OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / perspectives on culture
No. 45 (2/2024)

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DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4502.15

# "We order our lives with barely held stories": Limitations of Self-Narrative in Michael Ondaaje's *Warlight*

ABSTRACT

In his latest novel, *Warlight* (2018), Michael Ondaatje returns to the theme of identity and explores the role of familial past and history which intersect in the life of his protagonist. In the article I argue that the novel highlights the limitations of the self-narrative it contains and problematizes the idea of a simple recreation of life as a source of identity and self-understanding, a belief which informs Paul Ricoeur's conception of narrative identity. I show that the narrator's recreations of his and his mother's life stories display problems associated with self-narratives, frequently invoked by critics of Ricoeur's conception, such as the narrator's unconscious and defensive motives, which undermine both his story and the subjectivity it constructs. Additionally, the fact that the narrator's biography is situated in the context of intergenerational legacies, long temporal scales, and the non-human environment allows us to view his life, his traits and qualities from those wider perspectives as shaped by both human and non-human factors. This insight further challenges the narrator's mastery and the story's causal structure. The article employs contemporary discourses which foreground the impact of deep time and of the nonhuman context on narrative and subjectivity to illuminate the significance of those extended perspectives in the novel. In its questioning of self-narrative as a source of self-understanding and identity, the novel shifts away from the anthropocentric focus on biographical time and human perspective to the recognition of our embeddedness in deep time and the non-human environment.

KEYWORDS: self-narrative, Paul Ricoeur, deep time, *homo mimeticus*, self-understanding

**Suggested citation:** Gołębiowska, U. (2024). "We order our lives with barely held stories": Limitations of Self-Narrative in Michael Ondaaje's *Warlight*. *Perspectives on Culture*, 2(45), pp. 199–211. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4502.15

Submitted: 12.09.2023 Accepted: 05.04.2024

STRESZCZENIE

„Nadajemy życiu porządek, opowiadając niespójne historie": ograniczenia autonarracji w *Światłach wojny* Michaela Ondaatje

W ostatniej powieści *Światła wojny* (2018) Michael Ondaatje powraca do tematu tożsamości, analizując rolę historii i rodzinnej przeszłości w życiu głównego bohatera. Poniższy artykuł koncentruje się na ograniczeniach autonarracji, które powieść uwypukla, podkreślając osobiste motywacje narratora i wpisując jego biografię w szersze konteksty: międzygeneracyjnego dziedzictwa, długiego trwania i pozaludzkiego środowiska. Powieść problematyzuje ideę prostej rekonstrukcji życia jako źródła tożsamości i rozumienia siebie – przekonań, które stanowią podstawę koncepcji tożsamości narracyjnej Paula Ricoeura. Konstruowane w powieści historie życia narratora i jego matki zdradzają częste problemy autonarracji przywoływane przez krytyków Ricoeurowskiej koncepcji, takie jak nieświadome, defensywne motywacje narratora, które podważają zarówno jego opowieść, jak i wytwarzaną przez nią podmiotowość. Odtworzenie sekwencji zdarzeń okazuje się zatem zasadnicze dla samowiedzy narratora tylko o tyle, o ile pozwala spojrzeć na życie w kontekście długiego trwania w środowisku ludzkim i pozaludzkim. Narrator zyskuje świadomość cech, skłonności, tendencji ukształtowanych w długiej perspektywie czasowej pod wpływem czynników zarówno ludzkich, jak i pozaludzkich, które w bardziej znaczący sposób niż wydarzenia kształtują życie; ów wgląd podaje w wątpliwość jego kontrolę nad opowieścią i ustanowionymi w niej związkami przyczynowymi. Artykuł powołuje się na współczesne dyskursy na temat implikacji kontekstów czasowych i pozaludzkich przywoływanych w powieści XXI w. w celu naświetlenia znaczenia owych perspektyw na narrację i podmiotowość w *Światłach wojny*. Poprzez zakwestionowanie autonarracji jako źródła rozumienia siebie i konstrukcji tożsamości powieść Ondaatjego rezygnuje z antropocentrycznej pespektywy na ludzką biografię, rozpoznając nasze umiejscowienie w szerokiej perspektywie czasowej i w pozaludzkim środowisku.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: autonarracja, Paul Ricoeur, długie trwanie, *homo mimeticus*, samorozumienie

## Introduction

The theme of individual lives entangled in history has featured prominently in Michael Ondaatje's works. In his fictionalized memoir *Running in the Family* (1987) and 2000 novel *Anil's Ghost*, the writer inscribes the characters' lives within longer temporal contexts to explore how the imprint of the past manifests as individual and collective traits and traumas transmitted through intergenerational transfer. In his 2018 novel,

*Warlight*, the writer returns to the theme of familial and historical pasts intersecting in the life of an individual. Again, the novel points to long-term contexts and factors which complicate the idea of self-narrative as a means to self-understanding and a way to construct identity. Throughout the novel, the retrospective narrator attempts to recapture his own and his mother's past in the hope of completing his life story and thus reclaiming his identity. In Part One, the twenty-eight-year old Nathaniel Williams recounts his experiences as a teenager in post-war London, when his parents "went away and left us [the narrator and his sister] in the care of two men who may have been criminals" (Ondaatje, 2018, p. 5). In Part Two, he investigates his mother's secret service activities, which made her leave her children and eventually led to her death. I argue that, as Nathaniel starts to call into question the explanatory cause-and-effect sequence he has constructed, the novel problematizes the idea of narrative recreation of life as a source of identity and self-understanding, a belief which animates narrativist theories and a substantial portion of life-writing texts. The narrator's life story alone fails to provide the self-understanding he seeks as it is composed of "unconfirmed fragments" and self-serving fictions in order to answer his present needs (Ondaatje, 2018, p. 114). Additionally, the fact that the narrator's individual life is situated within long temporal scales and the non-human environment undermines the temporal and causal unity of the narrative, disrupting even further the illusory stability and authority of his narrative. I show that the more-than-human temporalities and environments in Ondaatje's novel not only challenge the linearity and causal structure of the narrator's story but also impact the conception of subjectivity emerging from the text.

In the following sections I demonstrate the ways in which Ondaatje's narrative resists Paul Ricoeur's idea of constructing identity and deriving self-understanding from a recreation of a life story.[1] In line with the theory's limitations, pointed out by anti-narrativist discourses, the self-narrative embedded in Ondaatje's novel appears to be fragmented, defensive, and creative rather than re-creative. The novel shows that it is not the recreated life events arranged in a coherent, linear narrative that contribute to the narrator's self-understanding, but the non-narrative features – personality traits, affects – that result from variously conceived inheritance: the legacy of the narrator's family and his embeddedness in the non-human environment. The non-human world is bound up with long time scales

1 Ricoeur's narrativist theory has been applied to readings of "autobiography and autobiographical fictions or incorporated (…) in autobiographical theory" and, since the contemporary term 'life writing' covers as well representations of fictional lives, this approach has been used to interpret novelistic lives (Crowley, 2003, p. 1).

featured in the narrative, which highlights the importance of wider temporal contexts for the understanding of the past. The impact of deep time on narrative and on subjectivity in Ondaatje's novel is illuminated by recent ideas such as Marco Caracciolo's work on deep time and narrative nonlinearity and Nidesh Lawtoo's conception of *homo mimeticus*. Caracciolo argues that narrative, as conceived of by Ricoeur, "is not at ease with deep temporalities of biological, geological, and astronomical phenomena," as it is "fundamentally skewed towards the ethical and hermeneutic concerns that the philosopher foregrounds in his work" (2021, p. 344). Not only do the intersections of the time scales of individual humans or human societies with more-than-human temporalities challenge linear conceptualizations of time, but those discontinuous temporalities also resist the conventional notions of teleology and agency. Following Lawtoo (2022), I demonstrate that the self in the novel, situated within deep time and the non-human environment, departs from the narrativist idea of the autonomous subject whose self-constructed narrative is a source of knowledge and understanding. By contrast, the embedded self, subject to the commonly acknowledged forces from outside itself (social, cultural), and within itself (the unconscious drives and instincts), is also "porous to affective influences, and open to a number of dispossessions, be they human or nonhuman" (Lawtoo, 2022, p. 32). Ondaatje's narrator, who looks at his life as inscribed into long temporal scales and the nonhuman environment, is this new mimetic self, limited in its autonomy by the tendency towards imitating human and non-human models.

## Subjective, defensive and creative – recreations of the past in Ondaatje's *Warlight*

The narrator's hope to find out who he is by composing a story of his life is grounded in narrativist conceptions which consider self-narrative as a source of insight into the self. The theories of narrative self-construction range from descriptive conceptions – the claims that people naturally seek to tell a coherent story about their lives – to prescriptive or ethical conceptions, according to which examining our self-narratives is the only way to learn who we are (Crone, 2020, p. 65). In general, narrativist theories foreground a conscious, reflective process involved in the construction of a unified, logical self-narrative. Ricoeur, for instance, employs Aristotelian terms to refer to self-narrative as the mimesis of action through emplotment – an aesthetic configuration which arranges the portrayed events to form a unified whole with a beginning, middle and end. This plot-like structure connects events causally and temporally, endowing

self-narratives with unity and meaning, eliminating a disturbing sense of contingency and disharmony. This aim is achieved through combining "those ingredients of human action which, in ordinary experience, remain dissimilar and discordant" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 4). The process of finding, or imposing, meaningful connections between disparate elements of experience endows a life narrative retrospectively with a sense of meaning and performs an explanatory function – telling stories about their lives allows people understand them as well as to articulate and construct their identities (Crone, 2020, p. 67). For Ricoeur, self-narrative which renders an otherwise incoherent life intelligible is a preferred medium of self-interpretation and a structure of understanding: "The subject comes to self-knowledge through the construction of a 'coherent and acceptable' story about himself" (Crowley, 2003, p. 3). Narrative self-construction is thus associated with a high dose of subjective power, control and autonomy, which partly explains why the idea of capturing life in the form of a conventional narrative has not lost its appeal, even though it has been frequently problematized in literary works and in anti-narrativist discourses.

Anti-narrativist philosophers have pointed out the potential for self-delusion associated with the construction of life stories, arguing that conventional self-narratives fail to capture life adequately or to serve as a structure of understanding as they are often creative, rather than merely re-creative. As Katja Crone (2020) notes, the recalling of past episodes in order to construct a life-story often fails to conform with the facts (p. 67). Instead, the process frequently involves "adaptations of content and distortions": not only do we select events which are more likely to produce a coherent narrative, but we also arrange them in a way that enhances the sense of unity (Crone, 2020, p. 67). If the elements of our lives do not cohere and "resist[s] yielding meaning, we attempt to impose it ourselves," by adding temporal and causal links, since we need to experience the world as meaningful (Vice, 2003, p. 97). The imposition of meaning in the form of fixed cause-and-effect connections solidifies the sequence, making the events seem necessary and inevitable, even if they are in fact contingent. This perception of a rigid life sequence contributes to a sense of self as a fixed entity, produced, determined, and limited, by the past story, while, as Galen Strawson argues, "we live (…) beyond any tale that we happen to enact" (2004a, p. 15). Elsewhere, Strawson (2004b) observes that it is the need to render a life intelligible and meaningful that makes us reduce it to a story which provides comfort, aesthetic pleasure or an explanation. In the process, whatever does not fit into a meaningful sequence may be modified or left out. Ricouer himself acknowledges that the need to construct a meaningful sequence may lead to specious attributions of causality and purpose (due to teleological thinking); still, his conception

conflates self-narrative with self-understanding and underplays the possibility of self-delusion or mystification inherent in the creative manipulations of narrativizing. The failure to recognize the unconscious forces and motivations which undermine the authority of narrative is in fact a limitation of all hermeneutic, continuist theories, which view life stories and history as temporally and causally unified structures.

Those unconscious mechanisms, which shape narratives of the past, both individual and collective, are evident in Ondaatje's novel. Through the construction of an intelligible, unified story, the novel's narrator seeks to restore order and meaning to his chaotic and precarious past, convinced that we all "order our lives with barely held stories" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 284). Nathaniel tries to reclaim the "lost sequence" of his and his mother's lives through the exploration of Rose Williams's buried secret service past (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 129). However, the narrator's reconstructions are heavily influenced by his current self, which is figured as the light which dispels darkness and illuminates the hidden meanings of his life in 1945 London: "You return to that earlier time armed with the present, and no matter how dark that world was, you do no leave it unlit. You take your adult self with you. It is not to be a reliving but a rewitnessing" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 114). The positive connotation of light thrown on the past by the present-day self is balanced by the implication that, while the self's needs and desires may illuminate certain memories, they may also keep in obscurity, even if not deliberately or consciously, other aspects of the past. As a result, recent events may be shrouded in darkness, as if insufficiently illuminated by the eponymous "warlight" – a dim light that guided emergency traffic during wartime blackouts in London. Nathaniel's sister, Rachel, chooses to "darken and make invisible or at least distant what was unhappy or dangerous in a life" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 62). Nathaniel's attachment to, and Rachel's dismissal of, the past highlight the fact that all narratives of the past are constructions contingent on the demands of the present, which involve all the manipulations identified by anti-narrativists, such as selecting, arranging and fictionalizing past events. Nathaniel admits that there is an element of fiction in his narrative: since he is unable to recapture his mother's full story, which stems from the nature of her work, her secretiveness, and premature death, he creates fictions, confident that he knows "how to fill a story from a grain of sand or a fragment of discovered truth" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 276). The narrator is, moreover, aware of the role unconscious motives play in his self-narrative as he admits that his "barely held" story is fragmented and "the chronology of events has fallen apart for whatever defensive reason" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 47).

Likewise, collective memories in the novel emerge as shaped by self-serving current political agendas, which takes the form of emphasizing

acceptable aspects of the past while erasing uncomfortable events and memories. The secret service archive where Nathaniel works, and conducts his private exploration of Rose's past, is revising action reports, especially those that reveal uncomfortable facts about Britain's involvement in post-war Europe, and its possible role in the exacerbation of local conflicts. Even though "it was no longer possible to see who held a correct moral position" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 134), fourteen years after the war the action reports of questionable activities are destroyed. The erasure of these documents aims at a construction of a desired image of Britain's role in the Second World War and, in this way, of an ideal national identity, which affirms Derrida's claim, invoked by Julia Hansen (2016), that archives are not only means of recording the past; they also produce it (205).

> Along with a handful of others, I sifted through the files and dossiers that still remained, assessing what had been successfully achieved against what had perhaps gone wrong, in order to make recommendations as to what might need to be re-archived or now eradicated. This was referred to as The Silent Correction. (…) a determined, almost apocalyptic censorship had taken place (…) the most compromising evidence was, as far as possible, swiftly destroyed (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 132).

The way the novel uses the actual archive shifts the reflections on the recreated past from the memory-as-archive idea, where memory is retrievable and unchangeable, to the conceptualization of memory as a "construction of the past under conditions determined by the present" (Whitehead, 2009, p. 49). According to the latter conception, the collective or individual past is an unstable construct, reinterpreted and reconstituted repeatedly, with memories retained or rejected according to the demands of the present. As Anne Whitehead (2009) explains, "Memory, in this instance, is no longer related to the past as a form of truth but as a form of desire," and most often focused on the creation of acceptable versions of the past (49).

In line with the above, the self-narrative embedded in Ondaatje's novel is an artifact, a construct intended to meet the narrator's present needs. Nathaniel's emotional attitude to the past, his need to compose a story which might provide explanation or consolation, is evident when he confesses that fourteen years after the events, the past which felt "completely erased began returning. And there was hunger towards it" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 127). The emotions bound up with the project of recreating his life appear to be responsible for the limitations of the narrative as a means of self-understanding: not only does the narrator select and arrange events in a way that enhances unity, inventing causal links between them, but

he also fills in the gaps with creative fictions to achieve a sense of completeness and meaning. The causal links are eventually undermined as Nathaniel finds out, for example, that the sources of his need for safety are not easily attributable to his mother's absence, but go back to his early childhood to events he has repressed. Also, his fragmented, subjective, defensive story, when confronted with another character's version, turns out inaccurate, exposing the manufactured character of the sense of coherence, meaning and, ultimately, identity.

## Longer temporal scales as a challenge to linearity and subjectivity

What further disturbs the narrative's linearity and causal coherence is the increasing presence of longer temporal contexts in the novel. Past events referred to in *Warlight* include flashbacks to Nathaniel's mother's childhood or war activities, which he recalls, reports, or imagines, as well as distant events such as the Roman conquest and the Norman invasion, whose material traces are visible in the landscape. All those evocations of the more or less distant past disrupt linearity and chronology; additionally, "Roman roads" and "Norman churches" provide a context for the wartime fears of a German invasion, suggesting a cyclical nature of conquests and a long-time endurance of the island (Ondaatje, 2018, pp. 18, 36). There are allusions in the novel to even longer time scales, which further disturbs the narrative's linearity. This effect is illuminated by contemporary discourses engaging with the concept of "deep time," and the mutual dynamic between the human and non-human world (Caracciolo, 2021, p. 343). For Marco Caracciolo (2021), the impact of the long time scales with which narrative becomes entangled is apparent in the narrative structure and construction of subjectivity in literary works. More precisely, the temporalities in narrative that "vastly surpass the time scale of individual humans or human societies" (Caracciolo, 2021, p. 342) put "a pressure on the linear model of time – and on emplotment itself" (p. 346). Linearity is understood here as "temporal sequentiality, causal coherence, and diegetic focus," and associated with human time (Caracciolo, 2021, p. 352). Conventional, or linear, narrative is at odds with deep time "of biological, geological, and astronomical phenomena" because it is "skewed towards the ethical and hermeneutic concerns," a feature which Monika Fludernik refers to as the "anthropomorphic bias" of storytelling (Caracciolo, 2021, 344). Accordingly, Ricoeur's conception of narrative is challenged by the literary texts "entangled" with deep time; actually, the philosopher himself "sidelines deep time" in his *Time and Narrative*; the "hermeneutic

framework of Ricoeur's thinking is, after all, firmly grounded in human experience" (Caracciolo, 2021, p. 343).

In Ondaatje's novel, the presence of deep time radically undermines the self-constructed sequence, suggesting causes and sources of narrated events other than the immediate past. The intrusion of "a history measured in centuries or millennia: 'the history of long, even of very long duration (the *trés longue durée*) – the geographical, but not quite geological, time," when humans were even less actors than in the case of the *longue durée*, is most apparent in passages featuring Felon Marsh, Rose's childhood friend and a fellow secret service agent (Guldi & Armitage, 2014, p. 16). Those references highlight the influence of long-term processes in the non-human world on individuals and on human history. In his radio broadcasts, Felon, an amateur naturalist, celebrates his native Suffolk landscape, especially the effects of gradual developments in the natural world: "the mystery of chalk hills, where whole faunas come and go, while the layers of the chalk are built from the efforts of infinitesimal creatures working in almost limitless time" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 208). Felon is aware of the impact of the non-human world on individuals and on history; he himself models his secret service strategies on natural phenomena and animal behavior. Making an analogy between fishing and warcraft, he observes that both involve "the art of coaxing – everything is a waiting game" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 212).

The situating of an individual life in the deep time and in the human and nonhuman environments disrupts linearity by calling into question the established causal links between events and the self-understanding derived from the reconstructed sequence; after all, "it is not just previous life events and actions – meaningfully organized – that are important for an individual self-understanding" (Crone, 2020, p. 68). Katja Crone emphasizes the significance of non-narrative features, or consistencies of the self, such as "certain qualitative states and bodily feelings," which are crucial for the comprehension of one's life (Crone, 2020, p. 68). In line with Crone's argument, the self-narrative in *Warlight* contributes to the narrator's self-understanding inasmuch as it leads to a recognition of those internal sources of actions and events. Both Nathaniel's and his mother's lives appear to have been more profoundly affected by their personal qualities, such as a desire for safety and secrecy, than by immediately apparent external causes. As Nathaniel realizes, Rose Williams may not have been seduced to the British secret service by Felon, even though it initially seemed obvious. Felon's influence was not necessarily decisive; she would have probably gravitated towards this type of work anyway, following her father's example: "It might not have been a path built by Marsh Felon at all" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 211). As some of those crucial personal traits may have been transmitted from the

previous generation, in the first chapter of Part Two of the novel, aptly entitled "Inheritance," Nathaniel explores the impact of familial legacy, believing that "something in my mother must rhyme in me" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 135). He remembers Rose commenting on her affinity with Nathaniel: "I suspect there might be a similarity and connection. I'm distrustful, not open. That may be true of you" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 254). Also, Nathaniel's father is described as a secretive man, who "needed to be alone," a description which applies as well to his son (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 30). Apart from those inherited traits, feelings and emotions appear to be vastly important for Nathaniel's self-understanding: he remembers feeling uncomfortable around his mother because of the "uncrossable distance" between them; "There was distrust on my part and a secretiveness on hers" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 140). By contrast, Nathaniel feels calm and secure in Sam Malakite's garden, in which he works during his school summer breaks. With its recurring cycles and patterns, Sam's garden represents a universe Nathaniel wishes to be part of, which is contrasted with the world perceived as constant conflict and confusion Nathaniel's mother clearly believes in when she plays "vicious competitive chess with her son" to prepare him for future battles (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 169).

Ondaatje's novel suggests that affects and personal qualities may originate from sources more distant than the previous generation. This insight is affirmed by contemporary ecocritical and posthumanistic discourses according to which certain affects and traits may be lodged in us because we are in turn embedded in the human and non-human environment, and affected by invisible processes occurring over long time scales. The power of the environment to gradually shape human behavior appears to be analogous to the creation of chalk hills "built from the efforts of infinitesimal creatures working in almost limitless time" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 208). From the perspective of deep time, it is possible to consider human traits as produced not only by the familial past but also as a result of recorded history, or even "of deep history, the combined genetic and cultural changes that created humanity over hundreds of [thousands of] years" (Sawyer, 2015, p. 2). Those complex interactions with the environment that inform human behaviour involve mimetic imitation, over long-time scales, of models from both the human and the natural world. In the novel this kind of mimeticism is implied when, observing vigilance in Rose's face, Felon "could never tell where it came from, for the landscape she grew up in was placid, a self-sufficient place without urgency" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 208). Nidesh Lawtoo (2022), the author of the conception of *homo mimeticus*, argues that from their evolutionary beginnings humans have been prone to imitating human or nonhuman models, with all affects being imitative and spreading "contagiously from self to others" (35). This permeability to

various environmental influences re-inscribes "humans and their mimetic drives, back in nature" (Lawtoo, 2022, p. 161). As for the implications of this conception for the conventional self-narrative, the awareness of environmental sources of selfhood undermines the role of life stories – recreated sequences of events and actions – in the construction of identity and self-understanding, as well as calls into question human "autonomy, free will, and rational presence to selfhood" (Lawtoo, 2022, p. 35).

Mimetic behaviours in the novel also include less distant examples of imitation of both human and nonhuman models – another source of self apart from long-term development or intergenerational transmission. While it is impossible to determine whether Nathaniel's resemblance to his mother results from an obvious genetic inheritance or from imitation, his emulation of Sam Malakite's way of life is definitely an instance of mimetic behavior. Admittedly, Nathaniel decides to settle in the country when he recognizes his deep needs and desires, but he still imitates Sam's way of life. In Sam's house, which he buys after the old man's death, Nathaniel feels as if he were "protected from the past," the recent past of the war and post-war violence (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 33). Already as a teenager, when he worked in Sam's vegetable garden he felt he no longer needed to draw obsessively "maps of our neighborhood in order to feel secure" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 137). In Mr. Malakite's presence, "those indistinct maps from childhood now became reliable and exact," allowing Nathaniel to trust "each step I took with him. He knew the names of all the grasses he walked over" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 141). After many years, Nathaniel chooses a life he feels "safest in; for me it is a distant village, a walled garden" (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 50). Safety and regeneration is what the narrator seeks in his imitation of models from the non-human environment. As ceasing to be conspicuous increases the chance of surviving in the natural world, Nathaniel hides behind his garden wall in order to recover from the emotional traumas and injuries. In an unstated analogy, his recovery resembles the revival of the nearly-extinct sea-pea mentioned in the novel: the plant is restored during the war when it is left alone due to a lack of human traffic on the mined beaches. Another instance of Nathaniel's mimetic attunement to the nonhuman environment is his daily habit to "eat at the hour the greyhound does," as the dog's needs resonate with his own (Ondaatje, 2019, p. 283). Nathaniel's need to arrange his life in the form of narrative subsides at the end of the novel, as if narrative functioned as a map and was no longer necessary in the natural world.

Ondaatje's novel questions a deeply entrenched assumption that the creation of a unified and coherent self-narrative leads to self-understanding and constructs identity. Not only are Nathaniel's self-narrative, and the recreated or imposed causal links between events, undermined by

self-serving and largely unconscious motives, but the references to deep time in the novel destabilize further the structure and role of self-narrative. It is internal factors, emotions, qualities, deep desires, that emerge as more crucial to the narrator's self-understanding than the recreated sequence of past events. The narrator locates the sources of those features of selfhood in a broadly-conceived inheritance, from immediate genetic transmission and mimetic reproduction of parental models to a more general inheritance connected with his embeddedness in the human and non-human world. One of those sources, mimetic imitation, is illuminated by Lawtoo's (2022) conception employed in the text, which explains that the self is not self-constituting, in Aristotelian sense, through a deliberate, controlled, mimetic representation and interpretation of life, but, rather, it is produced though unconscious, performative imitation of human and non-human models. Unlike in Ricoeur's theory, where mimesis is a consciously employed "technique of representation of reality," for Lawtoo, it is a mode of unconscious imitative performance, since such influences cannot be recognized, understood, narrated and interpreted. Thus, the novel's foregrounding of the deep history, and of the impact of human and non-human influences over long time scales, questions the idea of the strong, autonomous subject which employs deliberate emplotment strategies to produce a masterful self-narrative. In fact, self-narrative appears to be to a large extent shaped by non-voluntary forces, not only the unconscious, class or gender but also by environmental factors. In this way, the novel moves the idea of the development of human subjectivity beyond individual biography, and beyond the anthropocentric perspective, to consider human and non-human evolutionary, environmental, and genetic factors operating over long time scales. This shift towards the recognition of connections between human and non-human actors throughout deep time articulates an altered perception of the place and role of human mastery, autonomy, self-creation, which informs new, non-anthropocentric, approaches to life writing and fiction in general.

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