

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S REINVENTION OF SOCIAL
AND CULTURAL MYTHS: *IN THE SKIN OF A LION*

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From the beginning of his writing career in the early sixties until the recent publication of *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), the Canada of Michael Ondaatje had represented one thing: a geographical locale which he has selected as his home but which, fundamentally, had failed to engage his imagination. The fictional worlds he created in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family*, has been located outside of Canada, each corresponding to an actual place complete with historical and geographical references. For this very reason it has been impossible — as Sam Solecki noted in his introduction to *Spider Blues*, a collection of reviews and essays on Ondaatje — to place this anomalous literary presence in Canada within »a specifically Canadian tradition of writing...«, a tradition that would »include and see relationships among figures as different as Roberts, Pratt, F. R. Scott, Purdy and Atwood...« Ondaatje's »characters, landscapes, stories and themes resist any taxonomies based on overtly Canadian thematics.« In fact, Solecki further suggested that Ondaatje, like »V. S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott and Salmon Rushdie..., compels a rethinking of the notion of a national tradition.«¹ Similarly, another critic from the same collection described Ondaatje's position in the context of Canadian writing as unique — a position according to which »language or audience or the identity and the role of the poet are indeterminate.« For example, he elaborated:

Canada offers Ondaatje a geography, but no inheritance; Sri Lanka offers him a family story, but no tradition, no way of passing things on; the English language offers him both an inheritance and a history, but no time and place.²

However, with the appearance of *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje's relationship with Canada underwent a radical change; a change that necessitates our reviewing the above definitions. With this new novel, the Canadian geography that had been peripheral to Ondaatje's literary activity no longer remained a mere ground with no signs upon it — it was transformed into a map that offers a historical depth of field. Ondaatje's Canada has become a place invested with inheritance; it has emerged, like the novel

¹ Sam Solecki, »Introduction«, *Spider Blues*, p. 7.

² J. E. Chamberlin, »Let There Be Commerce Between Us: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje,« in *Spider Blues*, p. 31.

and like the novel's main character, Patrick Lewis, from a nameless landscape. Lewis, who is described at the beginning of the novel as someone »born into a region which did not appear on a map until 1910,« is metamorphosed by its end into a character who becomes involved with, and a witness to that history which Ondaatje had named *In The Skin of a Lion*. As Patrick re-claims his past, fragment by fragment, the nameless world of his birth and childhood emerge into presence. He can now tell its story and assume the role of a link between the presence of the past and the memory of the future. And, eventually, he will deposit this story into the custody of Hanna — the young woman whose mother, a political activist tragically killed, had been Patrick's consciousness and great love. Through the act of telling the story to Hanna, Patrick, in effect, himself inherits both a place and a future. In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje has come nearer to those Canadian writers who, like Margaret Laurence, Robert Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe and Jack Hodgins, dug into the local soil in order to unearth either private or tribal memories.

Throughout his writing career, Ondaatje has been consistently inspired by subjects from the past. In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Coming Through Slaughter* he selected two historical personalities, Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, one notorious and the other rather obscure, however both 'betrayed' by history. Billy the Kid, for example, had fossilized into a cliché of a blood-thirsty monster, unable to escape the imprisonment of the legend. Buddy Bolden, on the other hand, had been by-passed by history. He languished in a different kind of imprisonment — one comprising a few fragmentary documents and a number of memories. The act of re-imagining the historical foundations of these two characters led Ondaatje to the creation of alternative stories in which Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden were fleshed-out within a fictional reality different from the one to which legend had assigned them. It must be added here, however, that Ondaatje's creation of an alternative point of view was not motivated by his desire to unearth the truth about his characters or to render them historically accurate. He was less concerned, as he has stated in an interview, about whether his work is »physically and biographically right or wrong« than about its »emotional and psychological rightness.«³

As a consequence, the worlds in which Ondaatje's Billy and Buddy operate are situated somewhere on the borderline between fact and fiction. They are re-imagined realities in which the author himself plays an important role. In addition to being one who puts all the elements of the story together, he also enters the story as a character, thus deliberately obscuring the distinction between life and art. The main function of such 'transgression' on the part of the author is to reveal the process that orders and shapes all the disparate fragments of the story and that forms them into a continuous narrative. The author outside the narrative is someone who sifts through documents, re-imagines places, orders lives into relationships, re-structures myths and, in general, writes stories by means of selecting and interpreting. The narrator in the story is his surrogate, who often shows how these things are being executed.

Another important feature of Ondaatje's fiction-making seen in these works as well as *In the Skin of a Lion*, is the relationship between the author/narrator and the past. How does an author treat the historical material he chooses to use for his writing? According to Ondaatje, it should

be treated as fiction, rather than as something reliable. In this, he follows a post-modernist tendency in which the writing of history and fictional narrative stem from the same creative act. Historical texts are thus identified with poetic constructs since both involve the process of selection, interpretation and organization of material. Consequently, history is perceived as an unstable commodity that must be subjected to continual re-evaluation. Based on this assumption, Ondaatje's treatment of historical material in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, was, for example, governed by an iconoclastic attitude towards accepted social and cultural myths that crystallized around the person of Billy and were perpetuated through the so-called 'official' or, for that matter, 'popular' histories. Fundamentally, works like *Billy the Kid* scrutinize society's tendency to fix its heroic, legendary or pop figures into a unified and linear vision of the past. They also disclose to the reader subjective views from which, for the most part, histories are constructed. Ultimately, they expose the arbitrary nature of all historical writing which aspires towards veracity and seeks to tell the truth.

Unlike in his creation of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, in which Ondaatje had to work against a massive compilation of existing historical and apocryphal material, in writing *Coming Through Slaughter* he was confronted with the silence that surrounded the life of Bolden. The story of the real, historical Bolden — the great turn-of-the-century jazz musician from New Orleans — had its source in a few fragmentary documents and in interviews the author conducted with those who still remembered him. With the help of apocryphal material, however, the story of Bolden evolved into a complex portrait of the artist. Invented songs, quotations, personal references, together with real names and characters depicted in their historical situations, were all used by Ondaatje for the purpose of inventing and exploring the inner life of his character. Like in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, in *Coming Through Slaughter* he inserted himself into the fictional world of his hero. Such crossing of boundaries suggested the similarities in Bolden's and his own perception of art. The free character of jazz, its flexible form based on improvisation — »He would be describing something in 27 ways . . .«, Ondaatje said of Bolden — served as a metaphor for the open-endedness of his own fiction. The same idea is also suggested in a sentence borrowed from John Berger with which Ondaatje prefixed *In the Skin of a Lion*: »Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.« By extension, these thoughts can be seen as Ondaatje's comment on the limitless possibilities for historical interpretation.

In another novel, *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje continued to explore the fictional nature of history, only this time it was a journey into the personal past. The portrait of the family, built around the image of the father, emerged from a conjunction of personal memories of the author and those of his family with historical facts selected from documents. Through the process of ordering the chaos of historical and invented material and of placing it into a new verbal structure, Ondaatje created a history of his origin. The novel's open-endedness, its 'unfinished' quality, suggests the impossibility of anyone's really knowing the past. To this

³ Linda Hutcheon, »Running in the Family; The Postmodernist Challenge,« in *SP*, p. 300.

effect, Ondaatje leaves off the thread of his family history at the point at which the narrator, not without a sense of wonder, concludes that »there is so much to know and we can only guess.«⁴

In the Skin of a Lion is Ondaatje's latest attempt to recover, through the process of fictional re-creation, a fragment of a »lost history« of the place in which he now lives. The locale and the context are Canadian, more precisely those of Toronto and its surroundings. The period described is defined by the two World Wars. The theme concerns the articulation of the city's social history, both on the level of the characters who dreamt the city into existence, and on the level of the narrator who gathered and forged those dreams into a story. The characters themselves are, however, either historical or invented — the historical ones are released from the one-dimensionality of the document, and the invented ones are located within the temporal and spatial framework.

The story of Patrick Lewis, the novel's principal character follows the spiritual transformation of a young man who has detached himself from the nameless or »unbetrayed« landscape of Southern Ontario and who becomes, after a series of adventures, absorbed with and by the city's social history. His struggle for survival in an alien urban landscape is carried out on two levels — physiological and psychological. In addition to having to fight for a meagre existence reserved for underdogs, Patrick is confronted with a profound spiritual estrangement. The city of Toronto is for him an alien organism he can not grasp. It offers him no comfort of the familiar — at least, not at the beginning. Names of streets, public buildings and people have to be gradually de-codified and then transformed into the subtext of his personal history. From the rural world in which people define themselves as either farmers or loggers, Patrick crosses into the world of Toronto's complex social structure which at that time — the Depression era — is strained and in a state of some major readjustment. There is the gap between the rich and the poor which seems to be unbridgeable and getting wider. The nameless masses of immigrants from Europe are joining the ranks of the impoverished Anglo-Saxons. Responding to the appalling working conditions, union activists begin to urge workers to organize for a fight against merciless capitalism. It is within this volatile political and social theater that Ondaatje situates his protagonist; a theater in which Patrick will have to come to understand his own role and to know how to align it with those of the other 'actors'.

The south-east end of Toronto, where Patrick settles in the twenties, plays an essential part in the formation of his spiritual and social awareness. It is while living here that he descends into the demonic world of great suffering — loss of identity, mental confusion and physical hardship. With an elusive past — a past he will be able to name only much later in his life — he finds himself in an equally elusive present. Cast among immigrants — the east end of Toronto at the time was predominately Macedonian, Bulgarian and Greek — Patrick lives in a linguistic and cultural exile. Among these strangers, he confesses, he feels, »deliriously anonymous«. However, unlike them, he also feels to be a foreigner in his own country. The irony of his position is even further enhanced by the perception of him as an oddity by this minority group — a group that is itself an odd entity in the

⁴ Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, p. 200.

Canadian context. If these people, these Macedonians and Bulgarians — whose language, customs and history he does not understand — are his only mirror, what sort of a reflection of himself will he see? Being a person who lacks a cultural context, his view of himself will be grossly distorted.

However, Patrick gradually comes to familiarize himself with his neighbourhood — first through sounds, smells and colours, and later through relationships. He shares with these immigrants an indescribable hardship at work; he feels as they do, the humiliation of daily being de-humanized simply because he has to earn a living. But Patrick is also, as he will understand later when he begins to articulate his story, an observer of and a witness to an important segment of Toronto's social history. He will tell their story — a story of those who have worked in dyers' yards and on the killing-floors, surrounded by foul smells, dead animals, excrement, unprotected from chemicals and cold weather, and who will eventually die of consumption. The labour of these people, who were anonymous like the builders of medieval cathedrals, helped the city shape itself into existence. *In the Skin of a Lion* gives them the dignity of history.

In counterpoint to the nameless, Ondaatje presents the story of the visionaries who, like Rowland Harris, Toronto's commissioner of public works, gave the city two of its great public objects. He is seen as the great choreographer of matter and of human life. His obsession with the buildings he had dreamt depends upon those nameless, invisible participants, whose destiny and whose silent rapport with the history of the city are conceived, as the narrator described, in »the foresection of the cortex, in the small world of Rowland Harris' dream«. ⁵ However, it is ultimately Patrick's own story that will contain both the dreamer and the dreamt.

As Patrick becomes involved, first unconsciously and later consciously, with the nameless, with those he knows only »on this side of language«, his desire to unearth the secrets of his past grows in intensity. Thus, the other main theme in the novel is that of a person who becomes obsessed with the possibilities of other peoples' unexamined lives and attempts to flesh them out. A photograph that had been taken of a group of men working on the Bloor Street Viaduct, one of the grand edifices envisioned by Commissioner Harris, leads Patrick to trace their individual histories. In that photograph, their lives were abstracted into a single pose that suggested their association with the construction of the bridge, but offered no insight into their lives as though they had neither a past nor a future outside of that moment. However, Patrick never believes that characters, »like in those romances he swallowed during childhood«, lived only »on the page«, or, for that matter, in a photo. For him they possess an independent life somewhere outside of fiction:

They altered when the author's eye was somewhere else. Outside the plot there was a great darkness, but there would of course be daylight elsewhere on earth. Each character had his own time zone, his own lamp, otherwise they were just men from nowhere.⁶

The »official« history of the bridge yields little insight to Patrick into the lives of those who worked on its construction. Newspaper clippings, photographs depicting various stages of the construction, survey reports, all

⁵ Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, p. 111.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 143.

of which Patrick carefully examines in a public library, remained mute documents. As the narrator states, the articles and illustrations Patrick finds »depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge«. He continues that — and this we can take as Ondaatje's own statement on the nature of history — »official histories and news stories were always soft as rhetoric, like that of a politician making a speech after a bridge is built, a man who does not even cut the grass on his own lawn«. Only art can »betray official history and put together another family«. ⁷ Although Patrick may not be able to articulate these thoughts, he acts out his obsessions to identify himself with others by pursuing the intricate web of their individual destinies which lay on the other side of the photograph; it is he who eventually tells their story as part of his own to Hanna, who is the symbolic daughter of the entire community. This story will teach her that beyond every face there is a life of inheritance — an inheritance that is now also her own. Hanna, the daughter of the nameless, thus receives the story of her past which otherwise would have been lost, disinheritting her.

Only when an interest in the past takes hold of Patrick can he consciously re-examine his role in the scheme of things. He has, as the narrator sees him, »clung like moss to strangers, to the nooks and fissures of their situations. He has always been alien, the third person in the picture.« Though born in Canada he is dispossessed of its history. »All his life [he] had been oblivious to it, a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country.« The community of characters which surrounds Patrick, continues to live its own drama, without him. His role is a different one: not that of participant, but rather that of observer.

As the lives of others and the stories which lay behind them begin to fill Patrick's unbetrayered landscape with revealed meaning, they inadvertently give structure to his own life-story. Not only does he come to realize that he is »the sum of all he had been since he was that boy in the snow woods«, ⁸ but also that his »own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural...« He sees the interconnectedness of all the lives as a »wondrous night web«; as history in which fact and fiction are indivisible. Patrick, like the author himself, finds, selects and brings together all the fragments and shapes them into a story that shows him how he has been sewn into history. The mural of a particular moment in the history of Toronto came into existence when, to use the narrator's words, »the detritus and chaos of the age was aligned«. ⁹

In the Skin of a Lion, like Ondaatje's previous body of work, is an amalgam of historical and invented material. It interweaves actual personalities with fictional characters which are, however, unlike in some of his other works, situated within an actual, geographically accurate setting. And like his other work, *In the Skin of a Lion* is self-reflexive. The reader is continually let into the text, where he becomes a witness to the creative process. Most important, this novel reiterates Ondaatje's view of history as a multi-valent act of re-imagining the past. Every age invents the past anew and every generation of writers gives it a fresh interpretive meaning. Ondaatje's

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 145.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 152.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 143.

generation distrusts 'official' histories, not only because they have the tendency to reduce it to one-dimensionality. In such histories, people behind events are condemned to oblivion. Their stories would contaminate the purity of the main plot, take away the reliability of the document. Only through art can the past come alive again. And only the best art, as Ondaatje's narrator tells us, can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become.«

With *In the Skin of a Lion* Ondaatje has not only expanded the literary map of Canada, but has also acknowledged the effect of the spirit of place on his imagination. Ondaatje's Toronto is now a part of our imaginative landscape.