

EX-CENTRICITY: MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *IN THE SKIN OF A LION* AND HUGH MACLENNAN'S *BAROMETER RISING*

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Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) has been termed "ex-centric" (Hutcheon, "Ex-Centric" 132; *Postmodern* 94). Hugh MacLennan's work, in contrast, has been called "typical of the main development in recent Canadian fiction" (McPherson, "Fiction" 214); MacLennan has been named "the father of the Canadian novel" (Mandel 112) and categorized as the representative novelist of the contemporary period in Canadian fiction (Roy Daniells, cited in McPherson, "Fiction" 211). A close comparison of Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* with MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941) reveals that Ondaatje's novel both challenges and has significant affinities with Canadian tradition.

Both *Barometer Rising* and *In the Skin of a Lion* juxtapose real events in twentieth-century Canadian history with fictions; both novels give shape and meaning to the history and fictions by using archetypes from ancient literature. The explosion of the munitions ship in Halifax Harbour in 1917 was an event of national and international importance, an event MacLennan termed "more improbable than any novelist's plot" ("Potted Palm" 188). It was also of great significance in MacLennan's life: MacLennan was a child in Halifax at the time the explosion took place; he notes in a lecture that "it was on that morning, when I went out into the streets and saw some men dying in the streets, that I decided to become a writer" (*Maritime Writer* 11). MacLennan's description of the explosion and Roddie Wain's experiences during and after it in the novel draw on his own experiences as described in "Concussion," an essay he wrote for *Lower Canada College Magazine* in 1938.

In contrast, Ondaatje chooses the less known historic events

of building the Bloor Street Viaduct circa 1917 and the Toronto Waterworks in the 1930s;¹ he participates in these only—but significantly—as a writer, imaginatively recreating the events he re-envision. As Ondaatje becomes each of his characters and each of his characters becomes an alter ego for Ondaatje, as “each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story” (157), the writer participates with the workers in building the viaduct and the water filtration plants. An historical figure, Commissioner of Public Works Rowland Harris, the powerful master builder, is one of the most surprising alter egos for the writer in this novel; like Harris, Ondaatje dreams of wonderful structures and then brings them into being; like Harris, he looks at Patrick and identifies him as the ancient hero Gilgamesh.

Both *Barometer Rising* and *In the Skin of a Lion* present revisionist readings of history from marginalized points of view. MacLennan’s novel, published twenty-four years after the historical period it represents, offers “a fresh interpretation of the Canadian experience from a nationalistic point of view” (Goetsch 103). MacLennan tells of a movie mogul who told him, “‘But boy meets girl in Winnipeg and who cares’” (*Maritime Writer* 23). In choosing a Canadian historic event of international importance, MacLennan asserts Canada’s international importance. Although his characters are not depicted as people with large amounts of power and responsibility, they seem representative of major forces relating to building nationalistic feeling in Canada at the time. McPherson sees the story as a parable: “Neil Macrae is representative of the youth of Canada attempting to assert its independence of the ties which bound its elders for so long to a colonial mentality” (Introduction xii; see also Woodcock, *MacLennan* 64). Colonel Wain can only see Canada as a colony: “Everything in this damn country is second-rate. It always is, in a colony” (101). However, as his name implies, his power and influence are on the wane (McPherson, Introduction xi-xii). Neil Macrae believes in Canada; he speaks of Canada in a purple prose passage reminiscent of the “this England” speech in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (Cameron 144) as “for almost the first time in his life, he fully realized what being a Canadian meant”:

... this anomalous land, this sprawling waste of timber and rock and water where the only living sounds were the foot-

falls of animals or that fantastic laughter of a loon, this empty tract of primordial silences and winds and erosions and shifting colours, this bead-like string of crude towns and cities tied by nothing but railway tracks, this nation undiscovered by the rest of the world and unknown to itself, these people neither American nor English, nor even sure what they wanted to be, this unborn mightiness, this question-mark, this future for himself, and for God knew how many millions of mankind! (79)

The imagery of the passage presents a complex vision of Canada. As a wasteland, Canada reflects the spiritual aridity of many of its inhabitants (such as Wain) and is associated with archetypal wastelands traversed on spiritual journeys, places of wandering and testing prerequisite to entering the Promised Land. The comparison of towns and cities to beads with the railway as the string suggests both the value of the individual parts of Canada and the fragility of the connection between them. As *terra incognita*, Canada invites exploration. The birth image implies Canada's unrealized potential and hints at the trauma necessary for it to emerge. The metaphor of Canada as an interrogative punctuation mark focuses attention on the future as unknowable (to the characters, although not to writer and reader) and as yet unwritten (although MacLennan is writing it as he recreates the historic moments). The Halifax explosion serves as catalyst, dividing past and future. McPherson calls the explosion a death/rebirth image for Canada (Introduction xiv); MacLulich notes that the explosion becomes an image for a sudden jolt of self-knowledge for Neil and Canada, pushing both into fuller awareness (38); Spettigue writes that Neil "could have no identity until the colonial past, engendered in violence, has been violently destroyed. As Neil's identity is acknowledged, so is that of the nation: it has earned the right to be itself" (491).² MacLennan himself says, "I had believed the barometer was really rising" ("Reflections" 118).³

In contrast to MacLennan's using an historical event of international importance to signal Canada's emerging importance and focus Canadian nationalism, Ondaatje's choosing historical events of local significance challenges the notion of history as a record of events of world significance and asserts the importance of marginalized events and the relatively unknown people involved in them.⁴ In an interview, Ondaatje says, "If there was a

kind of direction in the book, it was making sure that something got said, to write about that unofficial thing that was happening" (Fagan 5). Whereas Neil and the other characters who join him in the birth of the new society that seems about to happen at the end of *Barometer Rising* are of British or Scottish descent, the power struggle as worked out in *In the Skin of a Lion* involves immigrant groups—especially Macedonians and Italians—against the more powerful and established people of British ancestry. Sutherland observes that "the Moodie attitude," the impression given by Susanna Moodie's works that "everybody . . . who is not of her particular caste has been hopelessly predestined to insignificance, *ipso facto*," "continues to infect the thinking of many English Canadians" (36-7). By choosing to write about groups "hopelessly predestined to insignificance," Ondaatje challenges traditional patterns of Canadian thinking. Hutcheon notes that

Ondaatje is one of the few North American writers who address the issue of our immigrant, working-class history, a history silenced by official versions of public events. . . . We know today the names of the rich (Ambrose Small) and the politically powerful (R.C. Harris, city commissioner), but we do not know the names of the peripheral, of the women of the rich (Small's mistress), or of the anonymous workers (who built the structures ordered by Harris). These are among the outsiders, the "ex-centrics," that are made the paradoxical (and very postmodern) centre of the novel. The protagonist, Patrick Lewis, may belong to the centre in terms of race and language, but he is working class and from the country. ("Ex-centric" 133)

Patrick Lewis, the "immigrant to the city" (53), is drawn into the immigrant groups by poverty and work; they engage his sympathy and his skill with explosives (which he learned from his father, hence his name, Pa/trick) in their fight for workers' rights. The Italian thief, Caravaggio, seeks a redistribution of wealth; Patrick's goal is a redistribution of power.

Both *Barometer Rising* and *In the Skin of a Lion* juxtapose twentieth-century historical events with ancient texts. In *Barometer Rising*, as in Homer's *Odyssey*, a man returns secretly from war, finds his Penelope surrounded by suitors but faithful to him, and eventually regains both his woman and his rightful position.⁵ Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* takes its title from *The Gilgamesh*

Epic, a Babylonian text less generally known to educated readers than Homer's epics. Ondaatje's novel begins with an epigraph from the ancient work that identifies the intertext and specifies grief for a dead friend as a key similarity: "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." In the epic, Gilgamesh, grieving for his dead friend, goes in search of Utnapishtim, a Noah-figure, who has been given everlasting life.

A number of episodes in Ondaatje's novel suggest scenes in the ancient epic. On his quest to find out why his friend Enkidu has died, Gilgamesh visits the garden of the gods and tells a woman, Siduri, of his grief and his quest. Similarly, Patrick hides on an island during his quest to avenge the death of Alice Gull and thinks of telling a blind woman he meets in a garden there of his love and grief: "Alice Gull, he could say, who once pushed her hands up against the slope of a ceiling and spoke of a grand cause, who leapt like a live puppet into his arms, who died later on a bloody pavement, ruined in his arms" (171). Urshanabi ferries Gilgamesh across the waters of death to visit Utnapishtim, who tells him the story of the great Flood; then Gilgamesh sleeps in his presence before beginning his return journey. Patrick, after being ferried to the intake of the water works by Caravaggio, tires himself by swimming through the intake tunnel and setting explosives; then, after telling Commissioner Harris the story of Alice Gull's death (for the first time telling the full story, the one that implicates himself), he falls asleep in Harris's presence, evoking the novel's second quote from *The Gilgamesh Epic* as Harris identifies the character of Patrick Lewis with Gilgamesh.⁶

He stood over Patrick. "He lay down to sleep, until he was woken from out of a dream. He saw the 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)

Gilgamesh's fight with the lions in the night is both an act of self-preservation and an act of anger that the beasts still enjoy life while Enkidu is dead. Similarly, Patrick Lewis's attempt on Commissioner Harris's life and the Waterworks grows out of his anger at Harris's continued success and power while Patrick's love,

Alice Gull, is dead. Harris retains his power as he orders the explosives removed, but, in recognizing Patrick as Gilgamesh, he recognizes the power and importance of the workers, the underlings; the unknown man who fails in his subversive mission, whom Harris previously designated as "among the dwarfs of enterprise who never get accepted or acknowledged" (238), is now identified as a hero.

The Odysseus returning myth relates Canadian experience to universal experience (Woodcock, *MacLennan* 53); the mythic journey reinforces the "'journey' of a country towards the point of self-consciousness in which it meets and recognizes its own identity" (Woodcock, *MacLennan* 60). Linking the Halifax explosion and *The Odyssey* implies that the focal point of the tradition of western civilization that began in ancient Greece and has continued unbroken has now crossed the Atlantic to Canada:

Why was he glad to be back? It was more than a man could ever put into words. It was more than the idea that he was young enough to see a great country move into its destiny. It was what he felt inside himself, as a Canadian who had lived both in the United States and England. Canada at present was called a nation only because a few laws had been passed and a railway line sent from one coast to the other. In returning home he knew that he was doing more than coming back to familiar surroundings. For better or worse he was entering the future, he was identifying himself with the still-hidden forces which were doomed to shape humanity as certainly as the tiny states of Europe had shaped the past. Canada was still hesitant, was still ham-strung by men with the mentality of Geoffrey Wain. But if there were enough Canadians like himself, half-American and half-English, then the day was inevitable when the halves would join and his country would become the central arch which united the new order. (218)

MacLennan says that, when he first thought of writing *Barometer Rising*,

Canada was virtually an uncharacterized country. It seemed to me then that if our literature was to be anything but purely regional, it must be directed to at least two audiences. One was the Canadian public, which took the Canadian scene for granted but had never defined its particular essence. The

other was the international public, which had never thought about Canada at all, and knew nothing whatever about us. ("Potted Palm" 187)

By presenting a major Canadian historic event in the context of *The Odyssey*, MacLennan asserts the emerging importance of Canada in western civilization.⁷

For Ondaatje, linking the labour/management struggles surrounding the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Waterworks in Toronto with *The Gilgamesh Epic* joins social message and artistic technique; like Nicholas Temelcoff saving Alice when she falls from the bridge, the writer rescues historic figures from "archival oblivion" (Greenstein 122); like Commissioner Harris, the writer cedes power yet retains it; like Patrick, the writer causes explosions that may advance an important cause or misfire and harm dear ones; like Patrick, the writer kills Alice Gull, his character, in the service of a higher cause; like Caravaggio, the thief, the writer camouflages himself in order to take by stealth what does not belong to him; like Ambrose Small, the writer is an important man whose disappearance is the cause first of searching and ultimately of joy and reunion. Whereas *Barometer Rising* asserts Canada's importance in the world because of its traumatic participation in the First World War, *In the Skin of a Lion* celebrates the importance of the marginalized persons and events that have shaped Canada. In celebrating the writer in his many alter egos, Ondaatje's text valorizes the interdependence among the workers, the powerful agents who control them, and the writer, who like them is both powerful and insignificant.

One of the themes of *The Gilgamesh Epic* concerns harnessing the power of the strong so that, instead of harming society, it benefits it. For Gilgamesh, the loss of his comrade, his period of mourning, and his learning the secrets of the great Flood turn him from a wild, strong youth into a responsible ruler. The definition of the hero changes from the man of sheer physical strength to the man with special knowledge of the human condition, of death and survival, as expressed in Enkidu's death and the story of the Flood. In the scene at the puppet theatre, Patrick sees himself as the hero, the rescuer, as he rushes on to the stage to save the exhausted Alice. As he joins with the workers, his power resides in

his knowledge of explosives. At the end of the book, he has acknowledged that he is not the hero/rescuer. He has perhaps learned what Van Nortwick sees as the main lesson of *The Gilgamesh Epic*:

... the poem suggests that Gilgamesh must learn to see himself not as preeminent among men, but as part of a larger whole, ruled by forces often beyond his ability to control. Rather than challenge his limitations, he must learn to accept them and live within them: maturity requires humility which requires acceptance, not defiance, not denial. (37)

In acknowledging Patrick Lewis as hero, as Gilgamesh, Commissioner Harris cedes power to those less politically powerful than himself. By calling for a nurse with medical supplies rather than the police, Harris accepts his role in the death of Alice Gull and accepts his "amateur" status (242) in the midst of the truly powerful. In acknowledging his own role in the accident that killed Alice Gull, Patrick ends his defiance and denial, freeing himself to journey toward Clara in the final chapter of the novel.

The narrator of *In the Skin of a Lion* tells us, "Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become" (146). For Ondaatje's novel, the ancient epic is the art that can order the chaotic tumble of events Ondaatje imagines into a new history of the twentieth-century in Canada. The opening of *The Gilgamesh Epic* directs the audience to look at the walls, rampart, and temple Gilgamesh built. *In the Skin of a Lion* asks the reader to look at the viaduct and water filtration plant that Harris built—and understand that they were built by the unknown and uncelebrated workers. Ondaatje reaches into the tradition that mothered the classical tradition that MacLennan sees as validating the Canadian experience in order to present a vision of Canada as a nation created by the previously unsung heroes, the immigrant workers on bridges and in tunnels and in tanneries, and immigrant writers like Ondaatje himself.

Comparing the juxtaposition of historical events with ancient intertext, then, suggests that *In the Skin of a Lion* is ex-centric to the norm implied by *Barometer Rising*. However, fifty years ago *Barometer Rising* was itself an ex-centric text asserting the significance of a marginalized nation. MacLennan's use of the

Halifax explosion to create a plot that departs from his ancient intertext points to beliefs and assumptions that have been considered typically Canadian; the fact that these beliefs are also implicit in Ondaatje's novel necessitates qualifications of its eccentricity.

In *Continental Divide*, Seymour Martin Lipset begins his extended comparison of Canada and the United States by noting that the American idea of the individual's right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is countered by the Canadian goal of "peace, order, and good government" (xii). In the novels that we have been considering, "peace, order, and good government" are threatened by the abuse of power by the ruling class and by the historic events that are recreated by the novelists.

Explosions, violent events, connote revolution; the frequently cited Canadian preference for peacefully negotiated change over revolutionary violence would seem to suggest that explosions might be antithetical to Canadian values. New describes the Halifax explosion as recounted in *Barometer Rising* as a revolutionary break, which has not been part of Canada's experience; he sees the snowstorm that follows as more characteristic of the national consciousness (75-76).⁸ In *The Skin of a Lion*, several small explosions mark the struggle of immigrant workers against the ruling class; however, the large explosion that would destroy the waterworks in Toronto and form the climax of the novel does not take place. Instead, hero and antagonist talk, argue, and admit to each other their individual guilt and their powerlessness to change the situation.

When Odysseus returns to his kingdom, he has to engage in battle to establish his right to rule. Using the Halifax explosion as a focal event in *Barometer Rising* allows MacLennan to depart from his classical model in such a way as to make his story specifically Canadian in theme. In MacLennan's story, the explosion becomes not so much a revolutionary event as an act of fate that makes consciously chosen revolutionary acts unnecessary. If he is to regain his honour, establish his right to marry Penny, and take up his rightful place as a Canadian, Neil must fight Colonel Wain and win. But for Neil, the return to Halifax initiates poignant consciousness of what it means to be a Canadian. The ideals defined in the British North America Act in 1867, "peace, order, and good government," cannot coexist with personal or collective violence.

The collective violence of the war has brought devastation to Canada; similarly, the personal violence of a confrontation between Wain and Macrae would be cataclysmic for a Canadian. The explosion signifies that the war violates Canadian values; the colonial mentality (represented by Wain) that privileges the interests of mother country over the interests of the colony is implicated in the explosion, for if Canada had not been at war, the munitions ship would not have been in Halifax Harbour. Wain and Macrae have no violent personal confrontation because, with fitting justice (if too coincidentally, as New argues [83]), the violence Wain and men like him have brought to Canada destroys him. The revolution against Wain's values, then, is fought not by man to man combat but by forces beyond man's control. Goetsch provides perspective on the relationship of the explosion to the birth of the new order: "While the explosion images the fact of war, the ensuing rescue work, which is carried out by members of both the old and young generations, suggests that, in the face of chaos, a new group spirit asserts itself" (104). Macrae's role is not to defeat the old order actively, but to establish the new order after the old order has been abolished without his involvement.

The ending of the novel focuses on Canada's future as much as on Macrae's. Woodcock notes that nationalistic emotion unrealistically displaces interpersonal feeling as Neil and Penny move into the future together (*Odysseus* 16). The imagery in Neil's thoughts clarifies the situation: Neil unites his future with Canada "for better or worse" (218); the words from the marriage ceremony imply that his marriage is to Canada. In fact, although they have a child (about whom Neil does not know), Neil and Penny are not formally wed. Their personal situation parallels Neil's political situation: at the outset, Neil lacks full commitment to his country; by the end of the book, he is ready to make commitments both to Penny and to Canada. In a traditional comedy, the overthrow of the old order allows the young lovers to marry (Frye 163); the birth of their child symbolizes the birth of the new order. Like Neil's child, the new nation has already been born, although he has been unaware of it.

Whereas Neil inherits his kingdom without personal violence, departing from the *Odysseus* model, Ondaatje's Patrick engages in violence, first dynamiting "for the foreman" as he "works with the muckers in the manual digging" (107) in the tun-

nel for the Toronto waterworks, then later using his knowledge of dynamite subversively, for the workers. However, his final and most significant act of subversion fails because he talks with Harris rather than detonating the explosion. The climactic encounter of the antagonists foregoes violence in favour of a duel of words and ideas. The ending of the novel is thus consonant with the Canadian tradition of "peace, order, and good government." Unlike both Neil and Gilgamesh, Patrick is forced in the verbal duel to admit his own complicity in the death of Alice Gull, who was killed accidentally by a dynamite charge Patrick set for subversive purposes (238-40); he acknowledges himself an oppressor rather than simply one of the oppressed. As Sarris explains, Ondaatje's novel's "insistence on the humanization of history includes the humanization of the enemy, a process that militates against the adoption of violent means to fight that enemy" (199). Sarris sees the lack of a final combat and Patrick's falling asleep as a "forfeit of moral responsibility" that results from humanizing the enemy (199-200). However, this scene marks the book as typically Canadian, for Patrick must give up his personal revenge against Harris when he realizes the truth of what Harris says: Alice Gull "was killed by an anarchist" (238). Subversion and revolution are rejected as Patrick accepts shared guilt and Harris acknowledges the heroism of Patrick as Gilgamesh, making it possible for "peace, order, and good government" to take precedence over individual pursuits.

Ondaatje's choices of marginalized people and events and the relatively unfamiliar Babylonian epic as intertext validate the term "ex-centric" to describe *In the Skin of a Lion*; however, application of that term must be qualified by the realization that, like MacLennan's more typical Canadian novel, Ondaatje's ex-centric novel upholds traditional Canadian values. Both novels end with the characters moving to reunite fractured families, pointing toward the re-establishment of "peace, order, and good government" in their personal lives, and by extension, in the life of the nation.

NOTES

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¹ Hutcheon speaks of "famous Canadian missing person Ambrose Small" (*Postmodern* 93); however, his fame is of a different order from that of the Halifax tragedy, which focused world attention on Canada.

² Less convincingly, MacLulich connects the explosion and sexuality: "The explosion's violence is an image of the potentially overwhelming power of sexual impulse to overcome human reason and induce destructively uncontrolled behaviour" (41).

³ Goetsch questions MacLennan's theory about Canada coming of age in World War I but acknowledges that "it becomes almost credible in the novel because there it is largely conceived in terms of character and action"; the nationalism localizes "a story of universal implications" (104).

⁴ Greenstein notes that Ondaatje rewrites "twentieth-century Canadian history by focusing on a disenfranchised minority" and "displaces Macedonians and Finns from margins to the centre of Canadian society" (126).

⁵ MacLulich sees this as a fairy tale motif in which a wronged, presumed dead stepson returns and wins the beautiful daughter of a wicked stepfather (32). Lucas works out parallels to the Oedipus story (47). McPherson suggests Perseus as archetype (xii). However, the name Penelope insists on *The Odyssey* as intertext, although in a letter MacLennan denied this was a conscious choice (Woodcock 53). Buitenhuis works out many specific details of the Homeric parallels (23-4).

⁶ Greenstein notes that Patrick Lewis and Nicholas Temelcoff, "two heroic builders and men of nature, lament the death of Alice Gull" (117), pointing up similarities with Gilgamesh for both men. However, only Patrick Lewis undertakes a quest of the sort Gilgamesh undertook, and only he is identified as Gilgamesh by Harris.

⁷ Cameron discusses how the novel was received as a great Canadian nationalistic document rather than as great work of art (144-45).

⁸ McPherson also equates the explosion with revolution when he writes, "But the old order will not abdicate: a revolution—an explosion—is needed to break their power" (Introduction xii).

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