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Ondaatje's The English Patient and Rewriting History

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Stephanie M. Hilger,
"Ondaatje's _The English Patient_ and Rewriting History"
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Abstract: Stephanie M. Hilger, in her paper "Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Rewriting History," situates the novel within the long-standing Western tradition of writing about the cultural "Other," from Herodotus to Michel de Montaigne to Rudyard Kipling. Michel de Certeau's notion of history serves as a reference point for the analysis of Ondaatje's presentation of the "English" patient's story as well as of twentieth-century history. Hilger argues that the protagonist's physical mutilation is a metonymic representation of post-World War II and postcolonial consciousness. In the same way that the characters in the novel attempt to understand the mystery that is the "English" patient, Ondaatje's readers are led on a search for the understanding of a brutal and fragmented reality. While the novel questions and undermines the opposition between the "civilized" and the "barbarian," Ondaatje also suggests that certain historical realities, such as the dropping of the atomic bomb, force characters into a binary that they have been trying to deconstruct throughout the narrative.

Stephanie M. HILGER

Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

Ondaatje's "English" patient starts his frequently interrupted and mediated I-narration with an acknowledgment of the influence and the power of the writing of history. He tells Hana, his devoted Canadian nurse, that "I am a person who if left alone in someone's home walks to the bookcase, pulls down a volume and inhales it. So history enters us" (18). That he inhaled the dusty smell of Herodotus's writings becomes clear when Hana looks at the book which came with him through the plane crash and the fire. It is "a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations -- so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus"(16). The "English" patient's palimpsestic creation of history and identity appears as an acknowledgment of Herodotus's claim that "this history of mine … has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument" (119). The "English" patient's supplementary exploration endeavors to complete Herodotus's project of "piecing together a mirage" (119). This desire to explore further and map in greater detail locates the "English" patient and Herodotus within a long-standing tradition of writing about the Other. The "English" patient acknowledges this tradition: "I knew... charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades … So I knew their place before I crashed among them, knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age, for this cause or that greed" (18). In evoking this tradition, Ondaatje blurs the thin line between history and fiction in order to complicate both the perception of the Other and the Self and his blurring occurs in a narrative in which fragments become centrally important in dealing with questions of identity.

The novel thematizes the concern with fragments on a formal level. *The English Patient* is -- as the title of the second part suggests -- "In Near Ruins" (25). The formal fragmentation parallels the reality that the characters have to face. In the present of the narration -- at the end of World War II -- they have taken refuge from reality in a bombed Italian monastery that is "in ruins." Although their stay in the Villa San Girolamo could appear as a flight from the outside world, the fact that each character attempts to remember the past in order to get a grip on his/her identity stresses the importance of the larger context. As a result, the novel consists of flashbacks, which are often vague and provide the reader only with a fragmentary account of both history and each character's story. In an attempt to redefine their identity, the characters turn to books, themselves partly destroyed by the war, that thematize the representation of the cultural Other: Herodotus's writings, Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans,* Tacitus's *Annals,* passages from the Bible, Kipling's *Kim,* Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma,* song lyrics, and accounts from the London Geographical Society. These fragmented accounts of the Other become mirrors of the characters' mutilated identity, inscribed with history's debris and its ruins. The first scenes in the novel present the reader with the mutilated body of the "English" -- as he is believed to be throughout most of the novel -- patient. His mutilation is mirrored by the destruction around him, be it that of the Villa or of the partly destroyed books in which there are "gaps of plot" (7), including his own story. A plane crash has melted his body into a paralyzed lump of aubergine-colored human flesh. The "English" patient's body represents the ambiguity of the term "history" metonymically; it contains both the effects of history and his story. In *The Writing of History,* Michel de Certeau describes history as "*a text* organizing units of meaning and subjecting them to transformations whose rules can be determined" (41). The "English" patient becomes the battlefield for different historical meanings which his body -- the text -- establishes for those who read it and attempt to understand its rules. Each character transforms the text's meaning in different ways by establishing his or her own relationship to the "English" patient. As Certeau points out, "*intelligibility is established through a relation with the other*; it moves (or 'progresses') by changing what it makes of its 'other' -- the Indian, the past, the people, the mad, the child, the Third World" (*The Writing of History* 3). The characters' attempt to make the "English" patient intelligible, to fit him into a category, is at the same time an indirect endeavor to come to terms

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with their own relation to a changed and changing reality, in which the question of who the "Other" is, cannot clearly be answered.

Incited by Hana's curiosity, the "English" patient attempts to overcome his amnesia. He starts his narration by defining himself in relation to the "Other," the Bedouins who rescue him after the plane crash. He describes these nomads as "water people" and observes that "even today caravans look like a river" (19). The Bedouins are nomads; they escape definition because they are not contained within one place. Ondaatje continues a tradition of associating the indefinable "Other" with nomads that goes back to Herodotus. In his history, Herodotus describes "wandering Scythians, who neither plow nor sow" (211) and who disappear from those places where the Persian army wants to capture them. Significantly, Herodotus's focus on the Scythians appears in the same book -- Book Four of his history -- as his wish to map the world the way it "really" is. Herodotus tries to define the Scythians, but he acknowledges that this topic is difficult to map: "additions being what [his] work always from the very first affected" (213), Herodotus does not give his readers a straightforward history, but, rather, points out that there are different accounts. There is "the account which the Scythians themselves give" (206), but the "Greeks who dwell about the Pontus tell a different story" (207) and finally there "is also a different story ... in which [he] [is] more inclined to put faith than in any other" (208). Despite his own preference for a specific account, Herodotus does not conceal the other versions, but instead points at the gaps in his knowledge. In Herodotus's description, the Scythians "are not to be found where they are sought. They are never *there.* Nomadism is not an attribute of the Scythian or the Cannibal: it is their very definition. What is foreign is that which escapes from a place" (Certeau, *Heterologies* 70). Herodotus's Scythians continue to be the ungraspable Other, as do Ondaatje's Bedouins whom the "English" patient remembers on his journey into the past. Although the "English" patient speaks the language of the tribe which rescues him, he can never locate it exactly. The nomads keep escaping the cartographer's eye. The closest the "English" patient comes to locating them is as "one of the northwest desert tribes" (Ondaatje 9). As a consequence it remains the "_____ tribe" (95) for the "English" patient and his readers. This blank parallels that of the "_____, the secret wind of the desert" (16), the wind that accompanies the unnamable tribe, the Other. The ungraspable Other is -- like the Scythian -- "a figure on the fringe who leaves the premises, and in doing so jolts the entire topographical order of language" (Certeau, *Heterologies* 70-71). There is no term for a signified that cannot be mapped. The nomads' wandering subverts the colonizer's language by exposing the uselessness of his linguistic signifiers and by projecting a gap unto the mutilated body of someone who, it seems, had been in charge of colonizing their terrain. The tribe also undermines colonial power more directly by appropriating the "English" patient's colonial knowledge to its own ends: "For some he draws maps that go beyond their own boundaries and for other tribes too he explains the mechanics of guns" (22). The "English" patient yields the knowledge of those instruments which made colonization largely possible in the first place, maps and weapons.

In 1944, approximately two years after his crash, the tribe members bring their patient to the British base at Siwa. There he "was one more enigma, with no identification, unrecognizable" (95) because -- as is indirectly conjectured later in the novel -- the tribesmen took away his identification plate. The removal of this sign opens up a blank in his identity, which could also have made him into the "_____" patient. But by deciding to bring "their" patient to the British base, the _____ tribe establishes his identity as British. He becomes the "English" patient, but the adjective is always used with implicit quotation marks. His physical signifiers do not refer to a stable signified; the nomadic quality and the mysterious identity of the _____ tribe is reflected mirror-like upon the "English" patient. He appears as Herodotus's "Scythian," totally Other, elusive and mysterious. At the same time that Herodotus focuses on the indefinable nature of the Scythian, he also hints at the possibility that the Scythian might be a barbarian, an intimation which can be transposed to Ondaatje's title character. Herodotus reports to have come across androphagi on the "inland boundaries of Scythia " (235): "The manners of the androphagi are more savage than those of any other race. They neither observe justice, nor are governed by any laws. They are nomads, and their dress is Scythian; but the language which they speak is peculiar to themselves.

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Unlike any other nations in these parts, they are cannibals" (236). The figure on the fringe becomes the absolute manifestation of the "uncivilized" Other. All marks of civilization are absent: there is no judicial system, their language is not intelligible and they are cannibals and thereby possess the ultimate marker of barbarity. Herodotus's description poses the question of what establishes identity. Language manifests itself as one of the markers of identity. Yet the "English" patient speaks various languages -- English, German, and the tribe's dialect -- rather than only one. He crosses linguistic as well as national boundaries and therefore remains an unidentified alien figure with his "black body" (Ondaatje 3) and his "dark face" (4). There is always something we do not know about the "English" patient. Is he a "barbarian"? Has he profited from the death of others in the context of the war? Is he a traitor? Is he the equivalent of Herodotus's cannibals in twentieth-century history? These questions hover over the novel and remain unanswered. The mysteriousness that surrounds the title character raises the suspicion that he himself might have behaved in savage ways, inconsistent with justice or laws. Even though different characters attempt to fill the gaps in his story and darn the holes that history has torn in the tissue of the Self, the "English" patient's identity remains fluid and therefore suspicious. He is the unsettling presence at the end of colonialism and the war because history writes the problems of a "period of adjustment" (54) upon his body.

The "English" patient hovers on the dividing line between the civilized and the barbarian. His presence undermines any rigidly established barrier between these two terms. In creating the character of the "English" patient, Ondaatje continues Michel de Montaigne's sixteenth-century questioning of this barrier. Certeau observes that Montaigne examines the possible transition of terms traditionally associated with the "uncivilized" Other to the side of the colonizer, the "civilized": "The name comes undone. It functions as an adjective in relation to places that have the value of undefined nouns. It bursts into pieces disseminated throughout space. It becomes dispersed in contradictory meanings, which are indifferently assignable to cases that used to be kept carefully separate: for example, "savage" remains over where it was, but with an inverted meaning, and "barbarian" comes our way, assigned to the very place from which it had been excluded.In this way, the place of the Cannibals is emptied -- it becomes vacant and distant. Where are they?" (Certeau, *Heterologies* 73). Certeau's comment relates to Montaigne's way of identifying the "place of the other" (67) in the specific historical context of the sixteenth-century discovery of the "New World." Montaigne was one of the first thinkers to deconstruct many of the tropes within the tradition of writing about the Other. He interrogates the order of center and margins by positing polarities which he establishes only in order to show how they collapse into each other. Montaigne's observation about the dissemination of the name and the inversion of the savage/civilized binary is enacted by Ondaatje's construction of the "English" patient, who no longer has a name. The figure of the "English" patient causes this binary to collapse in the context of the twentieth century. The term "barbarian" now becomes applied to the colonizing powers who claim to be the "civilized." The "civilized"'-s barbarity is less deniable and more visible -- through the media -- than ever before in history. After the fascist mass destruction of all kinds of Others, after the Allies' dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the use of colonies and dependencies as battlefields, the term "barbarian" has shifted to the "civilized" and has become disseminated throughout space. The novel refers to World War II as the "last mediaeval war" (Ondaatje 69) and to the fighting in the desert as "The Barbarians versus the Barbarians" (257), thereby highlighting the cruelty of twentieth-century history.

The "English" patient's charred body becomes a metonymic representation of the new dark age into which humanity has entered. His body dramatizes the conflict between a historiographical and a psychoanalytical conception of time and memory. These two disciplines conceive of the relationship between the past and the present in different terms because "psychoanalysis recognizes the past *in* the present; [whereas] historiography places them one *beside* the other" (Certeau, *Heterologies* 4).After the plane crash, the "English" patient is different from who he was before. He has been propelled into the elusive space of the nomadic Other. In this sense the past is different from the present and stands beside it, as a result of which the past can be studied from a historiographical point of view. There is a difference, a distance which creates the impression of

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objectivity, but at the same time there is also a *différance* which complicates the relationship between the present and the past by foregrounding the fact that they are intimately connected by the psychoanalytic concept of the "mnemic trace, the return of what was forgotten" (3-4). From this perspective a purely historiographical approach cannot maintain the illusion of two separate time periods because the "gap that had placed between them an urgency inspiring scientific investigation (and the origin of its 'objectivity') begins to waver. It is thrown topsy-turvy, it is displaced, it moves forward. This movement is precisely due to the fact that this gap was posited, *and* that now it cannot be maintained" (Certeau, *The Writing of History* 37). The power of memory displaces the constructed gap between the activity of inquiry and the object that is being studied. The present and the past are intimately connected. The return of what was forgotten and repressed creates an ambivalent space for knowledge, not only for the "English" patient who tries to recall his past, but also for those who want to fill the gaps in his identity in order to make sense of their own lives.

The plane crash has made the "English" patient forget his national origins. It appears that this amnesia has brought his earlier wish to "erase [his] name and the place [he] had come from" (139) to full realization. He has become a signifier without a signified. Yet, the novel teases the reader with the possibility of knowing who the "English" patient really is by mentioning the name "Almásy" (142). The name appears without any direct reference to its bearer. The reader establishes the link between "Almásy" and the "English" patient him/herself when he/she realizes that "Almásy" is the only name without a clear referent and must therefore designate the unnamed and unnamable character in the novel. In his acknowledgments at the end of the novel, Ondaatje refers to his sources, among them "R.A. Bagnold's review of Almásy's monograph on his explorations in the desert" (303). Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek identifies the historical Almásy, an aristocratic Hungarian explorer, as a model for the "English" patient (see Tötösy 1994, 1999 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/8/>, 2004). Yet, as Tötösy concludes from his overview of a variety of German and Hungarian historical sources, there is a "signification of questionable identity" (Tötösy, "*The English Patient*" 144) regarding the historical Almásy as well. For Tötösy, "the interesting factor here is the question about Almásy's slippery identity, an analogue to the 'English' patient's in the novel" (145). In the novel, the "English" patient establishes his slipperiness when he mentions that, "after ten years in the desert, it was easy for [him] to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation" (139). The idea of elusive identity in this "postmodern text" parallels the complexity in the identity formation of the Hungarian nation (Tötösy, "*The English Patient*" 141). By hinting at the fact that his title character is based on the Hungarian Almásy, Ondaatje teases his readers with the possibility of solving the mystery of identity. Yet, a closer look at the fictional construct of Almásy's identity reveals that Ondaatje propels us into yet another realm of fragmentation, questioning, imagination, and ambivalence.

Almásy undermines the idea of monolithic identity because Hungarian national identity is highly complex and ambivalent to begin with. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, Hungary is a forceful example of the fact that nations are "imagined communities ... cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (Anderson 4) based on the "need for a narrative of identity" (205). The readers' and the characters' attempt to reconstruct a narrative of identity for the "English" patient becomes an act of communal imagination, informed by the search for decisive clues. When he acknowledges his ability to speak German upon his arrival at the Allies' hospital, the "English" patient seems to provide the reader with a clue to his cultural identity by implicitly referring to the Habsburg empire's Germanic center, Vienna. But at the same time he knows everything not only about Britain --"ask me about Don Bradman [an Australian cricket player who was knighted in 1949]. Ask me about Marmite [*the* British yeast spread], the great Gertrude Jekyll [a twentieth-century British garden designer]" (95) -- but also "where every Giotto was in Europe" (95). The "English" patient's reference to his knowledge about Britain could be an attempt at averting the suspicion of having collaborated with Nazi Germany, yet it might also suggest that he was a German spy while at the same time referencing the stereotype of the cultivated Central European. But then, can the

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audience expect a definite answer from a character who declares that "[he] came to hate nations" and argues that "we are deformed by nation states" (138)?

The other characters in the novel, themselves hurt and their identity mutilated, gather around the "English" patient in their attempt to come to terms with history. He becomes, as Stephen Scobie points out, their "screen" (99), because "[e]ach character deflects his or her true desire through the image of another" (99).The "English" patient provides those surrounding him with the ultimate image of the Other; he absorbs their own quest for identity. The "English" patient's cathartic quality in this framework of "deferral or substitution" (99) becomes clear in his interactions with Caravaggio. Caravaggio wants to know what the "English" patient's political involvement was during the war; he attempts to prompt the return of what was forgotten and repressed. He urges the "English" patient to speak and hopes that the morphine which Hana regularly administers will help. Caravaggio's need to reassemble the "English" patient's splinters is fueled by a feeling that they are the clues to coming to terms with his own fragmented postwar identity: "Caravaggio watches the pink in the man's mouth as he talks. The gums perhaps the light iodine color of the rock paintings discovered in Uweinat. There is more to discover, to divine out of this body on the bed, nonexistent except for a mouth, a vein in the arm, wolf-grey eyes. He is still amazed at the clarity of discipline in the man, who speaks sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person, who still does not admit that he is Almásy" (247). Caravaggio assigns the "English" patient to the place of the nomadic and unidentifiable Other that needs to be controlled and circumscribed. The "English" patient acquires characteristics of a "wolf," a threatening and concealed presence in the wilderness. Yet, at the same time he also appears as a saint whom the members of a specific community visit for their own edification. He is explicitly referred to as a "despairing saint" (Ondaatje 3) and an "effigy" (161) at certain points in the narrative. Caravaggio's insistence on the "English" patient's mouth and his eyes parallels Certeau's observation about hagiographical accounts, which stress the importance of "the language of the body, a topography of holes and valleys: orifices (the mouth, the eye) and internal cavities" (Certeau, *The Writing of History* 279). Understanding the language of the orifices in this completely mutilated body is the purpose of all those who come and visit the "English" patient, but especially for Caravaggio who believes him to be the reason for his own physical and emotional mutilation.

The conversations -- with the "English" patient lying on the "couch" and Caravaggio sitting or walking around -- acquire the aura of Freudian psychoanalytic discourse. The frequency of these "sessions" and the process of "transference" -- in which the analysed thinks through his own issues and transfers them to the analyst -- and "counter transference" (by the analyst) establishes a psychoanalytic setting. But this setting is reversed because the analyst's -- Caravaggio's -- primary aim is his own healing -- rather than that of his patient -- which he can only reach by trying to put the fragments of his patient's body into place. In his attempt to make the "patient" speak, Caravaggio shares Freud's approach and his "assurance of finding in any discourse 'small fragments of the truth' ('Stükchen [sic] Wahrheit') -- splinters and debris relative to those decisive moments -- the forgetting of which organizes itself into psycho-sociological systems and the remembrance of which creates possibilities of change for the present state" (Certeau, *Heterologies* 6). Despite Caravaggio's attempts to extract a continuous narrative from the "English" patient's mouth, he only receives fragments, which he tries to assemble into a picture of the past in order to make life in the present possible. Immersing himself into the historical debris of the Other is Caravaggio's method of attempting to heal his own wounds.

Focusing on the fragmented nature of consciousness is a method of dealing with the feeling of disintegration of the postwar and the postcolonial period as Theodor Adorno has shown in his 1951 *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben.* These "reflections from a damaged life" are a collage of seemingly random thoughts on the postwar existence. The structure of Adorno's thoughts parallels what Douglas Barbour calls the "labyrinthine" (207) character of *The English Patient,* which he further characterizes as "Ondaatje's carefully casual *bricolage* of disassociated moments, the accumulation of narrative fragments" (209). The narrative fragments reflect the mutilation of the different characters. Adorno's figure of the mutilated man is not only enacted by

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the "English" patient but also by Caravaggio. Caravaggio, the former thief, has been robbed of the use of that body part which previously constituted the most "essential" part of his identity, his hand. During the war Nazi officers cut off his thumbs. He now is the "man with bandaged hands" (27). Caravaggio holds the "English" patient responsible for his loss of identity because he suspects him of having been a German spy. But his pain is tinted with the pleasure associated with the focus on fragments. At the same time that the bandages act as protective "gloves" (53), they also highlight Caravaggio's fetishized parts and thereby provide him with the narcissistic focus on the fact that he is not "whole" anymore: "The narcissism, which has been robbed of its libidinal object by the disintegration of the I, is replaced by the masochist pleasure of not being an I anymore; and the growing generation guards her absence of the I so jealously as few of her possessions as a communal and permanent property" (Adorno 79; my translation). The masochistic pleasure of the postcolonial/postwar subject's focus not only on his own fragments but also on those of others turns into a narcissism of disintegration. By highlighting absence, the subject defends itself against the lack of identity by establishing this "hole" as his individuality. By displacing the attention onto the fragmentation of others, the subject attempts to come to terms with its own disintegration. Yet, at the same time that Caravaggio tries to heal himself, he also desires revenge. He feels most comfortable in the presence of "the headless statue of a count" (34), which acts as a substitute for the punishment he wants to see inflicted on Almásy. Caravaggio's bandaged hands awaken Hana's desire to care for the man to whom they belong. She not only takes care of the "English" patient, but also of Caravaggio in an attempt to halt a process of self-destruction that had started during the war. Her maternal quality as a nurse is deeply entwined with a deliberate act of self-mutilation, an act prompted by the presence of "destroyed bodies [which] were fed back to the field hospitals like mud passed back by tunnellers in the dark" (49). She cuts off her hair, "the irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind -- when she had bent forward and her hair had touched blood in a wound" (49-50). She breaks with her past by acknowledging her miscarriage and the deaths of her lover and father. She feels drawn to the Villa San Girolamo which "had the look of a besieged fortress, the limbs of most of the statues blown off during the first days of the shelling" (43). Not only do these statues represent the physical destruction, but they also mirror the characters' continuing fear of destruction and cruelty.

The danger of destruction hovers over everyone in the Villa San Girolamo, but especially over Kirpal Singh, the Indian sapper who defuses bombs for the British army. The danger the sapper faces daily is displaced unto his desire to "aim his rifle and fire and hit some target precisely. Again and again he aims at a nose on a statue or one of the brown hawks veering across the sky of the valley" (73).By targeting the statue, he wants to mutilate that part of himself which -- figuratively -- enables him to detect bombs, his nose. He can literally "smell" the danger in the air when he comes near a hidden bomb. But this "nose" is not mere intuition because Kip has been taught by the British army. He is the product of the English colonial power in India and exemplifies the domesticated Other who, being a "not quite/not white" (Bhabha 92) subject, is never granted full equality. His teacher, Lord Suffolk, represents the colonial "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 86). Kip is one of the "authorized versions of otherness" (88), as the mutilation of his name indicates. His name is Kirpal Singh but the British gave him the nickname Kip when some officers interpreted the butter stain on one of his reports as kipper grease. A kipper is "a salty English fish" (87), usually smoked or dried. Kip's identity has been "smoked out" so to speak, and "within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten" (88). On an intertextual level, the mutilated name Kip evokes Rudyard Kipling and his titular "hero," Kim. In his own mutilation, Kip turns to the "English" patient. The relationship between Kip and the "English" patient "seemed to her [Hana] a reversal of *Kim* " (111). Yet it is more than a simple reversal of Kipling's narrative into "the young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English" (111) because "English" as applied to the "patient" and "Indian" as applied to Kip are classifications of nationality that do not acknowledge the new sense of identity in the postcolonial and postwar context.

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As a defense against this mutilation and appropriation, Kip clings to his carefully layered turban and his long hair, the only markers distinguishing him from the British soldiers. Yet he knows that his attempt to establish a "whole" and monolithic identity is doomed to fail because in many respects he is the most "British" among his fellow soldiers: "I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from *your* country ... 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" (283). He resents this appropriation and channels his anger toward the man whom he assigns to the place of those who forced their culture upon him. He directs his rifle away from the statue and instead "points at the Englishman" (283), the "English" patient. He wants to kill what he sees in himself. This decisive moment occurs when Kip puts the earphones of his radio set on the "English" patient's head and forces him to listen to the account of "One bomb. Then another. Hiroshima. Nagasaki" (284). He wants to rid himself of the guilt he feels because he helps defusing those bombs the colonizers throw on each other's countries instead of using his part of the "tremor of Western wisdom" (284) to prevent the "bombing [of] the brown races of the world" (286) by the "contract makers. The map drawers" (284). He resents and acknowledges his complicity with the colonizer "the moment the "eyes of the sapper and the patient meet in this half-dark room crowded now with the world" (285). He realizes the paradox of "cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil" (285) for those who are bombing the "brown races," with whom he has consciously started to identify after the crucial event of the dropping of the atomic bomb.

But the novel does not stop at this point. Rather than celebrating the characters' hybridity, the reference to the atomic bomb establishes a new binary in which the characters are trapped at the end of the novel. It does not matter to Kip whether the "English" patient was on the side of the Germans or the British; what prompts Kip to return to India as a doctor is his inclusion of the "English" patient into the category of those who dropped the atomic bomb: "American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman" (286). Kip realizes that "they would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation" (286).In this sense, the atomic bomb forcefully reconstructs the binary which the characters have gradually and painfully deconstructed in an attempt to emerge from their solipsism. The world of the Villa San Girolamo is destroyed as the outside world breaks in. The glances the reader gets at Kip and Hana at the very end of the novel when they are both back in their "native" countries show a new kind of imprisonment and make Caravaggio's earlier statement that "the trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn't be" (122) appear as a dark prophecy. While Ondaatje's novel might, at first sight, appear more pessimistic than many other postcolonial theorists' and authors' celebration of hybridity, it provides the reader with the possibility to participate in the writing of history and therefore also in the shaping of the future. The "reader, who must take a place in the communal act, must stay awake to keep the teller company and finally tell his own version of the story" (Cooke 208). The reader, instead of reciting historical lessons, has to look at the "stone of history skipping over the surface" (299) and come to his or her own conclusions about how to gauge the binary opposition on which the novel ends. Yet the implications of a novel which focuses on the unavoidable reality of fragmented identities are not neutral in this respect. Binaries establish oppositions which eventually give way to the ambivalence of the historical process, thereby undermining any rigidly established barrier between those who are "barbarian" and those who are "civilized." After all, the "English" patient remains a mystery, as do most events in history.

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