

## MODALITIES OF REPRESENTATION AND PERCEPTION IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *ANIL'S GHOST*

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### Abstract:

This study analyses the way in which the interdependence of the representation and perception of reality is exemplified and questioned in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000). As we enter this work of resistance literature by way of an omniscient narrator, we enter not just the geographical spaces and cultural history of Sri Lanka, but find ourselves taking part in the daily struggle of the people to survive, to identify and do justice to the many dead in this conflict between ethnic groups and the government. This fragmentation of the narrative structure – casting doubt on the conflicting relationships established between the characters' present and the past, between Western and Eastern values in relation to the concept of truth, the search for lost identity and love – highlights still further the interchangeability of representations and perceptions of reality.

**Keywords:** Reality; Identity; Truth; Value

### Introduction

The conceptual polyvalence of the terms “perception”, “reality” and “truth” is perhaps one of the most crucial elements permeating Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's ghost* (2000).<sup>1</sup> It enables us to see the way in which the interdependence of the representation and perception of the real is exemplified and questioned in this work, and consequently to broaden the range of interpretations given to the analyses of this narrative and of the hypotheses raised in our theoretical minds.

This novel, set in Sri Lanka during the civil war in the 1980s and 1990s, narrates the trajectory of Anil Tissera, a forensic scientist employed by the Centre for Human Rights who returns to her home country<sup>2</sup> to investigate the origin of organized operations for the killing of the population. In the course of a journey with the archaeologist Sarath Diyasena, she discovers the skeleton of a recently murdered man at a government archeological site. Suspecting that the killing had a

political motivation, they try to identify the skeleton and thus do justice to these anonymous victims of war. After presenting her report to the local authorities, Anil, despite her frustration, leaves the country, as Sarath fears for her safety.

Although this is the main plot, each of the novel's eight sections focuses on a particular topic or character; these sections are preceded by or interwoven with short stories or information. This fragmentation of the narrative structure – paralleling the disparity between Western and Eastern values concerning truth and reality, between the characters' present and past, in their search for identity, lost family bonds and love – highlights still further, at the levels of both *story* and *discourse*,<sup>3</sup> the permutability of the representation and the perception of the real.

As the Author's Note explains,

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three

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essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government. (...)

*Anil's Ghost* is a fictional work set during this political time and historical moment. And while there existed organizations similar to those in this story, and similar events took place, the characters and incidents in the novel are invented. (AG: vii)

This comment, of a type common in works of fiction set in the present and the past, emphasizes the importance of the novel's political, social and historical context, that is, of the referent.<sup>4</sup> But this "fictional referentiality" must be understood as pseudo-referentiality, considering that fictional practices also contain a certain perlocutionary<sup>5</sup> dimension, especially in relation to eventual ideological injunctions exerted on the receiver" (Reis & Lopes 44, emphasis in the original).<sup>6</sup> That is, the fictional referentiality in *Anil's Ghost*, despite being contextualized in a certain "political and historical moment" of Sri Lanka, remains a pseudo-referentiality, such that we are twice removed from reality: the characters and the incidents are "invented" and the narrative is "a fictional work".

Moreover, if "each narrative text creates a certain universe of reference, in which the *characters*, their attributes and their spheres of action are inscribed", and if in *Anil's Ghost* we have "a *possible world* whose logic may coincide with that of the *real world*", what interests us is to understand the way we readers, once inside the story, the "*epistemic worlds*, defined in function of the beliefs and presuppositions of the characters" and "in a relation of interpretative cooperation", introduce our own "*epistemic attitudes*" (Reis & Lopes 45, emphasis in the original).

Therefore, as we enter this work of historical fiction and of resistance literature, we enter not just the geographical spaces and the cultural history of Sri Lanka but also participate in the main characters' daily struggle for survival. Anil and the brothers Sarath and Gamini Dyiasena, faced with the atrocities committed around them, try to do justice to, and identify the innumerable dead in this conflict between ethnic groups

and the government. We also find ourselves reflecting with them about issues which worry them and which transcend the frontiers of the textual universe in which they are inserted.<sup>7</sup>

### The permutability and interdependence of the representation and perception of the real

Near the end of the novel Anil recalls parts of a conversation between Sarath and Gamini, when the three of them were on Galle Face Green, about the war in Sri Lanka, what they had done and what they did not intend to do:

At one point that night, she remembered, they spoke of how much they loved their country. In spite of everything. No Westerner would understand the love they had for the place. 'But I could never leave here, Gamini had whispered.

'American movies, English books – remember how they all end?' Gamini asked that night. 'The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. ... He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.' (AG: 285-6)

The following remarks serve as an introduction to our reflections:

- Anil's perception of the love which the brothers felt for their native country, besides confirming their deep feelings, impossible for a Westerner to understand, highlights the gap which is evident throughout the novel between Western and Eastern values.
- Gamini's comments about American movies and English books not only mock metafictionally the idea that the endings of these fictions are "enough reality" for the Western world – emphasizing that

this reality is not complete, since it only takes account of the Westerners' view of things. They also reinforce the comment about the notion of reality, as they take in the history of "Western political writing" of the last two centuries, besides continuing to mock this hero, encouraging him to go home, write a book and get it published, almost as a parodic counterpart to Ondaatje's novel.

By conceptualizing "reality" as real fact, truth, the ensemble of real things and facts – "reality" also therefore including the concept of "truth" (Houaiss, 2001-06)<sup>8</sup> – and if we consider that "it is precisely the multiplicity of the concepts of reality which produces the multiplicity of our modes of thought, and ... each ontological judgment we make inevitably entails far-reaching consequences" (Mannheim qtd. in Moisés 5),<sup>9</sup> we realize how the dialogue above illustrates this. The diversity of the concepts of reality expressed by the characters will color and pervade not just the chronotope of the novel (the geographical and cultural spaces of the country integrated with the political and historical context of Sri Lanka at the time when the action takes place), but especially the perception – as "a mechanism of capturing reality marked by the sign of relativity" (Moisés 200) – which the characters have of this reality, that is, of what is happening to themselves, to others and to their cultural, political and historical context.

Starting out from the conception of *mimesis*<sup>10</sup> – the *representation* of reality "understood in dialectical and non-dichotomic terms; which means that between *representative* and *represented* there exists a relationship of active interdependency" (Reis & Lopes 88, emphasis in the original), and, therefore, of *mimesis* as creative imitation"; not "duplication of presence", "but an incision which opens the space of fiction" bringing about "the literariness of the literary work" (Ricoeur qtd. in Compagnon 130)<sup>11</sup> – we shall concentrate on some episodes in which the interchangeability of the representation and the perception of the real come to the surface of the text through Anil, in confrontation with herself and with the brothers Sarath and Gamini.<sup>12</sup> We will thus see the way in which the concepts of

reality/truth are always being re-evaluated, depending on the view and the perception of these characters.<sup>13</sup>

### **1 – Anil's arrival in Colombo: from her "long-distance gaze" to the *hic et nunc* of reality in Sri Lanka**

The contrast of Anil's westernized view of the reality of Sri Lanka begins on her arrival in Colombo, which she left at the age of eighteen and now returns to at the age of thirty-three. As she realizes, after recovering from the journey,

The island no longer held her by the past. (...) Anil had read documents and news reports, full of tragedy, and she had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze. But here it was a more complicated world morally. The streets were still streets, the citizens remained citizens. They shopped, changed jobs, laughed. Yet the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale. At university Anil had translated lines from Archilochus – *In the hospitality of war we left them their dead to remember us by*. But here there was no such gesture to the families of the dead, not even the information of who the enemy was. (AG:11)

If Sri Lanka "no longer held her by the past" – as a result of her having lived for so many years abroad – her westernization and her "long-distance gaze" over the tragic events in her home country are not however enough to make her immune to the *in loco* view the country now offers her. It is now, on her return, that this "long-distance gaze" – as perception, as a "way of interpreting" (Houaiss 2001-06) – allows her to morally evaluate what is happening.

The triple repetition of "here" confirms the contrast between the reality of the citizens who walk the streets and the reality of war and its effects on families who have lost their dear ones, or who are the real enemies. The comparison of the tragedy that is occurring in Sri Lanka with "the darkest Greek tragedies" universalizes this perception of evil and highlights even more strongly

the atrocities being committed, which do not even allow the living to receive their dead, in contrast, again, to “the *hospitality of war*” which the ancient Greeks gave their enemies, making the civil war devastating Sri Lanka seem timeless.

These considerations are deepened when Anil and Sarath, who has been sent to work with Anil during the forensic investigations, go to the mountains, where three skeletons have been found which can prove if they were victims of old or recent massacres.

## **2 – Anil's and Sarath's archaeological discoveries in the caves of Bandarawela: from scientific investigation to the intuitive perception of reality/truth**

While traveling, Anil and Sarath discuss the differences between their ways of -dealing with archeological discoveries:

‘You know, I'd believe your arguments more if you lived *here*,’ he said. ‘You can't just slip in, make a discovery and leave.’

‘You want me to censor myself?’

‘I want you to understand the archaeological surrounds of a fact. Or you'll be like one of those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel. Their false empathy and blame.’

‘You have a hang-up about journalists, don't you.’

‘That's how we get seen in the West. It's different *here*, dangerous. Sometimes law is on the side of *power*, not *truth*.’ (AG: 44) (My emphasis)

In other words, the “here and now” in Sri Lanka cannot be understood by somebody like Anil, already westernized – just slip in, discover something and leave, in an attitude of “false empathy and blame”, as Western journalists do – if there is no perception and understanding of the referent, of the “archaeological surrounds of a fact”, that is, of the interrelationship of circumstances which accompany a fact or a situation. As Sarath stresses, “It's different here, dangerous. Sometimes law is on the side of power, not truth.” This perception of reality leads him to always behave cautiously in relation to his present work. His words are

also ominous, for at the end of the novel he himself will be murdered by radical groups.

The same subject is taken up again after they have found the three skeletons in one of the Bandarawela caves, a historical site under government supervision, and Anil notices that a fourth skeleton, which had not previously been discovered, is not prehistoric, since the bones “were still held together by dried ligaments, partially burned” (AG: 50). It is her chance to prove that people have recently been murdered there.

At the same time, Anil does not know if she can trust Sarath – as he suggests they should hide the skeleton, which they call Sailor, so that they can visit an old temple – and says to him: “I don't really know, you see, which side you are on – if I can trust you” (AG: 53). And she repeats, in the next exchange:

‘I don't know where you stand. I know... I know you feel the purpose of truth is more complicated, that ‘it's sometimes more dangerous here if you tell the truth.’

‘Everyone's scared, Anil. It's a national disease.’ (AG: 53)

As Anil's reflections on the permeability of the concept of truth continue,

In her years abroad, during her European and North American education, Anil had courted foreignness, was at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fe. She felt completed abroad. (...) And she had come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries. Information could always be clarified and acted upon. But here, on this island, she realized she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere. (...) Truth bounced between gossip and vengeance. (AG: 54)

These quotations emphasize not just the cultural differences between them – Sarath's reticence making Anil unable to trust him completely – but especially the ambiguity of the very concept of truth and the dangerous function it exerts in this referent, in the “here” dominated by fear. Instead of “clearly marked roads” towards truth,

Anil only finds the oscillating truth “between gossip and vengeance”. The quotations also bring out two basic philosophical concepts about reality:

- the **correspondence** theory (suggesting that the external world can be known by scientific investigation, which requires referential language and implies an objective point of view);
- the **coherence** theory (suggesting that the external world can be understood by intuitive perception, which requires emotive language and implies a subjective point of view). However, as language interpenetrates, no absolute divisions are possible (Cuddon 772).

Therefore, even if at first sight we identify the concept of correspondence with the way Anil perceives the external world, as a forensic anthropologist, basing herself on facts proven by scientific investigation to examine the bones and thus be able to prove that people have been murdered, and the concept of coherence with the way the archaeologist Sarath and subsequently his brother Gamini, the doctor, understand reality, basing themselves not only on facts but on the consequences these facts have in people’s lives, there is no doubt that these concepts interpenetrate and will be further questioned in the course of the novel. Anil’s objectivity and Sarath’s and Gamini’s subjectivity/objectivity, in relation to the concepts of reality and truth, and therefore to their perception of the real as factual and as psychological, will be constantly questioned among themselves.

### **3 – Sarath’s double truth: reality as correspondence and as coherence**

On one occasion, Sarath talks to Anil about the unauthorized places of detention in Colombo in which torture was carried out:

‘Is your tape recorder off?’ he had said. ‘Yes, it’s off.’ And only then had he talked.

*‘I wanted to find one law to cover all of living. I found fear...’ (AG: 135)*

This is the intuitive perception of reality which Sarath transmits to Anil, the law that dominates all living beings: fear. The italicized sentence heightens the effect of his statement still further, through the force of the words “law” and “fear”. The first, defined as “that which imposes itself on man by way of his reason, conscience or by certain conditions or circumstances” (Houaiss 2001-06) makes it very clear that, if Sarath thought about “law” as linked to his reason or conscience, the only law he finds here is that which imposes itself by “certain conditions or circumstances”, that is, by fear. Defined as an “affective state provoked by the awareness of fear or that, on the contrary, arouses this awareness” (Houaiss 2001-06), and already mentioned by Sarath in a former quotation – “Everyone’s scared, Anil. It’s a national disease.” (AG: 53) – fear dominates all the inhabitants of Sri Lanka.

As Anil also comments to Sarath, comparing his behavior and that of his compatriots in Sri Lanka with what happens when they are abroad:

‘We are full of anarchy. We take our clothes off because we shouldn’t take our clothes off. And we behave worse in other countries. In Sri Lanka one is surrounded by family order, most people know every meeting you have during the day, there is nothing anonymous. But if I meet a Sri Lankan elsewhere in the world and we have a free afternoon, it doesn’t necessarily happen, but each of us knows all hell could break loose. What is that quality in us? Do you think? That makes us cause our own rain and smoke?’ (AG: 138)

We are now, by contrast, no longer before an Anil who expresses her scientific interpretation of facts, but before one whose intuitive perception of reality leads her to an almost philosophical view of life, as she broadens her generalizations and concedes that human beings are anarchic by nature, and, consequently, creators of their “own rain and smoke”, that is, of their own disorder, agitation and moral disturbance. Her rhetorical questions at the end – directed to Sarath as

much as to herself – continue to echo in our minds, for they transcend the limits of the scene and of the text.

The disagreement between them about the two realities – that of Sri Lanka experienced by Sarath and the westernized reality which guides Anil – comes to the surface again as Sarath tells her how the situation in his home country has been much worse, emphasizing her lack of understanding of the situation at that time, since she had not been there; and the fact that they would not have survived with “your rules of Westminster”. This reference to the British Parliament emphasizes even more the contrast and the distance between the metropolis and the circumstances in the former colony, dominated by terror:

‘You don’t understand how bad things were. Whatever the government is possibly doing now, it was worse when there was real chaos. You were not here for that – the law abandoned by everyone, save a few god lawyers. Terror everywhere, from all sides. We wouldn’t have survived with your rules of Westminster then. So illegal government forces rose up in retaliation. And we were caught in the middle. ... In nearly every house, in nearly every family, there was knowledge of someone’s murder or abduction by one side or another. I’ll tell you a thing I saw...’ (AG: 153-4)

Anil’s and Sarath’s attempts to conceptualize what truth, or reality, is proceed in a conversation in the *walawwa*<sup>14</sup>:

‘You like to remain cloudy, don’t you, Sarath, even to yourself.’  
 ‘I don’t think clarity is necessarily truth. It’s simplicity, isn’t it?’  
 ‘I need to know what you think. I need to break things apart to know where someone came from. That’s also an acceptance of complexity. Secrets turn powerless in the open air.’  
 ‘Political secrets are not powerless, in any form,’ he said.  
 ‘But the tension and danger around them, one can make them evaporate. You’re an archaeologist. Truth comes finally into the light. It’s in the bones and sediment.’  
 ‘It’s in character and nuance and mood.’

‘That is what governs us in our lives, that’s not the truth.’

‘For the living it is the truth,’ he quietly said. (AG: 262)

Therefore, if truth for Anil is in the factual reality of “bones”, of “sediment” and for Sarath “It’s in character and nuance and mood”, that is, in a psychological reality, we perceive again the clash between the conceptions of truth which dominate their lives: the factual reality of truth supplied by scientific investigation, that is, by correspondence theory, and the truth supplied by intuitive perception, that is, by coherence theory. Moreover, if for Anil intuitive perception of truth is not “what governs us in our lives”, and for Sarath it **is** the truth for the living – we also realize how Anil’s westernized view is still not fully capable of understanding the reason for Sarath’s answer. For him, the psychological truth of human beings shows itself to be deeper than the factual reality of war, since he starts out from factual reality to reach the intuitive perception of psychological truth, complementing it.

As Lydia Kokkola comments, in “Truthful (Hi) stories in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*”,

During the course of the novel, Ondaatje casts doubt on the possibility that absolute truths exist in the context of historical investigation. He questions both the certainty and the neutrality of forensic science in order to foreground the importance of viewing truth as contingent and, ultimately, arbitrary. By creating characters whose differing views of the truth represent different philosophical traditions in the debates on the nature of truthfulness, Ondaatje concretises the importance of acknowledging the way in which truth is always subservient to other goals, such as reconciliation. (Kokkola 129)

#### **4 – Anil and Sarath: the final confrontation between the objective reality of history and the subjective reality of peace**

We now reach the climax of the narrative in terms of Anil’s investigation. After she and Sarath have identified Sailor as Ruwan Kumara – who worked as a “toddy

tapper”(AG: 269), and was believed to sympathize with the rebels – she presents her report to the “military and police personnel trained in counter-insurgency methods” (AG: 271) in the Auditorium of the Arsenal in Colombo. Because Sailor’s skeleton has “disappeared” and she is using another one, Anil feels twice betrayed by Sarath: for the disappearance and for his trying to belittle her work during the presentation (in fact, Sarath sensed the audience’s hostility at her remark “I think you murdered hundreds of us”(AG: 272) and was only trying to save her). Anil then defies Sarath when he insists that she has been invited to come to Colombo to work “for the government here” (AG: 274):

‘What I wish to report is that some government forces have possibly murdered innocent people. This is what you are hearing from me. You as an archaeologist should believe in the truth of history.’

‘I believe in a society that has peace, Miss Tissera. What you are proposing could result in chaos. Why do you not investigate the killing of government officers?’ (AG: 275)

Here, once more, the representation of truth clashes with factual reality, the objective truth of history, on Anil’s side, and of truth as psychological reality, the truth of the living – of a “society that has peace”, as Sarath says. With this confrontation created by Sarath, concerned for Anil’s safety, she leaves the auditorium, as he gives her “officially” forty-eight hours to examine another “skeleton”, besides the one she was using for the presentation, to determine its age – another artifice of Sarath’s to get her out of the country.

As Sarath wheels these two skeletons to the ship’s lab, where Anil is to carry out the analysis, he “knew they would halt her at each corridor level, check her papers again and again to irritate and humiliate her. He knew she would be searched, vials and slides removed from her briefcase or pockets, made to undress and dress again”(AG: 277). And, if “since the death of his wife, Sarath had never found the old road back into the world ... now, this afternoon, he had returned to the intricacies of the public world, with its various truths. He had acted in such a light. He knew he would not

be forgiven that” (AG: 277-9). Sarath thus emphasizes, for the last time, the multiformity of the perceptions of truth/reality, which he was aware of and in whose light he has acted, not only in relation to Anil, but also in relation to himself, and, in a final intuition, – “He knew he would not be forgiven that.” – thereby foreseeing his own murder.

Anil’s trajectory in the novel nears its end with her arrival at the ship’s lab, where to her great surprise she finds the skeleton of Sailor together with a message from Sarath on her tape-recorder, insisting that she complete the report and be prepared to leave on a flight next morning. She will return to the reality of the West like the tired hero of American movies and English novels, mocked by Gamini on Galle Face Green, but with a difference. For her now the perception of the reality of civil war will probably not have ended, as she has delved too deeply in its bloody meanders and has become too involved with her fellow countrymen to forget it.

As Anil looks back on the talk she had with the brothers on Galle Face Green, and already looks ahead to her return to England,

If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life? Would she talk to intimates about them, the two Colombo brothers? And she in some way, like a sister between them, keeping them from mauling each other’s worlds? Wherever she might be, would she think of them? (AG: 285)

Her rhetorical questions will receive an answer in the last chapter of the novel, significantly entitled “Distance”, in terms of time as well as space, as it describes the destruction by thieves of a gigantic statue of the Buddha, in a field in Buduruvagala, and its later reconstruction. Ananda Udagama, the sculptor and painter chosen for this task, reflects as he climbs the bamboo steps to the height of the Buddha’s shoulders for the ceremony of the reconstitution of the eyes, wearing Sarath’s shirt – “the one he had promised himself he would wear for this morning’s ceremony”: “He and the woman Anil would always

carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena" (AG: 305). He thus recalls, in analepsis, Sarath's death – we are not told if Anil has heard of it after her return to England – and simultaneously confirms, in prolepsis, that he and Anil would continue to think about Sarath. The mention that both "would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena" thus takes us back to the novel's title, suggesting that not only will Sarath's ghost continue beside them both – as the specter of a dead person for Ananda and as the image offered to the spirit by an object for Anil – but also, especially for Anil, all the reality of the historical, political and cultural context in which he was inserted, as an archaeologist and as a sensitive man, with the knowledge of two worlds – the East and the West.

## Conclusion

Although we have only highlighted a few episodes in *Anil's Ghost* which exemplify the permutability and the interdependence of the representation and perception of the real, we have offered some reflections in relation to our initial aim.

In relation to the fragmentation of the narrative structure, we have seen that, even if "*Anil's Ghost* is a fragmented collation of narratives and, as its many strands of story slowly overlay one another, all its central characters become equally important, but their narratives can reach no clear conclusion" (Barbour 187), this "fragmented collation of narratives" and the inconclusiveness of the main characters are in the end *mimesis* itself – already defined as "creative imitation" of reality, producing "significant totalities from scattered happenings" (Compagnon 131). In other words, the collection of narratives in the text expresses Ondaatje's cosmovision. As Georg Lukács says, "every poetic structure is deeply determined, exactly in the compositional criteria which inspire it, by a certain way of conceiving the world" (77).

Consequently, if the writer "needs to see the world in its mobile contradictoriness, to select as protagonist a human being in whose destiny the contraries cross each other" (Lukács 78), we perceive how much Anil has her destiny crossed by perceptions which are opposed to her own – not only by Sarath and Gamini, but also

by other characters, in Sri Lanka and in the Western world. Thus, another of Lukács's considerations is exemplified: "the more a conception of the world is deep, differentiated, nourished by concrete experiences the more plurisurfaced its compositive expression can become" (77-78). For, in order to

express the human needs of his characters ... the great writer must observe life with an understanding that is neither limited to the description of its exterior surface nor limited to putting in relief ... social phenomena ...: he must catch the intimate relationship between social necessity and surface happenings, building a plot which should be a poetic synthesis of this relationship, its concentrated expression. (Lukács 90)

This poetic synthesis which a plot must offer, this intimate relationship between social necessity and surface events – so well expressed in the discussions about reality and truth among the three main characters – is what Ondaatje's novel manages to build, in the final analysis.

Therefore, if the confrontation of Anil's, Sarath's and Gamini's epistemic worlds exemplifies the permeability and interdependence of the philosophical concepts of correspondence and coherence in relation to the modalities of representation and perception of reality, we as critics have only to agree that these hypotheses allow us to broaden our analyses and interpretations of literary discourse. As Luiz Costa Lima claims, in "Realism and literature",

in the same way as dream may have as subject matter happenings of the day before or lost in the farthest away childhood, thus also literary discourse may have as scene a near or distant, an extraverbal or verbal, a cultural or literary reality. We characterize realistic expression as that in which the features [of] a near, extraverbal and cultural reality prevail. (1974: 43)

Still within this broad perspective – the second objective of our research – we are reminded of some of Walter Benjamin's considerations, so relevant for their inclusiveness to the hypotheses raised in our theoretical



minds in relation to the conception and perception of reality:

Criticism seeks the tenor of truth (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) in a work of art; commentary, its factual tenor (*Sachgehalt*). The relation between them determines that fundamental law of literary writing according to which the more significant the tenor of truth of a work is, the more unapparently and intimately will it be tied to its factual tenor. If, in consequence, the works that reveal themselves to be more lasting are precisely those whose truth is deeply embedded in its factual tenor, then the data of the real in the work present themselves, in the course of this time span, all the more clearly to the eyes of the beholder the more they become extinguished in the world.<sup>15</sup>

As Benjamin proceeds, further on,

For the poet, as well as for the public of his time, it is not exactly the existence, but, in truth, the meaning of the data of the real in the work which will always remain hidden. However, since the eternal of the work only stands out on the foundation of these data, all contemporary criticism, even if it is of the highest quality, comprises more the truth in movement than the truth in repose, more the temporal performance than the eternal being. (1922)

As contemporary critics, we could conclude that the perception of the different realities which are highlighted in Ondaatje's novel have "their tenor of truth" embedded in its "factual tenor", that is, in a truth in movement, within the temporal action of the novel as a chronicle of a country in which terror, fear and death prevail. The truth in repose, the eternal in the work, which stands out only on the foundation of these data, can only be suggested, within the confines of this paper, as a consideration of issues that go beyond any frontiers created by man – identity, fraternity and love for one's native country.

## Notes

1. References to the work and quotations will be presented as AG, followed by page numbers. Emphases in italics are mine.
2. Thus reminding us of *Running in the Family* (1982), Ondaatje's fictionalized memoir, dealing with his return to his native island of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), in the late 1970s.
3. In narratology, according to Reis & Lopes, *discourse* is generally defined as an autonomous domain in relation to *story*. With this conceptual distinction, one can methodologically differentiate two levels of analysis of the narrative text: the level of the narrated contents (*story*) and the level of the expression of these same contents (*discourse*), which, nevertheless, are correlated, and thus, maintain connections of interdependence (Reis & Lopes 29, emphasis in the original). My translation. *Ibidem* in relation to other quotations from this source.
4. As Ondaatje confirms at the beginning of his Acknowledgments, "I would like to thank the doctors and nurses, archaeologists, forensic anthropologists, and members of the human rights and civil rights organizations with whom I met in Sri Lanka and in other parts of the world. This novel could not have been written without their generosity and their knowledge and experience in archaeological sites, in hospitals of chaos and dedication in archives of terrible sadness" (AG:309).
5. Perlocutionary: which exerts an effect on the listener, such as "to persuade".
6. My translation.
7. Commenting on the vast critical reception of *Anil's Ghost* exceeds the scope of this work.
8. My translation. *Ibidem* in relation to other quotations from this source.
9. My translation. *Ibidem* in relation to other quotations from this source.
10. As a theoretical discussion of the term *mimesis* would exceed the scope of this article, we have limited our remarks to the scholars mentioned below.
11. My translation. *Ibidem* in relation to other quotations from this source.
12. To extend this theme to the other characters would go beyond the scope of this article.
13. As Reis & Lopes confirm, "the *meaning* of a word, of an expression, of a proposition, etc., does not exist 'in itself' (that is, in its transparent relation with the literality of the signifier), but is determined by the

ideological positions at stake in the social-historical process in which words, expressions and propositions are produced (that is, reproduced)" (Pêcheux qtd. in Reis & Lopes 28). My translation.

14. Old manor house near the airport of Colombo.

15. My translation. *Ibidem* in relation to other quotations from this source.

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