

ONDAATJE'S METAMORPHOSES

“*In the Skin of a Lion*”

Michael Greenstein

“He who first proclaimed in architecture the dynamic equilibrium of the masses or first constructed the groined arch brilliantly expressed the psychological essence of feudalism. . . . In the Middle Ages a man unconsciously recognized the plain fact of his own existence as service, as a kind of heroic act.”

— OSIP MANDELSTAM, “François Villon”

ROBERT ALTER'S DESCRIPTION of contemporary fiction captures much, but not all, of Michael Ondaatje's prize-winning novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*: “there is a cultivated quality of rapid improvization, often a looseness of form; love of pastiche, parody, slapdash invention; a wilful neglect of psychological depth and subtlety or consecutiveness of characterization; a cavalier attitude toward consistency of incident, plot unity, details of milieu, and underlying all these a kind of despairing skepticism, often tinged with the exhilaration of hysteria, about the validity of language and the very enterprise of fiction.”¹ What this description fails to take into account are the historical and political dimensions of certain postmodern texts, such as *In the Skin of a Lion*, but for those categories we may turn to Ihab Hassan: “in the question of postmodernism there is a will and counterwill to intellectual power, an imperial desire of the mind, but this will and desire are themselves caught in a historical moment of supervention, if not exactly of obsolescence.”² Hassan goes on to list various criteria distinguishing modernism (design, hierarchy, totalization, centring) from postmodernism (chance, anarchy, decreation, dispersal); according to these, millionaire Ambrose Small and Commissioner Rowland Harris would be masters of modernism in Ondaatje's historical novel, while most of the other characters pitted against them would constitute counter discourses of post-modernism. Or, to put the matter more precisely in Jonathan Arac's terms: “this new Marxism and postmodernism share the conviction that literature and theory and criticism are not only contemplative, not mere superstructure, but active; they share commitments to human life in history.”³

Like many other postmodern texts, *In the Skin of a Lion* opens with multiple epigraphs, dedications, and acknowledgements that signal its intertextuality. The first epigraph is taken from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Babylonian legend of creation: “The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion.”⁴ These words are spoken by Gilgamesh, the godlike builder, after the death of his friend Enkidu, a wild or natural man. In Ondaatje’s allegory, Patrick Lewis and Nicholas Temelcoff, two heroic builders and men of nature, lament the death of Alice Gull. With all the melancholy of Ecclesiastes, this passage points to a levelling that pervades the novel — political, economic, and cultural stooping from High Modernism to the horizontals of late-capitalist post-modernism. Moreover, what Ondaatje further emphasizes in the course of his narrative is a process of allegorical metamorphosis from high to low as he progresses from Ovid through Kafka and beyond.⁵ And if his first epigraph deals with an ancient epic or high mimetic model, his second epigraph from John Berger, Marxist postmodernist, goes a long way to undercut any sense of epic totality. “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one” reminds us of multiple perspectives and fragments for reader and writer wandering through a verbal wilderness.⁶

Aside from their internal relationships to the rest of the novel, these introductory quotations serve as markers of postmodernism in contrast to less accessible (Latin or Greek) modernist epigraphs in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce’s *Portrait* alludes to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes” — a picture of Daedalus applying his mind to obscure arts. Where High Modernism courts obscurity as in Stephen Dedalus’s aesthetic theories, postmodernism treads a middle course on human ground and remains equally skeptical of heights and depths. “It is important to be close to the surface of the earth” (141), and equally important, the surface of the text. In place of Daedalus’s labyrinthine artifice we find ordinary workers on straight bridges, in tunnels, or in tanning factories. Ondaatje deflates the hubris of modernism in his pastiche of labourer as a young man, and artist as cityscape. The incident of a nun falling from a bridge parodies traditional myth: during the fall she is described as a “black-garbed bird” (32), and after the fall the process of bridge building continues as if nothing had occurred — “a giant bird lifting one of the men into the air” (31). Man and machine are extensions of one another, while Alicia the parrot domesticates and completes the parody of the entire incident. Like the parrot in Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook* and like Ondaatje’s workers, Alicia hangs in its cage in the Ohrida Lake Restaurant (itself an ironic descendant of Greek culture even as Cato is transformed from Roman statesman to union fighter, and Caravaggio from Renaissance artist to another kind of painter and honest thief). Just as this parodic parrot develops a language, so the nun assumes her name when she is transformed into Alice Gull, actress *engagée*, removed from convents to the

Parrot Theatre in her postlapsarian identity. Robert Scholes comments on this type of projection of a cultural fantasy onto an allegorical scene: “[post]modern fabulation, like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of an ethically controlled fantasy.”⁷ From *pseudacris triseriata* (66) to *homo sapiens* in this book of beasts, Hazen Lewis calls “Birdie fly out and the crow fly in, crow fly out and give birdie a spin” (185) around a decentering square dance.

FROM THE OUTSET, an inset passage frames the text, calling into question the relationship between inner and outer, structurally and thematically, when we consider how an outsider like protagonist Patrick Lewis comes to inhabit a lion’s skin. “This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning.” Reader, writer, and rider together gather Ondaatje’s story, participating in a dialogic process. But who is in the driver’s seat — Hana Gull or Patrick Lewis? In this opening frame Hana is the passenger, but at the novel’s end Hana drives, adjusting the rear-view mirror to her height while Patrick, luxuriating in the passenger’s seat, talks the gears to her. In this early morning drive, reader and writer shift gears, exchange positions, and adapt that rear-view mirror to reverse history’s mimetic process, as Patrick “brings together” and Hana “gathers” corners of an elliptical story. In response to his opening question, “Do you see?” Patrick concludes the novel with “Lights” to focus cinematically on an unbetrayed countryside and an equally betrayed history, to highlight horizons of inner and outer, and to examine metamorphoses. Through her looking-glass along the roadway to Marmora, Alice Gull’s daughter reviews Toronto’s past in fact and fiction.

“Little Seeds” begins in the third-person present tense, a historic present occasionally switching to past even as spatial shifts from window to window create a cinematic, surrealistic effect in the early dawn. “If he is awake early enough the boy sees the men”; this conditional announces the awakening of Patrick Lewis from nameless boyhood to manhood, a coming of age parallel to Toronto’s growth earlier this century. Like David Canaan in *The Mountain and the Valley*, Patrick window watches as a procession of loggers passes his farmhouse as if in a Michael Snow montage. Like Ondaatje’s political direction in this novel, they move from right to left, just as Patrick must soon move outside his fenestrated cocoon to join a larger community of workers. When these unnamed men place their hands on cows’ warm flanks to receive heat, they participate in more than thermal exchange, for “hands” symbolize manual labour as well as a bridging with humanity, nature, and art — bovine and textual black and white. (Pastoral and industrial worlds intersect later in the novel when Nicholas Temelcoff tries to “shepherd the new ribs of steel onto the edge of the bridge” [40].) These thirty loggers constitute a

“strange community,” a “collection of strangers” who do not own land around Bellrock. “It takes someone else, much later, to tell the boy” (8) their identity, but for now these estranged immigrants remain an enigma to Patrick and his uninitiated reader.

If we have to wait later for revelation, then we have to read earlier to locate Bellrock, not on a map of Ontario, but in an earlier poem by Ondaatje. “Walking to Bellrock” describes two figures “in deep water,” wading through the silt of history: “The plot of the afternoon is to get to Bellrock.”⁸ If this poem has a plot, then the later novel contains a poem about history. In terms of intertextual literary history, we witness Ondaatje’s metamorphosis from the germ of a poem to “Little Seeds,” a prose poem where boundaries between fact and fiction, lyric and narrative break down in dialogues between texts. And this dialectic of boundaries, which parallels postmodern levelling of hierarchies in class and culture, carries through toward the end of the novel when Ambrose Small retreats to Patrick’s birthplace. Indeed, the last two sections, “Caravaggio” and “Maritime Theatre,” present alternating versions of loosening structures and zones. Painting the tin roof of the Kingston Penitentiary blue (not the modernist hue of Wallace Stevens’ guitar but the more improvised “spider blues” of jazz), Patrick and Caravaggio become uncertain of clear boundaries so that the painted painter becomes indistinguishable from the sky. Through this metamorphosis the prisoner gains his freedom and comments, “Demarcation. . . . That is all we need to remember” (179). And the reader remembers these instructions when Caravaggio later makes Patrick invisible in preparation for dynamiting the tunnel. “Demarcation” (228), Caravaggio repeats, and we get the sense that it means its opposite — an effacement of all distinctions in air or water, fire or earth, four elements for a dynamics of making and destroying.

Similarly, Ondaatje plays with notions of horizon in his cinematic levelling and dissolving. Patrick’s entry to Toronto is marked by a sign in Union Station — HORIZON — at some distance from Sinclair Ross’s prairie town. “Horizon” seems to imply “barrier”; Patrick’s relationship with Alice has a horizon (137), and he becomes aware of his own inner horizon beyond which he cannot leap (157). Caravaggio, instructor of demarcation, sees and feels no horizon when attacked in his cell, while the millionaire thief Ambrose Small constructs separate high walls so that his lover Clara Dickens cannot see the horizon that holds him together (213, 215). Ondaatje opens horizons to admit history and politics from a newer perspective that endlessly questions: “questions about how ideologies are formed, the process whereby conventions are developed, the need for individuals to exercise their own imaginative and linguistic powers lest these powers be co-opted by others.”⁹ Left-hand lyrics, narratives, and photographs with open lens expose the horizontal tricks of men walking in another march of history.

FROM HIS FIRST DESCRIPTIONS of Bellrock's winter, Ondaatje switches immediately to summer, this seasonal metamorphosis pointing to the loggers' evanescence, their absence filled by summer's insects. At night Patrick studies his geography books, "testing the names to himself, mouthing out the exotic" (9), his apprenticeship reflecting his author's larger concerns for a self-reflexive naming of place and history through an oral tradition that combines exotic Nepal with ex-centric Bellrock. A postmodern reader of surfaces, Patrick closes his book and brushes it with his palms, "feeling the texture of the pebbled cover and its coloured dyes which create a map of Canada" (9). Just as a book's coloured dyes create Canada, so the dyers' hands at Wickett and Craig's tannery recreate an unwritten history of Canadian labour. "They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries" (130). Patrick moves from place to place, book to book, window to window — a horizontal shape shifter who exchanges roles so that other readers or insects may temporarily assume the role of protagonist during a summer night's inquiry.

From his early unmediated vision in Bellrock he will proceed to the cultural mediation of Toronto's Riverdale Library to learn the real names of these hoppers and moths. "There will suddenly be order and shape to these nights" (9), provided that the reader remains open to Patrick's epiphanies and books, fictional and formal titles, imagination and documentary. Examining these prehistoric creatures up close he haunts them, even as they haunt him, and even as Ondaatje enters the skin of history's previously unexamined: "He wants conversation — the language of damsel flies who need something to translate their breath the way he uses the ocarina to give himself a voice, something to leap with over the wall of this place" (10). Ondaatje's dialogic imagination gives voice to these dainty monsters, transforms lyric into narrative, privileges the underprivileged, and ultimately transcends all boundaries in his postmodern leap into history.

No sooner does he describe these summer nights than he shifts back to a winter scene in his nameless region where Patrick and his father Hazen rescue a cow that has fallen through the ice. This levelling act of salvation will be repeated in different forms in the rest of the novel, but in this section of "Little Seeds" as soon as Patrick returns home he imagines himself through winter and into midsummer when he helps his father set fire to caterpillar tents. These caterpillar flames are a prelude to mightier ignitions: Hazen practises blowing up an outline of his son's body before dynamiting the landscape around Bellrock. Chopping into hemlock, Hazen imagines levelling the entire landscape; the idea of an explosion strikes him as an epiphany, so the abashed father, like his son, becomes an explosive artist, a liberator of landscape for the transformation of pulp from tree to text. Hazen works at surfaces, unearthing a hidden history, following the horizontal zig-zag

of fuses. He is meticulous in washing his clothes every evening in case of remnants, "little seeds of explosive on his apparel" (19). Like these superficial bits, little seeds of knowledge spark Patrick and little seeds of narrative surprise the reader who follows Patrick and some lightning bugs to the river in winter. Out of season fireflies must be some kind of *ignis fatuus* belonging to carnivalesque loggers — "a coven, or one of those strange druidic rituals — illustrations of which he had pored over in his favourite history book" (21). Ondaatje's favourite game challenges the master narrative of history books with little seeds of fire and passion. "(Years later, Clara making love to him in a car, catching his semen in a handkerchief and flinging it out onto bushes on the side of the road. *Hey, lightning bug!* he had said, laughing, offering no explanation [20].)" No explanation is required for this dissemination of white dwarfs just as no explanation is needed for the procession of fire on ice. For the eleven-year-old's *rite de passage* a "tree branch reached out, its hand frozen in the ice" (21), while he longs to hold hands with these skaters under bridges, past boundaries. "But on this night he did not trust either himself or these strangers of another language enough to . . . join them" (22). Later, with the evolution of little seeds, Patrick will join the hands of immigrants and translate their other language. "Little Seeds" is a world without women or speech: no mother for Patrick, no wife for Hazen or the loggers, silence for skaters of another language awaiting germination and engendering.

From 5 A.M. and the fire of Bellrock we move to fire at 5 A.M. in Toronto, scene of "The Bridge." Just as the loggers do not own the land they traverse, so these tarrers of the Dominion Bridge Company "don't own the legs or the arms jostling against their bodies" (25), for they are alienated labourers (*bitumiers, bitumatori*) without a voice in history. Like one of Turner's cityscapes, the "bridge goes up in a dream," as Ondaatje lends his lyrical imagination not to nature but to the mechanical: a "man is an extension of hammer, drill, flame" (26) involved, like an artist, in the process of building bridges. Four thousand photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time-lapse evolution confirm John Berger's theory of pluralism, not modernism's single story but the multiplicity of postmodernism. Wordsworth's view from Westminster Bridge belongs to Romanticism, Hart Crane's "The Bridge" to modernism, and Ondaatje's Bloor Street Viaduct to postmodernism. Crane poses the question, "Whose head is swinging from the swollen strap"? Ondaatje answers; both could write "Chaplinsque" or "The Moth That God Made Blind" or "The phonographs of hades in the brain / Are tunnels that re-wind themselves." With its historical revisionism, *In the Skin of a Lion* focuses on political ceremonies, not from the point of view of politicians but from the perspective of an anonymous public. Thus, a cyclist, "a blur of intent," beats the officials across the bridge, but even he is not the first to claim it, for the previous night the workers carried their candles across "like a wave of civilization, a net of summer insects over the valley" (27). Ondaatje's similes and metaphors bridge history,

democracy, horizontal voids, nature, and a post-Romantic organicism from section to section of his novel. The metaphor of the Text, according to Barthes, is that of the *network*.¹⁰

Even when he presents the official version from Commissioner Harris's viewpoint, Ondaatje challenges traditional historical accounts. "Before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting" (29). To map history, a tall tale follows: five nuns march across the bridge, one is blown off, disappears yet is saved by Nicholas Temelcoff, unsung hero and artist. The structure of Prince Edward Bridge or Bloor Street Viaduct is the structure of society with its various levels; and the nun's fall initiates a levelling metamorphosis when she abandons her habit to emerge as Alice Gull. Just as Temelcoff saves Alice, so Ondaatje rescues him from archival oblivion. "Again and again you see vista before you and the eye must search along the wall of sky to the speck of burned paper across the valley that is him, an exclamation mark, somewhere in the distance between bridge and river. He floats at the three hinges of the crescent-shaped steel arches. These knit the bridge together. The moment of cubism" (34). A metafictional exclamation mark on paper and an intertextual reference to Berger's "moment of cubism" place *In the Skin of a Lion* squarely in the tradition of postmodernism. Like Patrick and his father, Temelcoff is a solitary artist bridging the century, knitting modern to postmodern; like Bertha in Leonard Cohen's *The Favourite Game*, he is a spinner linking everyone, for Ondaatje has gone one step further than Cohen who had placed Breavman temporarily in a foundry.¹¹

INDEED, WITH ITS DEDICATION and four epigraphs, Berger's essay "The Moment of Cubism" serves as a kind of blueprint for *In the Skin of a Lion*. Intertextual bridges span Arnold Hauser's "There are happy moments, but no happy periods in history" and El Lissitzky's "The work of art is therefore only a halt in the becoming and not a frozen aim on its own."¹² Hauser's remark carries backward to the sorrowful *Epic of Gilgamesh* while El Lissitzky's Bergsonian line leads directly to Ondaatje's aesthetics. Ondaatje's cubistic moment arises out of Berger's description of an unhappy period earlier this century. "An interlocking world system of imperialism; opposed to it, a socialist international; . . . the increasing use of electricity, the invention of radio and the cinema; the beginnings of mass production; . . . the new structural possibilities offered by the availability of steel and aluminum."¹³ Ondaatje displaces an interlocking system with his cinematic intertext replete with poststructural possibilities coursing through metallic surfaces. Cubists may have imagined the world transformed, but Canada's post-cubist imagines the very process of transformation, running through the family of mankind,

coming through slaughters of animals and labour, questioning the Enlightenment's progress with later process.

Consider once again the metamorphosis of a silent nameless nun into Alice Gull, vociferous political agitator. Abandoning her habit, she saves Temelcoff with her veil, an exchange of skins. From the radio's lyrics, from the Macedonian bar, from Temelcoff's injured skin, she learns a new language. "Now the parrot has a language" (37), "Words on the far side of her skin" (38), the zinc counter's surface an edge of another country, not Homeric Hellenism but Macedonian immigration with its difficult language — all of these problematize the texture and flux of language. Alice's penetration of society, her fall from an established church order, parallels Nicholas's absorption into Upper America, for they both learn new languages. When silent film metamorphoses into talking picture, North America receives a language that lights the way for immigration. Fairy tales, tall tales, translation dreams, and oral insinuation prepare for transatlantic adjustment. Alice and Nicholas twin: with his shears she cuts strips of her black habit to make a skirt for the street, while he sees Parliament Street from her point of view, the landscape transformed. He hangs like a bird, releases the catch on the pulley, and slides free of the bridge. Man and woman have been caught and liberated by the bridge joining east to west, outsider to insider, premodern to postmodern.

Like Nicholas Temelcoff, Patrick Lewis comes to Toronto as an immigrant and searches for Ambrose Small, but meets his mistress, Clara Dickens, instead. With his "brick" of a name, he falls in love with "the complex architecture of her past" (66), the historical and archi-textual structure of *In the Skin of a Lion*. When she accuses Patrick of having no remorse, he replies, "A strange word. It suggests a turning around on yourself" (67). This character trait transforms into the textual title of the second section of Book 2, "Remorse," suggesting self-reflexiveness. Character in print or person turns on itself, transforming representation and self-referentiality so that oral sex extends dialogue and little seeds: "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" (69). Interception and interruption characterize two ways of proceeding through Ondaatje's text: narrative pushes the reader forward while lyrical imagery turns around on itself. Vying with this white dwarf are the grey peacock or surplus figure attached to Small, and the green tree frog attached to the window of their room. In their erotic history Clara puts her mouth to this green belly against glass while Patrick slices Ambrose vertically in two with his penknife to exorcise him from Clara's mind. Ambrose is missing, Patrick disappears into Clara who got lost in piano music, Nicholas looks for his absent nun, and the reader becomes another searcher refilling historical absences with Ondaatje in the camouflage of Ontario's postmodern lightning bugs and off-white characters.

Patrick's oneiric trick with his penknife belongs within a pattern of cutting the epidermis of sensibility. Loggers emerge from their torso-sized windows (their skins of vision) to skate on blades made of old knives transforming the domestic into the cutting edge of the exotic. Ondaatje's postmodern utensils slice into fragments for pastiche. Hazen has always taught Patrick to save rope: "Always unknot. Never cut!" (14), yet he uses his knife to slice rope in an outrageous, luxurious act. Hazen's philosophy instructs the reader in strategies of reading — join with the writer wherever possible, but severing instead of bridging may also be necessary. Hazen cuts timber before graduating to dynamite. When Caravaggio quits the bridge after a year he cuts the thongs with a fish knife, thereby severing his nexus to labour and bridge. Temelcoff assembles rope, but Alice uses his wire shears to cut her habit. Artist, baker, and acrobat, "Nicholas is not attached to the travellers, his rope and pulleys link up only with the permanent steel of a completed section of the bridge" (40). Concrete poetry takes on a different meaning when he begins "to sing various songs, breaking down syllables and walking around them as if laying the clauses out like tackle on a pavement to be checked for worthiness, picking up one he fancies for a moment then replacing it with another" (42-43). Deconstructing language, the poststructural *bricoleur* juxtaposes its parts in metonymic sequences for the reader to reconstruct; that is, the reader builds real and fictional structures with character and author. Reader's, writer's, and Nicholas's "eyes hook to objects" (42) and to language — the double hook of making and destroying, connecting and breaking, representing and self-reflecting.

Clara Dickens's father uses a cow razor to shave his hounds to the skin, transforming and naming them with paint on their surfaces. Clara and Alice slip into tongues, impersonate people, and cut paper with draper's scissors to perform their spirit paintings, a parodic process. Denied access to the feminine earlier in his life, Patrick awakens to the magic of Clara and Alice. "He feels more community remembering this than anything in his life. Patrick and the two women. A study for the New World. Judith and Holofernes. St. Jerome and the Lion. Patrick and the Two Women. He loves the tableau, even though being asleep he had not witnessed the ceremony" (79). Incident transformed to art: New World and new age demand a different kind of canvas, inserting the past yet repainting the palimpsest with communal lyricism — *In the Skin of a Lion* sans St. Jerome. In his confrontation with Ambrose Small, Patrick uses his knife to cut open his burning coat and to cut Small's shoulder. After this accident Clara shaves him, wiping the razor in the quilt. "This was the way to know somebody's face" (98), for the skin of character or the surface of a postmodern text exposes itself through the pigments of pentimento. "She wanted to paint his face, to follow the lines of his cheek and eyebrow with colours. Make another spirit painting of him. He was less neutral now, his skin like the texture of a cave that would transform anything painted on it. She lathered his face, wanting to sculpt him" (98). Postmodernism transmutes

the primitive, probes surfaces and contiguous lines, and leaves traces: “discovering even the print of her hand perfect on the wallpaper, a print of blood on the English flowers” (100) — palimpsest of body against paper in the skin of a line.

Searcher turns tunneller turns tanner with his pilot knife slicing the hides in straight lines. The artist’s manual dexterity serves Patrick well: “Their knives weaved with the stride of their arms and they worked barefoot as if walking up a muddy river, slicing it up into tributaries. It was a skill that insisted on every part of the body’s balance” (129), like the loggers balancing on the Napanee River. Having spent his whole life learning tricks with a knife, Patrick saves Caravaggio whose throat has been slit in prison, but in the final section, “Maritime Theatre,” he cuts his own throat tunnelling through to Harris. Patrick’s curved pilot knife boomerangs in remorse, turning in on itself, another contradictory emblem of freedom and destruction, self-referentiality and realistic representation.

KNIVES CHANGE SHAPES, but there are other instruments of transformation in Ondaatje’s repertoire on the bridge from modernism to post-modernism. Shifting points of view, manipulation of perspective, or sleight of hand over surfaces also cause transformations. From the beginning of the novel when Patrick moves from window to window with no women in sight, we later move to Alice, striding from one frame of glass to another, watching Patrick depart for the train station. Ondaatje’s montage immediately juxtaposes Patrick’s vision against the train window, so cold after the previous night’s warmth. “Hungry for Clara, he thinks about Alice as if he has not focused on her before, as if Alice being touched by Clara has grown magically, fully formed” (78). Or fully transformed, as Patrick’s vision connects beyond himself and a *ménage à trois* into the visionary company of feminism and Marxism. Searching for Alice with a flashlight after her political performance gives Patrick additional insight. “What had been theatrical seemed locked within metamorphosis” (120). To unlock metamorphosis is to break down boundaries between drama, poetry, narrative, and cinema, and to unmake faces when Clara shaves Patrick, Patrick wipes paint from Alice’s face, and the boy Al unmask the painter Caravaggio. “Palace of Purification” shrinks under a microscope to “an eye muscle having to trust a fingertip to remove that quarter-inch of bright yellow around her sight” (121). Even at this minuscule level of metonymy, hand-eye co-ordination is paramount to establish communal feeling. A translator who himself undergoes transformations, Patrick is a “chameleon among the minds of women” (128) who leave him in custody of a blind iguana, while Nicholas Temelcoff, bridge builder turned baker, participates in the “metamorphosis of food” (149).

At the centre of the novel, "Palace of Purification," the longest section, focuses on the metafictionality of metamorphosis from "Little Seeds" to "Maritime Theatre." Arthur Goss's camera receives the image of two men in the tunnel under Lake Ontario; in receiving this image, the reader simultaneously participates in and distances himself from the labour of tunnelling. For every empathetic push of representation there is a surface alienation of self-referentiality to emphasize the workers' alienation and exploitation. Like his secret sharer, Nicholas, Patrick separates himself from the others only to reinsert himself in the unfinished choreography of 1930. Similarly the play (within the play) at the waterworks invites participation and paradoxically objectification; the illegal gathering acts as a *mise en abyme* for political subversion, for rewriting twentieth-century Canadian history by focusing on a disenfranchised minority. A community of immigrants oppose Harris's single-minded modernist design: populism contests palatial hubris, the underprivileged rise to privilege, putrefaction challenges purification, postmodernism goes after modernism. After dusk disappears into the earth, the multitudes, who had disappeared into the earth all day throughout history, arrive in silence. At this party and political meeting they trespass in response to the ways history has bypassed their efforts to construct a different society. Forty puppets on stage in costumes of several nations surround one life-sized puppet, the central character of this carnivalesque performance. If their stage is a "dangerous new country" (116), then this play re-enacts or caricatures an entire culture where distinctions between people and puppets break down. "A plot grew" (117) — at once metafictional and insurrectionary. Defined by gesture and detail of character, the hero links them all in this favourite game that recalls Temelcoff's heroic linking on the bridge. Barriers between actors and audience dissolve in this parody watched by Patrick watched by the reader *en abyme*. Underneath the mask with the manic hand trying to gesture a language is Alice Gull, and when Patrick goes backstage to find her he feels like an outsider intruding on a king's court.

To these overdetermined presences of photography and allegorical theatre, Ondaatje adds the role of a painter who would likewise frame scenes of labour to distance and embrace in a newer mimesis. "If he were an artist he would have painted them but that was false celebration. What did it mean in the end to look aesthetically plumaged on this October day in the east end of the city five hundred yards from Front Street? What would the painting tell?" (130). Ondaatje's painting would retell history to open ends and expose truths in false celebrations. With Alice's help Patrick undergoes a transformation in Toronto's east end intricate with history and ceremony; "the irony of reversals" (133) displaces Macedonians and Finns from margins to the centre of Canadian society. Musicians and writers come to the aid of painters to convert Patrick from mere bystander to political activist, yet the act of writing *In the Skin of a Lion* underscores the irony of action: "If only it were possible that in the instance something was written down — idea or emotion

or musical phrase — it became known to others of the era” (133). A belated *In the Skin of a Lion* disseminates this oral history even as Bizet’s *Carmen* transformed another kind of oral history: “The rejected *Carmen* of 1875 turning so many into lovers of opera. And Verdi in the pouring rain believing he was being turned into a frog [Caravaggio into Randolph Frog] — even this emotion realized by his contemporaries” (133). To add to this pastiche of canonization, Alice invokes Conrad’s letters to convert Patrick: “I have taught you that the sky in all its zones is mortal. . . . Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects” (135). Conrad first brings the heavens down to earth, then loosens structures or deconstructs reality in preparing for a shift from modernism to postmodernism.

Patrick the searcher soon turns into a researcher haunting the Riverdale Library with his author and reader looking over his shoulder at books and photographs juxtaposed in metonymic pastiche. He tries to match a photograph from Hana’s suitcases with newspaper photographs. “In books he had read, even those romances he had swallowed during childhood, Patrick never believed that characters lived only on the page. They altered when the author’s eye was somewhere else. Outside the plot there was a great darkness, but there would of course be daylight elsewhere on earth. Each character had his own time zone, his own lamp, otherwise they were just men from nowhere” (143). Illuminated book within book within text — Patrick lives on the surface of a self-referential page, but goes beyond to a representational world replete with *petits récits* of history with their shifting multiplicities and mortal time zones *ad astra*. These texts take on a physical texture, the proximity and rub of skin: “All his life Patrick Lewis has lived beside novels and their clear stories. Authors accompanying their heroes clarified motives” (82). Readers accompanying novelists seek this clarity which Patrick discovers in an epiphany, not on olympian heights of solitude, but amid a street-band. Intratextual and extratextual, a self-reflexive protagonist “saw himself gazing at so many stories . . . knowing now he could add music by simply providing the thread of a hum. He saw the interactions, saw how each one of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves” (144). An outsider among outsiders, Patrick the solitary joiner finds community and is transformed from mere observer into active participant in Ondaatje’s postmodern quest. “His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night web — all of these fragments of a human order. . . . the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned” (145). Falling to democratic-socialist horizontals and nocturnal webs of light from Finnish skaters to the drive to Marmora constitutes the fragments of *In the Skin of a Lion* which readers must realign to comprehend another kind of history — one that doesn’t turn a blind eye to detritus or writing on the wall.

Ondaatje’s narrator admires the American photographer Lewis Hine who be-

trayed official histories by locating evils and hidden purity, by realigning chaos and order. “His photographs are rooms one can step into” (145), but disadvantaged Patrick never sees these photographs nor reads Conrad’s letters, although he does step into rooms to gaze into a poetics of space in camera. As close as Patrick is to language, his creator’s irony distances him and his readers from it, teasing them through the touch of metafiction. “Her favourite sentence hovers next to Patrick as he awakens” (146). Alice’s post-Romantic sentence about celestial mortality seems as tangible as her rosary or sumac bracelet which are juxtaposed with Patrick’s cutting into leather. These, in turn, coexist on the same page with references to the eleventh-century’s Bayeux Tapestry, all of which requires authorial instruction as to how every novel should begin: “Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human” (146). Subverting Aristotelian hierarchies, this postmodern *énonciation* reverses didacticism insofar as it demands an *un*-learning of traditional strategies of reading. “Meander if you want to get to town” steps outside of the text only to reinsert itself in the wilderness on the road from Bellrock to Marmora. Again like his reader, Patrick “turns the page backwards” even as Hana looks into her rear-view mirror to understand her Canadian origins. “All these fragments of memory . . . so we can retreat from the grand story and stumble accidentally upon a luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still. Those moments, those few pages in a book we go back and forth over” (148).

THAT COLLECTIVE “WE” — writer, reader, character — in our belated retreat from and retreatment of history reverse concepts of luxury so that we elevate detritus above ground, somewhere between tunnels and bridge. No longer grand inquisitors at the still point of modernism, we interrogate foreground and background from agitated cesspools to a mortal sky. Within a chain reaction or network of metamorphosis Patrick transforms Nicholas Temelcoff while Ondaatje shifts gears on readers’ habits. “Patrick’s gift, that arrow into the past, shows him [Temelcoff] the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories” (149). Ondaatje’s arrow whistles *petits récits* that invert wealth and heroism; Patrick sews Nicholas into history only after he has stripped Ambrose Small of his surplus figure of capital. While the likes of Small and Harris must be submerged in a postmodernist version of history, the community of fictional others rise to the surface. Alice describes a play to Patrick in which several actresses share the role of heroine: a powerful matriarch removes her mantel and passes it to minor characters. “In this way even a silent daughter could put on the cloak and be able to break through her chrysalis into language. Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story” (157).

As a decentering star breaks down in the sky's mortal zones, the structure on stage also loosens into multiple stories transforming chrysalis into lunar moths with linguistic mouths. Patrick and other outsiders assume responsibility in their skins within *In the Skin of a Lion*, and it is up to the reader to peel away each epidermal layer, not necessarily to arrive at a final essence, but to participate in the process of skinning. By the end of the metafictional "Palace of Purification" Patrick finds himself moving towards the centre of a field, but Ondaatje's technique of cinematically framing this scene creates an aesthetic distance compounded by shifts in all tenses. "When he was twelve he turned the pages always towards illustration and saw the heroes carry the women across British Columbian streams. . . . This is only a love story. He does not wish for plot and its consequences" (160). With a cavalier attitude toward consistency of incident or plot unity, Ondaatje illustrates his text without the consequences of plot.

As Patrick Lewis reads in the library, alongside him on the shelves sit Ondaatje, Atwood, Berger, Bowering, Cohen, Findley, Fuentes, García Márquez, Hawkes, Hutcheon, Hodgins, Kroetsch, Munro, Rooke, Rushdie, Scobie, Solecki, Watson, and other poets, novelists, critics, and readers. But the library is only a stone's throw from the bridge, Patrick's scene of action: "As the agent of action is dispersed, so is the possibility of voluntary intervention, hence politics; postmodernism of course knows that the absence of politics is political, and (sometimes) fears the consequences of aloofness."¹⁴ *In the Skin of a Lion* intervenes between library and bridge as Ondaatje traverses Ontario's history from a perspective of *différance*. Turning pages, readers turn into others, shedding light and skin with chameleons, frogs, iguanas, and moths in their fables of identity or counter histories of the imagination where communal desire goes against the grain of reification. Another young man from the provinces has brought his seed catalogue to the city to rebuild after Gilgamesh.

NOTES

- ¹ Robert Alter, *Partial Magic*, as quoted in Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1985), 31-32.
- ² Ihab Hassan, "The Question of Postmodernism," in *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1980), 119. See also D. W. Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984).
- ³ Jonathan Arac, ed., "Introduction" to *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), ix. In the same volume see Bruce Robbins, "Feeling Global: John Berger and Experience," 145-61. In the same series see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984). For further discussions see *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), which contains important essays by Jürgen Habermas and Fredric Jameson.

- ⁴ Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987). Future references are to this edition. For the best discussion of this novel see Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford, 1988), 93-104. For important discussions of Ondaatje's earlier work, see Sam Solecki, ed., *Spider Blues: Essays on the Writing of Michael Ondaatje* (Montreal: Véhicule, 1985), especially those essays on postmodernism by Solecki, Stephen Scobie, and Dennis Cooley.
- ⁵ See Gay Clifford, *The Transformations of Allegory* (London: Routledge, 1974).
- ⁶ George Bowering has also been influenced by John Berger in *Burning Water* whose title coincides with Carlos Fuentes' *Burnt Water*, which deals with the paradox of creation and destruction. Similarly, Ondaatje's intertextual network extends to John Hawkes' *Second Skin* with its opening chapter, "Naming Names." Coincidentally, John Moss locates himself in Bellrock in *Present Tense* to disturb divisions between primary and secondary sources.
- ⁷ Robert Scholes, as quoted in Lori Chamberlain, "Magicking the Real: Paradoxes of Postmodern Writing," in *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Larry McCaffery (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 16. See also Alan Wilde on fluid and shifting horizons in *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981).
- ⁸ Ondaatje, *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), 81-83.
- ⁹ McCaffery, "Introduction," xxv.
- ¹⁰ Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *Image-Music-Text*. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 161.
- ¹¹ Cohen has influenced Ondaatje in poetry and in *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*. See Stephen Scobie, "His Legend a Jungle Sleep," *Canadian Literature* 76 (Spring 1978), 15.
- ¹² Quoted in John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 2.
- ¹³ Berger, 5. Also on Berger see David E. James, "Cubism as Revolutionary Realism: John Berger and *G.*," *Minnesota Review* 21, 92-109; Pamela McCallum, "Postmodernist Aesthetics and the Historical Novel: John Berger's *G.*," *Minnesota Review* 28, 68-77; and Joseph McMahan, "Marxist Fictions: The Novels of John Berger," *Contemporary Literature* 23:2, 202-24.
- ¹⁴ Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, "Introduction," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 87:3, 388. See also Stephen Slemon, "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23:1 (1988), 157-68. On the notion of architecture and intertexture from Benjamin to Berger and Ondaatje, see James L. Rolleston, "The Politics of Quotation: Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," *PMLA* 104:1, 13-27.