

HIS LEGEND A JUNGLE SLEEP

Michael Ondaatje and Henri Rousseau

Stephen Scobie

Having to put forward candidates for God
I nominate Henri Rousseau and Dr Bucke.

“The Vault”

THE CHOICE, FOR THIS EXALTED POSITION, of Richard Maurice Bucke (1837-1902), psychiatrist, intrepid wanderer in the Rocky Mountains, superintendent of the London insane asylum, author of *Cosmic Consciousness*, friend, pallbearer, and literary executor of Walt Whitman,¹ may come as something of a surprise to the reader of Michael Ondaatje’s poetry, for he is not, with this exception, a prominent figure in it. On the other hand, there is nothing at all surprising about the choice of the Douanier, “gentil Rousseau,” artiste-peintre, since Ondaatje’s fascination with him is visible throughout his poetry.

The Dainty Monsters contains one complete poem, “Henri Rousseau and Friends,” and Rousseau also turns up, appropriately enough, in the zoo poem “You Can Look But You Better Not Touch.” In *Rat Jelly*, the poem already quoted, “The Vault,” proceeds to a discussion of Rousseau’s last great painting, *The Dream*, a postcard of which is also to be found on the poet’s desk in “Burning Hills.” Earlier in the book, Ondaatje uses as the text for a found poem the famous letter “To Monsieur le Maire,” in which Rousseau, with his usual unsettling blend of naiveté and shrewdness, offers *The Sleeping Gypsy* for sale to the citizenry of Laval, the home-town which he shared with the author of *Ubu Roi*, Alfred Jarry.²

There is of course no mention (at least no direct mention: the presence may still be felt indirectly) of Henri Rousseau in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*: in 1881, the year of Billy’s death, Rousseau was still an obscure employee of the Paris octroi, who had not yet painted a picture. Only his apocryphal incarnation (in the legend fostered by Guillaume Apollinaire) has visited Billy’s part of the world, playing clarinet in Mexico for the army of the doomed Maximilian, whose ruined palace haunts the opening chapter of *Under the Volcano*.

Rousseau's entire life and work present a fascinating complex of paradoxes and contradictions. His genius was largely instinctive, yet he was a painstaking craftsman; unable to detect irony, he accepted praise and abuse alike as evidence of his own greatness; a committed admirer of the official, academic school of painting, he nevertheless exhibited with the most radical and anti-academic groups of painters, and may indeed have contributed to the naming of one of them: the Fauves. The kindest and most humanitarian of men, he was twice imprisoned for larceny. Personal anecdotes delight in exposing his naiveté, yet in many ways he was very shrewd — shrewd enough, even, to play up to his own naive image. Dora Vallier comments:

One day, in his lawyer's office, he made a telephone call. "Suddenly I heard him shouting," Maître Guilhermet tells us. "Surprised, I asked him why he was speaking so loudly, and he replied, 'The people I'm talking to are so far away.'" Rousseau was trying so hard to appear naive that he occasionally overacted the part. This was a form of self-defense, but the naiveté with which he approached the part made him seem much more naive than he really was — hence, the distorted image that those who knew him passed on to us. . . . On another occasion he was handed an invitation to a party being given by the President of the Republic [by friends as a joke]. When he came back, he told a long story: the guards had refused to admit him, he had insisted, and the President in person had come out and, patting him on the shoulder, said, "It's a pity, Rousseau, that you're in everyday clothes. You see, everybody is in evening dress. Come back some other time." But did he ever really go to the Elysée?

(Vallier, pp. 82-83.)

The Mexican legend is another case in point. Apollinaire, and most of Rousseau's friends in the last years of his life, may have been all too ready to believe in it because it provided a suitably exotic source for Rousseau's exotic pictures. "When questioned about this period in his life," Apollinaire's version runs, "he seemed to remember only the fruits which he had seen there, which the soldiers were forbidden to eat. But his eyes had preserved other memories: tropical forests, monkeys, and strange flowers. . . ." Historically, it appears certain that Rousseau did not go to Mexico: at best, he may have had the opportunity to talk to survivors of the expedition. The forbidden fruits, and the "tropical forests, monkeys, and strange flowers" actually had humbler, more domestic sources: the Jardin des Plantes, and the international displays from the Paris World's Fair of 1889.

But to some extent, Rousseau had to invent a past for himself. "A curious phenomenon occurred," writes Dora Vallier: "his painting provided him with the raw materials for a past. Since he excelled in exotic landscapes, his obscure years of military service became a fabulous journey to Mexico." Rousseau was forty years old before he began to paint, but from that time on he devoted himself to his art, and to his conviction (naive? shrewd? laughable? correct?) of his own greatness, with an intensity which blotted out and transformed almost everything

about his early years. His art became his life, and in the Mexican legend his life learned, in a Wildean manner, to imitate his art. Asked once if it was not uncomfortable to have to sleep in his cramped and crowded studio, Rousseau replied: "You know, when I wake up I can smile at my canvases."

In his life as in his work, Henri Rousseau was one of the most bizarre, and ultimately mysterious, of all artists. This alone might well account for Ondaatje's interest, for Ondaatje's own work shows a lively interest in the bizarre. What, for example, could be more like an Ondaatje narrative — the shifting of tone between absurdity and profundity of, say, "Letters & Other Worlds" — than the many stories which surround the famous Rousseau Banquet held in Picasso's studio at the Bateau Lavoire?

The banquet was held in November 1908, in honour of Picasso's acquisition of a Rousseau portrait, sold to him for five francs by a dealer who said that he might be able to make use of the canvas. In fact, it remained to the end of his life one of the treasured paintings in Picasso's personal collection. The gathering of those who came to honour this most unsophisticated of painters reads like a roll-call of the Parisian avant-garde: Pablo Picasso and Fernande Olivier; Georges Braque; Guillaume Apollinaire and Marie Laurencin; Gertrude Stein, Leo Stein, and Alice B. Toklas; Max Jacob, André Salmon, Maurice Raynal, and Maurice de Vlaminck. Picasso ordered the food for the wrong day but still had fifty bottles of wine; Apollinaire caught up on his correspondence and improvised a poetic tribute to Rousseau; André Salmon and Maurice Cretnitz chewed soap and foamed at the mouth in an elaborate impersonation of delirium tremens for the bemused benefit of the Americans. Gertrude Stein, writing of course in the person of Alice B. Toklas, records that "Guillaume Apollinaire solemnly approached myself and my friend and asked us to sing some of the native songs of the red indians. We did not either of us feel up to that to the great regret of Guillaume and all the company."

Throughout all this, Rousseau was seated on a makeshift throne consisting of a chair placed on top of a packing crate, directly beneath a lamp which "with remarkable regularity," according to Raynal, "let fall drops of burning wax on his head." Fernande Olivier's account perhaps improves on the story, but in its bizarre simplicity and juxtapositions it certainly reflects the centre of the Rousseau legend:

Rousseau was so happy that, throughout the evening, he received on his head drops of wax from a large lamp that hung above him, without finching. They ended by forming a small eminence on his head like a clown's hat which he kept right up to the moment when the lamp caught fire. He was made to believe that this was his final apotheosis. Afterwards he started to play a shirt piece on the violin which he had brought with him.

Gertrude Stein's version, however, shows that Rousseau was still assiduously propagating his own versions of legend: "Rousseau blissful and gentle played the violin and told us about the plays he had written and his memories of Mexico."

But it is not just this quality of the bizarre which accounts for Ondaatje's interest in Rousseau. They are in many ways very different artists — Ondaatje, obviously, works at a level of sophistication and self-consciousness entirely alien to Rousseau — but nevertheless there are areas of affinity between their works. I use the word "affinity" rather than "influence," because the latter would suggest too direct a causal relation. There are aspects of Rousseau's work towards which Ondaatje is drawn, but the poet does not treat them in the same way as the painter. This essay will explore two such areas of affinity: in each case, the use of Rousseau's paintings as an approach to Ondaatje's poems is not to be seen as limiting our understanding of the poems but as opening up possibilities, and showing how the self-conscious development of theme in Ondaatje inevitably raises questions which Rousseau's naiveté stops short of. It is, of course, the glory of Rousseau's work that he *does* stop short: it is the limitation of his imagination which produces those inimitable qualities which fascinate us still in the irreducible pictorial vision of the gentle toll-collector who never went to Mexico.

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... a postcard of Rousseau's *The Dream*.

"Burning Hills"

The Dream is a large painting (80½ by 117½"), depicting one of Rousseau's characteristic jungle scenes: thick foliage with spiked leaves in intricate crisscross patterns, exotic pink and blue flowers, oranges. One painter is reported to have counted more than fifty shades of green in the painting. An orange-breasted bird sits on a branch; an elephant hides in the undergrowth; two playfully drawn lions stare around them in a rather baffled manner; a large black snake with a pink belly glides towards a charmer playing his pipe. And plumped down in the middle of this, dominating the left side of the composition, is a large red couch with a naked woman reclining on it, stretching out her hand towards the scene.

The couch had long been in Rousseau's studio — all his friends recognized it — but its presence in this painting proved a sore trouble to the literal minded. Rousseau courteously and patiently explained it to the art critic André Dupont:

I am answering your kind letter immediately in order to explain to you the reason why the sofa in question is included. The woman sleeping on the sofa dreams that she is transported into the forest, hearing the music of the snake charmer's instrument. This explains why the sofa is in the picture. . . . I end this note by thanking you in advance for the article you will write about me. Please accept my best wishes, and a hearty and cordial handshake.

(To the poet André Salmon Rousseau gave a slightly different version: "The

sofa is there only because of its glowing, red colour.”) Attached to the frame of the painting was the following poem:

Yadwigha dans un beau rêve
 S'étant endormie doucement
 Entendait les sons d'une musette
 Dont jouait un charmeur bien pensant.
 Pendant que la lune reflète
 Sur les fleuves, les arbres verdoyants,
 Les fauves serpents prêtent l'oreille
 Aux air gais de l'instrument.

Yadwigha, peacefully asleep,
 Enjoys a lovely dream:
 She hears a kind snake charmer
 Playing upon his reed,
 On stream and foliage glisten
 The silvery beams of the moon;
 And savage serpents listen
 To the gay, entrancing tune.

(Vallier's translation.)

Describing the painting in “The Vault,” Ondaatje emphasizes the intimate connection between the dreaming lady and the landscape she has created for herself in her dream: she

has been animal and tree
 her breast a suckled orange.
 The fibres and fluids of their moral nature
 have escaped within her frame.

The hand is outstretched
 her fingers move out in
 mutual transfusion to the place.

The identity between the dreamer and the dreamed is complete, a “mutual transfusion” has taken place. The red sofa belongs in the imaginary jungle; the enchanter's pipe plays in the small studio on the Rue Perrel.

This, then, is the first area of affinity between Rousseau and Ondaatje: the coexistence, amounting to interpenetration, of a domestic scene and a jungle. Ondaatje's poetry reaches towards the kind of balance found in the visual composition of *The Dream*, but for him it is more difficult to attain. Rousseau's jungle is more exotic than violent; but for Ondaatje, violence is the essence of the jungle, and time after time it breaks through his poems with disturbing effect.

Not that violence is entirely absent from Rousseau's paintings, though in *The Dream* it is held in check: Yadwigha's dream is not a nightmare but “un beau rêve,” and the charmer is “bien pensant.” Similarly, with regard to *The Sleeping*

Gypsy, the letter to the Mayor of Laval insists that “A lion wanders by, detects her and doesn’t devour her.” Indeed, the absence of any footprints in the sand, in an otherwise meticulously realistic picture, has led some critics to suggest that *The Sleeping Gypsy* may also represent a dream. But in other Rousseau paintings, violence does erupt, as is shown by such titles as *The Jungle: Tiger Attacking a Buffalo*, *Tiger and Buffalo Fighting*, *Negro Attacked by a Jaguar*, *Horse Attacked by a Jaguar*, *Scouts Attacked by a Tiger*, *The Repast of the Lion* (a lion eating a jaguar), and the famous *Hungry Lion*, the painting which may have contributed to the naming of the Fauves, with its straight-faced commentary by Rousseau: “The hungry lion throws himself on the antelope and devours it; the panther waits anxiously for the moment when it too will have its share. Carnivorous birds have pecked out a piece of flesh from the back of the animal, which weeps. Sunset.”

The extraordinary understatement of these final words (like the “effect of moonlight, very poetic” in the description of *The Sleeping Gypsy*) may be deliberately ironic, or simply naive, on Rousseau’s part; Ondaatje’s use of this kind of comment is more clearly ironic, as in “Application for a Driving License”:

Two birds loved
in a flurry of red feathers
like a burst cottonball,
continuing while I drove over them.

I am a good driver, nothing shocks me.

The irony, and absence of shock, are constants in Ondaatje’s poetry, even if they do not always emerge quite as blatantly. Within the domestic scene, violence is always liable to erupt, and irony is frequently a way of dealing with the intensity of this perception.

The dog in “Biography” is “tacked to humility all day” by the children who are “unaware that she/ tore bulls apart, loosed/ heads of partridges,/ dreamt blood.” But if the children see only Yadwigha asleep on the familiar red couch, the poet sees also the jungle, the dreams of blood.

Such dreams intrude all the time: a summer badminton net becomes tangled with dragons, and “My mother while caressing camels/ had her left breast bitten off.” For Ondaatje, the problem is to achieve some sort of equilibrium, or “mutual transfusion.” It will not do simply to repress such knowledge — “In spite of this I’ve no objections/ to camels” — although this is undeniably what the social structure will attempt — “a vulture calmly resting at a traffic light/ would undoubtedly be shot, very messily,/ by the first policeman who spotted him.” Here again the ironic tone — the comic understatement of “I’ve no objections,” the more chilling understatement of “very messily” — is reminiscent of the distancing Rousseau achieves by his naive description.

Ondaatje's responses to the irruption of the violent into the domestic are rarely phrased as direct statements: at their best, the statement is indirect, controlled by tone, by what is not said. Often this emerges not as "un beau rêve" but as various kinds of nightmare: the tight hysteria of "War Machine," the surreal but savage humour of "Rat Jelly" itself. Occasionally the terms are reversed: "After shooting Gregory," Billy finds his carefully controlled world of violence disrupted by the intrusion of a *domestic* element, the chicken, which pushes the scene to a height of surreal horror before Ondaatje, reasserting the poet's control of tone if not Billy's control of death, dissolves the scene in laughter.

Most of these illustrations, both in Rousseau and in Ondaatje, have centred on the role of animals. Ondaatje's fascination with animals is too well known to require much comment: what is remarkable is the way that they retain their integrity and absolute identity *as animals* at the same time as they provide an almost continuous commentary on what is done in human society. From the dog's dream in "Biography" through to the terrifyingly detailed observation of the porcupine quills in "Dashiell,"³ the violence of the jungle is immanent in the most domestic of pets; the mad cracked eyes of Livingstone's mongrels are reflected in the one-eyed owls of Sallie Chisum's menagerie. Introducing his anthology of animal poems, *The Broken Ark*,⁴ Ondaatje wrote that he was not interested in pretty pictures of animals as pets, but rather that he wanted the reader to "imagine yourself pregnant and being chased and pounded to death by snow-mobiles." Ondaatje's vision reaches to levels of harsh reality which the Douanier's gentle exoticism never accounted for.

But if the violence is harsh, vivid, and uncomfortably convincing, the domestic scene is no less real. Rousseau's sofa, whose "glowing, red colour" provides the necessary visual counterbalance to the fifty greens of the jungle, was also the most familiar and affectionately regarded of the objects of his daily life. In *The Dream* it provides a fully adequate, and even humorous, image of the domestic security in which Yadwigha's dream is based. In the same way, Ondaatje's poetry is full of images which establish the warmth, reality and humour of the domestic scene. One such image, that of the Chisum ranch, is, as I have pointed out elsewhere,⁵ lovingly built up in direct contradiction to the acknowledged source material.

In *Rat Jelly*, the first section, "Families," is dominated by the evocation of that small circle — "wife kids dogs couple of friends" — which forms the necessary complement to the jungle of "Live Bait." It is often more difficult to present a convincing portrayal of happiness than of unhappiness; but Ondaatje is a master at this — as, indeed, is Rousseau. There is a skillful use of small details, observed with the most intimate affection, out of which the reader can reconstruct the fabric of a whole relationship:

I am writing this with a pen my wife has used
to write a letter to her first husband.

On it is the smell of her hair.
 She must have placed it down between sentences
 and thought, and driven her fingers round her skull
 gathered the slightest smell of her head
 and brought it back to the pen.

The centre of this section is the group of joke poems — “Notes for the Legend of Salad Woman,” “Postcard from Piccadilly Street,” “The Strange Case” — which are marvellous jokes but even better poems. Their humour is not there just for its own sake, but plays a functional role in establishing the tone and the credibility of the domestic image. If Rousseau smiled at his canvases, Ondaatje must surely smile at these poems.

The finest poems in this section, however, are those in which, as in *The Dream*, the red sofa is firmly set in the jungle. In “White Room,” the image of the woman’s body as “cool fruit” gives way to an image of her “stray bones” as “scattered fragments/ of a wrecked aircraft.” Ondaatje’s descent, “like helicopters onto the plain,” may be taken as the arrival of rescue helicopters at a crash site; but it also carries uncomfortable evocations of the Vietnamese television war. The final line, “within the angles of the room,” remains ambiguous: these angles may provide the security of a solid structure, but they are set harshly against the “collapse” of human “flesh.”

In “Letters & Other Worlds,” the domestic scene — again evoked by affectionate detail and the masterful narration of comic incident — becomes the scene for an intensely private struggle with an interior jungle. This is one of Ondaatje’s absolutely finest poems: the control of tone, as the poem moves from comedy to deeply moving simplicity, is breathtaking. It is one of Ondaatje’s fullest realizations of that “mutual transfusion” between the jungle and the sofa; but here, continuing the metaphor of blood, the transfusion is deadly: the “blood screaming in/ the empty reservoir of bones” so that “he died in minutes of a new equilibrium.”

“Equilibrium” is here a key word. (One is reminded again of Robert Kroetsch’s description of Canadians as “fascinated with problems of equilibrium.”⁶) As I mentioned earlier, the jungle dream cannot be repressed: a balance must be sought, and maintained in the control of the poems’ tone, whether it be ironic distance, surreal or affectionate humour, or the highly sophisticated manipulation of various tones in “Letters & Other Worlds.” At any rate, equilibrium is the task of the artist. Rousseau, not Yadwigha, is the real dreamer; and it is Ondaatje’s dream which must attempt to mediate between “Families” and “Live Bait.”

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Breavman loves the pictures of Henri Rousseau,
 the way he stops time.

Leonard Cohen, *The Favourite Game*.⁷

Rousseau always had trouble with feet. One of the points of technique that the naive self-taught painter never mastered was the natural perspective by which feet appear to be placed squarely and firmly on the ground. Frequently, Rousseau avoids this problem by hiding the feet behind low vegetation; but when he cannot do this, the deficiency is obvious — as, most obviously, in his famous *Myself: Portrait-Landscape* (note, in passing, the similarity in title to Klein's great poem), in which he seems to be standing on tip-toe on the banks of the Seine, or else gently floating, like a ghost oblivious to land subsidence, a few inches off the ground. Although Rousseau was very concerned with the interaction between a figure and its setting, and was proud of having "invented" the genre of "Portrait-Landscape," in most of his portraits there is a curious dislocation between figure and ground. Rousseau's people all seem to float in space, cut off from its normal continuum. One consequence of this is that they are also dislocated in time.

Rousseau's technique is an extraordinary combination of primitive, child-like naivety in the modelling, and high polish and exactness in the finish. The effect is to give his own awkwardnesses in space and time a very precise, fixed quality. He was capable of painting swift impromptu sketches of a scene which in manner and execution would stand with the best of the Impressionists; yet these were always painstakingly transformed into the precisions of his own style, all the rough edges made hard, all the sweeps of colour clarified to exact forms. Curiously, the eye accustomed to Monet sees these sketches as far more "realistic," at least in their sense of perspective and illusion of depth, than the finished works. Compare, for example, the sketch and the final version of *Path in Parc Montsouris* (Vallier, plates 60, 61). This is what lies behind Rousseau's famous comment on the Cézanne exhibition of 1907: "You know, I could finish all these pictures."

A good example of this aspect of Rousseau is *The Football Players*. Four men with identical moustaches are playing football (rugger) in a neat little field framed by trees whose trunks seem to rest on the ground like stage-props rather than grow out of it. The men's positions are drawn as if they had been frozen in the middle of a rather jolly ballet; their feet, of course, have no solid connection with the ground on which they supposedly stand. One man is about to catch the ball, which hangs suspended in the air above him, surrounded by a haze in which the leaves of the background trees are less precisely drawn than anywhere else in the painting. Rather than watching the ball which he is trying to catch (and probably therefore won't!) this man — like all the four-square, straight-on faces in Rousseau's portraits — stares directly out at the viewer. The effect is, totally, one of suspension.* The players stand as awkwardly in the temporal continuum as they do in the spatial. The eyes staring straight at the viewer induce an intense awareness of the artificiality of the situation: they stare out of the canvas and out

* Shattuck writes: "The figures move . . . in total stillness. . . . They appear to have no location, to float in air" (*The Banquet Years*, p. 95).

of time, out of the whole temporal-spatial situation of Henri Rousseau in 1908 into the timelessness of art.

This approach — through the naiveté of the technique, seeing the paintings' temporal dislocation as the result of their naive handling of space — is, I believe, the most profitable way of understanding that quality in Rousseau which Leonard Cohen eulogizes in the first section of Book II of the *The Favourite Game*. Cohen, however, approaches it entirely through subject-matter:

Always is the word that must be used. The lion will always be sniffing the robes of the sleeping gypsy, there will be no attack, no guts on the sand: The total encounter is expressed. The moon, even though it is doomed to travel, will never go down on this scene. The abandoned lute does not cry for fingers. It is swollen with all the music it needs.

(*The Favourite Game*, p. 58.)

This sounds very much like Keats addressing his Grecian Urn, and indeed, when the young Breavman is being lionized (excuse the pun) by literary Montreal Cohen comments that "Canadians are desperate for a Keats" (*The Favourite Game*, p. 101). One of Breavman's obsessions, throughout the book, is with the stopping of time — most notably in the midnight car-ride with Krantz — and this is associated with the vision he has in the brass foundry, of the "liquid metal" which was "the colour gold should be. . . . The arch of liquid came to represent an intensity he would never achieve" (*The Favourite Game*, pp. 104-6.)

This is an aspect of *The Favourite Game* which Michael Ondaatje does not deal with in his book on Leonard Cohen. He does comment, briefly, on Cohen's reference to the other Rousseau, Jean-Jacques,⁸ but there is nothing at all about Henri. This is very curious, considering Ondaatje's interest in Rousseau, and considering that this whole theme of "the way he stops time" is as central to Ondaatje as it is to Cohen. In his poetry, Ondaatje does pick up the associated image of the arch of liquid metal:

To learn to pour the exact arc
of steel still soft and crazy
before it hits the page.

("Taking")

The obsession with fixing moving things in time is most clearly announced in the opening of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*: under the empty frame of the "picture of Billy" is the quotation from L. A. Huffman describing the progress made in photographing moving objects: "I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire — bits of snow in the air — spokes well defined — some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main — men walking are no trick." This states, at the outset, one of the main themes of the book: *fixing* the

image of Billy, a character constantly in motion both literally (the finger exercises) and ontologically (as his image shifts between historical fact, legendary accretion, and the creations of Ondaatje's personal imagination). I have already discussed⁹ the differences between Ondaatje's fixing of Billy in legend, and bp Nichol's evocation of Billy as rumour: here it should be noted that Ondaatje's Billy, while constantly in motion, can in fact be frozen, as in Huffman's photographs (or Rousseau's paintings), to a much greater extent than Nichol's can.

This concern is also present in the early poems of *The Dainty Monsters*, and interestingly, it is directly associated with Rousseau. In the zoo poem, "You Can Look But You Better Not Touch," Ondaatje comments:

ROUSSEAU wisely eliminated
leopards from his follies
A mistake to imagine them static

The leopard is too much a creature of movement, Ondaatje says, to be frozen into the static image of Rousseau's paintings, and Rousseau was wise to recognize this. (In fact, Rousseau managed to incorporate lions, tigers, and jaguars, so there seems no reason why he couldn't have included leopards as well: but the interesting point is Ondaatje's insistence on the static nature of Rousseau's art.)

The motif is associated with all of Ondaatje's major themes. In "The Sows," the "immobile" animals "categorize the flux around them." In "The Time Around Scars," one of the results of the sudden eruption of violence into a domestic scene is to "freeze irrelevant emotions/ and divide us from our present friends." The task of the artist in "Four Eyes" is to "freeze this moment . . . and in immobilized time/ attempt to reconstruct." He can do this, in "The Respect of Landscape," only by "translating" himself and "taking the egoism" of birds, "becoming like them the centre."

In *Rat Jelly*, the idea is most thoroughly explored in "The gate in his head," a poem written for Victor Coleman. The poem celebrates the beauty of things in motion: "not clarity but the sense of shift." A book left in a fishbowl opens "like some sea animal/ camouflaging itself," and the "clarity" of the typeface letters acquires a new beauty, "going slow blonde in the sun full water." Ondaatje sees his own mind as "pouring chaos . . . onto the page," in the same way as the liquid metal is poured. But these movements/ moments are also caught and fixed in time: the chaos is poured "in nets." Coleman provides the climactic image with "a blurred photograph of a gull . . . The stunning white bird/ an unclear stir." Again, this is a "Caught vision," and the same word is repeated in the final stanza:

And that is all this writing should be then,
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
so they are shapeless, awkward
moving to the clear.

This is, in another form, the “equilibrium” which I spoke of earlier. The balance to be struck here is between the essential beauty of movement, the “sense of shift,” and the artist’s “catching” of that movement. The resulting image is simultaneously a fixed moment abstracted from time, and a moment which implies and contains the continued “moving to the clear.” It is a clear, unmoving image of a blurred movement towards clarity.

This kind of paradox is also implicit in Ondaatje’s portrait of Wallace Stevens writing:

his head making his hand
 move where he wanted
 and he saw his hand was saying
 the mind is never finished, no, never

(“Dates”)

Stevens creates a clarity, a fixed moment under his control, which immediately and uncontrollably generates a further movement towards a further clarity. Another poem says that Stevens “is thinking chaos is thinking fences” (“King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens”). The lack of punctuation equates the two activities, runs them together into one; it could also be read that what Stevens is thinking is that “chaos is thinking fences,” and in a circle, fences are thinking chaos. The artist performs these impossibilities; under Stevens’ hand, the page is “becoming thought where nothing had been,” just as the spider-poet “thinks a path and travels/ the emptiness that was there” (Spider Blues”).

The effect is always to stop time: in “Taking,” Ondaatje speaks of how he has “stroked the mood and tone/ of hundred year dead men and women,” and thus, for himself “removed them from historical traffic.” It could be said of all Ondaatje’s images, and also for the figures in Rousseau’s paintings, that “Their idea of the immaculate moment is now.”

There is a distinction to be made, however, here as always, between the poems and the poet. The poems may aspire towards the timelessness of the sleeping gypsy, the Grecian urn, or the blurred white bird; but the poet is still caught in flux and change, and so is the reader. Art may achieve moments of equilibrium, but these cannot be entered into by the artist or the spectator: the experience of them must pass. Ondaatje’s description of *The Dream* suggests that this is anticipated even within the painting itself. The reason that Yadwigha “looks to her left” is that “that is the direction we leave in/ when we fall from her room of flowers.” (This is, incidentally, factually correct for the present hanging of the painting in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.) Time is stopped in the “room of flowers,” but both artist and spectator must sooner or later “fall” out of it.

The perfect moments when the intensity of “the exact arc” is achieved may

go some way towards mediating between "Families" and "Live Bait," but they cannot go all the way. Rousseau died in despair when the petite bourgeoisie Léonie refused to become Yadwigha for him, even when Robert Delaunay pleaded with her to visit the painter's deathbed. The artist does not escape from the destructive movement of time: indeed, he may feel called upon to immerse himself in it.

The Huffman quotation which sets out the image of caught movement in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* closes by insisting that "many of the best [were] exposed when my horse was in motion," in other words, when the artist himself partook of the nature of the subject. The relationship between Ondaatje and his persona in this book is a very complex one: although Ondaatje has to stand back at times in his familiar ironic pose, he cannot totally separate himself from the outlaw personality. Ondaatje as artist moves towards Billy as outlaw, and vice versa. It is Billy himself who stops time to replay the scene preceding his death which "I would have seen if I was on the roof looking," and who prolongs the moment of death itself with "the bullet itch frozen in my head." When the blank frame is finally filled, it is not with a photograph of Billy, but with one of Michael Ondaatje.

The image of the artist projected in many of the poems in the "White Dwarfs" section of *Rat Jelly* is a self-destructive one: the herons who find "ways of going/ physically mad" ("Heron Rex"), those who commit "Our suicide into nature" as insects eat the brain ("Near Elginburg"), the unwinding body from Vaughn-James' *The Projector* which "will be consumed before ever reaching the ground," Icarus "fished . . . from this Quebec river" ("Fabulous shadow"), and above all the "heroes" of "White Dwarfs" itself. "White Dwarfs" is a hymn to self-destruction, to those who are — returning for a moment to the terminology of Leonard Cohen — beautiful losers. The artists are "those who disappear," those who "die in the ether peripheries," the outcasts who "sail to that perfect edge/ where there is no social fuel." The artists can "understand their altitude" only by the "Release of sandbags" to take them higher from the ground. The artist moves into silence: the lonely "silence of the third cross," the silence of mules with their tongues cut out, the silence of the "perfect white between the words." Participating in the very movement which their art cancels, immersing themselves in the destructive element which their words have transcended, they become like stars gone nova, collapsing in on themselves, imploding into that silence which Eliot proclaimed words could reach into, "beyond speech."

Ondaatje understands this type of self-destructive artist, or beautiful loser (as is shown, in fact, by his interest in Cohen); but he is not himself one of them. Neither indeed was Rousseau, and though Ondaatje's main poem on a Rousseau painting ("The Vault") is included in the "White Dwarfs" section of *Rat Jelly*, his major poem about Rousseau's personality ("To Monsieur le Maire") is not.

Rousseau is live bait rather than white dwarf, at least in the pathetically vulnerable naiveté which the letter displays. But if we remember that Rousseau's naiveté may well have been fully as calculated as it was genuine, and if we note that the price that Rousseau asks for his painting in this "naive" letter is considerably higher than any he had up till that time been paid, the same letter may be seen as demonstrating an intelligence and ironic control of tone not too far removed from Ondaatje's. When Ondaatje uses the Rousseau text as a "found poem," it is hard to tell which of them has the last laugh.

There is a clear distinction, then, between the misery of Rousseau's last days, which he certainly did not seek to bring upon himself, and the obsessive self-destruction of his friend, sponsor, and fellow townsman of Laval, Alfred Jarry. Having created the monstrous role of Ubu in his work, Jarry came to adopt it in his life to such an extent that he broke down all barriers between the two. The result was what Roger Shattuck calls "Suicide by hallucination": Jarry died at the age of 34, becoming in the most literal sense one of those who "die in the ether peripheries." In *The Banquet Years* (the book which Ondaatje acknowledges as his source for Rousseau's letter), Shattuck writes:

The willfulness with which [Jarry] kept himself saturated with ether was no longer a form of drinking or alcoholism; he was simply killing himself. . . . One of his last writings, a chapter called "*Descendit ad infernos*" intended for *La dragonne*, contains this visionary description of the hero's approaching death: "But soon he could drink no more, for there was no more darkness for him and, no doubt like Adam before the fall . . . he could see in the dark."

(*The Banquet Years*, p. 221.)

These are of course the lines which Ondaatje uses, without identifying their source, as the epigraph to "Letters & Other Worlds"; the source adds yet another dimension to this rich and complex poem. Ondaatje's father, in the terrible isolation of the room where he "stayed . . . until he was drunk/ and until he was sober," is also the artist immersed in self-destruction, yet "moving to the clear." His tragedy is the failure of equilibrium: he "balanced and fell," so that in death he is only human, "without metaphor." For him as for Jarry, the self-destruction of alcohol provided a new vision; but unlike Jarry, what he created — the "gentle letters . . . of the most complete empathy" — were expressions of love rather than of contempt. When Jarry died, he became completely Ubu; when Ondaatje's father died, he became completely himself.

"White Dwarfs," then, despite its climactic position in the book, does not seem to me to be Ondaatje's ultimate word on the nature of the artist. Rousseau and not Jarry must continue to serve as the paradigm: Rousseau who stops time, not Jarry who is destroyed by it. The maintaining of equilibrium is a matter of control, and Ondaatje is himself, always, a highly controlled artist. He is of course aware of the dangers of control, as "Spider Blues" shows — "Spiders like poets are

obsessed with power” — but this does not mean that he will endorse the surrender of control, the dissolution of personality, as completely as Cohen does in *Beautiful Losers*. The poet in “Burning Hills,” who has the Rousseau postcard on his desk, and who prizes “one picture that fuses . . . 5 summers,” is described in the final lines of the poem as writing “slowly and carefully/ with great love and great coldness.” It is precisely *that* equilibrium which Ondaatje at his best — as in “Letters & Other Worlds” — so triumphantly displays.

So perhaps a more profound statement is to be found not in the last poem of the “White Dwarfs” section but in the first: “We’re at the Graveyard.” It is a moment frozen in time, a moment of that small circle of friends — “Stuart Sally Kim and I” — preserved against the unfriendly world. Above their heads there are both mobility and immobility, together — “still stars . . . sliding stars” — which form “clear charts,” a “geometry of moving.” The stars provide an “intricate” form within which movement and clarity coexist; this form is paralleled “down here” by “friends/ whose minds and bodies/ shift like acrobats to each other.” Only the presence of such friends can give expression to the clarities of the stars — “When we leave, they move/ to an altitude of silence” — but the human limitations of these friends are clearly if unobtrusively indicated by the graveyard setting. At the same time, Sally is pregnant.

(If this poem is reminiscent of any Rousseau painting, it is *Un Soir de Carnaval*, with the lucid ordering of its night sky, the clown’s/ acrobat’s costume, and the mysterious pale mask hung on the wall.)

The human function, which *is* here the artistic function, is as always to give form, to exercise control, to maintain equilibrium, to “shape/ and lock the transient.” The image used here is that of “bats/ who organize the air/ with thick blinks of travel” — like the spider poet who “thinks a path and travels/ the emptiness that was there,” like Wallace Stevens’ page “becoming thought where nothing had been.” In the closing lines, Ondaatje offers another such image, a shape to lock the transient. Insofar as it achieves this, it is certainly fashioned with “great coldness” and control on his part; but it is also, just as certainly, fashioned like his father’s letters, “with great love”:

Sally is like grey snow in the grass.
Sally of the beautiful bones
pregnant below stars.

NOTES

¹ This information is derived from the article on Bucke by Robert W. Cumberland in *A Standard Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, ed. Charles G. D. Roberts and Arthur L. Tunnell, Toronto, 1934.

² The best short biography of Henri Rousseau is to be found in the book which Ondaatje acknowledges as his source: Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, first

published 1958, Vintage edition 1968. The most useful full length study is Dora Vallier, *Henri Rousseau* (Abrams, 1960.) Most of the biographical information in this essay is derived from these two sources.

- ³ Michael Ondaatje, "Dashiell," *Canadian Forum* (March 1975), 26.
- ⁴ Michael Ondaatje, ed., *The Broken Ark: a book of beasts*. Ottawa: Oberon, 1971.
- ⁵ "Two Authors in Search of a Character: Michael Ondaatje, bp Nichol, and Billy the Kid," first published in *Canadian Literature* no. 54, and reprinted in George Woodcock's anthology *Poets and Critics* (Toronto: Oxford, 1974).
- ⁶ Kroetsch makes this comment in Donald Cameron's *Conversations With Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), Vol. I, p. 85.
- ⁷ Leonard Cohen, *The Favourite Game* (Toronto: New Canadian Library, 1970), p. 58.
- ⁸ Cohen, p. 33; Michael Ondaatje, *Leonard Cohen* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), p. 34.
- ⁹ See footnote 5, above.

BUCK LAKE STORE AUCTION

Michael Ondaatje

Scrub lawn.

A chained
dog tense and smelling.
The outhouse.
50 cents for a mattress. 50 cents
for doors that allowed privacy.
What else can you sell?

A rain
swollen copy of Jack London
a magazine drawing of a rabbit
bordered with finishing nails.
6 chickens, bird cage (empty),
sauerkraut cutting board

down to the rock

trees