

# MAKING CANADA WHILE NARRATING IT: MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *IN THE SKIN OF A LION*

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## Abstract

This article addresses the themes which, unquestionably, Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* deals with, starting from an exploration of the formal choices structuring the book. Specifically, it argues that positing Patrick Lewis as (an impossible) narrator goes a long way in reinforcing formally Ondaatje's thematic concerns, namely, the problematic relationship between center and periphery, between Toronto documented official history and the undocumented and unofficial stories of its protagonists.

*Costruire il Canada narrandolo: In the Skin of a Lion di Michael Ondaatje*

Questo articolo affronta i temi che sono al centro del romanzo di Michael Ondaatje *In the Skin of a Lion* a partire dalla presentazione delle scelte formali che strutturano il libro. In specifico, il lavoro dimostra come indicare Patrick Lewis come narratore (impossibile) abbia l'effetto di rispecchiare formalmente i temi cari all'autore, in modo particolare, il rapporto tra centro e periferia, tra la storia ufficiale documentata di Toronto e le storie invisibili dei suoi protagonisti.

## Introduction

In what follows, I would like to address the themes which, unquestionably, Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* deals with – the problematic relationship between center and periphery, between documented official history and undocumented and unofficial stories against the backdrop of the development of the city of Toronto and of the protagonist's personality<sup>1</sup> –, starting from an exploration of the formal choices structuring the book. The very basic question concerning the thematic aboutness of Ondaatje's novel will hopefully proceed from an in-depth understanding of the narratological stakes at play in the book.

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<sup>1</sup> In spite of the many different readings Ondaatje's novel has fostered, the themes I here list are unanimously recognized as occupying the thematic core of *In the Skin of a Lion*.

In one of the most touching self-reflexive moments of the book, the protagonist, Patrick Lewis, while trying to cope with the absurd death of his beloved Alice, meditates on how he «has clung like moss to strangers, to the nooks and fissures of their situations», how he has, in his own words, «always been an alien» (163). After listing all the strangers he has so far clung to, he reflects: «Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story» (163)<sup>2</sup>. The clear reference to the title and the spelling out of the key-term “story” make of Patrick’s meditation the right place to look at to try and unlock the meaning of ‘this’ story.

The first of the two epigraphs to the novel, taken from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* – «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» (n.p) –, has already paratextually created the connection between mourning a loss (Gilgamesh grieves for the death of Enkidu) and wearing the skin of a lion. Here, two thirds into the book, Patrick connects mourning to taking responsibility for the story: Patrick’s wording may actually suggest that the real mourning happens ‘when and only when’ one takes responsibility for the story. To successfully provide a more precise answer concerning this story’s aboutness, however, it is necessary to delve into the exact contours of ‘this’ specific story and try and define what kind of responsibility it may call for.

To flesh out these key issues, I will slow-read some (opening) scenes to unearth the blocks on which the entire novel stands; more specifically, I will analyze the frame as it contains crucial indications on how we are expected to read what follows and the second chapter of book one as a representative example of the jumbled chronology that characterizes Ondaatje’s book. The two analyses will pave the way to a more pertinent articulation of what lies at the thematic center of the novel that gave Ondaatje a first taste of success back in 1987.

### Framing the frame

*This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through darkness. Outside, the countryside is unbetrayered. The man who is driving could say, ‘In that field there is a castle’, and it would be possible for her to believe him.*

*She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms. And he is tired, sometimes as elliptical as his*

<sup>2</sup> Unless specified, page numbers refer to Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*.

*concentration on the road, at times overexcited – ‘Do you see?’ He turns to her in the faint light of the speedometer.*

*Driving the four hours to Marmora under six stars and a moon. She stays awake to keep him company (n.p.).*

This passage presides over the entire novel as it precedes the page announcing the beginning of Book One. It is, thus, crucial to assess its contents in detail as its positioning – a diegetical antechamber which cannot be considered as part of the paratext proper – gives it an authoritative, prefatory quality.

Shorn of any reference to a specific content of the story whatsoever – we are ‘not’ told what the story is about –, the scene has to be interpreted as staging metafictionally the act of telling itself which is presented as a dialogic endeavor that involves two parties. Notably, the passage first concerns the listener – a clear indication that each and every story comes to life because there exists a listener/reader. Before asking questions, the young girl «gathers» the story; this is the first of the physical verbs which unconventionally describe here both the act of listening and the act of telling. This verb is, in fact, followed by «to pick up», «to bring together», «to carry [...] in his arms» (n.p.) which express what the driver/teller is trying to do. Carrying it «all» together is presented as an attempt: a provisional tentativeness is here conveyed, a fluidity that indicates the possible recalcitrance of the various fragments to fall into place and compose a coherent whole. As such, the story seems to be presented according to that cubist poetics which has been explicitly mentioned by Ondaatje as one of his main influences while writing the novel<sup>3</sup>. The nod to a choice of formal fragmentation corresponds as well to a clear thematic intent: as Salgado suggests, «Ondaatje privileges the provisional in order to foreground fragmentation, dispersal and the isolated image or moment, thereby unsettling the possibilities for monumentalizing historical inscription» (196).

The story which is being told, furthermore, depends on believing; the reference to darkness («outside the countryside is unbetrayed», n.p.) not only stages a context of undivided attention on the listener’s part as no distractions are available, but is suggestive of the absolute dependence on what the teller says: even if the story is elliptical or may bear signs of overexcitement, the listener has no alternative but to stay in its uneven flow.

As the story the young girl listens in the car is the one we will read in a moment, it is quite obvious that the scene does not simply flesh out the act of telling, but also the reading act this kind of story requires. I would thus argue that the physicality this passage evokes and invites to consider is not only sug-

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of Ondaatje’s cubist imagination cf. James, especially 65-95.

gestive, as Linda Hutcheon maintains, of «the kind of physicality that will characterize the lives of the characters and the history of Toronto in this book» (93), but gestures toward the intuitive notion of the embodied nature of our understanding both the world that surrounds us and what we read. The work of second-generation post-classical narratologists has placed particular emphasis on this dimension, working on the premise that fictional worlds and real worlds are cognitively permeable and contiguous: we make sense of characters in the same way in which we make sense of the people we meet and interact with. Delving on this crucial tenet of our readerly engagement is outside the scope of the present work; suffice it to underline how the vocabulary here employed makes perfect sense within the framework neurosciences present on how our brain works.

The closing of the frame, well in keeping with the fragmented nature of the novel, is split in two. In the first half that comes before we read about the crucial confrontation between Commissioner Harris and Patrick, the protagonist is woken abruptly up by Hana, Alice's sixteen-year-old daughter, because there is Clara Dickens over the phone: Clara tells Patrick that Ambrose died, that she is in Marmora and asks him if he could come to pick her up. Among the other pieces of information which are relevant for us while we consider the frame as a whole, we learn that Marmora is four hours away from Toronto, that the young girl is going with him to keep him awake and that Patrick has a broken arm. Most significantly, the exchange between Patrick and the young girl after the decision to go and pick Clara up has been made, ends with a promise on his part to tell the by now curious girl about Clara during the drive («You going to tell me about her on the drive? – Yes. – Great!», 230). All these details set the stage for the scene in the car creating an unmistakable relationship with the opening section.

Almost thirty pages later, after Patrick's climactic confrontation with Commissioner Harris, the consequences of which, in the umpteenth chronological twist, we already know about – Patrick's broken arm – our protagonist is woken up again and the young girl and him are eventually ready to leave for Marmora. Once reached the parked car, this conversation follows: «– Do you want to drive? he asked – Me? I don't know the gears. – Go ahead. I'll talk the gears to you till we are out of town. – I'll try it for a bit»<sup>4</sup>.

Once we examine the frame in its entirety (something the very nature of this textual device both invites and warrants), thus, it is worth considering it in the

<sup>4</sup> I agree with Michael Greenstein that reads the change in the driver's seat as gesturing toward a much vaster necessity «to shift gears, exchange positions, and adapt the rear-mirror to reverse history's mimetic process» (118).

reverse, that is, in the chronological order the *fabula* presents so as to appraise both its relationship with the storyworld and its transformation.

- |   |   |                   |
|---|---|-------------------|
| – You going to tell me<br>about her on the drive? | – Tell me about her.                                      | <i>This story</i> |
| – Yes.  | – She was your mother's<br>best friend. I'll tell you the |                   |
| – Great! (230)                                    | whole story (256).  |                   |

Patrick's storytelling intention takes initially a rather circumscribed shape – telling about Clara – but soon becomes «the whole story» even if Hana had simply asked again about Clara. The diegetic material, here marked by the normal font, is ready to be transformed in the italicized piece that we have already considered. There are a few other instances of italicized passages in the novel<sup>5</sup> but the positioning of this passage invests the graphic shift with a stronger authoritative tonality: the italics coupled with the location, in fact, single out the passage amplifying our attentional investment. In the transition between the end and the beginning (of the book), Hana and Patrick lose their individual identities. The anonymity of the two protagonists magnifies the focus on the act of telling and its dynamics we have already sketched out as it channels our attention not on their individualized identities but on their respective roles of teller and listener.

The italicized passage opens with the demonstrative 'this' which creates an indexical relationship with the story the book we are holding in our hands contains. The passage poses Patrick as the one in charge of the telling of 'this story'. This is well in keeping with the issue of taking responsibility we have started off with, as the most direct way to take narrative responsibility is becoming a narrator. And yet, this is far from being an unproblematic move as there is no place in the whole diegesis which bothers to explain how Patrick learned what he tells about various characters's lives (Clara, Caravaggio, and most notably Commissioner Harris and Ambrose Small) when he was not present. We may certainly come up with naturalizing<sup>6</sup> explanations – after all,

<sup>5</sup> Patrick's remembering bits and pieces of what Alice told him about Conrad and her life when she was alive, Caravaggio remembering a dream, Cato's letters to Alice, come to mind.

<sup>6</sup> The verb "naturalize" here and the term "naturalization" below refer to the reader's automatic attempts to come up with 'natural', that is ordinary, conversational contexts for the textual material presented. Typical naturalizing moves concern – as in the case at hand – imagining a textually plausible situation in which the narrator learns what he talks about. When this attempt at naturalizing fails we may be facing different kinds of violations (of the narrative pact); cf. Fludernik.

Patrick is a searcher, a role that implies collecting things – but there is at least one story that is impossible to naturalize: the account of Ambrose Small’s final days which we are told (through Clara’s focalizing perspective) ‘before’ Patrick picks Clara up at Marmora. Patrick thus becomes conspicuously possessing a knowledge that he could not have.

Be as it may, this initial frame creates a story about the story the novel tells that wants us – crucially – to entertain the idea that Patrick is the narrator, to posit «Patrick as the pivotal agent through whom the reader is encouraged to enter the fictional realm» (Schumacher 1).

I would argue that this (false) positioning fits the logic of the narrative in a profound way. Before spelling out my argument more precisely, it is however necessary to understand how this narrative works in more detail.

The most evident formal trait characterizing the novel is its jumbled chronology. After a first section, significantly titled “Little Seeds”, which, in presenting some scenes of Patrick’s childhood could be read as a promise to follow him through his life, we enter a world of fragments in which flashbacks and flash-forward follow one another in an apparently disordered fashion. We should actually acknowledge that the novel maintains an overall sense of chronology: we first meet Patrick as an eleven-year-old child and we leave him almost 30 years later. This macroscopic trajectory salvages a certain sense of linearity and may justify a reading of the novel as a *Bildungsroman* of sorts. And yet, at the level of the single chapters, linearity is repeatedly mined in a back and forth movement that may be taken to parallel the gradual but jumbled understanding that dawns on Patrick along the way.

Let us consider the second chapter of Book One – “The Bridge” – which is exemplary in its remarkable interconnections between formal and thematic choices.

### Crossing “The Bridge”

The chapter opens with «a truck [that] carries fire at five a.m. through central Toronto, along Dundas Street and up Parliament Street, moving North» (27). The truck which during its ride gathers, intersection after intersection, more and more workers, «moves towards the half-built viaduct» (27). We are plunged in the making of the bridge, the rawness of its being made and not yet completed conveyed by the choice of the present tense which is reinforced by deictics bespeaking presentness – «for *now* all that is visible», «*this* odour» (italics mine). The bridge – this much dense of metaphors – is first presented as the final destination of those who are helping to build it and who are driving

through an urban landscape which is progressively becoming visible. This first short scene is followed by a second bipartite one which shows us the bridge's fast-forwarded completion, its christening and the moment of its inauguration.

«The bridge goes up in a dream. It will link the east end with the centre of the city. It will carry traffic, water [...]. It will carry trains that have not even been invented yet. Night and day. Fall light. Snow light. They are always working [...]. On 18 October 1918 it is completed. Lounging in midair. The bridge. The bridge. Christened 'Prince Edward'. The Bloor Street Viaduct» (28-29). The strength and power of a dream transforms the present tense into a future tense which claims a futuristic projection (the train not yet invented). To measure the dream come true a list of numbered items that detail and concretize it are provided – this is Commissioner Harris's dream significantly devoid of the human presence which excavated the 45,000 cubic yards of earth. The following snapshot describes the inauguration of the bridge, or, to be more precise, multiple inaugural gestures. A cyclist escapes through the police barriers and manages to cross the bridge publicly before anyone else. He has not actually been the first one to cross it: the previous night «the workers had arrived and brushed away officials who guarded the bridge in preparation for the ceremonies the next day, moved their own flickering lights [...] like a wave of civilization, a net of summer insects over the valley» (29). Both gestures are symbolic claims: both the cyclist and the workers want to express what they feel; the former claims the bridge as a citizen proud of the new urban highlight, the latter to attest their physical, literal paternity. Two interrelated details are here worth stressing. This is the first scene in the chapter in the past tense; the present tense, as we have seen, precedes it and the present tense will soon return together with the bridge as yet to be completed. This positioning gestures toward the incontrovertible reality that the novel strives to redress: the future – that is the completion of the bridge – will soon become past and as such it will be accessible through what about the past has been documented. The first crossing that represents the true, physical paternity of the bridge, will not be recorded in official documents. We will learn about these documents much later on in the novel when Patrick goes to the Riverdale Library looking for references to the building of the Viaduct, but here we are already told about the photographs he will find there.

There is an inverse ratio at play in this scene: political ceremonies are just mentioned, whereas the workers' ritual walk across the bridge is lyrically depicted. The latter's comparison to «a wave of civilization» (29) amplifies the countering force of this narrative which tries to illuminate a parallel history which is doomed to be mentioned only in a novel. What may be taken to be a paradoxical, maybe ironical, reference to civilization, a word much frayed with

imperialistic and politically incorrect undertones, may actually point to the fact that the communal, shared effort that goes into such kind of construction is inherently civilizing for those who do it as it requires the organized orchestration of individual efforts. Constructing means advancing one's social skills, developing a common language, finding a unisonous voice past one's culturally and linguistically inflected diversity. This wave is physically framed and potentially forgotten by what will make it to the official documents. The cyclist occupies a middle ground between the official ceremonies here bypassed and the workers' crossing here represented. His flight, in fact, is chronicled both by the official documents and by the novel we are reading. It manages to be recorded because it has stolen the official stage, snatching momentarily the photographers' attention. The cyclist's feat is destined to survive even if it will remain anonymous. The «thunderous applause» that greets him at the far end of the bridge attests a recognition on other citizens' part of the symbolic significance of the cyclist's anonymous claim and belongs in the novel's general objective of giving voice to the silenced.

Here follows a synopsis of the scene in its constitutive elements: the italicized sentences refer to scenes in the present tense, the normal ones to scenes in the past tense and the underlined one refers to a sentence in the future:

*The truck with the bitumiers – The completion of the bridge – The bitumiers – Commissioner Harris during the construction – The night of the incident – About Temelcoff's work at the bridge – About Temelcoff's life – The night of the incident – The night of the incident – A week later – In a year.*

It is evident that there is no easily discernible pattern here. Thus, both at the macro-level (the structure of the chapter) and at micro level (the various passages) this section projects an idea of instability and incoherence which nonetheless does not hinder our sense that we are witnessing the shaping of the story world. Well in keeping with the explicit poetics at work here, the novel builds a cubistic whole made up of fragments which happen to make sense when they are juxtaposed<sup>7</sup>.

The section we have just analyzed gives an exemplary taste of how this story works. It is exactly in the juxtaposition of the internal mechanics of the novel proper which defies strict linearity while maintaining a recognizable sense of development and of its instructional prologue that lies the key to unlock

<sup>7</sup> «You're getting everyone's point of view at the same time, which, for me, is the perfect state for a novel: a cubist state, the cubist novel» (Interview. "Michael Ondaatje's Cubist Civil War": n.p.).



Ondaatje's own responsibility for this story. As with the completed bridge, it is a matter of claiming, that is, of challenging the boundaries of attribution.

### **Patrick as (impossible) narrator**

Let me thus return to the key question of the narrator of this story which the frame addresses and to my arguing that positing Patrick as (an impossible) narrator, namely, a narrator who cannot possibly know all he speaks about, fits in the narrative logic of the book in a profound way.

In such an engaged novel that clearly addresses the crucial issue of being granted an audible voice, what matters is that 'this story' be narrated through the dispersal and defusing of an authoritative, that is, privileged perspective. In presenting Patrick as the narrator and sustaining this positioning throughout the novel constitutes a way to mine any official controlling discourse – a very subtle way in which form reinforces content, indeed.

If Ondaatje had called more direct attention to the limits of Patrick's knowledge, the distance between what he actually knows and what the story succeeds at conveying would have weakened the strength of Ondaatje's suggestion – that Canada is founded on a multiplicity of heterogeneous stories that need to be heard<sup>8</sup>. Stories reach the reader unmoored from an overt narrating instance, or, to put it in another way, unrelated to a precise knowledgeable narrator.

In the prologue, Ondaatje sets the stage, preparing a frame that, given its positioning, exudes authority and then bends it debunking it. In giving it the lie, he attacks the idea that only master narratives can survive. He creates an experience of looseness, of fragile stability (if not instability), of fragmentation. And yet, the story made up of stories survives in the very basic interplay between a teller and a listener provided the second is ready to contribute her part, which is not merely listening, but is «enacting experience» (Caracciolo 49) to attend to the people that inhabit the story by setting in imaginative motion her whole embodied self.

This may be deemed a rather superficial compromise, and yet it opens up the book to our own involvement: it is now our turn as readers (and as citizens) to take responsibility for this story. Not just the story of Canada, but of all our own multicultural countries.

<sup>8</sup> Ondaatje underlies this polyphonic approach repeatedly: «I've tried in my novels to have various points of view, various speakers, various narratives, so it's more of a group conversation as opposed to a monologue» ("Ondaatje's Table").

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