

Anne Wilkinson in Michael Ondaatje's 'In the Skin of a Lion' Writing and Reading Class

In *the Skin of a Lion* is a richly intertextual novel, invoking the works of writers as diverse as Baudelaire, H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, John Berger, and the anonymous authors of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the books of the Old Testament.¹ Some of these references are in the form of directly attributed quotations, or the name of the author; others are buried more subtly, more elusively, in the text: the name of the essay from which the Berger epigram is taken, for example, is embedded in the description of Nicolas Temelcoff, the bridge daredevil:

Even in archive photographs it is difficult to find him. Again and again you see vista before you and the eye must search along the wall of sky to the speck of burned paper across the valley that is him, an exclamation mark, somewhere in the distance between bridge and river. He floats at the three hinges of the crescent-shaped steel arches. These knit the bridges together. The moment of cubism (Ondaatje 1987, 34).

One of these buried intertextual allusions is to the poetry and prose of Anne Wilkinson (1910-1961).² Like the other intertextual references in the novel, the works of Anne Wilkinson draw out meanings relevant to the themes of the novel, and enrich and complicate the scenes in which the references are made. The form of this allusion is different from all of the others, however, in that it occurs through the representation of Wilkinson in the character of Anne, the poet, who has a bit part in the section of the novel called "Caravaggio." That she is the only writer-character in the novel suggests that she has a metafictional role, one which is buttressed by the similarities

between Wilkinson's work and Ondaatje's, and one which is revealing in respect to the relationship between the writer and the material of the novel. Furthermore, because the Wilkinson intertexts are so deeply embedded under the surface of the episodes in which Anne appears, making them available only to the initiated and privileged, they provide telling metatextual information about the reading, and the reader, of the novel.

The encounter between Caravaggio and Anne offers one of many representations of the relationship between the wealthy and the working classes with which the novel is fundamentally concerned. It is the difference between Anne and Caravaggio in this respect which he most notices when watching her:

He put his hands up to his face and smelled them. Oil and rust. They smelled of the chain [in the boathouse, upon which he hoisted himself to the roof]. That was always true of thieves, they smelled of what they brushed against. Paint, mushrooms, printing machines, yet they never smelled of the rich....And what did this woman smell of? In this yellow pine room past midnight she was staring into a bowl of kerosene as if seeing right through the skull of a lover (Ondaatje 1987, 199).

Unlike Rowland Harris, or Ambrose Small, whose wealth is commensurate with their ambition and power, or the rich people at the Yacht Club ball, whose ignorance and decadence sets them apart from Caravaggio and Patrick, Anne inhabits a world which can be entered by Caravaggio. He first enters through perception, watching her through the window, comparing the boathouse with the houses in Toronto from which he has stolen:

But this boathouse had no grandeur. The woman's bare feet rested one on top of the other on the stained-wood floor. A lamp on the desk, a mattress on the floor. In this light, and with all the small panes of glass around her, she was inside a diamond, mothlike on the edge of burning kerosene, caught in the centre of all the facets. He knew there was such intimacy in what he was seeing that not even a husband could get closer than him, a thief who saw this rich woman trying to discover what she was or was capable of making (Ondaatje 1987, 198).

He then enters her domain bodily, not as a thief, but as a person in need of help (Ondaatje 1987, 200-201). In his first encounter with her, in the canoe, Caravaggio was struck by her generosity: he says, "I'm here to get my bearings;" she replies, as a native, "This is a *good* place for that" (Ondaatje 1987, 187):

He had never heard anyone speak as generously as she had in that one sentence. This is a good place....Caravaggio looked over the body of water as if it were human now, a creature on whose back he shifted. He did not think of approaches or exits, suddenly there could be only descent or companionship (Ondaatje 1987, 188).

In the house she offers him what he needs: the telephone, some food. After food, they discover that both live in darkness, he as a thief, she in her boathouse, in a conversation which provides one of the only dramatized moments of peaceful exchange between the rich and the not. Her role is thus that of a compassionate, generous, and non-threatening rich person; as Martha Butterfield writes, Anne “is redeemed by her earthiness, her generosity...her attempt to discover her capabilities, who she was, her focused stillness, her simple bare feet” (1988, 166). The only other rich character who behaves with generosity is Harris, when he acts with care towards Patrick at the end; these actions are necessary to defuse the tension in the episode, and Harris’ behaviour in the moment is further ironized by the history of his actions towards working men and women in the novel. Nothing about Harris, or about Small or the rich people at the Yacht Club party, suggest their affinity to Patrick, Alice and Clara, as Anne’s beauty, simplicity, and attention to the secrets of the dark do.

The further significance of Anne to the rest of the novel lies in the fact that she is a writer. Her role as a writer gives her a power in history³ which Caravaggio can never possess:

He was anonymous, with never a stillness in his life like this woman’s. He stood on the roof outside, an outline of a bear in her subconscious, and she quarried past it to another secret, one of her own, articulated wet and black on the page. The houses in Toronto he had helped build or paint or break into were unmarked. He would never leave his name where his skill had been. He was one of those who have a fury or a sadness of only being described by someone else. A tarrer of roads, a housebuilder, a thief—yet he was invisible to all around him (Ondaatje 1987, 199).

In this sense, Anne is representative of one of the major themes of the novel, that only the stories of the rich are written down and become history. When Patrick researches the building of the Viaduct, “[t]he articles and illustrations he found in the Riverdale Library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge” (Ondaatje 1987, 145). It is Patrick’s task in the novel to learn these stories, and ultimately to become the hero of his own, working-class, story, which he tells to Hana in the car, as we are told by the novel’s frame. In this respect, Anne represents the narrative hegemony of the ruling class, much as the waterworks building represents the story of Harris’ dreams, and the wealth of the city which supported them, but denies the lives and deaths of the men who built it. Within the novel, we are given

no information to suggest that Anne's texts are any different from those which Harris might produce. Her character is tempered by generosity and compassion; her power, however, to shape the images and history of the world around her, is unimpeached.

Several particulars about the scenes in which Anne appears suggest that she is—or stands in for, within the fiction—the poet Anne Wilkinson (1910-1961). The copyright information which precedes the title-page acknowledges the use of two sentences from the journals of Anne Wilkinson, which suggests the identification.⁴ In the novel, the cottage is on “Featherstone Point” (Ondaatje 1987, 197); Anne Wilkinson's great-grandfather was Featherstone Osler, and his son, Edmund Osler, owned a cottage estate at Roches Point on Lake Simcoe, where Anne Wilkinson spent all of the summers of her life. Anne Wilkinson's great-uncle was William Osler, a famous physician also noted for his sense of humour; in the novel, Anne tells Caravaggio about the time she had measles:

My uncle—he's a famous doctor—came to see me. In my room, all the blinds were down, the lights drowned. So I could do nothing. I wasn't allowed to read. He said I've brought you earrings. They are special earrings. He pulled out some cherries. Two, joined by their stalks, and he hung them over one ear and took out another pair and hung them over the other ear. That kept me going for days. I couldn't lie down at night without carefully taking them off and laying them on the night table (Ondaatje 1987, 202).

Finally, Anne tells Caravaggio about the poem she was writing as he watched her in the boathouse:

I have literally fallen in love with the lake. I dread the day I will have to leave it. Tonight I was writing the first love poem I have written in years and the lover was the sound of lakewater (Ondaatje 1987, 203).

This describes, with Ondaatje's customary brevity and accuracy, one of Wilkinson's early poems, “Lake Song,” which I quote here in its entirety:

Willow weep, let the lake lap up your green trickled tears.
 Water, love, lip the hot roots, cradle the leaf;
 Turn a new moon on your tongue, water, lick the deaf rocks,
 With silk of your pebble-pitched song, water, wimple the beach;
 Water, wash over the feet of the summer-bowed trees,
 Wash age from the face of the stone.

I am a hearer of water;
 My ears hold the sound and the feel of the sound of it mortally.
 My skin is in love with lake water,

My skin is the leaf of the willow,
My nerves are the roots of the weeping willow tree.

My blood is a clot in the stone,
The blood of my heart is fused to a pit in the rock;
The lips of my lover can wear away stone,
My lover can free the blocked heart;
The leaf and the root and the red sap will run with lake water,
The arms of my lover will carry me home to the sea.
(Wilkinson 1968, 20).

Wilkinson is primarily remembered as a poet, a contemporary of Margaret Avison, P.K. Page, Irving Layton, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and many others, and as a founding editor of the *Tamarack Review*. She was also, however, the informal historian of her own historically significant family. She wrote *Lions in the Way*, a history of the Osler family, and set down more personal memories of her family, and their places, in an unfinished memoir, "Four Corners of My World," published first in the year after her death and reprinted in the 1968 *Collected Poems*. Wilkinson's sense of history is deeply indebted to the continuity of her family and their places. She wrote of Roches Point, site of the Beachcroft cottage, in her memoir:

At Roches Point I witnessed my first summer, as did my mother and brother and sister; and the whole or part of every subsequent summer; hence no beginning, no moment when I observed it consciously for the first time. The place is tall with tales of my grandparents, uncles and aunts, my own generation and that of my children. Under the circumstances it is difficult to say what happened to whom. As members of primitive tribes experience group rather than individual emotions, likewise our eighty Roches Point summers appear to belong equally to the dead and the living. Here time flaunts its paradox; rushes by yet never moves an inch—a caged squirrel running on its revolving stair (Wilkinson 1968, 183-4).

In another passage of the memoir, she describes viewing the picture gallery at Craighleigh, her grandfather's Rosedale mansion:

The grandfather [Edmund Osler] sighs. He looks a long time at the portrait of his mother [Ellen Picton Osler]. Because she lived to be a hundred we always think of her as a century, not a day more or less. Once she walked these floors, a living presence. Her footsteps are still everywhere heard (Wilkinson 1968, 196).

This sense of history, of time, of personal identity is, as Wilkinson notes, tribal; one might also say that it is aristocratic, in the diluted Canadian sense of the word. The members of this family possess the stories, the means to perpetuate them, the places to share, and the negation of death which is provided by continuing inheritance which is unavailable to the working

class characters in *In the Skin of a Lion*. Significantly, the Osler family—particularly Edmund, Wilkinson's grandfather—were not just rich and powerful; they were deeply involved in laying the foundations of the official culture of Toronto in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Edmund Osler was a founding member of the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario and one of the first Chancellors of the University of Toronto. In a sense, then, Anne Wilkinson's history depends upon and incorporates the Harris's of the cultural world, building bridges and purifying plants for colonial civilization. The allusion to these texts and this history which is made through the figure of Anne and her situation in the splendid family cottage deepens and enriches the inter-connection between cultural history and capital which is such a significant theme of the novel. At the same time it provides a specific intertext which particularizes the sense of history against which the novel works.

Tempering the presentation of Anne as a scion of establishment Toronto and an aristocratic myth-maker are her poems, which are also invoked by the allusion. These serve, first of all, to identify the novelistic Anne as a poet who possessed great talent and integrity, and who used her craft to write beautiful poems. The character Anne, without this reference to specific, actual poems, is not actually shown to have such talent; without the intertexts, one might take her as an idle rich woman, frittering away the luxury of time scribbling poetry. There are similarities between Ondaatje's poetry and Wilkinson's which strengthen the quality of the allusion. A.J.M. Smith wrote of Wilkinson, as one might write of Ondaatje, "[s]he never knew the tragedy of not living in a sensual world....For Anne Wilkinson the body and its sense were the instruments through which nature and reality entered the mind and became a part of being" (Wilkinson 1968, xiv, xvi). Ondaatje's poems posit a similar relationship between sensual experience and the learning of living reality; the Ceylon poems, such as "The Cinnamon Peeler," exemplify this, but most of his lyrics require the same trope. In the prose poem which concludes *Secular Love*, the barriers between the human sexual and the natural worlds are dissolved:

He slips under the fallen tree holding the cedar root the way he holds her forearm. He hangs a moment, his body being pulled by water going down river. He holds it the same way and for the same reasons. Heart Creek? Arm River? he writes, he mutters to her in the darkness....He thinks of what she is, what she is naming. Near her, in the grasses, are Bladder Campion, Devil's Paintbrush, some

unknown blue flowers...He has gone far enough to look for a bridge and has not found it. Turns upriver. He holds onto the cedar root the way he holds her forearm (Ondaatje 1984, "Escarpment," 126).

The confusion and intermixture of objects in nature and parts of the human body is even more strongly evident in Wilkinson's poetry; in this respect, "Lake Song" is a good example, although "The Red and the Green," to which I will refer again below, is even more apt, and "In June and Gentle Oven," from which the following is excerpted, serves well:

Then two in one the lovers lie
And peel the skin of summer
With their teeth
And suck its marrow from a kiss
So charged with grace
The tongue, all knowing
Holds the sap of June
Aloof from seasons, flowing.
(Wilkinson 1968, 62).

Wilkinson and Ondaatje also share some images; for example, insects, with their precise, untamable beauty, figure metaphorically in both authors' works. In "In June and Gentle Oven" Wilkinson writes:

Fabulous the insects
Stud the air
Or walk on running water,
Klee-drawn saints
And bright as angels are.

Honeysuckle here
Is more than bees can bear
And time turns pale
And stops to catch its breath.
And lovers lip their flesh
Light as pollen
Play on treble water
Till bodies reappear
And a shower of sun
To dry their langour.
(Wilkinson 1968, 62).

In some of Ondaatje's poems and in *In the Skin of a Lion*, insects inhabit a world which is alien, desired, and finally known by the speaker. At the conclusion of "Claude Glass," for example:

the crickets like small pins
begin to tack down
the black canvas of this night,
begin to talk their hesitant
gnarled epigrams to each other
across the room.
Creak and echo.
Creak and echo. With absolute clarity
he knows where he is.
(Ondaatje 1984, 19).

In the novel, it is this “absolute clarity” which Patrick seeks, and it is in the insect world that he first locates his desire for understanding, and for voice:

He walks back into the bright kitchen and moves from window to window to search out the moths pinioned against the screens, clinging to brightness....He crayons the orange wings of the geometer into his notebook, the lunar moth, the soft brown—as if rabbit fur—of the tussock moth....Perhaps he can haunt these creatures. Perhaps they are not mute at all, it is just a lack of range in his hearing....He knows the robust calls from the small bodies of cicadas, but he wants 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....In the way he steps from the dark house and at the doorway of the glowing kitchen says to the empty fields, I am here. Come and visit me (9-10).

Like other images in the novel, the insects of his childhood return to him, as he attains his voice, as he begins to assemble his narrative, and—in the following instance, at least—when he is in the embrace of love. Regarding the Finns’ burning cattails on the river, which first appear to him as fireflies, Patrick says,

All that gave direction was a blink of amber. Already he knew it could not be lightning bugs. The last of the summer’s fireflies had died somewhere in the folds of one of his handkerchiefs. (Years later, Clara making love to him in a car, catching his semen in a handkerchief and flinging it out onto bushes on the side of the road. Hey, lightning bug! he had said, laughing, offering no explanation) (Ondaatje 1987, 20).

These thematic and metaphoric alliances between Ondaatje’s work and Wilkinson’s poetry serve to give Anne in the novel, “mothlike on the edge of burning kerosene....this rich woman trying to discover what she was or what she was capable of making” (Ondaatje 1987, 198), and her work, an integrity and authentic beauty they do not otherwise possess.

They also, more obviously, ally the actual author of *In the Skin of a Lion*

with the fictional author Anne, an alliance which is reinforced by the sense of history presented by Wilkinson in her poetry. In her verse Wilkinson invokes a sense of history which is markedly different from the history of the procession of the ancestors, of the portraits in the mansion houses, of the continuity of blood which permits the nobly-born to evade the erasure of death. In the poem "The Red and the Green," for example, memory is lost and amnesia is incurred in the experience of the senses:

Here, where summer slips
Its sovereigns through my fingers
I put on my body and go forth
To seek my blood.

I walk the hollow subway
Of the ear; its tunnel
Clean of blare
Echoes the lost red syllable.

....

But the quest turns round, the goal,
My human red centre
Goes whey in the wind,
Mislaid in the curd and why of memory.

Confused, I gather rosemary
And stitch the leaves
To green hearts on my sleeve;
My new green arteries

Fly streamers from the maypole of my arms,
From head to toe
My blood sings green,
From every heart a green amnesia rings.
(Wilkinson 1968, 68-69).

This ritual transformation into the green man metamorphosizes human time into natural ahistory and atemporality. This alteration does not occur in the poem entitled "Roches Point," which is about the cottage where the fictional Anne writes, but, in contrast to the sense of history described in Wilkinson's memoir, the objects which mark time, history, and the continuing presence of her family in that place, are here locked away in an attic:

This land rings,
In stone of its houses,
In cedar and sod,
The myths of my kin.

The long lake knows our bones;
 Skin and scar and mole, sings
 Them like a lover, truly.

....

The body still goes back
 For of necessity
 It makes strange journeys.
 I, my being,
 Shut the door against return
 And in the attic pack
 One hundred summers,
 Seven burning wounds,
 A root of deadly nightshade
 And the silky waters
 Where our epochs drowned.
 (Wilkinson 1968, 134).

This poem presents, therefore, a midway position between the experience of the body transformed in nature, which produces an atemporal epiphany, and the continuous, consistent, unending sense of history provided by the ancestors and their houses. The memories are packed in the attic, out of daily use, but still accessible, where one might, as Ondaatje puts it, “retreat from the grand story and stumble accidentally upon a luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still. Those moments, those few pages in a book we go back and forth over” (Ondaatje 1987, 148). The allusion to Wilkinson’s poetry, then, evokes a sense of history which differs from that presented in her historical works, and one which allies the poet Anne more closely with the unofficial histories, the histories of individuals which are begun through sensory experience, continued through passion, and consummated in love and violence, with which the novel is so deeply concerned.

These aspects of the intertexts which the character Anne brings with her into the novel greatly enrich her role as a metafictional author-presence in the novel. Throughout the novel, metaphors and images get drawn back into the plot at a later time (the Finns on the ice, the feldspar, the dynamite, etc.), creating a richly textured interplay between symbol and action which is essential to the meaning of the novel and indicative of the artistry of its author. That Anne does not get drawn back into the plot, that she seems to play no role in motivating action of any kind, and that she does not, as so many of the other characters do, have a relationship with a character other than Caravaggio, suggest further that her role is more strictly and simply

metaphoric than other symbolic characters and things in the novel. Her position outside the action of the novel reinforces her status as an image of the author. This does not imply that Anne stands in, biographically or autobiographically, for Ondaatje, but that she—as a writer, as a member of the upper classes, as one whose control over history is both acted upon and consciously relinquished in her art—represents the author's relationship to his material more fully than it is otherwise represented in the novel. This in turn suggests the delicate, ambiguous, and difficult relationship of the literate, educated, privileged writer to the histories with which he is concerned—of the illiterate, the under-educated, the unprivileged. As such, both the compassion, intelligence, perception, and talents given Anne and underlined by the intertextual allusions she brings, and the fact that her social position gives her power that she is not able to relinquish, provide a telling, sensitive and interesting portrait of the author of, or in, the novel. In this way, the Anne episodes differ from the other intertextual moments in the novel, inasmuch as they depict and invoke an author and his or her works, rather than just the works and their relevant meanings.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this intertextual reference, however, lies not in the construction of the author figure and the relation to his or her material which it implies, but in the way in which this episode constructs the reader's position and thus comments metatextually on the reader's perception of meaning in the novel. Unlike other intertextual references, which make available the relevant works to any reader willing to track down the allusion in conventional sources, the Wilkinson intertexts are so deeply buried as to be available to only a few readers, those who are either familiar with her work, or who recognize the obscure signs posted throughout her episode; the most public clue to her identity, the copyright information, refers to a document which was, at the time of the publication of the novel, unpublished and therefore unavailable to the ordinary reader. The Wilkinson allusions, then, suggest more strongly than anything else in the novel that, just as there are class divisions in work and writing, there are two classes of readers, one of which possesses privileged, insider information, and the other of which does not. Unlike the division between workers and bosses and the division between the writers and the written, both of which are permeable and transgressable (Nicolas becomes a boss and Patrick attains a certain authority over Harris; Nicolas and Patrick become storytellers, and Alice always has been; Ondaatje himself is able to write the

novel), the division between readers, in this episode, is absolute. For a reader who is not already inside the stories Anne Wilkinson told, it would be very difficult to get inside the stories Anne tells in the novel. Through Anne, then, the author seems to be implying that at the root of the structures of differential power depicted in the novel is the difference between the inside and the outside reader; that it is, ultimately, knowledge which is the only absolute sense of power, as a reader, as a writer, as a worker or a boss. This, the novelist implies, is something he can do nothing about; it is our responsibility, as readers, as privileged readers, to bridge the gap of knowledge between the inside and the outside of our texts.

When Caravaggio sees Anne in the boathouse, she is described as wearing “[a] summer skirt, an old shirt of her husband’s, sleeves rolled up” (Ondaatje 1987, 197). When she finds him in the house, he asks her if it is her husband’s shirt which she wears, to which she replies “No. My husband’s shirts are here, though. You want them?” (Ondaatje 1987, 200), a reply which marks both her fear of the thief and her generous impulses towards this fellow solitary traveller in the dark. Two pages later she tells him “I have a brother who doesn’t speak. This is his shirt. He hasn’t spoken for years” (Ondaatje 1987, 202).⁵ Putting on the skins of others who are mute is what the storyteller does in this novel; Alice does it (Ondaatje 1987, 157), Patrick does it. The intertextual information provided by identifying Anne as Anne Wilkinson allows us to relate this incident, unironically, to similar incidents in the novel, and to the title, which suggests the centrality of the episode.⁶ It is Caravaggio’s refusal of the shirt, a refusal of fear and misguided generosity, a refusal of her power to give and his talent for theft, which is perhaps most significant with regard to the metafictional role of this character, for it marks most poignantly the terrain of misunderstanding, of loss, of fear, of empty gifts which lies between the writer and his subject in this novel. That we, as readers, are drawn into this terrain if and only if we identify Anne Wilkinson, and bring her works, her integrity, her struggle with the making and the being of history, is testimony to the endurance of the divisions with which the novel is so fundamentally concerned. That—at least for the inside reader—Ondaatje’s simple delineation of a marginal character in the novel (a boathouse, a shirt, three sentences describing a poem) brings to the novel layers of complexity and intrigue is testimony to the extraordinary richness of the novel, and artfulness of its author.

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NOTES

- 1 This quality of the novel may be too obvious to have received much critical attention; even Linda Hutcheon, in her analysis of the post-modern aspects of the novel, does not note this distinctively post-modern technique, and I have found no other analyses of intertextual references.
- 2 This identification is also made by Martha Butterfield in her review of *In the Skin of a Lion*. According to Butterfield, the historical counterpart, Anne Wilkinson, to the fictional character Anne was suggested and confirmed by personal correspondence with Ondaatje.
- 3 The power of written history is countered, in the novel, by the power of oral and performed story, each of which is allied with a specific class. See Gamlin on the topic of orality in the novel.
- 4 These were unpublished at the time of the publication of the novel, but some have since been published in *The Tighrope Walker*.
- 5 Ruth Bonder, one of my students, pointed out the similarity between the shirts in this episode and the skins of the lions in others.
- 6 Is there a play in the title on Wilkinson's *Lions in the Way*? No need to be so literal in our reading, but the idea is intriguing, at least in passing.

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