

DESTRUCTIVE CREATION

The Politicization of Violence in the Works of Michael Ondaatje

Christian Bök

MICHAEL ONDAATJE HAS repeatedly demonstrated a writerly interest in violent, male protagonists who exhibit aesthetic sensitivity. William Bonney in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), Buddy Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), Mervyn Ondaatje in *Running in the Family* (1982), and Patrick Lewis in *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), all play the role of violator, and often they resort to physical violence as an expressive outlet that is paradoxically both creative and destructive at the same time. Ondaatje's romanticization of such protagonists, however, suggests a potentially disturbing vision of the creative intellect, and little has been said by critics about the social implications of this motif. Ondaatje's texts actually appear to encourage the reader to forgive, if not admire, the protagonists for their violent excesses, and the texts appear to do so without adequately addressing the protagonists' degree of social accountability. Violence in Ondaatje's work represents an aesthetic virtue, but whereas Ondaatje's earlier texts appear to valorize violence enacted for purely idiosyncratic reasons, Ondaatje's later texts begin to reevaluate the ethics of such violence and suggest that it must ultimately serve a socially responsible end.

Exotic violence has indeed become a hallmark of Ondaatje's style: *The Collected Works* depicts a man eaten alive by mad dogs, "the hand that held the whip . . . left untouched" (62); *Coming Through Slaughter* portrays a photographer who deliberately immolates himself, "diving through a wave and emerging red on the other side" (67); *Running in the Family* cites the death of a jockey "savaged to pieces by his own horse" (25); and *In the Skin of a Lion* refers to a bridge-worker cut in two by a giant wire whip, "the upper half of his body found an hour later, still hanging in the halter" (41). Protagonists in these texts are especially exuberant in their violence: William Bonney, for example, goes into a frenzy and blasts away at rats drunk on fermented grain (18); Buddy Bolden uses a straight-razor to

mutilate a man in a barber chair (73); Mervyn Ondaatje goes into a drunken rampage and holds up a passenger train at gunpoint (148); and Patrick Lewis uses dynamite to obliterate a country hotel (167). Truly, Dennis Lee in *Savage Fields* is correct when appraising Ondaatje in terms of a cosmological space where “[t]o be’ is to be in strife” (11).

Stephen Scobie in “The Lies Stay In,” however, asks (but does not answer) the crucial question: “Does Ondaatje luxuriate too much in these images of violence” (119)? Douglas Barbour in “Controlling the Jungle” responds to the calculated brutality of Ondaatje’s earliest, poetic images by praising the poet’s stylistic refinement:

[Ondaatje] has a clear imaginative understanding of violence, yet this violence never overwhelms the poet. The poetry is not voluptuous in its violence; it is chiselled and carefully wrought. The old idea of decorum applies perfectly to these poems. . . . [T]he poet deals with varieties of physical and mental violence in an almost virginally pure style and manner. The result is a tremendous gain in imaginative force over most modern treatments of the theme. (113)

Eli Mandel in *Poets of Contemporary Canada* sees that Ondaatje’s poetry is characterized by “the cold precision of a surgeon’s knife” (xvi), and Frank Davey in *From There to Here* points out that, “[i]n a world as bloody and violent as Ondaatje perceives it, the poet can apparently never relax his self-control” (226). Ondaatje in effect receives critical acclaim for his ability to stylize violence, to endow it with aesthetic integrity through both technical precision and emotional detachment.

Unqualified appreciation of such aesthetically rendered violence, however, raises unsettling questions about the social ramifications of violence in literature — for within the aesthetic celebration of brutality lies the potential for desensitization to brutality; continued exposure to violence as an aesthetic virtue may serve only to naturalize it as a social phenomenon. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse in “Representing Violence” emphasize this point: “To regard certain practises as violent is never to see them just as they are. It is always to take up a position for or against them” (9). Critical readers of Ondaatje’s “Elizabeth,” for example, are presumably expected to react with horror to the poem’s aristocratic narrator who can witness a graphic, public execution and then immediately afterward “find cool entertainment now/with . . . nimble rhymes” (69); nevertheless, critical readers go on to praise Ondaatje for his ability to maintain a similar sense of aesthetic refinement in the face of the violence that he depicts. Ondaatje is admired by critics in part because he can fix his gaze upon violence without flinching: like the nameless driver who runs over two copulating birds in “Application for a Driving License,” the poet appears to be quite capable of saying with breezy confidence: “nothing shocks me” (35). While this clinical detachment may

heighten the reader's horrified response, such detachment goes largely unquestioned by equally clinical academics: such detachment begins to replace emotional empathy as a measure of poetic talent. Ondaatje seems to focus more upon the individual glory of victimizers than upon the collective suffering of victims, and for this perspective critics reward him with what amounts to a wary appreciation of his sadistic visions. What remains paramount thematically in Ondaatje's texts then are the very dangers inherent in this glamourization of such violence.

O NDAATJE'S INFATUATION WITH brutality may at first glance seem completely idiosyncratic; however, the violence in his work may also arise directly out of the postmodern milieu in which Ondaatje operates. Linda Hutcheon in *The Canadian Postmodern* suggests that postmodern literature disrupts any naturalized assumption that tries to efface its status as an ideological construct (12). Such disruptive impulses in postmodern writing actually embody a strategy of *ostranenie* — or “defamiliarization”: violence is in effect the bazooka of the innovative. Graphic depictions of aestheticized brutality not only attract the prolonged attention of an audience, but also shock an audience into a recognition of its own implication in violent, ideological processes. As with any strategy of defamiliarization, however, the unorthodox soon becomes *doxa*, a standard formula of representation that must in turn be dismantled violently: audiences soon become desensitized to shock tactics; consequently, more extreme strategies of defamiliarization are required to challenge reified structures. This “vicious circle” is violent, but not necessarily undesirable: the result is an expansion of discursive boundaries. Whatever has suffered violent marginalization because of oppressive ideology is in turn violently centralized.

Ondaatje's writing indeed addresses unpalatable issues, such as rape, murder, sadomasochism, and suicide; however, Ondaatje has in the past tried to disavow the sociopolitical implications of his writing. Ondaatje in the 1971 *White Pelican* interview describes himself as an “arch-romantic” (10), and indeed his early works appear to support Webb's claim in *Coming Through Slaughter* that “[a]ll suicides all acts of privacy are romantic” (101);¹ moreover, this romanticization coincides with the poet's own self-professed, political disengagement at the time. Ondaatje states during the 1972 *Manna* interview, for example, that *The Collected Works* contain no political significance or sociological meaning: “I'm not interested in politics on that public level. The recent fashion of drawing journalistic morals out of literature is I think done by people who don't love literature or who are not capable of allowing its full scope to be seen” (20). Ondaatje later admits in a 1975 *Rune* interview that he has an interest in “the destruction of social violence by

the violence of outsiders" (46) and that "[t]he whole political thing has been obsessing me this last year" (51); however, he tries at the same time to deny any alignment with a systematized, political philosophy. Ondaatje states in *Rune*: "I avoid reading books on . . . politics. It's a funny thing, political theses I find impossible to read. I have to be affected emotionally or in a sensual way before something hits me" (51). Evidently, the early Ondaatje appears to agree with the sentiments of Patrick Lewis in *In the Skin of a Lion*: "The trouble with ideology . . . is that it hates the private. You must make it human" (135). Ondaatje in *Rune*, however, goes on to betray a potentially embarrassing, political naïveté by confusing Trotsky with Marx (52) — a curious, educational blindspot, given that *In the Skin of a Lion* appears to exemplify a political sensitivity to the plight of the working-class. Ondaatje in the 1978 *Twelve Voices* interview reasserts his sociopolitical disengagement by saying "I certainly don't feel any kind of duty to society as an 'artist' at all" (142); however, Ondaatje tempers this rejection of the sociopolitical world later in the interview, when he says:

I hate the term "artist," I hate the term "poet," it has so many connotations of someone who is separate from the real world, someone who supposedly "deserves" more, "knows" more, than the man on the street. It suggests someone who is superior to any other craftsman that exists around us today, and I think this is a real problem of artists. It's been created by artists who go around saying they are visionaries or they're prophets or they're noble figures. (143)

On the one hand, Ondaatje does not feel accountable to society; on the other, Ondaatje craves to reduce the separation between himself and the "real world," of which society is presumably a part. While the early Ondaatje appears to believe that great literature must be sociopolitically indifferent, the later Ondaatje appears to express a burgeoning tension between two conflicting, artistic impulses: the will to social retreat and the will to social contact.

O
NDAATJE'S EARLY OBSESSION with the violent rejection of society is best expressed in his frequently anthologized lyric "White Dwarfs," where the narrator asks: "Why do I love most / among my heroes those / who sail to that perfect edge / where there is no social fuel" (70). Such heroes remain fascinating to Ondaatje because they "implode into silence" (71), retreat into "the perfect white between the words" (71), either the aphasia of death or the aphasia of madness. Ondaatje regards this kind of inward withdrawal into silence as the ultimate act of violence against society, perhaps because such aphasia represents a deliberate abandonment of language, the very means by which socialization is even possible. Ondaatje writes in *Coming Through Slaughter* that "[t]he mystic

privacy one can be so proud of has no alphabet of noise or meaning to the people outside" (64), and recurrently the poet suggests throughout his longer texts that artistic aphasia may stem in part from either an emotional pain harsh enough to silence the voice or a creative insight too profound to be expressed in words; moreover, the texts go on to suggest that perhaps this pain is itself the insight. Stephen Scobie in "The Lies Stay In" points out that, while "Ondaatje's first temptation is silence" (118), the poet resists this temptation through the very act of writing about it: whereas the hate-ridden narrator of "War Machine" admits that perhaps he "wd like to live mute / all day long / not talk" (14-17), the narrator of "White Dwarfs" admits that "[t]here is my fear / of no words of / falling without words / over and over of / mouthing the silence" (70). This infatuation with aphasia almost embodies a kind of artistic death-wish, a compulsion that suggests a pathological psychology; yet, the degree to which Ondaatje's violent characters represent possible states of the poet's own mind remains unclear.

Urjo Kareda in "An Immigrant's Song" points out that Ondaatje is admittedly terrified of violence and cannot account for the brutality of his own work (49). Kareda cites Stan Bevington, who wonders whether or not Ondaatje's lack of violent experience might actually lend the poet a certain "clarity" about violence (49). Kareda also cites Dennis Lee, who suggests that the tension between the gentleness of Ondaatje's nature and the violence of the writing represents not an "iron control," but a "knowledge of something imaginatively grasped that cannot be acted out" (49). Ondaatje appears, however, to identify with his early protagonists and admits to Kareda that the works in which William Bonney and Buddy Bolden appear reflect a "private world" (40), one fraught perhaps with the constant threat of silence. Ondaatje admits to Gretchen Pierce in "Canada Gives Writer 'Sense of Place'" that "[w]riting *Billy* was a catharsis and I learned more about myself" (30), and in the *Manna* interview Ondaatje discusses *Billy* and confesses: "I was writing about something that had always interested me, something within myself" (20). Ondaatje in *Coming Through Slaughter* even intrudes as the ostensible narrator, who appears to identify with Bolden psychologically:

When he went mad he was the same age as I am now. . . .

When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be. . . .

What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? (133-134)

As Ondaatje says in the article "From Gunslinger to Jazz Musicians" by Adele

Freedman: "I put myself into the characters' situations for a long period of time. . . . A lot of my own world gets into their stories. It's probably a major illness" (1).

Ondaatje's apparent identification with such violent protagonists has prompted Robin Mathews in "Private Indulgence and Public Discipline" to describe Ondaatje as a self-indulgent writer who wallows in the "perverse titillation" of violence (40). Mathews believes that such self-indulgence cannot be "a means of figuring forth the internal turmoil . . . of the protagonist and . . . the author, in the face of a dessicated . . . culture which he or she must struggle to survive in"; instead, such self-indulgent authors are "often disconnected from the society except for artist/media connections, and are, . . . all-unconsciously, the most dominated by liberal ruling class ideology" (40). While Ondaatje does celebrate violent individualism in his early works from the position of a privileged class, he does attempt in his later works to reevaluate this aesthetic standpoint; moreover, violence as "perverse titillation" is perhaps an oversimplification of Ondaatje's use of violence. While his works may provide macabre entertainment to some readers, the violence is not merely embellishment, but appears to serve an integral purpose. Ondaatje actually appears to present a psychological argument in which the physical violence of his male aesthetes is in fact a pathological extension of a volatile creativity: in other words, the unmotivated violence of the characters parallels the chaotic intensity of their art.

WILLIAM BONNEY IN *The Collected Works* and Buddy Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* exemplify the socially irresponsible hero: both characters act out the romantic myth of the isolated, male artist unable to function within society, in part because of his anarchic sensitivity. Just as the character Pat Garrett affirms that William Bonney has an "imagination which was usually pointless and never in control" (43) — an imagination subject to macabre hallucinations (10), so also does the character Frank Lewis affirm that Buddy Bolden "was tormented by order, what was outside of it" (37). Both characters stand as models of dynamic individualism. The outlaw William Bonney can "never remain in one position more than five minutes" (44); he possesses a "range for everything" (74); and he remains fascinated with "the same stress as with stars, / the one altered move that will make them maniac" (41). Similarly, the jazzman Buddy Bolden "thought by being in motion" (109); he moved "gradually off the edge of the social world" (64); and he "did nothing but leap into the mass of changes and explore them and all the tiny facets so that eventually he was almost completely governed by fears of certainty" (15). Within both texts, multiple voices articulate conflicting impressions about a protagonist who remains

impossible to define authoritatively: the protagonist is in fact defined paradoxically as something that escapes definition. William Bonney remains an enigma to his peers: "The rather cruel smile, when seen close, turned out to be intricate and witty. You could never tell how he meant a phrase, whether he was serious or joking. From his eyes you could tell nothing at all" (43). Similarly, Buddy Bolden asserts that "[a]s you try to explain me I will spit you, yellow, out of my mouth" (140), and indeed he remains inscrutable to his acquaintances: "Their stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them" (63). Such volatility informs the very art of both protagonists.

William Bonney, for example, describes the process of his own poetic writing as virtually random and automatic: "a pencil that shifts up and sideways / mapping my thinking going its own way / like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood" (72) — "a pencil [that] . . . / goes stumbling into dots" (85). Similarly, Buddy Bolden strives to create perfect, unsystematic music: "Every note new and raw and chance. Never repeated" (95) — a spontaneous music intended to appeal to an audience as ephemeral as a passing parade (93-94). Such art does not valorize a formalized technique: indeed, both the poetry of William Bonney and the music of Buddy Bolden are predominantly concerned with the quality of the creative process, not with the formality of the creative product. Fittingly enough, this dynamic aesthetic is reflected in the very form of the texts in which the two characters appear: just as William Bonney and Buddy Bolden do violence to social codes, so also do the texts themselves do violence to literary codes. Robert Kroetsch in "The Exploding Porcupine" writes that "[i]n our most ambitious writing, we do violence to form" (108), and indeed Ondaatje emulates the aesthetic sensibilities of his protagonist by violating generic boundaries with the same irreverence that William Bonney displays when drifting back and forth across the Canadian border (20). *The Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter* each meander like the path in the Boot Hill cemetery: "the path keeps to no main route for it tangles / like branches of a tree among the gravestones" (9). The texts juxtapose unrelated fragments in the same way that Buddy Bolden mixes together "stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies" (24) in order to produce his magazine *The Cricket*, and just as Bolden plays a conglomeration of blues and hymns, "mixing the Devil's music with His music" (81) in order to produce something stranger than both, so also does Ondaatje produce a hybrid of poetry and prose. The texts, like the characters depicted in them, violently resist definitive categorization.

Ondaatje does formalistic violence by breaking up the narrative syntax of his stories so that they are staged as a series of disordered, textual fragments. Such a writing style calls to mind the disturbing image of the crippled photographer E. J. Bellocq in *Coming Through Slaughter*, a character who defaces the pictures that

he takes and thereby acts out the artistic death-wish, in which “[t]he making and destroying come from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of” (55). Ondaatje suggests through Bellocq that the creative impulse represents an unreliable exorcism of violence, that art represents a precarious means of sustaining the creative mind in the face of its own potential madness. Just as the objects of “violent beauty” made by the mute savage in “Peter” (5: 1) stem from the pain caused by the violent loss of his tongue, so also do Bellocq’s gentle photos of prostitutes stem from his own violent misogyny that causes him eventually to slash his photos, “to romance them later with a knife” (55).² Moreover, just as Peter fails in the end to resist the temptation to rape a woman, so also does Bellocq in the end fail to resist the urge to kill himself. Ondaatje’s depiction of Bellocq actually suggests that male artists are always potentially psychotic, that social integration for them is at best temporary if it is ever at all possible.

WOMEN AS ARTISTS IN fact do not appear to figure largely in Ondaatje’s aesthetic vision;³ instead, women appear to represent the passive victims of male volatility: Tara in “Peter” is brutally raped (5: 1-17), as is Mrs. Fraser in *The Man With Seven Toes* (16); Angela Dickinson in *The Collected Works* is shot in the wrist by a gunman (66); the “mattress whores” in *Coming Through Slaughter* lie beaten and mutilated, their ankles broken by pimps (118); and the woman depicted on the cover of *There’s A Trick With A Knife* stands as the passive target of the male knife-thrower. Teresa de Lauretis in “The Violence of Rhetoric” points out that violence is almost always engendered as a male construct, that the relationship between the victimizer and victim is a gendered paradigm (240): “The discourse of the sciences of man constructs the object as female and the female as object. This . . . is its rhetoric of violence, even when the discourse presents itself as humanistic, benevolent or well-intentioned” (253). Such pornographic objectification of women by Ondaatje is certainly consistent with the kind of violence that he wishes to explore, but while he may faithfully depict this paradigm as an accurate reflection of modern reality, he often refuses to make explicit moral judgements about such patriarchal violence and seems unprepared to acknowledge effective alternatives to an art that requires some male gesture of extremism.

Ondaatje’s romanticization of violent males does begin, nevertheless, to undergo some reappraisal in *Running in the Family*, a work in which the alcoholic father Mervyn Ondaatje is portrayed in a way that, although nostalgic, does little to glorify violent behaviour. Just as William Bonney and Buddy Bolden represent violators, so also does Mervyn Ondaatje deliberately flout established social codes; yet, unlike William Bonney and Buddy Bolden, Ondaatje’s erratic father lives a life

of tragic humour through his “technique of trying to solve one problem by creating another.” Ondaatje goes on to define this anarchic protagonist as “one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut” (200) — an enigma that is again defined paradoxically by its inability to be defined: “[W]e can only guess. Guess around him. To know him from these stray actions . . . told about by those who loved him” (200). Ondaatje also repeats the romantic motif of the male artist by endowing his father with qualities that suggest an isolated, hypersensitive personality: Mervyn, for example, suffers paranoid delusions about the poisoning of his family (199); he strips nude and runs madly into a train tunnel where he spends hours dreaming of suicide (149); and on one occasion, he runs away naked from the train, only to be discovered later holding up five ropes, with a large black dog dangling from each one, as though “[h]e had captured all the evil in the regions he had passed through and was holding it” (182). The text even begins with a dream of Mervyn “chaotic, surrounded by dogs” (21), an image that recalls the madman Livingstone in *The Collected Works* — a man who breeds a race of mad dogs and in the end gets eaten by them.⁴ Mervyn actually follows in the footsteps of his violent, literary predecessors (albeit in a more subdued way) by retreating into “the well of total silence” (199) where he dies as a virtual madman.

Violence in *Running in the Family* is, however, qualitatively different from the violence in earlier texts: Mervyn never kills or maims anyone, despite his volatility. Mervyn’s criminal behaviour is in fact not so much romanticized as pitied. Ondaatje in “Letters and Other Worlds” attributes the quality of “complete empathy” (46) to his father, even though Mervyn “edged / into the terribly acute hatred / of his own privacy” (46), and as Tom Marshall observes in “Layering”:

“[C]omplete empathy” is a rather more positive characterization of the poetic process so often seen in earlier poems as predatory or cannibalistic or suicidal. Perhaps this may even indicate the possibility of a new identification with the real that is now so close that it is no longer an imposition of [Ondaatje’s] private myth of the world or a “suicide into nature” . . . but a reconciliation with the world — a balance that transcends the two poles of destruction and self-destruction. (87)

Just as Ondaatje suggests that the creative works of both Bolden and Bellocq stem paradoxically from destructive impulses, so also does Ondaatje suggest that the articulate emotion in Mervyn’s letters stems from Mervyn’s last anarchic years as a “silent drinker” (54). Mervyn in *Running in the Family* says: “if I revealed this world to you you would suffer for you had no knowledge, no defenses against it” (200) — and here again the implication is that an artist’s severe retreat from the social world may ultimately arise from an unbearable degree of sensitivity to the violence of the social world. Susan Glickman in “The Emerging Myth of Michael Ondaatje” asserts that “[i]t is Ondaatje’s recognition of the adolescent fatuity of the code ‘White Dwarfs’ addresses, its spurious glamour, which makes him deflate it even as he continues to explore its romance” (79), and she goes on to point out

(81) that in "Tin Roof" (published immediately in the wake of *Running in the Family*), Ondaatje admits the possibility that "solitude . . . / is not an absolute, / it is just a resting place" (37) — not necessarily a violent doom.

While Mervyn conforms to the recurring pattern of artistic aphasia, the socio-political implications of language and silence are broached more directly in *Running in the Family*, especially when Ondaatje discusses the colonial history of Ceylon, a country "courted by invaders who . . . claimed everything with the power of the sword or bible or language" (64).⁵ Subjected to a multilingual heritage, the country has, not surprisingly, cultivated a myth of language, a myth that reiterates Ondaatje's own motif of the artistic death-wish: the Sinhalese actually believe that eating the tongue of the thalagoya lizard endows "verbal brilliance" — the side-effects of which include "bad behaviour" and possible death (74). Ondaatje's attitude toward such creative self-destructiveness through the use of language, however, undergoes some reevaluation, for he realizes that the artist's ultimate "violence of silence" amounts to only a private form of social protest:

When the government rounded up thousands of suspects during the Insurgency of 1971, the Vidyalankara campus of the University of Ceylon was turned into a prison camp. The police weeded out the guilty, trying to break their spirit. When the university opened again the returning students found hundreds of poems written on walls, ceilings, and in hidden corners of the campus. Quatrains and free verse about the struggle, tortures, the unbroken spirit, love of friends who had died for the cause. The students went around for days transcribing them into their notebooks before they were covered with whitewash and lye. (84)

Ondaatje begins to recognize that the privacy of silence can be defied via graffiti; such writing can be more than an autotelic act of violent transgression; such writing can also be a revolutionary statement of communal solidarity. Ondaatje responds to the militant, political poetry of the Sri Lankan writer Lakdasa Wikkramasinha (85) by writing a "communal poem" that combines diverse fragments of graffiti found upon the fortress walls of a despot king (92-94). Ondaatje begins to acknowledge that art can be more than the solitary expression of an individual ego in the face of social adversity.

Elsewhere in *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje asserts that language is a metaphorical violence, that "[w]ords such as *love, passion, duty*, are so continually used they grow to have no meaning — except as coins or weapons" (179). Ondaatje breaks from his previous attitude toward the violence of language by stressing that the responsibility of writing is to "keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos" (179), to grant both order and meaning to the apparently disjointed textual fragments that comprise the very structure of his familial history. As in the case of both *The Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, the anarchism in the content of *Running in the Family* is reflected in the fragmented structure, but whereas the shocking violence in the form of the earlier works repre-

sents a rebellious act that rejects social order and moves toward isolation, the subdued violence in the form of this later work represents a revolutionary act that reclaims social order and moves toward integration. Unlike the violence depicted in *The Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, the violence in *Running in the Family* is valued only in conjunction with some ordering principle that can channel such volatile energy toward a productive end.

O NDAATJE IN EFFECT does not reform his politics so much as qualify his romantic ethos. This subtle shift in attitude becomes most explicit in *In the Skin of a Lion*, a work that does not romanticize aesthetes who passionately reject social integration in the name of aphasia, but instead romanticizes aesthetes who passionately serve the social interests of the oppressed. Whereas William Bonney, Buddy Bolden, and Mervyn Ondaatje move away from all social gesture toward silence, the proletarian worker Patrick Lewis moves in the opposite direction and finds in a newly discovered language some sense of social communion and social purpose. Patrick, like his literary predecessors, has “always been alien, the third person in the picture” (156) and can “hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community” (157); however, the politically active character Alice chastizes Patrick for demonstrating the very characteristic that Ondaatje has until now admired: “You believe in solitude, Patrick, in retreat. You can afford to be romantic because you are self-sufficient” (123). Such individualism is seen to be inadequate. Patrick cannot immerse himself in the alienated environment of the Macedonian immigrants until he tries “desperately to leap over the code of language between them” (113), until he abandons his deliberate aphasia.

Although a violent outsider as hypersensitive as William Bonney and Buddy Bolden, Patrick does not conform to the psychological pattern of heroes commemorated in “White Dwarfs.” Whereas the early Ondaatje apparently admires the spontaneous chaos prevalent in the aesthetic sensibilities of the outlaw, the violator of boundaries, the later Ondaatje in *In the Skin of a Lion* now insists: “Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and the order it will become” (146). As Ondaatje emphasizes to Kareda in 1983: “Writing is trying to make order, to understand something about yourself. Orderless situations are, for me, the most interesting things, and I tend to write about the finding out of order” (49). Admittedly, Ondaatje has always been fascinated by sustaining the delicate equilibrium between order and chaos in art, an equilibrium vulnerable to the “one altered move”; however, his earlier works suggest that any attempt to achieve

this unstable balance is self-justifying, while his later works begin to reevaluate the autotelic nature of such an aesthetic. Whereas his earlier works emphasize the chaotic variable in the artistic equation, his later works begin to emphasize the ordered variable in the artistic equation.

Ondaatje's usual motif of creative self-destructiveness is in fact suggested only once in *In the Skin of a Lion* through the figure of Patrick's father, Hazen Lewis, a man "withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus" (15) — a man as silent and as introspective as Ondaatje's own father, Mervyn. Hazen's talent as a dynamiter is described in poetic terms that endow it with aesthetic integrity — like art, it becomes a craft of timing and precision; nevertheless, Hazen has destructive fantasies that recall Bellocq's own nightmares:

[Hazen] was sullen even in the company of his son. All his energy was with the fuse travelling at two minutes to the yard under floorboards, around the trunks of trees, and up into someone's pocket. He kept receiving that image in his mind. Could he do it? The fuse stitched into the cloth of the trouser leg. The man sleeping perhaps by a campfire, the fuse smouldering horizontal into his shirt pocket, blowing out the heart. (18)

Unlike similar images of violence in Ondaatje's earlier works, however, such fantasies of unmotivated destruction are never fulfilled in this work. Whereas the protagonists in *The Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter* exercise violence indiscriminately, often against the innocent, the protagonist Patrick attempts to exercise violence against the exploiter, against Commissioner Harris and his waterworks, his "palace of purification" that represents a cathedral-like monument to alienated labour. The kind of destructiveness seen in earlier works is now endowed with social purpose.

Ondaatje begins to demonstrate a more profound awareness of the sociopolitical implications of silence. Whereas his earlier texts deal with a silence that individuals impose upon themselves in order to escape social ideology, *In the Skin of a Lion* deals with a silence that social ideology imposes upon individuals in order to prevent them from exercising power. Within such a context, silence no longer becomes an act of sociopolitical rebellion, but an act of sociopolitical surrender. Aphasia loses its power to be an effective means of violent protest. Immigrant workers in *In the Skin of a Lion*, for example, perform illegal, agit-prop drama that allegorically mimes their own essential powerlessness resulting from their silence, from their inability to articulate injustice, to speak out effectively with their own voice against official ideology (116-117). Whoever controls discourse, controls official truth, and any socially sanctioned attempt on the part of the oppressed to break their silence implies the possible loss of their own native voice. While the immigrant Nicholas Temelcoff observes that, "[if] he did not learn the language he would be lost" (46), his attempt to learn English from popular songs

on the radio implies a possible willingness to engage the popular ideologies of an imperial culture on their own terms: “He loves his new language, the terrible barriers of it” (43). Non-verbal aggression becomes the only apparent recourse for the immigrant worker who wishes to speak in anger without succumbing to the ruling-class language. *In the Skin of the Lion* thus appears to reject the romance inherent in the “violence of silence” and opts instead for the romance of an art that centralizes the plight of the politically impotent. Whereas Ondaatje’s earlier works reject discourse in the name of private protest, this last work attempts to wrest discourse away from its controllers in the name of social revision.

ACCORDING TO JOHN MOSS in *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel*, “[v]iolence may be trivial, demeaning, horrific or heroic in fiction, but, whatever, it demands a moral response to the conflict that generates it” (12). Critical readers who see that, like Pat Garrett, the early Ondaatje can “come to chaos neutral” (47) may simply decide that Ondaatje leaves the moral reckoning to others; after all, the early Ondaatje, like the narrator in “Billboards,” appears to claim that “[h]ere was I trying to live / with a neutrality so great / I’d have nothing to think of” (33-35); and indeed, such neutrality cannot possibly accommodate moral judgements. Moreover, the early Ondaatje does not seem prepared to elaborate upon the kind of tantalizing comment that William Bonney makes: “A motive? some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence. Was there a source for all this? yup —” (54). While Ondaatje hesitates to broach the socio-political ramifications of his writing, he sees no reason to apologize for his depictions of violence and defends his work in the 1978 *Twelve Voices* interview by saying:

I don’t think I’m a particularly violent poet. . . . I think I have a vision of reality that is totally normal to me. . . . The thing is it’s a very real world to me and if people don’t want to see [violence] as part of the real world, then they’re ignoring it. It’s been said that violence is normal in our lifetime just as good manners were normal to the world that Jane Austen created. You know, it’s a reality. (135-136)

Ondaatje defends his case by alluding to the socially conscious playwright Edward Bond, who also tries to justify the violence of his own work in the “Author’s Preface” to *Lear*:

I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society, and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence.

(v)

While Ondaatje admits in a recent *Paragraph* interview that he no longer trusts “[n]ovels that give you the right way to do things” (5), he does stress the importance of exposing violence, especially the kind that official history tries to ignore: “If there was a kind of direction in [*In the Skin of a Lion*], it was making sure that something got said, to write about that unofficial thing that was happening. There were a lot of strikes, just as violent and extreme as anywhere else, but you hardly ever read about that in Toronto history” (5). While Ondaatje has always emphasized that artistic innovation does not occur without some act of violent intensity, of extreme defamiliarization, he no longer appears to value such intensity purely for its own sake or for its privileged ability to generate a private vision that turns its back upon generalized oppression; instead, he values such intensity for its ability to energize a collective, social vision that resists specific forms of ideological authority.

NOTES

- ¹ “Privacy” here, and elsewhere, refers to any individual disengagement from societal interaction.
- ² Linda Hutcheon has pointed out that photography implies an act of violence: “Taking pictures is a way of both certifying and refusing experience, both a submission to reality and an assault on it. . . . Cameras can engender in the photographer both aggression and a passivity born of impotence” (47).
- ³ The female artists in Ondaatje’s *corpus* of work include such characters as Clara the radio-actress, Anne the writer, and Alice the mime, all in *In the Skin of a Lion*; these female artists are either exploited by men or marginalized by patriarchal society.
- ⁴ Livingstone’s impulse to create something, no matter how grotesque, can only provide an unstable outlet for his latent insanity: “[H]e never showed any sign of madness or quirkiness. As if he left all his madness, all his perverse logic, behind that fence on his farm” (61). Livingstone’s death becomes a metaphor for the Frankenstein complex, in which the male artist, the creator, is destroyed by his art, the thing created.
- ⁵ Douglas Amarasekera’s epigraph to *Running in the Family* emphasizes Ondaatje’s concern with the power of lingual imperialism: “The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat” (9).

WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Nancy & Leonard Tennenhouse. “Representing Violence, or ‘how the west was won’.” *The Violence of Representation*. eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (London: Routledge, 1989): 1-26.
- Barbour, Douglas. “Controlling the Jungle: A Review of *The Dainty Monsters*.” *Spider Blues*. ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985): 111-113.
- Bond, Edward. *Lear* (Norfolk: Cox and Wyman, 1972).
- Davey, Frank. *From There to Here* (Erin: Press Porcepic, 1974).

- Freedman, Adele. "From Gunslingers to Jazz Musicians." *The Globe and Mail* 22 Dec. 1979: Sec. Entertainment, 1.
- Glickman, Susan. "'Philoctetes on the Island' to 'Tin Roof': The Emerging Myth of Michael Ondaatje." *Spider Blues*. ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985): 70-81.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988).
- Kareda, Urjo. "An Immigrant's Song." *Saturday Night* Dec. 1983: 44-51.
- Kroetsch, Robert. "The Exploding Porcupine." *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989): 108-116.
- Lauretis, Teresa de. "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on representation and gender." *The Violence of Representation*. eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (London: Routledge, 1989): 239-258.
- Lee, Dennis. *Savage Fields* (Toronto: Anansi, 1977).
- Mandel, Eli, ed. *Poets of Contemporary Canada 1960-1970*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972).
- Marshall, Tom. "Layering: The Shorter Poems of Michael Ondaatje." *Spider Blues*. ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985): 82-92.
- Mathews, Robin. "Private Indulgence and Public Discipline: Violence in the English Canadian Novel Since 1960." *Violence in the Canadian Novel Since 1960*. eds. Terry Goldie & Virginia Harger-Grinling. (St. John's: Memorial Univ.: 1981): 33-44.
- Moss, John. *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).
- Ondaatje, Michael. "Application for a Driving License." *The Dainty Monsters* (Toronto: Coach House, 1967): 35.
- . "Billboards." *Rat Jelly* (Toronto: Coach House, 1973): 14-15.
- . *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: Anansi, 1970).
- . *Coming Through Slaughter* (Toronto: Anansi, 1976).
- . "A Conversation with Michael Ondaatje." eds. Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie. *White Pelican* 1.2 (Spring 1971): 6-15.
- . "Elizabeth." *The Dainty Monsters* (Toronto: Coach House, 1967): 68-69.
- . Interview. *Manna* 1 (March 1972): 19-22.
- . "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje." ed. Sam Solecki. *Rune* 2 (Spring 1975): 39-54.
- . *In the Skin of a Lion* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987).
- . *The Man With Seven Toes* (Toronto: Coach House, 1969).
- . "Moving to the Clear: Michael Ondaatje." *Twelve Voices: Interviews with Canadian Poets*. ed. Jon Pearce (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1980): 129-144.
- . "Peter." *The Dainty Monsters* (Toronto: Coach House, 1967): 71-77.
- . *Running in the Family* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982).
- . "Letters & Other Worlds." *There's A Trick With A Knife I'm Learning To Do* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979): 44-46.
- . "Tin Roof." *Secular Love* (Toronto: Coach House, 1984): 21-43.

- . "War Machine." *Rat Jelly* (Toronto: Coach House, 1973): 11.
- . "Where the Personal and the Historical Meet." With Cary Fagan. *Paragraph* 12.2 (1990): 3-5.
- . "White Dwarfs." *Rat Jelly* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973): 70-71.
- Pierce, Gretchen. "Canada Gives Writer 'Sense of Place' Author of 'Billy' Keeps Low Profile." *Halifax Chronicle Herald* 10 Oct. 1975: 30.
- Scobie, Stephen. "The Lies Stay In: A Review of *There's A Trick With A Knife I'm Learning To Do*." *Spider Blues*. ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal: Vehicule, 1985): 117-120.

THE CIDA POET WRITES OF GUYANA

Cyril Dabydeen

Here there's no Orinoco, Demerara,
or darker rivers —
but journeys, sinuous; no recalling
Botanic Gardens, sidewalks of manatees,
snake slithering in dry grass . . .

Only flamboyant trees lining a roadway,
your face ruddy, remembering
a wife's death and yet smiling at love
as your son conjures up Africa's past,
visions too obscure to truly remember . . .

Making territory out of ancestry —
mutterings of other languages
with false accents, a tongue's
twister I say —