

RE-MEMBERING THE BODY: CONSTRUCTING THE SELF AS HERO IN *IN THE SKIN OF A LION*

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In "The Masculine Mode," Peter Swenger observes that "[i]n English Literature the body is either a transparent vessel for conversations and thoughts or is viewed from the outside. Seldom has a writer attempted to render the unique relations we really have with our own bodies."¹ *In the Skin of a Lion* is an exception. Michael Ondaatje's novel is rife with living bodies. They are brought to our attention, not by being objects of the narrator's gaze (or anyone else's), but, in part, by the many references to physical sensation: cold, heat, damp, hunger, longing, exhaustion, and, especially, pain. Many of the bodies in the novel are abused, either by hard manual labor or by the deliberate infliction of pain by another, and require care and attention. Bodies are painted, dyed, tattooed, and greased. The presence of blood reminds us that the bodies are more than machines used as the means of production or the shells of an "essential" self.

As Ondaatje restores working class individuals to a particular piece of Canadian history, he deviates from historical discourse in ways that include this figuring of bodies, for, as Francis Barker notes, "the body has certainly been among those objects which have been effectively hidden from history."² We are reminded of this in a very literal way when we discover that there has not even been a "body count" of those who died in the Viaduct and Waterworks projects described in the novel, let alone an acknowledgment of the workers. The body only becomes significant if it belongs to someone significant; the Bertillon system is developed to help identify the important bodies of missing persons and criminals. Small's body becomes important because it has gained monetary value: "The search had turned the

millionaire's body into a rare coin, a piece of financial property."³ Ondaatje focuses attention on the bodies of men that are not perceived as being historically important, men whose bodies have no individual market value. These men are the workers who provide the means of production for the rich. Against the general background of manual laborers, the interconnected stories of three men emerge, each with certain "heroic" qualities: Nicholas Temelcoff, who saves the life of a nun in an amazing physical feat; David Caravaggio, who deliberately effaces his body in his work and in his clever prison escape; and Patrick Lewis, the protagonist of the novel, whose self (and by extension, body) is constructed as the book develops and who eventually takes on "the skin of a lion."

The cover of the Penguin paperback edition of the novel features two male workers in an illustration by Frederick B. Taylor called "Hull Rivetting." One worker rivets while the other holds his arm steady. Here we have physical labor and necessary cooperation between workers vividly represented by the positioning of the bodies. Throughout the novel there are sections devoted to descriptions of the labors of male workers: logging, building a bridge, a tunnel, working in a tannery. Although the workers' bodies are made to work like machines, and are apparently considered mere means of production by the rich, we are constantly reminded that they are human. They are exhausted by their labors; their working conditions lead to wounds, diseases, even death. For example, the narrator describes the experience of the tunnel workers this way: "Each blow against the shale wall jars up from the palms into the shoulders as if the body is hit. Exhaustion overpowers Patrick and the other tunnelers within twenty minutes, the arms itching, the chest dry" (105). We learn that the tanning factory "brutalizes. . . . They get skin burns from the galvanizing process. Arthritis, rheumatism" (124). The bodies are the means not only of survival for the workers, but also of communication. Many of them are immigrants and communicate to each other through gesture and a recognition that they share the same pain in their labors and such pleasure as a meal or a steam bath in the company of others. The only distinction a man makes for himself is a job extraordinarily well done.

The epigraphs for the novel suggest the direction the workers' story will take. The first epigraph from the novel is from

a text which features feats of male heroism and extraordinary male friendship—an especially masculine story, according to Hammond and Jablow.⁴ Gilgamesh's great grief over the loss of his friend parallels Patrick's grief, and both will wear a lion's skin in their mourning: Gilgamesh does so literally for protection, and Patrick will do so in a symbolic sense, in order to confront the powerful and recreate his beloved. This skin, of course, gives the novel its title. This first epigraph suggests that there will be heroism in the novel; the second—"Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one"—indicates that the story of the hero will be the story of many. Heroism and storytelling, then, will inform the representation of bodies in the text.

The character who most obviously embodies the characteristics of a hero is Nicholas Temelcoff. Unlike the other immigrant workers, whose bodies are used like machines, Temelcoff's body works with precision as an extension of his mind. He moves intuitively, extremely aware of his body while working on the bridge, swinging in the air. He is "famous on the bridge, a daredevil" because "he could be blindfolded. . . . He knows his position in the air as if he is mercury slipping across a map" (35). Others have been killed doing exactly what he does. For a time, he remains a "recluse" (47) because he knows his body better than the language he must communicate in. His spectacular saving of the nun, something that is kept a secret for years, resembles the action of a superhero. The talented Temelcoff instinctively knows his physical strength and skill, as well as his limits, and he catches the plummeting woman in a firm embrace, at some cost to his body. The vocabulary of the nun invades the description of his catch: "his hand's timing had been immaculate, the grace of the habit, and he found himself a moment later holding the figure against him dearly" (32). The fright and the pain makes him doubly aware of his body; he admits he has a "[l]ot of pain," but, he says, "I feel good. . . . Alive" (36). Although the nun, "[h]er body . . . in shock" (32), cannot speak, she, too, experiences a renewal of life and goes on to change her identity. Temelcoff and the nun had had very different relations to their bodies; he has a precise understanding of his body's space and capabilities, whereas "she was always falling into windows, against chairs" (33). Now she becomes his "twin," putting his arm back into his socket, restoring his body as he had saved hers. Their experience

leads them both to a heightened awareness of themselves and a keen sense of each other's bodies.

Temelcoff does not tell anyone the story for years, and the nun, Alice, never does. Temelcoff becomes a baker and a family man, owning his own business and serving the needs of the community. His single heroic act remains a secret until Patrick, curious about the picture of the men on the bridge, and knowing something of Temelcoff's friendship with Alice and Hana, questions him. The story is returned, as it seems, to Temelcoff's body, when his remembering is likened to trying to recapture a dream by sleeping "in exactly the same position" as before "where the body parted from its images" (149). Here the images have been returned to the body, and he can tell the story to his wife. He experiences "the pleasure of recall" and believes that "[t]his is what history means" (149). Through his body, then, Temelcoff recognizes and locates himself in the history of others.

Caravaggio, who also begins as a worker on the bridge, has, like Temelcoff, the keen sense of his body necessary to his work and his survival. Rather than performing any acts of heroism which save the lives of others, or fulfilling a necessary service to the community by providing food for them to buy, he develops his craft as the "neighborhood thief" (47). He is accepted because he steals from the rich, not his fellow immigrants. In his trade, he works without human help, relying on the ability of his body to move quietly, quickly, and invisibly. He carefully trains his body, just as Temelcoff does for his work on the bridge. Like Temelcoff's, his body works by instinct and intuition as well. In order that he may escape discovery at a moment's notice, he sleeps lightly, "his body porous to every noise" (184). He cannot protect his body from direct attack when there is nowhere to hide, especially when the number of assailants is against him, as we discover from the incident in his cell. Thus, he recognizes the importance of effacing his body to survive, and actually makes his body invisible in order to escape from prison in a particularly vivid scene in the novel. He escapes by removing the lines of "[d]emarkation" (179) which he tells his fellow prisoners is important in locating themselves in the world of blue paint, blue sky. His painted body recalls the dyed bodies of the workers in the tannery, but, in contrast to them, his body does not suffer but is preserved by the colour.

Caravaggio is not only always aware of his body's space and movement, but also of its desires, and he does not deny or thwart them even in the interests of preserving his invisibility. When he is hurt and hiding in the mushroom factory, he is not afraid of securing the means of alleviating his hunger and pain. He is also aware of his body as sexual; aroused by the body of his deliverer, he instigates their relationship (though she encourages and freely participates in it). Their sexual relationship is celebrated in the wildest scene of lovemaking in the novel where, it seems, a kitchen is largely destroyed in the process. Although the scene may have been only imagined by Caravaggio, we are given every expectation that their reunion will take this course. He recognizes her body as "[t]he home of the other" (204) and both revel in "[t]he taste of the other. A bazaar of muscles and flavours" (205). His body bears her marks—her earring and its "tattoo of blood" (205) on his arm and her "footstep of blood" (206) on his shoulder. The scene reminds us of both the body's strength (as objects crash around them) and its fragility (blood).

The heroic characteristics possessed by Caravaggio are evident in the superior capabilities of his body; his excellence as a thief (and a kind of escape-artist) undermines the power of the rich. He is seen as a kind of hero by the boy who helps him after he escapes from prison, for he represents a more exciting and dangerous life to the boy. Caravaggio does not deny, but rather celebrates his body. He is even willing to use it to charm the rich woman whose boat he needs to help Patrick, drawing attention to his body when he wonders, laughing, "Can a man lose his balance with an erection" (225). In various ways, then, both Caravaggio and Temelcoff fulfill superior masculine stereotypes through their bodies. Patrick desires to achieve heroic status as well, but his coming to terms with his self and his body is a long process.

We are given Patrick's development from boyhood, when his models of masculinity are his father and the loggers he observes. For most of the novel, Patrick could be described as "inexpressive" in his relationships with others. Jack Balswick, in *The Inexpressive Male*, says that "[l]ow self-disclosure," which is seen most often in males, is often learned behavior from an inexpressive father and often seen as a heroic characteristic.⁵ This is made clear in the novel when Patrick learns how to deal with others by observing his father, who rarely speaks. In his boyhood years, "he

absorbed everything from a distance" (19). Patrick's father is not only important as a model of masculinity, but also as a model of adult behavior, since Patrick lacks a mother. He learns to work with others without using language, and it is not surprising that he ends up working with immigrants with whom he relies on gesture to communicate. Surrounding himself with those who do not speak his language precludes any necessity to reveal himself. In imitating his father, he learns "[t]he unemotional tongue" (19). Significantly, as his father teaches himself to use explosives, he "outlined the boy's body onto the plank wall" (14) and explodes what is within that body. Similarly, only the boy's body is recognized, as a means to work, and not his emotional, intellectual self, which cries out for company, for "conversation" (10).

Patrick associates the body with work from an early age. As a boy he watches the loggers carefully, noting that in the morning "[a]lready they seem exhausted" (7), watching their work, observing that "[t]he sweat moves between their hard bodies and the cold clothes" (8). The narrator associates these men with masculinity, describing their living quarters as having "a warmth which is the odour of men" (8) and "a window the size of a torso" (8). As Patrick sees the loggers skating, he "long[s] to hold their hands" (21) and to become a part of them. His experiences in the city where he remains, for the most part, an outsider result from his desire to join the community of men he has observed.

Patrick is also influenced by the stereotypic male hero of popular Western culture: physically superior, silent, a man of action, a loner rescuing females in distress. The paradigm of the hero is established in the literature Patrick reads as a boy: "[i]n the books he read, women were rescued from runaway horses, from frozen pond incidents" (61) and "[w]hen he was twelve he turned the pages always towards illustration and saw the heroes carry the women across British Columbian streams" (160). Yet, he recognizes the lack of heroic qualities within himself: "He could no more have skated along the darkness of a river than been the hero of one of these stories" (157). When he seeks to win Clara from Small, he contemplates that "[i]f [he] was a hero he could come down on Small like an arrow" (83), but he is not, and he comes to physical harm as a result of his attempt. His sense of what a man and a hero should be is challenged by what he en-

counters in the city, and he must locate himself outside the models he has observed.

When Patrick does not dare to join the loggers as they skate, the narrator concludes that "at this stage in his life his mind raced ahead of his body" (22). Although we can interpret this as he desires more than he has achieved, it also reveals Patrick's separation of mind and body. This separation divides Patrick from a source for understanding himself and others. Kenneth Shapiro, in *Bodily Reflective Modes*, valorizes the experience of "the lived body" which is the embodiment of our consciousness.⁶ As "the bearer of meaning" rather than the representative of meaning (or signifier), the body gives the self agency rather than always being "lost in language."⁷ In other words, the body, though socially inscribed, can be the site of change. Patrick perceives the male body as a means for heroism, for determining his place in the world, his self, but he discovers things about himself that go beyond these constructions. Part of Patrick's understanding of himself comes through his understanding of his body in terms of, for example, desire. He "aches" for Alice; he is "dazzled" by aspects of Clara's body "as if she without turning had fired a gun over her shoulder and mortally wounded him" (61); he feels "[s]omething hollow [in him], so when alone, when not aligned with another . . . he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community. A gap of love" (157). His experiences are responded to bodily; the body reveals the truth about himself and his situation.

His body is not used to save other women; rather, it is the women who appear to save him, as both he and the narrator clearly state. Although they may dominate him in several respects, Clara and Alice save him by giving of their bodies. Hana, too, saves him, by giving the role and responsibility of father. Patrick recognizes the power in the touch of the female, and even imagines the waitress he observes "would be able to transform the one she touched, the one she gripped at the wrist with her tough hand" (112). We should note that the touch he imagines is not soft and caressing, but strong and demanding. Clara and Alice are both independent women who initiate their sexual relationships with Patrick. He does not in any way control his relationships with them; Clara goes back to her lover and Alice continues to pursue her ideological goals without his endorse-

ment. Both women nurture him, perhaps fulfilling the role of his absent mother. While neither help to pattern his life on the paradigm of the stereotypical male hero, both help bring him to maturity, and an understanding of his body as a site of his self.

In entering into a relationship with Clara, Patrick enters into another world: "He liked to sleep separate, in his own world, but with her he kept waking, reaching to hold her flesh against him" (65) and "[h]e found himself . . . in the spell of her body, within the complex architecture of her past" (66). Thus her history becomes situated in her body. Of course this is particularly relevant because Clara's role is that of mistress to a famous man. In at least one instance, there seem to be an inversion of the traditional dominant male/submissive female sexual encounter. With Clara's "mouth on his nipple" Patrick feels "his whole body imprisoned there" (68). Later she passes his sperm from her mouth to his: "He took it, the white character, and they passed it back and forth between them till it no longer existed, till they didn't know who had him like a lost planet somewhere in the body" (69). Thus, he seems to be the receptacle for himself, taking in his own sperm. There seems to be a parallel here as well with the female nourishing the infant with milk. In this way he recovers his own body, experiences his own body through the other. Also the words "planet" and "world" are used several times in the novel in connection with bodies, suggesting how the body contains the entirety, the whole world of the self.

Most of the time, Patrick does not understand his relation to his body. Clara makes Patrick think of his body as powerful, and he tries to impress her with being able to use it with precision, by such antics as leaping around the room, blindfolded, "just throwing his body within an inch of the window" (80). Recognizing that he is using his prowess to impress her, Clara moves against his instruction, and they collide, leaving him with a bleeding nose, visible evidence of his vulnerability. He must realize that he cannot use his body like a machine because it does not exist in isolation. Two years after Clara leaves him, Patrick tells Alice, "Physically I'm fine, just my mind. I'm lucky, whatever state I'm in my body takes care of itself" (87), further indicating a division between his rational and his physical self. Alice's answer reflects her fuller integration: "I'm the reverse. That's the only way I can tell if I'm in bad shape mentally, through my body" (87). Patrick

needs to turn to female models of the relationship one has with the body.

Both Clara and Alice are aware of and comfortable with their own bodies. They appear closely associated with nature in this; while they are all at the cottage, the women go out in the dark, in the rain, and enjoy the sensation on their bodies, rolling around on the ground in an embrace. Patrick feels a special sense of belonging when he is around them, and "[h]e feels more community remembering [them coming in to paint him] than anything in his life" (79) even though he shortly thereafter fell asleep. Their "spirit painting" of Patrick is based on intuitive knowledge of him by observing "the vagueness of his covered body" (75) where they find "jealousy and desire" (75). Thus, the women recognize the self as an extension of the body.

Once Clara returns to Small, she can only offer her body to Patrick as comfort; she can soothe Patrick and make him feel alive again, but she cannot bring him to any acceptance of himself. After he has been hurt by Small, he feels alienated from his body. Even "[h]is hands . . . seemed to be someone else's hands" (95). Clara temporarily restores him by caring for his wounds, and by inscribing (though only in an impermanent gesture) her ownership of him by writing "Dickens 5" on his forehead (98). She also leaves her mark in his blood on the wall "where she had leaned to balance herself in their lovemaking as she crouched over him" (100). Alice, too, comforts Patrick in a temporary way when he has lost his sense of self in mourning for his lost Clara. However, when Patrick finds Alice again, and they engage in a more permanent relationship, he comes to a new and stronger sense of self.

Alice's change from nun to actress (and lover of at least two men) expresses a difference in how she sees her body. Alice moves from denial of body as a nun, to awareness of body when that body is saved by another, to a state of complete satisfaction where she has a "habit of sitting pale and naked at the breakfast table" (137). She has exchanged her nun's habit for a habit of ease with her body, one veil for the recognition that "[w]e're veiled in flesh" (125). Hers is also the only reproductive body in the novel. Experiencing her body, Patrick is again reminded of origins (as with Clara) but now he confronts and begins to understand his own. In one instance, Patrick thinks, "And who was she? And

where was she from?" (151) as they begin to make love. They go on to read each other's bodies, "[t]he brain and eyes interpreting pleasure in the other" (152), and he realizes for the first time that "he was the sum of all he had been in his life since he was that boy in the snow woods" (152). He also sees that a body can take on different roles by recognizing that Alice can be many things: an angry male immigrant on stage, a social activist, a caring mother, and a passionate lover, among other roles. After she is dead, it is "her smallness, her intricacy" that he "aches for" (159), remembering "the skin at the side of her nose where the scar lies" (163) and "the fragility of her breasts" (160). It appears to be her body that he longs for, but by this time he identifies her body as the site of her self, and in reconstructing her body in his memory, he can recover and reanimate her whole being for himself.

His life with Alice has made him conscious of how his body manifests the experience of his self. As a result of his new job and being "full of Alice Gull," "[h]is flesh tightened in this new dry world, his damp stiffness fell away" (129). He becomes aware of how his body is seen by others as he struggles to communicate: he resembles a "stroke victim" (138). However, he is not unduly frustrated; rather, he learns by reading bodies and by being read by others. In fact, "[e]very true thing he learned about character he learned at this time in his life" (138). Thus, the body as a site of meaning is privileged over language for this part of his life. Just when he achieves balance, his body fails him. He is not able to save Alice from the bomb she carries, not able to fulfill the role of hero he had desired as a child.

He believes he is somehow revenging Alice's death, by destroying the enemy's power just as she wanted, when he sets fire to the Muskota Hotel. He seems to succeed and experiences feeling "fully alive, feral, exhilarated" (172), as Temelcoff did after saving Alice. After breaking through a window of a boat, and hurting himself in the process, Patrick eats raw meat. In this, he very much resembles a stereotypic virile hero, manliness exemplified in the power of his body, in the success of his violent action, and in his animalistic hunger. Yet, his "heroism" is shortlived, for he is soon imprisoned for his offense, and there is no lasting positive effects from his action. He appears to regress in prison: "he had protected himself with silence—. . . as if saying even one word would begin a release of Alice out of his body.

Secrecy kept him powerful. By refusing communication he could hold her within himself, in his arms" (212). He falls back on the inexpressive mode of behavior of his childhood. His body now imprisons Alice and his power is potentially self-destructive. His self, and recognition of his body as part of that self, can only be realized by the awareness of the other. In helping Caravaggio when he is attacked, Patrick breaks the silence, and "turn[s] from himself" (212). Once he does that, he is more ready to recover Alice by gathering her story and reanimating her in sharing it with others.

He attempts one last heroic act, planning to destroy the waterworks where Alice once acted. This feat requires a complete understanding of his body, and like Temelcoff and Caravaggio, he must have this awareness without being able to see his body or what surrounds it. Again, "[d]emarcation" (228) is removed as he coats his body with grease and darkens his face. Swimming through the tunnel leading to the waterworks (which Harris viewed as "a human body" which "could be seriously crippled" (22)], Patrick can be seen as reentering the womb. He injures his arm (as Temelcoff did in his rescue of Alice) and becomes bloodied in the process, but also becomes reborn, no longer the hero, the powerful physical male who will use violence to revenge his loved ones. The Lewises had destroyed things in their line of work; Patrick's father was even killed in one of his own explosions. But, at the end, Patrick chooses not to use the full force of the technology of which he is master. He becomes someone who gives. He becomes the storyteller. We should remember that in Alice's description of the skin of the storyteller, the skin was taken on by a woman. Patrick returns to the female model for his construction of self. In the longest section of dialogue in the novel, Patrick confronts Harris, and tells him the story of Alice, and, in doing so, gives her life meaning. He is no longer the inexpressive male who will let action speak for him. Released from his struggle, he sleeps.

The change in Patrick is evident in the last scene of the novel. Instead of rushing to pick up Clara, he has taken care of his body first, giving it the rest it needs. He also allows Hana to drive, under the pretense that he would be more comfortable as a passenger. He gives her responsibility, but assures her of his guidance, showing that he takes his new role as parent seriously.

The novel began with "This is a story a young girl gathers. . . [T]he man . . . picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms. And he is tired. . . ." The story is represented as something physical that requires physical effort to construct. At the end, too, "the man" is tired, but he will tell the "whole story" (244). In giving the story now to Hana, he recovers her mother, and locates himself in their interconnected stories. Unlike his father, Patrick speaks to his child. He is no longer one of the workers, whose community he longed to be part of; he is not like his father; he is different from the more stereotypically masculine men in the novel, Temelcoff and Caravaggio. To some extent at least, his body has been the site of resistance in the social construction of the self.

Foregrounding the body is one of the ways Ondaatje explores alternatives in fictional discourse. Rather than having the bodies in the novel represent something other than themselves (which immediately effaces them as "lived bodies"), Ondaatje reclaims them as sites of meaning, as extensions of the self. To a considerable extent, Ondaatje explores the part that the body plays in the development of the self, in how the men regard their bodies, and, in the case of Patrick, how he reconciles his body and his self, and no longer completely adheres to social models of masculinity. His "heroic" gesture is a peaceful one, and he is able to "rescue" and recover his beloved through non-standard heroic means. Patrick's mind no longer races before his body; they become whole when he assumes his role "in the skin of a lion."

NOTES

¹ Peter Swenger, "The Masculine Mode," *Speaking of Gender*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Routledge, 1989) 103.

² Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984) 12.

³ Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion* (Markham: Penguin, 1988) 59. All further parenthetical citations are from this edition.

⁴ Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, "Gilgamesh and the Sundance Kid: The Myth of Male Friendship," *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, ed. Harry Brod (Boston: Allen, 1987) 241-258.

⁵ Jack Balswick, *The Inexpressive Male* (Toronto: Lexington, 1988) 2, 16.

⁶ Kenneth Joel Shapiro, *Bodily Reflective Modes: A Phenomenological Method for Psychology* (Durham: Duke UP, 1985) xvii.

⁷ Shapiro 41, xvii.