
Object and Practice: Creative Labour Throughout Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*

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Abstract

Throughout *In the Skin of a Lion*, which was published in 1987, Michael Ondaatje portrays forms of labour that blur the boundaries between work and art, and thus between high and low culture. The blurring of these boundaries expresses how the text reflects both the values of postmodernism, but also Marxist theory. Raymond Williams wrote in 1973 that the “true crisis in cultural theory,” during the time in which both he and Ondaatje were writing, was between the view of “art as object” and the alternative view of “art as practice” (1349). Over the course of *In the Skin of a Lion* then, Ondaatje expresses how labour is both worthy of celebration, as it constitutes a sort of art in itself and reflects often obscured dimensions of Canadian history, but also how readers can be critical of the forms of labour depicted, as they reveal brutal aspects of capitalist society. In his depictions of the forms of labour that Nicholas as a builder, Alice as a performer, and Patrick as a caregiver partake in, all of which trouble the distinction between work and art, Ondaatje questions whether art is a practice or an object and dually refuses to draw stark divisions between the two.

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Throughout *In the Skin of a Lion*, which was published in 1987, Michael Ondaatje portrays forms of labour that blur the boundaries between work and art, and thus between high and low culture. The blurring of these boundaries expresses how the text reflects both the values of postmodernism, in its skepticism towards the official and objective, but also Marxist theory in its focus on how economic and social conditions affect the characters. Marxist theorist Raymond Williams wrote in 1973 that the “true crisis in cultural theory,” during the time in which both he and Ondaatje were writing, was between the view of “art as object,” and the alternative view of “art as practice” (1349). This difference between “object” and “practice” relates to how works of art are conceptualized: either as artefacts to be observed or as exercises that are dynamically and continually carried out. Over the course of *In the Skin of a Lion* then, Ondaatje expresses how labour is both worthy of celebration, as it constitutes a sort of art in itself, but also how readers can be critical of the forms of labour depicted, as they reveal brutal aspects of capitalist society. Ondaatje’s investigation thus relates to Karl Marx’s statement that labour resolves the “personal worth” of the worker into “exchange value” (662). In his depictions of the forms of labour that Nicholas as a builder, Alice as a performer, and Patrick as a caregiver partake in, all of which trouble the distinction between work and art, Ondaatje questions whether art is an object or a practice and dually refuses to draw stark divisions between the two.

Through his poetic descriptions of Nicholas and the other bridge builders, Ondaatje reveals the aspects of performance inherent to the realities of hard labour and thus how the builders’ work mixes values of high and low culture. In phrases like “the bridge builders balance on a strut, the flares wavering behind them, aiming their hammers towards the noise of a nail they cannot see,” Ondaatje conveys both a musicality and grace to the builders’ actions (29). The alliteration of the phrases “the bridge builders balance” and “noise of nail” are akin to a song, which the builders join in together, while through the image of them poised on the strut, Ondaatje depicts a sort of gymnastics routine or dance performance (29). Their work, as can be seen in the repeated plosive sounds but also the verb “balance,” is both backbreaking and graceful. In

this way, as Williams posits, the workers engage in producing the bridge, but also producing themselves (1340). Just as the structure of the bridge is hewn from metal and hammered together with force, so the musical plosive sounds of the men plunking “beans into blackness” reflect the blows which their bodies take (Ondaatje 28). Both the bodies of the builders as well as the bridge are physically affected in an act of creation which is simultaneously brutal and beautiful. Through depictions of the builders’ work, Ondaatje also expresses a postmodern impulse to mix high culture music with low culture forms of labour. Ondaatje then questions the distinctions between the bridge and the body both as material objects but also as practices of creation. The bridge as well as the bodies of the workers are commodities, that are tied up in a complex web of art and labour, which Ondaatje refuses to simplify or easily distinguish. Through architecture and the workers then, Ondaatje bears witness to the ways in which labour defies binaries and thus is worthy of recognition, but also how recognizing this work means shining a light on the atrocious effects of capitalism.

In depicting Nicholas and the bridge builders as artists, Ondaatje also reveals how labour can be a creative act. Just as a paintbrush is popularly likened to an extension of the painter or a pen to the writer, Ondaatje writes that “a man is an extension of hammer” (26). These tools, just like that of an artist, give the builders a means by which to create the city, and thus the architecture of the city becomes a kind of artwork. As Ondaatje posits, “before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales” are “a kind of charting” (29). In this statement, Ondaatje conveys that designing a city requires creativity, and just as stories are often products of one’s imagination, so are cities. If building cities is an act of imagination then, it is also a tenuous act, and one that like a work of art can be interpreted in various ways. As Jameson posits, architectural projects are “virtual narratives or stories” which citizens “are asked to fulfill and to complete” with their “own bodies and movements” (1767). Ondaatje relays how architecture tells stories, but also how these stories are necessarily incomplete without the presence of people to fill them out. In his depictions of building as an act of creation then, Ondaatje reveals both how portraying the artfulness

of this labour counteracts capitalist narratives but also operates within them, and thus how this form of creativity is necessarily as object which ratifies dominant culture but also a practice against it.

With regard to the character of Alice, Ondaatje utilizes the metaphor of the puppet to blur the boundaries between reality and performance, and thus between labour and art. The language of puppetry is first introduced when Nicholas begins to fall asleep in a Macedonian bar and Ondaatje writes that Alice could “twist” him “around like a puppet and he wouldn’t waken” (38). The metaphor of the puppet is like the way in which the bridge builders are described in inherently physical and material terms, as this metaphor has to do with the body. Ondaatje describes Alice herself as a “nun with regard to her beauty,” which reveals that Alice is concerned with her body as a performative object (48). When the puppet show takes place, Patrick remarks that “perhaps it was an exceptional puppet of cloth as opposed to an exceptional human being” as he struggles to differentiate between the artful performance and Alice’s experience on the stage as her lived reality (116). Ondaatje then ties the person of Alice and her performance as the puppet together to show that each becomes a metaphor for the other and thus the two become inseparable. This entanglement mirrors how Alice is tied to her political ideology, in which she advocates strongly for a working-class revolution, and how this ideology makes her performative art into a sort of labour. Further, both her political ideology and her performance as a puppet are tied to her body as an object. Even in the other details of the scene like the musical instruments, which Ondaatje writes “in their curls and convolutions” look “like frozen organs on the body,” there is an invocation that art, labour, and the body are all connected (118). Aspects of this invocation relate to Williams urging that “we have to break from the common procedure of isolating the object and then discovering its components” and instead “discover the nature of a practice and then its conditions” (1350). The bodies of both the instruments and Alice cannot be fragmented into labour and art, but instead are part of an ongoing practice which involves both leaning into the contradictions of the body and paying attention to the

ways in which these contradictions exist because of the realities of capitalism.

The atmosphere surrounding Alice’s performance also blurs the boundaries between art and labour. Through Patrick, Ondaatje posits that “the noise of machines camouflaged” the performers’ “activity” to reveal how labour infiltrates the space of art (115). Similarly, Ondaatje draws attention to how producing the puppet performance is laborious, as he details the backstage area by writing that there were “no sofas, or arches of light, just performers cleaning up” (119). Even as Patrick helps Alice wash her face, Ondaatje goes over each detail of the paint to express the time-consuming nature of getting ready for a performance and then getting unready after it (121). The performance that Alice partakes in is artful but is also work, which, as becomes clear in the scene of her washing her face, is dependent upon her body. Further, the details surrounding Alice’s performance exemplify what Jameson refers to as “the erosion of the older distinction between high-culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (1759). Alice’s performance, as seen through the eyes of Patrick, is difficult to understand and comprehend, as she uses the high culture method of dance, which depends on symbolism and a knowledge of specific aesthetics, rather than straight-forward language to communicate. Yet, Alice presents her dance to a working-class audience, who like Patrick, struggle to comprehend its meaning. In addition to this, the performance is done not just for the sake of art, but to make a point about Alice’s political views. In this way, Alice represents Jean-François Lyotard’s statement that “the question of postmodernity is also the question of the expressions of thought” (1387). In a high culture sense, her art is metaphorical and elusive, yet it is also deeply political and tied to her body as both an object and a practice. The labour that goes into Alice’s performance, as she uses movement to make visible the silence of the immigrant worker, is both tender and deserving of attention, but also a reflection of her views on capitalism as a destructive force. Through Alice’s performance then, Ondaatje blur the boundaries between art and reality, and so depicts how Alice’s life is shaped by both object and practice.

Finally, through Patrick, Ondaatje presents a character who embodies a sort of skepticism towards tethering art to labour. When speaking of the leather dyers, Patrick remembers their “bodies standing there tired, only the heads white” and then attests that “if he were an artist, he would have painted them but that was false celebration” (Ondaatje 132). In a similar scene in the leather dying factory, Patrick declares, “there is a foreman’s white shirt, there is white lye daubed onto rock to be dynamited” but “all else is labour and darkness. Ash grey faces. An unfinished world” (111). Through these statements, Ondaatje speaks to an impulse to make labour into art and even more so to monumentalize labour through art. Patrick seems to understand this urge and even wants to participate in it, yet he declares it “a false celebration,” as regardless of the moments of light, which Ondaatje evokes through the repetition of the colour white, all else is “an unfinished world” of “labour and darkness.” Despite his instinct to make art out of what has often been relegated to the realm of the practical, Patrick grapples with the ethics of celebrating the darkness of capitalism, which hangs over the workers. Patrick’s grappling relates to Marx’s theory that “labour produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity” (657). In this way, through Patrick, Ondaatje contends with how one cannot celebrate labour without celebrating the commodification of the worker. Further, Jameson attests that “commodity production and in particular our clothing, furniture, buildings and other artefacts are now intimately tied in with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation” (1770). Patrick gives voice to how if labour is tied to art, the depiction of labour as art, and thus the body of the worker are bound to be exploited by artistic trends which are often intimately tied to generating profit. In Patrick, Ondaatje therefore reveals that the production of art is inseparable from economics.

Although Ondaatje portrays how Patrick is skeptical of the capacity of labour to be reflected through art, he also uses Patrick to reveal forms of labour which despite being tied to capitalist notions of profit are worthy of art as they give voice to human connection, which de-commodifies the body. Ondaatje first makes this revelation apparent as Patrick remarks that “the trouble with ideology, Alice, is that it hates the

private, you must make it human” (135). After this scene, Ondaatje writes that Patrick becomes aware that “his own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices” (145). Patrick realizes how to make impersonal “ideology” into “mural” and “story” through becoming Hannah’s caregiver. It is through Hannah that Patrick becomes “suddenly aware” that he has “a role” (126). Patrick becomes a sort of actor and sees art within his labour through his connection to Hannah. In this moment then, Patrick finds what Williams refers to as “the true practices” which are the “social relationships” that through the commodification of the person are often “alienated to components or to mere background” (1350). Ondaatje brings these relationships to the forefront of *In the Skin of a Lion* as the novel ends with Patrick saying “lights” to Hannah as he teaches her to drive. In this scene, Patrick engages in a labour of love, which is not based off of commodification but care (244). This final moment of the novel is both an object of art, as it exists on the text of the page and can refer to the beginning of a performance, but it is also a practice which decenters exploitative capitalism. It is in this liminality that Ondaatje chooses to rest his work.

Throughout *In the Skin of a Lion* and by using the characters of Nicholas, Alice, and Patrick, as well as their roles as builders, performers, and caregivers, Ondaatje weaves together complex tenets of postmodern and Marxist theory in a way that refuses to draw simplistic conclusions about how art and labour, as manifestations of high and low culture, interact. Work and creativity are both intimately tied to acts of memorialization as well as capitalism and thus to the body as a material object but also as a practitioner. Ondaatje reflects this tension within his work to depict how labour can be a source of art, which is worthy of celebration, but also condemnation as it objectifies the labourer’s body. If Ondaatje settles on any conclusion with regard to these topics within *In the Skin of a Lion*, it is that the only way to reconcile the realities of art and labour are by situating them within the realm of care and human connection. *In the Skin of a Lion* then has implications for how those living on the lands currently called Canada conceptualize art, labour, and the ethics of care in an ever consumer-driven society today.

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