

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

ERMA ASSENOVA PETROVA for the MASTER OF ARTS

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Title: THE ENGLISH PATIENT AND THE STORY OF STORYTELLING

Abstract approved: 

*The English Patient* is an exploration of the relationship between language and "reality." In *The English Patient* the search for mimetic structure, a narrative structure based on a pre-existing "reality," becomes associated with the metaphorical act of "reading" signs to derive meaning. As the original, solid "reality" begins to disappear, the act of "reading" is replaced by the process of "translation." Whereas metaphorical "reading" presupposes a non-linguistic "reality," "translation" occurs at the encounter of two linguistic systems. The transition from "reading" to "translation" can be described by Julia Kristeva's terms "symbol" and "sign." The symbol shows a pre-symbolic reality into a symbolic relationship with language; it requires a binary structure of surface signs and their meaning. The sign, however, allows for the production of meaning by two signifiers (since every signified is also a signifier). In such a linguistic environment meaning is indeed "produced" because it is the result of the artificial process of constructing narratives. When the conventions of this construction are mastered, the narrative can, according to Jean Baudrillard, "simulate" reality, since reality can only be known by its surface signs. In *The English Patient* the characteristics of signification change as it undergoes the complex transformation from the "symbolic" model which involves the "reading" of signs, to the "sign" model which is based on the interaction among narrative systems through the process of "translation," and which allows for the "simulation" of reality.

*THE ENGLISH PATIENT*  
AND THE STORY OF STORYTELLING

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A Thesis

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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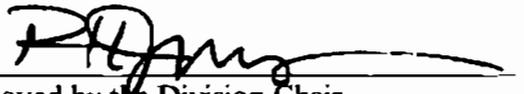
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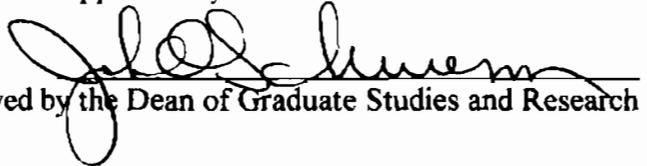
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I'd like to do something to have others understand things, paint some red stripes on my face for example, no reason in particular, just to let the others know I've put some stripes on my face . . .

--Italo Calvino, "Neanderthal Man" (183)

The work of Michael Ondaatje has attracted attention as a series of innovative and intensely postmodern experiments into the narrow borderlines of genre. *The English Patient* in particular is an exploration of the relationship between language and "reality." As a postmodern text, Ondaatje's novel focuses on one of the most subtle and persistent questions of writing--the shift from a Platonic, mimetic order in art (an order derived from an *a priori* reality) to an artificial, secondary narrative order which is always contingent upon conventions. In *The English Patient* the search for mimetic structure, a narrative structure reflecting a pre-existing "reality" becomes associated with the metaphorical act of "reading" signs to derive, rather than create, meaning. Such "reading" occurs in the symbolic relationship between map/surface and territory/essence in the recurrent geographical themes in *The English Patient*. All of the main characters in the novel make unsuccessful attempts at interacting with their environments through "reading" the surface and interpreting the available signs. As the credibility of the original "reality" begins to disappear and the "map" of signs ceases to refer to a "territory," a process of what can be called "translation" replaces the act of "reading." Whereas metaphorical "reading" associated with symbolic narrative orders presupposes a relationship between language and a non-linguistic "reality," "translation" occurs when two linguistic systems interact without reference to a metaphysical foundation, as in the realm of the sign. In *The English Patient* even historical texts, which

have traditionally postulated an objective "reality," reveal themselves as artificial constructs, narrative structures independent of historical "facts." In *The English Patient* the characteristics of signification undergo a complex transformation from a "symbolic" model which involves the "reading" of signs to a "sign" model which is based on the interaction among narrative systems through a process of "translation."

The theme of the nature of signification is not new to Ondaatje's work. His novels have continually challenged traditional definitions of narrative, history, fiction, and genre. Ondaatje's concern with the limitations and possibilities of language results in highly poetic texts, which often aim at recreating historical events while emphasizing the way such events reflect the conventions of story-telling. Greg Ratcliffe observes that Ondaatje's autobiographical novel *Running in the Family*, for example, "foregrounds the problems of writing history" (19). History, with its claim to realism and accuracy, has become a focus for Ondaatje's postmodern works. He creates textual environments in which "the distinction between fiction and history seems tenuous and is erased as both become the material of story" (Ratcliffe 20). Such works, as Branko Gorjup points out, "expose the arbitrary nature of all historical writing which aspires towards veracity" (91). History, the supposedly truthful record of reality, and the expression of language most faithful to its primary object--the historical event--becomes less dependent on any notion of "reality" and more tightly linked to the conventions of narrative. Douglas Barbour gives the following description of the unreliability of historical reference in Ondaatje's work: "In his hands, even the documents of history slide away from factual representation toward a haunting apprehension of indeterminacy" (207). This indeterminacy is the result of the arbitrary nature of signification

which makes all narratives, even historical accounts, equally fictional. For Gorjup, Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* exemplifies a "post-modernist tendency in which the writing of history and fictional narrative stem from the same creative act" (91). Ondaatje chooses the historical material for his works from marginal, enigmatic, or legendary figures whose tenuous biographical roots serve only to emphasize the impossibility of distinguishing between the "real" life of a historical personage and the accretions of fictional accounts which have been attached to it over time. In an article on the function of legend in Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Wolfgang Hochbruck observes that the "real, factual core legends may have--or, rather, may have had--has become indistinguishable from a tangled web of added information" (448). This "web" of fictional material serves to dilute the "true" identity of Ondaatje's characters to the point where historical truth becomes indistinguishable from its narrative representations. The emphasis on the *writing* of history reveals the fissure between writing itself and its ever inaccessible extra-textual referents.

The question of whether and how the arbitrary act of writing can organize its linguistic material in order to sustain identity is of primary importance to Ondaatje's novels, especially *The English Patient*, since all of them in one way or another initiate a search for identity. As Ed Jewinski remarks: "The lack of a clear identity, and the need to find one, is one of the main undercurrents of Ondaatje's prose. Just as there is no clear picture of Billy the Kid, there is no recognizable face of the title figure of *The English Patient*" (131-32). Similarly, Wil Verhoeven notes how "[a]gain and again persons (or their identities) get lost in Ondaatje's stories--lost in legends, lost in the bush, lost in the past, lost in history, lost in memory, lost in myth--and in each case people go after them in order to recover them, to remember them,

or to recreate them" (181). The search for identity is for Ondaatje usually an accumulation of precisely those distinguishing characteristics which would form an "entity" distinct from its environment. Since such characteristics, as in historical records and memories, are narrative in nature, it becomes impossible to arrive at the definition of an "entity." As Verhoeven observes, "the self as a coherent identity is an illusion" (184). Consequently, Ondaatje's characters can never complete the process of defining themselves. As Winfried Siemerling puts it, "all of his [Ondaatje's] long projects gravitate around half-defined, half-evasive characters, adumbrated in the margins of history" (108). The same could be said of Ondaatje's reconstruction of historical events, which also remain "half-defined" and "half-evasive." Instead of uncovering the past, the text exposes "history as a field of relations" (Varsava 212). In fact, not only history, but every other human endeavor becomes for Ondaatje a function of its relations with everything else. As Marian Hobson explains, "no moment of experience can present itself except as *reference* again to what it is not, what differs from it" (102). This negative counterpart of experience, "what it is not," becomes increasingly ambiguous; when both "what it is" and "what it is not" reveal themselves as equally arbitrary narrative conventions, any reference to an essentially different "other," to an essence which is not subject to textual metamorphoses, becomes impossible. Consequently, for Ondaatje, neither the identity of the self, nor the definition of "the other" can be satisfactorily, unambiguously determined.

These concerns are especially strong in *The English Patient*, a novel in which the interaction among the four main characters and the interweaving of their fates are set against the backdrop of a meandering and, at times, uncertain reconstruction of historical events. The

erratic memory of the English patient himself emerges as the shaping force of this tenuous process of reconstruction, where his listeners attempt to decode the truth and establish the chronology of the events in his story. This story, told by the severely burned victim of a plane crash, a man without a face, is his only possibility of identification. As Ondaatje shows, the narrative strategies of salvaging events and memories from historical oblivion become unreliable, arbitrary, but ultimately acceptable, preferable to the alternative of silence. Faithful to its postmodern context, *The English Patient* erases binary oppositions and focuses its narrative power on the undefined middle--the area of imperfect, fragmentary, or even misleading storytelling--located between binary extremes.

The novel itself, as a form, has to deal with an infinite number of pairs of oppositions: fact/fiction, the moment before the beginning/the moment after the beginning, signifier/signified, language/object. In its attempt to approach these oppositions in a non-dialectical way, the language of the novel as a genre changes, according to Julia Kristeva, from the "symbol" mode to the "sign" mode (38). Kristeva defines the realm of the symbol as a way to refer to an "unrepresentable and unknowable universal transcendence" (38), which, as is understood from the initial premise, has no logical connection or correlation with the symbol/mark representing it: "the two spaces (symbolized-symbolizer) are separate and do not communicate" (38). The symbolizer has the function of symbolizing an inconceivable reality beyond the linguistic sign itself (38). As Kristeva explains, the symbol transcends itself; its connection to a supposed transcendental referent is the primary characteristic of a symbolic system. Thus the symbol exists in direct dependency on the thing it symbolizes; its relationship is with an assumed "essence," the reality of its referent, and not necessarily with

other symbols. In contrast, the logic of the "sign" does not signify a reality outside signification. The sign, according to Kristeva's definition, emerges as a system of two elements (signifier and signified) both of which are "*concretized*" and exist on the level of the "immediately perceptible" (40). The transcendental quality of signification diminishes as signs refer only to other signs but not to an entity beyond them. If the symbol transcends itself to invoke an unequivocal reality, the sign becomes "a means of exchange" (Kristeva 42); it is replaceable and arbitrary and cannot be exchanged for anything else except another, also replaceable sign.

On a smaller scale the symbolic structure defines the concept of a map, which is of the same nature and employs the same process of symbolic thought. The marks on the map are understood to be completely different from the things they represent, and, at the same time, there is a logical algorithm, a sequence of stages of correspondence between the two, i.e., the reduction has a definable scale and the method of arriving at each symbol is equivalent to the procedure followed in defining all other symbols. The most significant characteristic of such a binary structure is that the two opposing entities have no common ground; the interaction between the two levels is practically and theoretically absent, and there is no symbol on the map which is also the object it represents.

The map is a recurrent image in Ondaatje's work. It is an extreme form of illustrating the gap between the name and the thing named, even when the two find themselves in maximum proximity. The assumption that the signs on a map refer to an objective, independent reality is constantly undermined in Ondaatje's work, as in this passage from Ondaatje's autobiographical novel, *Running in the Family*:

On my brother's wall in Toronto are the false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations--by Ptolemy, Mercator, Francois Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt--growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy. Amoeba, then stout rectangle, and then the island as we know it now, a pendant off the ear of India. (63)

The emphasis on the "false" maps in this passage puts the notion of "accuracy" into question and reminds the reader that representation faithful to "reality" will remain an illusion. As the shapes on the maps settle into their final contours, the illusion is at its strongest, because the last form of Ceylon is only the most recent version, nothing more than another translation of the previous shapes. Thus Ondaatje reduces the last map of "eventual accuracy" to the level of the older maps, the ones derived from accidental and partial information through unscientific reasoning. The solid structure of such "accuracy" gradually dissolves into fluid, arbitrary shapes, and the two extremes of "map" and "territory" are compromised, "translated" into each other, devoid of meaningful difference.

In *The English Patient*, the concept of "map" emerges as an organizing principle in the lives of all characters before it is eventually compromised. Stranded among the debris of World War II in a setting which contains the random remains of violence, the four main characters seek to rediscover, to map through memory, their loss in the war and their surviving identities. All of them (Hana as a nurse, Kip as a sapper, Caravaggio as a thief, and the English patient as an explorer) possess, in various degrees, the ability to "read" their environments. In traditional texts of realism, this process carries an epistemological value,

as in "Sillitoe's description of map-reading as 'the art of visualizing reality from the symbols on a sheet of paper'" (Daleski 138). The metaphor of "reading" in Ondaatje's work often designates the successful interpretation of signs in a consistently meaningful system of history, geography, or even human character, before Ondaatje undermines the foundation of this symbolic model. In *The English Patient*, the process of "reading" gradually gives way to a process of "translation," where the differences between two objects and even between object and word begin to disappear. This change corresponds to a shift from the realm of the symbol to the realm of the sign, from the symbolic representation of binary extremes to the equalizing indeterminacy of the middle ground where the "translation" neutralizes the tension between opposites as they transform into each other. In many ways, this shift also involves the mutation of chronology into simultaneity. The multiple "translations" of the middle operate simultaneously and do not allow the existence of chronology, whereas in the classical mimetic system the primacy of reality goes undisputed.

*The English Patient* begins by setting up a seemingly stable system of symbolic interpretation for each of its characters, a comfortable environment whose outer manifestations can be "read" because they lead to meanings beyond themselves. Hana, the nurse whose life has become a series of deaths which she has to witness, remembers the time before the war as a time when things made sense: "What she misses here is slow twilight, the sound of familiar trees. All through her youth in Toronto she learned to read the summer night" (49). Her effort to "read" betrays a belief in a linguistic structure organized according to knowable principles, although the ultimate subject of the attempted understanding must remain beyond knowledge. On another occasion, Hana is looking at Caravaggio's face,

"trying to read him . . . sniffing him out, searching for the trace" (39). She examines the geography of the sapper's features as well: "She watches Kip lean his head back against the wall and knows the neutral look on his face. She can read it" (178). For Hana, in the act of "reading" there exists a hidden essence to be revealed in the interpretation of surfaces. However, the surfaces begin to fade away and no longer represent an essence beyond themselves.

This loss of clear, binary opposites and the simultaneous emergence of an area between the extremes, the area of a no longer impossible middle is characteristic of Ondaatje's work as a whole; as Todd Kliman points out, images of "broken surfaces and fragmentation" (3) frequently appear in Ondaatje's novels. In *The English Patient*, the unstable surfaces consist of unreliable, uninterpretable signs--a map without territory. Thus Hana becomes increasingly aware of the gaps in her "reading." She knows about the existence of invisible dangers, "aware always of unexploded mines" which do not have external signs to make "reading" or discovery possible (43). She encounters the difficulty of defining and analyzing a surface which would signify something other than itself, a surface which would be "a surface of" something, a surface endowed with meaning.

Even the place where Hana chooses to stay with the dying English patient is a place where surfaces are weakened and disappearing:

The Villa San Girolamo, built to protect inhabitants from the flesh of the devil, had the look of a besieged fortress, the limbs of most of the statues blown off during the first days of shelling. There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled

remnants of the earth. To Hana the wild gardens were like further rooms.

(43)

The building is the antithesis of "safe" in the absence of walls and fortified outer surfaces; but, this vulnerability itself creates a new mode of protection: "They were protected by the simple fact that the villa seemed a ruin" (14). The setting gives the illusory impression that there is no "inside" behind the non-existent "outside." The lack of "demarcation" is a lack of difference. Thus, Ondaatje compares the open spaces of "wild gardens" to the closed interior of "rooms," the natural setting to the artificial design. In this process of merging or "translation" of one category into its opposite both lose their definitions. The characteristics of intention and chance, of construction and birth, of purpose and spontaneity no longer display meaningful differences. Everything becomes an open surface which has nothing to hide: "From outside, the place seemed devastated. An outdoor staircase disappeared in midair, its railing hanging off. Their life was foraging and tentative safety" (14). The rigid shapes of symbols, defined by an inaccessible "inside" which is reduced and thus "represented" by an "outside" *different* from the "inside," begin to lose their signifying efficiency.

As Kristeva explains, the loss of the symbolic order results in "a new signifying relation between two elements, both located on the side of the 'real' and 'concrete'" (39). According to Kristeva, this is the transition from the symbolic to the text as a system of signs. The sign emerges in the absence of a transcendental "reality," when language refers to nothing outside itself; the existence of a transcendental, non-linguistic referent becomes impossible. Unlike the structure of the symbol, Kristeva describes the "sign" as a relationship of "nondisjunction" (41). There is no interaction between the novel's binary oppositions, but the

text creates what Kristeva calls "deviations" of those oppositions (40). In his analysis of Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, Siemerling describes the same process with reference to the encounter of self and other: "At the moment of identity, self and other meet in a simultaneous, mutual deviation from their respective 'proper' course, a strange heterology in which writing produces 'the shape of an unknown thing'" (139). The result is a sign which Kristeva calls "ambivalent" (39), a sign whose function in the novel consists of "rebuilding the distance between life and death . . . [through] an inscription of *deviations* . . . that do not destroy the certainty of the thematic loop (life-death) holding the set together" (42). The ambivalence comes from the fact that the "initially presupposed *excluded middle*" (43), which does not exist in the binary opposition, is here approached through a "concatenation of deviations oscillating between two opposite poles, and, in an attempt at synthesis, resolving within a figure of *dissimulation* or *mask*" (43). In other words, definitions are not based on the essence of an entity but on its manifestations, its connections with everything other than itself. The resulting "mask" is the manifestation of the former "entity"; at the same time, the entity is nothing more than its manifestation. The term "mask" is misleading in the sense that the form which the entity assumes in order to present itself and to establish contact with its opposite does not hide any "real" identity. The text makes up a "middle" ground where the binary oppositions interact through their textual representations. According to Kristeva, the different categories remain irreducible to each other, but it is possible to pretend that the difference has disappeared and to accept the temporary "mask" (43) of double, "nondisjunctive" (41), intentionally indistinguishable faces. As Kristeva explains, "[t]he double (*dissimulation, mask*) . . . thus becomes the pivotal springboard for the deviations

filling up the silence" which would otherwise exist in the vacuum between opposites (44). The binary oppositions (past/present, subject/object, self/other), which by definition do not communicate, would define a space, the "excluded middle," in which language would not be possible; but, without the binary structure, the text enacts an infinite middle, in which oppositions are substituted by what Kristeva calls "deviations" working in "agreement" (51). The novel itself, as a genre, "is not possible unless the disjunction between two terms can be denied while all the time being there, confirmed, and approved. It is presented, now, as *double* rather than as *two irreducible elements*" (Kristeva 48). In a work of fiction the "double" elements would be visible as images of double roles, states, definitions, as in a single character who has different faces or characteristics: one of Kristeva's examples is a character who is "both child and warrior, page and hero, the Lady's fool and conqueror of soldiers, cared for and betrayed, lover of the Lady and loved either by the king or a comrade in arms" (51). However, these various roles assigned to the same character exist simultaneously, so that they become more than double or illusory masks, they indeed coincide. The inevitable identity of these elements can no longer be defined as a "mask" because there is no reality different from this condition. For Ondaatje, the convergence of two opposites into an entity (which is not double or deceptive) would make it possible for the English patient to talk in first and third person, to be both Almásy and an observer of Almásy, the character of the story and its narrator: "It was as if he had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller" (246) The area of the middle, the "pure zone between land and chart," is no longer the space of silence between opposites; the diminishing certainty with which a

category identifies its opposite, its other, signals the collapse of extremes and the demise of silence. These extremes not only approach each other through their textual transformations, but they become each other.

Such identity between extremes is possible because in the environment of the "middle" all events tend to become the product of what Jean Baudrillard calls "simulation." Simulation, by its very nature, defies the notion of a mask, since virtually nothing falls outside the definition of the mask; the definition is impossible because the difference it needs is not there: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (Baudrillard 343). In other words, the knowledge of the real bases itself on the textual manifestations of the real and cannot distinguish between the signs and what they signify. These "signs" do not refer to extra-textual meanings but only to themselves (for example, the English patient is nothing more than the person telling the story of the English patient). In the uncharted and unstable territory of the "middle," Baudrillard observes that "simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary.' Since the simulator produces 'true' symptoms, is he ill or not?" (344). From being functional, the masks become essential, and, at the same time, cease to be "masks." The sign is only a surface, "not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself" (346). The sign becomes redundant and self-identical. All opposites become simultaneous in their textual manifestations, "even the most contradictory--all are true, in the sense that their truth is exchangeable" (Baudrillard 355). This is not simply the co-existence of diverse elements, but a new amorphousness of signification in which the elements converge into "something else

entirely" (362). This new element is devoid of structure and the best approximation of a definition for it is, in Baudrillard's words, "an indiscernible chemical solution" (365). Siemerling offers a similar description: "the mutual predication in which both terms function simultaneously as signifier and signified, like the 'chemical reaction' of metaphor, leaves none of the 'ingredients' unmodified and thus constitutes an implicit critique of reflection" (140). The possibility of acquiring knowledge about a world beyond signification disappears as the linguistic terms signifying "reality" become interchangeable.

The distance between any two extremes has been not only reduced but devoid of meaning, and the treacherous middle has been narrated back into itself--it has become a territory of undifferentiated linguistic elements which cannot achieve definition as belonging to either one or the other binary category. In order to account for the metamorphoses which replace the definitions of identity in *The English Patient*, the sign has to relinquish precisely the "irreducibility of terms" characteristic of "reading" or interpreting, and adopt the more interactive approach of "translating" those entities which were previously considered inviolable and incapable of linguistic mutation.

And yet, such a mutation is possible. It undermines the traditional solid outlines of structure in the widest possible sense, the structure which depends on a symbolic relationship among its elements. The notion of structure itself, as defined by Derrida, includes the "freeplay" of signifiers, the "field of infinite substitutions" ("Structure" 260); for Derrida, it is not enough to have a "structure" in order to postulate a language based on "symbol" rather than "sign." It is only when the structure defines itself through an impossible, non-structural "center"--"a point of presence, a fixed origin . . . [a] point at which the substitution of

contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible" (248)--that the system begins to function as a symbolic model. This unity could be expressed in various ways, because "the center receives different forms or names," which are in fact "all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center" (Derrida 249).

It seems that in order to have a "symbolic" relationship (as opposed to one based on the "sign"), the structure organizes itself around a center, and this center constructs a non-symbolic, transcendental foundation. In that sense, it is not the relationship of things among themselves that makes symbolic thought possible, but the assumption that the connections can be systematically derived from a single organizing principle whose source lies outside of signification altogether. The movement from "symbolic" thinking to "sign" thinking, or the disruption of the notion of a structure organized by a non-structural, non-linguistic center, becomes apparent in the development of the characters in *The English Patient*. Their increasing awareness of the impossibility of uncovering the underlying "truth" behind linguistic signs counteracts their efforts to arrive at an essential identity, an area behind the map symbols.

The "symbolic" encounter with reality, the attempt to "read" signs, is especially strong in the character of Caravaggio. His knowledge of metaphorical "geography" consists of algorithms, rules of stealing. During the war, when the Allies discover his useful skills, Caravaggio is no longer a hiding thief--he becomes a licensed spy. His work depends on the knowledge of the network of spies and dangers *as* a network, a system, an explainable structure. When he is accidentally photographed, a particular danger is defined, and "[n]ow that he knows of its existence he can avoid it" (36). Caravaggio is also the only person who

"would walk into a room and look up into the high corners to see if he was alone" (74). His suspicions have to do with his prior knowledge of the relations of things, so that he needs to approach everything with caution derived from customary associations, trying to uncover the relationship of every object with everything else, to understand how it fits into the known system.

He approaches the unknown variable of the English patient himself in the same way. As much as it is important for Hana to "read" Caravaggio's face, it is even more so for Caravaggio to "read" the English patient. He searches for more details about the patient's identity in order to be able to place him in the "map" of spies and events he knows. Piecing all details together--code names, double agents, trips through the desert monitored by the British--Caravaggio concludes that the burned pilot, the man without a face known as the English patient is, *in reality*, Count Ladislaus de Almásy: "We are talking about someone who crashed in a plane. Here is this man, burned beyond recognition, who somehow ends up in the arms of the English at Pisa. Also, he can get away with sounding English. Almásy went to school in England. In Cairo he was referred to as the English spy" (165). Caravaggio needs to solve the mystery using Holmsian strategies of deduction, to know the whole story, the places, the names, the causes and the consequences: "I'd like to talk with him some more. With more morphine in him. Talking it out. Both of us" (166). Even Caravaggio's view of love is explained in terms of knowledge--people fall in love because they "want to *know* things, how the pieces fit" (121). He asks questions, supplies clues, tests guesses: "To unthread the story out of him, Caravaggio travels within the code of signals" (247). Caravaggio "had lived through a time of war when everything offered up to those around him

was a lie" (117), and, consequently, he attempts to recover the "truth" behind all those lies.

But two independent details point to the failure of his attempts. The first has to do with the unexplainable slips of the English patient into the third person when he talks about Almásy: "Almásy was drunk and attempting an old dance step he had invented called the Bosphorus hug, lifting Katharine Clifton into his wiry arms and traversing the floor until he fell with her across some Nile-grown aspidistras. . . . When Almásy was like that we usually dispersed" (244). Here, the English patient talks as an observer, a witness of Almásy's actions, though at other times he talks about events which only Almásy could know. Caravaggio wonders: "Who is he speaking as now?" (244). At first Caravaggio interprets the shift into the third person as a deliberate attempt at deception and is "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 he is Almásy" (247). According to the logical constructs of Caravaggio, the man *has to be* Almásy because all the clues confirm this hypothesis--the signals, the history, the story, the connections: "When Almásy speaks, he [Caravaggio] stays alongside him reordering the events" (248). However, Caravaggio is unable to be a dispassionate observer, because he is "constantly diverted by the human element" (209). Annoyed by the gaps in the story at first, Caravaggio gradually becomes less interested in the identity of the man than in the conversation itself. The "truth" of the past gives way to its narrative versions. Caravaggio is bound to fail in his attempt to reconstruct the original story, because there is no original story. He realizes that he has more than one option--he can either discover the English patient's identity or confer an identity upon him: "He watches the man in the bed. He needs to know who this Englishman from the desert is. . . . Or perhaps invent

a skin for him, the way tannic acid camouflages a burned man's rawness" (117) [italics added]. The suggested construction or "invention" of identity would endow the stranger not only with meaning but also with reality. Caravaggio knows well that the "camouflage" of words is strong enough to simulate, create reality:

Working in Cairo during the early days of the war, he had been trained to invent double agents or phantoms who would take on flesh. He had been in charge of a mythical agent named 'Cheese,' and he spent weeks clothing him with facts, giving him qualities of character--such as greed and a weakness for drink when he would spill false rumours to the enemy. (117)

Realizing that the "false" double agents have all the properties of the "real" ones, Caravaggio becomes sensitive to the way narrative creations acquire authority; they not only resemble the real ones but in fact *become* the real ones in every sense of the word.

Similarly, in his encounter with the English patient Caravaggio gives up the attempt to discover the "true" identity of the man without a face, to decode the past which is supposedly "contained" in his story. Instead, he focuses on the story itself, without looking for its "meaning"; he finally admits that "[i]t no longer matters which side he [the English patient] was on during the war" (251). The burned man reveals himself as the storyteller rather than the subject of the story; the more he talks about Almásy, the explorer/spy, the more he draws attention to the English patient, the man who constructs himself through stories. Accordingly, his listeners never learn who this person *really* was during the war, because his past is only accessible through his present, and the present, full of stories *about* the past, nevertheless tends to center around the process of storytelling in the present.

Characterized in this way, the narrative of *The English Patient* challenges the traditional distinction between the story and what the story is "about," and, by implication, the difference between author and character. Verhoeven observes:

Whereas in the conventional context of literary communication the three-fold hierarchy is meant to increase the distance between the extra-textual creator and the story, and thereby to contribute to the *authority* of the text, in Ondaatje's work the reader is continually invited to read the hierarchy upside down, that is, from the story back to its creator, who thereby wants to emphasize that he is in fact the author, narrator, and character/subject of the tale rolled into one and the same figure. (183-84)

In other words, attention is drawn not to the "extra-textual" but to its textual manifestations. The author is nothing more than the creator of the story; outside of the story itself, there is no author, no storyteller. That is why the identity of the English patient cannot be recovered—the emphasis in the novel falls on the narrative process of constructing the story rather than on the results. Even Caravaggio gives up the attempt to interpret, to "read" the signs for what is beyond them. Each sign is no longer simply a container or a vehicle to be used for recovering an underlying meaning; the sign begins to signify little more than itself.

In such a context, the metaphor of "reading" in *The English Patient* loses its efficiency. It becomes clear that the "truth" will not be revealed, and that, in the system of signs, the clues do not lead anywhere except back to themselves. Instead of pointing out a deeper identity behind the surface of the story of the English patient, the signs remain explicit surface features. Thus, the long expected definition of the mysterious patient does not

emerge from his story; on the contrary, his identity consists of the linguistic, accessible “surfaces” of his words. The story is not just one of the manifestations of a pre-existing English patient, because the English patient himself is nothing more than the man who tells this story. Again, neither the chronology, nor the irreducibility of terms can be maintained. The storyteller cannot be said to precede the story in any meaningful way, since the clues from the story cannot be traced back to a pre-existing reality. Furthermore, the attempt to do so places the story (the starting point of the deduction of identity) before the actual events described in it. And since the life of the English patient is nothing more than his story, the teller of the story and the story itself are already reducible to each other.

A result of this is the increasing difficulty of defining mutually exclusive identities. The metamorphosis of objects into stories seems almost pathologically inclusive in the sense that it prevents the differentiation of a surface interaction between "reality" and narrative. Surface interactions are no longer possible, since the once clear surfaces are now designating nothing but themselves. As Baudrillard points out, "it is no longer a question of either maps or territory. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between them that was the abstraction's charm" (343). This disappearance leaves the text to roam the middle ground, the once empty space between "map" and "territory," which is now both the map *and* the territory, a space alive with free transformations and arbitrary, temporary definitions. As a result, Ondaatje shows that all claims of identity in the text become suspect.

In the search for identity the encounter between "self" and "other" becomes especially important because they both depend on a distinction which has to be made without the help of any essentialist definitions; this distinction is, in the realm of the sign, a function of the

interaction between the two elements to be defined. The definition of the other "appears derived from a notion of the self" (Siemerling 4). In *The English Patient*, for example, the war has created a situation in which the characters are supposed to reveal their "true" identity; according to Caravaggio, the four people in the Italian villa "were shedding skins. They could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defense but to look for the truth in others" (117). But is there indeed such a "truth"? How can the self really "shed" all imitations and remain "what it is"? This view of "an essentialist, knowable self" (Verhoeven 184) ultimately evolves toward a notion of the self as increasingly indeterminate. The definition of the "self" in Ondaatje's work is in turn derived from a definition of the "other," so that, as Annette Lonnecke puts it, "the self emerges as intersubjective--that is, as definable only in its interactions with others" (41). Accordingly, the defining characteristics of the self are only external, objectified, manifested, so that "the self as synthesis is ontologically empty" (Verhoeven 184). As Ondaatje shows, the self cannot exist as an independent entity or as an entity at all; it remains a sum of references to the "other." In other words, the self is primarily textual, constructed through its narrative connections with the alleged "external" world. At the same time, all references to the other refer also to the self, so that signification remains a series of mutually exchangeable signifiers which do not point to an extra-textual referent. Defined solely by its textual manifestations, the self approaches the other so closely that the boundary between them is erased. This becomes possible only in the undifferentiated middle ground between binary entities, the area where the symbol gives way to the sign. As Siemerling explains, "[i]n Ondaatje's texts, the juxtaposition and interweaving of self and other often approach an indistinguishable superimposition of threads" (112), a

superimposition which cannot escape the self-referentiality of its interchangeable narrative elements.

Such a tendency is visible in *The English Patient* as well. The momentary certainty with which the English patient can become Hungarian, British, loyal to the Allies or a double spy, does not leave any possibility open for an unequivocal definition of his past. Steven de Zepetnek refers to this as "Almásy's slippery identity" (145). But the mystery of the Hungarian/British spy/storyteller does not exhaust the novel's capacity for indeterminacy. The "moment in which one identity steps over the edge toward another" (Siemerling 121) is the moment when each character is faced with the impossibility of his or her existence as an autonomous individual. Kip is Indian by birth and British by education; Caravaggio becomes a lawful thief when his craft of stealing is licensed and recruited for the war; Hana is "more patient than nurse" (*English* 95-96). Such deliberately tentative characterization is typical of Ondaatje's other novels as well. Christian Bok observes that in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, "William Bonney remains an enigma" and in *Coming Through Slaughter*, Buddy Bolden is "inscrutable" throughout the book (115). These texts draw attention to the process of defining their protagonists, a process which is never complete. *The English Patient* thus joins the group of narratives which "thrive on the impossibility of coming to terms with the other--of negotiating a final definition of the relationship between self and other" (Siemerling 11).

The same is also true for other traditional binary oppositions, such as real/fictional and true/false which fail to achieve a "final definition." These categories are put into question in the story told by the English patient, the story about Almásy, who may or may not be the

English patient himself. Almásy's lover, Katharine, is badly injured after a plane crash caused by her husband. She and Almásy are alone in the desert, and he has to find help. After an exhausting three-day walk he arrives at El Taj only to find that the English soldiers do not believe his story, have no intention of helping him, and actually believe that he is a spy: "Everyone with a foreign name who drifted into these small oasis towns was suspect" (251). The truth of the story he tells to the English has nothing to do with the way it is perceived.

Caravaggio finds the English patient's account of the event unconvincing:

"Are you telling me the English did not believe you? No one listened to you?"

"No one listened."

"Why?"

"I didn't give them a right name."

"Yours?"

"I gave them mine."

"Then what . . ."

"*Hers*. Her name. The name of her husband " (250)

The "true" name is not necessarily the "right" name. In this case, the true one is explicitly the wrong one. Again, the notions of right and wrong begin to blur as one element; Almásy's name shows simultaneous existence in both categories. It is supposedly the right name for him because it is his "real" name; yet it is *not* the right name for him in relation with Katharine, or for him in these particular circumstances. This one element subverts the definitions of the two opposites "true" and "false." What remains is an undefined and constantly shifting middle, a "multi-layered, destabilized text" (Kliman 5), which could assume

any definition just long enough to make it useless, to undermine its foundation and to embrace its opposite.

A similar transformation of a system of stable and recognizable differences to one of unintelligible and arbitrary events occurs in the world of the sapper, Kip. His training has taught him the logic of the symbol. For every bomb, there is a design, a plan which accurately reflects the mechanism of the weapon itself. Kip "had learned diagrams of order when he joined the army" (110); these "diagrams" are highly mimetic texts whose only function is to refer to an objective reality beyond themselves--the physical mechanism:

A bomb is a combination of the following parts:

1. A container or bomb case.
2. A fuze.
3. An initiating charge, or gaine.
4. A main charge of high explosive.
5. Superstructural fittings--fins, lifting lugs, kopfrings, etc. (182)

The science of danger works by breaking down the object into elements which are organized in a particular way in order to function, in order to *mean*, "danger." These "surface" features of the bomb are not dispersed but can be traced back to one source, "the possible forms of structure in the mine . . . the personality that had laid the city of threads and then poured wet concrete over it" (99). For Kip, dealing with the mechanical parts means identifying a center, an organizing principle of the system; however, Kip's reasoning subverts this "symbolic" system, because the center, the source to which he traces all the elements of the bomb, is not pre-symbolic. Instead, it is defined as a mind, the linguistically determined consciousness of

a human being, as in the following examples: "He [Kip] travelled the path of the bomb fuze once again, alongside the mind that had choreographed this" (102); "[h]e was an autodidact, and he believed his mind could read the motives and spirit behind any invention" (186); the bomb is a "knot of wires and fuzes someone has left him like a terrible letter" (76). The attempted, metaphorical act of "reading" here has characteristics similar to the ones in Caravaggio's professional watchfulness: the sapper is "unable to look at a room or field without seeing the possibilities of weapons there" (75). His world is organized around the "capacity for accident" in a given space, around its "choreography" (111). As with any system or theoretical organization of the visible "evidence," this one does not allow for incidental, detached existence of objects independent of the whole structure; in this case, the sapper is alert and "permanently suspicious of any object placed casually in a room" (275). A "casual," surface existence is not possible in the symbolic system; consequently, the sapper's skills include interpreting surface features and finding their "meaning." He is able to recognize the significance of "a frail scent of cordite" (110), to "translate . . . the smell, evolving it backwards to what had been burned" (124), and to conclude that somebody has died. From this point of view, definition and knowledge are possible and are a matter of the quantity of available information.

The sapper is troubled on the rare occasions when he is unable to "read" the bomb, to decipher the mind and intention behind it: "We have an impasse. There's a joke. I don't know where to go from here. I don't know how complete the trick is" (101). But the suspicion of "joke" contradicts the assertion of "impasse"--while the latter would mean a failure in the system, the former only alerts to a more ingenious variation of the familiar rules.

There is nothing random or unexplainable, since all details of the defusing operation are still reducible to the same source, the same hostile mind which has designed a deliberate "joke" and perfected the old mechanism. This assumption of intention means that resolution is possible; it also means that the origin of the problem can be stated in textual terms. As a result, a "translation" of the "original" intention into an intelligible explanation becomes possible; the problem is translatable to its solution, because both exist as linguistic systems. Kip knows that he will be able to reproduce the "original" pattern of thinking, to retrace and expose the "joke" in the weapon. Implied in such reasoning is the intervention of the human mind: Kip's knowledge of the parts of the bomb does not refer to the structure of the bomb itself but to somebody else's design, a linguistic blueprint which defines, explains, and creates the bomb. Its "origin" lies in an artificial, linguistic construction. In fact, the concept of a weapon itself emphasizes the fact that the order, the system Kip takes for granted, is a matter of human ingenuity. The approach of "reading" the inside of a bomb from its external, surface features evolves into a process of "translation" of the human design from one mind to another. The blueprint precedes and overrides the importance of the physical object itself. It is not accidental that the new, most powerful weapon is described in the same way, its familiarity beginning, for Kip, with linguistic identification: "A sudden sunlight of lightning through the tent wall, always, it seemed to him, brighter than sunlight, a flash of contained phosphorus, something machinelike, to do with the new word he has heard in the theory rooms and through his crystal set, which is 'nuclear'" (277). The meaning of the word itself entails unknown danger, destruction of inhuman magnitude. What makes it different from other weapons is its "machinelike" quality, which prevents interpretation. Kip imagines the nuclear

bomb as a machine free of human agency which does not allow him to "translate" the intention behind it and understand its logic.

Before he learns about the nuclear bomb, Kip is confident that "whatever the trials around him there was always solution and light" (272). As a sapper, he believes in the efficiency of his work; he is the one who remains on duty, "the only one of them who has remained in uniform" (74). He believes in knowledge--until he encounters a weapon about which he "knows nothing," the nuclear bomb (287). This is not to say that the mechanism of this particular weapon, although new, is inherently undecipherable; the sapper is likely to understand the physical components of the bomb without much difficulty. But for Kip, this new, unaccountable deviation from the system means taking out the human element of the equation, the impossibility of tracing intention in the weapon, of "translating" the thinking that originated the nuclear device into an intelligible version. This is the moment when Kip can no longer identify with the creator of the weapon, the moment when he rebels: "I believed I could fill myself up with what older people taught me. I believed I could carry that knowledge, slowly altering it, but in any case passing it beyond me to another" (283). He is no longer an Indian impressed with European rationality; the order or discipline that he borrowed from foreign culture begins to collapse: "My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them" (284). The ultimate distrust of the intelligible mechanisms of "civilization" destroys the system which Kip has assimilated during his training as a soldier. The impasse which he encounters takes away the legitimacy of all solutions he has mastered and puts in doubt the future success of decoding the human

intention embedded in a weapon. The thought of the nuclear bomb introduces the anonymity of massive consequences to the game of personal outwitting of the enemy.

A determination to solve seemingly unsolvable problems based on the assumption that there is an intelligible system has been identified as the "modern" (as opposed to "postmodern") reaction to ambivalence. A feeling of uncertainty for the "modern" mind is a temporary condition, where, according to Zygmunt Bauman, "the passage from uncertainty to certainty, from ambivalence to transparency seem[s] to be a matter of time, of resolve, of resources, of *knowledge*" (15). The opposite, postmodern attitude is one in which "the escape from contingency [is] as contingent as the condition from which escape is sought" (Bauman 15). While modernism "temporalizes ignorance" (21) and thus provides incentives for working towards a solution, the postmodern mind cannot distinguish between the state of ignorance and the state of knowledge. This condition is possible because both states depend on surface recognition, an external image which can, in Baudrillard's terms, "simulate" both ignorance and knowledge with the help of narrative conventions. Knowledge, as dependent on reality, becomes problematic in postmodern texts, including Ondaatje's novels, which draw attention to the process of signification, thus "deliberately obscuring the distinction between life and art" (Gorjup 90). In a way, the "translation" of one narrative system into another paradoxically allows for infinite possibilities of knowledge--it is impossible to encounter an element which is not susceptible to translation, an entity which has existence outside any linguistic system. At the same time, the knowledge of "reality" disappears, as it transforms into the narrative construct of "art." Again, what fails is the symbolic logic, the one-to-one correspondence between the linguistic and the non-linguistic order.

As such symbolic logic, for Kip, finds expression in the concept of a map, it could be said that Almásy himself is the epitome of the geographical skills related to the reading (literal and metaphorical) of map symbols. Almásy, in the story the English patient tells, has spent all his life reading maps: "In his rooms maps cover the walls" (153). He is a member of the Geographical society in London, one of these people who are described as "often lost, tickets misplaced, clinging only to their old maps" (133). He is interested in the "theorems of exploration" (143), the history of places, the truth behind the stories of ancient writers. Such exploration, according to Derrida, is, ultimately, the search for a center, for origins: "the movement of any archaeology, like that of any eschatology, is an accomplice of this reduction of the structurality of structure and always attempts to conceive of structure from the basis of a full presence which is out of play" (960). In other words, historical reconstruction of events aspires toward an identification of the past independent of the process of reconstruction. As Ondaatje shows, the "play" or infinite substitution of signifiers thwarts the possibility of a "presence," an objective origin. As Derrida explains, "the system of signs is constituted by the differences between the terms, and not by their fullness. The elements of signification function . . . by the network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to one another" ("Differance" 139). The mission of archaeology itself is to recover the past precisely in its "fullness," to identify the way it "really" was before the intervention of the present.

The English patient's story is the embodiment of this movement backwards in time for the recovery of beginnings. He is not only familiar with maps but immersed in them, as if his mind and the signs on the map have coalesced. He comes to possess the ultimate form of

"geographic" consciousness, "a man who can recognize an unnamed town by its skeletal shape on a map" (18). He describes himself this way: "When I was lost . . . unsure of where I was, all I needed was the name of a small ridge, a local custom, a cell of this historical animal, and the map of the world would slide into place" (19). However, the truthfulness of the description, the clear connection between map and territory and between past and present, gives way to a relationship of indeterminacy. The question of the "true" landscape remains open. The desert in which Almásy finds himself has been full of water in ancient times, and for him it retains the ambivalence of sand *and* water, both of which are equally real. Almásy can envision the past shape superimposed on the present:

In Tassili I have seen rock engravings from a time when the Sahara people hunted water horses from reed boats. In Wadi Sura I saw caves whose walls were covered with paintings of swimmers. Here there had been a lake. I could draw its shape on a wall for them. I could lead them to its edge, six thousand years ago. (18)

The definition of this place as a desert or a lake is equally accurate; it is impossible to tell which one reveals the "true" form of the landscape. At times even the long interval in the chronology during which water mutated into sand seems erased by the simultaneity of the perception of the two. Almásy describes his experience of the confusion of past and present in this way: "In the desert it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation. When I came out of the air and crashed into the desert, into those troughs of yellow, all I kept thinking was, I must build a raft. . . . I must build a raft" (18). Here, Almásy fails to define his surroundings in terms of the mutually exclusive categories of "lake" and "desert"; both possibilities remain

open, inclusive, and even paradoxically identical (the "troughs" of sand make Almásy think of water).

After the crash, the Bedouin people save the English patient in the desert; they need him and his knowledge of weapons: "He was there to translate the guns" (20). The English patient has the remarkable ability to supply each gun's name--"Twelve-millimetre Breda machine gun. From Italy. . . . French seven-point-five-millimetre Chatterault. Light machine gun. Nineteen twenty-four" (20). Later, he does the same with the history of Villa San Girolamo, identifying its place in history and reconstructing its context:

Yes, I think a lot happened here. This fountain in the wall. Pico and Lorenzo and Poliziano and the young Michelangelo. They held in each hand the new world and the old world. The library hunted down the last books of Cicero. They imported a giraffe, a rhinoceros, a dodo. Toscanelli drew maps of the world based on correspondence with merchants. They sat in this room with a bust of Plato and argued all night. (57)

This description does not qualify as "a capsule from the past" (33), because no one can testify to its accuracy. Hana has a different version of the history of the place: "It was a hospital . . . Before that, long before that a nunnery. Then armies took it over" (56). The two hypotheses about the villa co-exist and do not allow the recovery of the "real" past, as any version of it can be simulated by the narratives of the present.

This concern with the accuracy of historical knowledge is characteristically postmodern. As Bernd Engler points out, the accounts of the past "are not hidden in the historical record and thus they cannot be discovered" (24). The clues leading back to the past

are textual clues, so that "[b]oth the writing of history and the writing of fiction are . . . discourses of the imaginary" (Engler 27). The illusion of discovery becomes an elaborate projection of the present onto the past, working under the assumption of the possibility of recovering information, of acquiring knowledge, and the corresponding impossibility of historical loss, of empty spaces, of absence.

Although the oasis of Zerzura, which Almásy is looking for, has been described as "lost" (135), this is only a label signifying the purpose of the exploration, so that the word "lost" comes to mean "to be found." And indeed, "the lost oasis of Zerzura was found by Ladislaus de Almásy and his companions" during one of their expeditions (134). For an archaeological mind like Almásy's, the gaps in the historical understanding of particular events are only the exceptions, whereas everything else falling into place is the rule; the exceptions are temporary lapses in knowledge which will be overcome "when all of that time is fully discovered" (259). As with the structure of the map, the specific relationships among the known parts can suggest the shape of the missing ones. Almásy lives in a "fully named world" (21), a place where it is natural to talk about "the presence of an ancient lake" (169), the presence of absent things which need to be restored to their "normal" condition, to be found.

At the same time, as with all the other characters in the novel, this belief in a reliable system of references evolves into a system of self-referential signifiers. Again, the "translation" of two opposite categories (such as "lost" and "found") erases the difference between them to the point where statements like "the lost was found" become possible. Here, the text explores the undefinable middle of transformations. When the English patient talks about the desert, for example, the description focuses on the random and fluid character of

a normally solid territory: "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" (138). The desert emerges as a place where identity begins to dissolve. Almásy says: "It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand. We left the harbours of oasis. The places water came to and touched . . . I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from" (139). This attitude is very different from the "archaeological" one. It is as if there are two personalities, corresponding to the English patient and Almásy, and they not only coexist but coincide in the space of "translation" where all identity is one of metamorphosis.

It cannot be said that the notion of "mask" is really appropriate in this context. The English patient is Almásy in the same way as the desert is a lake--the present form does not conceal any "real" identity. In the words of Foucault, this kind of a mask is a "mask that conceals nothing, simulacra without dissimulation" (177). The only possibility of knowledge of the "original" is through its imitation--a view which undermines the notion of an entity preceding signification. Ratcliffe's question "[H]ow will the original be distinguished from the copy in the future?" (24) remains unanswered, except that simulation makes it clear that the original is indistinguishable from the copy and in that sense *is* the copy.

In terms of the text, the written accounts of events fail to invoke the reality of the events. What ends up in the story is not the "truth" *behind* the story, but the truth *about* the story, which presents itself as nothing more than a story. When the English patient remembers the night he fell in love with Katharine, he says: "This is a story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story from Herodotus" (233). The actual event of "falling in love" is left in the background and can be said to exist only as far as it is

reconstructed in the story. The narrator no longer needs the reality of the occurrence, because he can achieve a perfectly convincing simulation based on the signs of this reality--in this case, the memories which persist detached from their original source.

The same facility of reconstruction, the same emphasis on simulation, can be seen in the chronology of *The English Patient*. All the stories are reconstructed through flashbacks and flashforwards, but they can still simulate the original chronology, the "real" order of events. The text operates "under the sign of dead differences, and of the resurrection of differences" (Baudrillard 348). This "resurrection" is possible because the order of signification is arbitrary and can be reversed at will. As Brian Rotman observes, "[t]he signs of the system become creative and autonomous" (28). If the sign was once produced by a reality, now the process can easily be repeated backwards. The existence of real people can be simulated through stories in retrospect, so that the people become real to the listener *after* he hears the story about them.

If signification no longer refers to anything but itself and the signs are "dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs" (Baudrillard 359), the whole of reality is objectified into its external manifestations. The narrative can not only reveal its self-sufficiency beyond all claims of "reality" but can also simulate this reality at any time; the signified and the signifier will occupy the same surface, visible and accessible but not misleadingly so, since this surface will not refer to or hide any "invisible," deeper, and "true" layer of meaning. This new mode of signification is what, according to Kristeva, replaces the dialectics of the symbol:

The semiotic practice of the sign thus assimilates the metaphysics of the symbol and projects it onto the "immediately perceptible." The "immediately

perceptible," valorized in this way, is then transformed into an *objectivity*--the reigning law of discourse in the civilization of the sign. (992)

Devoid of a metaphysical, extra-textual referent, signification remains confined to its own "objectivity"; the surface of the sign does not participate in a relationship with anything that is not expressible in language. This process could be traced in the stories of all the characters in *The English Patient* as they encounter situations in which the assumption that the narrative has a transcendental foundation begins to disappear. There is nothing beyond the sign to be signified, so that the sign itself engenders all signification as it simulates its own meaning and reference. The result could best be described as a process of "translation," which equalizes sign and referent and easily adopts a variety of meanings. This process can be seen in the images of objects becoming something else, or in the merging of a word and the object it signifies. And, while the key word describing the logic of the "symbolic" is "read," the key word for the logic of the "sign" is "translate." The points where "reading" becomes "translation" in the text are the ones where the object *and* the word find themselves on the same surface. At the same time, the definition of the "surface" becomes more ambiguous, and it assumes the place of this non-existent middle where the oppositions converge through their deviations, or what Baudrillard would call simulations. In other words, instead of "reading" a sign as a "double" mask, giving the object multiple but recognizable identities, the text attempts a description which includes both identities simultaneously, at the moment when one of them *becomes* the other, or is translated into the other.

The word "translate" is frequently used in *The English Patient*, it emphasizes the stages of transition between incompatible extremes, as in this passage about Kip: "He

schemed along the different paths of the wire and swerved into the convolutions of their knots, the sudden corners, the buried switches that translated them from positive to negative" (101). The emphasis is on the neutralizing symmetry of diametrically opposed forces; the general relationship of tension between "positive" and "negative" can be replaced by "human being" and "inanimate object," as in the following example: "The woman translated into leaves and twigs" (175). Here, the tension between the customarily alien entities of the self and its environment dissolves as their linguistic manifestations continue to approach each other until they coincide.

Similarly, the description of the growing up of Hana as "translation" (222) suggests not only a process of change, but an inevitable self-identity as Hana's multiple versions through the years ultimately converge. The older Hana does not contain the younger one, in the same way in which the ancient lake is not concealed behind the mask of a desert--it is simultaneously the younger and the older version of itself.

The same transformations occur in the relationship between the story and the book/object as the two freely "translate" into each other. This relationship between the sign and the referent is one in which the referent is exposed as equally textual and derivative as the sign. Accordingly, the sign has assumed an aura of "reality" which allows it to freely appropriate the apparent characteristics of material objects.

The ability of language to display such characteristics has fascinated Ondaatje in many of his works, where, as Hutcheon explains, "[t]he physicality of language, its concrete letters, is a recurring motif" ("Postmodern" 90). The way a word looks or sounds becomes suddenly significant, obscuring and replacing the way it "means," as in *Running in the Family*:

*Asia*. The name was a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered, would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe, America, Canada. The vowels took over, slept on the mat with the *S*. (22)

The exclusive attention to the surface of the words reveals it as more than a surface; in fact, such treatment of language undercuts the definition of surface as the visible cover of something larger or deeper, something *else*.

Similarly, in another passage from *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje explores the possibility of meaning becoming literally visible in the shapes of the letters without reducing their significance:

I still believe the most beautiful alphabet was created by the Sinhalese. The insect of ink curves into a shape that is almost sickle, spoon, eyelid. The letters are washed blunt glass which betray no jaggedness. Sanskrit was governed by verticals, but its sharp grid features were not possible in Ceylon. Here the Ola leaves which people wrote on were too brittle. A straight line would cut apart the leaf and so a curling alphabet was derived from its Indian cousin. Moon coconut. The bones of a lover's spine. (83)

Instead of focusing on what the words "say," this passage emphasizes the explicit, surface features of the letters which communicate their visible shapes. The straight or curved lines here do not attempt signification beyond themselves; instead, they play with the possibility of self-identity. The question this passage raises is one which echoes through all of Ondaatje's work—to what extent does the text signify, evoke, or refer to something outside itself? And

if all such reference is a matter of Baudrillardian simulation, language remains ultimately autonomous, as well as ubiquitous, indistinguishable from non-language. In this context, the abstract finds itself on the same level as the concrete, assuming its physical properties, becoming accessible to the senses, as in the "wet alphabet of tusk" (*Running* 142), or "[h]is letters were a room he seldom lived in" (*Trick* 44), or "the body of her language in his ear" (*English* 270). Siemerling argues that "Ondaatje draws . . . on the materiality of signs to stage the encounter of different languages and realities" (165). However, it would be more accurate to say that the relationship between language and reality in general, and especially in their common ground, interests Ondaatje. Thus, his "marked inclination to conflate the factual and the fictional" (Varsava 210) suggests that "reality" is "translatable" into fiction, and consequently that every notion of "reality" is bound to be linguistic.

*The English Patient* pursues this question further when the notion of a book begins to have double meaning—as a story (where the words refer to something beyond themselves) and as an object (where the physical properties of the book or of the letters are independent of their “meaning”). The novel frequently draws attention to the physicality of the object "book," as in the following passage about Hana:

The book lay on her lap. She realized that for more than five minutes she had been looking at the porousness of the paper, the crease at the corner of page 17 which someone had folded over as a mark. She brushed her hand over its skin. (7)

The book is explicitly constructed as a physical presence open to the senses, capable of making contact with the material world. The book presents itself not as a text, but as a

conglomerate of objective data--the texture of the paper, the shape of the corner, the "skin" of the page.

Another example of the non-textual "presence" of a book is the occasion when Hana "rebuilds" (13) the missing steps of a staircase with books, finding them useful *as objects*, more (or less) than stories. But this simultaneous attentiveness to all the functions, all the meanings of things is not limited to books or even material objects. At certain moments in the narrative all boundaries become tentative and impossible: "A book, a map of knots, a fuze board, a room of four people" (111). These items are treated in the same way, as equal and often indistinguishable parts of one textual universe. In a way, the man without a face, the man telling stories, could be conceived as a text, a possibility which he himself acknowledges: "You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book?" (252). The novel presents the English patient not directly but through the story of the English patient. The narrative simultaneity of the English patient and his story (as well as his identification as Almásy and his simultaneous anonymity), means that all textual definitions are interchangeable and arbitrary. What is missing is the difference which would indicate the truthfulness of one version of reality and expose the falsehood of another. What Douglas Barbour says about Ondaatje's reconstruction of Billy the Kid can be said about the English patient as well: "Already dead, already no more than the sum of the ever growing 'works' of him, he remains beyond our grasp, defiantly and definitively indeterminate" (42). The English patient's identity can be textually constructed because, as Baudrillard puts it, the simulation of reality can "reinject fictional difference" (349) in the matrix of signification and thus create definitions, objects, meaning. In this process the sign would gain primacy over its referent

and the simulated reality would become simultaneous with, and indistinguishable from, its linguistic signs.

To draw attention to the demise of the conventional sequence of signification in which the referent comes first and the signifier second, Ondaatje considers the temporal relationship of the fictional and the real, of the written word and its object, of memory and event. Ondaatje's attempt to explore the connection between the two is an attempt to envision a moment before signification which he describes as "the perfect moment in time when everything can be understood simultaneously" ("Garcia Marquez" 31). In many ways, such a quest is a nostalgic return to an environment devoid of signs, a pre-symbolic world. Janet Giltrow and David Stouck trace this movement in *Running in the Family* and define it by the term "postmodern pastoral":

Mythically, pastoral seeks to recover a 'Golden Age' when existence was ideally ordered and there was no conscious separation of self from the rest of the world--no separation of subject and object, all things sharing an identity of being and purpose. (164)

A fully self-identical and knowable world would obviate all distinctions between self and other, past and present, life and death. In such a world, signification or translation of one thing into another would not be possible, because understanding would operate on the basis of primary, and not secondary (linguistic) terms. Consequently, meaning would not suffer loss or even delay in the process of communication; instead of being dependent on the incremental and continuous manifestations of its absence, meaning would be permanently and fully present.

The search for such presence often centers around the notion of ancient and therefore more "authentic" texts which, by default, appear closer to the original, pre-symbolic world. However, what is significant about Ondaatje's use of such texts is, as Carol Beran points out, his tendency to "juxtapose twentieth-century historical events with ancient texts" (74) and to expose both as fictional constructs. In *The English Patient* the role of the allegedly "authentic" text falls on Herodotus' *The Histories*, the book the English patient always carries with him. It has survived the fire in the plane much better than its owner--it is from the beginning an unlikely text. Instead of appealing to the authority of *The Histories*, *The English Patient* constantly refers to it as a shifting, incomplete, fictional text, a "guidebook, ancient and modern, of supposed lies" (246). The first time we encounter Herodotus, his work is already modified, physically reassembled, transformed, translated. Its physical unity and theoretical authority have been infringed upon by numerous other texts from various times and contexts, all of which constitute the book Almásy "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). From this moment on, it is assumed that the title of *The Histories* (significantly in the plural) designates all fragments, which thus acquire a common existence and become translatable into one another. In other words, the book is simultaneously an ancient text and a modern diary, and it has at least two authors at the same time--Herodotus and Almásy. The eclectic gathering of pieces of paper is parallel to the redefining of the content of the original book as well, so that the stories begin to mean more than one thing.

In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje subverts what is perhaps the single most important

message in Herodotus's book, the message of destiny. Destiny is an apparently objective referent against which all events are measured; it is the reality irreducible to linguistic terms, the extra-textual and permanent foundation of experience which lies beyond and precedes signification; it is the ultimate origin. Aubrey de Selincourt, in an introduction to *The Histories*, gives the following description of Herodotus's philosophy: "The great movements of history he invariably assigns to the will or whim of persons as their immediate cause, behind which stands Destiny, the ultimate and inscrutable shaper of the lives of men" (9). Herodotus himself insists that "not God himself could escape destiny" (50). The events recorded in *The Histories* always find their explanation in relation to the ultimate justice of destiny. Thus Herodotus seems to present the significance of experience always in terms of something outside experience, in terms of immutable and universal balance. Perhaps the most common situation is one in which the future is revealed to a king, who attempts to avoid the foretold destruction. Without exception, the king's actions bring about the very disaster he is trying to avoid--the event acquires meaning only in reference to a larger framework, a notion of the order of things which precedes experience and endows it with significance.

However, the idea of destiny in Herodotus emerges as nothing more than the effort to impose a pattern on historical events. The explanation and organization of the past into meaningful units come only with the intervention of the historian. *The Histories* only confirms the view that "we can only know the phenomenal world and ourselves through culturally pre-established discourses or meaning systems" (Engler 15). For Herodotus, the notion of destiny is such a system which makes knowledge possible. And if a historical fact does not fit into the proposed discourse of meaning, then it is probably false; if its credibility

within the narrative is in question, then its physical existence becomes questionable too. Thus at one point Herodotus declares: "I hesitate to believe in one-eyed men who in other respects are like the rest of us" (222). This hesitation has no direct bearing on the existence of such people; what makes one-eyed men unacceptable is their incompatibility with the known system of knowledge which needs consistency in order to function.

One Herodotus story in particular plays an important role in *The English Patient*: the story of Candaules, king of Sardis and Lydia, who "conceived a passion for his own wife" (Herodotus 16) and decided to show her beauty to Gyges, who had to obey the king and see the king's wife naked. After the plan is carried out, the queen offers Gyges two choices--he should either die because of what he had done or kill Candaules to become king himself. He chooses to kill the king and marry the queen (Herodotus 16-17). Here is where the story, as it is presented in *The English Patient*, ends. However, Herodotus' ending, the second half of the story as it is told in *The Histories*, is left out in *The English Patient*. It was predicted that "the Heraclids [the descendents of Heracles, among them Candaules] would have their revenge on Gyges in the fifth generation: a prophecy to which neither the Lydians nor their kings paid any attention, until it was actually fulfilled" (18). The fulfillment of the destiny would complete the circle, putting all events in perspective, assigning to them moral weight and meaning. This happens during the reign of Croesus, who

had expiated in the fifth generation the crime of his ancestor, who was a soldier in the bodyguard of the Heraclids, and, tempted by a woman's treachery, had murdered his master and stolen his office, to which he had no claim. The God of Prophecy was eager that the fall of Sardis might

occur in the time of Croesus' sons rather than in his own, but he had been unable to divert the course of destiny. (50)

This ending, which is missing in the account of Almásy, leaves the story of Candaules in *The English Patient* incomplete. There is an apparent shrinking of the scope of the original story, and the missing elements have to do with predestination, order, hierarchy, justice, and reason, which *The English Patient* calls into question. The story becomes a fragment; it no longer refers to a larger framework but only to itself. In this case, the Candaules incident no longer belongs to *The Histories*. In fact, we know that Almásy "always skim[s] past that story" (232) in the original book, and that it acquires meaning only in relation to its own presence in *The English Patient* as the story "she [Katharine] had chosen to talk about" (232). Thus, the story becomes one of those signs which identify themselves and point to nothing beyond their own re-enactment. It is significant only because Katharine is the one who tells it, in the same way as the choice of this specific story generates the significance of her telling the story. The story, as read by Katharine, *is* the falling in love, because her voice *is* all there is of Katharine at the moment when Almásy falls in love with her. Thus *The English Patient* shows how meaning is constructed in textual relationships as they enter into an infinite exchange of signs whose definitions are never stable, never present.

Almásy talks also about the presence of experience, the attempt to preserve experience in a non-linguistic way, to contain the past on its own terms:

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for

all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography--to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map . . . (261)

This simultaneity of presence collapses into simultaneity of signs as the fullness of "nature" encounters the necessity of being "marked," represented, signified. The attempt to erase the difference between the territory and the map, the object and the name, the physical experience and its description occurs, ultimately, in the territory of signification. Thus, the word itself begins to simulate the object in the impossible "middle," the place Almásy seeks to find, "coming closer and closer to the text as if the desert were there somewhere on the page" (235). In a sense, the desert *is* on the page; in fact, it is *only* on the page and nowhere else. The desert, as well as everything else in the novel, has to be simulated, not to evoke the "real" place but to replace it.

If the desert approaches its image on the map, it is because the desert is already secondary, already a matter of linguistic creation. Almásy talks about the "half-invented world of the desert" (150), and begins to suspect that the process of mapping the surface could be inverted, so that the signs on the map can engender, by defining, the objects they describe: "This country--had I charted it and turned it into a place of war?" (260). The categories of reality and language, as well as reality and fiction, begin to blur: "Give me a map and I'll build you a city. Give me a pencil and I will draw you a room in South Cairo, desert charts on the wall" (145). The appearance of the room will *be* the room without pretending to signify anything else, and the fictional existence will coincide with the existence of the "real" place.

This process of signification in *The English Patient* suggests an answer to Allen Thiher's question about language: "[I]s it autonomous, does it articulate the real, or does language receive its directions from some signifying source beyond it?" ("Postmodern" 15). Almásy's story postulates the autonomy of language in the absence of a primary referent. If there is anything outside signification it is the "void." Thiher describes the void as "that undifferentiated space that lies beyond the structuring activity of language" ("Jerome" 10). Ondaatje, like Beckett, would call this silence. In his often quoted lines from the poem "White Dwarfs," he defines silence as antithetical to the creation of meaning: "There is my fear / of no words of / falling without words / over and over of / mouthing the silence" (*There's a Trick* 68). Obviously, while voicing his fear, the narrator constructs words and meaning, so that the fear of lack of signification is already a part of signification; silence is just as impossible as the immediacy of presence in the "pastoral." In *The English Patient*, Almásy finds himself in the "presence" of stories even in the middle of the desert; he undermines the possibility of the void when he says that "in the emptiness of deserts you are always surrounded by lost history" (135). The emptiness itself appears simultaneously with its disappearance into the word "emptiness," which talks about but does not allow silence.

Ultimately, Ondaatje sees the role of the storyteller as an autonomous entity in the process of creating the "real." In his poem "Spider Blues" Ondaatje compares the movement of the spider to the activity of the creative mind: "A kind of writer I suppose. / He thinks a path and travels / the emptiness that was there" (*There's a Trick* 62). In the same way, storytelling leaves the story as evidence of its passage through history; the narrative constantly replaces its events. The story does not interact with reality but perpetuates itself

through fiction to simulate reality. For Ondaatje, there is neither an absolute "beginning," nor a final "ending" outside signification. In that sense, the narrative is always in motion, exploring "all the possibilities in the middle of the story" (*Coming* 43), always contemporaneous with the events it describes. Instead of "reading" the signs of reality and duplicating them in fiction, the text becomes autonomous and self-referential--it does not invoke a metaphysical meaning. *The English Patient* shows that such a meaning is simulated and engendered through fiction. The text does not transport meaning from a non-textual universe so much as translate it from one narrative to another. In this process of translation which occurs in *The English Patient* the metaphysical becomes just another "language" susceptible to the metamorphoses of fiction.

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The English Patient and the Story of Storytelling

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