

“Yes, but . . . have you  
read his *letters*?”

Epistolary Correspondence  
with the Past in Michael Ondaatje’s  
*In the Skin of a Lion*

To the letter-writer every event is recent, and is described while immediately under the eye, without a corresponding degree of reference to its relative importance to what has past and what is to come. All is, so to speak, painted in the foreground, and nothing in the distance.

—Walter Scott, “Samuel Richardson”

In 1824, Walter Scott suggested that the epistolary form hindered the creation of historical narratives. Charging the form with “prolixity,” an inescapable stress on the “moment,” and a lack of retrospective discrimination in reporting on “important” events, Scott departed from literary letters in his own writing and suggested that there was a lack of fit between the letter narrative and the historical narrative (*Redgauntlet* 141; “Samuel” 41-42). By contrast, in the present day it has become a critical commonplace to claim that Michael Ondaatje’s 1987 novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, rethinks official “History.” However, few critics scrutinize the formal or stylistic techniques through which the novel creates its historical narrative. On closer inspection, it appears that the novel self-consciously uses letters to create a narrative that asks the reader how they know, and who they hear. It is my contention that Ondaatje, an author not usually associated with the epistolary form, harnesses the epistolary flaws described by Scott in pursuit of an adequate literary material through which to narrate the human histories of Toronto for the late-twentieth-century reader. The novel calls upon the reader as epistolary recipient to rethink her present through a correspondence with Canada’s past. A close analysis of the epistolary craft

allows us to return to the importance of dialogue and communication in Ondaatje's novel: aspects which were admired by early book reviewers but were quickly submerged by a sea of literary criticism eager to embrace the novel as a quintessentially "postmodern" text. These literary critics often emphasized fragmentation, indeterminacy, estrangement, and ambiguity. In contrast, my reading directs our attention away from the impossibility of locating historical truth towards the possibility of corresponding or *connecting* with the past and witnessing truths for the *future*. I believe that this possibility is sedimented within the novel's use of the letter form.

This article explores the interpretative possibilities offered by the epistolary lens, building on Janet Gurkin Altman's assertion that "the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works" (4). My reading relies upon a strong intersection of mode and theme. The epistolary form lends itself to an interrogation of questions of history and temporality. On the broadest level, every letter is written to the future, every epistolary narration is retrospective, and every reading of a letter is a seeking of the past. Despite this mediation, the letter always demands connection in order to create meaning, and therefore challenges the separation of past from present. The other epistolary characteristics important to Ondaatje's novel are: the centrality of the reader *within* the epistolary text as well as without; the centrality of diegesis where meaning is created through acts of writing, sending, and receiving letters as well as through narrated content; the symbolic value of the letter, where the continuation and cessation of correspondence signifies within the plot; the emphasis on detail and "writing to the moment"; the first person voice, where the epistolary "I" coincides with a stress on the writing self and on witnessing and individual agency; and finally, and most importantly, the way the future orientation of the letter is structured by a specifically defined addressee who is called upon to respond, placing the "I-you" relationship at the heart of epistolary exchange. This "other"—the addressee, recipient and reader—is central to the epistolary structure, and Altman rightly asserts that it is the addressee "whose presence alone distinguishes the letter from other first-person forms" (87).

Upon publication, *In the Skin of a Lion* attracted rave reviews and won a string of prestigious literary prizes, including the City of Toronto Book Award and the first Trillium Award.<sup>1</sup> Through the lens of Patrick Lewis, a self-proclaimed "searcher," the narrative navigates Toronto in pursuit of

the threads of truth that lie beneath the grand veneer of modern bridges and monuments. The figure of the searcher recurs in other late-twentieth-century novels that also rely heavily on letters as historical sources, including Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* (1992), Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999) and M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1993).<sup>2</sup> By juxtaposing a contemporaneous investigator with letters from the past, these novels layer correspondences and position the reader of the novel as an epistolary addressee. As Ghosh's narrator suggests, this means that the reader must seek traces from moments when the only people we can imagine as fully human are those people "who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time" (16-17). *In the Skin of a Lion* highlights the failure of the written document to easily include those without this power: the illiterate, the dispossessed, labourers and immigrants, examining the inadequacy of its own literary material and project of "searching" whilst categorically insisting that we do not abandon this project. Much of Ondaatje's other prose fiction, particularly *Running in the Family* (1982), which he wrote while he was researching and writing *In the Skin of a Lion*, also formally and thematically engages with epistolarity, narration, and family history, and Ondaatje recently returned to reflect on the form in *The Cat's Table* (2011).<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, it may seem unusual to approach a novel that lacks an epistolary frame (and even an extended series of represented letters) through the epistolary lens. Despite the initial lack of obvious epistolary markers, *In the Skin of a Lion* not only explores how the unique structure of letters can open up historiographic possibilities, but is itself structured by the grammar of the letter, reflecting Ondaatje's own process of excavation, writing and address in its overall structure. At the time of the novel's publication Ondaatje stated that the lack of information about "the people who were building the bridge" was "a total eye-opener," and he turned to the "tapes and transcripts" of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario to locate individual histories of Ontario that were not available "in history books" (Ondaatje, "Interview" n. pag.). The literary material of *In the Skin of a Lion* reflects an attempt to convey these experiences to the reader, and we are called upon as recipients of this material, in the same way that Patrick is called upon as he pursues his quest for lived history. The novel also offers a meditation on the adequacy of literary material for the presentation of oral histories, an issue which is particularly pertinent to the constitutively written epistolary form.

Patrick's initial role as a "searcher" for the missing millionaire, Ambrose Small, develops into a more significant pursuit of the threads of untold

national stories when Hana, Cato's daughter, removes the "grade-school notebook" from her suitcase and shows him her father's letters: "*Dear Alice*, scrawled, the handwriting large and hurried but the information detailed as if Cato were trying to hold everything he saw, at the lumber camp near Onion Lake, during his final days" (160). This encounter sits at the heart of this article and I return to it shortly. Elsewhere, the sterility of the Riverdale Library that contains "everything but information on those who actually built the bridge" (151) is contrasted with the vitality of the "collection of letters" ignored by everyone but Patrick which leads him to Clara in his search for the missing millionaire (62) and with the letters Patrick composes to Clara in his head late at night (87-89). Later, Patrick's lover, Alice, "likes" Joseph Conrad (140) but it is his letters that *speak* to her: "'Yes, but,' she says rising as the child cries, 'have you read his *letters*?'" (140). She feverishly reads out an extract she has copied from the letters, bringing Conrad's first person voice directly into the room despite its material remove from the original rhetorical letter, written to William Blackwood, a Scottish publisher, rather than "to a newspaper" as the narrator suggests (141).<sup>4</sup> In Ondaatje's version, the letter directly addresses Alice and Patrick and conveys Conrad's belief that it remains possible for "infinitely varied" men to unite and struggle "for an idea" (141). In its entirety, the original letter appeals for a principled stance without "compromise" and praises Blackwood's magazine "Maga" because "In this time of fluid principles the soul of 'Maga' changeth not" (14). This admiration for that which endures—for the soul that "changeth not"—is put into dialogue with Patrick's response to Alice: "The trouble with ideology, Alice, is that it hates the private. You must make it human" (141). This brings us to one of the central problematics of the novel. *In the Skin of a Lion* asks us to consider how far it is possible to honor the infinite variation and specificity of individual experience while remaining committed to an ideal of human commonality, or solidarity. The first person letter narrative is leaned upon to convey the experience of the human individual whilst this experience inevitably exceeds the first person narrative. The novel therefore grapples with two difficult, and inextricably linked problems at the same time. On one hand, the narrative asks how far it is possible for people to unite in their diversity to take action, and how far individuals can correspond across boundaries of class, history, and culture towards redeeming the present, or even transforming the future. On the other hand, the novel struggles to forge an adequate literary material for this task. The narrative therefore attempts to performatively engage us in the collaborative dialogue that is necessary

to envisage a different future, taking us *through* the question of how far it is possible to rework existing literary conventions in the pursuit of a genuinely reciprocal encounter between writer and reader.

Interestingly, early reviewers were quick to notice the importance of human connection and dialogue in the novel. *In the Skin of a Lion* was published at the heart of what Robert Stacey recently called the “zeitgeist” that swept up journals and publishing houses and “saw ‘postmodernism’ and ‘the postmodern’ become part of the common vernacular” (“Introduction” xii). Like many of Ondaatje’s longer works, the novel soon became a staple in the body of texts representing Canadian postmodernism, and critics often view Ondaatje’s “Canadianness” and “postmodernism” as going hand in hand.<sup>5</sup> Although the capacious term “postmodern” is often loosely deployed to refer to a vast range of narrative techniques and thematic preoccupations, it is possible to outline tendencies of this criticism where, as Herb Wyile observes, “various critics have followed the lead of [Linda] Hutcheon in articulating how Canadian writers have deployed frame narratives, multiple narrators, unstable points of view, narrative self-reference, parody, the recontextualization of documents, and various other strategies associated with postmodernism to explore and subvert both traditional history and traditional historical fiction” (184). While these readings often purport to examine the novel’s treatment of “history,” most concentrate on fragmentation and the resultant destabilization of “history” and “discourse.” To take a single example, Douglas Barbour writes that in the “palimpsest” of the novel “History as fiction and fiction as history keep writing over each other . . . Nothing is certain, especially textuality” (180).

Early reviewers, however, were less hasty to ascribe the novel’s aesthetic to postmodernism, and instead observed how the novel’s “cinematic” or “filmic” style and use of the fragment and mosaic created a curiously recognizable narrative order. For example, Michael Hulse described “a novel about communication” where Ondaatje “employs juxtaposition and cinematic intercutting to create *continuity* of depth out of an *apparent discontinuity* of surface” (par. 3, par. 1, my emphasis). In other words, the superficial fragmentation and chaos of the narrative is not incompatible with a deeper structure of order and continuity. Jonathan Baumbach echoes this sentiment in his praise of Ondaatje’s ability to bring “together the *diverse* elements of his story into a moving and *coherent* whole” (par. 2, my emphasis), and even the more sceptical Michiko Kakutani describes how the novel “eventually yields faint intimations of order” (par. 1). Even Aritha van Herk, who describes an evasive, destabilizing narrative, concludes that “what is most

moving is the human connectedness of this book" (136). Perhaps Ken Adachi's warm review in the *Toronto Star* illustrates this most clearly. Adachi argues that Ondaatje's primary allegiance is "to history, to the immigrant past experienced as though it were the present; and hence he needs to make his characters lifelike and engaging. And so they are. The novel, in fact, is centred on Patrick's search for human connection and truth" (par. 8). Adachi, writing in Toronto at the time of the novel's publication, clearly describes a novel that draws on techniques of literary realism to forge connections and *make the past present* for a future reader. This differs quite significantly from the more popular approach to the novel, typified by Lynette Hunter's comment that "Ondaatje has long been recognized as a writer who points out the inadequacies of conventional realism with a thoroughgoing postmodernist investigation of language and form" (6).

Thus, while early reviewers responded to the language, tone and overall impression of *In the Skin of a Lion*, subsequent critics have tended to concentrate on the extent to which the novel's so-called postmodern aesthetic betrays or embodies its political commitment. John A. Thieme, for example, critiques Ondaatje's postmodernism for being apolitical.<sup>6</sup> Stacey's astute essay on the novel as "covert pastoral" has convincingly shown how the debate about whether the novel exploits the working class subjects it seeks to represent in fact relies on a misguided assumption that the novel intends to succeed as a "proletarian" novel ("Political" 441). Critics who debate the political efficacy of the novel's "postmodern" aesthetic rely upon a similarly problematic set of assumptions. By beginning with the theoretical frame, rather than closely examining the literary material itself, critics have frequently reduced the text to an arena in which to evaluate the postmodern rethinking of history. The focus on Ondaatje's use of postmodern devices to destabilize and contest official "History" neglects his simultaneous concern with recording the past in order to "keep the facts straight, the legends uncovered" (*Running* 85-86), and to recognize that "there is order here": "very faint," but also "very human" (*Skin* 152).

Although postmodernist strategies are undoubtedly important to an understanding of Ondaatje's work, the privileging and amplification of these coincides with a hermetic emphasis on indeterminacy, multiplicity, provisionality, liminality, decentering, constructedness, the fluidity of generic boundaries, and the deferral of meaning and facts. In other words, the thematic preoccupations created by a postmodernist lens distract from the simultaneous stress in the novel on *connection*: on the dialogue

between a past and future recipient, and on the urgency of witnessing truths for a future recipient.

A preliminary look at Cato's letters shows how the epistolary lens emphasizes witnessing, connection, and detail. His letters to Alice witness the brutal lived experience of the migrant workers who fuel industrial expansion: "*They lose two days a month because of wet weather. Travelling eats up \$10 a season; mitts \$6; shoes and stockings \$25; working clothes \$35*" (162). The minute detail of this inventory will be familiar to readers of epistolary novels, and seems to darkly echo one of the early letters in Samuel Richardson's well-known *Pamela* (1740): "my Master gave me more fine Things . . . several Ribbands and Topknots of all Colours, and Four Pair of fine white Cotton Stockens, and Three Pair of fine Silk ones" (*Pamela* 19). In Ondaatje's account however, the technique that Richardson famously described as "writing, to the moment" becomes a means of inscribing the routine, everyday violence that the capitalist economy imposes on the lives of the workers.<sup>7</sup> Cato's letter reads like a shopping list, punched through with semi-colons and dollar signs, so that the price and its repetition govern the grammar.

The density of detail in this letter is typical of the novel and this was also observed by early reviewers, including Hulse (par. 1) and Adachi, who describes a novel that is "addicted" to minutiae where facts, figures, and details "boggle" the mind (par. 6). This emphasis on detail takes us back to Scott's critique of the epistolary form. Scott argued that the epistolary stress on detail with its "various prolixities and redundancies" must "hang as a dead weight on the progress of the narrative" (*Redgauntlet* 141) and also complained that, "[a] game of whist, if the subject of a letter, must be detailed as much at length as a debate in the House of Commons, upon a subject of great national interest" ("Samuel" 41-42). Scott argues that epistolary narratives lack discrimination in distinguishing between important and unimportant events, and this obviously works against an attempt to objectively narrate historical events of significance. However, Scott also goes on to describe how this faculty of the letter also facilitates the creation of full, human characters, where letters afford "the opportunity of placing the characters, each in their own peculiar light, and contrasting their thoughts, plans and sentiments," suggesting that this means that "the inferior persons are sketched with great truth" ("Samuel" 42, 24). It seems then, that Scott perceives a tension between the ability to narrate past events with pace, discrimination and objectivity, and the richness of detail in epistolary narratives. Ondaatje's use of letters, however, collapses this



tension, so that the *only* way we can build up an accurate historical portrait is through the detailed, lingering representation of these so-called “inferior persons.” There is a formal correspondence here between Patrick’s seeking of the past and Walter Benjamin’s oft-cited grasping of the constellation of history. Consider the similarity between Scott’s comment about the game of whist and Benjamin’s proposal that a “chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (246). This similarity reveals the equalizing manoeuvre that the letter potentially contains where a meticulous attention to detail enables the writer’s lived experience to protrude into their recipient’s present. In contrast, in *In the Skin of a Lion*, Rowland Harris, Commissioner of Public Works in “his expensive tweed suit that cost more than the combined week’s salaries of five bridge workers” (46), relies on the deletion of detail: “For Harris the night allowed scope. Night removed the limitations of detail and concentrated on form” (31). As Lee Spinks rightly observes, Harris’ “monocular urban vision immobilises labour by translating it into the physical fact of the monuments it leaves behind,” evacuating “lived experience from civic space” (138). The epistolary form then potentially renders Harris’ abstracted world view untenable as Patrick’s search for lived detail not only questions sanctioned histories, but also works to positively accumulate knowledge, signal allegiances, and speak truth to power.

The letters also formally anchor the importance of dialogue and connection in the novel. This perhaps becomes clearer if we consider the moments of epistolary *failure* within the novel. Earlier, “frozen” letters metaphorically reflect Patrick’s inability to access his own history: “What remained in Patrick from his childhood were letters frozen inside mailboxes after ice storms” (55). Patrick is incapable here of reading his own past, as he lacks a reader to receive and thaw these letters. A similar dilemma can be seen in the series of staccato letters composed by Patrick in his head: “Dear Clara / All these strange half-lit lives. Rosedale like an aquarium at night. Underwater trees” (87). Patrick’s breathless letters convey the immediacy of spoken dialogue, and the insensible, almost unconscious associative word play creates the impression of words repeating inside Patrick’s head as he lays in bed: “This battle for territory, Clara, ownership and want, the fast breath of a fuck, human or cat—supernatural moans, moon talk—her hands over the face” (87). These “letters” are not recorded and consequently cannot be read. The first person “I” is almost entirely absent from the first two “letters”



which begin and end mid-stream, whilst the third recounts a violent, repetitive bloody dream, excessively peppered with I's and you's, and this hyperextends and distorts the "I-you" structure through overloading the text: "I came up to you and asked for a dance. The man with you punched me in the face. I asked you once more and he punched me in the face" (89). The grammar of these "letters" is not that of a letter. The opening line combines the I-you structure with the verb: "I came up to you and asked for a dance." Within the epistolary frame this is irretrievably recursive, as the recipient necessarily knows this exact information already. Relief from this recursive structure can only be gained if the addressed subject was absent in the original experience: in other words, if the telling describes a fiction, a lie, or a dream. We soon learn that the writer is recounting a dream, and this relieves the tension a little, but still sits uncomfortably with the epistolary structure, as the imagined "you" of the dream is merged with the supposed "you" of the (unwritten) epistle. This scene attempts to force these moments of consciousness, and unconsciousness, into a form that cannot contain them with verisimilitude, and therefore highlights the inadequacy of epistolary searching in seeking the visceral vibrancy of lived experience. However, this is not to abandon the form, but to put pressure on its structures in seeking the traces of lived experience. These interior narratives cannot be forced open without encounter. Within the epistolary frame, the narratives require recording in order to become "unfrozen" and potentially open to reception. The lack of encounter in the above letters brings us to a crucial point.

Epistolarity is inextricable from encounter. In short, letters are generated when a first person narrative is written to an addressee. The epistolary creation of historical narratives is dependent upon an understanding of encounter that accepts that the searcher can change in the face of the unfamiliar, and this involves pushing beyond neurotic interiority, or even self-reflection, and genuinely reaching out to an other. The Hegelian frame of the "experience of consciousness," *Erfahrung*, is useful in helping us understand this. As a continual process of judgment and revision, *Erfahrung* resists the immediate assimilation of the unfamiliar into the familiar, or fixation of this as absolute difference.<sup>8</sup> Here, one must change one's own criteria of truth in order to "know" in a more meaningful way. A refusal to do this is to unreflectively assign the encountered object its place and affirm an intact self. The intersubjective communication of epistolary exchange both necessitates the continual revision of consciousness and reaches out to another. This takes place both within and without the text.

The most powerful example of Hegelian encounter in the novel appears in Patrick's reading of Cato's letters. Let us pause for a moment on the scenes leading up to this. Patrick's epistolary encounter is immediately preceded by a vivid account of the subhuman working conditions that tarnish and disease the bodies of the darkly punning dye-workers as they work with the dangerous derivatives of the natural world: tar, feldspar, paint, fumes, logs, and toxic chemicals. This witnessing testifies to the realities behind Harris' monuments and presents the urgent challenge of re-presenting the experiences of those who are the "unborn photographs" (142). The letters in the novel offer a specific formal response to this challenge.

This is dramatized in the following scene when Patrick is watched reading Cato's letters, which were originally written to Alice, Hana's mother. "Hana sits on the bed and watches him. For what? He thinks as he reads what his face should express to the letter-writer's daughter" (160). This scene doubles the epistolary relationship so that the correspondence is now between Hana, the sender, and Patrick the recipient; overlaying the original exchange between Cato and Alice. This exchange mimes the conventional epistolary relationship where we read letters not intended for us. We, as readers, are therefore implicated in watching Patrick acting out *our* role, as he reads a letter not written for him. The narrative asks, "And who is he to touch the lover of this man, to eat meals with his daughter, to stand dazed under a lightbulb and read his last letter?" (162), forcing the reader to also ask, and "who am *I* to read this last letter?" Patrick's reading demands empathy and imaginative involvement with his correspondent(s): "He realizes what he is doing, that he has become a searcher again with this family" (162).

Hana's watching invites the reader to physically share Patrick's reading. "Patrick reads slowly," and the repetition of "*Dear Alice*" on the page takes the reader back and forth with Patrick as he glances back up to the addressee:

*Dear Alice –*

*The only heat in this bunkhouse is from a small drum stove. In the evenings air is thick from the damp clothes* (160)

Grammatical awkwardness evokes the material conditions of the text's production, and contrasts with the fluidity of the clause-laden surrounding narrative. This enhances the sense of the dislocated writing subject at the same time as inscribing the reception of the letter.

"He holds now the last ten minutes of Cato's language" (162). This letter holds the experience that remains unrecorded and unsaid. Although the

epistolary investigation cannot exactly retrieve this, the minutes before Cato's death are preserved in the folds of his letters: "While he is cutting a hole in the ice at Onion Lake, Cato sees the men. They ride out of the trees and execute him. They find no messages or identification on him. They try burning the body but he will not ignite" (162). The inclusion of Cato's physical letters make the mediation involved in narrating his death explicit as there are no witnesses and no documents on him, but at the same time they allow Cato's inscription of himself to be read and excavated for the present. These letters therefore respond to the challenge set in the previous scene: how can aesthetic plumage ever adequately enable radically singular histories to puncture the present, without reifying them or reducing them to untroubling entertainment?

The epistolary scene attempts an answer to this question. Patrick's reading of these letters makes the intertwined histories of four characters immediately present, even though two of these individuals are no longer alive. Cato's experience, Alice's reading and Patrick's reading are all physically presented by the text at the same temporal moment. "Patrick sees Cato writing by tallow light . . . sealing the letter, passing the package to someone leaving the camp the next morning. When Alice opens the package five weeks later she pulls the exercise book to her face and smells whatever she can of him, for he has been dead a month" (161). Even the moment of his writing is made present: "Cato sits dead centre, at the food table, the pipe smoke moves live and grey around him. His hair smells of it" (161). Hana is the epistolary sender in giving these letters to Patrick, and also a receiver of her father's letters. The narrative slips between the present and past tense, and readers must attempt to relate to all of the historical sender(s) and recipient(s) of the letter, at the same time as their own reading.

This is connected to the unique capacity of the epistolary form to layer readers within the text. As Altman proposes, "in no other genre do readers figure so prominently within the world of narrative and in the generation of the text" (88). This depends on the recorded dialogism of epistolarity. Cato's letters are received by Alice, and later by Hana and Patrick, so that the receiver of historical writing who was famously described by György Lukács as the "reader of a later age," is situated *within* the novel as a central and self-interrogating figure. Ondaatje therefore uses epistolary conventions to create a self-reflexive dialogue between past and present within the text.<sup>9</sup> As the addressed "you" the reader of the novel is not only spoken to, but is also obliged to respond.

We are therefore clearly shown how reading and writing are crucial generative acts within letter narratives. Scott's criticism that, "the characters must frequently write, when it would be more natural for them to be acting" ("Samuel" 43) must be reconsidered when examining writing *as* acting in the epistolary frame. As Altman observes, "[n]ot all of letter fictions narrative events are narrated events. In the epistolary work, acts of communication (confession, silence, persuasion and so on) constitute important events; they are enacted rather than reported in discourse" (207). Cato's letters are deliberately written to the future. As a letter-writer, he is deeply invested in an urgent and optimistic "call" to a future that is not identical with his own, in order for his letter to be received. Cato insists on inscribing these experiences to puncture the official histories from which they are already excluded, and even when he is hunted, "his package of letters is travelling, passed from hand to hand" (161). Cato thus seizes Richardson's "writing to the moment" as an act of resistance. As the camp bosses pursue him on horseback, "At each camp he writes into a notebook, jams it into a tin, and buries the tin deep under the snow or ties it onto a high branch" (161). The messenger here takes centre stage, countering Harris' dismissal of the role in the final scene of the novel where he tells Patrick that he belongs to "Mongrel company" and "lost heirs": "You don't understand power. You don't like power, you don't respect it, you don't want it to exist but you move around in it all the time. You're like a messenger" (248). Cato, however, certainly does understand power, and commits his letters to the uncertain archive of his environment in the burning hope that they will be received and thawed. The urgency of this deliberate writing to the future is stressed by the short sentences, the glimpses of his "hunters," and the burying of his letters that witness the plight of the unrecorded migrant workers. The novel juxtaposes the mediated testimony of the experiences of these labourers with the immediacy of the human chased and shot to death. The symbolic value of Cato's letters and his determination to write amplifies their narrated content, and the "searcher" brings Cato's message to the fore. Thus, through Cato, and the readers of his letters, the narrative moves towards an affirmation of the human aspect of political struggle and national history.

The epistolary scene of Cato's letters then speaks to Spinks' illuminating analysis of the "recursive" structure of the final scene of the novel. Spinks rightly identifies the following question as central to the novel: "how can we open ourselves once more to the emancipatory potential of the past without conceiving the future in the past's own image?" (168-69). The reading of

Cato's letters puts pressure on this recursive structure in re-presenting (making present again) a multiplicity of past moments through the unifying lived moment of the searcher's reading. This means that the present moment corresponds exactly with moments from the past and this puts pressure on the reader to conceive of a future beyond a recursive tautology.<sup>10</sup>

This is powerfully coded in a single word in this scene. In Cato's letter, "The words on the page form a rune—flint-hard and unemotional in the midst of the inferno of Cato's situation" (162). We should pause here, as the text does through the hyphenation and awkward single-syllable phrases, on the word "rune." The word itself is a riddle and condenses a number of moments from the novel into a single signifier. The rune as a "[c]ourse, onward movement," or the "running [of persons]" evokes the chase of Cato ("rune *n.1*," def. 1), whilst in meaning a "flow of blood" it invokes death but also the optimism of the bodily life-flow ("rune *n.1*," def. 2). More specifically, a rune is a "Finnish poem" ("rune *n.2*," def. 2a) and this points to Cato's Finnish genealogy, which in turn was the "key" to Patrick's identification of the Finnish loggers of his childhood. This further chimes with its meaning as "a watercourse" ("rune *n.1*," def. 3), invoking the river used for logging by these men: "The Finns of his childhood used the river, even knew it by night" (*Skin* 163). A "rune" is more commonly known as a "letter," ("rune *n.2*," def. 1a) and like other epistolary authors, Ondaatje plays on the interpretive possibilities of the relationship between alphabetical and correspondent "letters" and "characters" and between the "margins" of a document and society. The rune is also a "cryptic" sign with "mysterious or magical powers attributed to it" ("rune *n.2*," def. 1a), containing structure, and space for interpretation. The rune, then, presents a constellation of possible moments from within the world of the searcher, holding more than can be told and demanding continual re-reading.

Let us again recall the correspondence between Patrick's epistolary re-reading of the archive and Benjamin's demand that we stop "telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" in order to grasp the constellation which our "own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (255). In this way, one establishes a concept of the present as the "time of the now" which is "shot through with chips of Messianic time" (255). The epistolary agent is here sited in a fleeting moment that potentially contains all of the moments of the past, and is called to seize these moments in order to think imaginatively about her current position and the future.

Understanding this complex use of epistolary conventions casts a new light on the overall structure of the novel. Most critics mention the novel's

use of the “mural,” and while this is often conflated with the fragment, Ondaatje discussed the mural specifically with John Berger, a well-known influence on Ondaatje’s work who is deeply committed to the letter form.<sup>11</sup> Ondaatje told Berger that he learned a lot from the “kind of echo” used in the mural when writing the novel (“Conversation”). The echoes of a mural produce precisely the *correspondence* of meaning I described in the “rune.” Ondaatje describes the echo he perceives in the mural, when “someone is holding a pencil over on that wall, and someone is holding a wrench on that wall, and it is exactly the same gesture” (“Conversation”). Thus, while reviewer Kakutani interprets Ondaatje’s “repetition of certain motifs (fire, water, lizards, the image of someone falling)” as underlining “Ondaatje’s vision of the world as a fragmentary place” where everyone is “compelled to play a game of connect-the-dots” (par. 6), Ondaatje in fact moves away from the reconstruction of a fragmented picture towards inscribing order *differently*, so that, in Ondaatje’s words, “the structure of the novel becomes a recognition of echoes, perhaps” (“Conversation”). The time-lapses between letters make the epistolary form well suited to this echo and Ondaatje intensifies the effect by layering the readers of Cato’s letters as we have seen.

Nevertheless, the utopian impulse glimpsed here remains tempered by the limits of an individual’s historical and human context. Stacey argues that it is the novel’s “acceptance of history as a limitation” that marks it as “politically engaged” (465). This limitation relates to Patrick’s necessarily restricted perspective (as an historically situated individual), and to a significant constraint of the epistolary form, which is tightly bound by its first person voice. Although it is, of course, possible to create open letters with multiple signatories (we), or multiple recipients (plural you), thereby forcing open the I-you structure, these constructions also necessarily reduce the obligation on the recipient to respond. In Ondaatje’s novel however, the narrative cleverly exposes the limits of the first person address *and* its alternative (here posed as the openly addressed message in a bottle) whilst refusing to depart from the I-you structure: “Patrick would never see the great photographs of Hine, as he would never read the letters of Joseph Conrad. Official histories, news stories surround us daily, but the events of art reach us too late, travel languorously like messages in a bottle. *Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events*” (152).

This passage explicitly describes the limits of Patrick’s experience, making obvious what the frequent narrative interventions throughout the novel have already told us: as an individual Patrick cannot know everything. Indeed, it

is “only the best art” that can illuminate the past (152). And yet, this art, like the letter in a bottle that lacks a tightly circumscribed addressee, reaches us too late, and therefore the individual cannot simply be discarded, even with her or his human shortcomings and limited perspective. The reading of Cato’s letters perhaps evidences an attempt to prise open this limited perspective while preserving the I-you structure (thus keeping the obligation to respond intact). Thus, in *In the Skin of a Lion* the layered readers of Cato’s letters do not become the undefined “you” of the message in a bottle, but each remains addressed (and is obliged to respond) as a specifically situated “you,” even while the simultaneous multiple readings allow for a collaboration and a wide angle lens that is difficult to incorporate into the first-person perspective. The narrative therefore preserves the first-person narrator and I-you structure in an attempt to harness the illuminations of art *through* this limited perspective and not in order to expose this perspective as limited (which we already know). This scene therefore charts an affirmative attempt to envisage a different future based on an ideal of humanist encounter across time, even while its limits are acknowledged. By layering readers, combining letters and narratorial interventions and amplifying the echo, the novel therefore moves towards a collective vision of social transformation that requires us to look beyond the individual, even while it shows the indispensability of the individual in this process.

This brings us full circle, back to the dialogue, connection, and conversation that struck early reviewers of the novel. In contrast to Harris’s parting words, “Don’t talk. Just take it away” (254), the novel pulses with the imperative that is impressed on Alice as she is famously caught in the air and “pulled back into life”: “*Talk, you must talk*” (155). In this book, Harris, whose writing instruments surround him like bullets, “pad,” “grid,” “pen,” “gun” (249), is the record keeper who silences, whereas Cato’s buried letters speak loudly to their reader(s). From the first page to the last, we are reminded that the entire narrative unfolds during a dialogue between Patrick and Hana. The young Patrick yearns for “conversation—the language of damsel flies who need something to translate their breath the way he uses the ocarina to give himself a voice, something to leap with over the wall of this place” (10). But for this voice to transcend the time and place it must be written down and sent (as with the novel). Cato’s letters provide the older Patrick with this “something” that enables him to leap, temporarily, over the walls of his immediate time and place: “He had lived in this country all of his life. But it was only now that he learned of the union battles up



north where Cato was murdered some time in the winter of 1921" (163-64). Through an intensely personal correspondence, Patrick moves from being "a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country" towards a renewed political knowledge of the history of his nation (164). Thus, through reworking epistolary conventions, Ondaatje utilizes aspects of the form that Scott argued were incompatible with the continuation of historical narratives, leaning on us, as readers, to rethink our present through a critical engagement with the past. This requires allegiance, solidarity and a sustained imaginative empathy. It also demands us to look beyond an exhausted stress on fragmentation and the destabilization of the past, and instead turn our gaze towards the future in seeking those faint threads of order that bind us together as human beings.

NOTES

- 1 The novel was also shortlisted for the Governor General's Award (1987) and the Ritz Paris Hemingway Award (1987). It was the first of Ondaatje's works to be published with a large publishing house.
- 2 Ghosh's investigator, "Amitab," seeks the history of the "Slave of MS H.6" in the footnotes of Ben Yiju's letters, and Soueif's Amal al-Ghamrawi investigates the history of colonial Egypt through letters found in a trunk.
- 3 *The Cat's Table* contains various letters, which hold "the flame of another time" (242). *Running in the Family* is a scrapbook of notes, photographs, and anecdotes, which examines how acts of witness are recuperated. Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* investigates epistolary failure, and how letters can conceal and separate, as does Ondaatje's father's letter in *Running in the Family*, which conceals mental illness. This relates to the complex "Letters and Other Worlds" (*Rat Jelly*, 1980). Also see "Pacific Letter" in *Secular Love* (1984). *Anil's Ghost* (2000) examines the excavation of historical truth, towards justice. Letters are used in the later chapters of *Divisadero* (2007). *The English Patient* (1992) asks important questions of the form and the copy of *The Histories* contains notes, maps, and cuttings. A detailed discussion of epistolarity in Ondaatje's oeuvre is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay.
- 4 The original letter was written from Conrad to William Blackwood, the Scottish publisher, Stanford-le Hope, Essex. 29 Oct. 1897 (Conrad 14). There are some slight differences between the extract cited in the novel and the original letter: for example, the substitution of "hard" (Conrad 14) with "harsh" (Ondaatje 141).
- 5 For example, John A. Thieme suggests that Ondaatje's work is "typically Canadian" in its "post-modernist investigations of language and form" (40).
- 6 Thieme makes this wider point about Ondaatje's work within a more specific reading of *Running in the Family*.
- 7 Richardson describes this way of "writing, to the moment" in two of his long letters to Lady Bradshaigh, *Selected Letters*: 257 and 289.
- 8 This theory of "experience" is largely taken from G. W. F. Hegel's "Introduction" to *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, translated by A. V. Millar as *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

- 9 See Lukács' *The Historical Novel* [Történelmi regény (1937)], which discusses the importance of dialogue for the historical novel.
- 10 I am indirectly indebted to Benjamin's discussion of Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* here (see "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations* 152-96).
- 11 Berger is a well-known influence on Ondaatje's work. Berger's commitment to the letter form is in evidence in the recently acquired files of his personal correspondence in the British Library, and his epistolary novel *From A to X* (2008). See Bower (forthcoming).

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