

Michael Ondaatje's 'The English Patient,' 'History,' and the Other

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Recommended Citation

Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Michael Ondaatje's 'The English Patient,' 'History,' and the Other." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 1.4 (1999): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1058>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1058)

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Volume 1 Issue 4 (December 1999) Article 8

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek,

"Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, 'History,' and the Other"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/8>>

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 1.4 (1999)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/>>

Abstract: In his article, "Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, 'History,' and the Other," Steven Tötösy discusses the historical background of Michael Ondaatje's novel, *The English Patient* (1992). The historical background and its analysis extend to selected aspects of Anthony Minghella's and Michael Ondaatje's adaptation of the novel to film (1996) and the ensuing controversy after the release of the film. From the historical background Tötösy designates as the "Almásy theme" of the novel and the film, he relates Ondaatje's engagement of the protagonist -- Central European Hungarian László Almásy -- to the notion of the Other as a historical and fictional concept. Tötösy argues that Ondaatje's particular rendition of the notion of the Other provides venues for a specific understanding of the historical background of the novel (the "real" Almásy) as well as its fictional presentation (the "Almásy theme"). The article also responds to the pronounced interest in the novel's and the film's protagonist and his "real" history, evident internationally after the release of the film in 1996.

Steven TÖTÖSY de ZEPETNEK

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, "History," and the Other

In this paper, I discuss the historical background of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Anthony Minghella's adaption of the novel to film. Ondaatje's novel is fiction and the "truth" value of the historical background of this or any fictional text is of problematic and questionable relevance in the reading of literature or in the study of literature (that is, in most areas of literary study while in areas such as the sociology of literature this may not always be the case). However, research in audience studies shows that readers of fiction -- or viewers of films -- are voraciously interested in the "real" story of fictionalized persons and events. Indeed, in the case of *The English Patient* this has been the case and both the novel's and its filmic version's media coverage, reviews, web pages generated and internet chats, and follow-ups such as new novels, the (re)discovery of historical material, etc., suggest the readers' and viewers' interest in the historical background of the fictional renditions. In addition -- as criticism of the novel and its adaption to film shows -- Ondaatje's fictionalization of historical material raised questions in the minds of readers and viewers with regard to the problematics of social responsibility, history, and writing. It is in this context and perspective that I relate the novel's "Almásy theme" and its historical background to the author's treatment of the historical data and to the author's notion of the Other. The context of the Other is based on the suggestion that Ondaatje's concept is both specific (the cosmopolitan Central European) and universal. *The English Patient* was published in 1992 and won the Booker Prize in the same year and it also received a number of other awards such as the Trillium Prize. In 1996 it was released as a film, produced and directed by Anthony Minghella, with the cooperation of Ondaatje, and received seven Oscars.

In her study, "Michael Ondaatje and the Problem of History," Ajay Heble observes that "Ondaatje has repeatedly been engaged in an attempt to incorporate marginal figures out of the historical past into a non-historical genre" (97). While this observation is written with reference to Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) and *Coming through Slaughter* (1976), it applies to *The English Patient* as well. Several characters in the novel are indeed such "marginal figures out of the historical past." At the same time, we should acknowledge that Ondaatje's method of using "marginal figures" from history does not make his prose works "historical" novels in any sense of the word (I am referring here to the genre popular since the late nineteenth century in all Western literatures). On the contrary, his postmodern use of the historical produces poetic fiction that "manages" history, as Heble observes: "The force of Ondaatje's texts thus resides in their ability to articulate a tension between ... an insistence on what Ondaatje calls "the truth of fiction" -- on his imaginative account of the past as being narratively faithful to the way things might have been" (98).

The English Patient is a literary, that is, fictional text that succeeds in representing life -- underlining its fullness, complicatedness, inexplicability, fragmentation, and its subtextual richness which cannot be represented by traditional uses and linear narrative of historical "facts." Thus, an interpretation of the interrelation between the historical subtext, its fictional rendition, and in the latter the perception of the Other may be useful for readers and viewers of Ondaatje's work. Some critics say that Ondaatje's work, in general, is postmodern (see, e.g., Bjerring). To me, it is certain that his prose is lyrical and poetic, just as Alberto Manguel suggests "prose exquisite, polie avec la précision et la beauté d'une marqueterie" (80). In addition, I propose that Ondaatje's notions of historicity, his use of historical data behind the fiction, and his notions of the Other ought to be considered in an applied analysis of the text within and with the comparative literary and cultural approach (see Tötösy, "From" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss3/2/>>. Ondaatje's concern with the historicity of his novel is evident on a different level too: After I had begun my research on Almásy in early 1993, I wrote a letter to the author asking him about his knowledge of the "English patient," Almásy. Ondaatje explained to me that, beyond the sources he cited in his "Acknowledgements" in *The English Patient* (305-07), he was unaware of the history of any of the characters of his novel (Ondaatje's telephone calls, 5 April and 20 April 1993). He explained that he had never heard or read about the history and/or questions concerning Almásy in Hungarian and German sources, he did not know that Lady Clayton East Clayton died in plane crash one year after

her husband's death (see below), etc. On the other hand, Derek Finkle, in an article entitled "A Vow of Silence" suggests that Ondaatje has always been cognizant in most exacting terms of historical backgrounds in his writing. We simply do not know whether or how much Ondaatje researched and knew about the historical background of Almásy. As it will become evident and as I explain below, the historical background of the novel and knowledge about it is of some importance, and so from several perspectives.

In *The English Patient*, Almásy, the Hungarian aristocrat (if not in precise rank: see below, certainly in demeanor, behaviour, and contacts), cartographer, explorer, and military officer is depicted as the Other in the novel. The reader does not know for a long time who the "English" patient is. But when we find out that the patient is Almásy and that he may be Hungarian, the mystery of the Other is not diminished. This construction of elusiveness is both cumulative and specific. For instance, Ondaatje's use of the metaphor *félhomály* (semi-darkness, dusk, half-light, twilight) he borrows from the Hungarian -- in Hungarian poetry, this is an often-used and established concept -- can be paralleled, for instance, to a description we find in one of Almásy's texts: "The Arab children were wonderfully amused when I spoke to them in their own language. A little girl immediately asked me if I were an Egyptian. When I said no, the choir of children shouted: "You are lying, lying, you are Egyptian, we can see it from your skin!" I took my sunglasses off and asked them whether Egyptians had blue eyes. The crowd became silent and finally the little girl decided: "Your mother was Egyptian" (Almásy, *Rommel seregénél Líbyában* 87; my translation). It is the undetermined-ness, un-definability, the Otherness, that characterizes in many ways the Almásy theme of the novel and the film. But how and what is this Almásy theme? The historical data about the "English Patient" Almásy are oblique and they are analogous to the fictional Almásy of the novel -- and this may be one of the reasons of my own and many other readers' fascination with the novel and its historical background. László Ede Almásy, Count of Zsadány and Törökszentmiklós, second son of the ethnographer, zoologist, and Asia-explorer György Almásy (1864-1933), was born 22 August 1895 in the family's castle, Borostyánkő, and died in Salzburg 22 March 1951 (Forcher; Schrott and Farin; Török 1992, 21-22, 1998; *Encyclopaedia Hungarica* vol. I. 41-42, 250; *Magyar életrajzi lexikon* 23). The place of his birth, Borostyánkő, today Bernstein in Burgenland, Austria, is of interest in itself, as related to displacement and the Other: the Austrian federal state Burgenland is a construct of areas from provinces previously on Hungarian territory since the arrival of the *magyar*-s (Hungarians) in the Danube Basin in the ninth century A.D., an area that was ceded to Austria following the Treaty of Trianon after the First World War (for the history of Borostyánkő/Bernstein, see *Encyclopaedia Hungarica* 250). Today, Bernstein Castle is a hotel and the property of Andrea Berger, born Almásy, the daughter of László Ede Almásy's brother, János.

Almásy's merits include the discovery of the lost and legendary oasis Zarzura in the Lybian desert, the discovery of prehistorical paintings in the caves of the Uweinat mountains, the cartography of the Lybian desert (his name is preserved in an area called "Djebel Almasy"), the development of civil aviation in Egypt and the building of the Al-Maza airport, scientific and geographical data accumulation in Egypt, the Sudan, Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, Abessynia, and Tripoli, and several works published in Hungarian, French, and German about his travels, discoveries, and experiences in the Second World War (for a partial list of his texts, see the Works Cited). In his youth, he studied engineering at the University of London and was employed for a period by the Austrian car manufacturer Steyr. In 1949 he established a distance flight world record by towing a glider-plane from Paris to Cairo. Just before his death in 1951 in Salzburg, he was appointed director of the Desert Institute in Cairo (for biographical literature see Forcher; Schrott and Farin; Török 1992, 21-22, 1998; *Encyclopaedia Hungarica* vol. I. 41-42, 250; *Magyar életrajzi lexikon*; *Révai nagy lexikona*; Bagnold; Brenner; Kasza; Kospach; Kröpeli; Murray; Perlez; Seubert; Weis; Forcher in Schrott and Farin and Schrott and Farin list scientific literature where Almásy's Africa exploration and cartography is described, 18-19). In addition to Ondaatje's novel and Minghella's film, Almásy's life inspired four more novels: John W. Eppler's *Rommel ruft Kairo. Aus dem Tagebuch eines Spions* (Gütersloh, 1959) and his *Geheimagent im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Zwischen Berlin, Kabul und Kairo* (Preussisch Oldendorf, 1974), Hans von Steffens's *Salaam. Geheimkommando zum Nil 1942* (Neckargemünd, 1960), and Zsolt Török's *Salaam Almásy. Almásy László életregénye (Salaam Almásy: A Fictional Biography of László Almásy)*. Budapest, 1998) (see Forcher in Schrott and Farin 19).

We can begin with the questions about Almásy's identity with regard to his aristocratic title, count. While Hungarian encyclopedias and genealogical sources do not leave any doubts about Almásy's aristocratic rank, János Gudenus and László Szentirmay -- whose book about the fate of Hungarian aristocrats after the Second World War is acknowledged as an authoritative source -- suggest that Almásy could not have been an aristocrat (I add here that while in English "aristocracy" often means nobility in general, more precisely aristocracy means the ranks of titled nobility such as baron, count, duke, etc.). In their book, the authors take their source from Peter Bokor's book, *Zsákutca*, where Bokor writes that Count Almásy was assigned to the German army as a liaison officer and that in July 1944 he helped Vince Görgey, a Royal Hungarian army officer to escape to Berlin with the aid of the German SS (35). With reference to the question of count or no count, Gudenus and Szentirmay's suggestion is that Almásy was a member of the branch of the Almásy family that did not receive the title of count and remained in the ranks of the middle nobility (although other sources published between the two world wars consistently list this branch as "counts," e.g., *Révai nagy lexikona* Supplement A-Z. 49-50.). Gudenus and Szentirmay write: "In the aristocratic line of the Almásy family there was no László. Surely the reference is to László [de] Almásy, the renown Africa explorer and discoverer, whom the Hungarian General Staff, in his rank as a reserve officer of the Royal Hungarian Army, assigned to General Rommel as a desert expert. After the war he was exonerated and declared innocent of war crimes. In Egypt he is highly regarded and several institutes are named in his honour" (Gudenus and Szentirmay 106; my translation; for the court documents of his trial as a war criminal, see Népbíróságok Országos Tanácsa [People's National Tribunal] No. 1428-1947, Budapest).

In my own research about Almásy and his title, after going through Hungarian genealogical literature, I received confirmation from Szabolcs de Vajay, a noted Hungarian genealogist and expert of the history of the Hungarian aristocracy that László and his branch of the Almásy family were not granted the title like the other branch that received the title in 1771 (see, e.g., Kempelen I 75-78; Nagy I 19-23; Vajay, personal letter, 24 October 1994, Geneva, Switzerland). On the other hand, there is evidence that Almásy received the title orally from the last Emperor of Austria-Hungary, Karl, during or just after the ill-fated attempt of the emperor in 1921 to drive with Almásy from Switzerland to Hungary to reclaim his throne as King of Hungary. Almásy's rank and title of count was not recognized by the Hungarian parliament, the legal location where ranks and titles of nobility were passed scrutiny and registered until 1947 (see Schrott and Farin 7-8). I am not aware of any documentation suggesting that Almásy even attempted to have his title recognized legally. In any case, Almásy used the title and Hungarian sources published between the two world wars -- such as the *Révai nagy lexikona* -- listed him with the title of count. Indeed, genealogical sources refer to several cases where Emperor Karl bestowed titles and nobility orally in the last days of the monarchy; in some cases this has been recognized officially, in some it has not. In the case of Almásy, although the rank and title have not been officially recognized, their use by Almásy is not necessarily an act of usurpation, at least in my opinion. What is of interest for my discussion, again, is the elusive nature of the matter, as with many things of and about Almásy, in real life and in Ondaatje's novel.

Questions and misinformation about Almásy abound; for example, in the otherwise authoritative and often-quoted book about German military counter-espionage in the Second World War, the author, Gert Buchheit, writes: "Who was this Count Almasy? Laszlo Almasy, Count of Szombathely, was born about 1895 in the castle of Bernstein in Burgenland, then still in Hungary. The Almasys are ancient Hungarian magnates, whose title of count was abrogated after their participation in the 1849 Kossuth revolution. Despite of it all, the Almasys were committed monarchists. Janos, the older one of the two brothers, married a sister of Prince Esterházy, who almost went bankrupt after he bought the stables of the exiled Emperor Karl in 1918 for safe-keeping until the return of the monarch. It was in this milieu that Laszlo Almasy grew up. He became a commissioned officer, a well-known gentleman rider and later an exceptional gentleman driver. It was in this capacity that he participated in the epoch-making drive from Mombasa to Cairo with Prince Liechtenstein. When Emperor Karl attempted a Putsch from Switzerland [into Hungary], Almasy drove his monarch in a secret, thirty-hour drive through Austria" (Buchheit 234; my translation; the original German is without Hungarian diacritics).

Buchheit also recounts Almásy's desert travels and discoveries in Africa, his military career, his war years and intelligence work with General Rommel. He closes with "And what has happened to Count

Almasy? He is supposed to have died a few years after the Second World War in Egypt" (Buchheit 238; my translation). Buchheit's description suggests that he did not do much research on Almásy and he is unfamiliar with Hungarian history, that is, when it comes to detail. For instance, nobility in Hungary could not be abrogated for any reason (for a historical and legal explanation of this, see Ölyvedi Vad 68-75); the Almásys could not possibly have been counts of Szombathely, since the Middle Ages the seat of a bishopric; Buchheit also confused Sir Robert Clayton East Clayton (baronet) with an engineer by the name of P.A. Clayton, who was a companion of Almásy and the baronet (see Buchheit 239; Almásy *Récentes...* 43), etc. Nevertheless, the interesting factor here is again the question about Almásy's elusive identity, an analogue to his fictional counterpart in the novel. Plus, if it is indeed true that Ondaatje was not aware of Almásy's historical data as he claims, his construction of the fictional Almásy in its elusiveness and the Other thus overlapping with the said historical data confronts us with a remarkable coincidence (what we should do with that, I have no idea...).

I continue: Along with the questions about his origin and as yet not researched activities of his German counter-intelligence activities with General Rommel, Almásy's historical life includes curious incidents that point to an interesting marginality strikingly similar to his fictionalized story in Ondaatje's novel. Of interest are, for example, Almásy's own chapter five of his *Récentes explorations*, "Herodote et les récentes explorations du Desert" or his discovery of Hungarians who settled in Egypt in the sixteenth and again in the eighteenth centuries on an island on the Nile: another aspect of "history," the Other, and elusiveness. Almásy's ethnographic and anthropological discovery was the result of a chance encounter with an Arab sheik, who, upon learning that Almásy was Hungarian explained to him that he, too, was "Hungarian" (*magyar*). As it turns out, there were in 1996 about 14,000 such *magararab*-s (Hungarian Arabs) in Egypt in the areas of the Wadi Halfa, Cairo, Assuan, and Kom Ombo, descendants of two waves of immigration: The first in the sixteenth century consisting of soldiers captured during the Ottoman-Turkish and Hungarian wars and settled there by Suleiman II and the second in the seventeenth century of settlers who moved there on their own (see Almásy *Levegöben ... homokon* 104-08; *Encyclopaedia Hungarica* Vol. II 389). Almásy first traveled to Africa in 1926 when he organized a hunting expedition with Prince Antal Esterházy to the Sudan. In 1929 he organized another expedition with Prince Ferdinand von Liechtenstein, this time by automobile from Mombasa to Alexandria. In 1931 he attempted to fly from Hungary to Egypt with a small airplane but crashed in Syria (yet another "coincidence" between history and fiction?). His serious and scientifically-oriented cartographic, historical, and anthropological travels on the Nile with Sir Robert Clayton began after 1931. Clayton was "a young aristocrat taken by sports, who had a pilot's licence, and who was out to do adventure. Sir Robert came to see me in Hungary and offered his collaboration enthusiastically" (Almásy, *Récentes explorations* 4; my translation). Robert Clayton was born in 1908, fifth and last baronet of Marden and of Hall Place (*Burke's Peerage* 535). He was a British aristocrat who was keenly interested in geographical discovery and in travel. Immediately after his marriage on 29 February 1932, the young aristocrat "set out with Count L.E. de Almasy to explore the unknown are of the Lybian Desert north of the Gilf Kebir, and to find the legendary lost oasis called Zerzura. After being lost for several days in the desert and suffering hardships the expedition returned without achieving its object. A full account of the adventure, a map, and illustrations were published in *The Times* of July 6, 1932. In a few weeks Sir Robert was dead. He developed a disease similar to infantile paralysis, and though respiration was induced by an automatic apparatus he died on September 1, at the age of 24" (*The Times*, "Obituary" 12).

Zarzura is mentioned by Herodotus and in the *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, in the latter as the "city of copper." And then, in 1933, Almásy and his group discovered the oasis Zarzura: the discovery was presented in 1934 in London, at the British Geographical Society's meeting, by Wing-Commander H.W.G.J. Penderel and Dr. Richard A. Bermann, Almásy's companions (Bermann 450-63). The members of the successful expedition were Almásy, Dr. László Kádár, a geographer and geologist of the University of Debrecen (Hungary), Hans Casparius, a photographer, the Jewish-Austrian journalist and writer Dr. Richard Bermann, Commander Penderel, two Sudanese chauffeurs, and a cook. Bermann, in turn, is also of interest: the surname Bermann was a pseudonym, his real surname was Arnold Höllriegel, and he was a well-known author in Austria who died in exile in the USA in 1939. He published the description of the discovery in Zurich in 1938, in a volume entitled *Zarzura. Die Oase der kleinen Vögel* (*Zarzura: The Oasis of the Small Birds*) (on Höllriegel, see *Richard A. Bermann alias*

Arnold). In Penderel's and Bermann's descriptions of the expedition, it was Almásy's research and guidance that made the expedition a success (see Bermann 453). Kádár published his memoirs in 1972 in which there is a detailed description of the Zarzura expedition and Almásy's work and activities.

I continue now with historical data about Lady Clayton, the fictional lover of Almásy in both the novel and the film. The historical data about Lady Clayton East Clayton born Dorothy Mary Durrant (Katherine Clifton in the novel) is less oblique than those of Almásy, but they are equally striking in the context of the novel. For example, for the fictional Katherine Clifton "there was a line back to her ancestors that was tactile, whereas he [Almásy] had erased the path he had emerged from" (*The English Patient* 170). Dissimilar to Almásy, the historical data about Lady Clayton is clear: she was "a very experienced pilot ... [she] was also a talented sculptor, and her home, as well as the vicarage of Leverstock Green [her father, Arthur Durrant, was the vicar there], contained many examples of her work" (*The Times*, "Obituary" 12). She accompanied her husband in several desert expeditions and after his death she expressed that "I am only carrying on my husband's work. We always did this sort of thing together. He left with his work unfinished. I want to try and finish it off" (*The Times*, "Obituary," 12). However, her own expedition in the Lybian desert after the death of her husband, where she flew her own plane, was unsuccessful. There is no indication in the accounts whether she accomplished this expedition with Almásy; in her brief account of the expedition, she writes that she was accompanied by a Commander Roundell (*The Times*, "The Lost Oasis" 11). That Lady Clayton and Almásy knew each other from previous expeditions with her husband is obvious; however, in 1933 when Lady Clayton East Clayton organized an expedition with Commander Roundell, Almásy and his group had a parallel expedition at the same time (see Penderel 455; Bermann 457-58). After her return to England in May 1933 from this expedition, she led another expedition to Lapland. Five days after her return to England, on 15 September 1933, she fell to her death during a short flight at Brooklands. Inexplicably, Lady Clayton appeared to have climbed out of the cockpit and fell out of the plane (*The Times*, "Lady Clayton Killed" 10f). The accident has never been explained although an official inquest was held (*The Times*, "The Brooklands Accidents" 19a). Lady Clayton Dorothy Durrant's scientific interests and knowledge, her interests in aviation, her artistic talents as a sculptor, and her risk-taking attest to her exceptionality as an individual and as a woman of her time. It may be of interest why her friends nicknamed her "Peter" (*The Times*, "Lady Clayton East Clayton. A Correspondent Writes" 14c). These exceptional qualities, in the context of her time, are not recognizable in *The English Patient*, in the novel or in the film. Ondaatje, evidently, did not create Katherine Clifton based on her historical persona.

Almásy's history becomes difficult to chart after 1939, when the Second World War and its preceding political and societal upheavals began to wreck havoc everywhere. In 1936 and 1939, Almásy was a flying instructor in Egypt and this is the time when he was active in the development of Egyptian aviation. However, already in 1935 his activities in Northern Africa became an issue with the secret and intelligence services of England, Egypt, and Italy, as well as Germany (see Shaw; Schrott and Farin 12-17). As we know, Almásy was a reserve officer of the Royal Hungarian Army and he was first drafted to active duty, followed by an assignment to the German army, to the "Desert Fox," General Rommel, who was campaigning on his mythologized battles in North Africa. Obviously, Almásy must have been assigned to desert duty owing to his expertise of the Sahara and Northern Africa. Most sources about Almásy's activities in the latter part of the 1930s and then during the war when he was with the German army appear to agree that it is virtually impossible to establish whether Almásy was or was not a Nazi sympathiser although there is evidence that he approved of Hitler's economic and social policies (see Forcher; Schrott and Farin). At the same time -- that elusiveness again -- Raoul Schrott and Michael Farin write when describing the film made of the 1926 Sudan expedition of Almásy and Liechtenstein that while the film and the people in it exude the arrogance of colonialism, only Almásy appears camera-shy and detached (8). There are, however, voices who tell another story as I will describe below.

As to my notion of the "Almásy theme" of Almásy and Otherness, Almásy's history with General Rommel is equally suggestive as well as elusive: He had, allegedly, a homosexual relationship with the general. Rommel's and Almásy's relationship has been reported after the release of the film in 1996 by a nephew of the general, who lives in Italy today (see Schrott and Farin 16). This has been

confirmed, third-hand, from another source: I came into correspondence with Richard Bond of Arlington, Massachusetts, whose great-uncle, Marshall Bond Sr. -- brother-in-law of the industrialist William Boeing -- met Almásy and Count Zsigmond Széchenyi in 1927 in Egypt when Bond was on an expedition there (see Bond Jr., *Gold Hunter: The Adventures of Marshall Bond* 181). Richard Bond's father was Marshall Bond Jr., son of Marshall Bond Sr., whose grandfather was Judge Hiram G. Bond. The Bonds have had a fascinating history altogether and much of their stories and achievements are written down in Marshall Bond Jr.'s books. For example, Marshall Bond Sr.'s dog "Jack" while he was prospecting in the Klondike in 1898 is "Buck" in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, in which the story begins in the Santa Clara Valley near San Francisco on Judge Miller's fruit ranch: "Judge Miller" is of course Judge Hiram G. Bond. Marshall Bond Sr., an engineer and outdoorsman, was hired in 1927 by a newspaper to write a report on travelling by riverboat from Aswan to Khartoum. According to Richard Bond, based on his recollections of his father's stories he was told, Almásy seized the opportunity of the contact with the American in order to attempt to raise funds for his expeditions but neither he (Marshall Bond Sr.) nor the Boeings invested in Almásy's ventures because they considered him unreliable (although a socially most acceptable and delightful person). A further although much later connection between the Marshall Bond Jr. and the Almásys occurred in 1963, when Marshall met János Almásy (László's brother) in Czechoslovakia on a camping trip with other aristocratic companions and then visited him in 1964 in Bernstein Castle (see Bond, *Adventures with Peons, Princes, and Tycoons* 108-12) and again between Marshall Bond Jr. and Jean Howard, the British intelligence officer assigned to Almásy during the Second World War (Bond, *Adventures with Peons, Princes, and Tycoons* 110-12). Richard Bond also wrote that according to his uncle, the personal papers of Almásy, kept in Szombathely, were destroyed during the war in a fire. As to the story of Almásy's homosexuality, Richard Bond wrote that this was reported to his grandfather by Count Karl Coudenhove in a letter already in 1927 and that Almásy has always been very discreet about it (Richard Bond, e-mail correspondence July 1997, Arlington; unfortunately, Bond indicated to me that he does not have the letters). Bond also writes that "Jean Howard the analyst assigned to study him by the British Secret Service however considered him an enigma. He seems to me politically to have been a loyal Hungarian conservative serving an accommodationist government. As a scientific explorer before the war he had worked for whoever paid best. Laszlo Almasy could be described both literally and figuratively as a used car dealer" (note: Jean Howard's forthcoming work on the history of Second World War British espionage and Almásy has been announced in Schrott and Farin [18]; I am not aware of its publication as of yet). Personally, I think that Bond's assessment may be right on, despite the cultural slippage that the metaphorical figure of the used car salesman did not exist during Almásy's times: The figure and its associations are specifically American. On the other hand, I consider such an equation a compliment as I am conscious of the proverbial dislike of the Hungarian middle and upper classes -- that is, the gentry, the aristocracy, and much of the bureaucracy and intelligencia -- of anything business.

As far as I am aware, my 1994 article in *ECW: Essays on Canadian Writing* was the first English-language publication about Almásy's historical background with regard to Ondaatje's novel ("Michael Ondaatje"). In August 1993 I sent Ondaatje a copy of my then forthcoming article about Almásy's historical background and thus he was aware of Almásy's history: I met Ondaatje briefly at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 1993 where he was invited for the release of the German translation of *The English Patient* and he confirmed that he has received and read the paper. It is thus a bit of mystery to me why Ondaatje and Minghella would not anticipate and consequently attempt to preempt the storm that erupted with the release of the film. The storm about and international media coverage of the film -- including massive activity on the world wide web -- was the allegation that Almásy was a Nazi and that Minghella and Ondaatje should not have glorified such a figure, no matter how minor. Obviously, this was and is a serious and important aspect of the novel and the film and I will now discuss some of its implications as I see them.

One of the most interesting aspects of the novel to me is Ondaatje's construction of a fictional individual, who is in-between and peripheral and the consequences of this locus, namely Almásy's rejection of homogeneity, national self-referentiality, and its exclusionary results. Personally, I am painfully aware of the cultural and pragmatic results of nationalism, be that German, Hungarian, American, Israeli, Arab, African, or wherever this appears, and ubiquitously so. While I understand

and admit that the preservation of national identity may have had justification in history, in contemporary times this belief construction leads us nowhere except to the like of the Tutsi and Hutu wars or the wars of the former Yugoslavia. In my opinion, contemporary culture demonstrates that the most interesting and valuable objects of art -- and I dare to put this type of valuation on cultural products -- are those which emanate from in-between, multi-cultured creators like an Ondaatje. If we had empirical evidence on the most important contemporary novels, for instance, I propose that a very high number of texts were by thematics of non-hegemony content and produced by culturally and individually in-between and non-mainstream, that is, peripheral, authors. Contemporary culture and cultural production suggests that national self-referentiality and prioritization towards cultural homogeneity should be a matter of the past (of course, reality proves this otherwise but that is another story). Again, to me Ondaatje's novel represents the possible world of the non-nationalistic, non-self-referential Central European Hungarian -- a paradigm, of course -- being fully aware of the rarity of such in real life. This is the more outstanding and worthy of further attention in my mind because of the aforementioned controversy that erupted with regard to the historical background of Ondaatje's fictional hero, Almásy. In brief, I very much like Ondaatje's invention of the "international bastard" Almásy and the suggestion that there are Central Europeans and Hungarians who step outside, consciously, of the nationalist and self-referential paradigm so common and stereotypical of them (for the notion of "international bastards," see Ondaatje in Wachtel, Ondaatje, and Gibson 62). Elizabeth Pathy Salett published in the Wednesday 4 December 1996 issue of the *Washington Post* an opinion piece, "Casting a Pall on a Movie Hero." Salett describes her father's -- who was consul-general of Hungary in Egypt at Cairo before the Second World War -- encounters with Almásy in Cairo and concludes: "*The English Patient* calls itself a work of fiction. But in fact, what the film's director-writer does is to take a real story and a real person, minimize the meaning of his activities and recast him as a passionate, loving hero. *The English Patient*, which was constructed as a beautiful, romantically lyrical film, is amoral and ahistorical. The film's presentation of a moral equivalency between the Germans and Allies trivializes the significance of the choices men like Almásy made and the enormous consequences of their actions and alliances" (C6). Salett's opinion of the film demonstrates several factors which have bearing on my discussion here: 1) An audience response to the interrelationship of "fact and fiction"; 2) A personal opinion and perception, where fiction is rated below historical "accuracy" and "fact"; and 3) The publication of the opinion in an internationally known and read newspaper demonstrates the systemic and media-accorded importance to artistic representation of life. It remains without saying that the apparent success of the film influences the popularity and sale of the novel, as the case is in most instances of filmic adaptation of a literary text. This systemic factor with regard to the interrelationship between different media processing of the same artistic product is significant by itself. But it has further dimensions: with regard to the perception of ethical dimensions as suggested by Salett, Ondaatje responded to the criticism in a letter to *The Globe and Mail*:

"From Homer to *Richard III* to the present, literature has based its imaginative stories on historical event. We read those epics and literary works to discover, not the facts of the Trojan War, but the human emotions discovered in the story. If one writes a novel and pretends it is nonfiction or makes a film and pretends it is a documentary, then the writer or filmmaker should be tested. However, *The English Patient* came out a few years ago as a novel and the film version is not a documentary. I wrote about an enigmatic desert explorer whose role when World War II broke out was to be a betrayer. In reality the facts are still murky and still uncertain -- to some historians he was a spy, some others think he was a double agent. Whatever "spying" he did was witnessed and watched by the British Secret Service. *The English Patient* is not a history lesson but an interpretation of human emotions -- love, desire, betrayals in war and betrayals in peace -- in a historical time. It holds no sympathy for Nazis, in fact the most shocking scene in the film depicts a Nazi torture. It is about forgiveness, how people come out of a war. There are four other central characters who reflect and qualify the character of Almásy. The facts of the history behind *The Crucible* or *Richard III* is the raw material often chronicled by historians with a political dogma or party line to protect. Some are true, some are false. (Compare the histories of the War of the Roses or the Second World War written at the time and those written now -- and they still continue to be revised.) It is what Shakespeare or Arthur Miller have written out of it that teaches us about the human condition. If a novelist or

dramatist or filmmaker is to be censored or factually tested every time he or she writes from historical event, then this will result in the most uninspired works, or it just might be safer for those artists to resort to cartoons and fantasy." (Ondaatje qtd. in Saunders)

Salett's and Ondaatje's different opinion on the question of art in social discourse, is of course a crucial matter. It is not my intention to engage in the controversy whether *The English Patient* is a distortion of history or whether it is justified as it is fiction. Suffice it to say that in my opinion both Ondaatje and Salett have a point. As Ondaatje suggests and as we know, fictional descriptions of Napoleon or Julius Caesar have had the affect of mythologization in a positive context when alternate opinion may be that they were mass murderers of the first order. Ondaatje is right in his opinion that the novel and the film are both fiction as artistic expression. Salett is right in her opinion in the context of social discourse that the glorification of an individual -- even if in fiction -- who, under whatever circumstances, supported Hitler may be ethically questionable: The history of Hitler is unique in its horrors and too immediate, too near in time, and too raw for any audience still and hopefully will remain so. On the other hand, and here Salett's point of view gains on validity significantly, Ondaatje and Minghella could or should have paid attention to the said historical background concerning Almásy, as I suggested previously. The fact that the potentially explosive implication of the protagonist's historical background was not paid attention to may be the result of either Ondaatje's opinion that fiction is fiction and this preempts any and all criticism of historical "facts" or it may have been a result of the rule that "most studies in film adaptation do concentrate on the creative processes involved, and especially the contribution of the film director, rather than that of other members of the team, e.g. the screenwriter" (Remael 390). In both cases, however, *The English Patient* case is illustrative. Despite the controversy that erupted around the main character's "historical" role and possible Nazi sympathies, the film received the award of best picture at the Oscars of 1997. Personally, I question the award, based on my agreement with such critics as Salett and the problematics of mythologizing the "wrong" marginal figure. On the other hand, the Hungarian "count" is marginal to the point where we cannot be absolutely certain about his Nazi sympathies. In fact, there are a number of sources in which the opposite is argued, namely that Almásy was sheltering a Jewish-Hungarian family in his apartment in Budapest and that he, using his connections and uniform with medals displayed, has saved several Jewish-Hungarian families during the final days of the war in 1944, during Eichmann's and the Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross Party's terror and murder of Hungarian Jews (see, e.g., Offman <<http://www.salon.com/books/log/1999/04/05/almasy/index.html>>). In sum, we can observe that the conventions of fiction and art and the systemic properties of artistic communication mediate the "historicity" of "facts." In other words, fiction -- whether in word or image -- claims its own space and its own system. On the other hand, this is not the last word about *The English Patient*: Only time will be the true judge. Thus, ultimately, "history" will decide about both the artistic value of the novel and the film. As to the question whether social responsibility is or should be a factor in the case of fiction, the debate goes on.

In closing my discussion, I take a brief excursion to yet a further aspect of Otherness of the Almásy theme of the novel and the film, namely that of ethnicity. Winfried Siemerling, in his article, "Das andere Toronto. Mündliches Wissen in Michael Ondaatjes *In the Skin of a Lion*," deals with the question of ethnicity and its situation in English-Canadian historical discourse. His argument, namely that Ondaatje subverts the English-Canadian mainstream in his novels by drawing attention to the Other, is explained thus: "The experience of the immigrant does not yet infiltrate the public perception of the host culture with the acquisition of the foreign tongue by the individual. The interweaving of the searcher and narrator Patrick with the world of the foreign carries the fictional imprint of what was left out until now from possibilities of historicity while the success of the novel also builds bridges ... in Ondaatje's writing is that possibility of history raised in an awakened voice that was left in the dark in the dominant texts of history" (Siemerling 180-81; my translation). In *The English Patient*, Almásy's fictional position, that is, his indeterminability and elusiveness, overlaps with his "real" position of historical marginality and Otherness. This characteristic has extended to Almásy's position in the available critical readings of the novel, too. For instance, Kip has been noted as an example of Ondaatje's exploration of Otherness; yet the critical reaction to Almásy's position in the novel has been lacking. Val Ross's editorial in the *Globe and Mail*, "Minefields of the Mind," draws interesting and

well-crafted observations about the novel. Ross points to "Kip, the young Indian," and Caravaggio, "an immigrant whose name is rich with sensual allusions, whose name sounds as absurd among the Anglo-Scots of Toronto as, say, 'Ondaatje'" (Ross C1-C2), but she makes no reference to Almásy. Similarly, Alberto Manguel's article, "Le poète anonyme" in the journal *L'Actualité* or Douglas Barbour's "Michael Ondaatje's Sensuous Prose Seductive" in *The Edmonton Journal* -- to point to some selected instances -- have no reference to Almásy. Somehow I doubt that this is a result of not wanting to preempt the readers by giving away the story. Could it be that we are dealing with yet another situation of the Other, a situation that the Almásy theme represents as I discussed here, in his historical situation as well as in Ondaatje's the novel and, then, again, on the landscape of criticism?

Note: Versions of this article have been published previously in *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*. By Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998. 159-72; Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Social Discourse and the Problematics of Theory, Culture, Media, and Audience" in *Language and Beyond: Actuality and Virtuality in the Relations between Word, Image and Sound*. Ed. Paul Joret and Aline Remael. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998. 231-40; and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*: 'Truth is Stranger than Fiction'" in *ECW: Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (1994): 141-53.

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