Michael Ondaatje's Struggle between Reality and Fiction in *In the Skin of a Lion*

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Abstract:

This article investigates Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* in the light of Frank Kermode's theory of fiction. It argues that the narrative's form acts as an important medium by which Ondaatje inscribes the tension between showing respect for the contingency of reality and delivering a satisfying, consoling story. On the one hand, deeply aware of the gap between knowing and living, Ondaatje shows distrust of neat patterns in representing Toronto's past; the narrative resists linear narrative order to create a multidimensional world that allows different versions of reality to co-exist. On the other hand, the author recognizes the human efforts to counteract time and endorses establishing plots to make sense of one's life span; the text presents consoling moments of synthesis that illuminate the protagonist Patrick's existence in time. The study highlights the correspondence of Ondaatje's poetics and his thematic concern with the pursuit of meaning; by experimenting with its form, Ondaatje's narrative encourages us to reflect on sense-making as well as the ways of sense-making.

Keywords: sense-making; *In the Skin of a Lion*; Kermode; nonlinear structure; spatial form

Introduction

Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (henceforth *ISL*) fictionalizes the lives of European immigrants and the working class who remained outside the mainstream society of Toronto in the early 1990s. Imaginatively and poignantly, it restores a social milieu of complex cultural predicaments and tensions. The novel can be considered as a bildungsroman of Patrick Lewis, as he is the only character whose self-discovery is intimately related throughout, and the narrative's progression relies on his ever increasing understanding of the world and consequent actions (Schumacher 1996, 4). Specifically, *ISL* focuses on how the identity of a "white" subject develops in dialogue with subjects of other ethnicities, demonstrating the heterogeneous influences involved in Patrick's self-seeking and questions the essential binaries of identity (Lowry 2005, 69). It is suggested that to achieve self-understanding and self-representation, one needs to find his voice within a cacophony of voices (Yew 2016, 16). In rendering this process of coming-of-age,

Ondaatje's narrative widely practices postmodernist aesthetics. Both Rochelle Simmons (1998) and Winfried Siemerling (2005) make an analogy between *ISL* and cubism; they argue that the fragmented form, by interweaving different planes of reality and time, presents an openness to the space of the other and echoes the work's thematic concern with the interaction among diverse ethnic groups. Similarly, Michael Greenstein (1990) investigates the text's intertextuality and draws a symbolic relationship between the dialogic form and Patrick's discursively-constructed identity. Julie Beddoes (1994), from a different perspective, examines the tension between the novel's radical class politics and its postmodernist poetics; she contends that the politics of the characters' action (for example, Patrick's attack on the Scarborough waterworks) is obscured and complicated by the highly experimental formal devices.

Reading *ISL* thus greatly concerns not only making sense of one's life—as Patrick's self-exploration embodies, but also making sense of the ways one makes sense of life—as the text's experimentation on form shows. This makes it apt to read *ISL* vis-à-vis Frank Kermode's theory of fiction. In *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Kermode famously argues that "No longer imminent, the End is immanent" (1967, 25). According to him, because we are deeply uncomfortable with the fact that our lives only form a short period in the middle of endless time, there is a need "to speak humanly of a life's importance in relation to it" (4). We hence come up with plots, or "fictive concords with origins and ends" (7), to bear the weight of our anxieties and hopes and make sense of our span. In humanizing time by giving it form, what is *chronos* becomes *kairos*: the former is passing time, or simple chronicity, whereas the latter is a point in time charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end (47). These fictions are nevertheless limited in operational effectiveness. The "clerkly skepticism" (10) reminds us that fictive concords are mental structures that are conditional and revisable, unable to fully explain the complexity and vicissitudes of reality. As a result, we continuously invest in coherent patterns that, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and the middle on the one hand, and feel compelled to do constant adjustments in the interest of reality and control to show respect for things as they are on the other hand (17). Kermode further relates the theory of literary fictions to the theory of fictions in general and argues that reading is likewise concerned with "the immanence of the intemporal in the temporal" (1978, 588). In his view, novelists often face the problem created by "the divergence of comfortable story and the non-narrative contingencies of modern reality" (Kermode 1967, 128). The tension between the two reflects in that even though a literary fiction rejects neat and inclusive patterns, time will always reveal some congruence with a paradigm, provided that the work has something to communicate (129), not to mention that confronted with the denial of easy satisfactions, readers will take the challenge to creative co-operation and attempt to supply the suppressed connections (139).

This article reads *ISL* in the light of Kermode's theory and investigates how this literary fiction embodies the tension between *chronos* and *kairos*. Ondaatje tries hard to do justice to a chaotic and discontinuous reality; deeply aware of the gap between knowing and living, he shows

incredulity towards neat patterns in his imaginative reconstruction of Toronto's formative period. Despite so, Ondaatje also feels the necessity of redeeming this contingent reality and delivering a satisfying story; in a largely discordant textual world, he still recognizes the efficacy of fictive concords and allows comforting moments that illuminate one's existence in time. This struggle is illustrated by the narrative's organization that privileges space-logic over time-logic. Specifically, the former reflects in the rejection of simple, linear narrative order, and the latter lies in moments of synthesis which highlight the reflexive relations among segments within the text. It is my contention that the form of *ISL* functions as a crucial medium by which Ondaatje negotiates the inadequacy as well as the power of using paradigmatic forms in sense-making.

The study starts by investigating how *ISL* acts on clerkly skepticism and invalidates totalizing patterns in making sense of Toronto's history. To do justice to the nebulous nature of reality, the narrative juxtaposes various viewpoints, transgresses the boundary between fiction and reality, and constantly alludes to previous texts, resulting in a multidimensional textual world full of potentiality. The following part invokes Joseph Frank's analysis of spatial form in modern literature and delineates a correlation between the spatial form of *ISL* and the human efforts to work against mere chronicity. The plots that endow Patrick's life with form reside in the reflexive relations among different segments within the text, and they can be uncovered when we attend to moments that present temporal integration and the symbolic meaning of insect imagery.

A Discordant Textual World

Like fictions in general, literary fictions are invented, "under the compulsion of necessity" and "simulated by the outer world" (Kermode 1967, 40). Clerkly skepticism constantly alerts novelists to the limited explanative power of these mental structures and motivates them to make continuous efforts to challenge inherited forms so as to approximate the amorphous reality. For Kermode, a truly imaginative novelist should have a staunch respect for the contingent and not falsify reality with easy and paradigmatic forms (1967, 130). Ondaatje's work restores the non-contingencies of reality by presenting a multidimensional and fragmentary narrative refusing to be assimilated into a simple sequence or a unidimensional order. The application of the cubist collage, metafictional devices, and intertextuality disrupts the linear progression of the narrative; it also hinders readers from identifying plots and achieving apprehensions of the intemporal in the reading process.

ISL rejects a closed narrative structure primarily by defying linearity, with the circles of narrative widening to introduce new characters and their stories (see also Gamlin 1992, 71). The collage of different individuals' stories is reminiscent of Cubist paintings which, as John Berger observes, often capitalize on the multiplicity of viewpoints to break the continuity of the illusionist three-dimensional space and direct people's attention to the picture surface *per se*, and the consequent multiple perspectives resist any unified idea of what is being looked at (1969, 21-22). While *ISL* is mainly focalized around Patrick, it also constantly moves between Nicholas, Harris,

Clara, Small, Alice, and Caravaggio; instead of having a linear narrative told from a single, fixed point of view, Ondaatje chooses to frequently change the focalized character so as to present many stories from multiple perspectives. The resulting spatial complexity signifies the interpenetration of Patrick's and others' stories, reverberating the epigraph (which is also from Berger) that "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (Ondaatje 1987). Undermining a totalizing portrayal of Toronto's civic history, the narrative reveals the processes of *becoming* that reality (as opposed to simply recording it) and foregrounds the interaction among various individuals/groups that consist of it. For readers, the constant shift among multiple perspectives greatly spatializes the story world and diverts their attention to the synchronic relations between different layers rather than the narrative codes of causality and sequence. This effect is further intensified by the confusion over the chronological sequence of the represented events and temporal sections. In discussing narrative order, Gerald Genette distinguishes between the chronological order (the order defined by the occurrence of events in the world) and the textual order (the order defined by the presentation of events in the text) and calls the various types of discordance between the two "anachronies" (1980, 35-36). Such discrepancies exist extensively in *ISL* and one needs to make conscious efforts to recover the story-sequence. For instance, the linear development cuts off at the scene of Nicholas and Alice in the Ohrida Lake Restaurant after the rescue. Before moving on to the morning after the incident, the narration continually goes back and forth in time, recalling Nicholas's daily work on the bridge and his immigrating journey from Macedonia to Canada (Ondaatje 1987, 36-38; 41-44). In another case, readers are informed of Alice's death and Patrick's revenge for it long before the details of the death are revealed during Patrick's final confrontation with Harris (252-53). A more radical example is that the final car scene also prefaces the narrative: the circular structure obscures the difference between beginning and end, undermining the linear conception of the chronological order of events. As Siemerling puts it, *ISL* often creates "an oscillating, hologrammatic simultaneity of different possible assumptions for the reader—concerning identity of the speaker of a passage, of its point in time, and of its status with respect to reality" (2005, 100). The collage of the moments isolated in time and space displaces and puzzles readers, yet in the meantime builds a multi-dimensional world where distinct facets of the past exist simultaneously and inextricably. Ondaatje's work therefore not only allows different voices to speak out, but also holds an openness to the choreography of different possibilities and actualities.

The linear structure of *ISL* is additionally disrupted by the intervention from the discourse level. The narrative often presents moments of what Patricia Waugh calls "the ironic flaunting of the Teller", when the real author crosses the ontological divide and steps into the fictional world (1984, 141). For instance, the title of Berger's critical essay "The Moment of Cubism" is weaved into the text in the description of Nicholas's movement below the bridge (Ondaatje 1987, 37). At another moment, the philosophical concept *Tabula Rasa* (the theory that all knowledge comes from experience or perception) is invoked to illustrate Alice's first encounter with the

Macedonian community (41). Apart from these remarks on the content of the story, there are also comments on the construction of the story by which Ondaatje's voice exerts a more explicit presence. On how to use language to best portray Patrick's devastation in the wake of Clara's leave, the narrating voice reflects: "Sentences needed additions, parenthesis, to clarify not the information but his state" (90). The voice also points out the significance of art in organizing chaos: "*Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become*" (152; original emphasis). The most conspicuous metafictional intrusion occurs in the following pronominal shift, when a first-person "I" openly admits to the subjective investment in the character Alice: "She [Alice] could move like . . . she could sing as low as . . . Why is it that I am now trying to uncover every facet of Alice's nature for myself?" (154; original ellipsis). As Waugh observes, third-person narrative with overt first-person intrusion engenders more metafictional dislocation, as an apparently autonomous world is suddenly broken into by a narrator—often the authorial figure—who is rooted in an ontologically different world (1984, 133). The intrusion of the author points to the constructed nature of *ISL* and poses questions regarding the relationship between fiction and reality.[1] In the final analysis, Ondaatje's imaginative reconstruction incorporates not only the dissimilar voices of different social groups in the formative period of Toronto, but also the mediating voice of the author from the creative/writing process. The narrative thus negotiates a territory fraught with contrastive, and sometimes conflicting, voices and "regimes of truth" (Foucault 1980, 131), laying bare the connections as well as the tensions among the subjects in representing the city's past. The fragmented and discontinuous form acts as a reminder that the civic history cannot be properly written without recognizing the co-existence and interchange of these voices. As the narrator corroborates: "Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story" (Ondaatje 1987, 163). *ISL* in this way identifies a simple narrative order as illusory: "It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And that is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the storyline laterally" (Berger 1972, 40).

Another formal feature of *ISL* that denies readers a comfortable story is intertextuality. As Julia Kristeva famously claims, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double" (1980, 66; original emphasis). Ondaatje's work is highly self-conscious of this intertextual nature, as it invokes writers diverse in time and culture such as John Berger, H. G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, Anne Wilkinson, and the anonymous authors of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The intertextual references first provoke reflections on how an earlier text bears on and illuminates the new one. For example, Alice takes Conrad's insight into the structure of nature—"Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects" (Ondaatje 1987, 141)—as a license for her political activism and reads Conrad's letter to Patrick to inculcate in him her idea. In Ondaatje' version, the letter was addressed

to a newspaper and conveys Conrad's belief that it is possible for "infinitely varied" men to unite and fight for an idea (141). Yet as Rachel Bower points out, the letter was in fact written to William Blackwood, a Scottish publisher, to appeal for a firm principled stance and praise Blackwood's magazine for not changing its soul (2013, 60). Ondaatje's appropriation puts this admiration for the unchanged soul in a time of fluid principles in dialogue with Patrick's response that ideology hates the private and is not human, inviting us to consider the tension between collective political actions and the specificality of individual experience. At one moment Patrick seems to subscribe to Alice's militant activism—he burns down a hotel frequented by the rich, but his conversion into a political agent is incomplete. As I will discuss later, this sabotage is driven by anger and loss, rather than belief. The allusion to Conrad urges the attention to the vertical dimension of literary word, in which "the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus" (Kristeva 1980, 66).

In addition, the references to previous texts disclose the myth of origins and invalidate the author's authority. As Kristeva puts it, an intertextual text makes the author "an anonymity, an absence, a blank space", and at the origin of narration, "we experience emptiness" (1980, 74). Since we cannot assume that the language in question gives us direct access to the subject who wrote, the notions of unity, authority, and truth can no longer be claimed, and intertextuality in this way serves the purpose of subverting unity and reason, and by extension all ideas of the logical and the unquestionable (Allen 2000, 41-46). For *ISL*, The shaping force of the ancient Babylonian *Gilgamesh* epic is first and foremost seen in the epigraph which both provides the work's title and heralds its thematic concern with mourning.[2] Later, the narrative invokes the epic again when it describes the tannery works' acquisition of the skins of the slaughtered animals (Ondaatje 1987, 136) and associates Patrick's drowse-off in the waterworks with Gilgamesh's famous slaying of the lions (254). In the ancient text, grieving over his friend's death, Gilgamesh dons the lion skin and goes on a quest for the meaning of death/immortality; analogically, in *ISL*, Patrick puts on animal skins (he also works at a tannery) and obtains the revolutionary ideas from the immigrants, undertaking a journey of self-discovery. Apart from this thematic alliance, *ISL* also finds structural underpinnings in the epic. *Gilgamesh* as we know it today is composed of fragmentary tablets which were compiled by scholars. This is a process of constant creation; with fragments found in different times gathered into a complete piece, new episodes are continuously included to fill gaps and meaning is ongoingly updated (Dolphin1999, 122-23). Ondaatje's work likewise presents an open-ended structure. The narrative starts with Patrick telling Hana the story of Alice when he drives to Marmora; it ends with a similar but different scene where Hana gathers Alice's story from Patrick when she drives to Marmora. The circular structure does not draw a full circle. The closing moment seems to return to the beginning, but the twist signals the resistance to closure, highlighting the tale-telling nature of the novel—like oral tales, *ISL* is dynamic and open to revision and interpretation. Notwithstanding these resemblances, it is worth noting that Ondaatje's work is by no means a simple reuse of the

epic. In fact, the modern text also constantly abuses the old one, inscribing many splittings and realignments of the mythical associations (Dolphin 1999, 128-129). For example, while in the waterworks Harris identifies Patrick with Gilgamesh, he does not mention the destructive part of the original story—the ancient hero not only falls on the lions, but also destroys and scatters them (see also Gamlin 1992, 72). The thematic and structural references to the epic prominently illustrate the dialogical dimension of *ISL*; with the two texts meeting, contradicting, and relativizing each other, meaning emerges vertically, from the interaction of the two, rather than horizontally, from the linear communication from the assumed god-figure author to readers. In making sense of the narrative, the readerly attention is drawn to symbolic relationships and analogy rather than substance-causality connections (see Kristeva 1980, 72); we are therefore obstructed from building an easy concordance between beginning, middle, and end.

In a bid to create a sense of reality and restore a civic space of diversity and dissonance, Ondaatje capitalizes on the devices of collage, metafiction, and intertextuality, and presents a highly dialogic and miscellaneous narrative. However, while Ondaatje takes pains to demonstrate a multi-layered and multi-dimensional world full of potentiality that works against any monolithic notion of Toronto's past, he never intends to completely abandon form and create chaos. The author asks us to be patient, assuring us that some consoling plot will be given: "The first sentence of every novel should be: 'Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human'" (Ondaatje 1987, 152). In what follows, I draw upon Joseph Frank's idea of spatial form and investigate textual details that provide readers with comfort and enable them to establish the connections suppressed by the fragmented form. It is my argument that to work out the coherent patterns that shed light on Patrick's life, one needs to attend to units of reflexive reference, specifically, moments of intemporal significance and the recurring symbols.

Counteracting Time: Imposing Fictive Concords on Successiveness

It is hard to ignore the similarities between Kermode's ideas and Joseph Frank's discussion on the spatial form in modern literature, although Kermode himself vehemently opposes this analogy.[3] Frank observes that modern narratives attempt to overcome the temporal nature of language with an atemporal narrative organization, and the basic principle of this organization is "reflexive reference", which requires readers to "suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity" (1945, 230).[4] What he describes is a space-logic that demands a re-orientation in readers' attitude towards language: they need to work on reflexive relations among segments which are independent of the time-sequence of a narrative. As Jeffrey R. Smitten summarizes, Frank's spatial form has three manifestations: the use of verbal leitmotifs, the suspension of the temporal flow by the juxtaposition of synchronous events, and the contrast of the views of the same character at different times (1975, 209). For Frank, that spatialization enters fundamentally into the structure of language echoes exactly Kermode's idea that man needs plots to achieve temporal

integration: creating relations of meaning detached from pure succession exemplifies a tendency to counteract time by spatializing its flow (1991, 91).[5] Both scholars in fact stress the importance of finding plots in the temporal to achieve apprehensions of the intemporal in reading literature.

For *ISL*, the desire to escape from time is first inscribed in moments that bundle past, present, and future in a common organization. These are "historical moments of intemporal significance" (1967, 47), to borrow Kermode's words, or what Frank calls "a moment of time" (1945, 239). Units that juxtapose snapshots of Patrick taken at different stages of life play an important role in illuminating his self-exploration, particularly with respect to women and love. In one case, the music in the Thompson Grill throws Patrick across eras and brings back the memory with a girl when he was eighteen, before his arrival in Toronto. His mind subsequently skates across old conversations with Clara about Alice, and then moves back to the present. At this moment Patrick is watching himself within the past, trying to make sense of the women he had relationships with:

> The girl's eyes that night when he was eighteen were like tunnels into kindness and lust and determination which he loved as much as her white stomach and her ochre face. He saw something there he would never reach—the way Clara dissolved and suddenly disappeared from him, or the way Alice came to him it seemed in a series of masks or painted faces, both of these women like the sea through a foreground of men. (Ondaatje 1987, 133-34)

This travel in time and the juxtaposition of disparate memories indicate Patrick's urge to build connection with the past. Although he is yet unable to fully "reach" these women, who remain fuzzy and unclear to him, the effort to locate himself and find significance in these relationships is crucial for his self-discovery. Later on, Patrick makes progress in associating the present with a remote origin and finds some anchor in life. At the end of "Palace of Purification," Patrick mourns over the death of Alice. The memory pieces together their initial encounter, Canto's funeral, and their life together, making Patrick more aware of how he aches for her and for "those days that belonged to the moon" (167). The narration then moves to an atemporal and multi-layered space which encompasses all the great moments of their relationship, and where the two "sit in a field", "in the red and yellow and gold décor of the [Chinese] restaurant", and "the Macedonian café" (167). Simultaneous with their intimacy in this space is Patrick's recollection of his childhood: "When he was twelve he turned the pages always towards illustration and saw the heroes carry the women across British Columbian streams, across the foot of waterfalls" (167-68). As Patrick realizes, what he finds in the past is "a love story" (168) and what happens between him and Alice is likewise so. He simply wants to live in the good old days: "He does not wish for plot and all its consequences. Let me stay in this field with Alice Gull . . ." (168; original ellipsis). But plot will reveal, as the narrative later shows that Patrick's love for Alice leads to certain consequences. To mediate his loss of love, Patrick resorts to violence and sets the Muskoka Hotel on fire. As many scholars (Marinkova 2011, 110;

Schumacher 1996, 15; Gamlin 1992, 75) point out, his militant activism is motivated by sorrow and guilt, and it does not mean his complete conversion into a political agent. This causality is also detectable in Patrick's blasting of the waterworks. Confronting Harris, he inherits Alice's language—"'In a rich man's house there is nowhere to spit except in his face'" (Ondaatje 1987, 251)—and finally faces the death of his beloved one (251-52). While Patrick dozes off as he reminisces, the narrator picks up the recollection and helps him to restore the incident (252-53). The juxtaposition of two disparate moments—the present sabotage and the past traumatic event—corroborates Alice's influence on Patrick and the emotional drive underlying his radical action. In Ondaatje's experimental rendition of Patrick's life, these moments of junction offer a pathway centering around love through the character's interactions with the women in his life.

The desire to spatialize time also lies in the embedded "symbolic reference" (Frank, 1945, 234) or "verbal leitmotif" (Smitten 1975, 209). Images of insects are present throughout *ISL*, albeit in different times and spaces, and the significance of these images is often unclear by themselves. It is only by relating them to one another and viewing them as a whole can meaning be constructed; this time, we establish a different pattern undergirding Patrick's self-discovery, one that concerns the role of the immigrants in his constitution as a political dissent. Patrick's attachment to nature starts from his childhood. He would gaze on hoppers and moths and tune his senses to their noises; fascinated with the visits of cicadas and damsel flies, he is desperate to communicate with these prehistorical creatures (Ondaatje 1987, 9-10). The boy's obsession with insects is not explained, but the narrator assures us that it will be assimilated into a plot: "Years later at the Riverdale Library . . . There will suddenly be order and shape to these nights" (9). As revealed later, it is in there that the grown-up Patrick reads the official documents about the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct which mention little about the labours who actually built it (151-52). Indeed, it is insects that first connect Patrick with the immigrants. On a winter night, a blue moth brings the boy out of the house and leads him to a group of Finnish loggers skating on a land that does not belong to them. While "transfixed" (22) by them, the boy has no courage to step forward and join them. For the twelve-year old Patrick, the significance of this experience is beyond comprehension, though this moment is declared by the narrator as life-changing when he says that "nothing would be the same" (23). Years later in Ontario, that boy looking through the window and searching for moths appears again, and this time together with Clara. For Patrick, love is like childhood and it "opened him up", making him silly and relaxed (69). This might be why Clara evokes in Patrick his childhood affinity with insects: her dazzling clothes remind him of "a damsel fly" (63) and a tree fog bears witness to their lovemaking (69-71). As Patrick realizes his sole interest in her and no longer wants Ambrose Small (72), the search for Small becomes a search for Clara. This, according to Schumacher, initiates Patrick's pursuit of self-identity and guides him again to that vaguely perceived closeness to the immigrant community (1996, 8). It is Clara who entrusts Patrick with an iguana which literally brings him into contact with the Macedonians: the learning of the Macedonian words for iguana and

vetch—*gooshter* and *fee-ee*—initiates his communication with the group. At the end of Book Two, the moth image appears again, after Patrick's sabotage of the hotel. In the Garden of the Blind, he sees something familiar in Elizabeth's green eye:

> Her green eye echoes somewhere within him. *Aetias Luna*—and its Canadian name, *papillon lune*. Lunar moth . . . He had loved the lunar moth, its flare of the lower wing like signature, a papyrus-textured object whose small furred body he used to see pulsing on a branch or rock within his lantern night. (Ondaatje 1987, 179-80; original emphasis and my ellipsis)

Patrick is shocked into memory, discerning that the color of Elizabeth's eye is the same as one of the moths he used to study as a boy. This realization apparently offers Patrick consolations, as he feels at peace beside the blind woman: "He feels she receives all of his qualities, in this small garden, raucous with noise" (180). This moment exhibits a more conspicuous connection with the past and invites us to register a pattern that structures Patrick's life trajectory from a white village boy to a representative of the disenfranchised in Toronto. What purges his life of mere successiveness is his bond with the immigrants, which is planted long before, symbolized by his fascination with prehistorical and inconspicuous small creatures in nature; this little seed, nurtured by Clara's and Alice's love, gradually grows up and turns into concrete political action. Elizabeth's travelling gaze takes Patrick back to Bellrock, and more importantly, it allows the incipient revolutionary to see his intimate involvement in the histories of others (see also Marinkova 2011, 110). As Katherine Acheson points out, "insects inhabit a world which is alien, desired, and finally known by the speaker" (1995, 113) and it is in the insect world that Patrick first locates his desire for understanding and voice (114). Paralleling Patrick's engagement with and final embrace of the insect world is the gradual realization of his inextricable link with the disenfranchised. Patrick is better at making sense and gaining control of life when he treats his disparate moments with little creatures as a unity and establishes the reflexive relations among them. The space-logic of *ISL* here again demonstrates the human need for "interrelations of *kairoi* intimated by the action of *chronos*" (Kermode 1978, 585).

On a personal level, *ISL* endorses building connections between beginning, middle, and end so as to reach the discovery of coherent patterns. In due course, Patrick finds the organizations that give shape to pure temporal duration; he perceives "the interactions" and "a wondrous night web", and "the detritus and chaos of the age was aligned (Ondaatje 1987, 151). Despite so, the comfort afforded by these patterns is overshadowed by their arbitrariness. Before the mentioned epiphanic moment, approaching a street-band, Patrick finds his footsteps unintentionally attuning to the music: "He walked on beyond the sound of the street musicians, aware once again of the silence between his individual steps, knowing how he could add music by simply providing the thread of a hum" (150-51). This reflection is reminiscent of Kermode's discussion of the clock's *tick-tock*: that we call the second sound *tock* shows that we use fictions to enable the end to structure chronicity, and "the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely

successive, disorganized time" (Kermode 1967, 45; original emphasis). On the one hand, Patrick's voluntary contribution to the street music by humming—together with other different sounds (cornet, saxophone and drum)—demonstrates his desire to impose structure on passing time. On the flip side, that he does it in such a haphazard way indicates the contingency and incompleteness of the pattern thus invented. This distrust of human-made mental structures is more explicitly shown in Small, the millionaire who tries hard to keep his life in clear compartments; in his final days, however, he "had imploded" (Ondaatje 1987, 226) and is left drown in the discontinuous moments of his past. Small's situation points to the ultimate futility of the human efforts to make sense of a fundamentally formless, meaningless, and chaotic reality. The caveat hinted here again admonishes us to take note of the restriction of using paradigm to grasp reality.

Conclusion

This article has offered a reading of *ISL* in the light of Kermode's theory of fiction; it specifically zoomed in on the text's form and explored how it demonstrates the dilemma between reality and fiction, between respecting the non-narrative contingencies of modern reality and telling a comfortable story. I first examined how the narrative challenges inherited forms to mimic the overwhelming variegation of life. To portray Toronto's past as discursively composed and allow different versions of that past to be heard, *ISL* refuses linear narrative order; the application of the cubist collage, metafictional techniques, and intertextual references lays bare the illusion of representing life through simple sequences and causalities, and foregrounds the limitation of using easy concords between beginning, middle, and end to give sense to reality. I then capitalized on Frank's discussion on spatial form and dissected the patterns that confer organization and form on Patrick's existence in time. Patrick's journey of self-discovery manifests two plot-relationships: In the discussed moments of intemporal significance we discern the role of his relationships with women in turning him into a political activist, and in the recurring insect images we perceive how Patrick, in his interaction with the disenfranchised, gradually finds his own voice in a culturally plural community. In his imaginative representation of Toronto, Ondaatje rejects a linear and unidimensional composition to underscore the insufficiency of mental structures in understanding reality; at the same time, he shows that it is of necessity to count on the expedient meaning-giving capacity of fictive concords to save the underprivileged from the unbearable time of mere chronicity. The novel thus illustrates Ondaatje's struggle between showing purely successive, disorganized time as it is and humanizing time.

Endnotes:

1. On how *ISL* crosses the boundary between fact and fiction, literature and history, see also Ajay Heble (1995, 251) and Glen Lowry (2005, 66).

2. The epigraph goes as follows: "The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let me hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion" (Ondaatje 1987).
3. See Kermode (1978).
4. The discussed nonlinear structure also gives prominence to the spatial dimension of the narrative. In this article, to avoid confusion, I use *spatial form* strictly in Frank's sense.
5. Kermode himself rejects using the term "spatial" and he calls fictive concords "time-defeating" (1967, 52).

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