

"THINGS HAPPENED"

Narrative in Michael Ondaatje's "the man with seven toes"

Ray Wilton

THE MAN WITH SEVEN TOES" may be seen as Michael Ondaatje's first major narrative. However, reading this text as narrative presents numerous difficulties, not the least of which is the tendency of the individual poems to elicit lyric expectations that in fact resist narrative continuity. The design of the book, with its broad pages, visually emphasizes the independence of the poems, and the poems themselves tend to contain short flashes of imagery or meaning, resembling photographs or paintings hung in a series. The poem's evocation of conflicting lyric and narrative expectations disorients the reader, compelling her or him into an active awareness of the role of those expectations in the text's production of meaning.

Sam Solecki, in his essay on *the man with seven toes*,¹ explores the form of the text concentrating primarily on imagery and texture, finding that "echoes and parallels" in phrases and images "create a common ground or structure — even the possibility of an unsuspected metaphysical order — underlying the separate lyrics." However, he notes that that order is ambiguous and "avoids becoming a constricting grid." He finds that the structure built around imagery and metaphor pulls the reader towards a static spatial apprehension of the reality depicted, but one with unresolvable ambiguities, and one that fragments when we examine the text as a whole and discover the contradictions. The resulting discomfort for the reader roughly parallels that of the heroine, the anonymous woman, in the poems:

In *the man with seven toes* . . . it is the form as well as the content that pushes the reader into the unfamiliar ground of the work to the point that his reading of the sections of the text becomes roughly analogous to what is happening in the story . . . [and] demands the reader's active participation as an interpreter of a reality that is often not only ambiguous but even chaotic.²

However, while Solecki astutely cites ambiguities and discontinuities in the text, and also the tendency of the work to draw the reader into coming to terms with these difficulties, he says little or nothing of what the "reader's active participation" contributes to the narrative. How is our awareness of our participation significant?

Perhaps answering this question requires our becoming more sensitive to what Solecki calls "the tenuous narrative line."

Roland Barthes offers a theory on the general operations of narrative which aptly applies to Ondaatje's work. He says that narrative is the working out of a "logic" that is "exposed, risked and satisfied." This working out is "a process of becoming."³ Such a process strikes me as having important similarities to what Ondaatje refers to in the poem "a gate in his head" as "moving to the clear,"⁴ the difference being that Barthes is referring to narrative as a recreation of the process, while Ondaatje is referring to the lyric as "exposing" the logic and freezing it in mid-process. In both cases, the end of the process, whether it be a logic "satisfied" or the achievement of intellectual clarity, implies a static apprehension of the content, or cohesion. In *the man with seven toes* the individual lyrics suggest a static apprehension of "a process of becoming" while the continuity developed through recognizing narrative convention draws the reader into enacting the process. Solecki, it seems to me, ignores the latter process, and thereby precludes the possibility of discovering order in the text to be, at least partially, a temporal phenomenon, which seems to me central to Ondaatje's poetics.

In the opening lyrics of the narrative Solecki finds "no temporal, spatial or syntactical continuity." Of the first poem he says, "The character and the scene are isolated in space — 'desert and pale scrub' — and time."⁵ Yet the content to some extent suggests an adherence to narrative convention:

the train hummed like a low bird
over the rails, through
desert and pale scrub,
air spun in the carriages.
She moved to the doorless steps
where wind could beat her knees.
When they stopped for water she got off
sat by the rails on the wrist thick stones.

The train shuddered, then wheeled away from her.
She was too tired even to call.
Though come back, she murmured to herself.⁶

At the risk of stating the obvious, each time "she" is mentioned in the above poem, we assume that the pronoun refers to the same person, and that each action has a causal link with the other actions: she is on a train and when it stops she gets off, then is left behind. Convention leads us to believe in the consistency of the existents (characters, items of setting), in this case "she" in "desert and pale scrub," through a series of events.

The principles of connection and coherence assumed in the first poem at the level of 'naturalized convention,' that is convention so familiar it is no longer consciously noted, continue in the next poem. It is not too much for us to assume

that the same person from the opening lyric falls asleep, and then in the second poem awakes: "She woke and there was a dog / sitting on her shoulder" (10). Despite the narrator's reticence when it comes to offering context, there is here in the first two poems sufficient cause for the assumption of "story."⁷ Granted, much of that story is left out of the discourse, but in reconstructing a story from a fragmented discourse, as readers we actively participate in a narrative process, even if in making assumptions based on naturalized convention we do not participate at a conscious level.

OONDAATJE JOLTS US into awareness of our participation when in the fourth poem he undermines narrative convention by changing the identity of the narrator without warning or seeming acknowledgement: the natives "laughed, / then threw / the red dress back at me" (12, my italics). This shift throws into doubt our previous assumptions of consistency. We are forced to reconsider those assumptions and in the process of doing that discern that the shift may actually occur between the second poem ("she woke and there was a dog . . .") and third poem ("entered the clearing and they turned . . ."), where the identity of the missing pronoun before the verb "entered," which narrative convention initially led us to assume to be "she," becomes ambiguous. The shift in point-of-view, clearly indicated by the use of the pronoun "me" in the fourth poem, throws into doubt our assumptions maintained throughout the first three poems, and leads us into an awareness of those assumptions and the narrative process instigated by them. Clearly, such undermining of narrative convention simultaneously risks and foregrounds the narrative process. By initially allowing the possibility of conventional narrative continuity, Ondaatje lures us into expectations which he subsequently denies, compelling us into an awareness of our participation in the process of ordering.

However, more than an obvious shift in pronouns marks the transition occurring in the opening four poems. A shift from external to internal focalization also occurs. The first and second poems, where the train leaves the woman and she later follows the dog, could easily be rewritten in the first person without significantly changing the sense. The difference between the narrative in the first two poems and that which follows resides in the increasing emphasis on the woman's response to her situation. In the second poem Ondaatje provides little or no indication of how the woman thinks or feels about her situation, he simply states that situation:

She woke and there was a dog
sitting on her shoulder
doing nothing, not even looking at her
but out over the land.

She lurched and it sauntered
 feet away and licked its penis
 as if some red flower in the desert.
 She looked away but everything around her was
 empty.

Sat for an hour.
 Then the dog moved and she followed,
 flies prancing at her head. (10)

Ondaatje as narrator situates the woman in proximity to the dog and in relation to the desert while a specified "hour" passes. By thus locating her in space and time he provides us as readers with a point of reference in the story. Furthermore, the narrator is essentially transparent, emphasizing the story and not his discourse. For instance, the language is more metonymic than metaphoric; of the two metaphors brightening the text, the first is introduced with the explanatory "as if," where the explicit identification of the trope suggests the narrator does not wish to confuse the story's events with their depiction. The second metaphor occurs in the last line perhaps as a hint of the change in focus about to occur. In any case, we gain an unobstructed view of the heroine's actions and her location, the story's existents and events, as well as our relation to them, without noticeable intervention from the narrator.

However, in the third poem the language becomes much more terse and metaphorical, while also providing less indication of the woman's location spatially and temporally:

entered the clearing and they turned
 faces scarred with decoration
 feathers, bones, paint from clay
 pasted, skewered to their skin.
 Fanatically thin,
 black ropes of muscle. (11)

In effect the text shifts from an emphasis on story to an emphasis on discourse, from an emphasis on what is seen to how it is seen, which results in the increased prominence of the narrator. The discourse in fact obscures the story and thereby, as readers, our point of reference. Thus, coinciding with the change in narrator, a shift that undermines the narrative process, is the growing prominence of the narrator. As we become aware of the narrative process and our role in it, we also begin to notice the presence of the narrator, and through the clouding of our view of the story as well as our point of reference, begin to identify with her disorientation.

Our participation occurs at the level of narrative act, in the act of reading, where the real action is.⁹ The shift away from story induces us to seek from the increasingly discontinuous discourse the continuance of a coherent story line. This participation in the process of ordering, paralleling the woman's situation of being lost,

is a temporal activity. Thus the time consumed in the narrative act parallels the implied passage of time in the story. However, as our location both temporally and spatially in the story grows more indefinite, we gain a sense of moving in time and being lost in time simultaneously; events occur with seeming randomness, without causal order.

In the next series of poems the coherent story line we saw in the earlier poems continues to fade to the point where no temporal connection exists:

not lithe, they move
like sticklebacks,
you hear toes
crack with weight,
elbows sharp as beaks
grey pads of knees. (13)

We have here a description of an ongoing situation, given in the present tense. The use of the present tense (or in more precise narrative terms, "simultaneous" narration, wherein story and its articulation occur simultaneously) locates the narrative instance within the scope of the events narrated, but as the events are ongoing the narrative instance remains indeterminate. Although time passes, we as readers participating in the search for coherent order based on the story line, are effectively losing that sense of order.

The next two poems likewise lack temporal location. The first poem describes a rape and the second a ritualistic dance. In them, the foregrounding of the narrative process, instigated a few pages earlier by Ondaatje's undermining of convention, intensifies, while the increased discontinuity in the story threatens the narrative process altogether. A tension builds as the fragmented discourse threatens to destroy the continuity between the poems, the continuity derived from our awareness of a story line. The weakening of the connections between the poems emphasizes the structural ambiguity built into the text, the conflict between our expectation of lyric and narrative conventions. The sequence of poems threatens to fragment into individual, self-enclosed units, while we strive to link them together by providing some system of relatedness.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF RECONCILING conflicting perceptions intensifies almost unbearably, and finally provokes an almost cataclysmic release. As the order offered by a continuity in story fails, and as the emphasis increasingly tips over onto the side of discourse, the discourse finally breaks free from the story line, and thereby relinquishes any temporal reference in the story. However, an alternative order offers itself, one derived spatially through imagery and metaphor.

goats black goats, balls hushed in the centre
cocks rising like birds flying to you reeling on you

and smiles as they ruffle you open
 spill you down, jump and spill over you
 white leaping like fountains in your hair
 your head and mouth till it dries
 and tightens your face like a scar
 Then up to cook a fox or whatever, or goats
 goats eating goats heaving the bodies
 open like purple cunts under ribs, then tear
 like to you a knife down their pit, a hand in the warm
 the hot boiling belly and rip
 open and blood spraying out like dynamite
 caught in the children's mouths on the ground
 laughing collecting it in their hands
 or off to a pan, holding blood like gold
 and the men rip flesh tearing, the muscles
 nerves green and red still jumping
 stringing them out, like you (16)

The shift to spatial articulation accompanies a complex change in narrative voice. The woman, the narrator, separates herself from her environment, begins to perceive herself as a distinct entity outside the events of her story. We see this in her repeated reference to herself as "you." She, in fact, makes a conscious separation of her discourse from story, as the repeated introduction of metaphor with "like" indicates, showing her awareness of the distinction between reality and her depiction of it, and her need to distance herself from her story and rewrite it in a way that allows her some immunity. We see in her a growing disregard for the facts of the story: "[t]hen up to cook a fox or whatever, or goats. . . ." She manipulates the story to fit the pattern of discourse, attempting to give the chaos of her experience in story an order derived through imagery and metaphor.

The difficulty of sustaining a subjective position distant from the events of the story is shown in the chaotic energy of the "goats" poem, the frantic pursuit of an adequate metaphor that will capture the experience and dissipate its threat. The narrator leaps from one metaphor to the next seeking one that will hold and still that wild energy, but that energy always exceeds the attempt at its articulation. The reason for this is, of course that what the poem tries to capture at this point is its own process of ordering. To clarify this we need to note a number of processes at work.

In the "goats" poem the woman narrates an event that has already occurred in the two previous poems. At least she perceives the events as sufficiently similar to establish a sense of repetitiveness. This perception allows her to deny the difference, change, and in effect slows the narrative giving her more time to process the events. She can then begin to articulate patterns. But what becomes clear is that these patterns belong not to the events themselves but to her articulation of them. As we have already noted, the focus of the narrative shifts from story to discourse, from

the action in the story to the activity of narrating. The narrative act becomes the subject of the "goats" poem as it seeks to capture that activity within lyric stasis.

Her attempt almost succeeds. Through metaphor and a distancing of herself from her story the woman as narrator develops a conceptual framework in which to articulate the violence and chaos of her experience. That articulation to some extent gives her control over the violence, the story, and she achieves a sense of order that, although uncertain and ambiguous, provides a tentative point of reference.

and put their heads in
and catch quick quick come on
COME ON! the heart still beating
shocked into death, and catch the heart still running
in their hard quiet lips and eat it alive
alive still in their mouths throats still beating Bang
still! BANG in their stomachs (16)

The word "still" is rendered ambiguous in all its occurrences in this context, through having both temporal and spatial connotations, meaning both 'continuing' and 'not moving.' Mrs. Fraser thus expresses through the image of eating the heart alive a need to capture movement, and thereby expresses an inner reality in a constant state of flux that will not completely succumb to that need. That is, to a degree she fulfills her wish. She articulates her experience and finds within it a point of reference in the 'here and now' however ambiguous and unstable that point might be. In the poem that follows, Mrs. Fraser experiences at least partial acceptance of her situation:

at night the wind
shakes in your head
picks sweat off your body

yards away, they
buck out the night
The sky raw and wounded (17)

She perceives herself in the second person, she perceives "they" at some distance away from herself "at night," and then there is the sky "raw and wounded," a projection of her own pained but accepting response to her environment. The important point is that she has found a tentative but temporal location: not within the story, but within her articulation of it, the discourse.

As we, as readers, participate in the woman's dislocation in the earlier poems, we also now participate in her sense of relocation in the here and now. As the discourse breaks away from the story line, the connection between where we are now and where the narrative began, beside the tracks after the train left, gives way. At the same time, the sense of certainty that such a connection offers is lost. The

combination of the loss of a point of reference in the story line, with a shift to internal focalization as well as simultaneous narration,⁹ evokes the sense of being in the here and now, a position relative to our location in the traversing of the foregrounded discourse. In other words, instead of relating where we are now in the narrative act to our position in the story, we are compelled into the inverse position of relating that story to our position in the narrative act. Like Mrs. Fraser we seek in the movement across the discourse, the narrative act, an order. After the order offered by story fails we seek a spatial order in terms of metaphor and imagery that will give coherence to our movement. Ordering becomes a temporal movement through space: time orders space and space orders time. We find ourselves, with Mrs. Fraser, compelled into an ontological position without a stable foundation, into accepting coherence as a movement within a fluctuating and uncertain reality.

As the woman escapes from the natives, we escape from our conventional notions of narrative and share her renewed sense of location in the present. From here, with the help of a convict escaping from civilization, she finds her way back to civilization. Meanwhile, for us a vague sense of the story line returns to the narrative: events occur from lyric to lyric which, although surprising, are both temporally and spatially located: Mrs. Fraser and the convict spend days and nights in a journey across streams, through swamp and trees, until they finally move into the plain and along a river.

ALTHOUGH THE RETURN OF A discernible story line suggests a returning to conventional narrative, that conventionality continues to be undermined by vast ellipsis between individual lyrics, and as well by random but significant changes in the identity of the narrator:

he had tattoos on his left hand
 a snake with five heads
 the jaws waiting
 his fingernails chipped tongues;
 crossing a stream
 he steadied her elbow
 and she tensed body
 like a tourniquet to him. (21)

Ondaatje apparently narrates here, but unlike his narrative at the beginning of the text, now there is a different focalization. As narrator he is more prominent, registering through metaphor and imagery his reaction to the story, emphasizing the discourse while not losing sight of the story. In fact, this kind of internal focalization remains constant throughout the remainder of the text, regardless of who

actually narrates. For instance, no change in focalization occurs in the next poem, although we find a change of narrator.

in grey swamp
 warm as blood, thick
 with moving. Flesh
 round our thighs like bangles.
 Teeth so sharp, it was later
 he found he'd lost toes,
 the stumps sheer
 as from ideal knives. (22)

It would seem the fluctuations in the identity of the narrator enact a melding of points of view, where different points of view share a common discursive reality. The effect is a sense of moving toward coherence or intellectual clarity.

Coinciding with the shifting point of view and the emergent sense of clarity are subtle but important shifts in narrative instance. In the above poem, for instance, the absence of not only the subject pronoun at the beginning of the poem, but the verb as well, renders the narrative instance indefinite. If such an ellipsis suggests anything, it is that of immediacy, a sense of present tense or simultaneous narration. Yet in the third sentence of the poem the narrative instance turns out to be an imperfect form of subsequent narration: "... it was later / he found he'd lost toes. . . ." In other words we have a form of interpolated narration. A clear instance of this occurs in another poem.

lost my knife. Threw the thing at a dog
 and it ran away, the blade in its head.
 Sometimes I don't believe what's going on. (27)

The narrator clearly narrates the event subsequent to its occurrence, but when is not clear. The concluding comment suggests the narrative instance exists within the journey back to civilization, rather than outside that journey, thus rendering the narrative instance, like the narrator in this passage, indeterminate.

Positioned in the indeterminate here and now, having relinquished the certainty of a coherence beyond her articulation of it, the woman finds that events take on a renewed brilliance so very unlike her experience on first leaving the train. Lacking the absolute order of time or space, "Things happened and went out like matches" (38). She now sees the convict "striped and fabulous / like beast skin in greenery" (33).

eyes were grey beetles
 toes were half gone
 chest was a rain sky
 shirt was a rainbow
 mouth a collyrium that licked my burnt eyes (40)

Those "burnt eyes" receive the salve that enables renewed vision.

IN THE PROCESS OF MOVING THROUGH the text we develop a sense of continuity between the poems that is not based upon a clear story line, but upon a process of discursive ordering both spatially and temporally. We maintain throughout a sense of our participation in the process of ordering, our participation temporally in connecting a collection of disparate verses together. In the latter portion of the narrative this sense grows increasingly intense as the narrators seem to drop away; or more accurately, we merge with them, dissolving the borders between subjectivities, including the one between ourselves as readers and those depicted in the narrative. At the same time we experience a movement towards clarity. The achievement of this goal appears in sight when we arrive back in civilization and at the end of our journey:

She slept in the heart of the Royal Hotel
 Her burnt arms and thighs
 soaking the cold off the sheets.
 She moved fingers onto the rough skin,
 traced obvious ribs, the running heart,
 sensing herself like a map, then
 lowering her hands into her body.

In the morning she found pieces of a bird
 chopped and scattered by the fan
 blood sprayed onto the mosquito net,
 its body leaving paths on the walls
 like red snails that drifted down in lumps. (41)

Sam Solecki notes that here “the narrative closes with the ambiguous and densely allusive poem whose almost every image echoes some image or situation occurring earlier.”¹⁰ These echoes give the impression of the imagery taking on a coherent form, or of the narrative’s logic “being satisfied,” or as Solecki puts it a sense of “some kind of summarizing judgement upon the story.” The sense of impending closure, and the reference through “echoes” back to the events of the narrative, give the illusion of arrival at the point of coherence and order in the text. A static apprehension of the narrative’s content seems for the first time within reach as the narrative slows.

She could imagine the feathers
 while she had slept
 falling around her
 like slow rain. (41)

The slowing, calming effect of this image evokes the sense of arriving or concluding. Nevertheless it is an ambiguous conclusion, as Solecki says, for however much the image of “slow rain” succeeds in taming or civilizing the violence, the violence remains within.

The last poem provides the real sense of closure, post-narrative summation, and at the same time reconfirms our awareness of static order as illusion. The clichéd sentiments of the final stanza in the poem conventionalize, even trivialize, as they attempt to capture within metaphor an experience that has only been grasped temporally within the narrative act.

Green wild rivers in these people
 running under ice that's calm,
 God bring you all some tender stories
 and keep you from hurt and harm (42)

It hardly does the story justice. Rather, it reflects ironically on our need for the illusion of static order. While it may be the end of the process of ordering, it eliminates too much to be satisfactory. The sense of cohesion it attempts fails: the narrative remains an ambiguous sequence of disparate fragments, the order of which can only be tentatively grasped in the temporal process of traversing the text. In fact, the sense of movement towards cohesion results as much from our need for order, as it does from any absolute order built into the text.

Or, an alternative reading of the conclusion offers itself, and perhaps one even more to the point. The clichéd "green wild rivers" could be said to take on new meaning within the overall context of *the man with seven toes*. Gaining specificity, the dead metaphor is revitalized and meaning reproduced.

NOTES

- ¹ Sam Solecki, "Point Blank: Narrative in Michael Ondaatje's *The Man With Seven Toes*," *Canadian Poetry* 6 (Spring-Summer 1980): 14-20. Rpt. in *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal: Véhicule, 1985); 135-49.
- ² "Point Blank" 15.
- ³ Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," trans. Stephen Heath, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 294-95.
- ⁴ Michael Ondaatje, "The Gate in his Head," *Rat Jelly* (Toronto: Coach House, 1973) 62. "And that is all this writing should be then. / The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment / so they are shapeless, awkward / moving to the clear."
- ⁵ "Point Blank" 18.
- ⁶ Michael Ondaatje, *The Man with Seven Toes* (Toronto: Coach House, 1969).
- ⁷ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978) 19. "[E]ach narrative has two parts: a story, the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse, that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated."
- ⁸ By "narrative act" I mean the actual event of narrating or enunciating, which by extension necessarily includes the action of both sender and receiver. See Gérard

Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980) 26-27.

⁹ Genette, p. 219. He points out that simultaneous narration produces an unstable situation wherein the emphasis can tip either way, onto the story or the discourse. Context determines the direction the emphasis takes.

¹⁰ "Point Blank," 21.

BEAR

John O'Neill

The man in this poem has become a bear.
The man in this poem, any
man in your life you place in this poem,
a bear. Is gone and
the bear arrives. You will wake up beside
him, in the frosty
morning try to pull the quilt close and will
find it's his skin:
the fur is attached to the man who said, "I do." But doesn't.
The bear will go,
lumber from your bed, not bent on your harm,
and you will remember
your life with him, before: years spent as he
built up reserves,
alone, at work that kept replacing you. After all,
you asked him to change, when
the bear was thin, and never expected this, *this*—
long nails raking your legs in the night,
the rug on his back,
and his breath telling you what he has
eaten. Walk away from him, slowly,
never turn away. Let him watch
the fullness of your leaving.