

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S "IN THE SKIN OF A LION" AND THE ORAL NARRATIVE

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MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *In the Skin of a Lion* revises Toronto's civic history. While official accounts mention chiefly the town's city planners and corporations, Ondaatje allots less narrative space to such functionaries and their visions and concentrates on those who built the city and their stories instead. His "study of the New World" (79) does not focus on the controlling centre but turns to the workers at the periphery. Their diversity is rendered best through oral narratives which defy conventional monomorphic presentations. In search of a narrative model, *In the Skin of a Lion* reverts to oral narrative strategies¹ and to the beginnings of story telling. The work finds structural and thematic underpinnings in the *Gilgamesh* epic from which its title and much of its characterization stems.² In addition, Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* presents a number of thematic similarities to oral narratives, such as its emphasis on the tale-telling nature of the story and its resistance to closure. The notion of audience participation is also prominently featured. Ondaatje's retelling of hitherto unwritten history emphasizes especially the problem of immigration and the continual struggle for an acceptable division of power within changing social constructs. Ultimately, the novel allows an egalitarian voicing of previously marginalized perspectives.

One of the workers who helps build Toronto's infrastructure and whose story sheds a new light on conventional civic histories³ is Ondaatje's protagonist Patrick Lewis. Inspired by Alice and her political activism, he acts out her will and gets to "the centre of the city" (29) to undo its order. Patrick "literally 'infiltrates' the filtration plant from the outside tunnel he had earlier helped blast out of rock" (Hutcheon 102). The subsequent climactic scene of the novel is closely modeled after the *Gilgamesh* epic. With some preparatory work and help from others, Gilgamesh and Patrick both use artificial weights to dive deep into the waters towards the seat of power. Whereas Gilgamesh's quest led to the well, Patrick's travels end in what can be seen as the well of all of Toronto. Ondaatje's description of the descent echoes *Gilgamesh* repeatedly. As in the ancient epic, repetition inten-

sifies the images of darkness and claustrophobia. Ondaatje retains a further detail: Patrick injures his hand. Like Gilgamesh, Patrick questions the outcome of his undertaking. In an earlier scene Patrick sees “his visage never emerging out of the shadows. Unhistorical” (172). Given the odds against him, Patrick’s entrance into the “Palace of Purification” is in itself an achievement and a reward for his struggle. He has successfully overcome the danger of being obliterated by official histories.

Patrick’s intrusion recalls also the *Gilgamesh* epic’s notion of the outsider’s move to the controlling centre. In the oral source text, the autocrat’s civic order is created solely for his indulgence and veneration. Enkidu, the outsider, steps in to improve conditions for the citizens after he is lured from the wilderness by the goddess Ishtar and her servant. Similarly, the designs of Pomphrey and Harris are megalomaniac. Their vision initially excludes those who transform that very vision into reality. At first, their plans appear valuable in themselves: “Before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting” (29). In the process of creating, however, Nicholas the daredevil soon emerges as the hero of the bridge. His and Patrick’s courage in shaping Toronto’s infrastructure gives the city its character. As accounts of building the bridge are passed on and gradually become history, those who fought at the front line are immortalized while the planners who made the front page at its official opening sink into obscurity.

In the climactic confrontation between Harris and Patrick, with its oral narrative echoes, the values of the periphery oppose the values of the centre. Fittingly, a dynamiter comes to impress upon Harris “the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects” (135) and threatens to destroy the monumental project. “Do you know how many of us died in there?” Patrick asks. Harris invokes official history in a feeble attempt at a defense: “There was no record kept” (236). Conventional history has deliberately shut out the majority. Like Scheherazade, Harris resorts to tales to delay the threatening execution of Patrick’s plans. He is talking for his life (235), and hastily he assembles limited stock arguments to justify capitalist excesses (236). At one point, he refers to classical literature to avoid Patrick’s criticism (239). Thus he invokes canonical authority to stay in power. Given his life’s work, this is the only credible position left to him.

Patrick, however, will not debate Harris on such terms. Instead of Harris’s static confrontational mode, he seeks an exchange that will put him at peace with himself and others. Patrick’s formative years include a distinct natural division of language: on the one hand, the letters found frozen in his rural mailbox after a snowstorm testify to the stasis of the written word, and on the other hand the square dance calls of his father form a body of ritualistic language. Verse, rhyme and repetition of the oral tradition found in “the only moments his father was verbal” (19) become a source of reassurance and life to Patrick. All that is frozen in time or static poses a threat and must be exploded. As dynamiters he and his father move about the

countryside and employ their power to free the river's flow. To them, much that appears locked in certainty hangs merely in a precarious balance to be unhinged instantaneously. Harris, therefore, does not convince Patrick through argumentation. What he says is immaterial to his former employee. How and that he says it, on the other hand, saves him. Through the rhetoric, Harris not only gains time, but his strategy also leads to an unexpected opening. Overcome by the moment, Patrick finds in Harris a receptive listener. He therefore shares his story of Alice's death, and unburdens himself. In the end it becomes apparent that Patrick has sought the confessional more than the destruction of the waterworks. For him, the telling of the tale has inherent healing powers.

WHILE THE WORK'S MULTIPLE INDIVIDUAL HISTORIES dislodge conventional history, *In the Skin of a Lion* is also characterized by thematic similarities to oral narrative strategies. The novel announces itself as an oral tale. Hanna "gathers" the story in Patrick's Ford, and thus the opening frame tale defines the time and place of the telling and immediately identifies the teller as well as the audience. An Ondaatjean word play invokes the car's status as "vehicle of the story" and as a symbol of "the American way of life" but avoids the banality of both the pun and the cliché. The closing frame returns to the storyteller's round, and the final "Lights, he said" (244) signals, ironically, the start of a performance and further emphasises the tale-telling nature of the novel. Throughout the work, multiple tales combine into a shared history. The end itself, therefore, invites a retelling in which audiences can follow previously neglected strands of the story. Expanding curiosity replaces any sense of finality as readers encounter a series of beginnings which invite as many readings of the text, and history becomes subject to individual interpretations. As Robert Harlow puts it: "There is no such thing as history. There is only individual consciousness expanding" (Harlow 87). In the process, history is opened to questioning and investigation.

The story's resistance to closure is further apparent in Ondaatje's use of oral narrative strategies in his treatment of the theme of initiation. As the title "Little Seeds" suggests, the first chapter is devoted to origination. Patrick explores the prehistoric composition of the natural world around him, and his apprenticeship includes naming and mapping (9). After this primary context is established, "The Bridge" opens. For the second time in the novel, a Ford truck magically carries a Promethean flame to signal the coming of the new metropolis (25). Once the civic infrastructure is in place, the inauguration ceremonies become themselves a relay of beginnings: an anonymous cyclist claims the bridge before the official, but much earlier the workers and their lights commemorate their dead (27). Perpetual

geneses thus create the sense of a resonant past in the making. The individual stories of all participants share tangential points. Yet these points are not plotted along a simple storyline and the novel thus resists closure. From the onset, the representation defies linearity, and the circles of narrative widen to include new characters and their associates. One after another, the outsiders assert themselves in the New World, while the official dignitaries at the centre of civic history are much muted.

In many ways the novel's typically oral resistance to closure is personified by Clara, who makes her influence felt throughout the novel. Patrick's final rejection of destructive power in the waterworks dream sequence, for example, may well have been prompted by her. Like Ishtar's servant in the *Gilgamesh* epic, Clara effaces the destructive impact of individual self-assertiveness. Instead, she favours the anonymity oral strategies paradoxically offer by replacing individual authorship with a shared responsibility for a story. As Patrick and Clara love each other and share the "white character" of Patrick's ejaculation, Clara is associated with history, oral narratives and fertility:

[H]e bent down and put his mouth on hers. He took it, the white character, and they passed it back and forth between them till it no longer existed, till they didn't know who had him like a lost planet somewhere in the body. . . . He loved the eroticism of her history. (69)

The oral exchange of the seed makes the mouths wombs for a process of origination which subverts linear notions of causation. Infused with many individual contributions, history thus becomes a vigorously charged process. In a remark to Patrick, Small points to the source of Clara's influence: "It's her unfinished nature" (93). Both Clara's and Alice's powers are thus rooted in sexuality and the language of performance arts. Their emphasis and approach, however, differ, as do the contributions they make to their surroundings.

As mentioned earlier, the remaking of history draws together characters from vastly diverse backgrounds, many of whom initially join as participating audience members. Alice offers the following model for audience participation, which Patrick recalls when he sees himself as "a watcher" rather than "a hero of one of the [many] stories" that comprise the novel (157):

The powerful matriarch removed her large coat from which animal pelts dangled and she passed it, along with her strength, to one of the minor characters. . . . Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story. (157)

Alice's description of the oral performance model reminds readers also of the *Gilgamesh* epic and king Gilgamesh's acquisition of the lion skin. In Ondaatje's novel, the key gesture of taking the animal pelts precedes the telling. Amongst other conferred powers associated with the skin, the apparel transfers a character's identity to the storytelling. Individual players thus successively shape *In the Skin of a*

Lion with the urge to tell their story. Yet their interconnectedness emerges only gradually, as audiences learn that the various tales belong to a shared history. While the appearances of the characters provide colourful and often eccentric details, audience members must enter into active negotiations of meaning to form their impression of focal events. As authorial hierarchies are dismantled and passed to the minor actors, the participants become equals. No single 'hero' or 'heroine' commands the audience's attention.⁴ Instead, each character offers a unique perspective on a number of shared events and thus invites a revision of history.

AS DIFFERENT CHARACTERS TAKE CONTROL of the story, the animal skin becomes associated with the challenge to official history offered by individual oral tales.⁵ As if to draw attention to the lion skin as emblem, Ondaatje's only direct quotations from the *Gilgamesh* epic are the two references to animal pelts or lion skins. In the original tale, the passages follow each other immediately, though they are chronologically far apart. Gilgamesh's mourning and his enigmatic killing of two lions not only frames Ondaatje's story, but as his title suggests, the skin of a lion also defines the novel in its entirety: Patrick's taking the hide allows his participation in the process of retelling and shaping history. The actor's coat and the lion pelt are one.

Ondaatje enriches the skin-imagery in the tannery scenes, in which one's skin is emblematic of the gaining of a new cultural identity. At the same time, the workers' tales revise romanticized official accounts of an early Canadian trade:

[men] leapt in embracing the skins of recently slaughtered animals . . . pulling wet hides out after them so it appeared they had removed the skins from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries. (130)

Thus, the "skins" of the workers are associated with their cultural identity and with their position in the social power structure around them (130). In both the *Gilgamesh* epic and in Ondaatje's novel, the skin of the lion, therefore, suggests the acquisition of previously foreign attributes and qualities. Like the lion skin of the epic, these new qualities ultimately come to define the individual.⁶ Once such a "skin of a lion" is attained, the workers are ready to tell their story and to take part in the social event that is the performance of history. Since his or her active contribution determines not only a character's identity but also the composite identity of the group of which he or she is a part, the negotiating or constructing of society and of history lies with all participants and not with any single dominant interest group.

The process of acquiring a skin or identity is accompanied by another obvious prerequisite to audience participation within the oral tradition. Nicholas Temelcoff soon notes that the immigrant's first step towards social consolidation is language

acquisition (46). Shortly after his arrival in Canada — the country he chooses after listening to “Daniel Stoyanoff’s tall tales” (44) — he participates in performance arts, as a first step towards adopting a new culture and language. The process begins in silence and ends in a unified uproar: “the audience around him was silent . . . [then] a terrible loudness entered the silent performance. The audience began to clap in unison” (117). Yet, the process need not always be charged with tension:

[W]atching a Chaplin film he found himself laughing out loud, joining the others in their laughter. And he caught someone’s eye, the body bending forward to look at him, who had the same realization — that this mutual laughter was conversation. (138)

Here, the popular medium of visual story telling becomes a meeting ground. In the absence of an audible narrative, audience members become aware of their articulated reactions. Subsequently, the audience response to the presented images turns into a sub-story. The laughter sparked by the performance gives the audience a feeling of security and thus liberates it from external and internal censors. In this relaxed atmosphere of the performance arts the new language becomes accessible to all levels of learners: “Most immigrants learned their English from recorded songs or, until the talkies came, through mimicking actors on stage” (47). Nick joins others in songs and plays, and although they remain mere parroting audience members, the immigrants prove that they are ready to take the stage at any time (47). As the new Canadians enter the work place, the live performance becomes their metaphor and means of successful association and first step towards cultural participation.

FAILURE TO ACQUIRE THE NEW LANGUAGE, on the other hand, results in the loss of political power. For example, Alice’s silent puppet show demonstrates how the language barrier prevents the access of so-called ethnic minorities to society’s institutions (116). But Alice’s show does not end here. Following the exposure of social injustice, her presentation turns didactic. The climax of her performance requires audience participation for its resolution, and one evening Patrick commits himself and steps onto “this dangerous new country of the stage” (116). His dramatic intervention is both allegorical and actual. Thus, the open medium prompts Patrick’s response and exemplifies how the newcomers’ acts help to create a “neighbourhood intricate with history and ceremony” of their own (133).

Alice may favour gesture in her dramaturgy, but elocution remains the main source of her influence. Hers “was a party and a political meeting, all of them trespassing, waiting now for speeches and entertainment” (115). Alice’s political

theatre targets specifically the history of the nearly completed waterworks by foregrounding the lives of those who actually built the works as opposed to those who conceived them. Here “events of art” thus replace the “official histories [or] news stories [which] surround us daily” (146). Alice’s effective blend of art and social criticism is most apparent backstage, where Patrick is reminded of Mogul Akbar — a potentate who displays his dominance by imposing intermittent stasis on his subjects under the threat of execution (118). In Alice’s sphere, however, the king is hung (119).⁷ The appeal of the performance arts transcends the dictator’s decree. But Alice’s most effective instrument in challenging existing versions of history is the spoken word. Similar to the ‘word’ in the Canadian native oral tradition, Alice’s “‘word’ carrie[s] the power to create, to make things happen” (Petrona 10). After a discussion of the brutalities of early capitalism, Patrick asks Alice: “So what do you do”? Alice explains her strategy: “You name the enemy and destroy their power” (124). For Alice, at least, audience participation leads eventually to audience empowerment.

Increasingly, Patrick experiences the arresting quality of Alice’s oral narrative strategies. At first he is captured by Clara’s and Alice’s stories: “the night kitchen with these two actresses is overwhelming. Clara and Alice slip into tongues, impersonate people, and keep each other talking long into the night” (74). In telling their histories, they employ professional skills to lend a voice to all parties involved. Yet they also use their creative power as a means to indulge themselves:

Patrick . . . abandons himself to the sofa . . . The two women continue talking and laughing . . . After an hour or so they say to each other, ‘Let’s get him.’ . . . One travels along a descant of insight and the other follows, completes the phrase, making the gesture safe. (75)

Their prehistoric “cave mural” (76) is a ritualistic mapping of Patrick. But while Alice would complete the picture, Clara begins a “riotous laughter.” Her “mouth explodes with noise and she tugs Alice out . . . Clara’s growls unname things” (76). Clara thus instigates a freeing catharsis, while Alice initially attempts to use the performance to fix Patrick’s image. Alice is ready to transgress the boundaries of oral/aural worlds to her own ends. Without Clara, Alice later achieves her objectives, and Patrick is surprised when he learns that Alice has made him into a political activist: “He th[inks], I am moving like a puppet” (120). Her didacticism prompts him to break with safe routines in order to change the course of events to his cost.

The *Gilgamesh* quotations, however, foreshadow the inherent dangers of Alice’s strategy by warning of the damaging consequences of her action. Patrick’s destructive intentions, for example, are bound to harm him. Throughout the *Gilgamesh* epic, Ishtar and her servant control Gilgamesh and Enkidu, much as Alice and Clara influence Patrick and Nick. Alice’s destructive naming which is to destroy the power of the enemy (124) further recalls Ishtar’s morally equivocal power. As

Alice inherits both Ishtar's power to influence others, and Enkidu's tragic fate, she reveals the limitations of her manipulative use of oral strategies. Therefore, her story warns against any didactic or polemic usages of oral modes in historiography. It is a cautionary tale about cautionary tales.

Nevertheless, Ondaatje discredits neither Alice's political theatre nor her social criticism. Instead, her challenging of exploitative civic power structures is thematically anticipated in the ancient epic. Enkidu, for example, fights the ruler of the city not only to attain a place in his society but also to end the ruler's oppression. Similarly, Alice's tales of the workers testify to capitalist exploitation. Initially, Alice's "grand cause" (125) echoes Enkidu's cry to change the city's order. The refusal of the outsider to serve and to accept existing power struggles finally leads to the death of both Alice and Enkidu. Thus, Patrick is made tragically aware of the static properties of Alice's destructive naming of the enemy: "Alice . . . He breathes out a dead name. Only a dead name is permanent" (165). Still, Patrick —like Gilgamesh— takes up the cause of his deceased companion. Like Gilgamesh who as "king and conqueror of the dreadful blaze" (Gilg. 84) controls fire, Patrick is a dynamiter who has the knowledge and tools to carry out the destruction his friend wishes for. Here too, the ancient epic serves as the model for the retelling of Toronto's history.

At the same time, *Gilgamesh* provides a character study which undermines the conventional portrayal of individuals of historic impact. Neither Patrick nor Gilgamesh has a zealous commitment to changing the existing order. Instead, they are motivated by sorrow and guilt over the loss of a loved one. As Patrick puts it: "I don't believe the language of politics, but I'll protect the friends I have. It's all I can handle" (122). This partly explains why he lets destructive power slip away when it ultimately lies literally within his grasp in the shape of a detonator. Patrick's tacit rejection of such power finally enables him to carry out Alice's brand of political activism without again endangering lives. His evasion of any final commitment is an affirmation of life, but it also obliges him to rely on others to carry on where he leaves off. Patrick's course of action thus allows for further communal participation, in accordance with oral narrative aesthetics. Unlike the heroic individual at the centre of conventional historiography whose actions are said to be felt by generations to come, Patrick is part of a human web and who is influenced by others as much as he influences them. His portrayal thus undermines conventional history and its official chronology of conflicts amongst "historic figures."

LIKE THE ANCIENT *Gilgamesh* epic, the novel lacks a conventional conclusion. Alice dies and Patrick embarks on a new course of action, perhaps to redeem himself. In the climactic dream sequence which concludes in the

waterworks (220-242), he reaches his goal and holds power, only to let it slip away, "as if, having travelled all that distance to enter the castle in order to learn its wisdom for the grand cause, he now turns and walks away" (164). While Harris sees in Patrick merely an unwillingness to assume responsibility, his claims lack the resonance of Patrick's tragic awareness. Both men agree that the initial wish and even the process of acquiring power in the skin of a lion is worthwhile. The instant of attaining this skin, however, holds potential limitations. Thus Patrick endorses the struggle but rejects the position of final dominance. To do otherwise would mean a betrayal of his father, of his friends and even of Alice: Patrick would be written into history to be used by would-be followers to their ends.

As Patrick drowns off in the waterworks, Harris cites Gilgamesh's emblematic slaying of the lions: "He fell upon them like an arrow from the string . . ." (242). However, because of his own fear, he omits the epic's original images of fragmentation and explosion in which Gilgamesh ". . . struck and destroyed and scattered them" (Gilg. 97). Patrick is successful without having to destroy the waterworks. He can assert himself without dealing the final blow. His arrows connect where others sever.

Earlier Patrick sends off such an arrow, when he brings Nicholas an awareness of history. He shows Nicholas a photograph which recalls their shared story like a mnemonic device: suddenly everything falls into place as Patrick frees the flow of history.

Nicholas is aware of himself standing there with the pleasure of recall. It is something new to him. This is what history means. He came to this country . . . Language, customs, family, salaries. Patrick's gift, that arrow into the past, shows him the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories. (149)

Both *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Gilgamesh* address three aspects of socialization and history: the emergence of civilization itself, immigration and the access to power. Ondaatje gives particular emphasis to the immigrant myth of the epic in which freedom is increasingly defined as the access to power in an evolving community. Although many of the details are rearranged, *In the Skin of a Lion* echoes *Gilgamesh* repeatedly. The resulting sense of rich intricacy and complexity — the "architecture of the past" (66) — is suggestive rather than conclusive and stands in direct opposition to linear conventional historiography.

Modeled after an oral poem, *In the Skin of a Lion* shares many thematic similarities with oral narratives. Compared to Ondaatje's earlier prose works, oral narrative strategies have lessened somewhat but oral narrative themes have been enriched and complicated. A many-layered web of symbolic connections replaces simple cause and effect relations and shifts the focus from the functionaries to the common worker. Just as Patrick rejects the power and finality of a destructive blow, Ondaatje surrenders the authority of a closed narrative system. In each episode

his oral narrative strategies instead allow several points of departure for further tales. Ultimately, Toronto's civic history is negotiated in an interpretive retelling of events.

NOTES

- ¹ My discussion of translations from the oral to the printed medium draws upon the findings of Ruth Finnegan, who charts some of the no-man's land between oral and literary worlds.
- ² The three versions of *Gilgamesh* "are stories of folklore and romance which run back from the medieval courts through Celtic legend and minstrelsy to archaic Sumer, and perhaps further, to the very beginning of story-telling . . . We do not know how long the poem was recited, but the retention of those passages suggests an oral tradition alongside the written" (Sandars 46-8).
- ³ This study's notion of conventional historiography is derived from Hayden White's definition of "history proper" (White 4).
- ⁴ Martha Butterfield was the first critic to note the absence of a central hero.
- ⁵ "The ex-centric, those on the margin of history — be they women, workers, immigrants (or writers) — have the power to change the perspective of the centre, and that power is given voice in *In the Skin of the Lion* [sic]" (Hutcheon 103).
- ⁶ The newly gained identity, however, also contains new limitations and paradoxically fosters the need to "step out, in the erotica of being made free" (132).
- ⁷ The puppet is a giant which is linked to the giant Humbaba of the *Gilgamesh* epic (117). Alice and Patrick reenact the slaying of that giant when Patrick steps onto the stage to resolve the dramatic crisis.

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