Reclaiming the Past: Michael Ondaatje and the Body of History

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This essay examines the connection between body, history, and nation in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient (1993). The novel dramatizes and responds to questions concerning national belonging and community, while at the same time it longs to escape or transcend nation and history. The dialectical push and pull of this desire to escape and return is animated through the way that The English Patient imagines the body as a contested and contesting space, a conduit into the past and the means through which that past might be reclaimed. As a consequence, I hope to nuance political assessments of the novel and of Ondaatje’s contribution to historiographical metafiction more broadly, as well as his dual status as both a postmodern and postcolonial writer.

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In Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient (1993), the patient—whose body is burned beyond recognition, denationalized and deracialized, who cannot remember his own past and who keeps a heavily amended version of Herodotus’ Histories at his side—talks to Hana of the desert explorers at the beginning of the twentieth century: “We were German, English, Hungarian, African. . . . Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states” (138–9). The patient’s remark echoes a comment Michael Ondaatje made in a 2011 interview with The Observer: “I am a mongrel of place. Of race. Of cultures. Of many genres” (qtd. in McCrum n.p.) Both observations mobilize bodily metaphors of monstrosity to describe an unstable relationship between the sovereign self and the larger communities of citizenship in which that self is enmeshed. In the first instance, the nation-state causes a wounding or “deformation” of an otherwise whole and independent subject. In the second instance, the mongrel figures as a tentative, interstitial space between—a hybrid body that belongs everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Many read in Ondaatje’s writing a longing to fly beyond the nets of nationality, language, and religion in order to reach, like James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, some level of autonomy from the national and historical worlds of which one is
a part. Yet I argue that Ondaatje’s work frequently incorporates a countervailing desire to return, to reclaim, and to bear witness to the historical and national worlds from which his characters emerge. More specifically, this ambivalence registers itself through bodily wounding and trauma. These bodies—mongrel, interstitial, and frequently wounded—encode what I term a “double gesture.” They function as troubled sites between the past and the present, bearing that past forward but inevitably occluding or frustrating the present’s ability to decipher that past. The characters thus become caught in a double-bind between a political and ethical injunction to bear witness to the past and a longing to sever one’s connection with that past. In examining this relationship between bodily wounding, trauma, and historiography, I argue that Ondaatje’s modernist and postmodern aesthetic practices mark not a divestment from, but a commitment to, the complex politics of postcolonial subjects and postcolonial theory more broadly.

As Linda Hutcheon points out, Ondaatje shares with writers like Graham Swift, Salman Rushdie, and Umberto Eco an interest in “problematiz[ing] the entire notion of historical knowledge,” and as such his texts are concerned not only with what historical narratives represent, but also with what any claim or representation also occludes (Hutcheon 89). Lee Spinks has similarly described this particular tendency for Ondaatje’s writing to highlight “the inevitable inscription of subjective and ideological points-of-view within the medium of historical narrative” (51). This is nowhere more evident, perhaps, than in one of Ondaatje’s early poems, “The Cinnamon Peeler” (1982). In it, the cinnamon peeler’s work—and, by proxy, his family, his location, and his historical moment—make it impossible for him to do anything more than desire his lover from a distance:

Your breasts and shoulders would reek
you could never walk through markets
without the profession of my fingers
floating over you. The blind would
stumble certain of whom they approached
though you might bathe
under rain gutters, monsoon . . . (Ondaatje, Running in the Family 95)

To be a cinnamon peeler is to have one’s body tied to a specific space and place, including the economic and colonial dimensions of one’s work. The body occupies a liminal space between past and present and between the personal and the public; it marks the speaker in terms of her or his work as a colonial laborer, and likewise encodes the past relationship with the cinnamon peeler’s lover. The “profession” of fingers both touch and do not touch the lover’s body, implying that the physical connection between the lovers is always a tentative or unstable one, a dangerous contamination at the same time it implies a shared, erotic moment. The body thus becomes the contested site of history, retaining a connection between the lovers, but implying that this connection is fleeting, momentary, and elusive. The addressee is imagined as one trying to erase her connection with that past.
Likewise, just as the English patient momentarily finds an escape from his past and history in his burned body, riddled also with short-term amnesia, so the cinnamon peeler longs to escape from the world:

When we swam once
I touched you in water
and our bodies remained free
you could hold me and be blind of smell. (Ondaatje, Running 96)

The earlier motifs—blindness and water—now take on opposite roles. Blindness affords the speaker’s body and identity an autonomy not defined through work, family, caste, or class, as it had before. Water no longer serves a medium of erasure, but rather makes possible a liminal space for the lovers to come together. The stanza balances on a tentative and ironized logic: freedom is only possible through confinement in the water, and the lovers’ bodies can only come into full contact with each other if that contact is limited, even willfully “blind of smell.” The synesthesia compounds the stanza’s contradictory impulses: erotic pleasure depends on a sensual deafness or disability. But just as the cinnamon peeler’s body is encoded with specific ties to his work, his caste and class, the cinnamon peeler’s lover refuses the liminal seclusion that the water offers:

You climbed the bank and said

this is how you touch other women
the grass cutter’s wife, the lime burner’s daughter.
And you searched your arms
for the missing perfume

and knew

what good is it
to be the lime burner’s daughter
left with no trace
as if not spoken to in the act of love
as if wounded without the pleasure of a scar.

You touched
your belly to my hands
in the dry air and said
I am the cinnamon
peeler’s wife. Smell me. (Running 96–7)

The poem’s final gesture—a return to the world, a reclaiming of the past and of one’s connection to it—concludes with a significant moment of communal and performative witnessing. The two similes that end the penultimate stanza of the poem equate scars with a language, wounds with words. The responsibility of
the writer is thus analogous to the responsibility of the cinnamon peeler’s lover: to read the scars of history, to claim them as one’s own, though perhaps not to speak for them, nor to conclude authoritatively how they might be interpreted. The wound represents, in this way, a kind of historical trauma. The body speaks through its scars, but these scars are always troubled witnesses. They represent the past, but they are always trying to heal over, to seal themselves off, to erase the very histories that created them.

As Cathy Caruth has explained in her retelling of Torquato Tasso’s *La Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581), traumatic experience “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). Testimonial narrative thus operates in a way that “simultaneously defies and demands our witness,” embodied as a traumatic wound that “cries out,” but which can never be fully assimilated into or articulated in language. As conceived in trauma studies, this failure to describe or recapture the past paradoxically bears witness to the trauma of that past through—and not in spite of—its failure to articulate.

It is not surprising, then, that Ondaatje rhymes the dialectic between self and nation with wounding and trauma. Both involve a concomitant gesture back to the past and forward into the future, figuring this relation as partially resolved—wounds scar over—and partially unresolved, since scars seldom disappear entirely. The wounded or scarred bodies in Ondaatje’s fiction are thus forms or sites of writing at the same time they signify an erasure, a figural scarring-over of history, both personal and communal. Likewise, in his prose and poetry, Ondaatje is interested in a variety of recoveries: the recovery of a public past, even if that past is contingent and malleable; the recovery of personal identity and origin, even if that origin is hybrid, mongrel, and only accessible through politically suspect discourses; and the recovery of ethically viable modes of representation, even if those modes provide merely provisional or partial knowledge.

The critical lenses offered by trauma theory also help us to complicate what some critics have identified as a possibly problematic aestheticization of violence in Ondaatje’s work, especially in *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* (2000). Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to consider modernist or late modernist form and its broader relationship with trauma—especially since so much of modernist aesthetic practices were fashioned during or between the two World Wars—it is unsurprising that modernist fragmentation, collage, and temporal instability feature so prominently in Ondaatje’s writing. For even as these deformed or wounded bodies both register and occlude the trauma of history, either personal or public, the aesthetic pyrotechnics of Ondaatje’s texts—their elliptical temporalities and fragmented structures—might be read as surrogate deformed, wounded, or mongrel bodies, their tissues woven together into forms that bear witness to the traumatic pasts that have shaped them. Thus, Ondaatje’s unique blend of modernist fragmentation and postmodern narrative mutability operates as a mode of traumatic testimony. It attempts to “articulate” the past,
to bring together the body of history, while also highlighting its own failures in this regard, its elisions the result of its inability to articulate the past in a clear narrative chronology.

For example, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), a collage prose–poem that defies genre distinctions, blending memoir, poetry, photography, journalism, dime-novels, and biography, reconstructs Billy's final year as an outlaw in New Mexico. The collage of material that makes up the text reveals more about the ways Billy the Kid has been claimed, rewritten, and romanticized by the Americas' fascination and commodification of the “Wild West” than it does about Billy himself. At the book’s close, Ondaatje considers what we might find if we exhumed Billy's grave:

Imagine if you dug him up and brought him out. You'd see very little. There'd be the buck teeth. Perhaps Garrett's bullet no longer in thick wet flesh would roll in the skull like a marble. From the head there'd be a trail of vertebrae like a row of pearl buttons off a rich coat down to the pelvis. The arms would be cramped on the edge of what was the box. And a pair of hand-cuffs, holding ridiculously the fine ankle bones. (Even though dead they buried him in leg-irons). There would be the silver from the toe of each boot.

His legend a jungle sleep (Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* 101)

The coffin, the leg-irons, the ridiculous hand-cuffs: all are metaphors for the work of historical narrative, its explanatory procedures, its attempt to “arrest” time — here imagined as Billy’s fully decomposed and thus absent body — in ways both linguistic and intelligible. The gathered remains, or what is left of them, constitute the final “collected works” of Billy the Kid, though they cannot speak for themselves, do not constitute a narrative unless imagined into the “thick wet flesh” of Billy’s decomposed body. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* — a body of text assembled from various other “historical sources” about Billy — is more about the various ways these texts attempt to tell Billy’s story than it is about the story itself. It is, in this sense, a matter of historiography rather than history, a text about its own mediation: its seams are meant to show. For example, the first page contains an empty portrait box, which presumably should hold Billy’s picture. This image is denied to the reader for the rest of the text until the final page, where we find not a picture of Billy, but of a small child — perhaps Ondaatje himself — dressed in a cowboy outfit. For Ondaatje, there is an ethical obligation involved in resurrecting, in collecting, in giving form and structure to the past while there is, at the same time, a sense of inevitable failure.

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is in this regard an important, though not always acknowledged, predecessor for *The English Patient*. The novel centers on a group of characters who, both by circumstance and choice, have found themselves living together in the partially bombed and ruined Villa San Girolamo in Italy at the end of World War II. Unlike Billy the Kid, however, the bodies of this novel are all survivors of the past and continue to live on in the present. Like Billy the
Kid, though, they come to find that their ability to operate as witnesses to that past is troubled at best.

Hana, a twenty-year old Canadian nurse working for the Allies, has decided to remain in the villa to care for “the English patient,” an unidentified man found by the desert Bedouin after surviving a plane crash somewhere in the Libyan Desert. She is soon joined by David Caravaggio, a spy recovering from his detention by the Germans, and Kirpal Singh, an Allied Sikh sapper tasked with defusing bombs and mines buried around the area. Although in some sense centered on the mystery of the English patient’s true identity—further recalling the primary objective of *Billy the Kid*—the novel is really about the past behind all of the characters, who must come to terms with some form of traumatic experience. Hana has lost her father in the war and, although she is hesitant to admit it, has performed a self-abortion on a child whose unnamed father has also died while fighting. David Caravaggio, who knew Hana and her family in Canada before the war, is addicted to morphine and, along with his deformed hands, is obsessed with discovering whether or not the English patient was a German spy, and thus responsible for the death of countless other Allied troops. Kip’s English mentor and closest friend, Lord Suffolk, has been blown up while attempting to defuse a bomb, whose “joke” or new fuse design Kip himself decodes soon after.

The English patient has his own past that he must inevitably come to terms with, which he is able to accomplish—to a certain degree—through his time with Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip. This forms the second main plot of the text, which takes place through a series of flashbacks to the 1930s. After Caravaggio administers a truth serum, the patient reveals himself to be Count László de Almásy, a Hungarian desert explorer who had an affair with Katharine Clifton, the wife of the affluent Geoffrey Clifton. The Cliftons had joined Almásy’s desert exploration team in the early 1930s, as Geoffrey was secretly an English spy sent to collect intelligence on Almásy’s group. Geoffrey had other intelligence about the affair, and he attempts to kill both his wife and Almásy in a murder-suicide, crashing his plane in the desert. Both Almásy and Katharine survive, though Katharine is severely injured. Almásy, forced to leave her in a desert cave, is at first unable to return to save her, though he eventually aids the Nazis in order to travel back to the desert and collect her body.

One of the main symbolic objects of the text is the English patient’s heavily amended 1890 edition of Herodotus’ *Histories*, into which he pastes cigarette papers over certain passages so that he may include his own personal newspaper clippings, letters, sketches, and notes. This book is the only remnant of his past that he has brought to the villa, and it is this book that he originally leaves with Katharine in the Cave of Swimmers. Almásy explains his interest in Herodotus as follows:

I have seen editions of *The Histories* with a sculpted portrait on the cover. Some statue found in a French museum. But I never imagine Herodotus this way. I see him more as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends
as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage. “This history of mine,” Herodotus says, “has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument.” What you find in him are cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history—how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love. . . . (119)

We are clearly meant to read the English patient himself as a “spare [man] of the desert,” who gradually reveals a history of his own throughout the novel. But if the story we are being told is, according to the logic of this metaphor, a heavily amended collage, then what does this reveal about The English Patient as a novel and the English patient as a character, both “mirage[s] . . . pieced together” from the annals of history? Likewise, why must Almásy return to collect Katharine’s body if there is no chance of saving her? It is curious that critics have not highlighted that, in returning to Katharine and the Cave of Swimmers, Almásy does exactly what he insisted he would not do: identify national allegiance in order to claim responsibility for Katharine’s body and their shared past together.

The English Patient has been read primarily—and this is especially apparent in the Anthony Minghella’s 1996 award-winning film adaptation—as a star-crossed love story, the impossible affair between Almásy and Katharine, along with Geoffrey’s jealousy, mirroring the present affair between Hana and Kip, completed by Caravaggio’s jealousy. The novel, which won the Governor General’s Award and the Booker Prize, caused a controversy when it was revealed that Ondaatje had based the patient’s character on a real historical figure by the same name, a desert explorer and Nazi sympathizer. It is in this sense a story of betrayal: of Katharine and Almásy’s betrayal of Geoffrey, of Katharine’s betrayal of Almásy, and of Almásy’s betrayal of the English. Both love and betrayal figure prominently when Katharine reads the story of Candaules and Gyges from Herodotus, which Almásy pinpoints as the moment he first fell in love with Katharine: “This is a story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story from Herodotus. I heard the words she spoke across the fire, never looking up, even when she teased her husband. . . . Words, Caravaggio. They have a power” (233–34). But The English Patient is above all about various kinds of claiming: a claim for anonymity counterweighted with responsibility for claiming ownership of one’s own traumatic past, claims for sovereign autonomy both compromised and made possible through the claims of love or intimacy, and conflicting claims to historical truth.

The problem, then, hinges on how the characters negotiate claiming and disclaiming the past, both personal and public. During the affair Almásy and Katharine talk about what they each most despise. Katharine answers, “A lie. And you?” Almásy responds, “Ownership . . . when you leave me, forget me” (152). Almásy’s refusal to abide by the rules of possession or ownership makes him a foil to Geoffrey, who when he first lands in the desert to join the expedition jokingly declares, “I name this site the Bir Messaha Country Club” (142). In contrast to the clear colonial and political dimensions inherent in cartographical charting and
Western exploration, particularly of Africa, Almásy is interested in quite another kind of project, another reason for being in the desert:

The desert could not be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East. Its caravans, those strange rambling feasts and cultures, left nothing behind, not an ember. All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith . . . Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf. I didn't want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert. (139)

This is in some sense analogous to the cinnamon peeler’s desire to retreat to the liminal seclusion of the water. The desert is a “place of faith,” oddly because the patient imagines it in purely secular terms. This is a clear contrast to organized religion’s own political cooptation, which causes Madox to shoot himself in the middle of a Mass while the priest delivers a homily in an attempt to justify the war. But it is Katharine who insists that such a desire—to erase names, to erase nations—is unfeasible, or even irresponsible: “You slide past everything with your fear of hate and ownership, of owning, of being owned, of being named. You think this is a virtue. I think you are inhuman” (238). Almásy does not respond to her, but this passage does in part explain why he must return to the Cave of Swimmers to collect Katharine’s body, wrapped in the plane’s parachute, even though it has been three months since he had left her to seek help. To return to collect Katharine is to “claim” her, to acknowledge his responsibility for her death, even though when Caravaggio asks him about whether or not he holds himself responsible, he likewise does not answer. The Cave of Swimmers—named for the ancient, aboriginal paintings discovered there—is thus an ironic oasis, both an echo of Almásy’s love for the desert (he continuously describes the desert as a kind of ocean and the Bedouin as seafarers) and its opposite, a womb of unclaimed historical time and a space which makes possible the partial reclaiming of that unclaimed past.

However, it is important to remember that Almásy’s attempt to reclaim Katharine is, ultimately, an unsuccessful one. Carrie Dawson and Sam Solecki have appropriately connected The English Patient’s interest in historiography as it intersects with trauma, further drawing on Cathy Caruth’s description of traumatic experiences as those which cannot be assimilated, and so are continuously relived as a “double telling . . . between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth 187). This doubleness figures in a variety of ways, particularly in terms of the body. When Almásy attempts to reclaim Katharine’s body, he digs Madox’s old plane out of the desert and refuels it with petrol—a plane that they had previously abandoned to the sand, a performative gesture echoing Almásy’s own desire to lose himself in the desert, to erase his name. When he collects her body and takes off, Almásy
imagines the recovered plane as “rotted . . . carrion” with “the canvas sheetings on the wings ripping open in the speed. . . . The woman translated into leaves and twigs, the broken glass to the sky like a jaw above him” (175). The plane—now also symbolic of both Katharine’s decomposed body and an echo of Clifton’s murder-suicide attempt from his own plane, itself the result of Almásy’s secret affair—catches on fire: “He slips into the harness of the oil-wet parachute and pivots upside down, breaking free of glass, wind flinging his body back. Then his legs are free of everything, and he is in the air, bright, not knowing why he is bright until he realizes he is on fire” (175). The inability to reclaim Katharine is thus paired with the inability to reclaim or assimilate fully his responsibility for her death. She is a body, but a body “translated” into the patient’s story about her and also into the blackened image of Almásy’s own burned body, itself a kind of “rotted . . . carrion.”

These are not neutral translations, nor simply textual rhymes linking the characters together, but a commentary on art and narrative’s ability to bear witness to the past while also highlighting its own aporia, its failure at mimesis. As Theodor Adorno has explained, the power of such art lies precisely in this horizon between representation and difference. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno notes that “the true language of art is mute,” (Adorno 112) recalling Caruth’s reading of double wounding in Tasso’s story: “trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (Caruth 4). Such art is always a partially traumatic event, attaining its aesthetic value precisely through its “difference from empirical reality” (Adorno 7). This is why, for Adorno, aesthetic theory must be a matter of negative dialectics, aesthetic mimesis not as reflection, but refraction.

The patient’s body thus becomes the vehicle through which the various characters, including the English patient himself, re-imagine or reclaim their own past, though they find that they are never able to reclaim that past entirely. Hana’s need to care for the patient—which she jokingly refers to as an obvious consequence of her “father complex” (84) — becomes the means by which she can repress her own survivor’s guilt. She believes that caring for the patient absolves or in some way allows her to do what she could not do for all of her other patients in the war, including her lost father: “He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. Do you understand the sadness of geography? I could have saved him . . .” (296, emphasis original). She charges these lost bodies with a kind of linguistic power. Though the bodies are unburied and thus unassimilated, language itself is imagined through a surrogate burial: “Throughout the war, with all of her worst patients, she survived by keeping a coldness hidden in her role as nurse. I will survive this. I won’t fall apart at this. These were buried sentences all through her war” (48). These “buried sentences” resurface in the patient’s own
body. She describes him as a “man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire . . . [t]here was nothing to recognize in him” (48).

There is also “nothing to recognize” in Hana herself—for more than a year, we are told that she has refused to look at herself in a mirror, until she accidently does so while caring for the patient at the villa: “She peered into her look, trying to recognize herself” (52). The patient is both an Other and a mirror, reflecting back to Hana her own traumatic past that she could not previously confront or assimilate, but reflecting that past imperfectly, allowing Hannah to explore her relationship with that past while keeping it safely at arm’s length.

Likewise, it is no accident that Caravaggio is caught by the Nazis after he breaks into a house in an attempt to “reclaim” pictures of himself, having accidently let himself be photographed while working undercover at a German party. He spends the war inventing “double agents or phantoms who would take on flesh . . . like a man in the darkness of a room imitating the calls of a bird . . . [but here there] was no defense but to look for the truth in others” (117). The patient’s body operates as the site through which these truths manifest themselves and find momentary, if provisional, articulation. Lee Spinks helpfully explains the centrality of the patient’s body in similar terms:

For Hana the patient represents an aspect of her lost paternal relation; for Caravaggio his image symbolizes the body of the war and his own war-torn body; while for Kip the patient’s blackened remains offer a ghastly evocation of the ruined colonial body: a body fought over and ceaselessly remade in the image of its antagonists . . . [the true identity of the patient] is therefore both crucial and curiously beside the point: its continuing life is inseparable from its fantasmic appropriation by others. (Spinks 176)

Spinks’s reading is representative of earlier analyses by Ajay Heble, Raymond Younis, Steven Tótösy de Zepetnek, and others. It also reminds us that the patient himself, even if he was Almásy, has been in a sense “reborn” by the plane crash, has taken on a new identity and is as separate from his previous life as any of the other characters. Spinks imagines the English patient as an anointed Christ figure, a “mythopoetic conversion of flesh into symbol . . . a redemptive body” (Spinks 176, emphasis original), the association further reinforced when we are told that Hana has converted an old crucifix into a scarecrow for her garden—a transformation that both redeems and “scares off” the past, keeping it at safe distance (207).

But understanding the patient’s body entirely or only through an allegorical Christian schema ignores the thematic “claiming” present even before the attempted murder-suicide or Katharine’s death. Almásy’s return to claim Katharine’s body is a gesture that partially—but only partially—rescinds his earlier insistence that he remain sovereign or autonomous from history, his longing to “Erase the family name! Erase nations!” (139). To reclaim Katharine’s body is to acknowledge a responsibility to reclaim the past. But it is also a desire to reclaim Katharine from the past. Claiming thus functions as an attempt to get beyond melancholic repetition, to develop a relationship with the past that does not
merely oscillate between what Caruth describes as a “double telling . . . between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7).

At one point, Katharine overhears Almásy talking to himself: “She had blown out the other candles, lit just the night stub at the bedside table and sat there, the Englishman’s body facing her in silence after the wildness of his drunken speeches. ‘Sometimes a horse I’ll be, sometimes a hound. A hog, a headless bear, sometimes a fire’” (115). Neither Hana nor the patient identify the allusion, but it is of course a reference Puck’s quizzical remark, immediately after he gives Nick Bottom an ass’s head, during the mechanicals’ performance of Pyramus and Thisbe within Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The identification with fire is both a recollection of his past—his body on fire while parachuting from the rotted plane—and a refusal to be beholden to that past, or to Hana, Caravaggio, or Kip’s needs to appropriate the image of his body to work through their own traumatic experiences. His identification with Puck is in this way a kind of reclaiming of himself rather than a reclaiming of a traumatic experience. The text is carefully structured, then, as a series of mutually exclusive contradictions, refusing to conform to the logic of narrative mourning or melancholia that it so readily invites.

This is what is so curious about The English Patient. It clearly invites readers to understand it as a story about star-crossed lovers, jealousy, traumatic experience, or colonialism—yet each mode of reading it invites it also inevitably frustrates. The English patient is a Christ figure even as he plays the part of Puck; he is a redemptive body making the previously unassimilated, unarticulated word into flesh, while at the same time functioning as the site of a “bottomless dream,” a blackened pool, an erased past. Over the course of the novel, he becomes a bottomless bag of mixed metaphors: a map without coordinates, a book composed simultaneously of both truth and lies whose meaning lies not on the inside but on the outside, in the way that he is imagined or transformed by those around him. He is as much Christ as he is Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz. And the patient is aware of this somewhat precarious position, evident when he reprimands Caravaggio: “You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book? Something to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies . . . ” (253).

The associations between history, text, map, and body eventually converge when Caravaggio administers the truth serum to the patient. Caravaggio first asks about patient’s location when trying to fly out of the desert with Katharine’s body. The patient asks for a copy of Kipling’s Kim and uses the map in the book’s opening pages to explain:

. . . On the frontispiece of Kim was a map with a dotted line for the path the boy and the Holy One took. It showed just a portion of India—a darkly cross-hatched Afghanistan, and Kashmir in the lap of the mountains.
He traces his black hand along the Numi River till it enters the sea at 23°30’
latitude. He continues sliding his finger seven inches west, off the page, onto his
chest; he touches his rib.

“Here. The Gilf Kebir, just north of the Tropic of Cancer. On the Egyptian-
Libyan border.” (167)

The patient’s gesture, away from the map and over his rib cage, is significant. His
body, an extension of the map, is the “site” of history, his heart and his past buried
alongside Katharine in the desert that he has left behind. But it also a gesture that
emphasizes an absent or lost map, a history that cannot be seen and so, in spite of
Caravaggio’s questions, cannot be read, will not allow itself to become a “creature . . . tempted” into revealing itself.

Immediately after he locates the Gilf Kebir between the ribs of his body,
the story that the English patient tells Caravaggio is doubly loaded: “Leaving
the truck, I started walking towards Uweinat, where I knew there was a buried
plane,” Caravaggio amazed, responding, “Wait. What do you mean, a buried
plane?” (168). The patient is referring literally to Madox’s old plane abandoned by
the exploration team, soon covered by the sandstorms, after Clifton’s plane proves
to be a superior replacement: “None of us thought we would see it again. It was
another victim of the desert” (168). As suggested before, to return and reclaim
the “buried” plane is also to return to Katharine’s body and recover her from the
past, from his betrayal of her. But the futile attempt to recover and fly off with the
buried plane is also synonymous with Caravaggio’s need — along with Hana and
Kip — to recover or claim Almásy’s burned body for their own purposes.

In this way, The English Patient is about reading history, and it is also about
the impossibility of reading history. As readers, we are invited to read the patient’s
body along with Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip but, along with them, the only past
that we have access to is a mediated, occluded, and limited one. The patient’s
blackened body makes history visible and simultaneously marks it “off the page,”
locking it away beneath the patient’s ribs. The gesture to his own body is a sym-

dolic act that claims the self as a site of both personal and public history, but
it is also a double gesture, an act that represents the patient’s refusal to remain

helden to Caravaggio’s insistence that the patient articulate or reveal that past.

We eventually discover that Caravaggio has also suffered traumatic experi-

dence during the war, for which the Allies had trained him to invent fictional
“double agents” to deceive the Germans. When discussing Caravaggio’s work as
an agent, the English patient accuses Caravaggio of having “an absurd name”;
Caravaggio responds, “At least I have a name” (116). But then the English patient
provides Caravaggio with another kind of history lesson altogether, reminding
Caravaggio of his namesake, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610),
the famous Italian Renaissance painter:

“There’s a painting by [Michelangelo] Caravaggio, done late in his life. David with
the Head of Goliath. In it, the young warrior holds at the end of his outstretched arm
the head of Goliath, ravaged and old. But that is not the true sadness in the picture. It
is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man, how he looked when he did the painting. Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand. The judging of one’s own mortality. I think when I see him at the foot of my bed that Kip is my David.” (116)

All of the villa inhabitants, including the patient himself, are figural Caravaggios—both Caravaggio the painter and David Caravaggio whose “outstretched hand” claims the patient’s body and insists on its otherness and distance from his own. Although the English patient does not mention this, it is revealing to note that Michelangelo Caravaggio painted this version of the scene twice, one portrait with the young David looking heroically off to the side (Figure 1), and the second with a more compassionate, even regretful David, contemplating the head he has severed and which he has claimed as his own (Figure 2). The severed head is its own traumatic testimony. Its mouth—one of the only details that Caravaggio does not change between his two versions of the portrait—is always open, but mute.

The doubled painting appropriately echoes the double gesture at play in The English Patient: its multiple versions simultaneously represent the past and highlight their inability to capture or represent the past in any single, definite, or objective way. It claims and disclaims at the same time, anticipating Kip’s final judgment of the patient and of the West—“American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman” (286). Despite Kip’s critique of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he eventually acknowledges his own responsibility as a participant in the war. Against the advice of his brother, Kip chose to aid the Allies, and while reflecting on this choice his language both links in with Caravaggio’s painting and with his accusation of the patient: “What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For this to happen?” (285). Kip, along with Hana and David Caravaggio, have each attempted to “defuse,” to “cut away . . . [the] limbs” of their own pasts, and to reclaim them at the same time. The accusation—you’re an Englishman—is as much a subconscious accusation of himself as it is of the patient.

How then do we reconcile the clearly politicized, postcolonial dimension of this novel with its insistent resistance to historical or political “truth”? It is worthwhile here to pause and return to an earlier question: what is the effect of imagining the relation between The English Patient and the book within it, the patient’s heavily annotated copy of Herodotus’ Histories? The extended description of the desert winds and their names—dozens of them—included in his Herodotus notebook provides us with a clue. Hana picks up his copy of Herodotus and reads the catalog of wind names recorded by Almásy, but then comes across a passage about the winds without names:

There are other, less constant winds that change direction, that can knock down horse and rider and realign themselves anticlockwise . . . the ————, the secret
Figure 1: David with the Head of Goliath (c. 1607) by Michelangelo Caravaggio (1571–1610); Kunsthistorisches Museum Gemäldegalerie, Vienna.

Figure 2: David with the Head of Goliath (c. 1610) by Michelangelo Caravaggio (1571–1610); Galleria Borghese, Rome.
The wind that has no name, the simoom that buries its adversaries in the sand: all of these winds are figures of history that cannot, like the patient’s body, be captured, mapped, identified, or contained. They are pasts that cannot be fully erased nor fully articulated.

Similarly, Almásy falls deeply in love with a certain part of Katharine’s body, the hollow at the base of her neck, and asks Madox whether or not that part of a body has a name (162), although Madox dismisses his question. Forced to invent his own name, Almásy christens it himself: “There was a small indentation at her throat we called the Bosphorus. I would dive from her shoulder into the Bosphorus” (236). The name is significant: the Bosphorus is the roughly thirty-kilometer strait in Turkey that divides Europe from Asia, and that connects the Black Sea with the Aegean. It is thus simultaneously a geographical feature that both connects and divides, a bridge and, at the same time, a wall. It also anticipates one of the final images in the text: Kip turning too fast in the rain while driving over a bridge on his motorbike, sliding off the bike and into the water below. “The motorbike and soldier stilled in midair, then pivoted down into the water, the metal body between his legs as they slammed into it, jarring a white path through it, disappearing, the rain too entering the river. ‘He will toss thee like a ball into a large country’” (295). In this moment, Kip becomes a member of the “Cave of Swimmers,” too. The allusion to Isaiah—with whom Kip is continually associated in the novel—implies that his return to India is also in some sense an exile from his own past.

The film adaptation of The English Patient reveals little of Kip’s story. It removes his entire history with Lord Suffolk and transforms Kip almost entirely into a figure of the colonial Other, the Empire writing back to its colonizers. But Kip’s work as a sapper also provides a kind of skeleton key for unlocking the numerous doubled images throughout the text. Early on, we are told that “the successful defusing of a bomb ended novels” (105), which, as Lee Spinks has also pointed out, ironically anticipates the ending of The English Patient. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki inadvertently cause the small and somewhat haphazard cast of characters at the Villa San Girolamo to separate almost as suddenly as they have come together. For Spinks, The English Patient can be read as “the story of Kip’s gradual recognition that there is no private space untouched by the ‘public battles’ between imperial power and the emerging forces of colonial independence. This recognition, when it arrives, will tear the world of the villa apart, revealing Kip to be . . . the unexploded bomb concealed at the heart of the novel” (Spinks 198). Although I agree with Spinks, we might wonder: is Kip the
only unexploded bomb? Is not the English patient’s body itself, inextricably linked
to his copy of Herodotus and thus history itself, and ministered to in various ways
by the villa’s inhabitants, not also a kind of bomb? If so, is he in the end a bomb
exploded, or a bomb defused?

Ondaatje completed a great deal of research concerning bomb defusion and
disposal while writing The English Patient, and his descriptions of Kip’s work are
remarkably detailed. There is also a clear resonance between Kip’s work defus-
ing bombs and Caravaggio’s work in piecing together the patient’s identity. At
one point, Kip attempts to defuse a bomb that he finds very close to the villa:
“There were six wires jumbled up, tied together, all painted black. He brushed
the dust off the mapboard the wires lay on. Six black wires . . . this opponent had
not just concreted the thing but painted all the characters black. Kip was being
pulled into a psychological vortex . . .” (99). The wires, all painted black, echo
the patient’s burned body—Caravaggio quips that the English patient need not
worry about alcohol affecting his health: “Nothing will kill you, my friend. You
are pure carbon” (109). But, like the community at the villa, it is a body dispersed,
black wires arranged, even tangled together on the “mapboard” of the bomb. The
defusion proves too complicated for Kip, and he ends up holding two live wires
that he cannot put down without a descant chord. Hana finds him and helps him
complete the work, though Kip warns her: “We have an impasse. There’s a joke. I
don’t know where to go from here. I don’t know how complete the trick is” (101). A
poet with a love for unusual nomenclature, it is unsurprising that Ondaatje makes
extensive use of the rather ironic description of violent machines as composed of
“jokes” and “tricks,” but the allusion to them is more than simply ironic.

The English Patient is to a certain degree one giant “trick” fused with a second
“joke.” All of the characters must, as in this scene where Hana and Kip work
together, defuse each other. Even Caravaggio, who in the middle of a robbery
can’t help but feel annoyed when the windows of an advent calendar haven’t been
opened to the correct date, and pauses to take time to fix them, is also a kind of
sapper, a “defuser” of time. Kip’s final fall into the river beneath the bridge, the
“metal body” of the motorbike beneath him a doubled image of the ruined plane
that Almásy attempts to fly out of the desert with Katharine’s body, is also a per-
formative—though unplanned—gesture that returns Hana’s love even as it oper-
ates as a kind of baptism, both a break from and tie back to Kip’s past in the West.

Earlier, when Kip defuses the bomb with Hana’s help, Hana “dives” (like
Almásy with Katharine and Kip into the river) into his body:

... We have this villa this grass, we should have lain down together, you in my arms,
before we died. I wanted to touch that bone at your neck, collarbone, it’s like a small
hard wing under your skin. I wanted to place my fingers against it. I’ve always liked
flesh the colour of rivers and rocks or like the brown eye of a Susan, do you know
what that flower is? Have you seen them? I am so tired, Kip, I want to sleep. I want
to sleep under this tree, put my eye against your collarbone I just want to close my
eyes without thinking of others, want to find the crook of a tree and climb into it and sleep. (103)

Hana’s desire to climb into Kip’s body and sleep marks a possible “defusion” of history counteracts the detonation of the atomic bomb at the end of the text, even if this disarmament is ultimately a limited, precarious, and personal gesture that does not change the course of history in a larger national or political sense. This is part of *The English Patient*’s desire, like its characters, to attain some autonomy from officially sanctioned histories of the past, to exist both within and above the fray of those histories. For example, when Hana and Kip first sleep together, Kip cuts the English patient’s hearing aid so that their night together will pass unnoticed, Kip promising, “I’ll rewire him in the morning” (115). The English patient—a character whose baptism by fire has also clearly separated him from his earlier identity as Almasy—is in the end both Christ and Shakespeare’s Puck, a redeemer of history and the one who orchestrates the text’s “bottomless” midsummer night’s dream. We can read the English patient, as Kip does, as the ruined colonial body, but he is also a Kurtz figure whose meaning lies in not on the inside, like a kernel, but on the outside, like a haze.

This makes any assessment of the politics of *The English Patient* a bit more slippery than we might first surmise. It is a text that consciously and repeatedly underscores the problems of colonialism. As many of its critics have pointed out, it frames that critique especially through the ways that it subverts the major symbols and rhetorical machines used to legitimize imperialist ventures: officially sanctioned histories of the world and the cartographical maps with which they are paired. Madhumalati Adhikari argues that *The English Patient* is an “anti-war novel,” and he romanticizes the text by claiming that Ondaatje wants to “suggest how human beings have always searched for the silver lining despite the devastation [of war] and [the] devaluation of values” that have resulted from war (Adhikari 43). But *The English Patient* is far more problematic than that, suspicious and even critical of its own longing to rise above the fray of history, politics, and nation. The final image is of Hana dropping a glass in her kitchen. At the same moment, half a world away, Kip’s daughter drops a fork, and Kip’s hands sweep down and catch it just before it hits the floor. This image binds Hana and Kip together, but is also an inevitable reminder that they are apart and that—in all likelihood—the glass that Hana drops crashes onto the floor beneath her. The passage claims and disclaims a connection between the two, invites and simultaneously frustrates a romanticized reading of the novel’s conclusion.

Although I have been primarily concerned with the way *The English Patient* encodes this double gesture, a longing to “Erase the family name! Erase nations!” counterweighted with an acknowledgment of one’s responsibility to claim nation and name as one’s own, the ambivalence registered in these texts offers us a new way to think about twentieth- and twenty-first century literary history more broadly. As Susan Stanford Friedman has said, to imagine modernist and postcolonial literature as separate or even antagonistic aesthetic enterprises is analogous
to hearing “one hand clapping,” since so much of postcolonial literature draws on and retools the aesthetic pyrotechnics of its modernist predecessors. This also involves troubling a traditionally perceived antagonism between postmodernism and postcolonial studies, suggesting that a postmodern critique of historical objectivity and the aesthetic practices associated with postmodern writing marks not a disavowal of political responsibility, but a political commitment of a different kind. Finally, through using some of the critical lenses offered by trauma theory, I have also hoped to nuance the way we situate an emergent interest in transnationalism. I suggest that even as we acknowledge the importance of thinking about texts or authors in ways not defined by rigid national paradigms, so much of twentieth century literature remains in a tense or ambivalent relationship with a world that—whether we like it or not—is defined by those paradigms.

In “Is the Post in Postmodernism the Post in Postcolonial?,” Kwame Appiah rightly warns his readers, echoing Sara Suleri, not to treat non-Western texts and voices simply as “otherness machines . . . with the manufactur[ing] of alterity as our principal role” (Appiah 356). For Appiah, to read non-Western texts simply as “non-Western,” as defined and understood entirely by their Otherness, is to repeat the very colonial act that such a project would claim to subvert. Of course, any text that uses Herodotus—the father of Western history—as one of its central thematic tropes is reason enough to categorize The English Patient as a fully Western text. However, the novel is also associated with postcolonial literature or new literatures in English. Kip’s constant association with the biblical Isaiah further blurs any sense that the text neatly divides its characters or its worlds into a simple East and West. This blurring is intentional. In an interview with The Observer, Ondaatje quotes John Berger: “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one . . . [This] is the possibility of our age. A person grows up in Colombo or Wichita and their true mentor or touchstone could be Calvino or Miles Davis, or it could be a political gesture or act in a far away place” (qtd. in McCrum, n.p.). Appiah’s point applies to The English Patient, however, because it helps to explain that what may seem a kind of political escapism—to disavow politics or history—is also, as I have argued, a kind of political commitment. Kip is not just an image of the Other, the “ruined colonial body,” and thus simply an “Otherness machine” within the textual politics of the narrative. He is a character who shares with the patient a longing to erase names, to erase nations, however provisionally, even if in the end he must return to reclaim them. To allow Kip that complexity is to recognize the evolving calculus of identity politics, to see him as we learn to see the patient: as something more than “a book . . . to be read,” someone determined—but not fully determined—by his historical horizons.

**Notes**

1. The southwest coast of Sri Lanka has been dominated by three Sinhala castes distinct from the Goyigama in the Central Highlands. These include the Karava (fishermen), the Durava (toddy tappers), and Salagama (cinnamon peelers). Although originally of marginal or low status, increased
social mobility and modernization in the twentieth century have gradually eroded the link between caste and occupation. See Nubin 153. Cinnamon production was especially encouraged by the Dutch, who created and expanded numerous cinnamon plantations during the 1770s. See Schrikker 52–77.

2. See Heble 97–110; Younis 2–9; and Tötösy de Zepetnek.

3. Ondaatje identifies A.B. Hartley’s *Unexploded Bomb: A History of Bomb Disposal*—which he quotes from at length—as his major source in this area.

4. This is not to imply the postcolonial writing is simply derivative of modernist or postmodern writing, nor to suggest a model of unidirectional aesthetic diffusion. Rather, it calls for a more flexible or plastic relationship between postcolonial writing and its modernist forbears or postmodern contemporaries. Ondaatje has repeatedly highlighted the narrative tactics of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, for example, as influential for his own work. See Solecki 322–33.

Works Cited


