

Shift Work: Douglas Barbour's *Michael Ondaatje*

Douglas Barbour. *Michael Ondaatje*. New York: Twayne, 1993. xiv + 248pp.

Douglas Barbour's recent book on Michael Ondaatje opens with a pair of epigraphs, one from the *Canadian Who's Who*, which lists Ondaatje as someone who "has developed and bred a new strain of spaniel, 'The Sydenham Spaniel,' Candn. Kennel Club 1970, with Livingstone Animal Foundation Kennels," the other from Catherine Bush's 1990 interview with Ondaatje in which he confesses, "I'm a great believer in the mongrel." The juxtaposition of quotations slyly suggests a number of issues on which Barbour's study touches to varying degrees, from the ironic, elusive texture of Ondaatje's humour, to his interest in the "strain" between generic purity and hybridity, to the puzzling, shifting identity of Ondaatje the author / Ondaatje the character in his own work (who's who, anyway?), even to the writer's obsession with the secret life of dogs. The epigraphs also, incidentally, allow Barbour, a poet himself after all, to exploit the very citational technique that characterizes many of Ondaatje's longer works. The epigraphs are an early indication of the degree to which *Michael Ondaatje* the critical volume pieces together a version of Michael Ondaatje the author from the elliptical texts of his life and writing, as well as the work of others who have taken an interest in those texts, in a manner (in theory at least) not dissimilar to the ways Ondaatje himself has represented the historical/mythical figures that populate his own body of work, figures like Mrs. Fraser, Billy the Kid, Buddy Bolden, Mervyn Ondaatje or Ambrose Small. The question provoked by the analogy is, of course, what kind of a Michael Ondaatje does *Michael Ondaatje* work to construct?

There are other such moments of creative insight in *Michael Ondaatje* when Douglas Barbour the poet playfully peeks through the volume's dense critical prose, but this is not primarily a poet's response to Ondaatje's writing. It is a work of criticism: number 835 in Twayne Publishers' World Authors Series, to be precise. In writing *Michael Ondaatje*, Barbour is thus confronted with a difficult generic problem: how is it possible to accommodate the fairly rigid conventions of a volume in a series that implicitly presents itself as composed of definitive critical studies to a discussion of a writer Barbour argues is deliberately eccentric, one whose work often subverts conventional categorizations and defies definitive readings? Can there be a convergence of the Twayne? This is not a question with which Barbour deals explicitly, but it is one way of explaining a kind of dissonance I perceive between what Barbour's study seems to want to say about

Ondaatje's writing and what it is allowed to say by the kind of book it is. Barbour keeps to the chronological, work-by-work structure established by the Twayne series, beginning with a biographical/textual chronology, and a chapter titled "Crossing Borders in Life and Writing," that briefly surveys the facts of Ondaatje's life, from his early years in Ceylon/ Sri Lanka, to his education in England and Quebec, to his academic career and rise to Canadian and international prominence as a poet and novelist. Barbour then proceeds systematically through discussions of "The Early Poetry" (chapter two), *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (chapter three), "Poetry and Maturing Poetics" (chapter four), *Coming Through Slaughter* (chapter five), *Running in the Family* (chapter six), *Secular Love* (chapter seven), *In the Skin of a Lion* (chapter eight), and concludes with a short Afterword on Ondaatje's most recent novel, *The English Patient*. He does not, regrettably, discuss Ondaatje's film work to any significant degree, nor his work as an editor, anthologist and literary critic, nor the adaptations of his works to the stage, though a discussion of such endeavours would certainly contribute to Barbour's central argument about the ways Ondaatje's signature is his shiftiness, especially in the ways his work undermines generic distinctions. Ondaatje, then, is considered here as a "literary talent" in the conventional sense: as a writer of novels and poems.

Despite the book's bio-chronological structure, Barbour resists the implication that he is tracing Ondaatje's creative development or that he is offering an orthodox biographical interpretation of Ondaatje's work. The opening chapter, for instance, despite the fact that it is structurally positioned as a foundational statement of biographical background, is notably circumspect about Ondaatje's biography, reiterating only the basic, widely-known information about the author's life to date. It notes in passing that while Ondaatje "is a jealous guardian of his private life, he has proven an intelligent promoter of his own work" (2), though Barbour doesn't explore the possible connections between these two facts. Ondaatje, indeed, is a writer famous for his reticence about personal matters, at the same time as his work exploits autobiographical associations with his real life friends, family and pets. This gesture contributes to a species of personal myth that has been an important aspect of Ondaatje's reputation. Barbour repeatedly alludes to the transgressed borders between life and writing, but doesn't develop the question fully, in part, I think, because he studiously avoids conducting a systematic reading across the body of work, or one that draws too heavily on factual biographical narrative. He comments justly, for instance, that "it would be foolish to try to reconstruct the 'real' Michael Ondaatje's life from the written ones of the poems" (68), but he does often acknowledge the degree to which those works self-consciously create the impression of an intimate reciprocity between life and writing. This is an issue that goes to the very heart of the art/life border that Ondaatje, as a postmodern artist, re-theorizes. Barbour's analysis of "Letters & Other Worlds" calls attention to the predicament in which he finds himself. The poem presents itself as about the author's father. It is, Barbour argues, "Ondaatje's first attempt to place and placate his father's ghost (or 'his' 'father's' ghost—the

quotation marks signalling the essential fictionality of all autobiography, the fact that even memory is a shaping and a making, that it can never be an innocent representation)...” (73). Barbour explores the question further in a later chapter on *Running in Family*, but he does not consider the degree to which the paradox of public privacy, or the postmodern border blur between fiction and autobiography are part of the myth that is (or is becoming) "Michael Ondaatje," a myth in which Barbour's *Michael Ondaatje* is implicated.

Barbour resists the limitations of the critical volume as "author study" by focusing on close readings of individual texts, mostly in isolation from one another and from their broader social or historical context. He notes in the Preface that he has tried "to enter into the spirit" of each work, and that his analysis attempts "no conclusions beyond those implicit in the individual readings precisely because [Ondaatje's] career is so obviously far from finished; clearly there are many other approaches to his work which would yield insights" (ix). One of the strengths of *Michael Ondaatje* is its close readings, New Critical in their intensity if not their conclusions: Barbour tends to highlight the generalized impossibility of interpretive closure rather than the ambivalences of New Critical paradox and irony. Barbour writes that *Michael Ondaatje* "remains essentially a reading of a series of poetic writings in which the engagement with language in its microparticulars tends to be foregrounded in the texts, and in my readings of them" (9). His various analyses, then, stress linguistic detail, and pursue the implication that the problem of linguistic reference is a metafictional concern of the works under study. Barbour bears out this premise, not just in the poetry, where a concern with "microparticulars" is conventional, but also in the novels, which he examines with equal attention to detail. He is particularly attentive to Ondaatje's complex shifts of voice and time, a feature most evident in the chapter on *In the Skin of a Lion*.

The detailed analyses of Ondaatje's shorter, less frequently discussed and anthologized poems are often very valuable. In his readings, Barbour demonstrates a moment-by-moment encounter with language that many readers will find both engaging and useful. They sent me back with renewed appreciation to poems I had forgotten or had not initially read thoroughly enough. His discussions frequently trace the complexity and "shiftiness" of Ondaatje's language, the way it often conveys a sense of reality at the same time as it calls attention to its status as text. They also convey a strong sense of a reader interacting with poetic language and acknowledge the effects of that language on the individual reader in a way that many critical studies do not. Here, for example, is an excerpt from his discussion of "Pig Glass:"

'Bonjour. This is pig glass / a piece of cloudy sea' (TK, 84): while the colloquial opening addresses the reader as subject of what is said, the demonstrative pronoun points to an object that exists only in its name and in the shifting descriptions inscribed in the poem. As further transformations occur, indeterminate reference confuses 'my hand,' 'a

language,' and the 'pig glass' in a gesture intimating a complex intimacy, and seducing us into joining the speaker in his meditation: 'the pig glass / I thought / was the buried eye of Portland Township.' The line breaks imply the speaker is thinking the glass into existence as 'slow faded history / waiting to be grunted up.'

(90)

Barbour's personal presence in his own text breaks creatively with the presumed objectivity and detachment of conventional close reading. While engaging, however, his voice often emerges into readings in unpredictable and idiosyncratic ways. As Barbour's reader I felt, somehow, that we hadn't properly been introduced: that is, if I am going to be guided through Ondaatje's texts by a personalized critical voice (a very appealing concept), I would like to know more about its personal/theoretical grounding. The personal voice often emerges when Barbour draws attention to the limitations of his own understanding, insisting that the texts do not allow a single authoritative reading, or noting moments when he finds himself confused, or indicating that his own interpretation changes from time to time, or suggesting the essentially enigmatic quality of the texts under examination. In his discussion of the final lines of *Coming Through Slaughter*, for example, he observes:

My reading of this segment, like my reading of the whole, depends on my mood as much as on the implications of the text. But it remains opaque. Are those verbs simply the active present tense of a dropped first-person singular, or are they imperative? Do they address character, author, or us? To what and whom does "Thirty-one years old" refer? What does the final sentence really mean? Meaning is not the point: writing is. Finally, what I come back to, again and again, is the ever-changing yet always engaging energy of the writing itself, and the fact that because I can't fix either the characters or the text within a single generic focus or a particular kind of reading, they remain in flux, evading explanation, yes, but singing a siren song of empathy I cannot resist.

(135)

Rather than offering an explanation of just how mood affects reading, or the implications of a split between meaning and writing, Barbour's reading here retreats into a kind of romanticized indeterminacy and radical subjectivity. Readers of *Michael Ondaatje* may perceive such readings either as representative of a refreshing honesty and appealing openness of perspective, or, on the other hand, as a frustrating refusal to take a stand, a surrender to (and perhaps even a simplification of) textual indeterminacies and their effects. Depending on my own mood, I found myself somewhere between these two positions, charmed by the critic's candour and sympathetic to his attentiveness to the slipperiness of language, but often wanting a little more traction—perhaps through a more

comprehensive theoretical grounding or through the contextual framing of alternative readings.

The stand Barbour does take (as may already be apparent) is on the very issue of indeterminacy itself. This stance is clearest in the chapter on *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, where Barbour most methodically considers different critical perspectives on a single work, and positions himself in relation to them. This survey is in itself a valuable exercise that might have been broadened: Ondaatje is now one of the most critically discussed writers in Canadian literature, and a more general overview and appraisal of the field of that criticism would be a very useful enterprise. The chapter on *Billy the Kid* contrasts discussions of the poem by "thematic" or "realist" critics with those of critics who might broadly be called "postmodern" or "anti-realist" in their orientation. Barbour finds that "What the many and varied critical analyses reveal is how open to reader responses this text is, and how easily it can be turned to a particular critic's ideological needs; but they also suggest that there is a power to the book that resists analysis, something in it that seduces readers into a game of complicity with the writing and makes of them the highly active readers every writable text desires" (36). As this statement indicates, though, Barbour does not see the text as radically democratic. He argues against the thematic category of critics, precisely because they seek stable meaning: they do not allow for the essential undecidability of the text. He compares the thematic critics' handling of the poem to Pat Garret's treatment of his stuffed birds in *Billy the Kid*: "some critics seem to need to deal with dead bodies that stay in their place; the open, postmodern, indeterminate text 'of a world in motion where nothing is settled, where things only approach clarity' (Cooley, 233), slips away from them, and they strive to fix it and what they see as its eponymous narrator in place" (47).

Barbour's book seeks to counter such sure-footed readings of Ondaatje's work, to consider the power that resists analysis, though he does not see that power in ideological terms. Its unity as a volume is in its search for a way of describing the "sense of shift" these critics miss, which, as the analogy with the stuffed birds implies, Barbour sees as the very life of Ondaatje's writing. Ondaatje's later works have often been read in the context of his famous "poetics poems," such as "White Dwarfs" or "The Gate in His Head." These works describe an artistic endeavour that represents, as the latter poem puts it, "not clarity but the sense of shift // a few lines, the tracks of thought" (*Rat Jelly*, 62; *Trick with a Knife*, 64). To his credit, Barbour resists the urge to privilege these early lyrics by reading Ondaatje's later work "through" them in a programmatic way, but *Michael Ondaatje* does use Marjorie Perloff's notion of a "poetics of indeterminacy" as an overall principle by which Ondaatje's *oeuvre* might best be understood. Despite his resistance to a coherent reading, then, Barbour does see internal shifts of language, perception and subjectivity as characteristic of that ongoing body of work. He argues "that Ondaatje's texts are indeterminate, and that nothing, not even the documentation upon which they are based, escapes the rough if loving hands of chance and change. When everything is in flux and ambiguity rules over all neither new

writing nor the old upon which it is superimposed can be fixed" (180).

The principles of flux and ambiguity are, as the above quotation demonstrates, particularly striking when applied to Ondaatje's historically-oriented poems, which often incorporate factual information and documentary materials. Barbour offers both a detailed knowledge and a subtle understanding of allusions and intertextual citations, identifying numerous quotations and echoes of other works, and commenting productively on Ondaatje's canny alteration and occasional invention of historical and literary sources, calling them "the many little games he plays with documentation" (223). In these alterations and inventions Ondaatje is seen primarily as a postmodern trickster-poet, consistently demonstrating the essentially fictional nature of history and the relativity of perception. What Barbour does not explore—and which his complex grasp of the sources uniquely equips him to do—is whether the little games Ondaatje plays with documentation are power games: what, in other words, are the ethical implications of creatively re-inventing historical events and characters or of borrowing and then changing other people's words? Such implications are of increasing interest to readers interested in the moral and ideological functions of literary representation. To offer the best-known example, Arun Mukherjee has accused Ondaatje of outright "misuse of historical figures" in works like *The Man with Seven Toes* and *Coming Through Slaughter* (99).

While he does mention her briefly at several points, Barbour also does not consider to any serious degree the kind of provocative questions critics like Mukherjee have begun to ask, not simply of Ondaatje's writing, but of conventional criteria of aesthetic judgement, grounded as they tend to be in liberal humanist notions of universal value. It is not possible for Barbour to properly engage in this burgeoning debate about literary value, ethnicity and postcoloniality without confronting two issues. First, he does not significantly address the question of Ondaatje's reception, his now well-established position in both the international canon of literary "greats" (as marked most notably by his 1993 Booker Prize, and, most immediately, by his inclusion in Twayne's World Authors Series) and what Mukherjee calls "the star system that operates in the area of Canadian criticism" (97). Mukherjee has, perhaps, been most controversial in asking, implicitly, What's so great about Michael Ondaatje?, but one need not be confrontational or in any way disrespectful in order critically to address the *question* of Ondaatje's theoretical merits as a writer and his enthusiastic reception by audiences inside and outside Canada and inside and outside the academy.

Second, Barbour's book might more thoroughly deal with the related issue of Ondaatje's status in relation to literary periodicity and aesthetic movements. While this is a book that attempts to resist notions of career coherence or closure, it (inevitably, I think--a book generally presupposes some notions of coherence) considers various sites where some overarching patterns of significance might be found. Of these, the concept of indeterminacy is perhaps the most obvious. In addition, Barbour views the shifts in Ondaatje's creative career as representative of

a trajectory that begins in the Modernist lyric (of Yeats, Eliot and Stevens), moves toward "the larger collage constructions of the Pound tradition partly under the influence of a particularly Canadian tradition, the documentary poem" (7), edges with his longer works into the field of the postmodern and, finally, in *In the Skin of a Lion* and some recent poems, Barbour concludes, "takes a sideways step, perhaps, or one into a separate stream, towards postcolonialism" (8-9). But the question implied in the last quotation is never answered: *is* it a sideways step or a movement into a separate stream? To answer that question would involve a much-needed discussion of Ondaatje's work in relation to the aesthetic and ideological distinctions between postmodernism and postcolonialism. The Modern-Postmodern-Postcolonial literary-historical trajectory is problematic for other reasons too. First, it runs the risk of making Ondaatje sound like a follower of literary trends, and this implication doesn't do his innovative work full justice. Second, the sense of development it implies doesn't account for what might be argued is a move toward formal conventionality in Ondaatje's most recent works. Finally, it doesn't allow for what some might see as a deeply Romantic sensibility at the heart of much of Ondaatje's work, especially in his development of myths of the artist-hero.

Let me conclude with clarity *and* a sense of shift. Barbour's *Michael Ondaatje* is worth reading. It struggles admirably with what might be called "the Twayne predicament," working within the boundaries of that critical genre, but finding ways of creatively undoing some of its limitations. It is most appealing for not just describing, but engaging with, the subtleties of Ondaatje's craft and craftiness. In this, *Michael Ondaatje* both presents and is itself a shift work that sponsors insights about the creative instabilities of Ondaatje's poetic language and the twists and turns of perception involved in reading it. Given all this, though, I would like to be better informed about precisely the kind of work those shifts do.

Works Cited

Mukherjee, Arun. *Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space*. Toronto: TSAR, 1994.

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