

**“ The quicksand of the New World ”
in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion***

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Hybridity and instability are the hallmark of Michael Ondaatje’s novels, best defined by what they are not. *The English Patient* is neither a war novel nor a spy novel; *Running in the Family* can hardly be called an ethnic novel or an autobiography; *In the Skin of a Lion* is not an immigrant novel either, although the story is partly based on the construction of Toronto by a community of European immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century. Michael Ondaatje has been criticized for his lack of political insight or involvement, which he may have tried to make up for by writing *Anil’s Ghost*, his latest novel about the political situation in Sri Lanka, the country where he was born and which he left at the age of nine. Ondaatje himself is an immigrant; after several years in England, he went to Canada and settled down in Toronto. He may have experienced the situation of a displaced person, embodied by Kip, the Indian character in *The English Patient*, or that of the immigrants in the novel which is the topic of this paper, *In the Skin of a Lion*.

In *The Skin of a Lion*, the construction of the city of Toronto by a group of European immigrants builds up the historical background and sets up the referential function of the novel. However it is paradoxically highlighted by a deconstructed plot which combines the fragmented stories of Patrick Lewis, his two mistresses Clara and Alice, that of Ambrose Small, a millionaire who unexpectedly vanished in 1919, or Harris the commissioner of Public Works, with the presence of other characters ranging from an anonymous cyclist, a baker, a group of nuns to a group of anarchists, as so many facets of the kaleidoscope which composes the city. They coexist in the city as in the diegesis with immigrants from Macedonia and Finland, whose mysterious presence Patrick discovers as they walk past his farm when he is a boy, and whose language he learns several years later. Both Patrick and the immigrants are exiles in the city and look for a stable center in which to be anchored. Patrick’s discovery of and communication with the immigrant community of Toronto is part of a larger quest, a quest for identity, for the meaning of things, for contact with the Other, illustrated by the metaphor of his job as a searcher.

Patrick is an explorer of tracks left at the surface of the world; Patrick himself is first an empty outline, a graph drawn with chalk by his father on the wall of a barn and filled in with wires tacked on the boards in order to test explosives; he remembers tracks left on the snow or on granite, which he must fill with meaning. Patrick perceives the world as a surface: the insects which “navigate” “above the surface of the earth” (SL 9) and get caught in the mosquito net in summer evenings, the Finns skating on the lake, holding flickering torches in the middle of the night, his father and other lumberjacks driving logs down the river, and later his friend Caravaggio, the Italian immigrant, who skims over

surfaces, and vanishes, for instance when he covers his body with blue paint on the blue roof of the penitentiary he and Patrick are painting.

Patrick's first discovery of the "collection of strangers" (SL 7), similar to the first impression the novel makes on the reader is visual, auditory and "haptic", to quote Deleuze and Guattari's term (421), and synaesthesia marks the beginning of a hermeneutic quest for the meaning of signs and impressions. Born "in a region which did not appear on a map until 1910" (SL 10) Patrick tries to build up a coherent vision of the world by exploring the maps of other countries in his geography book, or when he creates and imagines a map of Canada by "feeling the texture of the pebbled cover and its coloured dyes" (SL 9), turning physical sensations into an imaginary construct which makes up for a lack: "In the school atlas the place is pale green and nameless" (SL 11). Patrick is in the same position as Marlow's in *Heart of Darkness* when the latter sees and fantasizes the map of Africa in a Belgian shop window before his departure for the Congo. Patrick, like the immigrants, is new to a world to be explored, to be built, a blank spot to be constructed. There is neither Old nor New World, but an experience of deterritorialization, estrangement, exoticism. The "new world" is a world of signs to be conquered and mastered by pioneers who discover difference and multiplicity, a world which threatens to engulf the newcomer at Toronto's Union Station: "one step away was the quicksand of the New World" (SL 54).

Patrick's quest is semiotic as he must learn how to decipher the tracks left by other people, above all the evanescent tracks his "self-sufficient," "sullen," "invisible" father (SL 18) left in his memory, like the elusive imprint of his vanished presence. Such tracks are rendered by flickering images or epiphanies in a fragmented narrative, and by the instability of narration itself. The third-person heterodiegetic narration and external focalization turn out to be an oral tale after all, which Patrick tells Hana, his adopted daughter, a tale actually introduced by the second epigraph — "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" — and the following paratext: "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 (...) 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." The story is not unique but multiple, and bringing together its "various corners" is a cubist approach to a multifaceted world, composed of individual stories which coalesce, that of Patrick and of the immigrants, seen as a deconstructed surface that leaves its fragmented imprint at the surface of a text which is a collage or "assemblage" (Deleuze, Guattari, 4) of fragments, snapshots, or press articles.

Writing, according to Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (5). Like the map of Canada which takes shape under Patrick's eyes and fingers, "a realm to come", or Harris' dream of construction and development, "the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting" (SL 29), the novel itself is a map which gradually takes shape in the act of reading: it is open, multiple, "connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification" (Deleuze, Guattari, 13). Readers are invited to roam over "the map of the story", a phrase Ondaatje himself uses in *The English Patient* (94), a map with "multiple entryways" (Deleuze, Guattari, 14)

corresponding to the various plateaus of the text: individual stories and collective history, highlighted by de-centered narration and focalisation, and cubist representation. The text can be regarded as an “assemblage” of various rhizomes which connect in an heterogeneous manner, a mode of representation in keeping with Patrick’s own attempt to connect with other people, friends, lovers and immigrants alike. However he realizes “he has always been alien, the third person in the picture. He is the one born in this country who knows nothing of the place” (SL 156-157). His destabilizing experience is represented by the instability of the narrative voice and point of view which shifts from external focalisation to the inner prism of Patrick’s consciousness. His feeling of alienation is counterbalanced by the opposite impression that he is part of a community, “part of a mural”, “a night web – all of these fragments of a human order” (SL 145). Estrangement and integration are of course the two facets of the immigrant condition.

Patrick’s experience is similar to that of the immigrants in the novel, newcomers to Canada, as he tries to organize his chaotic sensations and find a pattern through language (the fictitious names of insects he invents, for example) and knowledge (the books he reads and the words he learns at the local library): “there will suddenly be order and shape to these nights” (SL 9). Patrick tries to put things and words together to fulfil his quest for meaning in a chaotic world of incomprehensible sensations, which he achieves provisionally while listening to a band in a street of Toronto: “the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned” (SL 145). Naming the world, and pelmanism, a metaphor for Caravaggio’s attempt to memorize things scattered on the floor of his house, are ways to counteract “*the extreme looseness of the structure of things*” (SL 163).

Learning a new language is achieved through imitation, when immigrants learn English at the theatre by repeating the actors’ cues, in the same way as Patrick, who has not been taught anything directly by his father, learns by reproducing his gestures. The sensuousness with which he repeats the new words he learns, “testing the names to himself, mouthing out the exotic” (SL 9), with a pun on testing / tasting based on paronomasia, fills the gap left open by his father’s “unemotional tongue” (SL 19). Patrick, and the immigrants from Macedonia, Finland or Greece, are Mimic men, but more than mere imitation, their chameleon-like training enables them to set up connections with other people. The first word Patrick significantly learns, which acts as a password enabling him to communicate with a group of Macedonian immigrants, is the word “gooshter”, iguana, which belongs to the same lizard species as the chameleon.

Imitating, melting into the new world, illustrated by the painting or dying metaphor, is not sufficient to be fully integrated, though. The gilded picture of the immigrant condition in Toronto is debunked when the narrative exposes the other side of the coin. The immigrants first are displaced people, who live apart, at the periphery; they work in the woods, in mines or tunnels, and live in the outskirts of small towns, i.e. at the margin or under the surface of the world. Their origins are often unknown. They come and go like the seasons, “melt away with the ice on the river” (SL 8). Ondaatje also exposes the mendacity of representation when it is fantasized, turned into a trompe-l’œil painting, for instance when Patrick, who works with a group of Macedonians, Poles and Lithuanians at the dying factory, gets aware of the irreconcilable gap between his aesthetic gaze and

picturesque representation, and the Real the painting tends to mask: the exploitation of workers, their dreadful living and working conditions. The janus-like portrait is illustrated by the pun on the words “dye/die” and “consume”: the dyers consume the smell of death, and die of consumption. Dying is a metaphor for their diversity and their coming to the “new world”; they “had leapt into different colours as if into different countries” ; they shed skin — “it appeared they had removed the skin from their own bodies” (SL 130) — but have not taken on a new one as the metamorphosis is superficial. Mimicry remains a sign of their difference, as Homi Bhabha rightly pointed out:

in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers. (86)

Ondaatje raises the question of power relations, first by alluding to the immigrant condition, then by opposing two intertextual references: One is to Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (SL 232) when Patrick is about to blow Harris’ waterworks, the other is to Joseph Conrad’s letters and man’s struggle for an idea (SL 134). In spite of the implicit criticism of imperialism, Ondaatje seems to take the colonization of Canada for granted. Indeed, except one example (SL 119), Natives are virtually absent from the novel. However colonization is displaced in terms of power, money, and social struggle. Ondaatje clearly exposes the cost, in human lives, of building the city, and the predatory relationships between people like Ambrose Small, the millionaire, “the hawk”, “the jackal”, or Harris the construction engineer, and workers caught in the choreography of power and money. Newcomers discover the “quicksand of the New World”, a metaphor for the discrepancy between the immigrants’ dream and the horror of the Real, the interface between Harris’ utopian and utilitarian dream of appropriation and its implications: “all else is labour and darkness. Ash grey faces. An unfinished world. The men work in the equivalent of the fallout of a candle. They are in the foresection of the cortex, in the small world of Rowland Harris’ dream as he lies in bed on Neville Park Boulevard” (SL 111). The anonymous workers are significantly “unnamed” and given new names (SL 132).

The subterranean, in-between space which threatens to engulf the workers is illustrated by a porous environment, perforated by cavities, such as the pools at the leather factory where Patrick and the other dyers work waist-deep in colour, the tunnels dug out by construction workers to build the water tanks, the mushrooms cave in which Caravaggio takes refuge after escaping from jail. The cavities form the moist texture of the city and contribute to its metamorphosis. Its surface is similar to Patrick’s skin, “like the texture of a cave that would transform anything painted on it” (SL 98) with pores and grain, tunnels and viaducts, which readers are invited to survey; the workers’ sweat and eroding toil have left their imprint in the quicksand of the city, which in turn threatens to

erase them, only leaving an evanescent track, a flickering sign of their vanished presence which the text tries to preserve and bring back to life. In the same way, the text is a surface of aesthetic transformation which turns photos into narratives, fragments and sketches into a mural, and blends story and history, fiction and metafiction.

The 4,000 photographs, “ from various angles ” (SL 26) which Patrick discovers at the library, coalesce into a collage of fragments and epiphanies, like the nun falling off Prince Edward Viaduct, rescued by Nicolas Temelcoff suspended in mid-air, and turn into a photo album of the city which welds individual and collective history together. Patrick is part of a mural, and contributes to restoring its surface by saving individual lives from dissolution and oblivion, like the cyclist photographed on the bridge, “ a blur of intent ” (SL 27) or Nicholas, “ 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. ” (SL 34). The function of writing and telling is not to restore perspective but to bear witness, to draw a map of “ the interactions ” (SL 144), to rescue fragments, and prevent erasure ; this is what Ondaatje does in his poem “ Light ” when verse acts as a fixative for re-shot photographs, in a double attempt to preserve the past:

The past, friends and family, drift into the rain shower.
Those relatives in my favourite slides
re-shot from old minute photographs so they now stand
complex ambiguous grainy on my wall. (3)

Like telling for Patrick, faced with loss and erasure — “ Only a dead name is permanent ” (SL 165) —, writing acts as a supplement to photography and animates the shots taken by Arthur Gross, the city photographer. It gives birth to still lives — “ For a moment, while the film receives the image, everything is still, the other tunnel workers silent. Then Arthur Gross... packs up his tripod and glass plates... Work continues. ” (SL 105) —, and resumes the photographer’s work where it stopped. Writing is a way to find a fulcrum between disappearance and presence, in the quicksand of representation, and this is illustrated by various images referring to the edge and the fragile equilibrium between life and death, presence and absence, like Alice “ subliminal in movement ” (SL 76), the bridge builders who “ balance on a strut ” (SL 28), Daniel Stoyanoff whose “ balance (is) gone ” when his arms are cut off at the meat factory (SL 44), or Patrick looking for his own balance, “ like a weight on the end of a plumb-bob ” (SL 210). Aesthetics also has an ethic function when it counterbalances official history by focusing on individual, anonymous lives, like Lewis Hine’s photographs which “ betray official history and put together another family ” (SL 145). Ondaatje’s hybrid novel, based on different aesthetic modes — writing, painting, photography, and choreography, a metaphor for the “ assemblage ” of the text — has an ethic and pragmatic function of interpellation which counteracts the “ soft rhetoric ” of official historiography and offers a sub-version. The text is a quicksand in which “ the fairy tale of Upper Canada ” (SL 44) founders, and is replaced by Daniel Stoyanoff’s and Nicolas Temelcoff’s “ tall tales ” (SL 44, 149) which emerge at the surface of the narrative.

Writing has a healing, restorative power, too, when it fills a gap, a lack and makes up for loss or erasure, as Patrick's experience shows: " literature is the real gift. He turns the page backwards. (...) 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 " (SL 148). Reading is like a pendulum or a Fort-Da experience; it enables readers to find a fulcrum between epiphany and erasure in the quicksand of memory, between the " grand story " and " the luxury ", or collective history and individual stories as is the case with Ondaatje's novel. The author adds a supplement when he grafts history onto myth, like Nicholas Temelcoff, the Macedonian immigrant who is " sewn into history " (SL 149). The history of the Canadian nation, the myth of foundation and construction, are embedded in the epic of Gilgamesh who roams the wilderness " in the skin of a lion ", mourning the death of his friend Enkidu. The novel is framed by two quotations from the epic, a " luxury " in " the grand story ", which inscribe the themes of loss and rebirth in the history of the nation. Myth, History and individual story form the layers of a palimpsest, the surface of which hovers between presence and absence, a mere track in the "quicksand of the New World ".

The " quicksand " is thus an unstable metaphor for in-betweenness; it weaves threads or rhizomes at the surface of the porous, fragmented text, breaches the rift that runs through the novel on a thematic and metaphoric level (the imagery of mutilation), and connects its various plateaus: myth, individual and collective history, Patrick's existential quest, aesthetics and ethics. First a searcher, an explorer of tracks, Patrick eventually sees " the interactions " in the " nexus " of his life and that of the city (SL 144, 209). Like Nicholas Temelcoff floating on the bridge, " mercury slipping across a map " (SL 35), or Cato's letters " travelling, passed from hand to hand " (SL 155), Patrick becomes a go-between, an interface between the self and the other, space, history, telling and mapping, the text and the reader : " you reach people through metaphors " (SL 123). The novel interlaces Patrick's initiatory journey, his advent to the " New World " out of the belly of the whale, the birth of a city, and the advent of a text which, like myth, finds its justification in the act of telling as Jean-François Lyotard explains in *La condition postmoderne*: "never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one. "

Sources

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