

The Journey from the Underground to the Heavens: Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*

Ioana COSMA

University of Pitești, Râmnicu Vâlcea, Romania

Abstract: This paper proposes to explore Toronto's cultural heritage through an analysis of Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*. Through various narrative perspectives, in this novel, we are witnessing the construction of the city and of various immigrant identities. The city's memory is deeply entrenched in its constructions, in the blood and mud that make up urban buildings. In Ondaatje's world narrating the beginnings of the city, people and politics are imbricated in an image attempting to allow the effort of various characters to preserve traces of authenticity. We will look at how the politics of memory shapes the identities of several characters, at the necessity of remembering and at the passivity of forgetting. Some of the questions of this presentation are: How does memory influence the shaping of immigrant identities? In what ways is the creation of the city related to the destinies of individuals? How does Ondaatje narrativize the politics of memory and cultural heritage in his book?

Key-words: memory, scaffolding, identity, Canada, history

Michael Ondaatje is a Canadian-born writer of both poetry and prose. His works evoke the lives of immigrants, of the unadapted, and explore the workings of (cultural) memory. His themes center on the ex-centrics, on the marginal and outcast. Gamlin Gordon offered a complete description of these themes:

As self-consciously constructed 'alternative' stories of peoples whose experience and contributions to documented historical events have been ignored, Ondaatje's novels challenge the acceptance of historical

narratives that privilege the power and negate other voices. The author draws on themes grounded in postcolonial discourse concerning issues that confront peoples who have been affected by the imposition of a dominant culture on their own. The characters he creates suffer from the varying outcomes of this process: cultural displacement, loss of language, disempowerment, loss of a sense of identity, marginalisation and negation of voice. By acknowledging their experience and contribution, he gives his characters a voice and a place in history. (Gamlin 1992: n.p)

Milena Marinkova believes that this preoccupation for the marginal is in tune with the writer's political and social activism. He is deeply aware of the hardships of the lives of immigrants, of the ones lost on the periphery of the capitalist society and of man's loss of contact with nature and vicissitudes of urban living:

Ondaatje's acts of exposure – of the “ex-centrics” whose histories have been erased, whose names have been forgotten, whose photos have remained uncaptioned, whose parts have been muted – have been recognized as symptoms of the Canadian writer's political awakening and social engagement.

The difference inscribed on the workers' bodies is transferred onto the intimate landscape of their personal relationships; having lost the sense of taste, they absorb the odor of their surrounds and thus become indistinguishable from their contexts. (Marinkova 2011: 96)

Stephen de Zepetnek attributes this interest in Ondaatje's work to the fact that the author was an immigrant himself, moving to Canada with his parents from Sri Lanka:

It is not without significance that Ondaatje is an immigrant to Canada and that much of his writing is about identity, history and people 'in-between'. Identity, whether that of an individual or of a people, history and hybridity, are of great relevance in the age of globalization, disappearing borders and the migration of people whether for economic, political or other reasons. (De Zepetnek 2005: 1)

In the vision of Steven de Zepetnek, Ondaatje's work has an "eternal" quality, it is not to be subsumed only to memory and historicity but to the overall destiny of humanity, from the lives of plants and animals to the becoming of man. Ondaatje is essentially a humanist, his works speak for the destiny of mankind, he is deeply aware of man's suffering and shortcomings and attempts to offer a solution to all these problems. He is one of the most empathetic witnesses to the suffering of twentieth-century man and world from myriad perspectives:

Ondaatje's *oeuvre* constitutes a mythology which dramatizes the creation and dissolution of myths. In Ondaatje's prose and poetry, myth issues from a landscape or stage of chaos and mirrors the source of its genesis. It is any created thing, being, action, and even the emptiness from which it is formed. It is always in motion, either becoming clearer or fading into chaos. It is eternal, submerging in one work to re-emerge in another. (De Zepetnek 2005: 1)

Brenda Glover focuses on the poetic quality of Ondaatje's work, showing how he has re-worked his language and discourse so as to become more accessible while poetically vivid:

From the time of his first published work, Michael Ondaatje has shown a concern for both the power and the emotive limitations of words. He has grown increasingly interested both in making his work more public and accessible, and in the dynamic elements of other artforms that make such communalization possible. (Glover 2000: n.p)

Among other things, *In the Skin of a Lion* refers to the primary intertext of Ondaatje's novel, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, under whose epigraph the story begins: "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". It is, thus, a hero's story, a bildungsroman, one of loss and partial and equivocal redemption. The hero is perhaps the multifaceted and inchoate identity of the Canadian "I" with its several levels of historicity, immigration, from the most delicate relations between man and nature to the creation of social layers, one suppressing the other and enforcing a cultural grid on the still savage nature. Janet Zandy defines the novel as follows:

Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) is a highly intertextual postmodern novel that parallels the coming of age of the male protagonist, Patrick Lewis, with Canada's transformation from a largely rural society to a country of industrialized and booming urban centers fueled by capital and built largely by cheap, immigrant labor during the first three decades of the twentieth century. [...] It is certainly sympathetic to workers, a novel committed to recognizing

the invisible workers who built cities but were excluded from official records, and certainly from literary canons, but it is not a working-class novel. (Zandy 2004: 87)

In this paper, I will use Lisa Robertson's concept of *scaffolding* to discuss the structuring of memory in Ondaatje's novel. It is perhaps no coincidence that the novel is structured in seven parts exactly the same as the ziggurat, the monument of Mesopotamian culture which Gilgamesh is originary from. I will therefore take Ondaatje's hint, half in jest, half to make a point, to create a picture of the scaffolding of memory in the novel, in seven significant layers which make up the hero's frail identity. I will argue that memory in Ondaatje is scaffolded to construct the premises for the *monumentum* to the newly created city of Toronto but particularly of the texts, people and narratives which have impregnated this construction with their own lives.

In her book, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, Lisa Robertson says the following of the scaffold:

The scaffold is a pause, an inflection of passage. Scaffolding is analogy. It explains what a wall is without being a wall. Scaffolding is a substitute for a site. In darkness the scaffolding is foliage. It is a temporary lacework, ceremonial furnishing that supports desires of our bodies. Scaffolding is a falsework, both stable and "almost a catastrophe". (Robertson 2003: n.p)

I would like to pause on two particular definitions by Robertson: "substitute" which is a key-word for the personality of Patrick Lewis, or surrogate, or second-degree or prop; and the word "catastrophe", which informs and triggers Ondaatje's as well as

the narrator's story. Scaffolding, as is well-known, represents the mounting of a structure to help support the building until it is finished and to let the builders have access to emerging construction. In similar fashion, Ondaatje seems to surround his main character with layers upon layers of scaffolding up until he achieves his own agency and has formed an identity. But this identity will be formed primarily in dialogue with the lives of others, from insects, family to the arch-enemies Ambrose Small and Rowland Harris, the almost caricature figures of the capitalist development of the city.

But scaffolding is also used in psychology and education theory to refer to the aid received by children from their teachers and parents in the process of language learning. There is a whole literature of scaffolding in education which I will not linger on here because it relates only tangentially with what Ondaatje does in his novel. The story that is narrated is one that is told by a father to his daughter on a four-hour drive through Canada. The father is the main character of *In the Skin of a Lion*, Patrick Lewis, and the daughter is Hana, his dead wife's daughter. On its main diegetic level the novel is thus a legacy story, one that needs to be passed on to future generations. From this level on, the text will traverse several story levels, each of which will aver fundamental in the formation of Patrick's identity.

Childhood Memories – the Little Things

In his small childhood village in the Canadian backwoods, Patrick Lewis witnesses the life of rural Canada, the life of loggers. Christian Bok has defined Patrick's early relation to the world as "deliberate aphasia" (Bok 1992: 119). Instead, I propose to use the phrase "discrete sensitivity" as is suggested from Patrick's early attention to detail, to objects and small beings which fuel his imagination with aesthetic pleasure:

Bugs, plant hoppers, grasshoppers, rust-dark moths.
Patrick gazes on these things
which have navigated the warm air above the surface of
the earth and attached themselves to
the mesh with a muted thunk. He'd heard them as he read
his senses tuned to such noises.
Years later at the Riverdale Library he will learn how the
shining leaf-chafers destroy
shrubbery, how the flower beetles feed on the juice of
decaying wood or young corn. There
will suddenly be order and shape to these nights. Having
given them fictional names he will
learn their formal titles as if perusing the guest list for a
ball - the Spur-throated
Grasshopper! The Archbishop of Canterbury! (Ondaatje
1997: 6)

His love for plants, insects and small beings will follow him throughout his life and his iguana pet which he will receive from his lover Clara Dickens will become a means by which he is accepted by the community around him. This early attention to detail and love of nature of Patrick's is afforded by the rural environment which he grows in. Later on, it will fade into the back of his memory or translate into his desire to be close to earth and to people. But on this level of narration, Patrick still has the leisure to peruse the map of Canada – a *mise-en-abyme* of the author's deconstruction of the colonization of space – to play his ocarina, and to witness the first explosions in his life those of trees being blown into non-existence – explosions are a *leit-motif* in Ondaatje's novel, they subvert the apparently good order of things, they come to denounce that underneath the beautiful surface there lie layers of corpses, a stifled land and destroyed destinies.

This love for the “small things” opens a window into Patrick’s early poetic soul, his empathy for the world, which will become manifested later in life through his political activism. It shows also that men have an inborn love for the world and their surroundings which is not to be neglected. This minimalism of early living suggests the unnecessary accumulation of wealth that capitalism promotes, it shows that happiness is to be achieved by relating to the environment and to the other.

The Construction of the City

On the second level of the story, there is the urban construction of sites mainly by immigrant workers and coordinated by visionary city commissioners. The first construction is the Bloor Bridge, an image which resumes en abyme the narrative strategy of the novel, namely, scaffolding:

The bridge goes up in a dream. It will link the east end with the center of the city. It will carry traffic, water and electricity across the Don Valley. It will carry trains that have not been invented yet.

[...]

There are over 4,000 photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time-lapse evolution. The piers sink into bedrock fifty feet below the surface through day and shale and quicksand – 45,000 cubic yards of earth are excavated. The network of scaffolding stretches up. (Ondaatje 1997: 14)

It is in and around this scaffolding that several lives of men are lost and symbolically, that of a nun who had become lost at night with a group of other nuns and had been blown by the heavy wind off the bridge. The construction of the city thus begins with this

ominous sacrificial gesture as well as the loss of spirituality insofar the nun who had been rescued by Nicholas Telmencoff decides to give up being a nun and goes on to play an important part in Ondaatje's novel. The author's concern for the small things hidden from sight, for the lives of workers which went unrecorded but which had placed their imprint on the construction of the city can be witnessed in the following paragraph:

Bricks are banged into the earth and narrow creeks of sand are poured in between them. The tar is spread. *Bitumiers, bitumatori*, tarrers, get onto their knees and lean their weight over the wooden block irons, which arc and sweep. The smell of tar seeps through the porous body of their clothes. The black of it is permanent under the nails (Ondaatje 1997: 15).

This idea of permanence, of impregnation of the city's construction history in the skins of the workers appears several times in the novel and we will come back to it. For now, it is important to state that Ondaatje's focus is on the underground life of the city on the human scaffolding that goes on around it. This underground life is what seems to propel from within the lives of workers and immigrants, the destinies of Patrick and her lovers. While in some cultures the sacrificial gestures signify the durability of the construction, here the author seems to hint towards an ominous event, to show that the construction lays on uncertain feet, that it is a monster that engulfs the lives of people. The fact that the one who loses her life in this incident is a nun suggests the godless auspices under which the city is built and foregrounds the loss of life of one of the novel's main characters, Alice, Patrick's second lover. The tar, the bitum, the excavated earth, all interfere with the natural path of life and nature, they

undermine the beautiful countryside memories that Patrick has shared in the first part of his life.

The Lover

In the novel, Patrick has two important loves in his life, both actresses, friends to each other, similar in their profession but dissimilar in their personal life choices: Clara Dickens chooses to live with multimillionaire Ambrose Small while Alice Gull has a former lover, Cato, who is a dissident and who inspires her to become a dissident too. While Clara has a clear-cut, poster-like image, Alice is much more elusive, she escapes a firm grasp. The former will come back to Patrick at the end of the novel while the latter dies in a bomb explosion in the midst of their years of bliss. The fact that Patrick is attracted to these two actresses has a lot to say about his personality, he lives a life in the second degree, for a while he lives the life of others:

Clara and Ambrose and Alice and Temelcoff and Cato - this cluster made up a drama without him. And he himself was nothing but a prism that refracted their lives. He searched out things, he collected things. He was an abashed man, an inheritance from his father. Born in Abashed, Ontario. What did the word mean? Something that suggested there was a terrible horizon in him beyond which he couldn't leap. Something hollow, so when alone, when not aligned with another - whether it was Ambrose or Clara or Alice - he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community. A gap of love. (Ondaatje 1997: 83)

Even when he gets to have some agency, to begin to put bombs into the properties of the rich, Patrick will do what Alice and Cato had done before their deaths. He still isn't fulfilling his own

destiny. On this matter, the novel is undecided and only lets us guess towards the end of it, when Patrick and Hana go to rescue Clara, that his destiny will become fulfilled by becoming Clara's lover again and leaving a legacy for Alice's daughter, Hana.

It is significant, for the work of memory, that the author juxtaposes the opposite, yet similar in some ways, figures of these two women. Alice Gull, unassuming, petite, lost in the background and eventually bombed into non-existence and Clara Dickens, become famous by her lover and having an unforgettable, close-up face. Patrick seems in-between Alice's evanescence and Clara's firmness and groundedness, he will forever alternate between these two states of being. By the time the novel is finished, he still has not developed into either one of these models but he has integrated them and, through his activism, he will resemble Alice which through his love for their daughter, Hanna, he will become closer to Clara.

Big Things, Bombs, Deaths, Explosions

In Ondaatje's novel, there is a tendency for *gros-plan*, for magnifying things, starting from the lives of insects to the buildings of Toronto. This tendency finds its utmost expression in the presentation of the Palace of Purification which opens the second part of Ondaatje's novel. This is where we find Patrick working after his brief interlude with Clara, digging to achieve commissioner Harris' grandiose dream. I have already stated that one of the leit-motifs in Ondaatje's novel are explosions from the trees in Patrick's village to Alice's disappearance and other bombings which Patrick will cause, bombs come to speak, in the novel, of the fragility of things but most importantly, of the muddy waters the city was built on, the immense gap between the poor immigrants and the rich, of the need to undermine the established order and to condemn the treatment of nature by the

newly found urbanism. Commissioner Harris' dream of a building that would display or the power symbols of capitalism is at the expense of the hard work of low paid immigrant workers some of whom have lost their lives in the process. Of course, this is nothing new, and Ondaatje seems to criticize the development of urban sites of consumption which keep people distanced from reality and from themselves – like Patrick – over the proximity to life and sense that had made up the texture of Patrick's childhood.

The Trace

Another one of the motifs of Ondaatje's novel is the trace: it becomes imbricated in the narrative, it is the signaling post of the history that Patrick has to say but, most importantly, it shows the extent to which the workers' lives had been affected by the hard work they had been carrying out. It might also hint to the religiosity of their act of digging the earth and building temples of capitalism. In any case, their act has a toll and this toll is their own skin which becomes either dyed or impregnated with the smell of the animals whose lives they are taking. Trace is in line with the concept of scaffolding in its imbrication of presence and absence and it also talks about the identities of the immigrant workers, about their hybridity:

All that remained in their skin was the smell that no woman could get close to in bed. Alice lay beside Patrick's exhausted body, touching his neck with her lips, and she knew she was next to his smell, she knew that the tanners' wives would never smell their husbands' unadulterated smell. Even if they had removed from the body the pigments and the salt crystals they would still be smelling like the angel they were fighting in pits. The color of flesh. (Ondaatje 1997: 170)

This impregnation in the flesh shows the extent to which these people's destinies had been changed in the process of becoming Canadians, marginal as they were, but still part and parcel of the construction of the new city:

The difference inscribed on the workers' bodies is transferred onto the intimate landscape of their personal relationships; having lost the sense of taste, they absorb the odor of their surrounds and thus become indistinguishable from their contexts (Marinkova 2011: 106).

This impregnation pairs the loss of contact with origins and traditions, with the anonymization of the self into a world that is not capable of cultivating difference and individuality. The immigrant self loses his or her identity, both nationally and spiritually, he becomes imprinted like the city itself.

The trace, according to Derrida, is the only viable concept we can use when discussing history and memory: it is incomplete and inchoate but bears within the seeds of signification around which we construct our stories. In similar manner, Patrick's story is constructed around the notion of trace: from the stubs left from timber exploitation to the tracelessness he wants to inflict on those places which have destroyed or taken the lives of his lover and friends, the trace is the red line around which the hero's identity is constructed. Time and history leave palpable, material traces on humans' lives and skins and the trace is a witness to all the injustice of this undoing. Ondaatje's story itself is such a trace and the motif of impregnation is there to accuse the degraded human-nature relationships but also the century-long sublimation of the soul in the midst of urban capitalism. The trace is a way for nature and identity to make their stories run further than the wayward constructions of man.

The Immigrants

One of the book's *leit-motifs* is what Alice Gull tells Patrick: "I have taught you that the sky is mortal in all its zones". The color blue is significant in the story and reinforced by the character of the thief Caravaggio who escapes from prison painted blue to become one with the ceiling which had been painted the color of the sky by the inmates. Therefore, in Ondaatje's novel, there is this interplay between telluric and celestial, between the underground life of workers, thieves and dissidents and the freedom promised them, the moment of their immigration or escaping from prison. In-between, there is the scaffold, which keeps in a frail balance the lives of the workers, Patrick, Clara and Alice.

The (Dissident) Hero

The tanners and workers' imprinted skins become their own skins of a lion which give them the allure of tragic heroes in a newly formed world, in-between the old and the new, Europe and Canada, their language and English. Patrick is likewise trapped in this in-between state, a prop or a mirror or a witness of other people's lives: Clara and Ambrose, Cato and Alice, Caravaggio and Gianetta. With the price of his freedom he decides to embrace Alice's destiny after her death which finally awakens him from his political apathy. He finally has agency and his final, though failed attempt to bomb the Palace of Purification, gives him his final identity as the opponent of commissioner Harris:

- I was practically born in City Hall. My mother was a caretaker. I worked up.
- You forgot us.
- I hired you.

- Your goddamn herringbone tiles in the toilets cost more than half our salaries put together.
- Yes, that's true.
- Aren't you ashamed of that?
- You watch, in fifty years they're going to come here and gape at the herringbone and the copper roofs. We need excess, something to live up to. I fought tooth and nail for that herringbone.
- You fought. You fought. Think about those who built the intake tunnels. Do you know how many of us died in there?
- There was no record kept. (Ondaatje 1997: 127)

In the novel, we have followed Patrick play his ocarina in his village and discover the lives of tiny things, become a worker like his father, a lover, a widower, a friend in a community of immigrants, a dissident, an inmate and finally a free man ready to live his life in peace with Clara and Hana. Does this mean that he has come of age, or that he has formed a well-defined identity? Perhaps. Ondaatje is indeterminate on this point. But what Patrick expresses is the inchoate identity of the Canadian people at the intersection between the old rural and the new urban and the violent displays of power that shatter lives, force destinies into submission and humiliation. It is the story of building a city.

Bibliography:

- BOK, CHRISTIAN (1992): "Destructive Creation: the Politicization of Violence in the Works of Michael Ondaatje", *Canadian Literature* 132, pp. 109-124.
- CLARKE, GEORGE ELIOTT (1991): "Michael Ondaatje and the Production of Myth", <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/download/8129/9186?inline=1>, 05.02.2020.

- DERRIDA, JACQUES (1978): *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- DE ZEPETNEK, STEVEN (2005): *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*, USA, Purdue University Press
- GAMLIN, GORDON (1992): "Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* and the Oral Narrative", *Canadian Literature*, 135, 68-77.
- GLOVER, BRENDA (2000): "'Unanchored to the World'. Displacement and Alienation in *Anil's Ghost* and the Prose of Michael Ondaatje", *CRNLE Journal*, <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/10550/1/2008004914.pdf>, 05.02.2020
- MARINKOVA, MILENA (2011): *Michael Ondaatje: Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing*, USA, Bloomsbury Publishing.
- ONDAATJE, MICHAEL (1997). *In the Skin of a Lion*, Canada, Vintage Books.
- ROBERTSON, LISA (2006). *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, Coach House Books.
- ZANDY, JANET (2004): *Physical Labor, Class and Cultural Work*, Rutgers University Press.