

Postcolonial Cities: Michael Ondaatje's Toronto and Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo

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Article abstract

Michael Ondaatje's Toronto and Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo are imperial spaces which both writers deconstruct through a manipulation of genre. For Ondaatje as for Vera, the novel does not so much express the structure of the city as posit an alternative art form. In order to deconstruct the city space both writers portray the city in miscellaneous snatches through the use of a non-consecutive plot, and through their discussion of the working-class citizen and violence. These techniques create a sense of disorder allowing the writers to replace the symmetry of municipal organization into a shape of their own, one that is more alive to the nuances of behaviour. Through this deconstruction of the city the novel genre is transformed into a vehicle for a revolutionary, anarchic urban consciousness. Toronto and Bulawayo represent postcolonial cities.

Postcolonial Cities: Michael Ondaatje's Toronto and Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo

ROBERT FRASER

AMONG THE ACHIEVEMENTS of the age of high imperialism — which was also the great railway age — was the creation of a new kind of city. Empires thrive on trade; trade feeds off industries; industries require centres of collection, transportation and distribution. The characteristic colonial town, then, if it possible to speak of such an entity, existed at a railhead, or at the nexus between different modes of conveyance: water, rail or road. Toronto was the mart of the Dominion of Canada, a terminus for railroad and waterway on the shore of Lake Ontario, that basin of rivers. In Central Africa in the 1890s, the adventurer and con man Cecil Rhodes persuaded the Ndebele to part with their land. He then moved Lobengula's *kraal* of Bulawayo, the "place of slaughter," three miles to the South, and set his stamp on it. It became a meeting place for trade, and the location of the Rhodesia Railway headquarters, conveniently close to the border with South Africa.

For the inhabitants of such settlements, the defining moment was that of arrival. Patrick Lewis, the protagonist of Michael Ondaatje's novel *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), a study of urban friction in pre-Second World War Canada, has grown up among the timberlands and livestock farms of Western Ontario. Arriving in Toronto — Ondaatje's own city of adoption — he hesitates under the arches of Union Station: "Patrick sat on a bench and watched the tides of movement, felt the reverberations of trade. He spoke out his name and it struggled up in a hollow echo and was lost in the high air of Union Station. No one turned. They were in the belly of the whale" (54). The Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera sets her fourth book *Butterfly Burning* a decade later in Makokoba township in Bulawayo.¹ Among its descriptive *tours de force* is an evocation of the central station, where Fourth Class ticket-holders with nowhere to go

congregate and sleep. "They are here," the narrator remarks, "to gather a story about the city" (45). They waylay the next wave of hopefuls with impossible tales: "the heels of black women clicking red shoes against the pavement and holding matching bags close to their bodies clad in tight slacks." The neophytes practise unfamiliar vocabularies: "to describe a teacup, that is something else, it is necessary to creep up and peep through the windows or wander to the First Class waiting-rooms in order to say saucer with the right meaning" (47). They hang around for the mere glamour of being here.

Such moments are colonial epiphanies observed with postcolonial hindsight. The anticipation and confusion of the newcomer are interpreted by a mind that has seen beyond them, foreseeing consequences. Ondaatje's Toronto and Vera's Bulawayo are bold imperial spaces that a resistant intellect has converted into traps. For Ondaatje, the mere existence of the *polis* is an act of fantasy or hubris. In an early passage he describes the civic impresario, Commissioner Rowland Harris, lying in bed in Neville Park, dreaming up an Augustinian "ideal city" to be achieved by bringing water from the lake through the Bloor Park Viaduct and St. Clair Reservoir. Above the reservoir the Commissioner plans to erect a Byzantine-style municipal palace, gleaming with metalwork. The city in Harris's mind is both monumental and dynamic; it is late Romantic and decadent, a swarming hive. Alert to literary parallels he confounds local opposition by quoting Baudelaire: "The form of a city changes faster than the human heart" (109).

The postcolonial novelist tends to distrust such visions. For Ondaatje as for Vera, the novel does not so much express the structure of the city as posit an alternative art form. Both replace the symmetry of municipal organization with a disorder that they then arrange in a shape of their own, one less crushing, more alive to nuances of behaviour. As Ondaatje puts it, "*Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and the order that will come*" (146). Ondaatje's novel is initially impressed by Harris's urban dream but, like its principal character, it learns to dissent from it. Ultimately it excoriates the agendas of planner and civic official alike. In both of these books, the cities evoked are in effect deconstructed. In the process a corresponding overhaul is performed on the novel *genre*, turning it into a vehicle for a revolutionary, an anarchic urban consciousness.

Neither city, for example, is seen as the planners envisage it: an integral community. Instead, each is glimpsed in miscellaneous snatches,

polyglossic and precociously multicultural. Makokoba township, as Vera describes it, is a place of shifting allegiances and extravagant strangers, as daunting and challenging as the Harare of her third novel, *Without A Name*. It is a place of secrets, an environment that author and protagonist alike must constantly reinvent. Its emotional life too is improvised and precarious. In one passage, Phephelaphi, the ambitious and ardent young woman at the heart of the story, wonders what happened to the neighbourhood girls she grew up with: “Such girls had all but vanished. Instead they had discovered a swinging slingbag love, a sunhat, sunglass, sunshine kind of love that burned out quicker than hope” (79). One of the few things that holds the township community together is music, the music of the street, the music of the *shebeens*. It draws the people like a magnet. Its lure sustains and destroys them.

Toronto, as Ondaatje realizes it, is a town without orthodoxies, full of surprises. When Patrick Lewis takes a job working alongside European migrants on Commissioner Harris’s reservoir, he enters a world where every syllable of survival has to be learned anew: “The southeastern section of the city where he now lived was made up mostly of immigrants and he walked everywhere not hearing any language he knew, deliriously anonymous. The people of the street, the Macedonians and Bulgarians, were his only mirror. He worked in the tunnels with them” (112). Harris’s projects are constructed by such men, but he knows few of them, and few of them know him. Among these motley crowds Patrick drifts as an interloper, his only human contact being with the store where he buys food for his pet iguana. His anonymity is his freedom.

This creative anonymity extends to the reader, towards whom both novelists are merciless in their demands. Neither book possesses a consequential and consecutive plot. Instead, each writer assembles a collage, or a jigsaw puzzle with selected pieces missing. Patrick, for example, spends much of the first part of the book searching for a runaway plutocrat ironically named Ambrose Small. He proves as elusive as the city itself, as the mysterious protagonist of Ondaatje’s second novel *The English Patient*, or as Sailor, the enigmatic murder victim in the recent *Anil’s Ghost*. This is how Patrick’s successive women appear to him as well, a shifting charade: “a series of masks or painted faces” (128). Ondaatje heightens this sense of fugitive reality by deliberately withholding clues. Half-way through the book, for example, Patrick’s Marxist girlfriend Alice Gull dies. Though the circumstances change him forever, we are not told until much later how and why she perished. In

the book's closing pages we find out that Alice has been the accidental victim of an anarchist's bomb. The information helps make sense of Patrick's vengefulness and his resentment against the city, which until then has seemed like a meaningless vendetta, a grudge without correlative motive. By such means Ondaatje makes extreme requirements of the reader, left for much of the narrative to wander like a migrant amid turnings and side-turnings. After one such analepsis, he remarks: "The first sentence of every novel should be: 'Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human'" (146).

Vera delights in a very similar elusiveness. Phephelaphi has been raised by a woman called Gertrude, whom she believes to be her mother. In fact, her blood mother is Zandile, a local good time girl. We do not learn these facts until six pages before the close of the book, and neither does Phephelaphi. She mildly despises Zandile, whom we belatedly learn has given up the chance to bring her up because lured by the multiple delusions of the city: "The city was beckoning and she had just knocked on its large waiting door. She was determined to find its flamboyant edges, its colour and light, and above all else if she could, a man to call her own. She needed lightness. Not the burden of becoming a mother" (124). Before she has learned these facts, Phephelaphi has induced an abortion on herself, in the certainty that her pregnancy will prevent her continuing to study to become Rhodesia's first black nurse. Like her mother before her, she has chosen freedom. The city exacts its revenge when she loses the respect and love of her middle-aged lover Fumbatha, himself tormented by memories of his father, brutally hanged after an act of collective protest in 1896, soon after the foundation of colonial Bulawayo. Fumbatha has told Phephelaphi nothing of his history, and Zandile has been as silent about their relationship. The resulting enigmas produce throughout the book a peculiar transformational grammar of person and of gender.² When Phephelaphi is brusquely informed of her true identity by Fumbatha, the narrative, until then in the third person, swings abruptly into the first. The reader is again disorientated by a recognition that the syntax of recital has been a cover for an implied confessional monologue.³

By such means both novels replace the official rhythms of the city with an informal music all their own. The "human" order that Ondaatje proposes, for example, is an alternative to the formal structures of Toronto, something etched against the economic infrastructure of the town. In both of these novels, the informal and shifting patterns of allegiance described are carefully defined against the economic life of

the city. This is important because for much of the time they share a similar historical background: inter-war Depression and the New Deal in one case; post-war reconstruction in the other. The contrast between these political and economic initiatives and the lives of the characters is worked out stylistically. Both books in effect represent postmodern accounts of High Modernism. The vivid life of the streets is proposed as a series of *fin-de-siècle* reactions to the age of planning. Ondaatje's narrator, for example, seems preternaturally aware of some sort of gigantism creeping over the globe. In the year 1938, he observes, "The longest bridge in the world was being built over the lower Zambesi and the great water works at the east end of Toronto neared completion" (209). In Ondaatje's book, such developments seem like a sinister proto-Fascist preamble to the unspoken threat of war. In both books, however, the economic life of the city is something against which its human reality is articulated and expressed.

In the prevailing economic dispensation the working class citizen has become a cipher in schemes of construction that both novels consciously resist and transform. Both Ondaatje and Vera excel in evoking the drudgery of official work schemes, which they convert into a kind of subversive poetry. High above the Bloor Street Viaduct hangs Nicholas Temelcoff, a labourer from Macedonia. In the eyes of his employers, the Dominion Bridge Company, Temelcoff is a navy: "a man is an extension of hammer, drill, flame" (Ondaatje 26). In Ondaatje's prose he becomes a dancer, the choreography of his skill exultant:

Nicholas Temelcoff is famous on the bridge, a daredevil. He is given all the difficult jobs and he takes them. He descends into the air with no fear. He is a solitary. He assembles ropes, brushes the tackle and pulley at his waist, and falls off the bridge like a diver over the edge of a boat. The rope roars alongside him, slowing with the pressure of his half-gloved hands. He is burly on the ground and then falls with terrific speed, grace, using the wind to push himself into corners of abutments so he can check driven rivets, sheering valves, the drying of the concrete under bearing plates and padstones. (34)

In one episode Nicholas Temelcoff is hanging suspended at his work when a nun, who has wandered by mistake across the incomplete viaduct, falls over the parapet towards him. He swings outwards and catches her with one outstretched arm. The piece of improvisation saves her life; it also changes him from operative to redeemer.

In the opening passage of her book, Vera describes the sweating labourers cutting the long grass in Makokoba Township with equivalent understanding. Their effort is bought, but it is also balletic:

Their subtle but unwilling arms turn, loop and merge with the tiny tassels of the golden grass whose stem is still green, like newborn things, and held firmly to the earth. The movement of their arms is like weaving, as their arms thread through each thicket, and withdraw. The careful motion is patterned like a dance spreading out, each sequence rises like hope enacted and set free. Freed, stroke after stroke, holding briskly, and then the final whisper of release. The grass falls. (18)

There is a parallel here with the celebrated “mowing” passage in *Anna Karenina*, but Vera’s vision takes her well beyond Tolstoy’s. She observes the way these men transform the alienation of production — neutral, degrading in itself — into a form of aesthetic expression by personalizing, even eroticizing it. This is labour not as compliance, or spiritual service as in Tolstoy, but as signalled protest, potential revolution.

The revolutionary reflex is faithfully reproduced by both authors. In each case it corresponds to a cycle of baffled desire and pointed destruction. Once again, there are nineteenth-century precedents: Elizabeth Gaskell’s stories of Manchester life, for instance.⁴ For Ondaatje and Vera, however, there is no final saving complicity with the *status quo*, such as British Victorian novelists so often provide. Vera’s perspective is caught in a passage half-way through her book in which she describes an accidental spill of grain from the Baloos neighbourhood store. It provokes a scuffle or riot as

the crowd falls together and the bodies bend to the ground and find between the ground and the wild vacancy in their hearts, the flour mixed with the soil, and with folded Fanta bottle tops, burnt matchsticks and a multitude of yellow cigarette stubs which say Peter Stuyvesant in pale white — and they gather this mess into the small bowls which they have brought and examine it closely. Perhaps, between the grains of sand and the smoother grains of Red Seal Roller Meal, there was hope. They find none. (38)

Vera perfectly captures the flux of communal emotions: the limitless greed, the confusion, the grasping, then the ultimate shame on recognizing that nothing has been gained.

The desire, disillusionment and anger are matched in Ondaatje’s

story by Alice Gull's account of the life of Toronto's bourgeoisie. In Gull's committed vision, it is counterpointed against the degradation and the stinking toil of Wickett and Craig's tannery, where Patrick is currently working:

"I will tell you about the rich," Alice would say, "the rich are always laughing. They keep on saying the same things on their boats and lawns: *Isn't this grand! We're having a good time!* And whenever the rich get drunk and maudlin about humanity you have to listen for hours. But they keep you in the tunnels and stockyards. They do not toil or spin. Remember that." (132)

This is the very self-indulgence, and the sentimental philanthropy attending it, that Patrick — and through Patrick the novel — seeks to destroy.

The violence in both of these novels is therefore viewed as an expression both of anger and of thwarted desire. Significantly, both books are obsessed with the *motif* of conflagration. In a brilliant concluding scene, Phephelaphi sets light to herself and her dreams, expiring as the butterfly burning of the title. The apotheosis is alarming; it is also beautiful. It is as if Phephelaphi has at last created from herself an aesthetic phenomenon worthy of her aspirations, the true expression of her colourful transience: "She is lightness, floating like flame, with flame. The flames wrap the human form, arms, knees that are herself, a woman holding her pain like a torn blanket" (Vera 128).

Alice Gull instructs Patrick to turn his violence against Commissioner Harris and all his works: "You name the enemy and destroy their power. Start with their luxuries — their select clubs. Their summer mansions" (124-25). Accordingly, after Alice's death, Patrick torches the Muskoka Hotel, a haunt of the Ontario rich. He is jailed, and on his release makes an attempt to blow up Harris's now completed waterworks. Explosives strapped to his torso, he swims through the tunnel he once helped build, and confronts Harris amidst the tawdry splendours of his Art Deco palace. Two dreams face one another: the municipal Romantic and the postcolonial sceptic. "You forgot us," pleads Patrick, assuming the voice of the common man. Harris reacts with the standard New Deal justification: "I hired you." To which Patrick responds, "Your goddam herringbone tiles in the toilets cost more than half our salaries put together" (235-36).

This closing scene has an immediacy that reminds the reader of the confrontational and irrational politics of Ondaatje's Sri Lanka. It anticipates the surreal and macabre world of *Anil's Ghost*. The affinity alerts

us to the fact that Ondaatje, like Vera, has projected a complex post-colonial consciousness onto the screen of the historical novel. Though both books are set in periods when imperialism was apparently in full stride, the protagonists of each act as interpreters from a viewpoint that constantly shifts towards the reader's own. The city is a script written with a confident message that the novel reinscribes and undermines. A process of defamiliarization is at work as a result of which the common coin of colonial development — the fits and starts of progress, the oppression, the drift of events — is converted into a currency validated by freedom. Not the least of the advantages is a radical reassessment of the colonial enterprise itself. Vera has managed this feat several times before — in *Nehanda* with its recreation of the life and death of a female freedom fighter of the 1890s, in *Without A Name* with its angular perception of the private consequences of the civil war of the 1970s.⁵ In *Butterfly Burning* a colonial city of the 1940s and 1950s is radically redescribed by being mapped from its edges. In a sense too, like Toronto in Ondaatje's book, it is evoked backwards, since episodes early in the story only make sense in the light of subsequent events. Among her most successful effects is Vera's word painting of the public hanging of Fumbatha's father and his co-insurgents way back in the 1890s. Like Phephelaphi's self-incineration in the book's closing pages, it becomes a scene of aesthetic delight revitalized by language. The image used is that of drowning: "The voices of drowned men cannot be heard. They die in infinite solitude. The air leaves their bodies in a liquid breeze. They touch the surface with their faces, not their arms, with their lips. Nothing will bring them back" (7).

The fact is that they have been brought back; their voices have been heard. It is Vera who has ventriloquized them, just as Ondaatje has given vent to the perceptions of the Toronto underclass. Both novels are achievements of an intelligent and unblinkered love for particular places. Ondaatje possesses a fierce but disenchanting attachment to Toronto, and Vera has a passionate and sad appreciation of Bulawayo. Each creates a world that is imaginatively prophetic of our own transcultural reality. The anachronism is part of their point. Ondaatje's Toronto and Vera's Bulawayo are postcolonial cities.

NOTES

¹ Vera was born and raised in Bulwayo, where she now works as the Director of the National Gallery.

² For a fuller investigation of such usages see Robert Fraser's *Lifting the Sentence: A Poetics of Postcolonial Fiction*, 65-98.

³ The whole novel, in fact, represents an extended exercise in what I have called the "implied first person." See *Lifting the Sentence*, 87-93.

⁴ Cf. especially the demonstration witnessed by Margaret Hale at Mr. Thornton's Manchester factory in Gaskell's *North and South* (1855). For a provocative discussion of this and other such moments in Victorian fiction, see David Lodge's "Crowds and power in the early Victorian novel."

⁵ See also Vera's *Under the Tongue*.

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