

**"HISTORY REVISITED:"
NARRATIVE AND HISTORY
IN
MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S RUNNING IN THE FAMILY
AND
JACQUES POULIN'S VOLKSWAGEN BLUES**

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**A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts**

McMaster University

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MASTER OF ARTS (1992)
(English)

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: "History Revisited:" Narrative and History in
Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family and
Jacques Poulin's Volkswagen Blues

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NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 88

ABSTRACT

This study explores the interrelations between narrative and history in two Canadian and Québécois novels, Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family (1982) and Jacques Poulin's Volkswagen Blues (1984). Tracing narrative techniques in general and intertextuality in particular, the thesis reveals postmodern concerns in re-writing history. Both Ondaatje's and Poulin's novel refract the master narrative of History and its closed linear nature into multiple discontinuous histories. In accordance with recent historiography, they further unmask the textuality, and hence ideological embeddedness, of our knowledge about the past. Both exploiting and contesting historical authority, Poulin and Ondaatje inquire into the relations between art, history, and the structure of social and cultural power.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Hyman for his supervision.

Special thanks to Dr. York for her assistance and criticism, and to Dr. Ballstadt, whose course introduced me to Canadian literature.

My gratefulness also to Brigitte Glaser for her proofreading and help, Irene Gammel for her advice, and, above all, Dr. Caroline Bayard for her support and encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

The two founding literatures of Canada, one would assume, invite comparative study. Apart from two centuries of shared geography, government, and climate, historical and cultural similarities between English-Canada and Québec certainly do exist. Consequently, English-Canadian and Québécois literatures grew in similar ways and have several themes in common, such as the attempt to define a national identity and the search for cultural distinctiveness. Ronald Sutherland, in his studies of the 1970s, has advocated a strong underlying unity of Canadian literature and has concluded that

Canada may always have two principal ethnic groups and a variety of other smaller groups, but what all these groups already have in common has in fact created a distinctive, all embracing Canadian mystique, something independent of and transcending the separate ethnic identities. (58)

Critics such as E.D.Blodgett and Philip Stratford, however, have sharply rejected this "mainstream" theory. Although he does not deny common factors, Blodgett criticizes Sutherland's large, amorphous themes (21) for obscuring Canada's pluralism and resulting vitality. Stratford, too, points out that common historical or geographical features are experienced by English-Canadians and Québécois in "sharply contrasting" ways (2). As a result, there have been few

instances of direct exchange or cross-fertilization between French-Canadian and English-Canadian writers.

Still, the era of postmodernity, with its proverbial "transgression of boundaries", may have opened up new perspectives for a comparative study of the Canadian and Québécois literatures. Now that different media are said to form a world community, a "global village", and now that many mass products are available all over the world, intra- and international cultural contacts would seem unavoidable. Postmodernism¹ has been labelled an international phenomenon, characteristic of our uniformed civilization, since it permits hybridization and transcends regional particularities.

Intertextuality, defined by Julia Kristeva as the "transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another" (Moi 111), has become one of postmodernism's dominant modes. Its use has definitely exceeded the confines of a national literature and indicated affinities with diverse literary works.

Yet differences between English-Canadian and Québécois literary criticism clearly exist even in the context of postmodernism. For, while English-Canadian critics soon adopted postmodernism after their colleagues in the United States (where it originated as a literary movement during the 1960s), their Québécois counterparts, more influenced by theories coming from France, have been much more reluctant to do so. Despite the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's The

Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (upon request of the Conseil des Universités of Québec's government) in 1979, postmodernism as a critical concept was not absorbed until the mid 1980s. Notably Guy Scarpetta's L'Impureté (1985) and Kroker and Cook's gloomy vision of The Postmodern Scene (1986) then helped to shape the concept of postmodernism in Québec¹.

By contrast, English-Canadian criticism throughout the 80s has been dominated by Linda Hutcheon's extensive studies on postmodernism in the arts in general. Hutcheon, in fact, coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to refer to "fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities" (The Canadian Postmodern 13). Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family (1982) and Jacques Poulin's Volkswagen Blues (1984), the two novels examined in this thesis, constitute examples of "historiographic metafiction" in that their narrators, while searching for a cultural identity, re-discover, as well as revise, history.

In both Ondaatje's and Poulin's narratives, the protagonists, as they embark on a quest and move forward in space, also move backwards in time and attempt to restore private as well as public history. Sri Lankan born Ondaatje, in his memoir, recovers the history of his ancestors in general, and the life of his father in particular. As developments in the author's personal and family history are paralleled by national changes in Ceylon/Sri Lanka, Ondaatje

reviews colonial history as well. While, in Poulin's novel, Jack Waterman searches for his brother Théo, he and his Métis companion, la Grande Sauterelle, cross the American continent from Gaspé to San Francisco. On their way, they unearth semi-occulted stories and thus recapitulate North American colonial history from their particular Québécois perspective and demystify the "American Dream".

The protagonists' journeys involve, in fact, textual movements apart from geographical and historical ones. In the process of reconstructing the past, the main characters gather literary as well as historical intertexts and learn to identify, decipher and decode them. Since they are, furthermore, authors themselves, the protagonists are obsessed not only with the act of reading, but also with the process of writing and, in metafictional remarks, they comment on the actual construction of texts.

The following thesis examines the role of language and narrative representation in Volkswagen Blues and Running in the Family and considers its effects on the nature and status of history. Referring to Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia and dialogism in the novel as well as to Jean-François Lyotard's writings on postmodernity, it begins by analyzing problems of structure and narrative voices in these two "polyphonic" novels. The second chapter concentrates on processes of reading and discusses forms and effects of intertextual, or even inter-discursive, features of the two

novels. The final chapter will relate the views on history and historiography in Running and Volkswagen Blues to theoretical texts of recent historiography, particularly the New Historicism. It is, moreover, concerned with the social implications of history and postmodernity and considers Heinz Weinmann's "history of mentalities" of Québec.

Although a postmodern sensitivity to history and narrative dominates both novels, their actual themes are ultimately different. Michael Ondaatje tries to come to terms with his cultural identity by contracting his view to Sri Lanka's native heritage. Jacques Poulin's narrator, by contrast, emerges out of intense Québécois isolation by broadening his horizon to the whole American continent and by negotiating a North American, rather than a purely Québécois, identity.

NOTES

1. I am well aware that the very concept of postmodernism resists any unifying definition, but signals current tendencies in disciplines as diverse as literature, criticism, the visual arts, dance, music, theology, and philosophy, to name just a few.

2. See also Caroline Bayard's article "Post-modernisme et avant garde au Canada, 1960-84" on postmodern English-Canadian poetry in the Québécois journal Voix et Images. Also in 1984, Walter Moser, in "Mode-Moderne-Postmoderne", reacted to the European debate between Lyotard and Habermas. Later postmodern criticism in Québec includes Ginette Michaud's "Récits postmodernes?", which examines Poulin's novels, and, of course, Janet Paterson's study Moments Postmodernes dans le Roman Québécois.

I. NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

As both Jack Waterman and Ondaatje's narrator set out to survey *terra incognita* and map the geography of America and Sri Lanka, so their readers begin to explore the physical terrain of the books that lie before them: Volkswagen Blues and Running in the Family. At first glance, they might be surprised by the novels' visual impact. Poulin's and Ondaatje's narratives are spaced out in extremely short chapters, in which equally short paragraphs and laconic dialogues prevail. Moreover, the telling titles of chapters in Volkswagen Blues create the impression of the book as being a collection of tales, of stories about history (Jacques Cartier (9), Une Discussion sur Etienne Brulé (63)); geography (Mille Iles (53), La piste de l'Oregon (65)); and popular culture (Un coup de fil de Sam Peckinah (31), Les vieilles chansons françaises (245)). Similarly, the table of contents of Running seems to mark Ondaatje's work as a notebook or travel diary rather than a novel. When flipping further through the books, one also recognizes the heterogeneous material which both narratives incorporate. Tape recordings, interviews, maps, photographs, and acknowledgments, on the one hand, denote objective documentation. Interior monologues, song lyrics and poems, on the other hand, suggest the imaginative workings of fiction.

Ondaatje's and Poulin's playful oscillation between the "real" world and the world of fiction as well as their merging of poetry and prose are obviously deliberate. They question the traditional boundaries between the genres as well as the separation of historical and fictional discourse. When Jack Waterman, the writer in Poulin's work, is asked by the Immigration Service what kind of novels he writes, he is as confused as are readers of Poulin and Ondaatje:

C'était la question classique et il n'avait jamais réussi à trouver une réponse satisfaisante. Combien y avait-il de sortes de romans? Dans quelle catégorie fallait-il mettre les siens? (90)¹

To find one's way through the sometimes chaotic labyrinths of Poulin's and Ondaatje's narratives, one might find it helpful to consider the novels in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the novel. In his seminal essay "Discourse in the Novel", the Russian literary critic does not separate language and style from genre, but proposes to regard the novel as

a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized (262) ... The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types ... and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. (263)

Bakhtin, then, does not offer a universal theory including rules according to which one should judge narrative. His own perspectives are, in fact, "dialogic" and often contradictory, dynamic and flexible. Rather than predetermining responses or

pre-formulating results, Bakhtin simply suggests ways of analyzing the novel: by shifting the emphasis from seeing the printed word to hearing narrative voices, and by considering the literary work as a communicative act situated within a historical as well as social context.

If one accepts his definition of the novel as "a microcosm of heteroglossia" (411), one may be able to perceive the "architecture" of the disparate materials that make up the hybrid nature of Running and Volkswagen Blues. Both novels do, indeed, embody Bakhtin's notion of a radical intermingling of discourses and a multiplicity of utterances, all conditioned by the social, historical, and geographical circumstances under which they were expressed. For they attempt to convey different cultures in all their complexity, with their various national languages, and further juxtapose different historical epochs, the past and the present. Appropriately, the title Volkswagen Blues alludes to this polyphonous orchestration of voices.

Not only are both Volkswagen Blues and Running heterogeneously structured, but they also disrupt the familiar narrative pattern of beginning, middle and ending. As readers, we enter Poulin's Volkswagen abruptly and are not introduced to the main characters. They even remain unnamed and are merely referred to as "l'homme" and "la fille", until the two introduce themselves to one another and are finally named five pages after the opening. The "incipit" of Ondaatje's novel is

still more complex in that beginnings are doubled. The author prefaces the "actual" narrative with half a page of italicized text that heightens our awareness of the distinction between author and narrator/writer in Running: "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" (17). By introducing a third person, "he," Ondaatje indicates the fundamental paradox of his (auto-)biography, as Smaro Kamboureli has pointed out. The third person "he" acts as a character within the narrative and participates in past events; the "I," apparently the same person, writes in the present about the past. This split between the present moment of writing and past experience remains of crucial importance throughout the novel.

Significantly, while the personal pronoun "he" slides into "I," tenses also shift from present to past, although what is experienced by "him" actually takes place after the "I" has planned a return to Sri Lanka. Notions of order and chronology are subverted throughout Running, and the narrator actually expresses his difficulties in "trying to get it straight" (105). "Wait a minute, wait a minute, *when* is this happening?" (107) he wonders repeatedly, but the memories of the people he interviews do not follow a linear pattern. Neither does the narrator's account of the past. For instance, after he has related the death of his grandmother Lalla (129), she appears again on page 145. And, strangely enough, it is

only on page 75 that we are informed about his "first memory." Time appears to be uncontrollable and, accordingly, the narrative meanders off in different directions; actions are not developed, but are constantly interrupted and taken up again later.

The headings of chapters reflect this incohesiveness: "Kegalle (i)" begins on page 55, but continues eleven chapters later in "Kegalle (ii)" (98). The "Monsoon Notebook" is even fractured into three short pieces. These titles reverberate throughout the novel, as do other phrases that are introduced as headings and subsequently echoed within the narrative. "A Fine Romance" (29) is both the title of Running's second section and, as we learn later, his mother's favourite song. Similarly, "Don't talk to me about Matisse" (61) turns out to be the title of a poem (85). Conversely, the heading of the novel's final section, "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society" (183), is anticipated earlier on, as Ondaatje's father was a founding member of the organization (145). These elements function as connective devices and establish a narrative line in the seemingly chaotic collage of Running. Moreover, they imitate the associative workings of recollections and foreground the important role of memory in the novel.

Poulin's narrative, by contrast, largely follows a linear chronological pattern. Only twice does Jack interrupt this order when he inserts passages of his memories of Théo

(65-66; 68-69). On the whole, however, Volkswagen Blues recalls the form of a chronical, with its linear recapitulation of history, starting with Jacques Cartier and the French colonization in 1534 and ranging over the massacres against Indians to the losses on the Oregon Trail in the nineteenth century. Its progressive structure is reinforced thematically in that Jack and la Grande Sauterelle collect more and more clues to find the goal of their journey, Théo.

Yet Poulin eventually critiques the concept of a teleological history and subverts notions of finality. Although Jack and his companion make progress and finally succeed in finding the brother, Théo turns out not to be a hero, but an old man suffering from creeping paralysis. Volkswagen Blues, therefore, frustrates Jack's, and the readers', feelings of expectancy and curiosity. Its ending, in fact, resembles the beginning, in that Jack returns to Montréal, while la Grande Sauterelle continues her nomadic life in the Volks. Thus, the novel does not leave us with any kind of synthesis, conclusion or ultimate truth; instead, it ~~suspends a final meaning and points to an uncertain future which is left to our imagination.~~

A subversion of narrative closure is equally foregrounded in Ondaatje's narrative. The writer's account starts and the narrator's account ends in a dark room with barred windows just before daybreak, where the narrator is

remembering his childhood years and absorbing what is happening around him. The quest for his father, a goal that becomes apparent only gradually during the narrative, finally fails, as does the search for Théo. Ondaatje's narrator does not come to terms with his personal past, the divorce of his parents, his own emigration from his native Sri Lanka at the age of eleven, and the alcoholism and premature death of his father: "And yet he [the father] is still one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut" (200). "All this Beethoven and rain" (203) is his concluding remark, which suggests the unresolved tension between Asian exoticism and European or Western culture; Ondaatje's comment reveals rather than reconciles the paradoxes of his personal search for identity. Although the narrator realizes that his job would have been "to keep peace with the enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with 'the mercy of distance' write the histories" (179), he does not do so. Instead, he stresses indeterminacy and openness: "But the book again is incomplete" (201). As in Volkswagen Blues, the problems of finding one's roots are not resolved, but infinitely extended by structural circularity.

Eventually, then, both novels focus not so much on a final product, a result, as on the process of discovering and searching. Gilles Marcotte is right in stating that "ce n'était pas, en vérité, pour Théo que Jack avait entrepris le voyage. C'était pour le voyage. Théo n'était qu'un prétexte,

un leurre: une image" (16). And appropriately, the titles of both novels already convey a sense of instability and mobility. Poulin and Ondaatje evoke, but simultaneously undercut, classical notions of closure and totalization, coherence and harmony - one of the postmodern paradoxes which Linda Hutcheon constantly stresses. She sees the function of these contradictions (between installing and subverting) as defamiliarizing conventional, and supposedly "natural," notions of narrative. Order is always imposed by authors as well as readers and therefore constitutes a human construct.

In fact, this distrust of totalization calls to mind Jean-François Lyotard's analysis of "The Postmodern Condition," the first major study of postmodernity. The French philosopher claimed that the destruction of a people (the Jews) by the people (the Volk), the Holocaust, opened up the new historical era of postmodernity (Le Postmoderne 40). With the crime of Auschwitz, the idea of "people" as the legitimating authority crumbled and this produced a crisis in the legitimation of knowledge. The master or grand narratives and myths of Western civilization, the explanatory models for natural as well as social sciences that recount a Universal History of humanity (e.g. Marxism), have increasingly become discredited: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (The Postmodern

Condition xxiv). According to Lyotard, one can no longer commit oneself to one single belief in a unified story of the past, which embraces the ensemble of human events. Instead, the theoretician celebrates "les petits récits," popular and little narratives, which do not attempt to order the crowd of events and thus escape the crisis of legitimation:

The narrative function ... is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements - narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. ... Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these.
(PMC xxiv)

Both Volkswagen Blues and Running illustrate and confirm Lyotard's views in that they focus on little (hi-)stories' in their attempt to reconstruct History.

Short and anecdotal stories abound in Ondaatje's narrative and reinforce the impression of the novel as a ~~notebook or an album, composed of snippets of information jotted down,~~ both verbal and visual snapshots and individual portraits. Lalla's impulsive and eccentric character, for instance, is depicted in various episodes, whether in scenes of heavy drinking and hectic partygoing or in the bus where another passenger fondles her rubber breast (42-43). Information about Ondaatje's father Mervyn is equally piecemeal and dispersed, consisting of interviews and fragments of memory. Even single events, such as the wedding (105-109), are presented by different voices in different versions. The narrator, consequently, evades fixity and

definite characterization, but allows, and indeed provokes, multiple subjectivities and perspectives.

Volkswagen Blues, similarly, renders the past as a discontinuous series of small narratives rather than a universal account of History. Both Jack and la Grande Sauterelle relate legends of Eldorado (29) and Starved Rock (114-116), the penguin tale (61), the deep-sea diver's complex (146-7), and numerous disconnected stories about Indian genocides. Far from trying to form one coherent, continuous grand narrative out of these stories and legends, both characters, significantly, always close their tales with the phrase "Voilà, c'est tout." They do not gather their different local stories under an all-including rubric of Universal History, but emphasize individual events and persons as well as ethnic or folk traditions.

"The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal", Lyotard holds (PMC xxiv). Jack's brother Théo might, then, represent one of the grand narratives. And Marcotte confirms that Théo is "le héros de l'aventure vécue, du récit réaliste ... C'est Théo qui est la cause et la fin du récit" (15). For Jack, Théo used to epitomize the ideal elder brother, a mentor, a person who was "absolument convaincu qu'il était capable de faire tout ce qu'il voulait" (137)¹. However, this heroic vision is demystified during the journey through North America, when Jack learns about his brother's

criminal record and Théo's name engraved on a stone. The ensuing depression, the deep-sea diver's complex, corresponds, in Lyotard's terms, to the intellectuals' lamentation and disappointment they feel in the loss of a major narrative. Jack's search is finally frustrated when he sees his brother's staring eyes: "there was a sort of silent question in his gaze, but the rest of his face was devoid of expression" (208). Jack thus comes to distrust his brother's superiority and recognizes Théo's former authority as an illusion, as his own construct:

Je ... l'idée qu'il vaut mieux ne pas revoir mon frère ... j'ai accepté cette idée tellement vite que ... maintenant je me demande si j'aimais vraiment Théo. Peut-être que j'aimais seulement l'image que je m'étais faite de lui." (289)¹

"Don't talk to me about heroes," is Waterman's disillusioned comment in San Francisco (279). As the carnivalesque atmosphere around Théo might suggest, however, the breakdown of former authorities also opens up new perspectives and allows popular elements to enter. It is fitting that Pitsémine's last remark to Jack should be "Que les dieux vous protègent!" (290)¹. La Grande Sauterelle thus indicates that the belief in one single authority ("Théo" being the Greek word for God) has been refracted into a belief in several gods.

"Where is the intimate and truthful in all this?" (54), Ondaatje's narrator wonders and maintains: "Truth disappears with history" (53). Both Poulin and Ondaatje

question our concept of factual, objective truth not only by refracting and multiplying the master narrative of History, but also by integrating mythical stories into their novels. They place history as one narrative within a framework of legends and stories, rumours and gossip. Ondaatje explicitly subverts the notion of objectivity in his acknowledgments:

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 (206).

At the same time that Ondaatje's and Poulin's novel present fabrications of history, they convey a general sense of vagueness, doubtfulness, and uncertainty. Jack Waterman, for instance, often complains about the fog in his head; he has no sense of either time or of space, and continually confuses directions and distances. Volkswagen Blues also displays such inconsistencies as Jack Waterman's starting to search for his brother fifteen (or twenty?) years after Théo has left. Still, the novel's two main characters confirm that "On ne peut pas toujours être logique!" (290)' and ironically declare: "On est les deux plus grands menteurs de l'Amérique du Nord!" (79)'.

The narrator of Running, in his turn, also makes us aware of his unreliability and lays bare his uncertainty when, for instance, referring to "a man who may or may not have been in the Cabinet" (124). It should come as no surprise that dreams and excessive drinking (not to mention elements of

magic realism) play an important part in Running, since they indicate the novel's exuberant, bizarre, and fabulatory quality, the "confused genealogies and rumour" (205).

While Volkswagen Blues and Running playfully refute abstraction and demystify our notions of Truth, History and other metanarratives, they simultaneously celebrate banalities and trivial incidents. Whether it is a cat named Chop Suey or Jack Waterman making himself a hot chocolate in the middle of night without even turning on the stove light: Jacques Poulin indulges in those picaresque scenes "de zouave", "tout à fait idiot" (225) - vignettes that depict the small complications and seemingly unimportant episodes of daily life. Despite their existential search in America, Jack and la Grande Sauterelle do not abstract or theorize problems, but frequently revel in childish, ludicrous games. They pretend to be detectives (23), sheriff (198) or Jesse James and Calamity Jane (143). Even Jack's deep-sea diver's complex is given an ironic twist when Pitsémine mocks Waterman after coming back from the bathroom: "Vous avez oublié d'enlever vos grosses semelles de plomb!" (147)'. In such scenes, Poulin displays the "tendresse" of his style, the warmth and tenderness towards his characters, for which many critics have praised him'. Instead of offering detailed verbal accounts of psychological analysis and characterisation, the author ^{— sp.} portrays his characters by their gestures and actions. That Jack Waterman has recovered from his deep-sea diver's complex

is not announced by words, but by the fact that he has a massive American breakfast after three days of fasting (145). Poulin thus demonstrates that banal incidents can be as effective characterizations as lengthy passages of minute psychological analysis provided by a narrator: "Poulin est un minimaliste, il est un maître des sous-entendus, de l'art du 'tout dire avec rien'" (Michaud 70). And instead of interfering with his characters, Poulin treats Jack as the writer Waterman handles his own characters:

dans un certain décor, il avait mis deux personnages en présence l'un de l'autre et il les avait regardés vivre en intervenant le moins possible. (91)¹⁰

More significant yet, while details in realist fiction lent an air of verifiability and specificity to the fictional world, their function has radically changed in Poulin's and, more generally, postmodern fiction, where they function as "véritables opérateurs textuels" (Michaud 77). Michaud holds that details, such as the spray of orange juice which attracts attention to a photo of Jesse James in Volkswagen Blues (144-5), mirror the postmodern narrative event par excellence in that they oscillate between (at least) two modes of interpretation (78). On the one hand, details can function as signals and guides for readers by attracting their attention to significant events. On the other hand, banalities may as well parody these signals and mock those readers who take them

as meaningful signposts. "Pure coincidence," comments la Grande Sauterelle on the spray of orange juice (145); "Impossible de voir si elle disait la vérité ou non," interjects the narrator (146). Minute descriptions and details (other examples are the brand of soap (244) and the exact number of motorways (92)) seem to authenticate the fictional universe. Yet they contrast sharply with the artificial and fictitious aspects of Poulin's novel. Postmodernism's realistic air is, then, highly ambiguous, as Linda Hutcheon has pointed out: "postmodernist metafiction tends to play with the *possibilities* of meaning (from degree zero to plurisignification) ... and it does so self-consciously as to begin to subvert the critic's role" ("A Poetics?" 35). Poulin, who deliberately remains a marginal figure on the Québécois literary scene, might well make fun of his academic readers in the institution. As the latter attempt to see a deeper meaning in everything, the author exploits insignificant details and thus plays with non-senses just as he plays with genres¹¹.

Michael Ondaatje, in his turn, is equally fascinated with miniatures. Like Poulin, Ondaatje's narrator presents absurd particulars, such as the number of the footnote when he quotes his ancestor (81) or the fact that Francis de Saram used to remove his false teeth when he got into a fight (44). However, some apparently trivial episodes gain a special importance in that, as microcosms, they reveal concerns of the novel's macrocosm. The story about the thalagoya tongue, for

instance, indicates Sri Lanka's mythic heritage and the value attached to "verbal brilliance" (74); "Honeymoon" (37-8) reflects the heterogeneity, discontinuity and juxtaposition of "important" and "insignificant" information characteristic of Running. G.E. Clarke confirms the chinese-box-structure of Ondaatje's novel when he notes that the "nature of the Sigirian and Vidyalankaran prison poems mirrors the construction of Family" (17), since both are communal as well as confused works. And even on the syntactic level, sentences reveal the narrative's fragmentary and incomplete nature: "Teenager and Uncle. Husband and lover. A lost father in his solace." (54)

"His words are sensuous as mangoes," commented Mark Abley in his review of Ondaatje's novel, and the narrator, indeed, emphasizes all kinds of sensuous perceptions. He minutely describes foods, dishes and tastes (197) and even attempts to transmit Ceylon's characteristic cinnamon smell. All surrounding impressions are absorbed by him, including sun and electric light, oppressive heat, the noises of rain and fans (202) as well as the sounds of voices, which, paradoxically, cannot be rendered except in printed words. The narrator, apparently, tries to convey everything as authentically and as immediately as possible: "It is now almost a quarter to three" (26); "Here. ... At this point of the map" (64). At the same time, however, his metafictional remarks indicate his awareness of the narrative's

incompleteness and thus parody all attempts to present a totality:

I am writing this book about you when I am least sure about such words. (180)... In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we ever thought we would be fully understand you. (201)

Interestingly, the majority of "petits récits", both in Running and Volkswagen Blues, are told orally: titles such as "Asian Rumours" (19), "Tropical Gossip" (53), "Lunch Conversation" (105), and "Dialogues" (173), in Ondaatje's narrative, announce the novel's emphasis on oral story-telling right from the beginning. Talks and exchanges constitute a major part of Running and, in addition to its lyrical flavour, grant a dramatic quality to the novel. The segment "Dialogues" (173), for instance, introduces eleven voices that report memories of Ondaatje's parents. However, we cannot localize these voices (merely introduced by quotation marks), since we do not know which persons are speaking (although we might deduce the speakers from their relationship to the subject they are talking about). Even though the narrator names the voices in a later fragment, "Final Days/Father Tongue" (192), he does not connect their utterances, but lets the sometimes contradictory voices speak for themselves. Similarly, "Lunchtime Conversation" (105-110) comprises the diffuse statements and different modes of thinking of the people involved. Again, the narrator does not assimilate or appropriate these voices on his part. Rather, he foregrounds

multiple subjectivities and presents a textual version of collectivity and community - reminding readers of the photograph of the human pyramid on the book's cover. As Ondaatje's narrator admits in his acknowledgments, "A literary work is a communal act. And this book could not have been *imagined*, let alone conceived, without the help of many people" (205).

Although the narrator sometimes appears to lose control over his narrative as multiple voices overwhelm him, at the same time, he clearly exposes his manipulations when using a metafictional voice that comments on the actual process of narrating. In self-reflexive remarks, the narrator lays bare the mechanisms of organizing events and constructing a narrative out of them. An impersonal omniscient narrator, who relates all events of his narrative and forms a single coherent vision out of them, does not exist in Running, Volkswagen Blues, or any other postmodern novel. The literary work, then, acquires aspects of dynamism and performance, although these effects are, again, paradoxically conveyed by the static fixity of print.

Ondaatje complicates the narrative point of view even further in one of the last fragments of his novel. As the narrator attempts to trace the workings of his father's mind before his death, he slips from the third-person (denoting his father) to "I," thereby indicating his identification with the father: "Leaving the car door open like a white broken wing on

the lawn, he moved towards the porch, a case of liqueur under his arm. ... The bottle top in my mouth as I sit on the bed like a lost ship on a white sea" (188). Once again, the narrator emphasizes the subjectivity of his account.

Positions of narrative authority in Volkswagen Blues are established just as subtly. Although the novel is a third-person narrative, several critics have noticed striking resemblances between the author Jacques Poulin and Jack Waterman, the character. In one of his few interviews, Poulin mentioned that he instinctively endowed his principal character with his own age, tastes, and a similar profession; moreover, the decision whether to use a first person narrator or to adopt the point of view of a third person posed a major problem to him (Voix & Images 8, 14). The character Jack in the novel admits that his name is the English version given to him by his brother. Théo also suggested Jack/Jacques's last name "Waterman" as a pseudonym, which is a "pen name" in the very literal sense, as Hodgson and Sarkonak have pointed out (29). However, despite the transparent relationship between Poulin and Jack, Waterman is also constantly teased, and thereby distanced, from his creator through ironical remarks. The point of view in Volkswagen Blues is, then, neither that of an omniscient narrator nor that of one single subjective character. We are limited to Jack Waterman's and Pitsémine's experiences during their journey, though these are told by a detached narrative voice, with "l'attitude paternelle" (165)

that the two main characters appreciate in The Oregon Trail Revisited.

The polyphony of voices in Ondaatje's novel invokes Bakhtin's analyses and his leading concept of dialogism, i.e. the constant interaction between utterances, characteristic of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Each distinct voice is consciously responding to another ideological position and, conversely, also anticipating a response. Different social or ideological, historical, and geographical wor(l)ds are thus allowed to enter the novel. The Russian critic opposes dialogism to monologism, which he characterizes as authoritative, absolute discourse, evolving under the influence of "centripetal" centralizing forces in society. A single authoritative "monologic" voice attempts to repress other consciousnesses and absorbs different world views to impose one ideological position. Monologic discourse might then well be considered the dominant mode of Lyotard's grand narratives, since the latter have rigorously dogmatic qualities. As Volkswagen Blues and Running reflect the destabilization of "grands récits," they simultaneously foreground the notion of dialogism among characters and countries.

In a recent article, Pierre L'Hérault used Bakhtin's concepts to point out "le métissage des personnages" in Poulin's novel (31-35). He considered the treatment of characters in Volkswagen Blues and perceived a living dialogic

relationship between Jack and la Grande Sauterelle. As their different backgrounds denote (Jack being a Québécois intellectual, representing male explorers; la Grande Sauterelle, a Métis, referring to displaced females), the two main characters epitomize two poles. As Pitsémine, significantly, states right in the beginning:

Quand vous parlez des découvreurs et des explorateurs de l'Amérique... Moi, je n'ai rien en commun avec les gens qui sont venus chercher de l'or et des épices et un passage vers l'Orient. Je suis du côté de ceux qui se sont fait voler leurs terres et leur façon de vivre. Et puis ... [...] Et puis il paraît que les Indiens sont venus de l'Asie et qu'ils sont arrivés en Amérique par un pont de glace qui recouvrait le détroit de Béring. On est arrivés par l'Ouest et vous êtes arrivés par l'Est. Il y a 7000 kilomètres qui nous séparent! (28)¹²

During the communal journey through America, however, Jack and la Grande Sauterelle cooperate and come to share the Volkswagen, food, their problems as well as their stories. They are aware of their distances and prefer being alone (290), but nevertheless exchange ideas and compliments and relativize each other's opinion. Whereas dialogism in Ondaatje's novel is formal (all people involved in conversations belong to Ondaatje's family or class), it is ideological in Poulin's narrative in that different social voices express their world-views.

The border between male and female in Volkswagen Blues is, in fact, not as clear-cut as one might assume; for Pitsémine is an automobile mechanic (31), accustomed to driving cars, and she easily disguises herself as a male guest in the YMCA. Jack Waterman, in his turn, often assumes the

stereotypically female tasks of cooking and doing the dishes. The writer also humbly characterizes himself as a "faux doux" (211)¹³ and appears quiet, passive, and insecure, whereas la Grande Sauterelle displays the "male" traits of independence, liberty, and self-confidence. Moreover, each of the two characters is marked by his or her doubleness, since both carry two names: the pseudonym Jack Waterman and la Grande Sauterelle or Pitsémine respectively.

Just as in the Volkswagen male and female, explorer and victim, enter into a dialogue, so Poulin's novel transgresses the boundaries between Québec and the Americas as well as those between French and English, the familiar and the distant, the known and the unknown. Both Running and Volkswagen Blues oscillate between history and fiction, the past and the present, high and popular culture, modern technology and traditional mythology, factual details and imaginative fiction. These binary oppositions constantly enter into a dialogue, but are, after all, only negotiated, and not reconciled or resolved. Demarcations become blurred as irony, parody, laughter and playfulness enter the narratives, but distinctions are not effaced. Finally, also the novels and surrounding texts or intertexts as well as the reader and the writer enter into a dialogue - an interaction which will be further examined in the following chapter.

NOTES

1. It was the standard question, and he'd never been able to come up with a satisfactory answer. How many kinds of novel were there? What category did his belong to? (see Sheila Fischman's translation of Volkswagen Blues, p. 66)

2. One should note the double meaning of the French term "histoire", which can refer to a narrative structure (e.g. a story, a fable) as well as to a succession of historical events (history).

3. absolutely convinced that he was able to do whatever he wanted to (98)

4. I ... the idea that it's better not to see my brother again... I accepted it so quickly that ... now I wonder if I really loved Théo. Perhaps I only loved the image I'd made up. (212)

5. May the gods protect you. (213)

6. You can't always be logical. (213)

7. And the two of us are the biggest liars in North America! (57)

8. You'd forgotten to take of your big lead soles. (106)

9. see, for instance, Jean-Pierre Lapointe, p. 25.

10. he had placed two characters together in a certain setting and then he had watched them live, intervening as little as possible. (66)

11. Jean-Pierre Lapointe, in his article, refers to Poulin's novels Les Grandes Marées and Mon cheval pour un royaume to denote Poulin's anti-intellectual attitude (27).

12. When you talk about the discoverers and explorers of America ... I've got nothing in common with the people who came looking for gold and spices and a passage to Asia. I'm on the side of the people who were robbed of their lands and of their way of life. And ... And apparently the Indians came from Asia and reached America by means of an ice bridge that used the Bering Strait. We came from the West and you came from the East. There's 7,000 kilometres between us! (23)

13. phony gentle (153)

II. "Knitting the story together:" INTERTEXTUALITY

As the main characters in Running in the Family and Volkswagen Blues travel from one place to the next, they also move from text to text, or map to photograph. For their search for roots, family or national history involves tracing a genealogy of texts, literary as well as historical. The two novels are not only maps of journeys, but also maps of reading: texts resemble a geography and function as signposts, since the protagonists read historical and literary writings in order to learn where they came from and where they are going. At the same time as Jack Waterman and Ondaatje travel through America and Sri Lanka respectively, readers travel through Ondaatje's and Poulin's narratives, and the maps with which the novels open help them to find their way through the sometimes labyrinthine structure; appropriately, readers arrive at "Le milieu de l'Amérique" in the middle of Volkswagen Blues.

Not only space, but also time is rendered textually in both novels. The past events we learn about survived only because of their material representation, in documents, records, inscriptions on tombstones, postcards or photographs. Not surprisingly, then, archives, libraries, bookstores, and museums assume a special importance in Ondaatje's and particularly Poulin's narrative, for they collect and preserve

the literary and historical text(ure)s of the past. And since both Running and Volkswagen Blues integrate other texts, cards, maps, and photographs into the narrative, they are themselves likened to archival collections of texts, which have to be identified and decoded by the novels' readers.

In addition to locating material, Jack Waterman and Ondaatje's narrator have to identify and decipher texts. These processes of reading and their role in human life are underlined by the different types of readers presented in the novels. Both Ondaatje's father and mother loved books; but while Mervyn was a secretive reader, who "swallowed the heart of books and kept that knowledge and emotion to himself" (168), Ondaatje's extroverted mother "read her favourite poems out loud, would make [her children] read together and acted herself" (168). These reading habits are indicative of his parents' personalities, the father, reclusive after the divorce, standing in sharp contrast to Doris with her "sense of the dramatic, the tall stories, the determination to now and then hold the floor" (168).

In Volkswagen Blues, characters are similarly distinguished by their reading habits, as well as by their attitudes towards travelling. La Grande Sauterelle, on the one hand, is a voracious reader who virtually devours vast amounts of books. She has her particular way of "borrowing" material from the library and she even steals books from bookstores (41/42). Jack Waterman, on the other hand, is an anxious,

parsimonious reader, whose favourite books are as valuable to him as old friends (42). He admits that "Tout ce que je sais, ou presque, je l'ai appris dans les livres" (30)¹. Whereas he reads slowly and carefully, stops reading when writing a novel, and prefers to remember the impression of his first reading (208), Pitsémine is addicted to books and words: she re-reads Kerouac's novel because "'Qui n'a pas relu, n'a pas lu'" (258)² and holds that "UN MOT VAUT MILLE IMAGES" (169)³. Her attitude towards books is significant to Volkswagen Blues on the whole, since it helps to explain the nature of Poulin's narrative:

Il ne faut pas juger les livres un par un. Je veux dire: il ne faut pas les voir comme des choses indépendantes. Un livre n'est jamais complet en lui-même; si on veut le comprendre, il faut le mettre en rapport avec d'autres livres, non seulement avec les livres du même auteur, mais aussi avec des livres écrits par d'autres personnes. Ce que l'on croit être un livre n'est la plupart du temps qu'une partie d'un autre livre plus vaste auquel plusieurs auteurs ont collaboré sans le savoir. (169)⁴

La Grande Sauterelle's conception of books actually mirrors Poulin's attitude, since the author expressly designed Volkswagen Blues as a network of other (historical as well as literary) texts. In Ondaatje's fabric, too, characters "knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong" (110). Running and Volkswagen Blues, thus, disestablish themselves as mere sources of influence and instead openly display their intertextuality.

In the 1960s, Julia Kristeva refined Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in the novel by shifting the emphasis from

the notion that every utterance is caught up in a context of other utterances to the dialogue of texts. She coined the term "intertextuality" to expose writings as mosaics or tissues of quotations without quotation marks. Texts consequently become dynamic sites in which literary and cultural (con-)texts blend, clash, and interact equally, and in which the reader is actively engaged in pursuing the traces of other (inter-) texts.

The palimpsestic layering of diverse texts and their continual interplay is by no means a purely postmodern strategy, nor does it exist only in literature. What might distinguish intertextuality in postmodernism from intertextuality in previous forms is its deliberate awkwardness, visibility, and abundance. Intertexts in postmodern novels are not spontaneously or "innocently" used as sources, but rather distorted and abused for parody; they are manifestly assimilated and often ironically transformed to suit the author's aim to rewrite previous texts.

Intertextuality in Ondaatje's novel first of all manifests itself in the epigraphs which open the novel or preface single segments (76, 78). The lines quoted, which are generally identified by their author, introduce essential themes which recur throughout the narrative or in the following section. The quotation from Oderic, for example, which mentions "fowls as big as our country geese having two heads", prepares the reader for elements of magical realism in

Running: a wild pig is stealing Pears Transparent soap (143), and a pole cat gets drunk on berries (59). Oderic's posture further resembles Ondaatje's in that both present their experiences, their subjective eye-witness accounts, of visits to an island. Even more important, just as the Franciscan Friar points to the gaps of his report ("other miraculous things which I will not here write of"), so too Ondaatje's narrator will declare that his "book again is incomplete" (201).

The second epigraph functions to introduce the opposition between Americans and Sri Lanka's natives (Sinhalese and Tamils) and, more generally, the (supposed) superiority of Western civilization over Asian "backwardness:"

"The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils, whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat."

Perception and knowledge are, in addition, linked to language, to linguistic competence in English - another theme that will recur in the narrative.

Literary texts and authors are mentioned throughout Running, starting with a line from Jane Austen's Persuasion (22) which opened Ondaatje's eyes to his lost childhood, over Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's poem "Don't talk to me about Matisse" (84/85), to allusions to Shakespeare's plays (81, 179/80, 189) and lines from Goethe (198). Far from hiding these literary intertexts, the narrator openly mentions the authors and their works and thereby indicates the influence of literature upon

his life. He associates himself with other literary figures and recognizes a sense of tradition and continuity from Shakespeare's plays onwards: "Fortinbras. Edgar. Christopher, my sisters, Wendy, myself. I think all of our lives have been terribly shaped by what went on before us" (179).

More important, the narrator perceives his life and the world around him only in terms of literature and his quest almost fuses with the one in King Lear. Not only for Mervyn, but also for Michael Ondaatje, books become a physical world, comparable and equivalent to reality:

With dark blue bindings. You creaked them open and stepped into a roomful of sorrow. A midsummer dream. All of them had moved at times with an ass's head, Titania Dorothy Hilden Lysander de Saram, a mongrel collection part Sinhalese part Dutch part Tamil part ass moving slowly in the forests with foolish and serious obsessions. (188/9)

Needless to say, Running embodies something of the atmosphere of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, for it displays and celebrates fantastic qualities, exuberance, and the eccentricity of women. More significantly, however, the border between life and literature becomes obscure, as real-life persons and fictional characters blend in the narrator's mind.

Ondaatje introduces not only fictional literary figures, but also historical authors such as Edward Lear, D.H. Lawrence, and Leonard Woolf (78). All of them visited or stayed in Ceylon and related their cultural experiences in travel writings or novels, as does Ondaatje. Yet, coming from a British background, Lear, Lawrence, and Woolf also represent

the colonial power present in Sri Lanka until 1948'. Quotations from these authors, then, unmask the British arrogance and feelings of superiority towards the "brown people" or "savages", "odiously inquisitive and bothery-idiotic": "they are the negation of what we ourselves stand for and are" (76). Besides, the narrator explicitly criticizes Lawrence's "cantankerous nature" (77), but corrects his view on Leonard Woolf, one of the "very few foreigners [who] truly knew where they were" (83). Still, Ondaatje has to inscribe the three authors mentioned above in order to reject their presumptuousness and to specify his own position. He differs from them in his willingness to accept the native culture (which he even celebrates), but, on the other hand, he cannot hide a certain ambiguous relationship to the country of his birth. His education has given him a British cultural background so that he, too, feels alienated when coming to Sri Lanka: "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (79), he admits in the very next segment.

Apart from literary intertexts, Ondaatje's narrator exploits historical material. He cites from Rex Daniels's journals (33/34), mentions family journals (39), newspaper clippings (69), judicial records (116), Robert Knox's An Historical Relation (82), and refers to the Coloured Atlas of Some Vertebrates from Ceylon, Vol.2 (75). The narrator thus emphasizes the processes of his reconstruction of the past and indicates the "textuality" and physicality of all past events.

we can only know about them if they have been recorded and have survived as texts. Ondaatje's narrator, moreover, marks himself as an historian who, in a quasi-scientific manner, bases his account on facts, on documentary knowledge.

But although he appears to be as accurate and truthful as possible, the narrator, paradoxically, juxtaposes these facts with native myths (such as the belief that eating the thalagoya tongue will lead to verbal brilliance) and elements of magic realism. Linda Hutcheon has pointed out the intertextual relations between Running and Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude (see Solecki, 308/9). She sees the latter's opening structurally echoed in Ondaatje's novel, and also indicates thematic parallels in that both novels are generational tales, which take place in exotic settings and similar climates. Besides, both Márquez and Ondaatje oppose the native tradition of oral story-telling and the static fixity of written texts. Ondaatje stresses this orality not only by dialogues and poems (such as "High Flowers" (87-89) or "Sweet like a crow"(76-77)), but also by song texts ("Yes, we have no bananas", "There is a tavern in the town", "Rio Rita"(46)), which again form intertextual elements and denote the influence of popular, as opposed to "high", culture.

Another model upon which not only Running, but also Volkswagen Blues, is based is, of course, the quest, the mythical search or pursuit to find or obtain something, one of

the major motifs since Homer's Odyssey. Like Merlin in search of the Holy Grail in the Arthurian legend (to whom Pitsémine actually alludes (99)), both Jack Waterman and Ondaatje's narrator travel through distant regions and undergo existential crises. However, Poulin and Ondaatje parody the quest motif by subverting its ending. Even if the protagonists progress and mature, they are eventually disillusioned and have not achieved a final goal or knowledge. Neither is Jack united to his brother (nor even to Pitsémine), nor does Ondaatje's narrator come to terms with his father's life and death.

Much has been made of the intertextuality between Volkswagen Blues and American literature', and it is true that Poulin's novel repeatedly and almost exclusively refers to American authors and novels. La Grande Sauterelle reads John Irving's Hotel New Hampshire (41), borrows Kerouac's On the Road (258), and cites from Carson McCullers's Celui qui passe as well as Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March (108); the vagabond prefers Jack London's The Valley of the Moon (234), while Hemingway, Salinger, Brautigan (42), Scott Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein (192) are among Jack Waterman's favourite authors. The Mississippi is immediately associated with Mark Twain and William Faulkner (118), and authors such as Saul Bellow and Laurence Ferlinghetti actually appear as characters in Volkswagen Blues. Other "beat poets," for instance Allen Ginsberg, Tom Wolfe, Peter Orlovsky, and their works are

referred to (269), and the photo of Théo as unidentified man stems from The Beat Angels (265).

Critics have noticed particular affinities between Jacques Poulin and Hemingway, an author who is mentioned fifteen times in three of Poulin's novels⁷. Not only is Jack Waterman an expert on Hemingway and recognizes that the old man hitchhiking pretends to be the famous American author, or that "Shakespeare and Company" is a library in A Moveable Feast (264). Poulin also echoes Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea in the title of chapter twelve in Volkswagen Blues, "Le Vieil Homme au bord du Mississippi" (117). Furthermore, similarities with Hemingway's style are suggested by Poulin's sober, factual, and precise way of writing, his short, simple sentences with few adjectives and adverbs and his detailed descriptions of objects. The Québécois author, in fact, openly avows his appreciation for Hemingway, his way of working and his anti-intellectual attitude⁸.

Like Ondaatje, Poulin exploits not only literature, but also historical texts: Jack finds Théo's postcard in Walker Chapman's The Golden Dream (12), while the actual text on the postcard leads him to Pouliot's La Grande Aventure de Jacques Cartier (22). In his library, Waterman is looking for La Pénétration du continent américain par les Canadiens français (44) by Benoît Brouillette; and while Pitsémine spends the night in the cemetery in Brantford, Jack reads Les Indiens du Canada (84). La Grande Sauterelle, in her turn, "borrows"

Toronto during the French Regime in Toronto's public library (70) and Timothy Severin's Explorers of the Mississippi (123) in St. Louis. A photograph of Théo's possessions kept in the police records leads Jack and Pitsémine to The Oregon Trail Revisited (75), a book, we learn later, by Gregory M. Franzwa, which becomes their favourite reading.

All of these historical documents actually exist' and confirm the novel's realistic qualities. As several of the texts mentioned were published only shortly before Poulin's novel, they also mark Volkswagen Blues as a product of the 1980s and enhance its actuality, implicitly setting it apart from the French-Canadian novelistic tradition of the 1960s and 70s. While literary works of the "révolution tranquille" focused on Québec as a nation and demanded an autonomous culture, Poulin clearly follows a different direction. He traces the routes of the first French explorers and settlers on the American continent (each historical intertext marking a new stage in the colonization of the land) to emphasize common roots with the whole of America. In other words, Poulin's use of intertextuality projects a re-evaluation of American literature and history at the same time as it denotes the neglect of "purely" French-Canadian texts. (Waterman likes only the marginal authors Gabrielle Roy and Réjean Ducharme.) The intertexts of American literature, which the author does not evoke for the use of parody, suggest that Volkswagen Blues

discovers and recovers a cultural or literary heritage common to "the Americas."

Allusions and references to American literature reinforce specific thematic issues in Poulin's novel. Authors like Hemingway and Salinger are naturally associated with the motif of the solitary hero who searches for happiness as well as with the theme of a lost childhood and a nostalgic longing for it. References to Kerouac and the beat poets also serve to elaborate and "modernize" the quest motif and the search for happiness. Similarly, historical intertexts allude to the quest for the promised land, the myth of "going West," the gold rush and the "American Dream." By returning to these typically American themes and well-known, canonised authors, Poulin delineates the tradition in which he situates himself and, perhaps, indicates his ambition to write "le grand roman de l'Amérique". Furthermore, he manages to bridge the gap between past pioneers and adventurers of the 1980s, since obvious allusions and popular authors naturally stimulate the reader to draw parallels.

Like Ondaatje, Poulin frequently incorporates elements of popular culture to counterbalance the influence of "high culture". La Grande Sauterelle, for instance, refers to Waterman as Watson and thus gives Volkswagen Blues the flavour of a detective novel, while an allusion to Pipi Longstocking (197) emphasizes the ludicrous qualities of Poulin's narrative. Jack, in addition, introduces Sam Peckinpah, his

favourite filmmaker as far as action movies such as Straw Dogs are concerned, and further associates the island of Alcatraz with Burt Lancaster's film Les Oiseaux d'Alcatraz (257). Among his brother's heroes of popular culture are John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Alan Ladd, Randolph Scott, and Kirk Douglas (257). Furthermore, both Pitsémine and Jack playfully compete to see who knows the saddest song in the world, and the lyrics of these songs underscore the themes of the novel: Jack is "Un Canadien errant" in America, and "Qu'il est long le chemin d'Amérique" (100) further emphasizes that his search for happiness involves hardships and losses and entails a way of growing up from his childhood.

Although Poulin connects Jack's quest to the journeys of the explorers on the Oregon Trail as well as to the travellers of the beat generation, he does not adopt his American models without reservations. Even if Poulin does not obviously parody or abandon the old myths, he clearly distances himself from them. When still in Canada and looking at the Royal Bank Plaza in Toronto, Jack and la Grande Sauterelle feel "comme si tous les rêves étaient encore possible" (79). Yet the further they travel, the more they recognize America's violence:

Avec le temps, le 'Grand Rêve de l'Amérique' s'était brisé en miettes comme tous les rêves, mais il renaissait de temps à autre comme un feu qui couvait sous la cendre. Cela s'était produit au 19e siècle lorsque les gens étaient allés dans l'Ouest. Et parfois, en traversant l'Amérique, les voyageurs retrouvaient des parcelles du vieux rêve qui avaient été éparpillées ici et là, dans les musées, dans les grottes et les canyons, dans les

parcs nationaux comme ceux de Yellowstone et de Yosemite, dans les déserts et sur les plages comme celles de la Californie et de l'Oregon. (101)¹¹

The refraction of history thus corresponds to a dispersion of the "American Dream." Théo's heroes of history and popular culture are demystified; la Grande Sauterelle also parodies American radio stations which only broadcast country songs by introducing the traditional French song "Le temps des cerises" on the imaginary CKRL-MF (247). Chicago's associations with Al Capone, gangsters, and gamblers create a sense of exoticism rather than familiarity, just as the era of jazz, linked to the Mississippi, seems remote. The famous river, "l'âme de L'Amérique" (118), is, in fact, muddy, polluted and has an oppressive odour (117). What Poulin offers us, then, is a reading of America in the 1980s, not nostalgic reminiscences of the past, but a critical confrontation with and re-evaluation of it.

Even though Poulin's style resembles Hemingway's, the Québécois author does not adopt thematic concerns of Hemingway's novels, such as war, fishing, or hunting. Furthermore, Poulin expressly distances himself from a cult of virility, since he attributes feminine traits to Jack Waterman and makes his male character share his experiences with a female companion.

Not only do texts exist as print on paper, they are also representations encoded in other media. In order to uncover such unconventional text(ure)s, Ondaatje leads us to

Colombo's St. Thomas's Church where the name of his ancestor is chiseled into the stone floor. Jack Waterman and la Grande Sauterelle, similarly, decipher inscriptions on tombstones at the cemetery in Brantford to find out about the chief Thayendanega (Joseph Brant) and his family as well as about the Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson. They also visit the Rivera Mural in the Detroit Institute of Arts (93), discover the epigraph of Rachel Pattison, aged 19, probably a victim of cholera on the Oregon Trail (84), and Théo's name, inscribed upon a stone in red letters (214).

Maps constitute yet another kind of historical record, and their double function (as geographical outlines and as maps of reading) in Volkswagen Blues and Running has already been mentioned. However, both Poulin and Ondaatje question the status of maps as objective documents. Ondaatje refers to the "false maps" on his brother's wall in Toronto (reproduced on the inside jacket cover pages of the hardback edition): "The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations - by Ptolemy, Mercator, Francois Valentyn, Mortior, and Heydt - growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy" (63). Just as translations are inaccurate transformations, sometimes even distortions, which reflect the translator's view of the original, so maps are constructed and shaped by the circumstances under which they were produced. Those who give them shape can exploit unknown space or appropriate and

marginalize territory to suit the colonial authority; maps, therefore, are geopolitical claims:

The maps reveal rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade ... And so [Sri Lanka's] name changed, as well as its shape ... This pendant, once its shape stood still, became a mirror. It pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities. (64)

Maps, like other records, are allied to the ideology that produces them; they seek to impose a view, perhaps even more subtly than printed texts.

Poulin, similarly, exposes the ideology behind mappings when, in the museum in Gaspé, Jack and Pitsémine compare two maps of North America (20). On the map produced before white explorers and settlers came, the names of numerous Indian tribes are inscribed; by contrast, the map created under French rule in the middle of the eighteenth century depicts the immense colonized territory from which the names and lands of natives have been erased. These two divergent maps of the past further represent the gap between Jack, standing in the tradition of French explorers and settlers, and Pitsémine, whose predecessors were displaced. But, as L'Hérault has noticed (31), whereas the past separates them, the present allows the two characters to travel together, and, significantly, both characters agree on how to read actual road maps of the United States.

Moreover, Jacques Poulin and especially Michael Ondaatje exploit photography in their novels and thereby underscore the visual dimension of their works. Volkswagen

Blues and Running might, then, more accurately be labelled interdiscursive rather than intertextual.

Not only does the literary structure of Running resemble to a series of verbal snapshots, but the author actually incorporates seven photographs into his narrative, each picture preceding one of the novel's larger sections. Photographs, first of all, form part of Ondaatje's attempt to render the past as fully and as authentically as possible. That the narrator should voice his wish to fix the present moment in a photograph is, then, hardly surprising: "I would love to photograph this" (110). But apart from a sense of accuracy and documentation, photographs add a sense of vividness to the narrative and thus stimulate the reader's imagination: pictures of a flood (61) and of a train passing along a mountain cliff (131) serve to foreshadow Lalla's death (129) and Mervyn Ondaatje's adventurous train rides (149). Just as titles of chapters are echoed within the narrative, so photographs are dispersed and their themes taken up again later, so that readers are forced to draw connections and piece the novel together.

Still more importantly, photographs in Running provide ways of recording and preserving events that would otherwise be lost. While charcoal drawings done by an insurgent were destroyed by a flood, ten pictures of it survived (85). Yet even photographs can be threatened by destruction, as

silverfish invade photograph albums, "eating their way through portraits and wedding pictures" (136).

Family albums, in fact, assume a special significance in Ondaatje's novel, for the photos in them disclose links between family members: "The image of the human pyramid which recurs throughout Running in the Family acts as a visual representation of this complex web of relations among human beings", Lorraine York has pointed out (117). The group portrait of the fancy dress party, reproduced on the book's cover, illustrates this view: Dolly

has looked at it for years and has in this way memorized everyone's place in the picture. She reels off names and laughs at the facial impressions she can no longer see. It has moved tangible, palpable into her brain, the way memory invades the present in those who are old. (112)

Photographs, then, represent concrete keys to the past in that they trigger memories; and memory, conversely, assumes a physical dimension: "those relations from my parents' generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words" (22). Ondaatje, accordingly, traces photographs of his father and mother in order to explore their separation and other dark regions of his past. Individual portraits of Doris and Mervyn in their youth exist (29), but only one picture presents the two of them together: it "is the photograph I have been waiting for all my life" (161). Like Ondaatje we have to wait until we can see it (163), for it is first described to us verbally. The narrator warns us that we are not to expect an ordinary wedding picture; Ondaatje's

parents intentionally make "hideous faces" (161) and perform "this theatre of their own making" (162). But precisely because of the distortions depicted, this photograph is a precious document: "Everything is there, of course" (162), the narrator contends and thus denotes that the distortions express his parents' personalities more accurately and effectively than supposedly "natural" portraits.

Just as masked faces and poses can be truthful, so apparently authentic pictures can deceive and be exploited to suit political aims. Sir John actually relates how he, as a bystander, was presented in a photograph where a man was supposedly sucking a snake's venom from a woman's thigh. Although Sir John simply inquired what was happening, the picture portrayed him as casually consenting to the scandalous sexual scene (160). Besides, the fact that an amateur theatre group wishes to be photographed in the dream-like setting of Sir John's grounds further reveals the artificiality and falsification of photographs.

By highlighting these paradoxes between seeming and being, appearance and reality, Ondaatje exposes the fact that photographs are not reliable objective documents of the past. Like maps, they are informed by those who produce them and can, in turn, manipulate the viewer's perception of reality. "Eventually, photographs can both fix our sense of truth and liberate it, by leading us not only into history but beyond history" (York 120).

Poulin, on his part, is less experimental in his use of photography and integrates only three pictures into his novel. However, the nature of these portraits of Jesse James (144), Starved Rock (188), and the beat poets (265) is as double-edged as that of photographs in Running. While pictures in Ondaatje's novel preserve and record as well as falsify and distort, they problematize the relation between the fictional and the real world in Volkswagen Blues. On the one hand, the three photographs appear to authenticate Jack's and Pitsémine's journey through America; they relate to the real world and present actual persons and natural phenomena. (Poulin in effect extracted two of the photos from existing books and even adds the exact source and page number on the right side of the pictures.) On the other hand, these photographs only function within the fictional world of Volkswagen Blues, for they indicate the way to follow if la Grande Sauterelle and Waterman want to find Théo and they provide clues to Théo's nature. In fact, the pictures' realistic nature stands in sharp contrast to the utopian quest for Jack's brother. Like banal details, photographs, then, oscillate between reality and the fictional universe of the novel. To some readers, pictures might suggest that Jack's journey actually takes place and that Théo really exists; to others, the idea of Théo sitting at the same table as Ferlinghetti might simply seem absurd and appear as one of Poulin's ludicrous obsessions.

Apart from underlining thematic concerns in the novel, intertextuality or interdiscursivity raises more general issues relating to the interactions between author, text, and reader. Regardless of what material is actually alluded to or cited, and whether the reader knows the writings mentioned or not, the mere intertextual mechanisms suggest a dialogic relationship among texts, fictional writings clashing with factual accounts and canonized literature intersecting with popular culture. Since Running and, above all, Volkswagen Blues, are visibly composed of other texts, they blur generic boundaries and challenge notions of centrality and totalization by stressing plurality and heterogeneity. The conviction they expose is that no text can exist independently, but depends on others if it is to have meaning. Neither can a definite meaning be pinned down, for one intertext always leads on to the next.

Of course, the concept of intertextuality dismantles the Romantic myth of originality and subverts the belief in the author as a God-like figure. That Roland Barthes should have proclaimed the death of the author shortly after Kristeva introduced the concept of intertextuality should come as no surprise. Poulin and Ondaatje almost seem to dissolve as other historical as well as literary intertexts take over their narratives. Apparently, they only rewrite what has already been said. Yet, on the other hand, the protagonists in Volkswagen Blues and Running are writers themselves and assume

important roles in that they attract attention to the creation of texts. Even if they are not the original source of meaning, but rely on intertexts of the past, they remain unique in appropriating other texts and forming their own discourse out of them. Ultimately, then, Ondaatje's and Poulin's novels do not so much reject as demystify and devalorize notions of authority and authorship.

At the same time that the importance of the author decreases, the role of the reader increases. Intertextuality arouses her curiosity and involves her in an enigmatic game with the author, as she has to trace intertexts. Instead of creating the novels as finalized products, Poulin and Ondaatje thematize dynamic processes of reading and hermeneutics and thus question the role and function of reading. Reading habits are disturbed as one has to pay attention to details and examine rather than accept texts. Jack Waterman argues that writing, for him, is a form of exploration, and the same might be said about reading. Both readers and main characters adopt, in fact, the role of historians or archeologists, who gather material, are forced to organize as well as interpret their fragmented textual sources and fill in the gaps. However, Théo on the one hand, has marked his path and left traces (though by no means unequivocal ones), and thus guides Jack and la Grande Sauterelle to an intertextual decoding. Ondaatje's narrator, on the other hand, has to find those textual traces himself in addition to having to interpret them. In his

narrative, readers feel as uncertain as the narrator, since they never know where they are going.

In Volkswagen Blues, the meaning of Théo's postcard can only be disclosed by visiting the museum in Gaspé and consulting Pouliot's book. Even after this first discovery one textual source always leads on to the next. Interestingly, it is not the learned people like Waterman or the student at the museum's information counter who know how to read; instead, humble, ordinary people like Pitsémine's mother, the bull-rider's wife, Lisa ("the live naked girl") and, above all, la Grande Sauterelle herself find the decisive clues so that Théo can be found.

Considering that one text always refers to another, one might well wonder where the universe of texts ends and reality begins. As has been mentioned, books constitute a real world for Ondaatje, and similarly, Jack Waterman does not perceive what is going on around him when he is writing a novel, and he admits:

Il y a des gens qui disent que l'écriture est une façon de vivre; moi, je pense que c'est aussi une façon de ne pas vivre. Je veux dire: vous vous enfermez dans un livre, dans une histoire, et vous ne faites pas très attention à ce qui se passe autour de vous ... [Mes livres] ne changent pas le monde. (136)¹²

One is equally reminded of the old tramp in Volkswagen Blues who appears to be so absorbed by literature that he identifies himself with Hemingway. Where, then, is the boundary between literature and life, if it exists at all? Are Running and Volkswagen Blues autonomous from life and separate from the

world? Is their intertextuality nothing but a self-indulgent form of intellectual aestheticism or does it bear a relation to society?

While it is true that literary intertexts create a network only within the realm of fiction, historical allusions and quotations as well as maps and photographs clearly establish a link to the real world, however ambiguous it may be. Running and Volkswagen Blues do not disconnect themselves from reality, as, for example, the insertion of radio news (100), commercial products, and real-world figures in Poulin's novel demonstrates. Rather, their documentary character breaks the frame of the fictional world to the world outside the novels. Both works situate themselves in a specific historical context so as to prevent, rather than promote, tendencies to dehistoricize.

Yet because these references to the outside world merely function within the constructed fictional universes of the novels, the status of reality becomes dubious. It is perhaps fitting that the graffiti on the Volkswagen should read "Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins" (85)¹¹. For it is only through language that we can gain access to the real; the only way to come to know reality is through a mediation by cultural representations, such as maps, photographs, and other records. Conversely, we can only represent or construct our view of reality by means of texts and language. Linda Hutcheon has pointed out that "representation is always alteration be

it in language or in images, and it always has its politics" (Politics 92). What Poulin and Ondaatje aim at is, then, not so much an erasure of the ontological boundary between the factual and the fictional, let alone a denial of the referents. Rather, they problematize our notions of reference by exposing the ideological implications inherent in every representation: whether they are textual, cartographic, or photographic, all of these representations have been produced in a certain social and historical context that has to be taken into account if one wants to interpret them.

Acts of reading in the novels are, of course, closely related to processes of writing, for historical texts must be decoded and interpreted before they can be rewritten. Jack Waterman and Ondaatje's narrator are both readers and writers, just as the actual readers of their novels are implicated in ordering, imagining, and giving meaning to what they are reading. Jonathan Weiss and Anne-Marie Miraglia have pointed out that, in Volkswagen Blues, Waterman is not only searching for his brother, but also for the topic of his next novel, for an inspiration:

Pour l'instant il n'avait pas de roman en chantier. Il vivait les moments d'angoisse qui attendent les écrivains quand ils ont terminé un livre et que, déjà conscients des faiblesses de cet ouvrage et encore incapables d'imaginer l'oeuvre suivante, ils se mettent à douter leur talent. (42-43)"

Théo might be the haunting image of the writer's failure, as Weiss suggests. During the journey through America and after his confrontation with the brother, however, Jack learns to

accept his failures and finds material for his writing. In Running, it is even more obvious that the narrator's reading of texts constitutes his writing, since the narrator constantly informs us about his writing activities while he is travelling and collecting material about his family history.

Just as Poulin's and Ondaatje's novels are structurally circular, they demonstrate that the past always has to be read and reread, written and rewritten inexhaustibly, but never definitely. This notion, as well as the relations between history and fiction, have been examined by recent historiographical writing, as the following chapter will show.

NOTES

1. Everything I know, or just about, I've learned from books. (24)
2. Who hasn't reread hasn't read. (187)
3. One word is worth a thousand pictures. (121)
4. to understand it you must put it in relation to other books, not just books by the same author, but also books written by other people. What we think is a book most of the time is only part of another, vaster book that a number of authors have collaborated on without knowing it. (122)
5. Sri Lanka continued to be a dominion in the Commonwealth with the British monarch as the titular head of state until May 1972.
6. Jonathan Weiss, Laurence Mailhot, and Anne Maria Miraglia each devoted their articles to thematic affinities between Poulin and American works of literature.
7. see Voix et Images, p. 16
8. Poulin admitted that "ce que j'aime le plus chez cet auteur, à part sa façon d'écrire, c'est son honnêteté absolue à l'égard de son métier ... Pour moi c'était avant tout un écrivain et non pas un chasseur de fauves" (interview in Voix et Images, p. 11)
9. Silverberg, Robert (pseudonym of Walker Chapman). The Golden Dream. Seekers of El Dorado. Indianapolis, 1967.
 Pouliot, Joseph-Camille. La Grande Aventure de Jacques Cartier. 1934.
 Brouillette, Benoît. La Pénétration du continent américain par les Canadien français, 1763-1846: traitants, explorateurs, missionnaires. Montréal: Fides, 1979.
 Robinson, Percy J. Toronto during the French Regime: a history of the Toronto region from Brûlée to Simcoe, 1615-1793. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965.
 Franzwa, Gregory M. The Oregon Trail Revisited. Gerald (Montana): The Patrics Press, 1983.
Les Indiens du Canada: Québec et les provinces atlantiques. 1973.
 Severin, Timothy. Explorers of the Mississippi. London: Routledge, 1967.

10. One should note that, throughout Volkswagen Blues, Poulin employs the "passé simple", a tense which is characteristic of the classic French novel.

11. In time, the 'Great Dream of America' had been shattered like all other dreams, but from time to time it was revived, like a fire smouldering under the ashes.....And sometimes travellers crossing America found traces of the old dream scattered here and there, in museums, in grottoes and canyons, in national parks like those of Yellowstone and Yosemite, in the deserts and on the beaches like those in California and Oregon. (73)

12. There are people who say that writing is a way of living; if you ask me, it's also a way of *not* living. I mean, you shut yourself away inside a book, a story, and don't pay much attention to what's going on around you [...] [My books] don't change the world. (97)

13. Language is the home of being. [My translation]

14. For the time being, he had no novel in the works. He was experiencing those moments of anguish that await writers after they've finished a book and already aware of its flaws and still unable to imagine the next book, they begin to doubt their talent. (32)

III. NEW HISTORIES

In their textualist approach to, and revision of, history, Ondaatje's and Poulin's novels coincide with recent developments in historiography which, in North America, have been subsumed under the title "New Historicism"¹ (its British equivalent being "Cultural Materialism"). Scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose have developed its central themes and concerns. Influenced by post-structuralist theories as well as Michel Foucault's concept of discourse, they consider the individual author or work not as autonomous and unified, but as constituted and constrained by language and society. New historicists, therefore, collapse the literary text and its non-literary context in order to reveal the ideological basis of history; in their view (as in the view of historiographers before them), history itself is a story of power struggles. Moreover, new historicists problematize the nature of historical knowledge by revealing the complementary relationship between the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. All writings are historically and socially embedded; at the same time, history is mediated by its textual traces, which, if they survived, determine the limits within which we can inquire into the past.

Michael Ondaatje is well aware of the problematic nature of historical knowledge when he admits that "There is no information about Lalla growing up" (113). "I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover" (54), the narrator of Running wishes, realizing the gaps in records of the past. Even those traces which survived can be very fragile, he reminds us: "Reading torn 100-year-old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand, information tough as plastic dolls" (69). The preservation or effacement of historical documents is, in effect, subject to social processes. When Mervyn Ondaatje and Sammy Dias Bandaranaike (a close relative of the eventual Prime Minister of Ceylon) antagonize each other by their comments in Visitors' Books, they cause the destruction of historical traces: "The literary war broke so many codes that for the first time in Ceylon history pages had to be ripped out of visitors' books. ... Pages continued to be torn out, ruining a good archival history of two semi-prominent Ceylon families" (152). That the creation of histories is an ideological act is further illustrated by the fact that the book Ian Goonetilleke wrote about the 1971 Insurgency cannot be published in Sri Lanka: "Because of censorship it had to be published in Switzerland. ... he has to publish in other countries in order to keep the facts straight, the legends uncovered" (85).

Poulin, similarly, demonstrates the gaps in our knowledge of the past. *La Grande Sauterelle*, for instance, points out that "s'ils [les voyageurs] avaient laissé des écrits derrière eux, leurs exploits seraient probablement comparés à ceux des pionniers de l'Ouest américain" (46)¹. The past may, in fact, be forgotten or recalled at will, because certain forces in society decide who and what matters. As Pitsémine finds out, the wife of Joseph Brant or Chief Thayendanegea has been left out of the records. Not even her name is inscribed on her tombstone, and we do not know anything about her relationship with her husband (82).

Ondaatje's narrator also complains about the anonymity and cool indifference of the historical registers:

But nothing is said about the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other's presence. No one speaks of that exchange of gift and character - the way a person took on and recognized in himself the smile of a lover. (54)

By juxtaposing written formulations and oral story-telling, he himself presents accounts of the past which are emotional, empathetic and communal. His sensuous and often violent imagery, in addition, counterbalances the sobriety of traditional historical accounts. By emphasizing native story-telling, the narrator further denotes possible gaps in the records of the past. We cannot know whether what is told in the oral tradition really happened (nor can we, of course, be sure whether what is written down is accurate).

Running, furthermore, parodies official historiography in the section "Honeymoon" (37-38) by presenting a cross-cultural collage of disparate newspaper headings, which shows the gaps and absurdities in our received knowledge:

Fred Astaire's sister, Adele, got married and the 13th President of the French Republic was shot to death by a Russian. The lepers of Colombo went on a hunger strike, a bottle of beer cost one rupee, and there were upsetting rumours that ladies were going to play at Wimbledon in shorts. (37)

The epistemological status of history and its reliability are called into question, for even those written accounts, maps, and photographs which survive are nothing but representations, transmitted semiotically and informed by political and moral processes. Recent historiographers like Louis Mink and Hayden White, in particular, have emphasized the similarities between history and fiction in that both are linguistic constructs, shaped by their rhetoric, argument, and narrative. Contesting the view that history is a science, objective, transparent, neutral and impersonal, White has exposed historical narratives as "verbal fictions" (see Canary 41) and has elaborated a metahistory to examine questions like "What are the possible forms of historical representation and what are their bases?" (41). Historical events do not have an immanent structure and do not speak for themselves. Their interrelationships can only be grasped in the construction of narrative form:

The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition,

variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies. (47)

In other words, historians, like writers of fiction, *create* what we consider "facts" by selecting events, by endowing them with a certain meaning, by emphasizing particular scenes while compressing and omitting others, by shaping their account in accordance with a certain pattern (what White calls "emplotment" (Content 44)). History, therefore, has to be studied as discourse.

Having exposed the rhetorical dimensions of historical narrative as well as its ideological implications, new historicists go on to construct alternative revisionist histories. Aware of their own ideological position, they acknowledge their limitations and evade totalization by focusing on contradictions, discontinuities, and gaps. They aim not so much at replacing the master narrative of History, as at demonstrating the possibilities of different histories, free from the biases of established monoliths (yet dependent on others).

In accordance with new historicist positions, Poulin and Ondaatje revise the conventions and norms of historiography (such as notions of totality and teleology) at the same time that they question conventional narrative forms. As has been shown, Jack Waterman and la Grande Sauterelle reject any monolithic universal form of History in favour of multiple (hi-) stories. By openly announcing the narration of

their stories, the two characters, moreover, declare their version as relative and subjective.

Ondaatje's narrator, for his part, explicitly reveals the mechanisms of writing about the past:

[W]e 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 ever 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. (26)

The first-person narrator in Running prefers multiple versions of the past to any single totalized account. He lays bare his desire to recuperate the past "like that deserving lover" (54), and thus undermines the reliability and detachment of his narrative.

New historicists not only change the form but also the content of their accounts of history. They exploit the cross-fertilization of discourses at work in every culture and return to such obscure, uncommon sources as diaries, sermons, pamphlets, anecdotes or travel accounts. Transferring material from one discursive sphere to another, they cross the boundary between history and anthropology, the visual arts, politics, literature and economics. Their methods of studying history and culture through their widely-disseminated discourses resemble a kind of anamnesis, which Lyotard has identified as one of postmodernity's characteristic processes (Le Postmoderne expliqué 119).

Since "[t]he island hid its knowledge" (82), Ondaatje's narrator has to trace unconventional documents in order to recuperate his family's and Sri Lanka's past. As has already been pointed out, he discovers texts on brass plaques of church walls, names in its stone floor (65), searches information in ledgers (66), learns about upheavals from graffiti poems (84) and presents information from judicial records (116). He also includes biological accounts when describing the kabagoyas and thalagoyas (73) and when referring to his ancestor's description of poisons (81-82). Jack Waterman, similarly, reads the emigrant diaries cited in The Oregon Trail Revisited (206) and visits not only museums and archives, but also cemeteries and natural parks, where he and Pitsémine hope to find fragments of the American Dream.

Not only do new historicists focus on marginalized material of the past, they also privilege forgotten or silenced persons, devalued and suppressed subjects, as well as moments of social change and rupture. As a result, histories of death, childhood, sexuality, madness as well as feminist histories have recently been written, which bring to consciousness what has been left out or deliberately unexamined. Those (hi-)stories which have been rejected and displaced by a totalizing History also become the subject of Volkswagen Blues and Running.

Ondaatje's narrator admits his attempts to recuperate "[t]he voices I didn't know. The visions which are anonymous.

And secret" (85). He refers to native traditions and customs as well as marginal persons, such as the prisoners under the tyrannies in Sri Lanka in the fifth century BC and in 1971. Consequently, Ondaatje gives a picture of the culture generally, not a totalized account, but manifold bits of information, a cross-cultural collage. This way, he responds to Wikkramasinha's poem "Don't talk to me about Matisse":

*Talk to me instead of the culture generally-
how the murderers were sustained
by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote
villages the painters came, and our white-washed
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire. (86)*

History, in Ondaatje's view, includes all cultural products. And in order to talk to his readers about the culture generally, he informs them, for example, about the tradition of resthouses (150). Since he seeks to convey cultural specificity, he incorporates the original letters of the Sinhalese alphabet (83) so as to engage readers actively with his narrative. Ondaatje's narrator, furthermore, gives a sense of cultural distinctiveness by presenting Sinhalese names and then glossing them:

I realize it is a kabaragoya. In English a sub-aquatic monitor. (73)
A *val oora* - a large filthy black wild boar has appeared majestically out of the trees [...] (141)
"Thanikama." "Aloneness." Birdless. ... Midnight and noon and dawn and dusk are the hours of danger, susceptibility to the "grahayas" - planetary spirits of malignant character. (190)

Far from appropriating the Sinhalese language, the narrator painstakingly respects its cultural context and acknowledges

otherness. He tries to be as authentic as possible in order to initiate readers into the uniqueness of Sri Lanka's culture.

Poulin, similarly, focuses on quasi-forgotten stories; the search for Théo is, after all, the quest for someone who has been left out of the public records, for an unidentified man in a photograph. More generally, Volkswagen Blues tries to restore annihilated or oppressed peoples, women, and even animals in order to supplement the records of the past and to reveal that traditional accounts of history were one-sided. Pitsémine, above all, recovers the history of Indian genocides. In 1854, soldiers killed Indians who had stolen a cow from an emigrant in Fort Laramie (202). Whites also slaughtered Indian women and children in Sandcreek in 1864 (204-5) and massacred the Sioux under Wounded Knee in 1890 (207). La Grande Sauterelle, moreover, reveals the losses of 30,000 travellers on the Oregon Trail (184), the deaths of females on the way through the Rocky Mountains (210) and further denounces the brutality of supposed heroes like Buffalo Bill, who killed a dozen bison a day for eighteen months (170). However, Poulin's novel attempts to counteract the waste and destructiveness of white European culture by recuperating and "recycling" what has been left out of History. This sense of ecology, in effect, corresponds to Lyotard's analysis:

Ou bien la postmodernité est-elle cette occupation de viellard qui fouille dans la poubelle de la finalité pour y trouver des restes, qui brandit les inconscients, les lapus, les bords, les confins, les goulags, les

parataxes, les non-sens, les paradoxes, et qui en fait sa gloire de nouveauté, sa promesse de changement?
(Le Différend 197)

The penguin story, which Pitsémine tells Jack (61), addresses comparable issues. To survive in Antarctica, the weakest father penguins form the center until they have regained their strength.

Just as centers are only provisional and lose their importance in favour of the periphery, so borders assume a new significance. In both Volkswagen Blues and Running, the frontier not only closes Canada in on itself and separates it from other countries, but it also opens up new countries to Canadians. Conversely, while Ondaatje's narrator and Jack Waterman discover a foreign culture, they also attempt to find their personal as well as national identity. Being confronted with a different, distinct identity, they manage to locate their own.

Interestingly, both Ondaatje and Poulin are figures coming from the periphery, who intervene to rewrite the history of the centre. Michael Ondaatje returned to his native country after 24 years during which he built up a life in Canada. Poulin approaches North American history from his particular Québécois position. Both, therefore, speak as foreigners, as 'others,' which enables them to introduce a new perspective on, and a redefinition of, the centre.

As the narrators in Running and Volkswagen Blues return to their childhood to liberate themselves from it, they

parallel tendencies taking place on a national or public level in Québec and Sri Lanka respectively. Ondaatje's and Poulin's novels can, then, also be read as narratives about the development of two nations and the paradoxes of their cultural life.

Volkswagen Blues responds, in effect, to Heinz Weinmann's "histoire des mentalités québécoises" (12), in which he analyzes the Québécois unconscious and its traumas as they are manifested in literature, myths, and the imaginary. Weinmann maintains that the definition of Québec is "la plus archaïque des questions" (140) and, in contrast to prevalent opinions, argues that

le *Canadien* (français) a toujours été perméable à l'Autre. Français d'Amérique, il s'est imprégné des us et coutumes sauvages, il s'est métissé et a laissé métisser ses coutumes. ... Vu cet héritage assimilateur, il est remarquable que le Québécois, finalement, après un long processus de doute et de remise en question, ait trouvé <<son>> identité. (200)

Weinmann, like Poulin, alerts us to the fact that "le guerrier *canadien* a complètement disparu des champs de batailles et surtout des champs de conscience des Canadiens français" (271). Jacques Poulin, however, recuperates that aspect in that he re-covers the brutal treatment of Indians by the first French explorers. Far from insisting on the English victory over the French on the Plains d'Abraham, Poulin turns to the relationship between the French (and more generally the whites) and the indigenous people. This way, he disqualifies himself as the prototypical Québécois historian, as Weinmann

remarks ironically: "N'ont droit au titre d'historiographes <<objectifs>> de la cause québécoise que ceux qui se sont voués à l'écoute obsessive et exclusive des conséquences de la Défaite." (284) Instead of isolating Québec's culture and history, Poulin broadens his perspective to Québec's interrelations and interdependencies:

Tant que le Québec ne prendra pas conscience de la généalogie du Canada et du Québec, tant que le Québec ne se souviendra pas que la réponse à la <<question du Québec>> a déjà été donnée par l'Histoire du Canada et du Québec, il tournera en rond, répétant obsessionnellement les mêmes gestes, exténuant ses forces. Là où les militants de l'indépendance, dans la méconnaissance de leur histoire, ne voient qu'incomplétude, inachèvement, la généalogie profonde de l'Histoire du Canada et du Québec nous dit que c'est là que réside la <<vraie nature du Québec et du Canada>>. (Weinmann 466-67)

Volkswagen Blues, therefore, negotiates a heterogeneous North American identity instead of a "pure" Québécois one. Significantly, when Pitsémine complains that she is neither Indian nor white but something in-between, Jack assures her: "Je trouve que vous êtes quelque chose de neuf, quelque chose qui commence. Vous êtes quelque chose qui ne s'est encore jamais vu." (224)³.

That Volkswagen Blues is open to an 'other' culture is demonstrated not only by its intertextuality, but also by the consumer articles Jack and Pitsémine refer to as well as by their eating habits. The two characters have breakfast at "McDonald's" (129), eat at "Burger King" (203) and live on economical, quick meals such as sandwiches, salads, Nescafé, Coke, hamburgers, and hot dogs. Waterman and la Grande

Sauterelle therefore reflect the American culture they are crossing in their meals, and significantly, terms for food frequently appear in English.

Poulin reminds readers that his characters are travelling through an anglophone country by his extensive use of the English language in general. In Volkswagen Blues, English words like "bum" (72), "panic stop" (164), and "road mice" (239), inserted into a dialogue in French, naturally render the journey through America more vivid and authentic. More significant, the author alerts us to communication problems and the issue of bilingualism in Québec when he presents whole dialogues in English. Jack and la Grande Sauterelle have to communicate in English at the YMCA in Toronto (64), at the United States border (89), in the park in Detroit (95), when addressing Saul Bellow (109), and in their conversation with the bull rider's wife (189). In these episodes they reveal the Québécois insecurity in speaking English, for Jack, for instance, misunderstands the desk clerk in the YMCA who is speaking too fast. Waterman has to construct English sentences in his head before speaking, and talking to the bull rider's wife "[i]l essaya de dire qu'ils venaient du Québec et tout ça, mais son anglais était encore plus infantile que d'habitude" (189). Both Jack and la Grande Sauterelle, in effect, reveal their naiveté and helplessness in America when, in the "rough town" of Detroit, they are

trying to go through a park instead of around it after sunset (95).

Still, Waterman does not defend his language, but makes an effort to adapt. Pitsémine even reads Toronto during the French Regime (75-76) and The Oregon Trail Revisited (184) in the original English version. She also prefers the English expression "soft shoulders" to the French "accotement mou" (99), thus demonstrating the degree to which she feels comfortable in her second language. Jack, later on their journey, also has to admit that the English "to ramble" is a more accurate expression for the tramp's life style than various French terms (229). After all, even Waterman's name is English, because "[q]uand on était petits, on se donnait des noms anglais et on trouvait que ça faisait beaucoup mieux!" (14)'. "Code-switching" between English and French in Volkswagen Blues is, then, not merely a device to give local colour, let alone an element of postmodern playfulness. On the contrary, Poulin demonstrates the political and social dimension of language, reveals the (in-)competence in English in Québec and demands bilingualism from his readers.

In addition to stressing common roots, a common history with the Americas, the author implicitly rejects Québec's moves towards independence in favour of interdependence. Théo, a Québécois nationalist and perhaps even a member of the FLQ (146), is depicted as a criminal and eventually as an old man in a wheelchair, deteriorating

physically and mentally'. Hearing the term "creeping paralysis," Jack instinctively has to think of "un homme rampant sur le sol comme un insect" (286). Théo, therefore, stands for regression and decline instead of progress and growth. He embodies the American Dream from which one has to wake up. "Sa mémoire était atteinte et il ne savait plus très bien qui il était" (288)', we are told. If his brother Jack wants to succeed in the future, he has to discard the myths of the past and acknowledge present interrelations and interdependencies.

Poulin's responses to the issue of anamnesis are therefore ambiguous. On the one hand, marginalized peoples and persons have to be restored to consciousness and the past has to be recuperated in order to define one's present identity'. On the other hand, Jack Waterman faces the problem that "[e]n essayant de faire ressurgir le passé, on risquait d'aggraver [...] état [de Théo]" (288)'. This way, the author of Volkswagen Blues reacts ironically to the characteristic Québécois slogan "Je me souviens." He might agree with Weinmann when the latter maintains cynically, "C'est parce qu'il [le Québécois] est amnésique qu'il répète obsessivement qu'il doit se souvenir" (282).

The ambivalent relationship which Poulin has with his American intertexts, his simultaneous borrowing and distancing from them, also becomes apparent in the depiction of American cities and people. In Volkswagen Blues, Chicago, as Saul

Bellow describes it, embodies the fundamental paradox of American civilization:

She's been a wicked city in her time, but ... [...] I mean rough. Now the violence is still here but it's mixed with business and culture. This is the city that gave birth to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Zenith TV's, Wrigley's gum, Quaker Oats, and McDonald's hamburgers. But take a walk downtown and there are sculptures and paintings by Picasso and Calder and Chagall... Strange city... I don't know if I like her or not. But I think she's in my blood. (109-110)

The United States stands for a materialistic consumer society, but it also offers art and cultivation. On the one hand, cities like Detroit and Chicago seem violent, menacing, and sinister. Even the ranch Jack and Pitsémine pass before they arrive in San Francisco does not offer them a welcoming barbecue as they had expected (252); instead, German shepherd dogs threaten the two and force them to leave immediately. On the other hand, America also suggests human warmth and kindness, which Jack Waterman discovers in the encounter with ordinary people. The captain of the Mississippi boat, for instance, comes up to Jack and Pitsémine to tell them about the Francophones in the little town where he had been born. And when saying good-bye to the bull-rider's wife "[i]ls restèrent plusieurs minutes dans ses bras, heureux comme des enfants d'être enveloppés dans la merveilleuse chaleur de cette femme.'" (195) As Jonathan Weiss confirms, "c'est précisément dans cette rencontre de l'humain et de l'inhumain, de la violence de la ville et de la douceur d'une chanteuse de

que Poulin, comme Steinbeck, découvre le paradoxe américain." (94)

In contrast to many reviews of and articles on Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family, which celebrate the novel's colourful imagery and delightful exoticism, Arun Mukherjee has focused on the author's silence about his displacement in Canada. Comparing the Sri Lankan born author with Cyril Dabydeen from Guyana, Mukherjee holds that "Ondaatje's success has been won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada" (50). She criticizes the "the denial of history for the sensations of the present" (52) and sees Ondaatje's self-reflexivity as self-congratulatory, as a way of evading realities (54-55). Labelling the author a "universalist" (65), Mukherjee concludes,

The poet who chooses to speak to all men, I feel, is only indulging in a fiction. He has simply refused to address himself to the particular needs of his community. The otherness is a fact of life and the universalist, by overriding it, is simply in retreat from the questions of ideology, power, race and class. (65)

While Mukherjee contributes valuable insights regarding the elliptical nature of Running in the Family, she overlooks other conflicts and disjunctions in Ondaatje's depiction of Sri Lanka. It is, of course, true that the author's account is one-sided in that it portrays the well-off Ondaatje family as representative. Not everybody in the Ceylon

of the 1920s and 30s could afford to send his or her children to Oxford, to indulge in wild tea parties, sports like tennis and horseracing, and retreat to the mountains to escape the heat. Given his background, the narrator appears unconvincing in describing "the first of [his] socialist tendencies" (84) and characterizing Lalla, who steals flowers and toys, as "a lyrical socialist" (122).

Although the narrator focusses on himself and is more concerned with Sri Lanka's past than with its present or future, and even if he sometimes assumes a nostalgic sentimental tone, he does exhibit a double vision. Ondaatje conveys a complex recurrent dualism in that he juxtaposes Sri Lanka's paradisaical qualities with the island's threatening forces. Myths may have it that eating the thalagoya tongue brings about verbal brilliance (73); in reality, however, it will lead to death (74). Because of its richness in spices, Sri Lanka may well resemble a "perfumed sea" (81), but numerous species of poison are as easily available to the island's inhabitants (81). The reference to cobras certainly gives Ondaatje's narrative a sense of exoticism, but the narrator also points out the dangers his father and stepmother had to endure (98-99). Conversely, the insurgents in the 1971 incident may have seemed anarchical, menacing, and violent. However, instead of ransacking Mervyn Ondaatje's house, they eventually played cricket on the father's lawn (100).

This paradox between exoticism and violence, laughter and tears, fondness and fear is at the very heart of Running in the Family, as is the author's double allegiance to the country of his birth and the Western culture in which he grew up. Consider, for instance, the impressions jotted down in the "Monsoon Notebook (i)":

old girlfriends from childhood who now towel their kids dry on the other side of the SSC pool, and my watch collecting sea under the glass and gleaming with underwater phosphorus by my bed at night, the inside of both my feet blistering in my first week from the fifteen-cent sandals and the obsessional sarong buying in Colombo, Kandy, Jaffna, Trincomalee ... and the man sleeping on the street who objected when I woke him each of us talking different languages (70)

The clash between the Asian and the American way of life could hardly be more powerful than in the opposition of a phosphorus watch and fifteen-cent sandals. Furthermore, the narrator sharply contrasts the noises of peacocks, frogs, gruntings, and birds, which he taped in Sri Lanka, with his kitchen "with its own unheard hum of fridge, fluorescent light" (136) in Canadian February.

"The leap from one imagination to the other can hardly be made... We own the country we grow up in or we are aliens and invaders" (81), the narrator in Running rightly recognizes. He does not feel at home in Sri Lanka, although it is the country of his birth. The reason why Ondaatje experiences no need for redefinition in Canada, as Mukherjee notes, might be that the author sees himself as a product of a Western education and civilization. Ondaatje, in fact,

admitted that he "was writing the book for [him]self, for [his] relatives in Sri Lanka, as a Canadian" (Oughton 8).

Literary allusions in Running also mark the narrator as part of an intellectual elite and set him apart from the native traditions and customs, which he appears to appreciate. His discovery of first editions of poems by Pablo Neruda, D.H. Lawrence, and George Keyt forms one of his final statements, and the narrator's tone suggests his equal fascination with these as with Sri Lanka's native heritage.

Furthermore, remembrances of his first years at school where he learnt to write in the Sinhalese alphabet seem distant and foreign to Ondaatje's narrator. Apparently he does not function in his Sinhalese language any longer:

Years later, looking into a biology textbook, I came across a whole page depicting the small bones in the body and recognised, delighted, the shapes and forms of the first alphabet I ever copied from Kimarodaya's first grade teacher. (83)

Although the postmodern rewriting of history has often been considered post-colonial discourse (for example in the novels of Salman Rushdie), neither Volkswagen Blues nor Running in the Family can be considered part of this stream. Québec's political and economic situation is not equivalent to that of former colonies in the third world, and Poulin explicitly exposes the French settlers as colonizers of the indigenous peoples. Nor does he consider contemporary Québécois people as colonized by Anglo-American culture. His

novel might, however, be labelled "post-nationalist" because it questions the sense of a "pure" Québécois identity by demonstrating various relationships with the American continent.

Neither can Ondaatje be regarded as the voice of a colonized country. Although the author appears to concentrate on Sri Lanka's native heritage and not the colonizers' version of the past, the island's relationship to colonialism remains a significant gap in his narrative. While the narrator rejects Western conceptions of Sri Lanka in his epigraphs, he brings his own educational baggage to the island and judges by European and North American standards. The ancestors he writes about were, in fact, among the privileged and exploiters, not among the colonized natives. They may not have been as condescending as the British, but they seem to have had the time and the money to lead an extravagant life. As the author recreates the era of his parents, he simultaneously minimizes the era of colonialism in Sri Lanka, to which, significantly, the narrator only refers as Ceylon.

Being largely a white European male discourse, postmodernism has sometimes been accused of appropriating and assimilating post-colonial worlds (see, for example, Tiffin in Adam viii). Yet neither Volkswagen Blues nor Running in the Family displays such homogenizing or assimilative tendencies. In spite of its "cosmopolitanism," Poulin's novel does not portray a universal culture, but a plurality of cultures, oral

as well as written, popular as well as "high." Michael Ondaatje, similarly, juxtaposes Beethoven and the songs of his mother, Shakespeare and graffiti. He presents his fascination with facets of Sri Lanka's native heritage, even if he looks at them with the eyes of someone who comes from a Western background. Ondaatje cannot be accused of appropriating the island's history or culture; on the contrary, he might have appeared presumptuous had he written on part of the colonized people in Sri Lanka.

After all, both authors articulate cultural differences and reject notions of culture as being unified by a nation, a language, or the people. Although we may be living in the era of universal civilization, the "global village," Poulin and Ondaatje demonstrate the importance of local, not global, interests and, by rephrasing culture as a patchwork of little narratives, alert us to the heterogeneity of ethnic cultures and traditions.

NOTES

1. I am well aware of the paradoxical nature of the name, for the term "historicism" implies a continually changing concept of the past according to the present. For a discussion of whether the New Historicism is innovative or not, see Brook Thomas, "The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics" (in Veaser, p.182-200).

2. if they [the voyageurs] had left any writings, their exploits would probably be compared with those of the pioneers of the American West (34)

3. I think you are something new, something that's beginning. You're something that has never been seen before. (162)

4. He tried to tell her that they were from Québec and all that, but his English was even more infantile than usual. (136)

5. When we were little we gave ourselves English names; we thought they suited us much better! (13)

6. One might detect allusions to Hubert Aquin, the Québécois novelist and political activist, who worked on behalf of the French-Canadian separatist movement. Suspected of terrorism, Aquin was under observation in a psychiatric hospital, where he began writing Prochain Episode.

7. His memory had been affected and he didn't really know who he was. (212)

8. One might, of course, object to the presumptuousness of a white male writer who attempts to recover the history of females and natives. Significantly, however, it is la Grande Sauterelle who recuperates the treatment of Indians and the deaths of women travellers on the Oregon Trail.

9. Trying to bring back the past might aggravate his condition. (212)

10. They stayed in her arms for several minutes, happy as children to be enfolded in the woman's marvelous warmth. (140)

CONCLUSION

In Volkswagen Blues and Running in the Family, History has been refracted into numerous discontinuous stories. The narratives' incohesiveness, playfulness, and their lack of closure further undermine any notions of totality or single authority. Intertextual, or interdiscursive, features in Poulin's and Ondaatje's postmodern novels indicate the textuality of our knowledge about the past and reveal the ideological bases of textual, cartographic, and photographic material. Confirming concerns of the New Historicism, both Ondaatje and Poulin reject the distinction between texts and their sociocultural contexts. Volkswagen Blues and Running in the Family do not separate the public and the private, high and popular culture any longer. The two novels are narratives of native myths, regional conflicts, and cultural ambivalences rather than about universal laws and general patterns of history. After all, even if Poulin and Ondaatje challenge conventional notions of history and historiography, they also acknowledge and confirm the value of histories and historical contexts.

In a stimulating interpretation of Québec literature as a whole, Pierre Nepveu has recently interpreted Volkswagen Blues as "une métaphore même de la nouvelle culture québécoise: indéterminée, voyageuse, en dérive, mais

<<recueillante>>" (217). In the 1980s, Québec has also seen the publication of novels like Jacques Godbout's Une Histoire Américaine (1986) and Nicole Brossard's Le Désert Mauve (1987), which indicate this new "Americanness" of Québec culture. It might be interesting to compare and contrast the relationship to the United States - usually a delicate one for Canada - in the novels mentioned above and contemporary English-Canadian writing. As far as Ondaatje's novel is concerned, a fruitful comparative study could point out affinities and differences between the concept of history in Running in the Family and native South East Asian literature.

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