Postmodern Narrative Strategies: Intertextuality and Historiographic Metafiction in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*

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**Introduction**

In connection with the publication of *In the Skin of a Lion* in 1987, Michael Ondaatje recalls during an interview to CBC Radio that it took him over ten years to write the novel (“In the Skin of Michael Ondaatje” 0:0:21). At first, the focus was on Ambrose Small, the Canadian theatre magnate who disappeared in 1919. But as Ondaatje continued his research for the novel, the building of the city, and more specifically the Prince Edward Viaduct (commonly known as the Bloor Street Viaduct) as well as the R. C. Harris Water Treatment Plant, became more interesting to him (0:2:50). Subsequently, while consulting history books and archives to find out more information about the bridge, Ondaatje was incredibly surprised to know that all the history books and archives tell one all sorts of information about the technical details and the materials used in the construction, but nothing about the people who were actually building the bridge (0:3:04). In his novel, the author uses his character Patrick Lewis to shed light onto this omission when Patrick pays a visit to the local library looking for any references to the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct: “The articles and illustrations he found in the Riverdale Library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge” (Ondaatje 145). In respect to this omission presented in the novel, Graciela Moreira Slepoy claims that “[h]istory is implicitly considered as a master narrative that allows no space to articulate local narratives and to account for the richness, variety and complexity of human experience”, meaning that history, as a totalizing metanarrative, does not give opportunity for the local and private voices to emerge, since it is constructed by those in power.

Ondaatje’s novel exposes history to be a narrative discourse similar to fiction, where historians, just like storytellers, “decide which events will become facts” (Hutcheon 122), revealing that “[m]emoirs are true and useful stars, whilst studied histories are those stars joined in constellations, according to the fancy of the poet” (Pepys 69). This lack of information on those people who built the bridge is what made Ondaatje raise his pen and confront the version of history presented by the official sources. *In the Skin of a Lion* is a deliberate attempt to betray - in the sense of unveiling other realities - and rewrite history. In this novel, Ondaatje takes us on a journey along the winding paths of Patrick’s memories and, as an avenger of the future, presents an alternative version of events as well as a reparation to the immigrant workers for the historic debt owed to them by the Canadian society.

This essay will focus on *In the Skin of a Lion*’s revisionist reading of history by analyzing the novel’s narrative strategy. Ondaatje uses intertextuality, inside a historiographic
metafictional frame, as a postmodern narrative strategy to provide information, making it possible to challenge the historical records and at the same time illuminate the contributions of the immigrant workers to Toronto. The novel could also be read as a contribution to the debate about immigration as a local and global phenomenon, in the past as well as in the present and in the future.

**Background**

What inspired Ondaatje to write this novel is the lack of information about the immigrants whose labour built the city (“In the Skin of Michael Ondaatje” 0:3:04). Since the author himself is an immigrant, this can be seen as a strong motivation to challenge the official history and portray the immigrants’ importance to the City of Toronto. The author was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on 12 September 1943 from a Dutch father and a Ceylonese mother. He first moved to England in 1954 and then immigrated to Canada in 1962, becoming a Canadian citizen in 1965. Having lived in three different continents and having parents of different nationalities, the author himself is a product of a globalized, fragmented, and postmodern world. The plurality of perspectives in the novel, as well as the multicultural perspectives offered in the characters’ narratives could perhaps be seen to reflect the author’s own experiences of being an immigrant.

**Aim and Approach**

As previously stated, the aim of this essay is to explore Ondaatje’s use of intertextuality, both as a postmodern narrative strategy and inside a historiographic metafictional frame, and as a means to give voice to the immigrant workers that helped build Toronto and who have never been mentioned in the official records. In order to support this claim, I will use a postmodern approach and close reading of the novel.

In what follows, this essay addresses the rhetorical function of the narrative structure in *In the Skin of a Lion* from three perspectives. Firstly, I will discuss the novel’s frame as historiographic metafiction. Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon coined in the late 1980s the term ‘historiographic metafiction’. The concept of historiographic metafiction is applied to “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 5). Historiographic metafiction is thus characterized by the appropriation of historical characters or events in order to rethink and rework the forms and contents of the past (5). It is used for works of fiction
which combine the literary device of metafiction with historical fiction. In this sense, historiographic metafiction presents a type of textual composition that is self-conscious and that systematically draws attention to its own status of a construct. According to Hutcheon, the text itself raises questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, hence its contradictory character, which could be seen to both recover and reject the historical assumptions, since it depends on what it is challenging (the fact) and from there it obtains its power. Notably, it does not have the desire to tell the truth, but to present other possibilities of interpretation.

Just as postmodernism could be seen to challenge the historic discourse, so the historiographic metafictional frame enables the author to situate his novel in relation to time and space, giving it a historical context. At the same time, historiographic metafiction enables the confrontation of history as one totalizing voice when it presents other perspectives through the histories of the fictional and marginalized characters. Thus, through the historiographic metafictional frame, Ondaatje reveals that history can be as subjective as fiction, since history and fiction “have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs” (105). Basically, I will analyse how this frame is used by the author in order to problematize the historical discourse.

In many passages throughout the novel, Ondaatje uses intertextuality as a narrative strategy to interact with the reader and to provide hints and information about how the narrative will be conducted and also about themes and the structure of the text, making it possible to identify the author’s intentions and the purpose of his narrative, which can help to demonstrate the deliberate intentions of the writer in confronting history through fiction. So, in the second part of the analysis, I will discuss intertextuality in the novel. According to my argument, Ondaatje has written In the Skin of a Lion with the goal to show an alternative version of events. After a close reading of the text, it is possible to draw this conclusion by analysing, inter alia, some narrative strategies used by the author, in particular the concept of intertextuality, a term coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, based on the theory of dialogueness by Mikhail Bakhtin (Allen 39).

In order to discuss intertextuality as a postmodern narrative strategy, one good definition of narrative strategy comes from O. A. Kovaliov, where he affirms that “[t]he concepts of ‘narrative strategy’, similarly to the term of ‘the strategy of the text’ implies a certain idea of the author about his reader; and through a literary text, the author tries to achieve some of the goals; he uses a variety of methods of influence for the sake of achieving them” (39). Therefore, it is possible to see that through intertextuality, the author can interact with the reader in a sort
of intertextual game, where the reader is expected to actively decode the meanings hidden in the intertext. In one layer, there is the dialogue between texts, and in another layer, there is the dialogue between the author and the reader (Allen 39).

Another fruitful definition for the understanding of the role of intertextuality as a postmodern narrative strategy in the novel comes from Hutcheon. She defines it in this way: “Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context […] It is not an attempt to void or avoid history. Instead it directly confronts the past of literature - and of historiography, for it too derives from other texts (documents)” (Hutcheon 118). By using intertexts in the narrative, the author refers to other texts with the purpose to establish a relation with the reader and indicate his intentions of bringing up the past into the present in order to open it up to new interpretations.

Lastly, I will discuss the importance of literature and art, and more specifically fiction, in bringing order to the chaos. In Ondaatje’s interview published by Louisiana Channel, he affirms that not relying on one voice is for him a literary statement as well as a political one, the multiple voices represent “community as opposed to one voice” (0:12:54). Based on this utterance, it can be deducted that the author intends that his novel is seen as a work of art that shows other perspectives and brings up alternative versions to the ones presented in the official discourse. Ondaatje eventually sews his characters into history and brings order to the chaos through his art.

Concerning the postmodern literary techniques and strategies used by the author, I am aware that Ondaatje uses parody, pastiche, irony, imagery, temporal distortion, and so on. In this essay, however, I will focus on the historiographic metafictional character of the novel (as it enables the problematization of history), on intertextuality (as it occurs very often throughout the novel), and on the role of art and fiction in challenging history (where this novel is a clear example of that). In essence, this analysis shows how the author, through his narrative, challenges and deconstructs the notion of absolute truth of official history, which presents an exclusionary nature, and offers the reader an alternative version of events.

**Previous Research and Material**

The primary source of study is the novel *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje, which was published in 1987 by McClelland and Stewart. For this analysis I will be using the First Vintage International Edition from January 1997. Since *In the Skin of a Lion* was nominated for the
1987 Governor General's Award for English Language Fiction and won the 2002 edition of Canada Reads, it is a famous novel, and, as a result, a considerable number of researches have been carried out since its publishing.

The novel has been read from a variety of approaches and the most obvious is the postcolonial, or a combination of postcolonial and Marxist ones, due to the recurring themes of capitalist exploitation of the working class and the plight of the marginalised groups, especially the immigrants. By way of illustration in regards to the postcolonial approach, Susan Spearey and Andrea Yew writes about the migrant experience, and Glen Lowry about the representation of race.

In my analysis, however, I will focus on some of Ondaatje’s narrative strategies, specified in the previous section. There is a large number of researches on the novel, as I have already mentioned, and some of them focus on the narrative strategies adopted by the author. One of them is a book written by Lee Spinks (2009), where he discusses Ondaatje’s narrative in In the Skin of a Lion in Chapter 6. Spinks addresses the two epigraphs (as I do in the second part of my analysis), analyses each chapter separately and even discusses the influence of Cubism upon Ondaatje’s literary style.

Other interesting researches about the novel are the ones made by Robert David Stacey and Ridvan Askin. Stacey suggests that the novel is written in a pastoral mode (covert pastoral) and that this mode “continues to offer the contemporary novelist a set of structures from within which to explore the dynamics of difference and the meaning of history, whether for those with power or those without” (467). Askin focuses on Ondaatje’s novel The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, where Ondaatje’s narrative “complicates the relation between fact and fiction” (“Narrating Sensation” 78), similarly to what he does in In the Skin of a Lion.

In regards to the secondary sources, the one that I relied most heavily on is A Poetics of Postmodernism by Linda Hutcheon, where she discusses the concepts of postmodern historiographic metafiction and intertextuality, as presented in the previous section. This book and its discussions and definitions are crucial to my study of the primary source.

Since The Epic of Gilgamesh is the novel's compass, and it is vital for its understanding, another secondary source that was very important to my study is a lecture on The Epic of Gilgamesh, by Prof. Ed Greenstein, from Bar-Ilan University, called “The Gilgamesh Epic and Its Interpretations”. This lecture enabled me to identify many similarities of the themes and the structure of the studied text with the epic, making it possible to detect some of the intertextual games played with the reader and, in that manner, to identify some of the author’s intentions and strategies, which will be developed in the analysis.
Besides those, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has also helped me to understand postmodernism as a movement that challenges universal truths embedded in metanarratives, and also how these metanarratives shaped our understanding of the world, which are very important in my study of the primary source.

I will also be using some essays written on postmodernism, memory, fiction, literature, and history, as well as interviews with the author and articles about the novel in the media.

**Analysis**

Before entering the very heart of the analysis, I would like to present some considerations about the debate concerning the differences and similarities between history and literature, fact and fiction, which has permeated for a long time the works of a considerable number of scholars in both areas. For instance, words like ‘history’ and ‘story’ have been used as opposing terms: history refers to the real and the factual; story refers to the unreal and the fictional. Richard Walsh declares that “[i]n *Poetics*, Aristotle is concerned with the difference between history as ‘confined to contingent particulars’ and fiction (or rather poetry) as concerned ‘with general truths’” (47). Literary scholars theorizing postmodernism have also been challenging the dichotomy history and literature, and a very prominent one is Hutcheon, who claims that “literature and history were considered branches of the same tree of learning” (105), but in the nineteenth century, with the advent of the enlightenment, history gains a scientific status through the works of Leopold Van Hanke, the founder of modern source-based history, thus being seen as an impartial discourse (105). When the historic discourse is consolidated as scientific discourse, history is regarded as a metanarrative that establishes nothing but the truth. This view of history as scientific discourse occasioned the separation between literature and history, consequently making them distinct disciplines (105).

Notably, too, the scientific status of history has been increasingly challenged by postmodern scholarly perspectives on modernism and modernity who theorize history as a narrative among (meta-)narratives. A main characteristic of postmodern society is the “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). Metanarratives, or grand narratives, are totalizing and universal philosophies that could explain the world, and they made us understand the concepts of truth and justice (Lyotard 1984). For the postmodernists, the problem with metanarratives, such as history, is related to their nature, in that they are totalizing and universal, thus excluding the ones who are not members of the ruling class, the ones not in
the center - the “ex-centric” (Hutcheon 1988). For the postmodernist movement, “[t]hese ‘metanarratives’ which purport to explain and reassure, are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition, and plurality” (Barry 88). When difference, opposition, and plurality are not considered, there is a serious risk that many regional and local mini-narratives become hidden under the surface, as the contributions of the immigrant workers that helped build Toronto.

With that in mind, in the next subsection I will be discussing how official history can be challenged by a historiographic metafictional frame.

**Historiographic Metafiction: Problematizing the Historical Discourse**

As we have seen before, the choice for a historiographic metafictional frame, where fact and fiction blend, allows the author to contextualize the story in the historical context and at the same time challenge the historical veracity: “When [the self-reflexivity of historiographic metafiction is] conjoined with historical references to actual events and personages, this demystifying auto-representation engages a problematizing of historical knowledge and of the borders between fact and fiction, conducted within the powers and limits of narrativization” (Hutcheon 227). Such a mingling of history and fiction is present in *In the Skin of a Lion*, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Ondaatje starts the fragmentation and deconstruction of history by bringing up historical people (Small, Harris, Temelcoff, Caravaggio and so on) and transposing them into a fictional environment with purely fictional characters like Hana, Patrick, Clara and Alice. Cato, for example, a unionist in the novel, is neither purely historical nor fictional; he is an amalgamation of historical unionists Viljo Rosvall and Janne Voutilainen. As the historiographic metafiction relies strongly on the previous knowledge and, consequently, on the capacity for interpretation of the reader, it is only possible to deduct that Cato is a representation of these two historical unionists if one knows or searches for the facts related to their deaths and funeral. In regards to the funeral procession for Viljo Rosvall, it is said that “[s]oon after the funeral began there was an 85% eclipse of the sun, casting a brooding shadow of divine judgement on the whole affair” (Raffo 14). Ondaatje alludes to that in the book to verify this relation between Cato and Rosvall-Voutilainen: “During Cato’s funeral, while Alice held the infant Hana, there was an eclipse” (Ondaatje 159). Those Finnish-Canadian unionists disappeared and then were found dead “in shallow water” at Onion Lake (Raffo 3) and their deaths were ruled as accidental drownings (3) according to history; “[t]he ‘Truth’ about the fate of these two men is now probably lost in
the past” (3). In the novel, Ondaatje, challenges this veracity by associating Cato to these unionists and by showing that he was in fact murdered and “found under the ice of a shallow creek near Onion Lake” (Ondaatje 157), which is more in accordance to the public’s beliefs, bringing a shadow of doubt upon the historical records.

Furthermore, the same procedure of casting doubt upon the historical facts happens in relation to the other historical characters. The real Ambrose Small disappeared and his body was never recovered according to history. In the novel, the author challenges this veracity by showing that his character Ambrose has freely disappeared and was living with his lover Clara Dickens (100). And the same happens with the nun; according to history she fell from the bridge; in the novel, she is saved by Temelcoff (32-33) and becomes Alice Gull (144). Fact and fiction is now blurred, the reader does not really know where fact ends and fiction starts. The story is now contextualized and historical facts are being challenged.

This blur occasioned by the mix of fact and fiction can be seen to be symbolized by the cyclist who “escaped by bicycle through the police barriers” during the political ceremonies of inauguration of the bridge and raced across it. As a result, the first one to cross the bridge was “[n]ot the expected show car containing officials, but this one anonymous”– “[i]n the photographs he is a blur of intent” who “on his flight claimed the bridge in that blurred movement” (27). The blurring of lines between fact and fiction enables the anonymous ones, the unempowered, to claim their space in the historical records.

Moreover, from the moment that you want to re-signify the historic discourse, you must fill in the gaps with something else, and this something else is a discourse based on the voices of the ones that have been excluded from the official records. However, as the discourse of the marginalized, unlike the official discourse, was not given space by history, it has not been written down. And that is why memory is so important for the construction of the text in the historiographic metafiction. On his considerations about “Memory and Literature”, Ilan Stavans suggests that “to remember is to recreate. Remembering is not a return to the past but the adaptation of a past event to the circumstances of the present; it is a reorganization and the giving of new meaning to what was lost” (84). That is represented in the novel by Patrick’s memory, which is the starting point of the novel. Patrick’s memory is an individual one, but this individual memory connects to the other characters’ memories and form this ‘community that opposes to one voice’. A representation of single memories that are put together to form a broader meaning is when Ondaatje compares Patrick’s discovery about the interactions of those memories and histories with a street-band, with its music made up of different solos that converge in order to create the chorus: “The cornet and saxophone and drum chased each other
across solos and then suddenly, as Patrick drew alongside them, fell together and rose within a chorus” (144). Patrick realizes then that “[h]is own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices” (145), meaning exactly Patrick’s relations with the other six main characters in the novel, referred to in the prologue as “six stars and a moon”, where Patrick symbolizes the moon by functioning as a “prism that refracted their lives” (157).

Additionally, in respect to the importance of sharpening our hearing towards the voices of the marginalized, Ondaatje makes a parallel between moths and the immigrants in the novel: when the workers and their families were on their way to the waterworks, he describes them as “[e]merging from darkness, mothlike” (115). Moths are a strong symbol in the novel, appearing several times (9, 10, 39, 115, 170, 198), and while studying the moths in the beginning of the narrative, Patrick observes that “[p]erhaps they are not mute at all, it is just a lack of range in his hearing” (10). When the immigrants, symbolizing the ex-centrics, are compared to the moths, Ondaatje tells us that they are seeking for the lights and that they have always had a voice, but nobody was willing to listen to them, and he is prepared to give them a voice, since, as Patrick realizes, all they need is someone capable of hearing them.

The ‘scene’ in the novel that best represents the clash between history and fiction is the moment when Patrick confronts Commissioner Harris in the last part of the novel, where Patrick, being a fictional character, could be seen to represent a fictional perspective, and Harris, a historical character, could be seen to represent the historical events. As Alice explains to Patrick in the novel, “[y]ou reach people through metaphor” (Ondaatje 123). So, let us use a metaphor to explain this clash. In one corner there is Patrick, dressed in his fiction cape, who confronts Harris by asking him if he knew how many workers died while building the intake tunnels. On the other corner, there is Harris wearing his history cape, who answers: “There was no record kept” (237). This is exactly what is argued by postmodernists, that is, the “representations of the past are selected to signify whatever the historian intends” (Hutcheon 122). During this confrontation, the goal of Patrick is to explode the waterworks, but in the end, he loses the battle to Harris and does not accomplish his plan, as Harris wins through language, by talking Patrick into sleep: “He was asleep!” (Ondaatje 241). In this sense, we can see that the historical discourse (Harris) wins over the ex-centric’s discourse (Patrick), as the historical discourse, similarly to the fictional discourse, can be seen as a linguistic construct that decides which events will become facts, as we have already seen.

Historiographic metafiction also enables a revisionist reading of the past by bringing up the past into the present: “Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past
in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present” (Hutcheon 110). Thus, postmodern historiographic metafiction favours the possibility of “[turning] the page backwards […] which in literature is the real gift” (Ondaatje 148). And Patrick gives this gift of revisiting the past to Nicholas Temelcoff when Patrick reminds him about the nun: “Patrick’s gift, that arrow into the past, shows him the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history” (149). To illustrate this, Ondaatje uses the single story of Nicholas Temelcoff, the daredevil who, despite his past difficulties in adapting to his new life as an immigrant, has become “a citizen now, in the present, successful with his own bakery” (149). When Temelcoff, being reminded by Patrick, revisits his past and recollects having saved the nun, he discovers “the pleasure of recall. It is something new to him. That is what history means” (149). By being ‘sewn into history’, Temelcoff discovers that now he has a voice, so “[n]ow he will begin to tell stories” (149). Single stories are then incorporated into history as they are revisited and re-signified.

As seen before, one significant aspect of historiographic metafiction is self-reflexivity, since it reinforces the perception of the text as a human construct; metafiction is a narrative device that enables showing awareness of itself, that is, it is marked by the return of its discourse towards itself. As an example, there is this passage where the author reminds us that Patrick is a character within a novel: "All his life Patrick Lewis has lived beside novels and their clear stories" (82). Another good example of metafiction in the novel is when the author identifies the story within a story when describing the love story between Patrick and Clara as something outside the text: "He has come across a love story. This is only a love story. He does not wish for plot and all its consequences" (159). The metafictional device, thus, contributes to its own understanding as an artefact, and it uses this self-awareness about its own nature in order to pose questions about the dynamics that links the real and the fictional. To a greater extent, it also affects the perception of the world that is usually recognized as real:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside. (Waugh 2)

Conforming to the above, the active role of the reader in the metafiction is evident in the production of meaning. Between the real story, already told, and the possibilities suggested by fiction, there is a space of freedom for the reader to test his ability to remodel the constructs already elaborated. But, as I mentioned before, this effect cannot occur unless the reader is aware of the historical context. In this light, it is seen that the historical discourse privileges or
denies alternatives; “[h]istoriography and fiction, as we saw earlier, constitute their objects of attention; in other words, they decide which events will become facts” (Hutcheon 122). The other stories, suggested by historiographic metafiction, are opportunities to recover the possibilities abandoned by official discourse.

**Intertextuality as Narrative Strategy**

Historiographic metafiction, however, is not the only narrative strategy used in the novel to challenge and undermine notions of the past, but another important narrative strategy is intertextuality. Intertextuality in the novel reveals itself from the very beginning and it is present throughout the novel, including citations, imagery, allusions to famous paintings and other authors, passages from the bible and so on. In this study, though, I will focus on the two epigraphs and the prologue.

In *In the Skin of a Lion*, the author has chosen to include two epigraphs: one from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which contains the title of the novel, and one by John Berger, which is about not trusting only one voice. In this section, I will develop my analyses by looking carefully into these two epigraphs. According to Merriam-Webster, an epigraph is “a quotation set at the beginning of a literary work or one of its divisions to suggest its theme” (“Epigraph”), and that is precisely what the author does when he chooses these two epigraphs - he signals to the attentive reader his intentions with the narrative.

Concerning the first epigraph, taken from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*: “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” (Ondaatje 1997), Ondaatje criticizes “historical practices of the last thirty years [that] have limited agency’s significance, […] seeing the human as the patient of History rather than its agent” (Fitzhugh and Leckie 2001). That being so, he compares history to ‘the wilderness’ and he tells the reader that he ‘will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion’, that is, exercising human agency, as assuming “the skins of wild animals” denote “[taking] responsibility for the story” (Ondaatje 157). Moreover, the oldest written story in the world, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, is, according to Prof. Ed Greenstein’s lecture “The Gilgamesh Epic and Its Interpretations”, a story about the quest for immortality. Greenstein explains that by looking closely into the epic, one can see that “it’s a story of revelation and immortalization through literature” (0:38:07) and that one of the roles of the poets and writers is to “give immortality to heroes” (0:40:55). Accordingly,
Ondaatje uses the myth of Gilgamesh to state his purpose, which is to give immortality through literature to his own heroes, the immigrant workers in Toronto.

Another possible interpretation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* presented by Greenstein is the one that G.S. Kirk identifies in the epic, based on the ideas of Lévi-Strauss in his famous book about myths entitled *The Raw and the Cooked* (0:0:24). In this interpretation, G.S. Kirk identifies the conflicts and tensions between the raw (representing nature in a raw state — “uncivilized, underdeveloped, uncultured”) and the cooked (representing culture, civilization – using fire, cooking) (0:2:20). In the epic, the raw is symbolized by Enkidu. Enkidu is created by the Goddess Aruru and is one third human and two thirds beast, and he lived among animals in the wilderness. In order to come into the town of Uruku and live among the civilized, Greenstein tells us that Enkidu was domesticated by a prostitute called Shamhat (0:15:53). She teaches him the art of love making and also how to eat and drink as a civilized man. As a result, this woman is the gateway to the civilized world for Enkidu.

Here we can see a clear analogy in the novel between Patrick and the immigrants, where, as Enkidu, they represent the raw. They all come into town in a raw state. Patrick Lewis was also like an immigrant to the city; Patrick had lived all his life in the country, alone with his father Hazen Lewis, “an abashed man, withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus” (Ondaatje 15). That being so, “Patrick Lewis arrived in the city of Toronto as if it were land after years at sea. […] He was an immigrant to the city” (53). Furthermore, Patrick, as Enkidu, was domesticated and transformed by not only one woman, but by two - first by Clara Dickens, Ambrose's mistress, and later by Alice Gull, the nun who fell from the bridge. These women are the ones who will bring light into Patrick’s life, helping him to discover his true self and to adapt to the life in the city, filling the gap left by no feminine presences in his life. He will understand it only afterwards, when “he will think of the seconds when he was almost asleep and they entered the dark room with candles. […] He feels more community remembering this than anything in his life. Patrick and the two women. A study for the New World. Judith and Holofernes. St. Jerome and the Lion. Patrick and the Two Women” (79). This moment is captured and transformed into a painting by the narrator, ‘Patrick and the Two Women’, representing Patrick’s awakening and salvation, as in the themes of the paintings named by the narrator. Patrick is then awakened from his raw state by these two women. In the same sense, Ondaatje is the one who will bring lights upon the gaps in history, depicting how the lives of the immigrants could have been if their histories have been told.
Still relating to the clash between history and fiction, the author leads us once more to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, when Gilgamesh falls into a deep sleep while Utnapishtim puts him to a test (“The Gilgamesh Epic” 0:33:24). And the brilliancy in all this is that Harris recognizes Patrick as Gilgamesh, which can be confirmed by the second quotation from the epic in the novel that says: “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” (Ondaatje 242). Harris recognizes Patrick as a hero who dares confront him and all that he symbolizes, and he respects Patrick for that, for he could have accused Patrick of terrorism, but instead he asked his official to “let him sleep” and “to bring a nurse with some medical supplies” (242) since Patrick got hurt in his way to reach for Harris. Making a parallel, Ondaatje forces the historical discourse to admit its flaws while representant of a unique truth, sketching a ‘mea culpa’ in a highly implicit way.

The second epigraph by John Berger, which reads “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one” (Ondaatje 1997), is also a criticism against totalizing historical practices, where only one truth is validated, and a hint concerning how he will conduct the novel according to postmodern philosophy in regards to the multiplicity of truths. According to postmodern reasoning, “there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one *Truth*” (Hutcheon 109). In consonance with the postmodern perception, one way to deconstruct the objective totalizing truth postulated in the metanarratives, is to fragment it, thus creating many different points of view, and consequently many different truths. In that respect, going back to *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and its fragmented structure, which is presented in the form of twelve tablets, it can be compared to the fragmented narrative of *In the Skin of a Lion*, where the latter is a clear challenge, represented by the multiple voices in the narrative, to the idea of ‘one Truth’.

Not satisfied about using the two epigraphs to familiarize the readers with his intentions, Ondaatje writes a metaphorical prologue with some more indications about the strategy and structure of the text. In the beginning of the novel, Patrick and Hana are embarking on a journey through the countryside, which is a representation for revisiting the past, and for that, Hana is “adapting the rear-view mirror” (Ondaatje 244) to follow in this journey. The story Patrick is about to tell, which is based on his own memories, is fragmented and composed by mini-narratives that consists of several multifaceted personal histories, very representative of how memory works and typical of postmodern style: “She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms” (prologue). When we change metanarratives, which are totalizing and universal, for fragmentation and
mini-narratives, as Ondaatje does in *In the Skin of a Lion*, we give voice to individuals and minorities that were in the dark, that were mute, that would never be heard otherwise.

Consequently, Michael Ondaatje makes clear from the beginning his intentions to revisit the past and to reveal the subjectivity that exists in the historical discourse. By depicting the imaginary lives of the immigrant workers based on the memories of Patrick, the author can create different perspectives, showing that history, or any other story, cannot be understood by just a single viewpoint.

**Messages in a Bottle: The Importance of Art in Bringing Order to the Chaos**

In relation to the novel, the importance of art in bringing order to the chaos is related to its social function, because it communicates aspects of collective life as opposed to one person’s point of view. The recovery of an event made through a work of art usually generates controversy, because this visit to the past may bring up ‘truths’ not yet revealed due to the relations of interest and power of conservative groups (Hutcheon 1988). And the role of historiographic metafiction lies precisely in contrasting this view of the dominant part with the view of the subjugated, highlighting the narrative character that history has, since, as we have already seen in this essay, both the writing of history and fiction can be identified as linguistic constructs.

As previously noted, since history can be seen as a construct, it can be seen to represent only one voice, the voice of the ones in power, whereas fiction, representing the arts, has the power to challenge this unique voice and give space to multiple voices. In order to demonstrate that the official records are constructs, the narrator describes that after paying a visit to the Riverdale Library, when Patrick was “looking for any reference to the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct” (Ondaatje 143), he could observe that everything was depicted in the articles and illustrations, except “information on those who actually built the bridge” (145). The novel then raises the flag for the importance of art and its role in challenging official history and opening a way to show other truths, other perspectives beyond the official discourse. Ondaatje writes that “[o]nly the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events” (148) in the sense that it shows hidden stories which are not brought up by official history. In addition, Ondaatje compares official histories and news stories with “soft rhetoric” - beauty and eloquence instead of real content (145). As an example of the importance of the best art that challenges history, the author mentions the photographer Lewis Hine, “who in the United States was
photographing child labour everywhere” (145) and, with this, showing that “Hine’s photographs betray official history and put together another family” (145), suggesting that art has the power to betray history and reveal the evils that official history can hide.

However, the problem is that the best art reaches us only after some time in comparison to official histories and news stories, and this delay in how art reaches us gives official histories and news stories a clear advantage in establishing themselves as truth, since they reach us almost immediately, especially after the advent of internet and social media: “Official histories, news stories surround us daily, but the events of art reach us too late, travel languorously like messages in a bottle” (145). Moreover, “[n]ews reports of political and social events are provided by competing television channels, often with their own political and social agendas. These reports employ processes of framing, editing and other reproductions of images and speech which the viewer, possessing only what is presented, cannot challenge” (Allen 182). It is with a sad tone that Ondaatje writes: “But Patrick would never see the great photographs of Hine” (Ondaatje 145). So, the reader is asked to trust in the power of art and to be patient: “The first sentence of every novel should be: ‘Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human’” (146).

The best art does travel languorously, but when it reaches us it has this wonderful capacity to “order the chaotic tumble of events” (Ondaatje 146). Judith Mara Gutman wrote in her essay “Lewis W. Hine and the American Social Conscience”, and Ondaatje quoted her in the novel, that “[o]nly the best art can realign chaos to suggest that both the chaos and order it will become” (146). The novel In the Skin of a Lion is written several years after the construction of Toronto and, in the same way as the photographs by Lewis Hine, it “betrays official history” (145) and gives voice to the thousands of immigrants whose stories have not been told, even if it took time to happen, as ‘messages in a bottle’.

Conclusion

It can be seen from the above analysis that the power of fiction in challenging history cannot be denied, and a fantastic master of story-writing like Ondaatje, through his novel, gives us a convincing proof of that power. Without the writing of In the Skin of a Lion, probably not many people would have thought or talked about the contributions of the immigrant workers to Canada, and they would have remained forgotten in the past.

Ondaatje succeeded so much (literature/art succeeded) that today there is a plaque beside the bridge with a passage from In the Skin of a Lion. This is part of a project called Project
Bookmark Canada, where Ondaatje’s novel became Bookmark No. 1 (“Bookmark #1 Toronto, Ontario”). This project links books to landscape; it “aims to post pieces of prose next to geographic features all over Canada, thus inspiring us to read our stories about our landscape”, affirms Miranda Hill, a Toronto-area writer, in the article by Kuitenbrouwer. Below is an excerpt from this article, where Ondaatje demonstrates how happy he is to see that the name of Nicholas Temelcoff, one of the bridge builders, is now somehow on the bridge because of his novel:

Mr. Ondaatje recalled the trouble he had finding names of bridge workers while researching the book. “The newspapers spoke only of the companies hired and the money used, or the poobahs who were in charge of it,” he recalls. Then, at the Toronto Multicultural History Society, “I discovered ... a Macedonian bridge builder named Nicholas Temelcoff. Ideally I would love to have this bridge named after him, rather than calling it, ‘The Prince Edward Viaduct,’” the author said. “But I am very glad that, because of the plaque, his name is somehow on this bridge at last”. (Kuitenbrouwer; emphasis added)

Through the use of a historiographic metafictional frame and intertextuality as postmodern narrative strategy, the author creates the possibility for the immigrants to assume the position of protagonists and to write their own histories. Ondaatje immortalizes them through literature, giving them a voice and a place in history, in the same way as “Gilgamesh achieves immortality through the survival of his name” (Greenstein 0:40:32). When Ondaatje mixes these historical people with the fictional characters, he confronts history by fragmenting it and merging these pieces with the histories of the immigrants in order to give voice to them and to insert them into history. Michael Ondaatje uses the thread of poesy to sew a beautiful and metaphorical patchwork quilt made of rags of multiple shapes, emerging stories, and many colors.

In relation to the dichotomy between history and literature, fact and fiction, and the role of fiction in challenging history, one can come to the conclusion that “literature, therefore, tells the historian about the history that did not occur, about the possibilities that did not succeed, about plans that did not materialize. It is the sad, though sublime, testimony of men that were defeated by facts” (Sevcenko 21; my translation). Therefore, after studying this novel as a literary work that challenges the notion of history as one truth, the most sensible would be to conclude that history and literature are not opposing terms, but complementing ones.
Works Cited


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