CHAPTER SEVEN

IMAGES OF IDENTITY AND THE IDENTITY OF IMAGES

[The following scene takes place in Sri Lanka (Ceylon).]
There is a ceremony to prepare the artificer during the night before he
paints. You realize, he is brought in only to paint the eyes on the Buddha
image. The eyes must be painted in the morning, at five. The hour the
Buddha attained enlightenment. The ceremonies therefore begin the
night before, with recitations and decorations in the temples.

Without the eyes there is not just blindness, there is nothing. There
is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence.
Later he will be honored with gifts. Lands or oxen. He enters the temple
doors. He is dressed like a prince, with jewellery, a sword at his waist,
lace over his head. He moves forward accompanied by a second man,
who carries brushes, black paint and a metal mirror.

He climbs a ladder in front of the statue. The man with him climbs
too. This has taken place for centuries, you realize, there are records of
this since the ninth century. The painter dips a brush into the paint and
turns his back to the statue, so it looks as if he is about to be enfolded in
the great arms. The paint is wet on the brush. The other man, facing him,
holds up the mirror, and the artificer puts the brush over his shoulder
and paints in the eyes without looking directly at the face. He uses
just the reflection to guide him—so only the mirror receives the direct
image of the glance being created. No human eye can meet the Buddha’s
during the process of creation . . . . He never looks at the eyes directly. He
can only see the gaze in the mirror.

Michael Ondaatje, Anil’s Ghost

Images and the Senses: From Gregory the Great to Guillaume Durand

In 600, Gregory the Great (d. 604) wrote to the iconoclastic bishop
of Marseille, Serenus, that images (picturae) in churches allow those
who do not know letters (litteras) to learn something of sacred history
(historia) by seeing (visione) and reading (lectione) on the walls what
they are unable to grasp in written texts. In his letter, Gregory gave
much evidence of his belief in the supremacy of the written word over
the painted image. He repeatedly cast the non-literate as ignorant
simpletons (ignorantes, idiotae) and virtual pagans (gentes). Though
recognizing the image to be functionally analogous to script when the
capacity for reading Scripture was wanting, he nevertheless denied
concrete images any of the sacrality that imbued the Bible. He held that the contemplation of religious images might lead to the adoration of God, but that the power to do so was not inherent in the image itself. For Gregory, the effect of an image was limited by what corporeal vision could offer, a mere sensual grasp of material forms. It was the historia painted upon religious images, it was the vision of sacred history (visio historiae, visio rei gestae) which engaged spiritual seeing and feelings (ardor compunctionis), and led to proper adoration, that of the Triune God.1

When early eight-century Byzantine iconoclasm radicalized the ongoing debates surrounding the place of icons in Christian worship, the council of II Nicaea, in 787, proceeded to justify the cultic use of images. A Latin mistranslation from the Greek counciliar acta led Frankish scholars to believe that the Byzantines had condoned the adoration of images. On the basis of this misunderstanding, the Franks found themselves in a tricky situation. Following the tradition laid down by Gregory the Great, they had to accept images, even while