PATRICK'S QUEST: NARRATION AND SUBJECTIVITY IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *IN THE SKIN OF A LION*

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My discussion of Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* is intent on seeking a correspondence between narration and the acquisition of subjectivity. To achieve this correspondence I centre my argument specifically on Patrick Lewis in order to illustrate how his incremental movement from private to communal symbolic registers facilitates his quest to subjectify himself within society. This approach is dependent upon understanding the role narration plays in the framing of personal and collective experience, and also how narration functions as a medium for desire. The theoretical foundation of my discussion borrows heavily from Lacanian poststructural theory. Here again, I am attempting to gain a fuller understanding, not only of the relationship between language and subjectivity, but also the important roles that community (or collective discourse) and narrative play in the development of subjectivity.

In addition to my analysis of Patrick, I also intend to situate the reader as a subject who gains knowledge through narration by identifying his/her own position within textual discourse. My reading necessitates viewing Patrick as the pivotal agent through whom the reader is encouraged to enter the fictional realm, seek and discover knowledge, and finally, carry that knowledge into the real world. In this regard my discussion is very much in the service of the social and political aims of Ondaatje's text. However, before dealing directly with the novel it is necessary to present a fairly broad understanding of how I will be employing the term *narration* in the contexts of reading and framing experience.

Poststructural theorists such as Jacques Lacan and the later Roland Barthes have continually reminded us that we are always involved, consciously and unconsciously, in reading the world and

narrating our experience. As Barthes states: "narrative begins with the very history of humanity; there is not, there has never been, any people anywhere without narrative" (*Semiotic 95*). Reading the world constitutes a narrative act, a continual placing and displacing of signifiers, the goal of which, on a conscious level, is to gather experience into a coherent pattern. Our memories, conclusions, dreams, fantasies, careers and our projected visions of our futures appear most coherent to us when we can consciously situate them within narratives.

According to Lacan, narration is motivated by the unconscious search to reinstate the unity of the self that is imagined to have existed prior to the acquisition of language. For Lacan, our need to speak our experience and to attend to stories is driven by our desire to be (what V.A. Miller calls) sutured to a symbolic representational code, to unite the speaking subject with the "whole structure of language" (Cohen 156). In other words, language is both a representational substitute for the absence of a whole self, and the source of the self. Likewise Barthes views narration as a process motivated by the desire to bond with language: "reading is a conductor of the Desire to write . . . we desire the desire the author had for the reader when he was writing, we desire the *love-me* which is in all writing" (*Rustle* 40-41). However, despite the implied promise of wholeness, language "does not unify subjectivity . . . but, on the contrary, continually manifests the division of the subject" (Cohen 156). That is, we can imagine there is meaning in language, we can be inscribed by discourse and situate ourselves within a community, but we can never become the being of our speech or the subject of speech. Signification is always a process of "sliding . . . [of] no fixed binding of signifier to signified in the mental life of the subject" (Cohen 157).

My point in presenting this brief excursus into poststructuralism is to emphasize how discourse—and by extension narrative—is always falling short of unifying the speaking subject with the subject of speech; we are always subjects of, and subjected to, the representational system of language and, as Cohen and Shires assert, the subject "cannot mean independently of it" (153). And because we are unable to step outside this symbolic realm, we strive to attach meaning to it in order to mediate our lives. Language, applied in all of its possible forms, remains the primary means by which we at-

tempt what might be called *self-closure* (the contentment of being). However, as listening and speaking agents, as nominal producers and subjects of narrative, we constantly grant "some full meaning to the words we speak" and hear, only to be "surprised to find them determined by relations outside our control" (Cohen 161). Every discursive community is always already formed prior to our entrance into its representational codes and, according to Lacan, our status as subjects within these representational codes begins when we are initiated into the established structures of discourse.

In their explanation of Lacanian theory, Cohen and Shires note that "a narrative representation of subjectivity functions similarly as a signifier with which a reader or viewer identifies" (149). By extrapolation, a narrative such as Ondaatje's, with its focus on acquiring identity through language, functions as a sort of surrogate world in which the reader, by becoming entangled in the hero's desires, imaginatively joins in the quest for subjectivity. According to Lacan, the reader is motivated by the unconscious desire to pursue narrative as a means to construct an image of him/herself that will hopefully resolve the separation that occurred when the symbolic register of language fractured the coherent relationship between the mother and the pre-linguistic child. The reader's desire is the unconscious Other, the buried aspect of the human psyche that, like a hungry infant, is always craving contentment. The desire of the reader is an attempt to resolve the lack of the mother. As Barry Cameron states in his article "Lacan: Implications of Psychoanalysis and Canadian Discourse," "For Lacan, narrative is an effort to catch up retrospectively on the traumatic primordial separation from the self and mother with the entry into language" (Moss 148). In other words, the text activates the reader's unconscious desire to be sutured to its symbolic code, the hoped-for result of which is to enable the reader to share Patrick's desire to be signified as a coherent subject. (Of course, not all novels provide the same level of subjective coherence, and may seek to resist signifying a coherent subject; however, this is not the case in Ondaatje's text.) Because the reader is always positioned outside the text s/he has to enter into a very personal relationship with the work in order to discover how s/he can become signified within it. This is one of the reasons Barthes refers to the act of reading as "a work and a game"

(*Rustle* 41). When we commit ourselves to a text—and here as throughout this paper I am referring to a literary text—we enter into a process that allows us to play the fictional text against our own personal texts. In doing so, we test the competence of our personal experience against that of the text's. This interaction is, in essence, founded on the reader's desire to continually search for alternative modes of representation that will provide a more stable self-image. In addition, the reader also gains pleasure in imagining him/herself as an active and desiring subject within a discursive field that is distanced from the turbulence of everyday life. In other words, literature offers a safe outlet for the desire of the unconscious Other.

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As I have stated, Patrick Lewis is the pivotal figure in Ondaatje's novel, and for a number of reasons. First of all, Ondaatje intended the reader to seek to identify with Patrick and to use him as a guide throughout the text. There are many other important characters in the novel but Patrick is the only one whose process of self-discovery is intimately related. The narrative is dependent upon Patrick's ever increasing awareness of the world, and more importantly, the actions which stem from what he learns. If we desire to read and learn this world we will seek to identify with Patrick, because he, like us, and in the manner of the Bildungsroman, is also being introduced to it. In other words, Patrick and the reader share in the activity of cultural initiation, and as we shall see, Ondaatje has made certain that the ground on which we begin our journey is as barren as possible.

The novel begins with Patrick looking out at the world, trying to situate himself in the "pale green and nameless" backwoods of northern Ontario. Because there is very little knowledge of the world available to him, Patrick uses the few resources he has to feed his imagination and give voice to his thoughts. He studies the moths and insects attracted by the kitchen light, giving them fictional names and recording their visits in a notebook. He opens his geography book and whispers the exotic names of "Caspian, Nepal. Durango" (9). This very rigorous display of writing, reading, whispering, and imagining are in direct conflict with what Christian Bök has termed Patrick's "deliberate aphasia" (119). Any feelings of alienation that Patrick experiences, either in

the wilderness or in Toronto, arise not from some calculated withdrawal from the world, but rather from his inability to use language effectively. His desire is not to seek silence, but to break out of it. The names he creates and reads from maps serve his desire to frame his private experience in language, and this begins the naming motif that runs throughout the text. By naming the world, even if only in whispers and in his imagination, Patrick displays his desire to create his own private narrative.

Patrick's textualizing of his life is presented as a concealed act, something he does not do in the presence of his father. He waits until his father is asleep, and this furthers the isolation of his desire to narrate his experience. Hazen Lewis, being an "abashed man, withdrawn from the world . . . uninterested in the habits of civilization" (15), is clearly of no help to Patrick's quest. There is very little conversation between Patrick and his father; in fact, there are only two moments in the novel in which there is dialogue between them, and even these instances amount to a scant thirteen words (12,14). Hazen's first words to Patrick, "I'm going under now" (12), are significant in that they imply that the end result of remaining silent is to be left in obscurity, and this is exactly what happens to Patrick's father. Hazen's silence denies Patrick the opportunity to vocalize his experience, and this in turn forbids him to test his own competence with language. As the text points out, "he wants conversation" in his life; only by sharing language with others will he be able to "leap . . . over the wall of this place" (10). By being restricted to a concealed and monologic articulation of experience, Patrick's desire to situate himself in the world is severely hampered.

The isolation and silence of Patrick's early years serve a very specific function in the novel. As we know from the first epigraph, and from Gordon Gamlin's comparative analysis, Ondaatje framed much of the narrative around *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. There are many approaches to a comparative study of the two narratives—Gamlin, for example, discusses the corresponding oral implications. Many of my predecessors (Beddoes, Beran, Duffy, Sarris) have also offered comparative readings of the two texts, and a general consensus exists in viewing Patrick in the image of the ancient hero Gilgamesh.[1] However, there is more than a passing likeness of Enkidu, the beloved friend of Gilgamesh, in Ondaatje's

hero, Patrick Lewis, in that both have been raised outside a highly-developed cultural setting. In addition to this, both narratives tell the story of how these two characters respond when encountering a civilization wherein a majority of the inhabitants is oppressed by a dominant figure of power. And finally, both Enkidu and Patrick, by managing to remain on the periphery of culture, are positioned as having a perspective that I will generalize as being aloof from ideological constructs. By comparing Patrick's character to Enkidu's, it becomes possible to view Patrick as a culturally uninscribed figure who carries within him some sort of instinctive ability to separate justice from injustice. This instinctive aspect is very central to both narratives; and although it would not be in the interests of most poststructuralists to allow for it, I will, nevertheless, refer to it on occasion. Suffice it to say, that where Enkidu's "primeval" nature (Kluger 31) acts as a positive and active force in *Gilgamesh*, Patrick's marginalized cultural inscription—he has, after all, gone to school, and has at least a fragmented history—functions as a means to defamiliarize, or, better yet, disassociate the reader from his/her own cultural/ideological perspective. In other words, the beginning of the novel details a world so personal that the reader's imaginative entrance into Patrick's life is more a sensual initiation than a social and cultural introduction. We would not be far off the mark to consider Patrick as representing *l'enfant savage* popularized in Europe in the 1970s, the feral child of folklore, or any one of the similar romantic figures who have surfaced since Rousseau's era. By initiating our identification with Patrick outside of a highly structured discursive community, we become dependent on his ability to provide us with the knowledge of the text. And because so much of his boyhood experience is founded on his instinctive relationship with nature, we are encouraged to trust in our own ability to sense our way through the text, rather than trying to bend it into a predisposed coherent pattern. In short, the reader, as subject, is seduced by Patrick's lack of identity into privileging an emotional response over a cognitive one. Ondaatje is attempting to loosen our attachment to established centres of discourse in order to intensify our desire to assume a subject position similar to Patrick's. Ondaatje wants the reader to *feel* the experience of being displaced.

When we meet up with Patrick again, he is twenty-one years old and has just been "dropped under the vast arches of Union Station" in Toronto (53). We quickly realize that during the nine years since we first met him he has made very little progress in giving voice to his experience. His documented past is reduced to nothing more than "letters frozen inside mailboxes (53), a figure that once again echoes his desire to share language and also foreshadows a time—a spring—when he will be able to. Once again, his most significant memories arise from sensual experience: "What he remembered was loving only things to do with colour . . . the warm brown universe of barns, the breath and steam of cattle" (53). There is still no sign of his having acquired the vocabulary necessary to signify his subjectivity. His past is still predominantly couched in private images of the natural world of his early years. Patrick's attachment to nature, when considered in the context of Lacan's theory, suggests that he has cultivated an imaginary relationship with nature in order to mediate the silence in his life. This point will be developed further when I discuss the important role Clara plays in preparing Patrick's full entrance into the symbolic register of language; suffice it to say that even the fragmented, private narrative of his youth has been lost: "He spoke out his name and it struggled up in a hollow echo and was lost in the high air of Union Station" (54).

After this very brief reintroduction the novel leaps through time and Patrick is now employed as a searcher. There is a specific irony in his trying to discover the whereabouts of Ambrose Small in that, unlike Patrick who desires to name and situate himself within a community, Small has purposely fashioned a network of false names in order to become invisible. It is also ironic that while searching for someone so determined to erase himself from history, Patrick should find the very person who initiates his self-identity.

When we consider the components of Patrick's private narrative it is easy to understand why he becomes infatuated with Clara. In less than two paragraphs the text of his introduction to Clara calls forward all of the signifiers of his concealed narrative. Her body not only provokes his sexual desire, it also affects him like a sensual wound. She is "rare" and "perfect" (61) like the exotic names of far away countries. Her elegant clothes remind him of "a damsel fly" and his boyhood fascination with moths and in-

sects. Furthermore, there is no coincidence in our being told of their destined lovemaking in the "silence of the reading room" at the library (62)—a site which evokes both the silence and the textual basis of his boyhood desire to know the world. Patrick is also drawn to her because he senses that by "not turning around to talk to him properly," Clara may live in a silence similar to his own. In this brief and evocative passage, Clara textualizes the whole repertoire of Patrick's concealed narrative; his personal signifiers have, for the first time, been validated beyond his private sphere. Her body has become a text of his desire for wholeness. Clara's impact on Patrick is a necessary step in his subjective quest, but it does not, in itself, bring him fully into the realm of collective discourse. What Clara does is provide him access to a coherent personal history.

As we read the novel, we are aware that Patrick's narrative is destined to encounter the other narratives that have been interlaced with his. His contact with Clara can be understood as a necessary step in preparing his entrance into the whole context of the novel. There is a pattern represented here, in which the stories that weave around Patrick's narrative correspond to his desire to fill the absence in his own life. In this regard, the Lacanian notion of suture has been incorporated within the very structure of the novel. As the novel progresses Patrick's narrative becomes more and more imbricated with the other narratives—he and the reader are gradually moving from a private and isolated space to an interpersonal relationship with Clara, which in turn will lead to the collective site of the immigrant community. Clara's function is to bridge the space between personal and social narrative. The origins of Patrick's infatuation, at least from the point of view of narrative, stem from her ability to articulate and educate Patrick in the intimate details of personal history:

> He loved the eroticism of her history, the knowledge of where she sat in the classroom, her favourite brand of pencil at the age of nine. Details flooded his heart. . .he found he had become interested only in her, her childhood, her radio work, this landscape in which she had grown up. (69)

By listening to Clara narrate her past, Patrick learns a valuable and practical lesson regarding the importance of maintaining personal history. By becoming an engaged listener—an activity that corresponds to the reader's entanglement with narrative—Patrick begins

to understand that his own history has significance, and that there are forces outside of himself that have shaped his life. However, when encouraged to narrate his own life, he is still incapable of speech:

> He defended himself for most of the time with a habit of vagueness. . .There was a wall in him that no one reached. . . A tiny stone swallowed years back that had grown with him and which he carried around because he could not shed it. . . Patrick and his small unimportant stone. It had entered him at the wrong time in his life. (71)

The isolation of his youth and the silence of his father are obstacles which even Clara's history cannot overcome. There is, however, a reason why Patrick's relationship with Clara fails to immediately bring him into the realm of language.

What is of particular significance vis-à-vis a Lacanian reading of Patrick's youth is the mystery of the mother-figure. Ondaatje's text carefully avoids any mention of a feminine presence in Patrick's early years. We are left to assume that the dynamic Oedipal moment, so necessary in psychoanalytic theory, has somehow not taken place, and therefore his acquisition of language and the subsequent identification outside of the mother have yet to be completed. This lack of mother is further evidence of his entering the social realm as a marginally inscribed subject, but it does not necessarily imply that the mother-figure is absent during his upbringing.

As I have already stated, Patrick's attachment to nature represents an imaginary relationship through which he attempts to situate himself in the world. In other words, he has adopted the natural world as an imaginary referent for the absent mother. The manner in which the text describes his bond with nature is similar to the kind of protective relationship a young boy would have with his mother. Patrick's maternal bond with nature is obvious in his response to the Finnish skaters. This scene also serves to intimate the increasing degree of conflict he will encounter as he becomes more and more subjectified within language.

In Lacanian terms, Patrick's fascination with the skaters represents his unconscious desire for the phallic authority of language symbolized by the light cast from the burning cattails. In fact, the whole motif of fire and light that runs throughout the novel can be read as a symbol of Patrick's search for the authority of language. Just as the moths are attracted to the *man-made* glow

of his kitchen light, so too is Patrick attracted to the "fire" of the symbolic register. However, when he approaches the river he senses the authority of the *male* skaters and hides the lamp he is carrying behind a tree so he will remain hidden from view—a gesture similar to a timid child clinging to the hem of a mother's skirt. He is afraid to contact "these strangers of another language" (22) because their "light" threatens his bond with the mother-figure which is troped as nature. The skaters remind him of "a coven, or one of those strange druidic rituals" he had read about. And even though he is fascinated by their joyful energy, and wishes he could "hold their hands and skate the length of the creek," he still refuses to step from the safety of the bushes. He cannot compete against the light of this strange language which gives these men the confidence to move "like a wedge into the blackness" (22). The encounter has awakened his desire to enter the authoritative realm of language, but it has also made him aware that these men are his rivals; that is, they are in possession of "*his* shore, *his* river." In other words, he senses that the phallic authority of language is a threat to his maternal bond with nature. By remaining in the darkness of the trees, by concealing himself from view, he is safe from confronting what Lacan calls "The Law of the Father": the masculine authority inscribed in the symbolic register which prohibits the child's desire for and access to the intimacy of the mother. According to Lacan, "The Law of the Father" manifests itself in language by renouncing desire for the mother, and substituting and/or compensating this loss by seeking dominion over the feminine (mother/nature) through the possessive act of naming. This capacity to authorize existence, to situate himself and gain some form of control in the world, is exactly what Patrick is striving for. However, because he is unable to articulate an appropriate response, some kind of self-empowering statement, retreat "back through the trees and fields" (22), is his only option. His withdrawal to the safety of the mother-figure is an unconscious acknowledgement of his inability to defend his subjective status. However, as the title of the chapter suggests, the incident has given him the "Little Seeds" that eventually bring about his full entry into the symbolic register.

It is important then to view Clara (and to a lesser extent Alice) as representing, in a very literal though non-biological sense, Pa-

trick's absent mother(s). By transferring his maternal bond from the natural world to a genuine female presence he has achieved another incremental step in his quest. Through Clara, he seeks to establish contact with the mother who lives solely for him and is the object of all his desires. The reason he is still unable to speak his own narrative in the presence of Clara is because he is fully contented with being the object of her attention; and the reason he becomes attracted and distressed when in contact with the phallic "light" of the Finnish skaters is because he has yet to move from the imaginary to the symbolic registry. In terms of a Lacanian reading, Patrick, although nearly thirty years old, has yet to find the means to mediate his separation for the mother-figure. As long as Clara remains in his life he will be content to simply be in her presence, and this in itself will furnish him with all the meaning he requires. It is only after Clara disappears, like an actress having fulfilled her part, and leaves Patrick to suffer the absence, or the lack, of the mother-figure, that language begins to function as a substitute for his loss. With Clara no longer present, he finally rehearses the "Oedipal crisis, which is the inauguration of full entry into the symbolic register" (Cohen 159). His brief and passionate relationship with Clara is a belated yet necessary step in his quest for subjectivity.

Patrick's next attempt to position himself within the symbolic register begins with his entry into the labour class. However, the representational register through with he comes to identify himself is not based on language, but on the visual markings that distinguish the various jobs of the immigrant workers. When we consider the important role that the natural or sensual worlds play in both his life and in the novel as a whole, it seems appropriate that Patrick should first come to situate himself according to visual or tactile inscription. The stained skin of the dye workers, the stiff clothing of the tunnellers and the signifying hole in the back of their shirts are like the tribal body inscription of "primitive" societies. Again, this manner of seeking identity is another incremental step toward the more sophisticated register of language.[2]

After two years of living in almost total silence, Patrick finally becomes situated within Toronto's Macedonian community. It is important to note that his initiation into this cultural site is precipitated by his having learned and employed the Macedonian word for iguana: "A living creature, a gooshter" (112). Once again

we see how the phallic authority invested in naming, and therefore codifying and possessing the feminized natural world, serves as an attraction to the symbolic register. Furthermore, this one new word leads to a vast network of "new words" (113) that "he must now remember" (114). At this point in the novel Patrick's acceptance into the Macedonian community is dependent upon his ability to articulate some aspect of his character that aligns him with the cultural expectations of the community. In order for him to become a trusted member of this society, and, more importantly, for him to feel he truly belongs within their ranks, he needs to prove his competence, as much to himself as to the community at large. There is a correspondence here that I wish to develop between Patrick's inscription into the Macedonian community and Lacan's interpretation of the *fort/da* game played by Freud's grandson.

The relationship between language and community is similar to the *fort/da* game in that, just as the child gains control over his separation from his mother by staging the disappearance and return of the lost object, so too does Patrick come to position himself by testing his personal text against the social text of the community. In a sense, Patrick must cast his personal narrative outward in order to test whether or not it will be accepted by the greater community. If he has acquired a representational code that corresponds with, or is sympathetic to, the ideological concerns of the immigrant labour classes, he will then be able to enter a community that will permit him to vocalize, and therefore situate himself, as a subject. Just as Freud's grandson transferred his anxiety to a referent outside the mother, so too does Patrick employ language as a referent to seek a fuller sense of control within a greater field of discourse. This sense of control can only be obtained by testing his personal experience against the customary knowledge of the community. Customary knowledge, to borrow Jean-Francois Lyotard's explanation, "includes notions of 'know-how,' 'knowing how to live,' how to listen" (18). Patrick must test his lived experience, his personal narrative, and his ability to articulate, in order to prove his right to become subjectified within a larger social narrative. If his personal narrative is deemed competent, it is because it "conform[s] to the relevant criteria of justice, beauty, truth, and efficiency respectively accepted in the social circle of the 'knower's' interlocutors" (Lyotard 19). Of course Patrick's ad-

mittance into the Macedonian community is easily achieved since both parties share the common narrative of displacement.

By being accepted within the Macedonian community Patrick is given access to a vast history of cultural experience. This is the first time he has come in contact with a collective narrative that is older than any living individual. There are roots here that he has never imagined before, and he begins to love the historicity of culture. It should be noted that Macedonia and *Epic of Gilgamesh*—which, like Ondaatje's novel, is also a narrative of tribal solidarity—are culturally and geographically inseparable, and by using them as referents in the novel Ondaatje is explicitly drawing attention to narrative as the primal structure for making meaning and, perhaps more importantly, sustaining culture.[3] Material referents of culture—bridges, water stations—have always been subject to decay, but narrative, travelling through time from subject to subject, has always been able to carry cultural identity to future generations. As Fredric Jameson states:

> [P]ersonal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present; and. . .such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence. . . If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify. . .our own biographical experience. (324)

Patrick's newly-acquired social register also unites his narrative with the inner-narratives that have woven their separate paths throughout the novel. We have anticipated the merging of these narratives to be a sort of joyful reunion for Patrick, and also for ourselves as readers. The fragmented linearity of the text has encouraged us to desire that Patrick's narrative become sutured into the whole structure of the novel. Although this wholeness is achieved, the joy that we have anticipated is only temporary. I suggest that Patrick's growing attachment to Alice and Hana, and the regularization of his life within immigrant culture, represent the kind of imaginative celebration of wholeness that we seek as readers. However, Alice's role—to "veer" Patrick "to some reality" (88)—is clearly meant to foil the celebration that we wish for Patrick and ourselves. Her primary function is to activate the political implications that are always already attached to all discourse. It is Alice who bursts Patrick's bubble by educating him—

as Clara, though in a different capacity, has done earlier—in the hard world of political expediency. "I'll tell you about the rich" (132), she says to him, and Patrick stubbornly begins to realize that language is also a powerful political weapon, and that the power in Alice's words is dangerous and necessary. By becoming a subject within the discourse of the marginalized, he has unknowingly and unavoidably situated himself in opposition to dominant culture. In a particularly parodic move, Patrick begins to conceal his identity from his employers so he can join Alice in bringing down the authority of the elite. Like Ambrose Small, Temelcoff, and his father, Patrick begins to make himself as invisible as possible. Just as Enkidu in the Gilgamesh narrative struggles to correct the abuse of authority, so too must Patrick attempt to bring justice to his world.

Although Alice initiates Patrick into the politics of signification, it is through the printed word that he becomes fully acquainted with the barbaric treatment of immigrant workers. By reading Cato's letters, and the "official histories" (145) wherein only the elite are credited with the construction of *their* cultural monuments, Patrick realizes that the vibrant history and the contributions of the immigrants has not been, and will not be, properly documented for prosperity; the depth and warmth of the very community in which he has become a subject will be erased from history—its narratives will become invisible. When Alice is accidentally killed by a bomb that has likely been made by Patrick, his anger with himself is displaced to the rich. His immediate response is to retreat into silence—an attempt to cast off the irresolvable turmoil which surrounds him and to reclaim the wonderment and innocence of his youth. But his entrance into immigrant society has altered him; he can never return to his past, and he can never step outside of the realm of language. It is important to note that from the time of Alice's death and Patrick's encounter with Harris, Patrick never expresses remorse. And it is during this time that he becomes personally involved in destructive activities. Judy Beddoes likens Patrick at this point in the novel to "a child playing with matches" (211), and Sarris goes even further by viewing him as a "purely sensual, unthinking savage" (197). The word "feral" surfaces both in the novel (172) and in Sarris's essay (197), but nowhere is there any sense of the

innocence that was so much apart of Patrick's early years of isolation in the Ontario wilderness. His romanticized attachment to nature has been shattered by the ideological implications inscribed in language and his indoctrination into the constant turmoil of civilization. As in all encounters where innocence is defeated by experience, there is no way to retrieve the past.

His militant activism is largely due to his inability to speak of his involvement in Alice's death. Silence and violence have become the only channels through which he can attempt to mediate his loss. In short, Patrick is literally tongue-tied because he has yet to assume responsibility for the creation of his own narrative. By this, I mean that his entrance into the symbolic register has been achieved by borrowing from Alice's discursive schema. We recall how, unlike Clara's open and detailed history, Alice's past "remains sourceless" (74), and her body is filled with "suppressed energy" (75). By relying on Alice to indoctrinate him into language, Patrick has become an extension of her militant story. He has yet to find his own vocabulary, or the kind of *skin* that will grant him the means to express his own subjectivity.

What Patrick has unwittingly been attempting to achieve in his search for Small, and also in his encounter with Harris, is to finally confront the father-figure who left him "at the wrong time in his life" (71). Figuratively speaking, Patrick's ultimate quest is to steal the "fire"—the phallic authority—that resides in language. According to Lacan, gaining the authority of language requires some form of violent psychological struggle, a castration or "self-mutilation" (Cohen 159). We can now understand why Patrick, as a boy of only eleven, was so intimidated by the Finnish skaters. If he is to find "his own time zone, his own lamp" (143), he must first accept the wounding by the father-figure; only then will he be able to detach himself from the imaginary realm represented by Clara and nature, and move toward the symbolic register. The *burns* (read: the wound) he receives from Small's attack are yet another step toward spitting out the "small unimportant stone" (71) that has kept him from accessing his own narrative voice—a voice he eventually discovers to be quite different from the one he has borrowed from Alice, who, in turn, had borrowed it from her husband, the self-named Cato.

Patrick's encounter with Harris in the water plant can be viewed as his ultimate confrontation with the authority of language, and I would like to take two discrete yet corresponding approaches to the scene. First of all, the encounter creates a wonderful sense of the unifying potential of narrative. There is a distinct archetypal pattern here as first Harris, and then Patrick, reveal their intimate narratives in the dark and cave-like space that surrounds them—a setting that is also a Father-space, made to control nature (water). Even the moon-shaped windows suggest Harris and Patrick are removed from the time frame of the novel and are acting out the most fundamental social activity known to humankind. Harris begins defending himself by narrating the visions he had in dreams. He tells Patrick that "We need excess, something to live up to" (236), and that the only reason the elite exist is because people like Patrick reject the responsibility of power, and therefore allow "bland fools" to speak for them. He tells Patrick that what he is "looking for is a villain" (237), and because Harris's narrative is not founded on political power, but on a personal vision of beauty, Patrick is unable to view Harris as a figure of evil. Patrick then turns on the light—a significant gesture in Lacan's lexicon—to confirm Harris's sincerity:

> Patrick turned the light on and saw Harris' eyes looking directly into his.
> — Have you decided?
> — Not yet.
> He switched off the light. Again they disappeared from each other. (238)

The material world is the point of contact, but the world of narrative is where we wrestle with ourselves, and with each other.

It is now Patrick's turn to tell his private narrative, but, as with Clara, he is still reluctant to speak. Again another ironic shift occurs as Harris, who we might have supposed to symbolize the authority of dominant culture, becomes the agent who insists that Patrick not remain silent. When Patrick balks at speaking of Alice's death—"I don't want to talk about this anymore" (239)—Harris tells him his life will "always be a nightmare" (238) if he refuses to speak. Giving voice to private experience, and sharing it within a community of listeners—even if that community is made of only a speaking subject and a single listener—provides

both Patrick and Harris the opportunity to be heard, understood, and also to frame experience into a coherent narrative pattern. The darkness of the scene shuts out the real world, and we are left with two individuals struggling with language, trying to find some common ground. Beran claims that "[I]n acknowledging his own role in the accident that killed Alice Gull, Patrick ends his defiance and denial" (78). I agree with Beran, but I would place less emphasis on Patrick acknowledging his role—he was undoubtably aware of it from the very moment the bomb went off— than I would on the actual act of speaking about it. The theme of breaking silence, of giving voice to what lies beneath the surface of events, is too important an issue in the novel, and Patrick's silence is much less an act of denial than an inability to articulate grief.

Patrick, after finally voicing his distress, falls asleep on Harris's bed. Sarris takes a Rip Van Winkle approach to Patrick's sleep by interpreting it as a "withdrawal from the world . . . a forfeit[ing] of moral responsibility" (200). In contrast to Sarris's appraisal, this sleep scene is also one of the most powerful and affirming moments in the novel, in that it further asserts the unifying potential of narrative while at time same time providing a figurative reunion of the earlier image of Patrick and his father sharing the same bed after rescuing the cow from the river. It would be difficult to imagine a more complete gesture of trust than falling asleep in the presence of a potential persecutor. When Harris realizes the danger in Patrick's incredible entry into the building— "My God, he swam here . . . What vision, what dream was that?" (241)—he is stunned by Patrick's selfless devotion to his ideals. By listening to each other they have become obligated to the common ground expressed in their personal narratives. If Harris hands Patrick over to the authorities, he knows he is also rejecting the vision that has guided his own life.

The second interpretation of this scene involves recognizing it as Patrick's final confrontation with the Lacanian father-figure. Patrick, although believing he has entered the water station to destroy it, is really motivated by his subconscious desire to gain or at least challenge the phallic authority that it symbolizes. His encounter with Harris defuses his urge to destroy the building because Harris, the holder of phallic power, becomes actively involved in helping Patrick identify his role within the symbolic

register. In short, Harris becomes the benevolent father-figure who passes phallic knowledge to the younger male. Patrick's underwater journey, his subsequent wounds, and his meeting with Harris in the womb-like atmosphere of the temple, symbolize his acceptance of "The Name of the Father," a crucial and final step in his entrance into the whole context of language. He has, in effect, suffered the pains of rebirth and fully entered the symbolic realm. He now knows his role is not that of an anarchist, and his life is "no longer a single story but part of a mural . . . a wondrous web" (145) that must be preserved. And finally, he has come to the point of taking responsibility for his own narrative. He is now able to interpret Alice's favourite quotation from Joseph Conrad—"Let me re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects" (135)—on his own. He no longer believes, as Alice did, that Conrad is calling for the destruction of the centres of authority. He now realizes that what Conrad is really stating is that all ideological structures are inherently vulnerable, and they will all be replaced by other structures that are similarly flawed. And the only cultural objects that can withstand the rise and fall of these loose ideological objects are the narratives of its history. As Dennis Duffy states, the novel "makes use of ancient, durable monuments and thereby demonstrates the power of the fragile medium of paper finally to encompass them" (132). These "durable monuments" are in ironic juxtaposition to the seemingly fleeting and unstable nature of language.

As the novel closes we realize the entire story has been told by Patrick while he and Hana are driving to reunite with Clara. Patrick will never be silent again, and by sharing his narrative with Hana his story and the stories of the immigrant workers will be carried into the future. Sarris, after acknowledging that most critics agree the novel's point of view belongs to Patrick, makes an important and, for the purpose of this paper, a very significant claim that "perhaps that point of view might more accurately be seen as that of Hana, Alice's daughter" (189). Sarris argues for this shift because in the novel Hana is the actual recipient of Patrick's story. Hana's role, as stated in the prologue, is to "gather" Patrick's story, a gesture which, when placed within a Lacanian reading, is an attempt to unify the mediating realm of language/narrative with the wholeness that is associated with the female/

mother realm. Patrick remains the focus of the novel, but on a figurative level Hana, at the age of sixteen, can be seen as a sort of mythic regenerator of narrative, whose role is to gather, incubate, and safeguard what she hears. If this story had been a fairy tale we would have no difficulty viewing Hana as the embodiment of an ideal similar to Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. Her gender, age, purity, and fecundity make her an idyllic figure for the safeguarding and regeneration of language, and the fantasized site of the longed-for resolution of the lost mother.[4] What Patrick passes on to her is not an "official history," and there are no statistics attached to it; and it is only one of the living narratives Hana will use to position herself in the world. The closing image of Patrick and Hana driving toward the rising sun once again opens readers' imaginations to the possibility that the wholeness we desire in narrative may still be achieved.

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By joining in Patrick's quest we gain a fuller understanding of what it means to be an attentive listener, and we also become better acquainted with the importance attached to sharing our experiences in an intimate atmosphere. In fact, every time we become entangled in narrative we are, in a sense, reenacting Patrick's and Harris' intimate struggles to be heard and understood: we read, pay attention, ask questions—we feel the life within the pages. Literature constantly reminds us who we are, who we were, and who we might become. As Robert Kroetsch states, "we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" (63).

If we place any significance in Barthes statement that "literature and language are in the process of recognizing each other" (*Rustle* 11), then we have already begun to acknowledge that when we speak we are calling forward the text of our experiences. And even though this text is only a symbolic register of experience, and has already been coded with meaning, it is still the primary medium for mediating our lives. In the case of Ondaatje's novel, the text draws our attention to the role narration plays in inscribing and sustaining meaning. In other words, the novel calls attention to the value of narration, and specifically, it reminds us that stories are the fundamental mode of transferring cultural knowledge. On this point I conclude by recalling Lyotard's assertion that narration "is the quintessential form of customary knowledge" (75).

NOTES

[1] Although my focus throughout is on Patrick, it is interesting to note a similar correspondence exists between Enkidu and Ondaatje, as both arrive in a civilization of which they have no previous knowledge, yet both step boldly forward to address existing injustice. Enkidu, perhaps the oldest example of what we now refer to as Rousseau's noble savage; Ondaatje, the contemporary writer from the margins. Carol L. Beran also views Commissioner Harris as "one of the most surprising alter egos" for Ondaatje, as both imagine "wonderful structures and then bring them into being" (72).

[2] In fact, Patrick's movement from the wilderness to Macedonian society can be read as a retelling of humanity's emergence as linguistic beings.

[3] *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is also the oldest narrative known to the west, and considered by many scholars to be a founding text of western civilization. See Kluger.

[4] Furthermore, Hana, like the fairy-tale characters mentioned, also lacks a living mother.

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