

Thus, Daisy’s unreliability encompasses her attempt to recover her self from the “dark voids and unbridgeable gaps” (76) that define her experience with the world, even as she knows that her fabrications are an insufficient solution to her lack of individual agency. The final chapter, titled “Death,” is a testament to her failure, as she resorts to an assemblage of lists to summarize her experience in the world, lists which include her various illnesses, the books she has read, and her assortment of bridal lingerie. The most significant list, however, is the one which fully captures her sense of dissatisfaction by listing things she has **never done**:

Flett, Daisy (nee Goodwill), who, due to historical accident, due to carelessness, due to ignorance, due to lack of opportunity and courage, never once in her many years of life experienced the excitement and challenge of oil painting, skiing, sailing, nude bathing, emerald jewellery....[and etc.] (344)

In this final chapter the ultimate futility of Daisy’s autobiography is

revealed; she understands that she has wasted her life, that it has passed her by mainly because she herself has allowed it, as in the observation that she "...never gave herself over to the kind of magazine article that tells you to be good to yourself, to believe in yourself, and do things for yourself."(345). The tone of the final chapter connotes the desperation at the end of her autobiographical journey; at one point she makes the statement, "Isn't there anything else you can tell me?"(348). But the most powerful utterance which characterizes Daisy's failure to find the meaning of her life, and also summarizes the entirety of her experience: "I am not at peace.' Daisy Goodwill's final (unspoken) words." Their drama is fully realized when one considers that the words are unspoken, which only heightens her failure to assert her sovereignty as an individual.

The Stone Diaries is a novel that reveals the biographical and autobiographical genres to be "full of systematic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground streams"(196). Shields uses the postmodern conceptions of this literary genre to present readers with a female protagonist who, due to patriarchal conventions, is unable to achieve a stable sense of self-hood, and is thus forced into the act of wilful self-deception and invention in an attempt to resolve this condition. Despite the epistemological uncertainty that the unreliable perspective of Daisy stimulates in the reader, however, the narrative gains a tangibility in its own right by self-consciously acknowledging its

own fallibility. It is not meant to be a faithful account of events; it is rather an elaborate re-construction of a life wasted by its possessor, a series of impressions, a reduction of events and people to their basic elements in an endeavour to make her life meaningful. However, this endeavour is inevitably doomed to failure from its very beginning. The readers too are forced to share in the narrator's sense of self-loss; her image is not included among the many photographs in the novel, and we are therefore left to 'fabricate' her appearance. In short, Daisy Goodwill does indeed "occupy a cavern of vacancy at the centre of the text" (Mellor 106).

Conclusion

**“Sometimes we may learn more from a man’s errors,
than from his virtues”
(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)**

In any form of fictional discourse, the narrator, as inscribed author, wields a certain amount of power over the reader. As both the holder and the sender of information, the controlling consciousness of any given work selects the data that the receiver is to inherit, and controls the means by which it is distributed. In any work of fiction, the author creates a narrative persona that acts as the emissary between authors and their readers, between the subject of a novel and the consumers of that subject. In many cases, the reader’s view into the text is mediated by an omniscient third-person perspective, which creates in the reader the illusion that he/she is viewing the characters and their lives directly, without intervention by the teller, who serves an invisible function. In other forms of narrative, however, the teller reveals him/herself, plays an active role in the text, and is often a character within the story, a witness or observer who relates the thing being seen to the reader.

In the disparate power relationship between narrators and readers, there is always the existent possibility that the sender can (and often

will) abuse his/her authority by withholding, distorting, or fabricating certain crucial elements of the data in question. Throughout the history of the novel, unreliable narration has existed in some form or another, more prominently in certain periods and less in others. In the work of Henry Fielding, for example, the narrator acts as an extension of the authorial persona whose purpose is to tell a tale that is both true and entertaining. He wishes to maintain reader interest, so at times, he may unexpectedly announce the omission of certain data which he feels is both unnecessary and uninteresting to the readers. In doing so, however, he emphasizes the fact that the reader is being told a story, that, as opposed to witnessing events from a firsthand point of view, we are receiving information after the fact, and must therefore take on faith that the data the sender 'transmits' is accurate. Fielding's narrator does not necessarily abuse his relationship with the reader by selecting his version of the story; rather, he reminds us that he is in fact the teller, and that the information we are receiving is *his* story. He is potentially unreliable, but does not actually (to the reader's knowledge) distort his information. The reader's awareness of this potentiality draws attention to the act of storytelling itself and away from (although, not entirely) the intricacies of the plot. In this sense, narratives of unreliability, potential or otherwise, have a metafictional dimension, in that they examine the role, function, and authority of the teller in relation to the reader.

The same is doubly true of modern and postmodern narratives, which

are infinitely concerned with the authority of the tellers, and their ability (or inability) to present their subject matter. The discourse of modernity is concerned with epistemological issues, the nature of information or knowledge and who possesses it, how it is transmitted, and how it operates in relation to the 'truth.' The narrator's position in these texts is that of the questor, one who seeks to learn some form of truth in relation to certain events which occur during the course of the narrative, but is unable to discover this truth due to certain fundamental shortcomings in his/her psychological makeup. The characteristic example of this narrative schema is Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier, whose narrator Dowell learns of his wife's infidelity with Edward Ashburnham after her death, and sets out to relate the truth to which he has supposedly been blind. However, his perspective is unreliable because he is not candid with the readers in relation to his personal knowledge; he eludes responsibility by claiming ignorance, and yet there is an ever pervasive sense throughout the text that his ignorance is feigned, an elaborate means of denial which spares him from emotional pain. Thus, the subjectivity of Dowell's perspective prevents the truth from being known, and the text is left in a perpetual state of epistemological uncertainty, in which the 'truth' becomes an extra-diegetic element of the story. Moreover, because the reader views the story through the eyes of an involved participant, the text's status as metafiction is emphasized, focusing attention on the individual teller and his flawed

transmission of the 'truth' as opposed to the story itself. The reader, then, views the narration from a critical remove and disengages from complete involvement with the plot.

Postmodern fiction essentially elevates the same notions to their extreme conclusions. When epistemological uncertainty becomes absolute, to the point where it is impossible to discover knowledge or truth in its uncorrupted form, ontological uncertainty results, in which the status of being can become a created thing in much the same way as the truth can be fabricated, or enslaved to the individual realm of perception. To illustrate these notions, postmodern unreliable narratives often incorporate the complex use of dual ontological structures, in which the text is divided by two separate levels of being, one in which an 'inside' mode of perception is constructed and another which uses an 'outside' perspective to deconstruct the account, revealing its flaws, inconsistencies, and fabrications. In Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family, an autobiographical subject narrates his return to Sri Lanka to rediscover familial ties that have long since been severed in his life, and proceeds to produce whimsical and comical accounts of his relatives. However, a master authorial consciousness deconstructs the autobiographical genre within which Michael operates, and assembles the text in a way that lays bare the emotional pain which lurks behind the familial biography; his father's alcoholism, the separation of the family, and Michael's own feelings of guilt for abandoning his father form

a subtext which is thinly concealed by the comedy in Michael's account. Because the author and Michael are different manifestations of the same person (one lives in the realm of fiction, the other does not), the text has a dual ontology, and this structure is the means by which the novel's unreliable narration is detected by the reader, who disengages from the narrative and views it from a critical remove, analyzing the utterances of Michael for indications of inaccuracies and half-truths. In this way, the novel's subtext usurps the attentions of the reader from the account and toward the teller himself, and the psychological factors which affect his perception.

In The Wars, unreliability is defined by the discrepancy between a historical account of World War I soldier Robert Ross, and the information (or lack thereof) that a researcher/narrator uses to construct this account. Ross's story is the 'inner' world of the text, the historical narrative that is transmitted to the reader by the researcher. The text's 'outer' world is defined by the researcher's exploits in the archives, as well as his/her interviews of eyewitnesses. Through the use of this dual ontological structure, the reader is able to observe the problems of the researcher, his/her difficulty in finding information, and thus, Findley is able to metafictionally dramatize the difficulties inherent in rediscovering lost histories, as well as the way historical narrative often incorporates the rhetorical devices of fiction to capture the past. Robert Ross's story, and its account of information that can be

classified 'private,' contradicts the information available to the researcher, which falls into the public domain. It is thus clear that the researcher fabricates a good deal of Ross's story and creates a personal vision of history. One of the clearest indications of the history's status as a visibly made thing is the existence of narrative patterns that are based around certain dominant motifs, such as, for example, the recurring appearance of dogs and horses in Robert's experience. The account is thus defined by epistemological uncertainty, because it is difficult to gauge the true extent of the researcher's invention, as well as the extent of the bias in his/her account. This uncertainty thus draws attention away from the narrative and towards the teller, who, it seems, has invested a great deal of emotion in his subject, and reacts strongly enough to the human violence inherent in war to make his/her account of Ross a strong anti-war statement. In the absence of concrete information that reinforces this moral reaction, the researcher is forced to fabricate much of his/her account, and in doing so, fictionalizes history.

In the Stone Diaries, a dual ontology is revealed through the separation of two modes of existence in the narrative of Daisy Goodwill; in the 'inner' world, Daisy narrates her life as it progresses in the text, organizing events and occurrences in an attempt to discover their meaning in relation to her identity. In the 'outer' mode of experience, another manifestation of Daisy speaks from the 'afterlife' and

deconstructs the 'inner' account, exposing its unreliability, and in the process metafictionally addressing the failings inherent in the autobiographical genre. The notion of an authoritative narrative voice is completely destabilized, and the absolute unreliability of Daisy once again draws attention away from the substance of her narrative, and towards the teller herself. More specifically, the readers place themselves at a critical remove from the text in order to examine the purpose of Daisy's fabrication, and it becomes clear that the narrator lies in a desperate attempt to assert her agency in a world that has systematically denied it throughout her life. However, Daisy has been conditioned to believe in the insignificance of her voice and the dubiousness of her perspective, and thus, she deconstructs her own rhetoric in the third person. The implied author of the text uses this format as a means of placing the patriarchal norms under scrutiny, emphasizing the difficulties for women of asserting their individuality in a society that institutionalizes the denial of female autonomy.

Since its beginnings in literature, unreliable narration has always been somewhat indicative of metafictional concerns, which attract attention to tellers and the way their stories are told to the reader. The unreliable narration of postmodernism elevates these concerns to their most extreme level by establishing the ontological status of fiction as an alternate vision of reality, one which gains a tangibility in its own right. Although the novels focused on in this study are all Canadian in origin,

the general characteristics of unreliability extend across the Postmodern literatures of other nations and cultures. The notion of multiple ontologies is particularly prevalent in recent historical fiction, as in Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow and Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy, which, like Findley in The Wars and Famous Last Words incorporates the use of historical personages in a fictional narrative, and thus combine the ontologies of the 'real' or 'outside' world, and the fictional or 'inside' world in one narrative. The purpose of such inclusion is to create an alternate version of history that contradicts and thus destabilizes the annals of 'known' history, which are perceived by most as 'true' because of their supposed status as nonfiction.

Even more interesting is J.M. Coetzee's use of a dual ontology in Foe, which uses a fictional story to destabilize the truth value of both the fictional and the 'real' world. The novel is narrated by Susan Barton, who is marooned on a desert island with a man named Cruso, and she relates her experiences to Daniel Defoe, the real life author of Robinson Crusoe. This structure is used by the author to metafictionally destabilize the reality status of both the fictional and the 'outside' world. To illustrate, Barton's account of the desert isle contradicts the version which appears in Defoe's novel, in which Susan Barton does not appear. Various elements of the story are entirely changed; Barton's Cruso has no religion, has no desire to be rescued, and has few memories of his life in England, and some are inaccurate: "one day he would say his father

had been a wealthy merchant...but the next day he would tell me he had been a poor lad of no family”(12). Foe's account of Crusoe contradicts and thus destabilizes the epistemological foundation of its intertextual counterpart. Crusoe is presented in the text as a person equally real as Defoe, his creator, who has fabricated the version of Crusoe that appears in Robinson Crusoe. To add to the text's metafictional complexity, Susan Barton relates her story because the fictional discourse of Defoe will render her experiences substantial, confirming their reality and by extension her own substantiality. She is a character in search of an author to record her true experience, but as the narrative progresses, she is less certain that her truth will be presented:

Dubiously I thought: Are these enough strange circumstances to make a story of? How long before I am driven to invent new and stranger circumstances: the salvage of tools and muskets from Crusoe's ship...a landing by cannibals on the island...Alas, will the day ever arrive when we can make a story without strange circumstances? (67)

Paradoxically, Susan does not consider herself capable of the act of narration and relies on an author of fiction to truthfully disclose the real elements of her life: “Alas, my stories always seem to have more applications than I intend, so that I must go back and laboriously extract the right application and apologize for the wrong ones and efface them” (81). However, Defoe (as the actual text of Robinson Crusoe can attest) ends up writing Susan out of her own story, and using other parts of her account to create the novel that becomes Roxanne Foe, then, is a novel which uses unreliability to metafictionally examine the power of

authors to usurp the voice of marginalized individuals and fictionalize their discourse. Coetzee's text also displaces the notion of authority altogether, by destabilizing both the 'outer' world of reality and the 'inner' world of fiction, through the innovative use of intertextual unreliability.

The postmodern discourse, then, is continually discovering new and innovative methods of unreliable narration which dramatize the connection between stories and their tellers, between authors and their fictions, and between characters and their authors. The notions of multiple textual ontologies, shifting narrative perspectives, and with Foe, intertextual unreliability, clearly open new avenues of creative possibility for novelists who use unreliable narration as a structural device. These new developments in turn challenge readers to extract textual meaning from several levels of awareness, to maintain the reliability of their perception of works in spite of the unreliability of the emissary who guides them through the fictional world.

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