


Oral History and the Writing of the Other in Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*

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Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*"**

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**Abstract:** Winfried Siemerling argues in his paper "Oral History and the Writing of the Other in Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*" that the simulation of oral narratives in the novel imagines the conveyance of oral histories of immigrant experiences obscured by historiography. The narrative device of simulated orality -- the written text casts itself as the outcome of serial story-telling -- serves here to introduce erstwhile anonymous societal actors as makers of history, and emphasizes the collective production of story and history. Oral narratives emerge dreamlike like light out of darkness in this text; yet light, like writing, creates a problematic visibility whose multiple sources must be acknowledged. A critique of previous writing of history, *In the Skin of a Lion* "betrays" in both senses of the word history, silence, and darkness -- by imagining necessary possibilities and necessarily omitting others. The interdependence of orality and writing and of darkness and visibility evokes in the novel the romantic valorization of darkness that inverts the classical metaphor of light as purveyor of truth. Yet, this interdependence also critiques orality: articulations of history and the "survival" of events have to cope with the lacunae created by writing and with the hazardous transmissions and temporalities of orality. The title of *In the Skin of a Lion* evokes the *Epic of Gilgamesh* intertextually, whose eponymous hero fails to achieve immortality because of his inability of staying awake several nights. Similarly, the oral narratives Patrick Lewis collects and conveys throughout the novel almost remain in darkness when he falls asleep at a critical moment. The "immortality" of these narratives and their silenced subjects is assured only by a listener who later keeps the speaker awake in the night, and the stories alive in a conversation that sees the light of day in a written text and its simulation of oral history.

## Winfried SIEMERLING

### Oral History and the Writing of the Other in Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*

*In the Skin of a Lion*, Michael Ondaatje deciphers and invents the signs of another world coexisting silently with Toronto's written history and the surface of its present-day reality. The novel defamiliarizes habitual perceptions of Toronto by superimposing a reconstructed and imagined new world. With the non-English-speaking immigrants of Toronto, Ondaatje follows a whole community that crosses boundaries and borders to another reality and a new language. As in so many of Ondaatje's texts, from *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* to *Anil's Ghost*, a searching figure tries to decipher a disappearance. In *In the Skin of a Lion*, the emergence of the world of the other begins with a moment in the night. The as yet unnamed world of the immigrants that emerges in fragments of oral history, conversations, and passages closely related to dreams, is associated throughout the novel with lights in the night. They are thus perceived in the absence of historical daylight and in the interstices of historically known (and constructed) perception of reality. Ondaatje's stories about Toronto and Ontario in the 1920 and 1930s begin with a short framing vignette that introduces the written text we are about to read in a context of oral speech and story telling: "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 unbetrayed. The man who is driving could say, 'In that field is a castle,' and it would be possible for her to believe him" (1). Besides alluding to the traditional request for a suspension of disbelief, this passage joins the mode of un-finalized, fantastic possibility with the atmosphere of a conversation during the night. The identity of the two as yet unnamed participants we encounter in this conversation is still shrouded in darkness, like the world outside just before dawn and the story not yet revealed. Light is shed upon the situation as the conversation progresses.

Ondaatje shows time and again an awareness of the authority that usually makes the "evidence" of the visible carry the day, a power, however, that sets his own written text necessarily over against the oral memory culture it brings to light. When the narrative, in an account of its own genesis, both leads and returns to the car drive at the beginning, Ondaatje draws our attention simultaneously to the fact that the visual images of the literary creation and its world have now replaced the initial darkness -- and maybe superseded some of its possibilities. Not only has this potential been filled with stories; we are made aware that our eyes have been "listening," in this light, to the simulation of an oral tale in writing. Writing, of course, is the medium also used by a city historiography that has largely left out and overwritten the stories we have just read. But his last words -- "Lights, he said" -- end the book with a *fiat lux* in the plural. As the text takes us thus back to the scene at the beginning, we are not only reminded that this "elucidation" has been mediated by the "light beams" of a mobile, composite subjectivity traversing, in conversation and conjecture, a landscape of the possible; we also hear a "pluralized" variation of the biblical phrase that associates creation with the spoken word--a perception of reality that for Hans Blumenberg is typical of the Old Testament, in which "seeing is always predetermined by hearing, questioned or overpowered by it" ("Sehen immer schon durch Hören vorbestimmt, in Frage gestellt oder überboten [ist]") (442; my translation).

The narrator of the initial scene, it will be revealed later in the stories he relates, is Patrick Lewis, who deciphers, with his slowly growing cognizance of other, foreign cultures, a new knowledge of himself. The first encounter between two different worlds is set, like the opening vignette, in the darkness of the early morning hours. Like the first signs of a landscape outside expected to arise out of the night, the lights of a "collection of strangers" (7), of a "strange community" (7), appear in the darkness outside the window of a small boy's room: he "stands at the bedroom window and watches; he can see two or three lanterns" (7). The name and identity of the boy, Patrick, emerge for us gradually, as the world of the other appears for him out of the darkness. When Patrick moves to an immigrant neighborhood in Toronto, where he will eventually catch up with the unknown stories about the world of the loggers he has encountered as a child. Here he also discovers a whole world of the other, outside his familiar boundaries (and for us

beyond the horizon of a Toronto history written predominantly in English). Most significantly, with the discovery of the (in terms of the English language) silent other, and his journey into a foreign language and culture, Patrick translates himself into a new reality as much as he has transformed by it. Leaving his own past, the "immigrant to the city" (53) is, like the immigrants from abroad, "new even to himself" (54).

When he works in the tunnels under Lake Ontario that are needed for the new waterworks, he moves into the neighborhood of the Macedonians and Bulgarians who are his colleagues, and begins to perceive similarities between the contrasting worlds of self and other. As English-speaking Canadian he becomes the foreign other of the foreigners in his own land, "their alien" (113). Simultaneously he recognizes his own position as an outsider in their image: "The people on the street, the Macedonians and Bulgarians, were his only mirror" (112). His knowledge of these other cultures is limited, however, to a formal awareness of a common experience of alienation. A mediation of horizons begins only with a knowledge that lies, with the foreign language, un-elucidated in the dark, beyond the compass of immediate visibility. This lack of words pertains also to our own, present-day knowledge of the historical reality Patrick is shown to enter. The section of *In the Skin of a Lion* that introduces us to Patrick's work in the tunnels, "Palace of Purification," begins with the taking of a photograph, an act of transcription that imposes an eerie silence on the scene: "For a moment, while the film receives the image, everything is still, the other tunnel workers silent" (105). Ondaatje's description of these photographs invites our ears synaesthetically, again, to hear another word and world underneath the written "white lye" that indicates the site of the actual work -- also in a different, double sense a work yet to be done: "In those photographs moisture in the tunnels appears white. There is a foreman's white shirt, there is white lye daubed onto rock to be dynamited. And all else is labour and darkness. Ashgrey faces. An unfinished world. The men work in the equivalent of the fallout of a candle" (111). Again, a small bright light is evoked as the illumination of a potential world that is "unfinished," and has not yet come to light. The darkness of labor, the dynamite to be blasted, and the workers silenced at the moment the picture is taken, are without sound or language in these pictures that give us an "unfinished" portrait of the reality they seek -- or pretend -- to convey. The code we need to decipher these scenes is absent. This potential process from silence into language is a journey similar to the one Patrick begins when we see him trying to understand the foreign world around him. At first, he is confronted with a lack of known words, with an exotic language, and with pictures separated from language and explanation. His first "breakthrough" (112) comes with his first word in the foreign language, the Macedonian word for "iguana" (an animal he has received from his and Ambrose Small's lover Clara, who thus provides him indirectly, not with a key to find the disappeared impresario, but with a lead for another kind of discovery). After the first word is found, a whole group of Macedonians "then circled him trying desperately to leap over the code of language between them" (113).

In a similar way, Patrick faces a silent picture without a code when he tries, later, to decipher the life of Clara's friend Alice. The old newspaper picture of construction workers at the Bloor Street Viaduct, which he is shown by Clara's daughter, Hana, has been separated from its caption. The windows of the library where Patrick hopes to find more information, "let in oceans of light" (143); but in this light only the written knowledge is visible that has been captured by the English language, and by the perspective of those who used it in this case: "The articles and illustrations he found in the Riverdale Library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge" (145). When Patrick is finally able to find the missing caption, the written language provides him with a date, and with the name of his Macedonian acquaintance, Nicholas Temelcoff. The texture behind these bare outlines of history, however, is woven only out of Temelcoff's memory and narrations when Patrick shows him the picture. Although these stories have potentially existed, they have remained in the dark. But not only for Patrick do they begin to come to light; for Temelcoff himself they have been uncreated: "Nicholas Temelcoff never looks back.... Patrick's gift, that arrow into the past, shows him the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories" (149). These stories will turn out to be some of those related by (an as yet unnamed) Patrick

during the opening car ride -- and superimpose two speakers. The simulated oral mode will thus be retroactively marked at least by a double accent, since we now know that Patrick's narration is inhabited by Temelcoff's voice. The character of Nicholas Temelcoff is based on the Macedonian immigrant by the same name (who died on Sept. 12, 1988 in Toronto), and in particular on the research and the interviews with Temelcoff by the historian Lillian Petroff. The historiographic invisibility, up to that point, of the Macedonian immigrant community in Canada begins with their immigration records; these reflect, however, only the passport definitions that listed Macedonians as Turks, Greeks, Bulgarians, or Serbians (Petroff 10-11). These immigrants shunned visibility in official written documentation by their own informed choice: "Used to avoiding Turkish authorities, Macedonians tried to evade Canadian officialdom as well... As in the old country, Macedonians risked official non-existence in North America " (Petroff 11).

In the new country, this culture is characterized by an unequal distribution of languages. As Robert Harney points out in his introduction to the volume *Gathering Place: Peoples and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945*, ethnic group identity is often expressed at home in the familiar language of the old country, and barely surfaces in the English language, which dominates the professional lives of the immigrants outside their community in the city. This situation is one of the reasons responsible for the fact that certain group realities remain silent potentials in Toronto's multi-layered city history. With a quotation from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Harney opens an attack upon a form of city history that reinforces this tendency by emphasizing British immigration, reducing a multiplicity of group-specific perceptions of the city to monochromatic history: "Beware of saying to them that sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site with the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves" (Calvino qtd. in Harney 1-2). Referring to Clifford Geertz's notion of thinking as a profoundly public activity that takes place in markets, squares, and courtyards, Harney shows that these forms of public life still survive inside ethnic groups; the city as a whole, however, has not functioned as a communicative space--as that "Gathering Place" which the city's Native name refers to. Harney therefore suggests Toronto history rely more on oral history and its methodology. Petroff understands her own work in this sense, as an inner history of Macedonian immigration, as "creation of oral history, of an understanding of the 'memory culture' of Macedonian Canadians" (Petroff 10). But this elucidation, this coming to light of oral culture is of interest for Ondaatje also because of its implicit original disappearance, the inherent transformation exemplifying the possible and the unknown in motion. The first images we "see" of Temelcoff in the text (who is, again, as yet unnamed) are thus set, like the initial vignette and the first images of Patrick and the group of strangers, in the darkness of the early morning. The "faint light of the speedometer" in the moving vehicle at the beginning, however, has been transformed, by now, into a fire--and the landscape outside has become Toronto: "A truck carries fire at five A.M. through central Toronto.... Aboard the flatbed three men stare into passing darkness... But for now all that is visible is the fire on the flatbed" (25). As the number of people increases to "twenty, crowded and silent" (25) (like the "strange community" Patrick has witnessed earlier), "the light begins to come out of the earth. They see their hands, the texture on a coat" (25). These strangers appear, for us as for themselves, out of the darkness like the bridge they build, which "goes up in a dream" (26). Eventually, they will take over the bridge--which grows in the void of the valley like Ondaatje's fiction in an unwritten space -- with their flickering lights in the middle of the night: "The previous midnight the workers had arrived and brushed away officials who guarded the bridge... moved with their own flickering lights -- their candles for the bridge dead -- like a wave of civilization, a net of summer insects over the valley" (27). Ondaatje's Temelcoff, like the unnamed workers moving on the truck in darkness, appears initially to himself invisible and silent after having crossed the border, after having left behind his old language and the old images of himself: "He never realizes how often he is watched by others. He has no clue that his gestures are extreme. He has no portrait of himself.... As with sight, because Nicholas does not listen to most conversations around him, he assumes no one hears him" (42-43).

Temelcoff's invisibility in the pictures of the bridge is "seen," in *In the Skin of a Lion*, as part of a potential in which humanity extends itself beyond given reality. John Berger, in his essay "The

Moment of Cubism" -- evoked discreetly in the novel (34) -- describes an artistic confidence similarly in new constructions as part of a historical moment in which the relationship between human possibilities and reality changed (see 34). In the years 1907-14 (the period prior to construction of the Toronto bridge), Berger sees human productivity transcend its old limits by means of new techniques and materials, through steel, electricity, radio, and film. A certain secularization is completed: "But now man was able to extend *himself* indefinitely beyond the immediate: he took over the territory in space and time where God had been presumed to exist" (7). Berger finds this changed relationship between human being and reality in cubism as well (15); beyond the imitation of visible reality, but also beyond Romantic emphasis on subjective experience, cubism thinks subjective experience as part of, and continuous with, perceived reality (20-21). Berger ascribes the intimation of a new world to these pictures that model perception itself, and force the imagination of the observer to search and to test possibilities. Cubism, for Berger, is prophetic (9). To Ondaatje's commissioner Roland Harris, the progress of the bridge occurs, by night, like the prophecy of a Toronto that is invisible as yet. The bridge by night that exists half-real, half-imagined by the eyes that see in the darkness of the night, disappears beyond the edge of the valley, and transcends Toronto's visible image by day. This extending and prophetic vision is significantly compared with oral forms of language that construct other worlds in excess of given reality -- rumors and tall tales: "For Harris the night allowed scope. Night removed the limitations of detail and concentrated on form. ... before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting" (29). Nicholas Temelcoff goes in Ondaatje's novel even beyond this human-made structure pointing into the void. With the other workers he disappears time and again--although held by ropes--"over the edge of the bridge into the night" (30). When Ondaatje refers to Temelcoff, who floats invisibly between the two sides of the valley as he lives between languages, as a "spinner" linking everyone, he alludes, with the archaic meaning of the word, to the spider web as one of his preferred textual metaphors; but the word "spinner" evokes also a "teller of the yarn." With the character of Temelcoff, who appears to us mediated by several instances, Ondaatje offers also an image of language that exceeds reality, and proceeds from the gaps of a historical discourse seeking strictly factual representation. Similar to Temelcoff's life between the old and the new continent and their languages, and between the two ends of the bridge opening out into the empty valley, Ondaatje's novel grows in the gaps of the transcribed interviews with the historical Nicholas Temelcoff. Although the work on the bridge is mentioned here, we learn next to nothing about the daily work experience (see Petroff 143; Temelcoff 6-8).

With Temelcoff's emergence in the new language simultaneously, the new emerges in Ondaatje's language, an otherness beyond the factual knowledge asserted by recorded history. Like the workers who climb -- secured by ropes and anchored in historical truth -- day after day "over the edge of the bridge into the night" (30), the novel advances in its telling of history; but, in a parallel formulation that recalls and contrasts with this secured advance, the story steps beyond that limit. A nun falls "off the edge of the bridge. She disappeared into the night ... into the long depth of air which held nothing" (31). This fall and disappearance into the undefined darkness of the night opens here the possibility of a metamorphosis, and offers the space for an untold story (not dissimilar to the "vehicle" that "travels through darkness" at the beginning). The fall of the nun is caught by a secularized *deus ex machina*, the stranger, the other, Nicholas Temelcoff. As so often in Ondaatje's texts, both participants in this encounter transcend the demarcations of their former spaces. On the one hand, after this meeting of historically certified figure with the purely fictional one, the nun will change her name and her life, translating religious aspirations into secular hope; on the other hand, Temelcoff's speech begins, in a conversation with the as-yet nameless nun, to mix the accents and words of the old language with those of the new: "He talked on, slipping into phrases from the radio songs which is how he learned his words and pronunciations" (37). Similar to Patrick's entrance into a double-voiced reality both in his discovery of Macedonian words, and in his telling of the stories of himself and others in the middle of the night, Temelcoff reveals himself, on the dividing line between wake and sleep, in a double

language: "He talked about himself, tired, unaware his voice split now into two languages" (37-38).

Ondaatje draws -- so often in some of his most fascinating passages -- on the materiality of signs to stage the encounter of different languages and realities. Whereas the technical medium of the radio and thus the ear and the spoken voice function here already as a catalyst in the orchestration of realities, of languages, and of voices that are alien to each other, the eye will have to wait, significantly, for the "talkies" to "lighten" -- to ease and bring light to -- the immigrants' experience: "The event that will lighten the way for immigration in North America is the talking picture" (43). The silent movie is associated with the voiceless darkness and grotesque of a nightmare: "These comedies are nightmares. The audience emits horrified laughter as Chaplin, blindfolded, roller skates near the edge of the un-balconied mezzanine. No one shouts to warn him. He cannot talk or listen. North America is still without language, gestures and work and bloodlines are the only currency" (43). Ondaatje tells us about immigrants who learn English by parroting actors in the theatre, destroying the punch lines with their multiple echo. Slow ballads and blues, rich with repetition, accommodate the newcomers as well. "Sojourners walked out of their accent into regional American voices" (47), Ondaatje writes, letting Temelcoff alter himself in the modulations of the jazz singer Fats Waller: "His emphasis on usually unnoticed syllables and the throwaway lines made him seem high-strung or dangerously anti-social or too loving" (47). But the acquisition of the foreign language by immigrants does not guarantee their visibility in the written history of the host culture. With the interwoven story of the searcher and narrator Patrick, who himself accepts the status of a stranger in the world of the immigrant strangers, Ondaatje's novel listens to this historical silence and "renders" unrecorded history in written, often necessarily fictional words. Patrick intervenes in a puppet play that stages, as a pantomime and *mise en abyme*, the immigrants' silent life in the English language of the city during an illegal meeting of workers at the waterworks, an "illegal gathering of various nationalities" where "many languages were being spoken" (115; see Lemon 53). Patrick's interruption of this pantomime enacting silent history will have been, at the end of the novel, one of his first steps as a mediator and eventually narrator of that silence. The play's main figure, whose silent gesture of despair he ends, has emerged from the play as human being among silent puppets. She turns out to be Alice Gull, who is later revealed as the "flying" nun. If the nun has not spoken in the earlier scenes (silently added to the historical record of the bridge), she now gains a voice in the novel's story, in the fictional version of history. While Patrick has ended her silent play within the novel, she will end his silent role in the story.

When Patrick reflects on his own outsidership, on the fact that he "has clung like moss to strangers, to the nooks and fissures of their situations" (156), unable ever to have "been the hero of one of these stories" (157), he remembers Alice's description of a play in which the power of language is handed on among several heroines: "After half an hour the powerful matriarch removed her large coat from which animal pelts dangled and she passed it, along with her strength, to one of the 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). The passage evokes the novel's title and its first epigraph, taken from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: "I will let my hair grow long for your sake, and I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion." (93) In the epos -- the story of a double -- Gilgamesh abandons his way of life after the death of his friend Enkidu, with whom he has transgressed the laws and the boundaries determined by the gods, in order to immortalize his name. He leaves his city and his friends in order to learn the secret of immortality from Utnapishtim, to whom eternal life has been given by the gods. But after a long journey through darkness, and over the waters of death, he cannot pass Utnapishtim's test: he cannot vanquish deathlike sleep for six days and seven nights. Patrick's friend Alice dies, not because she is punished by the gods like Enkidu, but through the more modern violence of a time bomb, meant to transgress the order of the city. Like Gilgamesh, Patrick leaves the city after the death of his friend. Burning down a resort hotel of the rich, he adopts the pose of a violent anarchist (Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* might be one of the intertexts here), both to take

revenge on those Alice has taught him to oppose, and to transcend the limits of his former life (as Temelcoff and Alice have done before him). After his return from prison, Patrick aims more precisely at the demarcation line between the anonymous dead of history, and those who are granted immortality by its "monuments." He enters the waterworks through its intake pipe, after having made himself invisible with the help of Caravaggio -- a thief who routinely transgresses the boundaries of buildings, and has eluded the confinement of Kingston Prison by letting himself be painted into the roof (Blumenberg mentions Caravaggio together with Rembrandt as one of the first painters who used light as a localized factor, rather than letting a homogeneous light guarantee an evenly accented scene [446]; see also Sarris).

The anti-climactic scene in which Patrick, after having crossed the dark Lake Ontario as Gilgamesh had traversed darkness and the waters of death, faces the city commissioner Harris at night inside the water works, takes on rich signification with the intertextual references to the epos. By entering the waterworks, Patrick has most certainly not "successfully overcome the danger of being obliterated by official histories" (Gamlin 69). His encounter and dialogue with Harris pose the question of death and survival, practically at this decisive moment of the novel, and symbolically with respect to historically recorded reality. Threatening to destroy the building that today still immortalizes Harris' name, Patrick demands to know how many suffered death in the construction of the building. "No record was kept" (236), Harris answers. Patrick now asks Harris (who has survived in the light of written history), to turn off the light, and face him in his -- Patrick's -- world of darkness. But Harris reveals himself as a visionary dreamer who can see potential worlds beyond the visible realities of daylight. His visions of the city that came to him in dreams, he tells Patrick, often turned out to be possibilities the city had dismissed. Such a possibility, Patrick is being told, is he himself: "These *were* real places. They could have existed. I mean the Bloor Street Viaduct and this building here are just a hint of what could have been done here. You must realize you are like these places, Patrick" (237-38). Patrick does not accede to historical immortality by blowing up the water works, in this fictionalized version of Toronto 's history. In a surprising turn of events, Patrick falls asleep while telling the story of Alice 's death; we hear its end as part of a dream. While this solution hardly corresponds to the climactic expectations connected with the realistic novel, it is clearly motivated by the mythic theme of vanquishing sleep and death, a theme the novel transposes from the epos to the realities of historiography. In the early light of day, Harris wins over Patrick, and with him the written history we know. Like Gilgamesh, Patrick does not pass the test of conquering sleep. To take the skin of a lion, and accede to the language of historically recorded reality, remains a story between possibility and dream. This status between an uncertain power and prophecy distinguishes as well the narrative of an earlier stage in Gilgamesh's journey, which Ondaatje now quotes: "[Harris] stood over Patrick. 'He lay down to sleep, until he was woken from out of a dream. He saw lions around him glorying in life; then he took his axe in his hand, he drew his sword from his belt, and he fell upon them like an arrow from the string'" (242; *The Epic of Gilgamesh* 94).

Patrick is not awakened here from out of his dream. Only in Ondaatje's novel, the historical possibility (and probability) of another history of Toronto comes to life, and with it a multi-faceted mural of the city that its dominant historiography has left in the dark. Ondaatje's writing distinguishes itself from this form of visible knowledge by appealing to an oral history that again and again finds its beginnings, in *In the Skin of a Lion*, as a tale about and of the other told in darkness. Like the bridge, Ondaatje's fictive oral stories are imagined in a night that, for Harris, "removed the limitations of detail and concentrated on form" (29). And thus Patrick, who loses his reality with the beginning of daylight in the water works, is awakened and remains awake when he tells his tale--unleashing his "arrow into the past" -- during the car ride at night when the novel returns to its beginning. But Patrick's tale has come about, in retrospect, as a structure in which many perspectives intersect. His narrative during the car ride is possible because, in this case, he is kept awake by Hana, the listener. "She stays awake to keep him company," we read at the beginning. At the end we learn, furthermore, that she has woken Patrick from his sleep (243), and made him talk by her questions -- just as Patrick, earlier, has motivated Temelcoff to tell his stories. As we come to attribute certain passages in retrospect to both Temelcoff's *and* Patrick's



discovered power of language, at the end the frame narrative similarly identifies, and thus overdetermines, the written novel we have read with the oral story being told at the beginning. And now, we learn also that Hana, the listener, has been sitting in "the driver's seat" (244) part of the way, and has "gathered" the slowly "betrayed," imagined landscape of the narrative from her own perspective, "adapting the rearview mirror to her height" (244). Throughout the novel, the searcher Patrick, who has set out to find the disappeared, wealthy Ambrose Small, ends up finding the perspectives of "ex-centrics" (Hutcheon 94) that history has neglected: besides the story of Nicholas Temelcoff, those of ethnic minority immigrants, and those of women.

These multiple possible perspectives and points of view often create an oscillating, hologrammatic simultaneity of different possible assumptions for the reader -- concerning the identity of the speaker of a passage, of its point in time, and of its status with respect to reality (both in the novel and in historical reality). The novel uses, for instance, a non-linear structure in which chronologically later events of the plot are presented (frequently as memory from an even later point in time) prior to earlier events -- the most extreme case being the final car scene presented at the beginning. Similarly, a prolepsis indirectly "announces" Alice's end as memory (147-48), long before the details of her death are finally revealed in Patrick's dream. Furthermore, this very dream and Patrick's adventure in the waterworks are framed by a chronologically later episode, in which Patrick lies down to sleep (219, 243). The sentence, "He felt his clothes wet with the sweat of sleep" (243), recalls the water imagery of Patrick's journey through the lake on the previous pages; only his actually broken arm seems to balance the possibility that his encounter with Harris might have occurred in a dream. Similarly, Patrick wakes up wounded after his earlier encounter with Ambrose Small. Yet as if in a dream, Small "doesn't move as Patrick steps up to him and cuts him at the shoulder" (95). A few lines later, the text continues: "When Patrick woke" (95). After one of several dreams Patrick has earlier about Small, he is directly asked by Clara: "I said, were you dreaming?" -- and answers: "I don't know. Why?" (68). These interconnected temporal and "ontological" oscillations remind us both of the double possible modes of dream and manuscript that Ondaatje discerns in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Ondaatje, "García Márquez" 31), which for him "is a dream, an instant" (29), and of the double time structure he observes in García Márquez's book: "About halfway through the book you begin to feel that while you are still moving forward to the end you are simultaneously moving from midpoint to the beginning. Your consciousness is sliding both ways. Time has been shattered by Melquíades' experiments to overcome death" (Ondaatje, "García Márquez" 30). He continues: "We have been reading the manuscript of Melquíades or witnessing the dream of the first Buendía" (31). Already in the opening pages, Patrick is referred to as the "boy who witnesses this procession [of strangers in the darkness], and who even dreams about it" (8).

The juxtapositions and mutual framings of moments perceived normally as isolated in time, or by the separations among dream, possibility, and reality, emphasize the simultaneity of different historical and subjectively accessible spaces and times in the novel. Ondaatje answers thus John Berger's call that serves as his second epigraph: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one." *In the Skin of a Lion* interprets effectively some of the possible implications of this manifesto by interweaving different planes of reality and time, thus opening the space for another dimension that coexists with the realities of Toronto and Ontario that we may be aware of. Worlds meet in a fluid choreography of possibility and actuality, dream and prophecy, versions of the past, of the present, and possibly of the future. This openness towards the space of the other, however, is accompanied by a self-reflexive awareness of mediality on the part of the writing self, which both discovers and opens itself to the silences, and the oral history, of the other. On the one hand, oral history plays a very conspicuous role in *In the Skin of a Lion* (as in Ondaatje's two previous works of fiction), and Ondaatje may well be seen among those novelists who -- "despite themselves," as Hutcheon has suspected -- "are McLuhan's true spiritual heirs" (52). On the other hand, Ondaatje thematizes writing also very explicitly as an act of self-discovery. We see the thief Caravaggio, for instance, who "was invisible to all around him" (199) and "had never witnessed someone writing before," stand outside a window and observe a woman write, "trying to discover what she was or what she was capable of making" (198). In this scene, the figure in the darkness

outside begins to intermingle liminally with the room in which the written self is created - but the stranger at the window remains unnamed himself: "He was anonymous" (199).

Ondaatje's novel stages both the potential violence and the fascinating possibilities inherent in the perception, history, and writing of the other that necessarily implies an act of self-mediation and mutual creation. If his writing is fictive memory, it creates an example -- and adumbrates the outline -- of a distinct necessity: the coexistence of "invisible" cities and existences, both in the past and in Toronto's present. We often know about these realities only that they exist, or must have existed -- in silence. If invisibility and darkness are typically associated, in *In the Skin of a Lion*, with the rich potential of a collective oral history, the eye is made aware of its other through writing, a medium associated with light. *In the Skin of a Lion* overtly addresses this mediation; in its last plural, however, the text seeks both to evade the mono-perspectival limits of this process, and to multiply its possibilities: "Lights, he said" (244). These "lights" often reveal infinitely altering perspectives that often do not move toward resolution. In the "final" encounter between Patrick and Harris, for instance, Harris reveals his "other" side as a being of the night, thus becoming Patrick's equal. Because of this unsuspected partial identity between the two, the exclusion of the other -- the expected arrest of Patrick -- never occurs here. But if this scene in the night carries a few traces of a dream, it brings its own possibility and potentiality to light. If this moment may not have happened except as a dream -- either in history or in the novel -- scenes of similar otherness and intent could have happened -- and probably did in some form. The decision whether to exclude this reality of fiction, or whether to perceive the constructed fictionality of our own familiar room, is left to us.

Note: The above paper is an updated version of a text on pages 153-72 in Winfried Siemerling, *Discoveries of the Other: Alterity in the Work of Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Michael Ondaatje, and Nicole Brossard*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994.

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