

Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Altered States of Narrative

Beverley Curran

Aichi Shukutoku University, Nagoya

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Curran, Beverley. "Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Altered States of Narrative." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.3 (2004): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1235>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1235)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

CLCWeb Volume 6 Issue 3 (September 2004) Article 3
Beverley Curran,

"Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Altered States of Narrative"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/3>>

Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 6.3 (2004)
Thematic Issue *Comparative Cultural Studies* and Michael Ondaatje's Writing
Edited by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/>>

Abstract: Beverley Curran argues in her paper "Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Altered States of Narrative" that Ondaatje reconfigures in his novel the "romantic" figure of the father/artist as a clandestine lover, a drug addict, or an eccentric translator, all figures with dependencies. In *The English Patient*, the father or artist's sense of source, continuity, or authority are translated into a narrative which rejects the perverse captivity demanded of the lover and the translator by fidelity or by the tenets of realistic representation. Using sex, drugs, and translation, Ondaatje deranges both time and space to reconfigure the role of the artist as a translator in an attempt to dislocate the "false rhapsody of art" or historical explanation and their authority and relocate the site of the story. Creation is less a preoccupation than contradiction and the consequences of choice in this novel, and instead of the textual strategies of realist narrative to "maintain self-other relations of dominance" to establish authority, Ondaatje applies translation to narrative in the novel so that, at the story's heart there is deferment, for a translation is never definitive.

Beverley Curran

Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Altered States of Narrative

In his discussion of translation, George Steiner recalls Saint Jerome's representation of that process as "meaning brought home captive by the translator" (298). From both within and without, former European colonies have been seen as "translations" of a distant and idealized original whose standards have been transplanted and reduced to "imperfect copies, characterized by absence or imitation" (Brydon and Tiffin 57). In a search for origins, we will find not a source but absence, dispersal, and loss. In Australia, alongside the more potent legend of Ned Kelly is the story of Eliza Fraser, a "captivity narrative" of "first contact" operating as a key myth in the process of translating nationhood into being. Like that of Ned Kelly, the Eliza Fraser story inspired a series of paintings by the Australian modernist Sidney Nolan. Nolan's images, in turn, provoked the imagination of Sri Lankan Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje, who rewrote the story in his early long poem, *The Man with Seven Toes* (1969) inspired only by "the account in the paintings" (Barbour 220) and Colin MacInnes's succinct and rather snide version of that story that appears in the catalogue of the 1957 Whitechapel Gallery exhibition, Nolan's first major retrospective, and which Ondaatje includes as an afterword to his long poem: "Mrs Fraser was a Scottish lady who was shipwrecked on what is now Fraser Island, off the Queensland Coast. She lived for 6 months among the aborigines, rapidly losing her clothes, until she was discovered by one Bracefell, a deserting convict who himself had hidden for 10 years among the primitive Australians. The lady asked the criminal to restore her to civilization, which he agreed to do if she would promise to intercede for his free pardon from the Governor. The bargain was sealed, and the couple set off inland. At first sight of European settlement, Mrs Fraser rounded on her benefactor and threatened to deliver him up to justice if he did not immediately decamp. Bracefell returned disillusioned to the hospitable bush, and Mrs Fraser's adventures aroused such admiring interest that on her return to Europe she was able to exhibit herself at 6d a showing in Hyde Park." (*The Man with Seven Toes* n.p.)

According to Kay Schaffer in her examination of the Eliza Fraser stories, gaps in that captivity narrative facilitate speculative supplements like the MacInnes version. There is an absence of verifiable data concerning both the characters and circumstances: there are no records of birth or death for Eliza Fraser --she may have been born in Ceylon -- nor convincing evidence to confirm the details of the shipwreck, captivity, or rescue. What can be verified is that Fraser's "captivity" lasted six weeks rather than months, and that "the popular Queensland version of her rescue and sexual liaison during a lengthy trek back to Moreton Bay with the convict David Bracefell did not occur, although historians still speculate that Bracefell may have been involved as a helpmate to her official rescuer ... and his 'contact' with Mrs Fraser may well have been sexual" (Schaffer 136). In writing his long poem, Ondaatje was not interested in investigating the historical account of the Fraser story nor in explaining it to his readers: "It had to be brief and imagistic because the formal alternative was to write a long graphic introduction explaining the situation, setting, characters, and so on. All the geographical references in the book are probably wrong and I'm sure all Australians think that the book is geographically ridiculous, just as the people of the south-west might think *Billy the Kid* is" (Solecki 20). Just as "the cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history" (Ondaatje, *The English Patient* 119) were sought out by Herodotus in *The Histories*, MacInnes's modulated version of the Fraser story interests Ondaatje as "the supplementary to the main argument" (119), as do the obscured "historical" figures of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, or the elusive desert topography of the American Southwest or the Sahara. *The English Patient*, I suggest, reconfigures radically the nebulous representation at the core of these narratives as a translator who exists in and as the dead centre of powerful cultural tensions. Whereas Douglas Barbour contends that for Ondaatje, the father appears as a writer, as a "kind of romantic artist [that] is a paradigm of all such figures one encounters in the poet's work" (76), including Billy the Kid and Bolden, it would seem that in *The English Patient*, creation is less a preoccupation than contradiction and the consequences of choice, and that the "romantic" figure of the father/artist is being re-read as a clandestine lover, a drug addict, or an eccentric translator, all figures with dependencies. Instead of

the textual strategies of realist narrative to "maintain self-other relations of dominance" to establish authority, Ondaatje's application of translation to narrative in *The English Patient* means that, at the story's heart there is deferment, for a translation is never definitive, "a knowledge derived from displacement" (Clifford 53) and from multiple "sources." Ondaatje does not begin with historical accuracy or a character to write *The Man with Seven Toes*; from the dozen versions of Eliza Fraser's story, he takes Nolan's paintings and the deliberately skewed version by MacInnes. In *The English Patient*, the father or artist's sense of source, continuity, or authority are translated into a narrative which rejects the perverse captivity demanded of the lover and the translator by fidelity or by the tenets of realistic representation. If there are a hundred different images of Isaiah's face, the "English patient" is too damaged to be identified.

In "Traveling Theory," Edward Said outlines four stages of the transportation of ideas: first, a "point of origin, or what seems like one;" next, "a distance transversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts" followed by conditions of acceptance or resistance to the "transplanted" theory or idea, and finally, the transformation of the idea by its "new uses, its new position in a new time and space" (226-27). These four stages could just as easily be applied to the process of translation, and indeed, the translation is one way in which ideas travel. But alongside the movement of ideas over time or space, there are other considerations such as speed: the particular displacement and mobility of information and communications technology disturb and redefine the process of translation and how it is represented or understood. In this regard, it is interesting to locate the Eliza Fraser story at the dawn of the Victorian era in the 1830s and then to consider the seemingly unassailable position England would occupy over the next sixty years as a wealthy and confident nation with an extensive empire and remarkable record of cultural and scientific achievements. However, by the 1880s, Britain was losing control of the industries and technologies that had been so instrumental in its progress, importing chemicals from Germany and calibrated tools from America. "The 'civilizing mission' of imperialism, so readily subscribed to earlier in the century, so inspiring to thousands of idealistic best and brightest colonial administrator-missionaries, had become a cynical exercise in trade and despotism" (Blaise 226). The "dreadful progress" was subverted in art, culminating in the "touchstone literary confirmation" of the derangement of temporal order in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, where, based on an actual incident which took place in 1894, anarchists attempt to terrorize the complacency of mercantile British society by blowing up the Greenwich Observatory. The touchstone text for this particular paper is Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, which uses sex, drugs, and translation to derange both time and space in an extreme complication of the captivity narrative, and to reconfigure the role of the artist as a translator in an attempt to dislocate both the "false rhapsody of art" (Ondaatje, *The English Patient* 241) and its stern authority. Resisting the established rules of personal, national, or literary relationships can be seen less as betrayal than "the desire of another life" (239), a notion in keeping with Said's "Traveling Theory Reconsidered" essay, in which the sense of remedy or reconciliation implied in the fourth stage of theoretical travel in the earlier essay assumes a more transgressive posture: the translation or "transformation" of an idea by new uses now "flames out [and] restates and reaffirms its own inherent tensions by moving to another site" (438).

Both the captivity narrative and the translation are genres linked to colonialism and national identity, "used in all kinds of ways to perpetuate the superiority of some cultures over another" (Bassnett and Trivedi 17). They also share an interesting publishing history. By the end of the eighteenth century, English translations, particularly of Eastern erotica and gothic novels, had gained enough prestige and commercial credibility to create a demand for forged translations. While literature moved toward realism, translation moved away. Translators "did not hesitate to change titles, delete entire pages and introduce new elements with a view to pleasing the reader and conforming to sensibilities that were dominant at the time" (Delisle and Woodsworth 212). At the same time, however, pseudo-translations of Eastern erotica attempted to appear as authentic academic studies through fictitious footnotes, glosses and bibliographies in order to camouflage their sexual content as scientific research (see Schick 182). In fact, imitation became more important and more attractive than the importation of actual foreign views or values, or the cachet of an original text. There was a similar hunger for captivity narratives. About seven hundred of them

were published in America between 1682 and 1800 (Schaffer 49) and by the late eighteenth century, pseudo-captivity narratives were appearing in England. Captivity narratives, too, had concerns about fidelity; a version of Mrs Fraser's captivity was promoted, for example, as a "plain, unvarnished tale, exaggerating nothing, but recording truly and faithfully the particulars" of her ordeal (Schaffer 53-56). While pseudo-translation assumed the guise of scholarship, the pseudo-captivity narratives borrowed stylistic devices from the sentimental novel until "the 'truth'-effects of the genre were so challenged by melodramatic embellishments, exaggerations and improbabilities, as well as frequent plagiarism, rhetorical and illustrated borrowings from one event to another, that disbelief was the likely result of publication" (Schaffer 49). While there were claims to historical accuracy in prefaces that "would feed the ethnographic interest of scientists and historians" (Schaffer 57), there was also a facetious tone which assured readers that along with information there would be (sexual) excitement. In other words, the popularity of accounts of captivity narratives and translations of Eastern erotica in the nineteenth century are evidence that the sexual metaphors of travel and imperial conquest can probably not be overstated.

Running alongside nineteenth-century versions of these genres were accounts of natural science and geographical exploration, which eliminated all emotion from their accounts. This was the legacy of a Victorian colonialism in which, as Clark Blaise describes it in *Time Lord*, "nature was only to be studied, not to be worshiped" (119) and even sermons were "crafted documents, listened to and judged not on their emotional content, but on their intellectual and moral merit" (119-20). This detached tone, for example, was used in accounts prepared for the Royal Geographical Society, and, in Ondaatje's novel set decades later, in the accounts of their desert explorations written by Count Ladislaus de Almásy and Madox. Nevertheless, these men each carried a translation, Herodotus's *The Histories* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, respectively, as a literary talisman that countered and informed the disembodied voice of the explorer. Perhaps it is his choice of talisman that allows Madox to suspect not only Almásy's love and adulterous relationship with Katharine Clifton, in spite of his friend's attempts at camouflage, but also to recognize the larger dangers of that liaison. While for Almásy and Catharine, "there was only one person to avoid being seen by" (237), namely Catharine's husband, Geoffrey, Madox, through his "continual rereading [of Tolstoy's] story of romance and deceit" (237) knew the complexity and extent of the web in which the two lovers had been caught: "Geoffrey Clifton was a man embedded in the English machine. He had a family genealogy going back to Canute. The machine would not necessarily have revealed to Clifton, married only eighteen months, his wife's infidelity, but it began to encircle the fault, the disease in the system. It knew every move ... from the first day of the awkward touch in the porte cochère of the Semiramis Hotel" (237). This strange translation of a captivity narrative extends far beyond the rules of fidelity demanded by marriage and "the boulder," Almásy and Katharine "had placed between themselves for some social law neither had believed in" (171), to reveal the tense connection between history and contingency despite the fact that there is no mention of "adultery in the minutes of the Geographical Society;" and that the site of lovemaking "never appears in the detailed reports which chartered every knoll and every incident of history" (145). Obsessed with Katharine while writing his book, "unable to remove her body from the page" (235), Almásy nevertheless resists dedicating the monograph "to her, to her voice, to her body" (235), choosing instead a king. And yet, in his commonplace book, it was his own identity that he would obscure: "He bought pale brown cigarette papers and glued them into sections of *The Histories* that recorded wars that were of no interest to him. He wrote down all her arguments against him. Glued into the book -- giving him only the voice of the watcher, the listener, the 'he'" (172). All the texts they read, too, in one way or another, contain echoes of their lives.

It was "the habit of social graces" (97) that prevented Katharine from admitting her love for Almásy to her husband or anyone else. The "English" patient did not want to admit his emotion and made up for it with an excessive politeness that was rude. In the Villa San Girolamo, another unlikely love was enacted in even less certain terms than that in the desert. The tender love between the mad, young, sad Hana for the "English" patient is one of psychic survival and somatic care. As a nurse, her coping mechanism for deep melancholy -- the war, the death of soldiers, the loss of her father and her unborn child -- was reductive: her possessions were minimal; she used

the same name ("Buddy") to address everyone, including herself. She focuses her attentions on caring for the English patient and the only way that he can get Hana to communicate is to ask her to read to him. Hana's intimacy with the English patient is indeed one sustained by sharing books and administering morphine.

In *The Man with Seven Toes*, an intimacy is established tentatively between the lady and the convict who guides her through a terrible geography of swamp and desert to "the city" (19). It is a drugged landscape with "night birds / who clawed the barks of trees / sucking out cocaine, so one could catch them / staggering in the sand at dawn / their nerves clogged and rotted with drug / feathers caked with a red vomit" (28). This "ridiculous" desert geography of the poem was the site of a "love story" remembered later by an anonymous "lady" in the final poem as she sleeps in the Royal Hotel, "her burnt arms and thighs/ soaking the cold of the sheets" (41), recalling the convict's mouth as "a collyrium that licked burnt eyes" (40). The historical character of Eliza Fraser has lost her name and become "she" or "me" in that long poem; Bracefell had found a new one (Potter). In *The English Patient*, Almásy's intimate geography has been burnt to anonymity, recalling the desert in his own seared somatic state and through his memory, as he mediates between the nurse, thief, and sapper that share the provisional space of the abandoned Tuscan villa in the waning days of the Second World War. And it is the desert evoked by morphine and memory, a place rather than a time or an image, that holds the secrets of the titular English patient's identity in Ondaatje's novel, and never really relinquishes them.

The English patient is a reservoir of information and a pool of memory, "a translated subject, a liminal figure, not someone who has 'gone native' ... but someone whose identity has become terminally displaced through cross cultural experience" (Jay 421); and his stories of the desert are fragments of an immense and fluid interweave of narrative whose pieces no longer fit snugly together in an assured and sturdy way. This is a sabotaged narrative; body parts of the text are missing. Thus a subtle echo of earlier moments in the history of conquest and contact are heard in the opening pages of the novel when the anonymous English patient recites his stories: "They found my body and made me a boat of sticks and dragged me across the desert. The Bedouin knew about fire. They knew about planes that since 1939 had been falling out of the sky. They could recognize the drone of a wounded plane, they knew how to pick their way through such shipwrecks" (5). The novel also reminds us that the desert experienced an averting of Western eyes for hundreds of years after Herodotus, from 425 BC to the beginning of the twentieth century: "The nineteenth century was an age of river seekers. And then in the 1920s there is a sweet postscript history on this pocket of earth, made mostly by privately funded expeditions and followed by modest lectures given at the Geographical Society in London" (133). Love and war and endless emotion charge the explorations, but in the name of scientific objectivity, these are erased in the process of writing, much in the way that "the truth of lived communal (or personal) experience has often been totally sublimated in official narratives, institutions, and ideologies" (Said, "Opponents, Audiences" 147), or technology airbrushed out of the wilderness in order to differentiate between the corruption of Civilization and the purity of Nature. Almásy entered the Libyan Desert as an explorer in 1930 and gradually become nationless, nameless. For him, 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" (138-39). As an explorer, he thought he was acting alone, or in concert with a group of men who cared only for the land, although one wanted a sand dune named after him, another a village. In the reports delivered to the Royal Geographic Society, "all human and financial behaviour [lay] on the far side of the issue being discussed -- which [was] the earth's surface and its 'interesting geographical problems'" (134). But his eye had been fooled by the pseudo authority of the West, for even as Almásy registered "the brightness and faith and colour" (261) of a desert illuminated by the "communal book of moonlight" (261), he only belatedly realized that "the ends of the earth are never the points on the map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever" (141).

The English patient knew the desert before he had ever been there, "knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age, for this cause or that greed" (18). The act of reading had served as a means of transport to places never seen. In the wake of his seduction in and by the desert, the attraction to that geography is in the re-reading, turning the pages backwards and "re-treat[ing] from the grand story ... stumbl[ing] accidentally upon a luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still. Those moments, those few pages in a book we can go back and forth over" (Ondaatje, *Skin of a Lion* 148); in the English patient's case, the story of his illicit love for a married woman. But like a book, the desert is also "crowded with the world" (*The English Patient* 285), and with the aid of books in code to guide spies and armies across it, the desert has been "raped by war and shelled as if it were just sand" (257). Caravaggio, the thief, sums it up: "The trouble with us is we are all where we shouldn't be" (122). Europe is fighting wars in the "vast and silent pocket[s]" (134) of the Libyan Desert; Kip, a Sikh, is in Italy, dismantling German bombs and fighting English wars. Kirpal Singh, or Kip, is aligned with the English patient through a mutual affinity for machines and affection for Hana. In his own mind, the Indian sapper, whose own name has been erased and individual identity rendered invisible by his brown skin, has aligned the English patient with his teacher, Lord Suffolk: "He was most comfortable with men who had the abstract madness of autodidacts, like his mentor, Lord Suffolk, like the English patient" (111). Lord Suffolk, who had taken Kip under his wing in order to train him as a sapper, was a font of eclectic local knowledge and he introduced "the customs of England to the young Sikh as if it was a recently discovered culture" (184). Prior to his wartime preoccupation with dismantling bombs, Lord Suffolk's "passion" had been "the study of *Lorna Doone* and how authentic the novel was historically and geographically" (185). His interest in authenticity and authority marks a cleavage in the similarity between him and the English patient. Unlike Katharine, who loved words for their clarity and reason, Almásy, although a reader and polyglot, "thought words bent emotions like sticks in water" (238). Clarity was something more valued by Hana. Although she had elected to have no interest in anything but the present, she grounded herself in relationships of her personal past: "In her life there was her mother Alice her father Patrick her stepmother Clara and Caravaggio. She had ... admitted these names to Kip as if they were her credentials, her dowry. They were faultless and needed no discussion. She used them like authorities in a book she could refer to on the right way to boil an egg, or the correct way to slip garlic into a lamb. They were not to be questioned"(268).

And indeed this is also the way that Kirpal Singh had thought of "British civilization," something certain down to the smallest detail of haberdashery. Standing over the "English" patient in the wake of news of the bombing of Hiroshima, condensing all of England into the symbol of the burnt body lying on the bed, Kip speaks of his conversion by the missionary rules and traditions that replaced those of his own country: "Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and printing presses?"(283). Kip's explosive reaction to the bomb is a surprise to all, not just because he has already implicitly questioned the national identity of Almásy by noticing that the way the patient sucks condensed milk is not the way the British do. Kip has operated, like the English patient in the "slipstream," understanding the power of invisibility; wanting "not to belong to anyone" (139). Thus he had been patient with his brother's defiance of British rule, and took no offence at the treatment he himself had received as a recruit in the British army. Kip chooses the vantage point of the periphery -- from his cold professional position, "everything ... apart from danger, was periphery" (126) -- where he can see the relationship between things, but not be sucked into responsibility. While he dismantles bombs effortlessly in the realm of straightforward choices, he is dismayed to find himself being drawn into love. During the war, the sapper had found statues to sleep with, grieving stone angels to watch over him: "he had giving his trust only to a race of stones" (104). But Hana had drawn him inside something "like a painting" (104), and it "annoyed" him that, by staying with him when he had defused a bomb in the garden, she had "made him owe her something. Making him feel in retrospect responsible for

her" (104). His youth lets her sleep with him and engage in tender games, but "his body allows nothing to enter him that comes from another world. A boy in love who will not eat the food she gathers" (126), preserving the "hardness and clarity" of gem cutters" (110). Stone angels and gem cutters bring to mind the thoughts of Walter Benjamin and his melancholy gaze and "gesture of attentiveness" which "fundamentally and resolutely resists incorporating the other" (Hanssen 162).

There are other echoes of Walter Benjamin in this novel, as well. The "English" patient Almásy lies dying in a bed in a ruined villa in Tuscany whose name, Villa San Girolamo, summons thoughts of Girolamo Savonarola and his "bonfire of the vanities." The room in which he lies fools the patient -- he thinks it is one in the Villa Bruscoli -- but evokes Savonarola in association with Poliziano, the Renaissance translator of Homer and a poet whose verse inspired paintings by Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci. The Renaissance seems, like Hana's adolescence, "a place rather than a time" (90), the resonance of its bold turn from the limited but certain dogmas of the medieval through a re-reading of Plato and other classical works to a "natural" inquiry into the study of man and the universe. This search for another origin recalls Benjamin's interest in "natural history," but moving in another direction, namely, towards an "*Ursprung* or 'primal leap', no longer of the order of the Greek *arche*, the foundation of Western epistemology and ontology" (Hanssen 4) and his project for a new historiography and reappraisal of idealism through a theory of allegory that would de-limit "the human subject through a reading of the figures of stones, animals, and angels" (4). Benjamin was interested in the debris of history, rather than its skeleton, as Hanssen describes it, and chose allegory as a way to expose "the incontrovertible historicity that defines all human acts of signification" (15), and translation as the operation by which "the agent or power that symbolized" was turned into "the symbolized by hitting on the stratum of language that at once erased meaning, intention, communication" (35). The painted angels of the Renaissance haunt Ondaatje's novel with their sad beauty, but hovering too is the modernist image of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, the angel of history, whose face "is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 259). It is a figure which Ondaatje evokes in his description of Almásy carrying Katharine from the Cave of Swimmers, "her body facing back, over my shoulder" (171), the way he had held her in his arms when they had been lovers, "her arms out, fingers like starfish" (171).

Nolan's *Woman in Mangroves*, inspired by the rock art of Aboriginal artists, might well be in there, too, at least in the modernist sensibility it asserts in exploring its subject from a multiple of perspectives. In the 1957 painting, the figure of Mrs Fraser is "splayed across a rock ... as the convict emerges from the cave" (MacInnes, qtd in Schaffer 148). MacInnes's recapitulation of the Fraser captivity narrative portrays Eliza Fraser as betraying the convict who had saved her, sending him back into the bush. This is ignored in Ondaatje's long poem, as is "the paintings political theme of betrayal" (Barbour 34). But the theme is of importance in *The English Patient*, tied to issues of personal identity and national allegiance, as well as translation. It is pursued by the thumbless thief Caravaggio, who constructs a raft of morphine to let the English patient drift and identify himself and explain what he was doing in the desert during the war, why he guided the German spy Eppler across the desert. Caravaggio's appearance in the novel makes an intertextual reference to Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, and his name sounds a wider cultural resonance. In the earlier novel, he was a convict, who escapes from prison by making boundaries uncertain. "Demarcation," he says "is all we need to remember" (497). Applying blue paint to his body he walks across the blue roof he was painting and disappears, invisible to the guards "who look up and saw nothing there" (498). In the desert of *The English Patient*, too, "it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation" (18). Just as Kirpal Singh dismantles a bomb, "reestablish[ing] the maze of wires into its original pattern" (193), so Caravaggio shares ampoules of morphine with Almásy in order to "unthread the story out of him: "Each swallow of morphine by the body opens a further door ... When Almásy speaks [Caravaggio] stays alongside him reordering the events. Only desire makes the story errant, flickering like a compass needle" (248-89). The drug "implodes" time and geography "the way maps compress the world onto a two-dimensional sheet of paper" (161) and Cara-

vaggio later realizes that this map constructed of morphine has not after all been drawn for his desire. On the contrary, he now believes that "Almásy has used him and the morphine to return to his own world, for his own sadness" (251). Almásy, in his turn, challenges Caravaggio to reveal his own hidden stories: "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, loose vegetation, pockets of stones" (253): the guide has changed places, the subject has shifted. The desert's hazy architectures built within the mirage of drugged memory suggest rather than reveal the complex tangle of translation and transnationalism.

In another book, a woman follows a dog into her captivity; a man with seven toes leads her back. Jackals guide the dead, and translators, books, into an afterlife in a melancholy act of liberation. Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, saturated in sadness, guides the reader away from the containment of fidelity to authority and origin and the captivity of self absorption to a narrative that admits its dependencies as a communal strategy for survival: the linguistic association of a needle under the skin, the guiding needle of a compass, and the needle skipping on the record of history are played out in narrative postures as troubling, irreconcilable and vital as the task of the translator.

Works Cited

- Barbour, Douglas. *Michael Ondaatje*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993.
- Bassnett, Susan, and Hareesh Trivedi, eds. *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968. 255-66.
- Blaise, Clark. *Time Lord*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000.
- Brydon, Diana, and Helen Tiffin. *Decolonizing Fictions*. Sydney: Dangaroo P, 1993.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.
- Delisle, Jean, and Judith Woodsworth, eds. *Translators through History*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995.
- Hanssen, Beatrice. *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.
- Jay, Paul. "Translation, Invention, Resistance: Rewriting the Conquest in Carlos Fuentes's 'The Two Shores'." *Modern Fiction Studies* 43.2 (1997): 405-31.
- MacInnes, Colin. "Introduction." *Sidney Nolan: Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings from 1947 to 1957 Held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London: June to July 1957*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1957.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The Man with Seven Toes*. Toronto: The Coach House P, 1969.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *In the Skin of a Lion*. New York: Quality Paperbacks Book Club, 1997.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1992.
- Said, Edward W. "Traveling Theory." *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Edward W. Said. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983. 226-47.
- Said, Edward W. "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Edward W. Said. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. 118-47.
- Said, Edward W. "Traveling Theory Reconsidered." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Edward W. Said. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. 436-52.
- Schaffer, Kay. *In the Wake of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.
- Schick, Irvin Cemil. *The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alteritist Discourse*. London: Verso, 1999.
- Solecki, Sam. "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1975)." *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*. Ed. Sam Solecki. Montréal: Véhicule P, 1985. 12-27.
- Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975.

Author's profile: Beverly Curran teaches cultural studies and translation in the Department of Creativity and Culture at Aichi Shukutoku University in Nagoya, Japan. Curran's papers, interviews, and reviews have appeared in collections and journals including *Canadian Literature* (1998), *Style* (1999), *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* (2000), *He Said She Says: An RSVP to the Male Text* (Ed. Mica Howe and Sarah Appleton Aguiar, 2001), and *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (Ed. J. Scott Bryson, 2002). *Rezubian nikki*, Curran's translation of Nicole Brossard's *Journal intime* was published in 2000. E-mail: <bcurran@gol.com>.