

**REPRESENTATION, AFFILIATION AND
COMPASSION IN SELECTED FICTION BY
MICHAEL ONDAATJE**

BY
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university. I also confirm that all the sources I have used and quoted are acknowledged as indicated in the Bibliography.

SIGNED:

DATE:



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“ ‘Up there on stage he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story.’ ”

Coming through Slaughter (1976: 43)

“[T]he first sentence of every novel should be: ‘Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human.’”

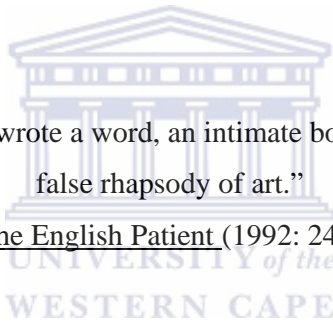
In the Skin of a Lion (1987: 146)

“Madox said Odysseus never wrote a word, an intimate book. Perhaps he felt alien in the false rhapsody of art.”

The English Patient (1992: 241)

“This sweet touch from the world.”

Anil’s Ghost (2001: 307)



INTRODUCTION

Michael Ondaatje, poet and novelist, was born in Sri Lanka in 1943. He received his secondary school education in England, having moved there in 1954. He immigrated to Canada in 1962 and has lived there ever since. He published his first collection of poetry, The Dainty Monsters, with the Coach House Press in Toronto in 1967, and has produced seven volumes of poetry in all. A selection from these volumes was published internationally by Picador in 1989 under the title, The Cinnamon Peeler. His first work of fiction, Coming through Slaughter, was published in 1976. Although based on the life of turn-of-the-century jazz musician Charles “Buddy” Bolden, it is regarded as a fictional portrait rather than a biography. In 1981 he published a similar work known as The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, subtitled “Left-Handed Poems”. In recent editions of the book this subtitle has, interestingly, been removed. The book is a collage of documentary, photography, poetry and reportage, including segments in first-person and third-person narrative. In 1983 he published Running in the Family, a combination of memoir, travel narrative and fiction. Since then four more novels have appeared; namely, In the Skin of a Lion (1987), The English Patient (1992), Anil’s Ghost (2000), and Divisadero (2007). A further volume of poetry, Handwriting, appeared in 1998. Ondaatje has also published a book on film editing and continues to co-edit the influential “Brick” literary magazine in Canada. He is also an avid film-maker having done many short documentaries, including one on fellow Canadian poet, bp nicol.

My interest in the work of Ondaatje has been triggered by the stylistic innovations in his work, by the blurring of the lines between poetry and prose and his bending of the manifestations of time, space and identity. Ondaatje’s work also explores the possibilities of the restoration of humanity and the world following psychic, physical and geographical devastation. In Coming through Slaughter, psychic and artistic dissonance is imagined through the figure of Buddy Bolden. The book is a mosaic of historical fact and fictional construction surrounding Bolden, a trumpet player from turn-of-the-century New Orleans, who spent the last quarter of his life in a mental asylum. In The English Patient the psychological and physical devastation following the Second World War is the subject, while in Anil’s Ghost the story covers the recent Sri Lankan civil war and its consequences.

All of his prose works have a factual foundation which he explores, and upon which he elaborates. Bolden provides this foundation in Coming through Slaughter, while in In the Skin of a Lion it is RC Harris and Ambrose Small, moderately important people involved in the development of Toronto as a metropolitan city in the 1920's and 1930's. In The English Patient, the Hungarian Lazlo Almásy is the person around whom the text is imagined, while in Anil's Ghost the spectre of the civil war appears as an important character.

Ondaatje also subverts the concept of the linear narrative in which novels are expected to follow a progressive trajectory from beginning to end. Moreover, he undermines the role of the narrator by introducing different narrative perspectives of the same incident, particularly in In the Skin of a Lion and The English Patient. Another innovation which appears in these two novels is his use of characters, namely Caravaggio and Hana, who feature in the former and re-appear in the latter. The later novel does not proceed as a sequel to the former though. This device clearly destabilises the notion of closure or finality in the novel.

A great deal of modern fiction from what is termed the post-colonial environment deals with issues of identity and the examination of the modern subject.¹ The history of the novel has been connected with the development of the nation-state and, in this respect, ideas about the formation of the post-colonial state have been explored in post-colonial fiction. In his article "The National Longing for Form", Timothy Brennan examines this connection and argues that, "[T]he rise of the modern nation-state in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is inseparable from the forms and subjects of imaginative literature". (Brennan 1995: 172) He expands upon this point by suggesting that,

it was especially the novel as a composite but clearly bordered work of art that was crucial in defining the nation as an 'imagined community'... [I]t was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structures of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. (172-173)

¹ See Susheila Nasta's comments in her "Introduction" to the collection of interviews, Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 1-11.

Although he states that he is ultimately sceptical about the connection, Salman Rushdie also acknowledges that there have been attempts to track the “historical development of the twin ‘narratives’ of the novel and the nation-state”. (Rushdie 2003: 65) While this parallel between nation and novel may not be an entirely congruent one, it might be more convincing to suggest that the predicament of the modern subject is a prevailing preoccupation of the novel. In his prose fiction, Ondaatje explores the arbitrary nature of modern identity extensively. An example of this is in his best known work, The English Patient, where the character described in the title is revealed as not being “English” at all but as a Hungarian aristocrat. There is a further improvisation in this regard relating to skin-colour. It may be generally assumed that the “English patient” would have a pale skin-colour, yet he is described as having had his body blackened by the fire from an air-crash which he survived. His appearance in the novel therefore contradicts the archetypal depiction of English identity. In In the Skin of a Lion the Eastern European immigrant workers representing different ethnic backgrounds immerse themselves in the different colours of the dye in the leather tannery. They emerge from the concrete vessels in which the dye work happens “in colours up to their necks, pulling wet hides after them so it appeared they had removed the skin from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries”. (ITSOAL 1988: 130) Where colour may indeed be regarded as a primary marker of individual identity, it is shown that this is not a fixed indicator, but one that is fluid and changeable.

Similarly, in Anil’s Ghost the emblem of duplicitous identity is present in the main female character who has claimed an identifiably male name for herself and appears caught between Sri Lanka, the land of her birth, and the United States where she was educated and now lives. The presentation of the modern subject in his fiction is therefore one in which identity is not fixed but fluid, determined in the main by situation and experience. In other words, it is open to change and thus not predetermined by ethnic, racial and/or filial designations.

Ondaatje’s fiction also foregrounds inherent concerns related to the status of the novel as a contemporary genre and how late modern, postmodern and post-colonial developments have affected the genre. My interest here is with the apparent contradictions inherent in the disjuncture and/or congruence between the late modern and the postmodern in literary studies.

I recognise a similarly contradictory relationship between the postmodern and the post-colonial. My approach to these distinctions is based on an overall scepticism about the precision and the merit of these terms. The definition of what constitutes the postmodern novel is a matter of continuous dispute. I would argue that instead of endeavouring to ascertain the distinctive qualities of the postmodern novel, it would be more productive to acknowledge that its contemporary manifestation encompasses what is deemed late modern, postmodern and post-colonial either simultaneously or in parts. The work of Ondaatje traverses all of these terrains and thus presents us with the interesting possibility of exploring the ways in which creative practice incorporates or exceeds these theoretical developments. The central argument of this thesis is two-fold and related; namely, that the preconfigured analysis of fictions described as post-colonial is limiting and inadequate and that a reading of these texts beyond these delimitations is more valuable. It is therefore necessary to qualify the particular theoretical approach I believe is appropriate and applicable.

My contention is that a primary feature of the postmodern in fiction is the unsettling, the disruption and the reshaping of time, space and identity. I engage, too, with the notion that contemporary fiction is necessarily secular, in the sense that religion has apparently been excised from it. This thesis is an assertion that, contrary to this assumption, several works of contemporary fiction contain voluminous references to religion, and that what is deemed secular, is misrepresented. My approach to the concept of the secular relies heavily on the definition developed by Edward Said. According to him “religion has its limits in the secular world”, and that what is required is, “a secular and humane vision...based on the idea of human history not being the result of divine intervention”, which suggests that the secular is distinctly separate from the realm of the religious. (Said 2001: 130) In their headnotes to the chapter on “Secular Criticism”, in The Edward Said Reader, Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin provide a useful summary of this approach, describing it as, a “commentary on the manner in which literary criticism is itself bound up with social realities, human experiences, and institutions of authority and power”. (Bayoumi & Rubin 2000: 218) Moreover, I take this to mean that the secular is that which pertains to the present world, and which involves matters related to the civil rather than the ecclesiastical. This does not imply the eradication or absence of the religious. What it may indeed mean is that humanity retains the right to separate the worldly from the divine; the spiritual from the material.

I will therefore investigate selected texts by Ondaatje to confirm the significance of his work as an engagement with these preoccupations. The novel as a genre has been the subject of re-evaluation, with many predictions about its imminent demise.² According to Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, the modern novel is identified by four preoccupations: namely, “with the complexities of its own form, with the representation of inward states of consciousness, with a sense of the nihilistic disorder behind the ordered surface of life and reality, and with the freeing of narrative art from the determination of an onerous plot”. (Bradbury & McFarlane 1991: 393) The novelist and critic David Lodge expands on this when he remarks that,

modern fiction...is fiction displaying some or all of the following features. First, it is experimental or innovatory in form, exhibiting marked deviations from existing modes of discourse, literary and non-literary. Next, it is much concerned with consciousness, and also with the subconscious or unconscious workings of the human mind...Lastly, modern fiction eschews the straight chronological ordering of its material, and the use of a reliable, omniscient and intrusive narrator. (Lodge 1991: 481)

The American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, once remarked that, “we write from aspiration and antagonism, as well as from experience”. (quoted in Poirier, 1987: 138) In his clarification of this concentrated argument, Richard Poirier notes:

while we aspire to say something new, the materials at hand indicate that whatever we say can be understood only if it is relatively familiar. We therefore become antagonistic to conventions of language even though we are in need of them. Indeed, the social and literary forms that ask us for our compliance were themselves produced in resistance to conventions of an earlier time. Even in words that now seem tired or dead we can discover a desire for transformation that once infused them. Any word, in the variety and even contradictoriness of its meanings, gives evidence of earlier antagonistic uses, and it is this which encourages us to turn on them again, to change or trope them further. (Poirier 1987: 138)

I find in these summaries the foundation of the provisional quality connected to what may be deemed the postmodern.

² See Salman Rushdie, “In Defence of the Novel, Yet Again,” in Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992- 2002, London: Vintage 2003, p. 49, for a forceful and engaging counter to some of these assertions.

There is here the recognition of the fluctuating nature of textuality, language and meaning, and the interaction between these elements, which I regard as the complex dynamic of literature. I want to suggest that contemporary fiction contains the complexities identified by Bradbury, MacFarlane, Lodge and Poirier, and that it is cognisant too, of a distance between the producer of the text and the text which materialises on the page. Marguerite Alexander confirms this point in drawing attention to the connections between the academic and the literary: “[I]t cannot be accidental that the growth in the study of modern literature in universities has paralleled an increasingly theorized and self-conscious attitude to fiction by novelists themselves”. (Alexander 1990: 5) The result of these examinations has been a rigorous questioning of the original authority of the author in relation to the text.

Discussing the significant contribution of post-structuralist theory to the field of literary analysis, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provides a valuable and succinct interpretation. She suggests that “post-structuralists, if I understand them right, imagine again and again that when a narrative is constructed, something is left out. When an end is defined, other ends are rejected, and one might not know what those ends are”. (Spivak 1990: 18-19) I regard Roland Barthes’ work in this respect, as an influential contribution to the recognition of writing as a complex process, and as a creative construction. He states the following regarding the relationship between writing and novel: “We now understand what is profitable and what is intolerable in the preterite as used in the Novel: it is a lie made manifest, it delineates an area of plausibility which reveals the possible in the very act of unmasking it as false”. (Barthes 1983: 47) At the moment when fictive meanings are made, there is the simultaneous division of those meanings, from meanings associated with fact. With this separation there must be the accompanying understanding that fiction, while made in historical moments, must retain its autonomy as a literary creation, and be appreciated as such. In his introductory essay to the book The Theory of the Novel, Philip Stevick suggests that:

[T]he novel, also, more than any other genre, can give form to a set of attitudes regarding society, history, and the general culture of which the novel is a part, and this too is a reason for reading novels; but the criticism which results from this motive runs the danger of treating fiction as a document, evaluating it less as art than as cultural exhibit and ideological force. (Stevick 1967: 3)

The point made about reading fiction merely as document is an important and highly relevant consideration in the ongoing assessment of not just the novel but also of literature in relation to society. It seems that literature is continuously scrutinised for a plainly utilitarian function. It is simultaneously assessed for the representation of 'truth', and when that is found to be rather elusive, literature is regarded as unreliable as a functional service to society. I would argue that Ondaatje reiterates what may be coarsely referred to as the crisis of representation which one may recognise within the broad rubric of modernism and postmodernism. The text is no longer a conclusive and exclusive domain. There is an open quality to it over which several trails of thought stake a claim, with history perhaps the most avid contender for hegemony of meaning. This idea of the 'openness' of the text is in line with John Berger's approach to the art of fiction. In his essay, "The Changing View of Man in the Portrait", he writes:

We hear a lot about the crisis of the modern novel. What this involves, fundamentally, is a change in the mode of narration. It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the story line laterally. That is to say, instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the centre of a star of lines. (Berger 2001a: 101)

It is therefore evident from the developments in the novel that linear progression and temporal conventions are no longer the exclusive rules governing the genre. Devices such as multiple narrative perspectives, disjunctures in time and space, parody and intertextual references are frequently applied. Postmodernist scepticism of form has also led to uncertainties of content, and concomitantly, to questions of the redemptive value of fiction. In all of the novels I discuss there is a scene of physical and/or psychic dissonance and destruction. Coming through Slaughter depicts Bolden's emotional and mental breakdown; In the Skin of a Lion examines the conflict between classes in the construction of a city; The English Patient details destructive scenarios during and after the Second World War, while Anil's Ghost depicts the recent civil war in Sri Lanka. At the end of each of these novels there are the possibilities of physical, natural and psychic restoration though. While they contain numerous allusions to religious practices there are no resolutions offered which imply that religious faith or practice produce salvation for the characters in the worlds in which they find themselves.

It may be argued that in each of the novels it is the inherent aesthetics of literature, art and music rather than the faith in doctrine, which offers the possibility of redemption. Religious inspiration is therefore not absent but altered or considerably diluted by doubts about its efficacy in rehabilitating the world.

My argument, therefore, has a three-fold objective. It will firstly examine the ways in which history, documentary and apocrypha are utilised for the purposes of constructing a fiction. Secondly, it will investigate the development of ideas of self and community in the selected novels, and, finally, it will consider how those individuals and communities seek the possibilities for rehabilitation, salvation and redemption in the various worlds they inhabit. I argue that Ondaatje's work offers a reading of these possibilities in the ways in which he deals with communities and societies found within the contexts of violence, destruction and oppression. His fiction demonstrates the promise of different ways for individuals and communities to exist and offers the potential for solace and salvation. A brief extract from his latest novel, Divisadero, provides a succinct summary of this. He writes: "This is where I learned that sometimes we enter art to hide within it. It is where we can go to save ourselves, where a third-person voice protects us". (Ondaatje 2008: 149) While religious and spiritual symbolism is distinctly present in his writing, I argue that the presence of these devices is based on their power as symbol and not for any inherently sacrosanct quality. These propositions are based on a secular interpretation of rehabilitation, salvation and redemption.

The writer whose work informs much of this understanding of the ways in which literature and society intersect, is Said. In his Beginnings: Intention and Method (hereafter Beginnings), he makes the case for reading and writing to be regarded as secular procedures as opposed to sacred acts. He argues that the sacred belongs to origin, and warns that "ideas about origins, because of their passivity, are put to uses I believe ought to be avoided." (1985: 6) What may be referred to here is the notion that a beginning, as opposed to an origin, is perhaps a secular process of thought, word and deed; that it is about what can be reassessed and revised, and not that which is consecrated, and therefore incontrovertible. In his Preface to the 1985 edition of Beginnings he emphasises the importance of reason and human agency in this project in the following way:

For in isolating *beginnings* as a subject of study my whole attempt was precisely to set a beginning off as *rational* and *enabling*, and far from being principally interested in logical failures and, by extension, ahistorical absurdities, I was trying to describe the immense effort that goes into historical retrospection as it set out to describe things from the beginning, *in history*. (Said 1985: xviii, *emphasis in original*)

The crucial point about the roles of reason and human agency therefore establish this approach as distinct from the preordained destinies which organised religion prescribes. There is also the possibility of revising a beginning because nothing is fixed to a predetermined position. This understanding also informs his approach about what constitutes the literary canon, in the ways in which it has been compiled and revised throughout history. Said introduces the notion of adjacency, namely that works of literature stand side by side in relation to each other, and not in a dynastic or sequential manner. There is therefore no orderly canon but a rather more haphazard and, probably, more dynamic, classification and re-classification of writing in relation to other writing. Each new piece of writing takes its references, its point of departure from what has already been written. In this way it begins to write something new. The familiar, then, is somewhat revised; altered by what is now being made.

Ondaatje's writing has been the subject of numerous academic studies and individual papers. A great deal of these studies and articles have focused on the presence of postcolonial concerns in his work. Many of these endeavours have been productive and valuable. One or two, however, have been less rewarding, arguing in a belligerent fashion that Ondaatje betrays allegiances to oppressed national and/or ethnic identities.³ An instructive example of this is Qadri Ismail's review of *Anil's Ghost*, "A Flippant Gesture Towards Sri Lanka", in which he charges that Ondaatje inexplicably privileges Sinhala nationalism in the novel.⁴

³ The most prominent of these critiques are, Chelva Kanaganayakam, "A Trick With a Glass: Michael Ondaatje's South Asian Connection," in *Canadian Literature* 132 (1992), 33-42, Arun Mukherjee, "The Sri Lankan Poets in Canada: An Alternative View," in *Toronto South Asian Review* 3.2 (1984), 32-45, and, Suwananda Sugunasiri, "Sri Lankan Canadian Poets: The Bourgeoisie That Fled the Revolution," in *Canadian Literature* 132 (1992), 60-79.

⁴ See Qadri Ismail 2000 "A Flippant Gesture Towards Sri Lanka: A Review of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*," in *Pravada* 6.9, 24-29.

Other commentaries in the same vein, charge that Ondaatje represents the bourgeois cosmopolitan celebrity who fled the civil strife of the postcolony and that his writing only contains oblique references to postcolonial predicaments. I argue that the full import of his work cannot be appreciated if it is to be restricted to a focus on preoccupations which may be circumscribed by what is regarded as the postcolonial. Through his fiction, in particular, he explores and examines the opening of ethical questions related to individuals, societies and the world. It is my intention to demonstrate that his fiction resituates the novel away from a tendency to only represent human insularity, parochialism and decadence. One may describe an important aspect of the work of writers, such as Philip Roth, Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, as examinations of variably disaffected metropolitan bourgeoisie individuals caught up in the various dilemmas thrust upon them by late capitalist consumer society. Ondaatje's fiction, however, covers both the metropolitan and the postcolonial environments. He explores the predicaments of individuals and marginal communities, depicting, to varying degrees, the ways in which they deal with defeat and despair.

This thesis is compiled essentially of three chapters excluding the Introduction and the Conclusion. In the first chapter I deal with the contemporary construction of fiction in which documentary details and apocryphal knowledge are employed to produce a novel. I argue that Ondaatje relies heavily on this strategy to complete his various literary enterprises and that this approach has invited several critiques. In the second chapter I deal with the representation of identities, the depiction of communities and the ways in which the dictates of modern society affect the formation of new identities and new alliances or communities in his fiction. The third chapter concerns the moral and ethical implications of each of the fictional works I have read in the course of this thesis. This chapter investigates each of the novels as a portrayal of secular morality and its possibilities in societies devastated both physically and psychically by the ruling social order.

CHAPTER ONE:

DOCUMENTARY, REPRESENTATION AND FICTION

One may conclude that the difficulties of representation through writing are manifold. There is an inherent doubling in the term writing in that it refers to both the act of writing and that which it produces. Jacques Derrida has provided an extensive critique of the foundations of the Western philosophical tradition, including the notion of language as the means by which absolute truth is conveyed. The scope of Derrida's critique is extensive. I am, however, primarily concerned with its implications for the idea of representation and the manner in which it is configured in writing. In his examination of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's contention that "writing serves only as a supplement to speech", and that, "the art of writing is nothing but a mediated representation of thought", Derrida argues that, "[W]riting is dangerous from the moment that representation there claims to be presence and the sign of the thing itself". (quoted in Derrida 1997: 144) For Rousseau, writing is no more than an epiphenomenon, separated from the immediacy of speech. Moreover, it serves the Platonic ideal of attempting, weakly, to represent ideas. At every turn, writing is secondary or inadequate to the task at hand. For Derrida, though, writing challenges both the primacy of speech and the universality of ideas. More importantly, it threatens to displace speech's authority to represent itself as both proper and immediate to itself. The significance of this argument is recognised in the tensions between the representation of fact and the idea of fiction, in the sense that writing unsettles the traditional binary and hierarchy between fact and fiction, without slipping into either empiricism or linguistic idealism.

For Derrida, following de Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and signified may be arbitrary, but not disconnected. Saussure's point, which Derrida picks up on, is that the signifier and signified are indissolubly connected like two sides of a coin or a sheet of paper. For Derrida, the world may be textured – our relationship to the world passes through or is mediated by language – but not without a disturbing affect.

If we concur with Derrida's interpretation of Rousseau here, then, the representation of what is perceived to be factual, is rendered, not only questionable, because of the inherent secondary nature of its re-presence in the form of writing, but by the unmistakable force of 'otherness' which history or the factual cannot tame or control. While the factual, or the historical, endeavours to claim the authority of an original presence, fiction traditionally presupposes a presence that is imagined.

However, Derrida's intervention is to point out that writing undermines the binary opposition between fact and fiction, in the sense that though they are separate and different but cannot be delineated along the lines of fact being real while fiction remains secondary, ephemeral or frivolous. Ondaatje's novels, I will argue, allow one to take their stories seriously in the sense that they are neither reducible to their political or historical message, nor to the free play of their aesthetic or their status as fiction. In his interpretation of this complexity, Terry Eagleton regards this operation as occurring in the following manner:

Rather than 'imaginatively transposing' the real, the literary work is the production of certain produced representations of the real into an imaginary object. If it distantiates history, it is not because it transmutes it to fantasy, shifting from the ontological gear to another, but because the significations it works into fiction are already representations of reality rather than reality itself. The text is a tissue of meanings, perceptions and responses which inhere in the first place in that imaginary production of the real which is ideology. The 'textual real' is related to the historical real, not as an imaginary transposition of it, but as the product of certain signifying practices whose source and referent is, in the last instance, history itself. (Eagleton 1978: 75)

A cogent elaboration of the tension which occurs in the representation of history through fiction is provided by J.M. Coetzee. In his talk, "The Novel Today", he argues that the story is capable of surviving all manner of threats to its continued existence, and sets out an argument for a fiction which is not subservient to history, stating that,

history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that a history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other – that, as Don Quixote argued so persuasively but in the end so vainly, the authority of history lies simply in the consensus it commands. The categories of history are not privileged, just as the categories of moral discourse are not privileged. They do not reside in reality: they are a certain construction put upon reality. (Coetzee 1988: 4)

These assertions, dealing as they do with the notion that fiction finds itself pressed into the service of history, deal lucidly and emphatically with the challenges regarding the perceived problems of representation in Coetzee's fiction, which result from the often literal readings of his work.⁵ I suggest that these challenges are equally applicable in the case of Ondaatje. Coetzee's statements explicitly defend the strategies of compiling fiction as opposed to other discursive projects which are intended to convey an unmediated engagement with history. It acknowledges that the rendering of history is itself a narrative exercise.

In his study of Coetzee's work and its relationship to South African politics, David Attwell states that, "Coetzee's novels are located in the nexus of history and text; that is, they explore the *tension* between these polarities". (Attwell 1993: 2 *emphasis in original*) I would suggest that Ondaatje's fiction is located in the same position between the exigencies of history and the complications of textuality. Discussing this complexity, Said argues that the work of Derrida and of Michel Foucault, respectively, position the text, either,

as a praxis on whose surface and in whose interstices a universal grammatological problematic is enacted, or as a praxis whose existence is a fact of highly rarefied and differentiated historical power, associated not only with the univocal authority of the author but with a discourse constituting author, text, and subject and giving them a very precise intelligibility and effectiveness. (Said 1983: 214)

⁵ See Peter D. McDonald's "The Writer, The Critic and The Censor: J.M. Coetzee and the Question of Literature", in *Book History*, 7, 2004, pp. 285-302, for some examples of these readings.

I would argue that it is within this “collision”, as Said terms it, that at least two complications are enacted; namely, the secondary, and therefore ‘unreliable’ act of writing, and the further ‘unreliable’ performance of the imagination in the context of the social, the political and the historical. In the chapter entitled “The Novel as Beginning Intention” in Beginnings, Said discusses these complexities through an explanation of his terms, “authority” and “molestation”. He determines that the novel produces these two simultaneous and contradictory conditions in the following way. The concept of “authority” is, “grounded in the following notions: (1) that of the power of an individual to initiate, institute, establish – in short, to begin; (2) that this power and its product are an increase over what had been there previously; (3) that the individual wielding this power controls its issue and what is derived therefrom; (4) that authority maintains the continuity of its course”. (Said 1985: 83) He concludes this point by stating that, “[A]ll four of these abstractions can be used to describe the way in which narrative fiction asserts itself psychologically and aesthetically through the technical efforts of the novelist. (83) In contrast to this, “molestation” describes “the bother and responsibility of all these powers and efforts”. (ibid.) It is,

a consciousness of one’s duplicity, one’s confinement to a fictive, scriptive realm, whether one is a character or a novelist. And molestation occurs when novelists and critics traditionally remind themselves of how the novel is always subject to a comparison with reality and thereby found to be illusion...To speak of authority in narrative prose fiction is also inevitably to speak of the molestations that accompany it. (84)

His examination of the dubious and distrustful associations attached to fiction, are useful in marking out the, at best, wary and suspicious relationship between fact and fiction. It is perhaps a crude generalisation, but a seemingly common perception that fiction is understood as an exercise to pervert the certainties of fact.

Zygmunt Baumann has argued that in contemporary society there is almost an inversion of the role that fiction is expected to perform, with the novel, in particular, serving as a place of solace from the constant disorder of reality. He quotes the assertion by Umberto Eco that the novel “offers us the pleasant impression of inhabiting worlds in which the notion of truth is unshakeable; by comparison, the real world appears to be an awfully uncertain and treacherous land”. (quoted in Baumann 1997: 124) Baumann elaborates on this point by stating that in,

the modern world, the fiction of the novel laid bare the absurd contingency hidden under the surface of reality; in the postmodern world it strings together cohesive and consistent 'sensible' chains, out of the shapeless mass of scattered events. The status of fiction and of the 'real' world acquires the attributes relegated by modernity to the domain of art, the more artistic fiction turns into the shelter – or is it, rather, factory? – of truth. (ibid.)

What both Baumann and Eco illustrate here is the complex connections between the realms of reality and that of fiction. In their book, To Relish the Sublime?: Culture and Self-realization in Postmodern Times, Kate Soper and Martin Ryle make several significant and telling arguments regarding the concept of fictional representation. They state that the reader is wont to,

compare what is found in the novel with what is found in social experience. This comparison is necessary to validate the authenticity of the fiction, as well as to enforce the conclusion that things might be otherwise. This brings novels into close discursive relation with other kinds of writing, but in ways that require a dialectical understanding of fiction as both continuous with and distinct from 'textual production' in general. (Soper & Ryle 2002: 100)

In addition to the distinction that we should insist upon regarding the dialectical separation of fiction from historical reality, it is important to recognise too the function that the novel performs as a medium of artistic expression. Said's comments about the particular qualities of the novel are instructive here: "The novel is an incorporative, quasi-encyclopaedic cultural form. Packed into it are both a highly regulated plot mechanism and an entire system of social reference that depends on the existing institutions of bourgeois society, their authority and power". (Said 1994: 84) This recognition of the multiplicity of the novel is echoed in the statements by Italo Calvino in his book Six Memos for the Next Millennium, where he argues that "the contemporary novel is an encyclopaedia, as a method of knowledge, and above all as a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world". (Calvino 1996: 105)

Anil's Ghost is the only novel out of the four in which there is no character based on a discernible historical figure. Coming through Slaughter uses the apocryphal detail which surrounds the life of musician Buddy Bolden, as I have pointed out previously.

In addition to this there is the figure of E. J. Bellocq, a professional photographer who worked in New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century. Bellocq photographed the prostitutes of Storyville, an infamous district of New Orleans. In the novel, Ondaatje establishes a connection between Bellocq and Bolden, although there is no historical evidence that there was indeed one. The documentary evidence available on Bolden is used to construct the narrative which is determinedly fictional. The approach to this construction of fiction is revealed obliquely in the description of Bolden's apocryphal role as the editor of the scandal sheet, *The Cricket*:

The Cricket existed between 1899 and 1905. It took in and published all the information Bolden could find. It respected stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies. This information came from customers in the chair and from spiders among the whores and police that Bolden and his friends knew. *The Cricket* studied broken marriages, gossip about jazzmen, and a servant's memoirs told everyone that a certain politician spent twenty minutes each morning deciding which shirt to wear. Bolden took all the thick facts and dropped them into his pail of sub-history. (CTS 1984: 24)

This renegade approach to writing imitates Ondaatje's own approach and Bolden is likened to an artist with a "pail" of paint with which he represents the facts. Documentary evidence is blended with imaginative construction, or re-construction, to create a fiction. Near the end of the book there is the representation of an obituary of Bolden which presents an abbreviated summary of his life. In the succeeding two pages there is a narrative which appears to be a commentary by the writer. In what seems to be the depiction of a research excursion, the narrator surveys the contemporary environment in which Bolden "had lived seventy years ago". (133) There is the description of a search for the tenuous presence of Bolden:

The street is fifteen yards wide. I walk around watched by three men further up the street under a Coca Cola sign. They have not heard of him here... There is the complete absence of him – even his skeleton has softened, disintegrated, and been lost in the water under the earth of Holtz Cemetery. When he went mad he was the same age as I am now. (*ibid.*)

At this point the narration becomes even more self-reflective and there is the sense conveyed that the writer regards Bolden as an expression of himself involved in his own anxieties. The distinctions between author, narrator, text and reader, are therefore de-familiarised:

When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be...The thin sheaf of information. Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, 'Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade...' What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? (133-134)

The significance of this narration is its acknowledgement of authorial presence in the process of the construction of the fiction. In confirming the presence of the author as a narrative component, Ondaatje is restating the thesis that the writer retains a semblance of presence in the act of writing the text, and in the subsequent existence of the text, and is, therefore, never displaced entirely from it. What we observe here too is the writer-narrator's recognition of his complicit involvement in the construction of the literary work. He acknowledges that his own preoccupations are contained within the concerns of the fiction. He confesses that, in relation to Bolden, he did "not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body". (134) His intentions are therefore for the representation of something more substantial than an act of superficial imitation. Moreover, as an act of improvisation, the writer's anxieties are fused with the documentary evidence, the folklore and the imaginative possibilities, to assemble a work of fiction. The connections between this improvisational writing and the improvisations in what is known as jazz are evident too. This passage from Coming through Slaughter confirms that the jazz music idiom is not just the subject of the story but also the structural approach used in the making of the book:

On his last night Webb went to hear Bolden play. Far back, by the door, he stood alone and listened for an hour. He watched him dive into the stories found in the barber shop, his whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change. The music was coarse and rough, immediate, dated in half an hour, was about bodies in the river, knives, lovepains, cockiness. Up there on stage he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story. (43)

The nature of the aesthetic method proposed here troubles conventional manner of the representation in which subjects commonly regarded as indiscreet, are excluded. Here though, the contaminated and the crude are included in the content of the art.

This, therefore, equates with the method of jazz in which the sacred, the ordinary and the profane are mixed into one form. The English Patient also includes a reference to the jazz idiom when Hana escapes into the reverie of song, singing, “When I take my sugar to tea”. (TEP 1992: 64) This seemingly releases her: “[S]he broke free of the chords and released her fingers into intricacy, tumbling into what she had held back, the jazz detail that split open notes and angles from the chestnut of melody”. (ibid.) There is the sense here that the act of singing and the jazz style of the song allows Hana to liberate herself from the psychological restrictions she has experienced. The song thus provides her with a cathartic moment. The application of an aesthetic approach inspired by jazz music is evident in In the Skin of a Lion, too.

According to Douglas Malcolm the novel utilises the patterns of solos and choruses in its narrative structure: “chorus...acts as a master narrative”, while the solo or improvisation “subverts the hegemonic and totalizing nature of composed melody”, or chorus, while being bound together in the narrative. (Malcolm 1999: 148) The association with jazz music is extended in the use of an image as a recurring motif or refrain in the text in Coming through Slaughter. The line, “[P]assing wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky”, appears alone on a page early in the book. (CTS 1984: 60) The same line is repeated later in the text, but improvised into a poetic form. The line is presented as a recurring, yet reshaped refrain, similar to a jazz riff or motif which is reshaped and reworked in a song:

Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky.

Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky.

Passing wet chicory that lies

like the sky,

like the sky like the sky like the sky

passing wet sky chicory

passing wet sky chicory lies (85)

In In the Skin of a Lion, the character Ambrose Small is based on an affluent theatre owner who had disappeared in 1919. Small’s body was never discovered following his disappearance which generated great public interest in Canada at the time.⁶

⁶ See the Wikipedia entry for Ambrose Small www.wikipedia.org

Ondaatje though creates a meeting between Patrick and Small in the novel and produces an imagined resolution for the saga which surrounded him:

Ambrose Small, as a millionaire, had always kept the landscapes of his world separate, high walls between them. Lovers, compatriots, businessmen, were anonymous to each other. As far as they knew there were no others, or they assumed the others lived in far countries...In the days before he died, Small's mind slipped free of its compartments as if what had kept all his diverse worlds separate had been pulled out of him like a spine. (ITSOAL 1988: 213)

One could say that this description of Small is analogous to the collapsing "walls" between fact and fiction, and the liberation from "compartments" prompted by his death. What is implied here is that the apocrypha which surrounds lives such as Small, Bolden, Bellocq and Almasy, nurtures the development of fictional construction which merges with the factual and accumulates into something which can be made into story. The city itself is a fiction. It has to be imagined before it is constructed. Rowland Harris, the Commissioner of Public Works, "envisions" the construction of the water filtration plant: "Before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting". (29) The city is likened to the compilation of a fiction in which apocrypha and unverifiable document are combined to make a story. This notion of the city as a constructed space can also be connected to an important moment in artistic representation. The novel describes Nicholas Temelcoff's prowess in performing the extremely difficult tasks necessary for completing the construction of the bridge. In the vast landscape that is being reshaped, he becomes almost invisible. His image in this vast landscape is complicated by the immense space that is represented:

Again and again you see vista before you and the eye must search along the wall of sky to the speck of burned paper across the valley that is him, an exclamation mark, somewhere in the distance between bridge and river. He floats at the three hinges of the crescent-shaped steel arches. These knit the bridge together. The moment of cubism. (34)

The direct allusion to cubism and the essay, "The Moment of Cubism", by Berger in particular, is therefore no coincidence. Cubism questioned the idea of lifelike representation in art by depicting things from many angles. Berger's essay examines the significance of the Cubist movement and its effects on approaches to art since then:

During the first decade of this century a transformed world became theoretically possible and the necessary forces of change could already be recognized as existing. Cubism was the art which reflected the possibility of this transformed world and the confidence it inspired. Thus, in a certain sense, it was the most modern art – as it was also the most philosophically complex – which has yet existed. (Berger 2001a: 91)

This essay is itself an important intervention in the theory of representation. Berger states, furthermore, that the consequences of social and cultural developments in European society at the turn of the twentieth century fundamentally altered the relationship of the human self to the world:

The developments which converged at the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe changed the meaning of both time and space. All, in different ways, some inhuman and others full of promise, offered a liberation from the immediate, from the rigid distinction between absence and presence...The second consequence concerned the relation of the self to the secularized world. There was no longer any essential discontinuity between the individual and the general. The invisible and the multiple no longer intervened between each individual and the world. It was becoming more and more difficult to think in terms of having been *placed* in the world. A man was part of the world and indivisible from it. In an entirely original sense, which remains at the basis of modern consciousness, a man *was* the world which he inherited. (74-75 *emphasis in original*)

The significance of Cubism in the writing of fiction is therefore evident in the complexities of it as a work of representation. In her paper, “In the Skin of a Lion as a Cubist Novel”, Rochelle Simmons explores the associations between Cubism, Berger’s novel, G., and Ondaatje’s novel. Simmons argues that Ondaatje applies the principles of the mosaic and the mural in the form of the novel. She states that the novel’s “deployment of multiple points of view – or a multifaceted narrative technique – can be likened to the faceting in analytic Cubist paintings”. (Simmons 1998: 702)

Furthermore, she argues that the intertextual references in the novel are not merely coincidental but reflect Ondaatje’s more substantial interest in the complexities of representation; a concern evident in much of his creative output.

Simmons applies the arguments made by Berger in her examination of the ways in which these concerns are rehearsed in the novel. One example of this is the depiction of the prodigious construction of the bridge which invades the space previously revered as exalted space. She states that “both the Prince Edward Viaduct and Nicholas Temelcoff could be said to literally take over the ‘territory in space and time’ which God was thought to occupy”. (Simmons 1998: 708) She explores too the Cubist examination of space and the manner in which Patrick’s developing awareness of self and of space, are related. One of the major proponents of Cubism, Pablo Picasso, provides an invaluable opinion regarding the relationship between art and reality: “We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given to us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies”. (quoted in Ganteführer-Trier 2004: 15) I believe that the “manner” that Picasso refers to here could be said to be the capacity for the imaginative; the techniques of invention. I would suggest that in Ondaatje’s work this capacity is recognised as a “gift”. I would argue that this is emblematic of the capacity for, and the value of the imagination. For example, in In the Skin of a Lion, Patrick ruminates on the absence of Alice and wishes her,

to be with him here in this room as if she is not dead. As if he can be given that gift, to relive those days when Alice was with him and Hana, which in literature is the real gift. He turns the page backwards...All these fragments of memory...so we can retreat from the grand story and stumble accidentally upon a luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still. Those moments, those few pages in a book we go back and forth over. (ITSOAL 1988: 147-148)

This notion of the gift of imagination is repeated in The English Patient when Kip sits in his garden and remembers Hana. He is provided with a moment in which he is able to observe Hana as she exists at that moment: “This is a limited gift he has somehow been given, as if a camera’s film reveals her, but only her, in silence”. (TEP 1992: 300) The modern consciousness that Berger refers to above complicates society’s perspectives on the concepts of authoritative truth or fact.

The scepticism about incontrovertible truth and fact demanded a revision of the relationship between the written word and society. The fifth-century figure, Herodotus, is commonly regarded as the ‘father of history’.⁷ This suggests that his work, collected in the text, The Histories, is an undisputed presentation of fact. The reception of the textual as irrefutable and verifiable truth is no longer as irrefutable as it may have previously been accepted. This change in the reception of the text applies to the Herodotus book as well. Ondaatje exploits this shift in The English Patient with the use of the Herodotus text as a space in which fact and fiction are merged and exchanged. The author of the text is no longer the commanding purveyor of fact but a more modest figure. The English patient provides us with this portrayal when he discusses the book with Hana:

I have seen editions of *The Histories* with a sculpted portrait on the cover. Some statue found in a museum. But I never imagine Herodotus this way. I see him more as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage. (118-119 *emphasis in original*)

Instead of a figure of authority who is valorised in the form of a statue, Herodotus is presented as one of a group of anonymous men who exchange something far less tangible than historical fact. The act of bartering is motivated by a pragmatic need, namely the seeds which may be a source of nutrition, rather than by a more profound ideal. The contents of texts such as The Histories, Stendhal’s The Charterhouse of Parma and others referred to in the novel, become equivalent to the contents of technical and empiricist texts.

Information describing instructive and functional activities is included in this mosaic of the discursive, the apocryphal and the imaginative. The description of procedures such as, “[S]ome use the swede saw. It cut spruce at twice the speed of the crosscut, and when they moved to the next camp they rolled up the narrow blade, making new handles in whatever forest they arrived”, in In the Skin of a Lion, is merged with poetic imagery, to compile the composite representation that constitutes the fiction. (ITSOAL 1988: 16)

⁷ See the biographical details in Herodotus, The Histories, London: Penguin Classics (Revised Edition, 2003).

A further method is the use of seemingly authoritative lists of proper nouns such as “Richie Cut Stone Company, Raymond Concrete, Heather & Little Roofing and Sheet Metal”. (109) These lists of apparently factual details are intended to secure the authority of the narrative. Although these companies may indeed have existed there is no evidence of this independent of the use of it in the novel. This authority is imperative in creating a convincing environment for the fiction; in establishing the fiction as credible and compelling. In the estimation of the narrator in one of Coetzee’s novels, this process is incremental: “[I]n the novel, the voice that speaks the first sentence, then the second, and so onward – call it the voice of the narrator – has, to begin with, no authority at all. Authority must be earned; on the novelist author lies the onus to build up, out of nothing, such authority”. (Coetzee 2008: 149) In placing these seemingly factual details into the frame of fiction, the producer of the text is affirming the authority of the detail and simultaneously distorting it. In her specific reference to Ondaatje’s use of this strategy in the passage listing the commercial concerns quoted above, Linda Hutcheon states that, “[T]he text here is dense with historical (and ironic) detail, for capitalist history has recorded – if not the names of the workers – at least the names of the companies who participated in the building”. (Hutcheon 1988: 96) Ondaatje’s novel thus rehabilitates the historical record in as much that this is possible through fiction, by focusing on the lives of the workers.



While Coming through Slaughter relies on the serialised trajectory of Buddy Bolden’s life for its structure, in In the Skin of a Lion, The English Patient and Anil’s Ghost, the narrative is more disassembling. This approach is summarised by the use of a line from Berger’s novel, G, as one of the epigraphs to In the Skin of a Lion, namely, “[N]ever again will a single story be told as if it were the only one”. (Berger 1973: 149) This disparate and disorderly quality of the modern story is reinforced by two further narrations from the same novel. The first is from the beginning of the novel when Hana is preparing to hear the story: “She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms”. (ITSOAL 1988: Prologue)

Later in the novel the narrator quotes an extract from one of Joseph Conrad’s letters: “[O]nly the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become”. (146)

A few sentences later the narrator comments that “[T]he first sentence of every novel should be: ‘Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human’”. (*ibid.*) In her study of the postmodern in contemporary Canadian writing in English, Linda Hutcheon argues that Ondaatje is a writer, “who seems most aware of generic borders, and of how they can be usefully trespassed”. (Hutcheon 1988: 82) Discussing his work in general and the book, Running in the Family, in particular, she states that the “relation of language to the representation of reality is an important issue...” and that, one of “the reasons for this is the number of problems it raises for the process of both reading and writing”. (85) The quotation from the Berger novel also implies the use of the device of multiple narration rather than the conventional mode of the singular, and often, omniscient narrator. The idea about the multiplicity of stories is echoed in the memoir, Running in the Family, when the narrator suggests that, “[N]o story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgements thrown in. In this way history is organized”. (*RTS* 1984: 26) The latter comment about the construction of history, in particular, invites a debate about the procedures through which history is compiled and the ways in which those processes are constantly open to question. In each of the Ondaatje novels there is the feature of multiple perspective narration. There are gaps and interruptions of narration with characters disappearing and reappearing. A passage concerning Patrick’s recollections from In the Skin of a Lion reiterates this approach:

In books he had read, even the romances he swallowed during childhood, Patrick never believed that characters lived only on the page. They altered when the author’s eye was somewhere else. Outside the plot there was a great darkness, but there would of course be daylight elsewhere on earth. Each character had his own time zone, his own lamp, otherwise they were just men from nowhere. (*ITSOAL* 1988: 143)

In her specific comments about In the Skin of a Lion, Hutcheon remarks that it continues the “exploration of the boundaries between fact and fiction, life and art, and, even more explicitly, men and women”. (Hutcheon 1988: 93) She adds that Ondaatje “adds another dimension: a confrontation between the conventions of the realist novel (and so-called objective history writing) and the self-reflexivity of postmodern metafiction”, and that while “...this too is a somewhat fragmented novel in its form, it also both uses and abuses, exploits and subverts the conventions of realist fiction in a way that is very postmodern, though different from Ondaatje’s earlier prose works”. (*ibid.*)

Several critics of Ondaatje's work have sought to draw connections between his aesthetic approach to writing fiction and his personal identity as a Sri Lankan immigrant in Canada. Responding in the main to the memoir, Running in the Family, Tangea Tansley suggests that,

the form of the narrative – its apparently chaotic, splintered arrangement – mirrors not only the nation it describes but also the composite nationality and hybrid identity of its author...If it appears at times disjointed – if it ducks, dives and weaves its way through a host of anecdotal data, shot through with historical references juxtaposed with pieces of poetry, the whole structure undermining itself, rebuilding, collapsing – the disorganisation...is in itself representative of the way he *imagines* and thus reconstructs his childhood and his family and his own difficulties with regard to nationality. (Tansley 2004: 213-214 *emphasis in original*)

While I find Tansley's description of the narrative particularly convincing, I regard the preoccupation with the author's representation of national belonging as unnecessarily restrictive. It suggests that his work can only be interpreted as an allegory of his personal experiences. I would argue that Ondaatje applies the same complexities of representation to his own story as he does to the stories of others.

This connection between authorial identity and stylistic approach presupposes the thesis that only writers whose personal lives have displayed some sort of hybrid existence would be able to imitate the apparent disjointed quality of it in their work. This notion extracts any aesthetic agency the writer might have at her or his disposal, suggesting therefore that no other stylistic approach is possible. It is an argument akin to the one made by Fredric Jameson in his paper, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital," where he states that,

[W]hat all third-world cultural productions have in common, and what distinguishes them radically from analogous cultural forms in the first world, [is that] all third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. (Jameson 1986: 69)

This approach assumes that novelists who emerge from locations acknowledged as being within the, at best, contentious designation of the “third world”, as Jameson terms it, are limited to merely enacting portraits of their own experiences, rather than exercising any other kind of novelistic performance they may wish to embark upon. Jameson’s assertions have, indeed, been subjected to a comprehensive response by Aijaz Ahmad where the reductive and totalising nature of the argument is critiqued. I would argue that it would be untenable to appreciate Ondaatje’s writing only as representing a national allegory. The subjects of his fiction militate against the imposition of a reductionist interpretation in which one reads the trajectories of the characters only within the parameters of the nation-state. Indeed the characters he chooses to present in his work are not solely determined by ethnic or national identities.

The English Patient develops a fiction around one Ladislaus or Lazlo Almasi, an Austro-Hungarian aristocrat, who flew expeditions over the Sahara desert in pre-war Egypt, and is alleged to have served both sides of the conflict in the Second World War. Ondaatje compiles a fiction from some of the known facts related to Almasi’s life, and, thus, follows a strategy used previously in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and in Coming through Slaughter. The apparent depiction of Almasi in the novel generated some admonishing censure of Ondaatje for endeavouring to portray Almasi, an alleged Nazi sympathiser and cohort, as a heroic figure.⁸ At the end of The English Patient there is a narrative intrusion which suggests that the identity of the characters are not complete in themselves, in that sense that they should be regarded as having an existence outside of the realm of the novels in which they appear. In this sense, Ondaatje appears to be making the point that identity whether in fiction or in history is never fixed, complete or coherent. The narration states that Hana “...is a woman I don’t know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life”. (TEP 1992: 301) This point of view restates the notion that writers do not have complete authority and control over the fates of the characters they create.

⁸ See Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, (1994) “The English Patient: Truth is Stranger than Fiction”, in Essays on Canadian Writing, Issue 53, Summer 1994, pp.141-154, and Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, (2004) “Will the Real Almasi Please Stand Up! Transporting Central European Orientalism via The English Patient”, in Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 24:2, pp. 163-180.

The view that characters exist both inside and outside the text, may relate in some way to the statement by Said that we read “not univocally, but *contrapuntally*”. (Said 1993: 59 *emphasis in original*). I would add that this occurs not only with an awareness of competing histories, as Said argues, but also because of the text’s, and the context’s, intrinsic complexity. The characters, themselves, are also, therefore, seen to be involved in the difficulties of the text as a particularised domain, *and* within the context, or world, of hegemonic relations and forces, in which it is broadly situated. The ‘author’s eye’ does not possess the panoptic vision of the authoritative creator. The perspective implied here is tangential not celestial, with the result that the author is a decentred agent rather than a dominant consciousness. The perspectives represented are consequently multiple, implied in In the Skin of a Lion by the epigraph from The Epic of Gilgamesh. The epigraph concerns Gilgamesh’s expression of grief following the death of his friend and travelling companion, Enkidu:

In the first light of dawn Gilgamesh cried out, ‘I made you rest on a royal bed, you reclined on a couch at my left hand, the princes of the earth kissed your feet. I will cause all the people of Uruk to weep over you and raise the dirge of the dead. The joyful people will stoop with sorrow; and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion.’ (Gilgamesh 1960: 95-96)

The motif of taking on the skin of a lion is used to represent storytellers who assume the identities of others to tell their stories. There is, thus, the interpretation that the novelist attempts to perform this role as occupier of skins to relate the stories of others. There may be some significance that it is the lion, often referred to as the dominant animal in its environment, which is used in this analogy. In assuming the authority of the storyteller, the individual imitates, perhaps, the powerful and influential position of a lion. There is, therefore, a reallocation of authority to the teller of the story or author. It is, however, not the original presence of the author who is subsequently dismantled or disentangled by Barthes in his essay, “Death of the Author”. It is, instead, a feigned authority, reliant upon an assumed guise. The following passage describes how this is enacted in the novel:

Alice had once described a play to him in which several actresses shared the role of heroine. After half an hour the powerful matriarch removed her large coat from which animal pelts dangled and she passed it, along with her strength, to one of the minor characters. In this way even a silent daughter could put on the cloak and be able to break through her chrysalis into language. Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story. (ITSOAL 1988: 157)

The notion of performance is important to note here. It suggests that there is a separation between events conducted during the normal course of everyday experience and thought of as natural or real, and those in which human behaviour is consciously and deliberately enacted. In the quoted passage there is a distinction made between what is a surreptitious disguise for the purposes of deliberate deception, and the performance of mimetic acts in which the serious implications of imitation and responsibility for the consequences thereof are recognised.

Another way in which Ondaatje establishes the separation between fact and fiction is in the appropriation of documentary texts for the provision of precise and voluminous detail. The certainty of the factual becomes disturbed by framing the detail within a fictional work. Ondaatje admits to this strategy in a note accompanying his memoir, Running in the Family:

A literary work is a communal act. And this book could not have been imagined, let alone conceived, without the help of many people....*While all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or "gesture."* And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts. (RITF 1984: 205-206 *my emphasis*)

The acknowledgements notes in each of his books provide evidence for the extensive process of research that accompanies each fictional project. On the acknowledgements page to The English Patient, he confirms this in the following manner: "Many books were important to me in my research. *Unexploded Bomb* by Major A. B. Hartley was especially useful in re-creating the construction of bombs and in describing the British bomb disposal units at the start of World War II". (TEP 1992: *Acknowledgements*)

The use of the word “re-creating” here is significant in emphasising the point about the novel as artifice; as composition, as opposed to unequivocal detail. The factual is therefore subjected to a fictional transformation. The role of the peritextual, such as acknowledgements, credits and disclaimers, reinforces the work as fiction; demarcates the texts as altered and adjusted by artifice. In the Skin of a Lion contains the following disclaimer: “This is a work of fiction and certain liberties have at times been taken with some dates and locales”. (ITSOAL 1988: Frontispiece) The English Patient has the following paragraph in its acknowledgements: “While some of the characters who appear in this book are based on historical figures, and while many of the areas-such as the Gilf Kebir and its surrounding desert-exist, and were explored in the 1930s, it is important to stress that this story is fictional, as are some of the events and journeys”. (TEP 1992: *Acknowledgements*) This proviso may seem like a counter to the text which precedes the contents page and is signified by quotation marks, as an extract from the minutes of a Geographical Society meeting, London. The date, though, is obscured by the deletion of the exact year, as “November 194-, London”. (ibid.) The effect of this is the attachment of the semblance of historical validity but not validity itself. The deletion subverts the simultaneous attempt at authority.

Anil’s Ghost also contains a substantial acknowledgements page in which several resources are credited. As with the previous novels there is a disclaimer about the text which marks it as a fiction. In this case it takes the form of an “Author’s Note” at the end of the novel: “Anil’s Ghost is a fictional work set during this political time and historical moment. And while there existed organizations similar to those in this story, and similar events took place, the characters and incidents in this novel are invented”. (AG 2001: Author’s Note) The general effect of these notes, acknowledgements, disclaimers and provisos, is akin to the complementary, yet contradictory, operation of “authority” and “molestation” advanced by Said, referred to earlier. These procedures, it would seem, are meant to attach an authority to the writing; a sense of legitimacy, which establishes it as beyond dispute, while its insertion as preface and/or postscript implies its “molestation”; the recognition of it as pretence. The aggregate result of Ondaatje’s strategy to employ historical figures in his work is the creation of characters who carry the names of historical persons, but who exist only within the realm of fiction.

In The English Patient there are several references to other texts, advancing the argument that it operates as a metafictional production. Linda Hutcheon has argued for the recognition of the term 'historiographic metafiction', and describes it as,

fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities... [T]hese works are not quite historical novels in the traditional sense, for they are very metafictional in their attention to the processes of writing, reading, and interpreting. They are both self-consciously fictional but also overtly concerned with the acts (and consequences) of the reading and writing of history as well as fiction. In other words, the aesthetic and the social, the present and the past, are *not inseparable discourses in these novels*. (Hutcheon 1988: 13-14 *my emphasis*)

Hutcheon regards the use of interceding historical, social, and political realities as evidence of the fact that contemporary producers of fiction are keenly aware of the intersecting procedures which occur between history and fiction. She argues that this recognition of the discourse of history as a significant influence on, and a structuring component of, contemporary fiction, marks these literary productions as altered. I am of the opinion that this recognition is overstated and would wish to argue that historical discourse as it exists adjacent to the fictional, undergoes a transformation when it is entered into the discourse of fiction. My contention is that this has been an enduring quality of fiction and that there has been no alteration to its integrity. What I would concede is that the claims of history over the space which fiction occupies have indeed become more robust. In her book, The Distinction of Fiction, Dorrit Cohn argues for the recognition of conventions of fiction which specifies its uniqueness and differentiation from the factual. Supporting the integrity of the fictional space she suggests that "fictional narrative is unique in its potential for crafting a self-enclosed universe ruled by formal patterns that are ruled out in all other orders of discourse". (Cohn 2000: Preface) She examines the various uses of the word fiction and concludes that the,

standardization of *fiction* as a generic term has not resulted in eliminating its other meanings. And this is true despite the fact that in all four of these meanings it is used as a synonym for other, readily available words: untruth, abstraction, literature, narrative. Though it is no doubt futile to campaign for lexical reform, one may perhaps hope that a clearer awareness of the word's semantic instability will prompt literary critics to adhere to its restricted generic meaning. (11-12 *emphasis in original*)

Cohn's ideas seem to me to be similar to Coetzee's argument that fiction is a separate and discrete discourse, contrary to the aforementioned argument by Hutcheon that the discourses are inseparable. I would suggest that the appearance of what may be regarded as the factual or historical in a work of fiction, therefore renders the factual or historical as a composite and distinct part of the fictional work.⁹

This transformation of the factual into the fictional certainly operates in Ondaatje's novels. One of the instances of this is in the depiction of Caravaggio. He is portrayed as a thief in the first and as a spy in the second. Caravaggio is the name of the early 17th century Italian painter who gained notoriety for his participation in street brawls and as a fugitive from justice.¹⁰ He was known for using the affects of chiaroscuro, the play of light and shadow, in his work. He was also known for getting people from the 'lower classes' to pose for paintings which depicted religious figures. It can be argued that Ondaatje imitates both the play of light and shadow in the descriptive scenes in his fiction, over and above his portrayal of people from the 'lower classes' in society. In In the Skin of a Lion, for example, the character Caravaggio is active during the night as he unlawfully enters various premises. Temelcoff is another who works during the night at the time when the bridge is built. The cityscape which is the backdrop to the action of the novel is described in painterly detail:

By eight A.M. the fog is burned up and the men have already been working for over two hours. A smell of tar descends to Nicholas as workers somewhere pour and begin to iron it level. He hangs waiting for the whistle that announces the next journey of the traveller. Below him is the Don River, the Grand Trunk, the CN and CP railway tracks, and the Rosedale Valley Road. He can see the houses and work shacks, the beautiful wooden sheeting of the abutment which looks like a revival tent. (ITSOAL 1988: 41)

The suggestion here is that he attempts, in the form of a gesture, some affinity with the approach taken by the artist, Caravaggio, in his painting.

⁹ See also the comment related to this by Milan Kundera: "Outside the novel, we're in the realm of affirmation: everyone is sure of his statements: the politician, the philosopher, the concierge. Within the universe of the novel, however, no one affirms: it is the realm of play and hypotheses. In the novel, then, reflection is essentially inquiring, hypothetical". in The Art of the Novel, 1988, p. 78.

¹⁰ See Brigitte Hintzen-Bohlen, "Defying Convention – the Life and Art of Caravaggio," in Art & Architecture: Rome and the Vatican City, Germany: Tandem Verlag GmbH 2005, 232-235, Hibbard 1985: 176, and Lambert 2006, 7 & 48.

The latter spent the final years of his life fleeing from justice after he had killed a man in a fight.¹¹ The name of this man, Rannucio Tommasoni, appears in The English Patient as the name of the torturer who severs the thumbs of Caravaggio as he appears in that novel. (TEP 1992: 55) Historical identities are thus exchanged for fictional ones, emphasising once again the complicated connections between the two distinct discursive practices. Qadri Ismail argues that this incident in the novel represents an instance where “literature can rewrite history, avenge it even”. (Ismail 1999: 405) The inference which may be drawn from his interpretation of this minor event in the novel is that one of the motives of literature is to conspire against and undermine the predetermined stability and validity of history. It also assumes that literature operates as a discourse in opposition to history. There is also the presumption that history is a stable and unequivocal entity; that it does not contain its own elements of disruption. I would argue that the relationship is a far less defined and fixed one; that it is constituted as a process of contestation where the two discourses are sometimes in opposition but that at other times it is a process of assimilation in which elements of each discourse are interchanged.

Taking all of these arguments together I would suggest that fiction does not rewrite history, but aligns itself as a discourse adjacent to history. This operation is, no doubt, precarious and contested, but I would assert that it is elucidated effectively by Said in his discussion of Paul Ricoeur’s differentiation of speech and circumstantial reality on the one hand, and writing and texts on the other:

The principal difficulty with all this is that without sufficient argument Ricoeur assumes circumstantial reality to be symmetrically and exclusively the property of speech, or the speech situation, or what writers would have wanted to say had they not instead chosen to write. My contention is that worldliness does not come and go; nor is it here and there in the apologetic and soupy way by which we often designate history, a euphemism in such cases for the impossibly vague notion that all things take place in time...The point is that texts have ways of existing that even the most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society – in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly. (Said 1983: 34-35)

¹¹ See Lambert 2006, p.78 & Hibbard 1985, p. 206.

What is acknowledged in Said's summary is that there are dynamic connections between the worldliness of the environment in which fiction is made and the literary assignments which writers embark upon. In addition to this existing dynamic connection is that of the prevailing complications between fiction and textuality. Whereas the prominence of the social, the political and the historical may be seen to have comprised the integrity of fiction, it is crucial, I would suggest, to reaffirm it. As imaginative constructions possessing their own inherent patterns, each of Ondaatje's novels, therefore, requires distinctive interpretations as fiction. As such they rely vitally on the appreciation of the imaginative. In In the Skin of a Lion, Alice responds to a question from Patrick with the following: "No, it's a metaphor. You reach people through metaphor. It's what I reached you with earlier tonight in the performance". (ITSOAL 1988: 123) In all of the novels examined for this study, it is the compelling power of the imagination that is the most prominent quality of the work. The framing device in In the Skin of a Lion is the telling of the story on a road-trip. The book is, therefore, circular in structure and may also be said to be a version of a travel narrative. Patrick tells Hana the story as they embark on the journey to Marmora to see Clara. The opening and the closing segments of the book are thus the frames within which the story is situated. The closing words in the book - "[L]ights, he said", - is Patrick's reminder to Hana that she should switch on the headlights of the car. (244) It can also refer to the instruction given within a theatre designating the end of a staged dramatic performance. It may also be significant that Hana takes the driver's seat at the end as she and Patrick drive to Marmora.

The description of Caravaggio's apprenticeship to the 'craft' of theft in In the Skin of a Lion may also be read as a foray into the art of writing fiction. It advances in an oblique way the notion that the fiction writer is a thief of sorts who appropriates an assortment of fact, fiction, documentary, apocrypha and folklore to compose a literary mosaic. In addition it proposes the idea of character as the central focus of this enterprise:

He was in awe of them, wanted to be all of them in their moments of extreme crisis. He hung around them not so much to learn their craft but to study the way they lived when they stepped back into the world of order. He still had that to learn. He was twenty-two at the Blue Cellar Café and he was fascinated only by character. (ITSOAL 1988: 191)

It may be argued that the distinctive trajectories of the characters are a fundamental preoccupation in the fiction of Ondaatje. There are many connections made between characters and books in his novels. In a passage from In the Skin of a Lion, the narrator contemplates Patrick's relationship with books: "All his life Patrick Lewis has lived beside novels and their clear stories. Authors accompanying their heroes clarified motives. World events raised characters from destitution. The books would conclude with all wills rectified and all romances solvent. Even the spurned lover accepted the fact that the conflict had ended". (82) The idea of novels accompanying Patrick's life may be said to be in line with the notion of fiction as separate and distinct.

The character of Hana reappears of course as the focus of the narration in the opening to The English Patient. The framing device in the latter book is the character Kip's recollection of his relationship with Hana which leads to the story of the English patient's temporary recuperation in the villa and by extension, to the story of his illicit love affair with Katharine Clifton. The composite and interrupted narrative approach which appears in the previous novels by Ondaatje is present in The English Patient, too. While he is attended to by Hana in the villa, she reads to him. The readings she does for him are random and haphazard and he gains the sense that the books, "had gaps of plot like sections of road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night". (TEP 1992: 7) The books imitate the idea of the mural and the mosaic in the way in which the narrative is constructed. This image reasserts the notion of the textual as a composite and fractured phenomenon.

The notion of the independence of story which exists distinct from the characters who inhabit them is confirmed by the lines referring to Hana's experiences with it: "She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awakening from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams". (12) This passage offers fiction as a place to enter and emerge from. It advances the effect of fiction as producing a state of reverie. It supports too the idea that fiction is adjacent to the worldliness of the environment in which it is produced. The recollections of the English patient are identified as stories rather than as depictions of historical and verifiable events.

The following series of quotations from the text make this clear: “That was 1936, the beginning of our story...” (142); “That was the beginning of our story”; (229) “That was the burden of our story”; (230) and, “This is a story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story from Herodotus...It was simply a story that had jarred her in its familiarity of situation”. (233) Each of these direct narrations by the English patient advances the idea that his recollections are stories, as opposed to events with historical certainty. The validity of his versions of the past is therefore inconclusive. We have no other character verifying or disputing the details he provides. The character has his own doubts about the legitimacy of his narration.

Near the end of the novel, when increasingly regular doses of morphine are administered to him and he is, seemingly, in a more advanced state of delirium, he wonders whether he is not indeed a book: “You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book? Something to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies, loose vegetation, pockets of stones”. (253) The character of Caravaggio acts as the agent who extracts the story from the English patient. He performs his role in keeping with his involvement in subterfuge and espionage, to coax or “unthread the story out of him”. (247) It may be suggested that prone English patient resembles a text that is being read by the other characters who come to reside in the villa. Hana, Caravaggio and Kip all make their own attempts at deciphering him. During his time in the desert Almsy carries a copy of The Histories by Herodotus with him. The book survives the fire of the plane crash and Hana finds it on the table beside his bed in the villa. She refers to it as a “notebook” rather than merely a book. (16)

She discovers that he has added to it, “cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations – so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus”. (ibid) The implication of this detail is that Almsy inserts his own versions of history as well as other versions of it into this apparently authoritative text, “The Histories.” Almsy claims the book as his own by this process of incorporation: “Hana listened as the Englishman turned the pages of his commonplace book and read the information glued in from other books”. (58)

Moreover, the Herodotus text is referred to later in the book when Almasy reflects on the comparisons between the details of his illicit love affair with Katharine Clifton and the incidental story of the King of Sardis, Candaules, his queen and his bodyguard, Gyges.¹² There is a further connection made with the story in that Katharine recites the story to Geoffrey Clifton, Almasy, Clifton and Madox one night:

Then she began to read from The Histories – the story of Candaules and his queen. I always skim past that story. It is early in the book and has little to do with the places and period I am interested in. But it is of course a famous story. It was also what she had chosen to talk about...There are several things one can say. Knowing that eventually I will become her lover, just as Gyges will be the queen's lover and murderer of Candaules. (232-233)

Katharine's reading of the story of Candaules therefore, functions as an ironic forewarning of their respective fates in their own story. In the Herodotus text it is minor detail whereas here it is magnified in disproportion to other parts of the text by the apparent coincidental similarities with the events surrounding Geoffrey Clifton, Almasy and Katherine.

Another interesting textual insertion is the novel Kim by Rudyard Kipling. There are connections made with the character named Kirpal Singh or Kip, who is a Sikh serving in the British army during the war. Kip is recruited by Lord Suffolk who mentors him in the skills required to defuse bombs. In Kipling's novel, Kim, or Kimball O'Hara, is the orphaned son of an Irish soldier who ekes out a living on the streets of Lahore. He also does occasional work for his friend who is a local collaborator for the British secret service. Kim becomes a disciple of an aged Tibetan Lama who is on a quest to free himself from the Wheel of Things by finding the legendary River of the Arrow. The rest of the novel tracks their adventures as they embark on their journey. When Kip befriends the English patient in the villa Hana recognises the similarities between the two characters by suggesting an ironic reversal of roles: "Hana had watched him sitting beside the English patient, and it seemed to her a reversal of *Kim*. The young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English". (TEP 1992: 111 *emphasis in original*)

¹² See Herodotus, The Histories, London: Penguin Classics (Revised Edition, 2003), pp. 6-8.

This seems to indicate that Kipling's novel becomes a palimpsest for the story of Kip in The English Patient. This seems to point to it as case of the colony 'writing back to the empire'; that the colonial subject now becomes the focus of a story instead of as the representative of empire, as in the case of Kipling's Kim. The ending of the novel where Kip is seen to react violently upon hearing the news about the dropping of the bombs on the cities in Japan and his subsequent flight from the villa, suggests, though, that this reversal of roles between the characters in Kipling's novel and those in Ondaatje's one, is not as secure as it is implied in the aforementioned extract. Kip seems to be at odds with his position as a beneficiary of colonialism and someone who rebels against its abuses. His character, therefore, seems to describe the contradictory tensions inherent in the position of the colonial subject.

Some critics have argued that Ondaatje's aesthetic approach to the novel neutralises the political content of his work. In her article on In the Skin of a Lion, Julie Beddoes argues that Ondaatje's employment of the self-destabilising post-modern approach to fiction negates the powerful critique of power, class and politics that the novel engages in. She states that the "conflict in In the Skin of a Lion is between its aesthetics and its ideology; if this conflict is produced by that ideology, then it is not established power but the novel's own attempt at subversion that is subverted". (Beddoes 1994) I would suggest that this argument is reductive and allocates inordinate power to the aesthetic over the subject. It is based on the rather glib assumption that the techniques of compiling the fiction obscure the evocative depictions of social injustice, of resistance and human endurance which form a large part of the novel. More importantly though, it subordinates the discourse of the novel to that of history and politics in much the same that Coetzee argues we should be alert to. It implies that the novelist should convey a reality in an unmediated and direct way, rehearsing the position of Rousseau regarding the hierarchy of speech over writing.

An alternative to this criticism is the assertion that Ondaatje's novel critiques several manifestations of hegemonic practices, including that of the author and of historical representations. This point is supported by Winfried Siemerling who argues that, the novel offers "the historical possibility (and probability) of another history of Toronto...and with it a multi-faceted mural of the city that its dominant historiography has left in the dark". (Siemerling 2004: 97)

Jon Saklofske, however, argues that in Ondaatje's use of historical and apocryphal details, he imitates the role of an imperial collector in the way that he appropriates material for his fictional work. He contends that the writer's accumulation of various material resources is akin to the accrual of "a private narrative collection", which is used in service of the writer's particular objectives. (Saklofske 2004: 73) Dealing with Coming through Slaughter he states that "[W]hile Ondaatje does "rescue" the figure of Bolden from obscurity, elevating and complicating his memory, the liberties the author takes with his subject to achieve the representation require further interrogation". (73) Furthermore, he argues that "in the same way that the impersonal machine of history sometimes commits an injustice to such unique personalities as Billy the Kid or Buddy Bolden, so the intensely personal activity of the author's fictional use of these same figures may involve a similarly problematic appropriation". (ibid.) I would argue that this distortion that Saklofske attributes to the author is exactly the sort of "molestation" that Said argues is an inherent aspect of the act of writing.

While this recognition is significant in marking, in particular, the duplicitous quality of fiction, it is curious that Saklofske wishes to construct a binary opposition between "the impersonal machine of history" and "the intensely personal activity" of the author, both of which are equally complicit in the violation of historical subjects. This notion seems to imply that fiction intends providing an alternative when indeed it may be said to provide an artistic or inventive representation of, rather than a verification of history. At the end of his essay Saklofske concedes that Ondaatje's writing style "prevents its author from fully appropriating, assimilating, possessing or enslaving his subject and reintroduces the object into the present as a capable multiplicity, capable of survival through transmission and interpretation". (81) He proceeds to dispute the position taken by Beddoes, referred to earlier. He suggests that Ondaatje's approach to rendering the historically marginalised into fiction is "more successful than Beddoes claims" and that the characters, "whether based on historical figures or representative of certain cultures or classes, were, until Ondaatje, falling off the bridge". (80) His concluding remarks are a direct reference to the characters of Temelcoff and the nun in In the Skin of a Lion, but are also a more general reference to the predominantly obscure and marginal characters in his novels.

In an essay in which he reflects upon the writing of his novel Midnight's Children, Rushdie details a creative process that resonates with Ondaatje's approach to fiction. Rushdie recalls that in writing his novel, "it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me." (Rushdie 1991: 12) Furthermore, he writes:

human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death. (ibid.)

Apart from the prescient and ironic nature of the last statement in relation to Rushdie's own destiny, this passage provides an evocative presentation of a contemporary and relevant idea of fiction. In echoing this notion about the inventive quality of language itself, Said says that, "[W]ords signify a movement away from and around the fragment of reality. This is another way of characterizing the human capacity for language. To use words is to substitute them for something else – call it reality, historical truth, or a kernel of actuality". (Said 1985: 65-66) The aggregate point being made here is that in working factual material and references to other fictional texts into his work, Ondaatje is complying with the common practises associated with writing fiction, namely, the produced structure of language itself, the inventiveness of the writing process and the complexities of representing a perspective of the world.

What may be significant about his approach to fiction are the ways in which he applies the quality of invention to the construction of narrative and the form in which this is made. Taking a line from the same essay by Rushdie, namely that "re-describing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it", Kristina Kyser states that Ondaatje's approach to fiction in both In the Skin of a Lion and The English Patient offers an alternative to the presentation of narrative. (Kyser 2001: 900)

She states that “[B]y exploring the complex relationship between individuals’ stories and the collective tale, and interweaving Eastern and biblical images, The English Patient provides a new vision, an alternative to the destructive apocalypse that Kip describes,” and that it “is a vision that has a great deal to say about the importance of stories and their tellers, and the ways in which they construct the world around us”. (900)

It may be said that in experimenting with narrative structures, Ondaatje is examining the representation of subjectivities in his work. I would argue that he maintains a self-reflective position about the power that the narrating perspective may wield and is conscious of the ways in which its dominance may colour the narration. In her assessment, Lamia Tayeb asserts that “the narrative focus marginalizes the subject of the story, and foregrounds the form and method of the telling itself, thus calling into question the teleology of truth claimed by narrative discourse,” and that his “narrative endeavours are both conditioned and coloured by the anxiety of referential uncertainty”. (Tayeb 2006: 233-236) She suggests that “authorial agency is brought within the line and scope of story-telling by contriving a certain convergence and merging between the act of narrating and the recorded event within the textual and thematic fields of the novel.” (236) Furthermore, she argues that these features of Ondaatje’s writing confirm him firmly as an author following techniques where the presence of the narrative voice is decentred, creating a “fragmentation of temporal and spatial frameworks and the resistance to narrative finality and teleology”. (ibid.)

I would contend that this resistance to finality is linked to Derrida’s thesis regarding the inherent deferment of meaning or supplementarity in the text: “It is a strange essence of the supplement not to have essentiality: it may not always have taken place. Moreover, literally, it has never taken place: it is never present, here and now. If it were, it would not be what it is, a supplement...The supplement is neither a presence nor an absence”. (Derrida 1997: 314) Stephen Scobie explores this idea further in his analysis of The English Patient. He states that Ondaatje’s use of the Herodotus text is the performance of an act of supplementarity:

Katharine reads the story of Gyges and Candaules out of a copy of Herodotus' The Histories. It is a book that the English patient has carried with him for years, and he not only reads it, he writes in it....As it is set out by Jacques Derrida, the "supplement" stands in a paradoxical relationship to its "original." It presupposes both, that the original is complete in itself, a finished work to which any addition must come from the outside, as a supplement; and, simultaneously, that the original is incomplete, that it contains within itself an emptiness or lack that the supplement comes to fill. For the English patient, Herodotus' The Histories is both complete (the act of cutting and pasting in pages from other books foregrounds itself as the addition of something extraneous) and incomplete (what he writes into the text responds to a lack, and a demand, that the text already exhibits). In thus supplementing the text of Herodotus, the English patient is duplicating the supplementary nature of the original. (Scobie 1994: 95)

In confirmation of his point, Scobie quotes Derrida's phrase from Of Grammatology: "One wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognize that there is a supplement at the source". (quoted in Scobie 1994: 95) When the patient, therefore, randomly inserts other texts in his copy of The Histories, he is marking the latter text as lacking finality; as possessing the quality of supplementarity. Scobie suggests too that this quality of deferral is prevalent in the relationships between the characters in the book: "[E]ach character deflects his or her true desire through the image of another". (ibid.) The relationship between Kip and Hana is perhaps as much a trace of the relationship between Almasy and Katharine as that relationship is a residue of the relationship between Candaules, his queen, and Gyges, which appears in the Herodotus text, and functions as the initial point of reference for Almasy's attraction to Katharine. According to Eleanor Ty, "the novel suggests that all the characters are parts of one whole and that they are different versions of each other". (Ty 2000) Taken with the previous point there is the suggestion that characters substitute each other and that they are indeed the various representations of each other within different times and locations, reinforcing, thus, the fluctuating nature of identity.

In Anil's Ghost the epigraphist Palipana is the character through which ideas about both writing and representation are mediated. He is a former teacher to Sarath and lives near the ruins of the ancient city of Anuradhapura, where he is cared for by his niece due to his impending blindness.

Anil and Sarath visit him to seek advice about establishing the identity of the skeleton. He suggests that they find an artist to reconstruct the face of the skeleton. He is described as initially having been an influential post-colonial nationalist who “was for a number of years at the centre of a nationalistic group that eventually wrestled archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans”. (AG 2001: 79) The interpretation one could offer here is that he represents an archetypal anti-colonial nationalist who is convinced by the validity of anti-colonial truths, such as the existence of an Asian history which stands in a diametric opposition to European history. As such it is presented as an alternative to that history:

The main force of a pragmatic Sinhala movement, Palipana wrote lucidly, basing his work on exhaustive research, deeply knowledgeable about the context of the ancient cultures. While the West saw Asian history as a faint horizon where Europe joined the East, Palipana saw his country in fathoms and colour, and Europe simply as a landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia. (*ibid.*)

His conviction about these apparent dogmatic certainties, changes significantly while he works on archaeological digs in the country and is involved in a controversy following his interpretation of rock graffiti he allegedly discovers there: “He had discovered and translated a linguistic subtext that explained the political tides and royal eddies of the island in the sixth century. The work was applauded in journals abroad and at home, until one of Palipana’s protégés voiced the opinion that there was no real evidence for the existence of these texts. They were a fiction”. (81) The result of this act was that he became an outcast and retreated to live a monastic existence in the forest grove. While the archaeologists and historians who evaluated his work surmised that “he had choreographed the arc of his career in order to attempt this one trick on the world”, to Palipana this act “was more than a trick, less of a falsehood in his own mind; perhaps for him it was not a false step but the step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance”. (*ibid.*) Despite the ostracisation which followed after the controversy, he “refused to give up what he claimed to have discovered, and made no attempt to defend himself”. (84) He continued working in the fields investigating the archaeological sites there.

He developed a different approach to this work and “he began to see as truth things that could only be guessed at. In no way did this feel to him like forgery or falsification”. (83) What is evident here is that the direct associations between truth, history and archaeology are being questioned. In performing this role, he could therefore be regarded as someone imitating a producer of fiction; as something which is adjacent to reality. It is also possible to recognise the idea of history as a text open to interpretation, being advanced here. As an interpreter of history and archaeology, Palipana has problematised the accepted rules governing these disciplines and has consequently been “erased” from a new edition of “the Sinhalese encyclopaedia”. (96) He continues in his pursuit, though, and discovers evidence that only serves to confirm the incomplete and revisable quality of history: “In the last few years he had found the hidden histories, intentionally lost, that altered the perspective and knowledge of earlier times. It was how one hid or wrote the truth when it was necessary to lie”. (105) Palipana, in fact, becomes more of a compiler of fiction, a kind of novelist perhaps, than an historian or archaeologist, and is wary about the line between fact and fiction.

His niece, Lakma, becomes an audience to his tales: “Lakma watched him and listened, never speaking, a silent amanuensis for his whispered histories. He blended fragments of stories so they became a landscape. It did not matter if she could not distinguish between his versions and the truth”. (105) This assertion is reinforced later in the book when it is stated that, “[A] good archaeologist can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel”. (151) The soil is thus a text open to interpretation and carries with it all the contradictions inherent in a text. As his blindness becomes more apparent, Palipana’s ability to discern verifiable fact becomes more unreliable and elusive. Sarath recognises this in his recollections to Anil and Gamini: “Don’t forget, he was going blind. In the last years of partial sight, he thought he finally saw the half-perceived interlinear texts”. (191) Sarath relates further that Palipana regarded himself as an, “epigraphist... [A] skill...to decipher inscriptions... [T]o study history as if it were a body”. (193) There is the suggestion that “Palipana went mad”. (*ibid.*) Sarath reconsiders this when he states that it was the “over-interpretations, what we must call lies, over the interlinear stuff”. (*ibid.*) He states further that he regarded Palipana as “just never a ‘sacred’ guy,” and that, “in the heart of any faith is a history that teaches us not to trust”. (*ibid.*) Inherent in the latter comment is the notion of a sceptical attitude to what is regarded as the unequivocal and the incontrovertible, and points to a secular approach to both faith and history.

The narrative strategy of detection applied in the previous novels is also evident in Anil's Ghost. While Bolden, Ambrose Small and Almasy are the pursued subjects in the former novels, here it is the identity of the skeleton 'Sailor' which is being sought. As with the other novels, this process of detection is not restricted to the search of the single identity. Most of the primary characters undergo a simultaneous scrutiny of their selves in the course of the quests for the main focus of detection. The other aspect of detection which is shared between the novels is the idea of the pursued body as a text.

In Anil's Ghost the skeleton is read for evidence to confirm its life and its death. Anil performs this reading in an attempt to discover the nature of work that 'Sailor' may have been involved in, allowing them some clues to establish his identity: "On Sailor's bones she could find no precise marker of occupational stress. As she stood utterly still in the courtyard, she realized there were *two* possible versions of a life that she could deduce...[T]he first, from her reading of the bones, suggested 'activity' above the height of the shoulder". (177 *emphasis in original*)

It is through Palipana that Anil and Sarath contemplate the connections between history and truth. The discovery of 'Sailor' creates a difficult set of problems for them. In uncovering it they are confronted by questions about the validity of official truth as presented to them by the government, and the facts that they glean from the skeleton itself and the material surrounding it. In what is described as a "rainy-night conversation", Sarath and Anil suggest that the distinctions between truth, clarity and history are rather more difficult to discern than it may appear to be. The conversation is quoted below:

'I don't think clarity is necessarily truth...

...I need to break things apart to know where someone came from. That's also an acceptance of complexity. Secrets turn powerless in the open air.'

'Political secrets are not powerless, in any form,' he said.

'But the tension and danger around them, one can make them evaporate. You're an archaeologist. Truth comes finally into the light. It's in the bones and sediment.'

'It's in character and nuance and mood.'

'That is what governs us in our lives, that's not the truth.'

'For the living it is the truth,' he quietly said.

'Why did you get into such a business?'

'I love history, the intimacy of entering all those landscapes. Like entering a dream. Someone nudges a stone away and there's a story.'

'A secret.'

'Yes, a secret'. (259)

The conversation is intriguing, in that there is no exact distinction between the two speakers, despite the fact that we recognise it is the two brothers speaking to each other. The particular comments in the conversation are not directly attributed to any one of the speakers which in its own way, symbolises the subject discussed, namely, the difficulties of attributing validity to truth when it is closely involved with history, story and dream. One could also interpret the reference to the story proceeding from the shifting away of a stone to the resurrection of Christ and its reproduction as mythical story. History is represented as multiple landscape and dream, and not as a procedural and empirical exercise in exacting the definitive facts. It is treated as a more tenuous experience which includes stories and secrets. What we may take from this is the idea that truth, history, story and dream exist as adjacent articulations of existence rather than in a hierarchical structure. The authority of fact, truth and history is being subjected to scrutiny and measured as narrative excursions similar to dream and story.

In his analysis of The English Patient, D Mark Simpson investigates the presence of architecture and suggests that the villa is "an inescapable textual presence," and that its "architecture orients reading space...so as to calibrate, on and off the map, textual excursions, textual passions, textual crises". (Simpson 1994: 216) While I understand that Simpson's essay is a complex argument about the intertextual features of the novel and that its terrain includes the space for re-writing, uninscribing and mis-reading, it also offers the suggestion that the villa is analogous to the precarious state of the novel form. The ruined state of the villa may be seen to symbolise the ramshackle state of the novel in a condition of destabilisation.

In a study in which he examines the state of narrative, story and the imagination, Richard Kearney argues that despite, what he terms, “a general sentiment of slackening and senselessness”, and “a radical threat to the power of narrativity in our expanding information age”, it is instead only the “traditional linear narrative”, that has been challenged. (Kearney 2002: 125) Moreover, he argues that, [O]ur inherited notions of rooted space and time are being profoundly altered by the emerging megapolis of expanding velocity and immediacy”, and that, “the old stories are giving way to new ones, more multi-plotted, multi-vocal and multi-media”. (126) Discussing recent contemporary fiction in the aftermath of what he terms “the Thatcher years”, Rushdie considers that many “writers wrote without hope. They had lost all ambition, all desire to wrestle with the world.” (Rushdie 2003: 38) In considering the ways in which Ondaatje employs the imagination in his reconstructions and his inventions of story, I would argue that his fiction does indeed convey the possibilities of hope and that it certainly makes an attempt to “wrestle with the world.”



CHAPTER TWO: SELF, COMMUNITY AND AFFILIATION

It may be indisputable that notions of self have been irrecoverably problematised by modern, postmodern and post-colonial interventions in the last century. The human self can no longer be regarded as stable, unequivocal and fixed. It is therefore credible that human identities are at least provisional and interchangeable. These ideas are based on the understanding that identities are made through societal relationships, language and experiences, and do not emerge exclusively out of genetic and biological determinations. In his study of the individual in contemporary society, Zygmunt Baumann quotes Stuart Hall in positing the notion that identity is unstable; that it is not a singular entity “unfolding from the beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change”. (quoted in Baumann 2001b: 152) Baumann elaborates on this understanding by insisting that we shift our perspectives even further and that “instead of talking about identities, inherited or acquired, it would be more in keeping with the realities of the globalizing world to speak of *identification*, a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged”. (Baumann 2001b: 152 *emphasis in original*)

It may be suggested that the novel has served as the most convenient literary form in which explorations of the self have been examined. In their study of self-realisation through culture, Ryle and Soper state that “the story of how cultural works and artistic movements have at once reflected and provided for the ‘inward’ self is complex”. (Ryle & Soper 2002: 72) The reasoning they provide for this assertion is that “the self is not and cannot be a fully self-aware and self-directing self, but has to acknowledge that it is always ‘in the world,’ with others, and formed by structures and forces that transcend it and whose impact can never be entirely transparent”. (ibid.) They conclude this point by saying that it must therefore be acknowledged that “a component of our selfhood is as others ‘receive’ us, whether intuitively, or linguistically, or by whatever other mode, then we also know ourselves to be in some sense ‘alienated’ in the other’s constitution of us”. (ibid.)

From this argument one may deduce that the novel is a significant cultural exercise in which this process of self-realisation occurs. It is the place within which the individual subject seeks to find meaning for her or his life in relation to the natural and social reality within which she or he exists. Georg Lukács charts this development in his study of the novel. He states that “the inner form of the novel has been understood as the process of the problematic individual’s journeying towards himself, the road from dull captivity within a mere present reality – a reality that is heterogeneous in itself and meaningless to the individual – towards clear self-recognition”. (Lukács 1971: 80) Prompted by Lukács, Berger asserts that the novel “was born of a yearning for what now lay beyond the horizon: it was the art-form of a sense of homelessness”. (Berger 2001a: 307) It can indeed be said that novel is the genre in which the individual self is able to re-evaluate his or her relationships with others and may confirm or sever these ties in the process.

The genesis of the novel as a literary genre is integrally tied to the examination of the self with the most dominant mode being the *Bildungsroman*, where individual identity is followed through a trajectory from indeterminate youth to assured maturity. In contemporary fiction there is the presence of more self-reflexive presentations of the self in fiction, although this phenomenon appeared much earlier. Laurence Sterne’s 18th Century novel, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, can be regarded as a highly significant early experiment in disordered and digressive narrative. The nature of existence in modern society encourages a more credible association between disorder and disjuncture in both narrative and reality. Kundera reiterates the idea of the novelistic space as a place for the exploration of the self when he argues that, “novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self. As soon as you create an imaginary being, a character, you are automatically confronted by the question: What is the self? How can the self be grasped? It is one of those fundamental questions on which the novel, as novel, is based”. (Kundera 1988: 23) According to André Gorz, the late modern existence is marked by several unprecedented trials of individual survival. He states that “fear of the future, withdrawal into the private sphere and despair...are caused by the collapse of social cohesion and lived social relations, the crisis of socialization...by all those things which render individuals impotent in the face of autonomized processes and faceless powers”. (Gorz 1994: 4)

Twentieth-century fiction contains numerous human subjects with multiple or splintered identities. In all of Ondaatje's fiction there is the presence of characters who undergo shifts and changes in their constructions of self. In her comments on Ondaatje's work in her book, Modern Allegory and Fantasy: Rhetorical Stances in Contemporary Writing, Lynette Hunter states that "all of his narratives, whether prose or poetry, tell about the terrible destructive search for a fixed personal identity that will challenge the way that the state/public history forgets and erases individuals". (Hunter 1989: 205)

Coming Through Slaughter charts the apparent degradation of self of Buddy Bolden, leading to his 24-year stay in a mental asylum at the end of his life. Public knowledge of Bolden is in fact marked by a sense of erasure rather than confirmation. The only biography published on Bolden is a 130 page account written by Donald Marquis in 1978. According to Naomi Jacobs "the book's two greatest contributions to knowledge of Bolden's life are negative: Marquis disproves the persistent legends that Bolden was a barber and edited a scandal sheet named the *The Cricket*". (Jacobs 1986: 4) Richard Cook's Jazz Encyclopaedia records the following note in its synopsis of Bolden: "Another great legend surrounds Bolden's only recording: a member of his band insisted that they had cut a cylinder before the turn of the century, but it has never been otherwise documented or traced. His music is entirely lost to us". (Cook 2005: 69-70) This anecdote provides a poignant metaphor for the erasure of Bolden from public history. In Coming through Slaughter, though, Ondaatje uses all the myth surrounding Bolden and fictionalises additional incidents. The Bolden in the novel is therefore at a remove from the Bolden recorded in historical document. Returning to the notion of self, it is possible to argue that the book is a report on Bolden's psychic disintegration. Bolden is depicted as a character who wrestles with the demands of living an ordered life as a husband and father, while simultaneously being subjected to the improvisation and disorder of the music.

The testimony of fellow band-member Frank Lewis attests to this conflict: "But there was discipline, it was just that we didn't understand. We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot – see his music was immediately on top of his own life. Echoing". (CTS 1984: 37)

This sense of deletion is re-emphasised with the lines “[H]e could just as easily be wiping out his past again in a casual gesture, contemptuous”, (22) and later when the narrator comments that there are “[S]o many murders of his own body”. (49) This suggests that Bolden dies and is reborn again. Earlier in the book Frank Lewis’ narration records that “[H]e was found before we knew where he had come from. Born at the age of twenty-two. Walked into a parade one day with white shoes and red shirt. Never spoke of the past”. (37-38) Throughout the book though Bolden’s self is reconstituted by Webb, the detective who pursues him following his disappearance, by tracing his existence. The concept of detection functions here as an instrument for the composite image of Bolden that the book makes available to the reader. In her article on the novel, Manina Jones investigates the ways in which Ondaatje applies the approaches of biography and detective fiction. She quotes Tzvetan Todorov’s argument that the detective novel “has reflexivity built into its very structure,” and that it consists of “two narrative lines, “the story of the crime and the story of the investigation”. (quoted in Jones 1994: 12)

If the character of Webb operates as the pursuer of Bolden in the mode of detective fiction then the author performs the same pursuit of Bolden as a biographer. The search offers more of a trace of the subject rather than a definitive and substantive illustration. This novelistic innovation also appears in the other three other novels I discuss. In In the Skin of a Lion Patrick takes on the job of a professional searcher engaged in finding the missing celebrity, Ambrose Small. It is through this pursuit of Small that he encounters Clara Dickens and her friend Alice Gull. In The English Patient Caravaggio attempts to ascertain the true identity of the patient whom he suspects is the enemy spy, Almasay. In the later novel, Anil’s Ghost, the search for the identity of the skeleton named ‘Sailor’ is the obvious object of detection. In each of the novels, though, there are simultaneous explorations of identities. In most of these instances the various investigations reveal simulacra of identities rather than distinct, vivid and resolved selves. There are ostensibly three discernible identities we can attach to Bolden. One is of the barber, another is as the editor of the scandal-sheet (a rudimentary gossip newspaper), and the third is as a cornet player in a jazz band. In pursuing Bolden, Webb recognises this: “Since then it was Bolden the musician that Webb heard stories of”. (CTS 1984: 37)

Webb's pursuit takes him to Bellocq, the photographer, where he seeks the one photograph known to have been taken of Bolden. Webb's comment that, "I can't even remember what you look like too well. I'd recognise you but in my mind you're just an outline and music", reaffirms the blur of identity that is Bolden. It may be said that Bolden identity is as improvised as the music he plays. Ondaatje connects Bolden's unravelling of self to the increasing dissonance of his music, while the incoherence of his language is reflected in his dialogues with other characters and in the first-person narrative fragments in the text.

The photograph as a motif of memorialisation is interesting here too. According to Susan Sontag, "[P]hotographs are not windows which supply a transparent view of the world as it is, or more exactly, as it was. Photographs give evidence – often spurious, always incomplete – in support of dominant ideologies and existing social arrangements. They fabricate and confirm these myths and arrangements". (Sontag 2003: 220) Webb requires the photograph to re-establish a more vivid representation of Bolden in his own mind, while for Bellocq it is a deception, "more on the level of fetish, a joyless and private game". (CTS 1984: 64) The character of Bellocq is also based on a real person, namely, a photographer who documented the legalised prostitution in the Storyville district of New Orleans.¹³ In historical terms, Bellocq's existence coincided with Bolden's. They also occupied the same geographical space. In the book there is no direct contact between the two characters other than the hint that Bellocq had taken a photograph of Bolden, but there are striking similarities in their respective preoccupations and anxieties.

Both are artists attempting to relate to their pursuits. With Bolden it is the escalating dissonance of his music. It is as if the obsession with the music overtakes all other preoccupations in his life and violently consumes his existence. The self is displaced by this fixation on merging with the music. Personal relationships are at the mercy of this - depicted in Bolden's relationship with Nora: "When they were alone together it was still a crowded room. She had been fascinated with him. She brought short cuts to his arguments and at times cleared away the chaos he embraced". (110)

¹³ E.J. Bellocq (1873-1949) worked as a professional photographer in New Orleans. His photographs of Storyville have been collected in [The Storyville Portraits](#), Jonathan Cape & Random House, 1996. The Introduction to this book is by Susan Sontag, and also appears in her collection of essays cited in this thesis. See Sontag 2003: pp. 223-226. See also www.masters-of-photography.com

Bolden is portrayed as helpless in this consuming of his self within the frenzied expression, which is his style of playing. He is completely attached to the instrument: “Then later Webb came and pulled me out of the other depth and there was nothing on me. I was glinting and sharp and cold from the lack of light. I had turned into metal at my mouth”. (114) This discord reaches its climax when he plays in the street parade. In these passages, the syntax represents both the withering of his mental stability and the distorted harmonies of the music he plays. These features of improvisation, dissonance and distortion are displayed in the following extract:

March is slowing to a stop and as it floats down slow to a thump I take off and wail long notes jerking the squawk into the end of them to form a new beat, have to trust them all as I close my eyes, know the others are silent, throw the notes off the walls of people, the iron lines, so pure and sure bringing the howl down to the floor and letting in the light and the girl is alone now mirroring my throat in her lonely tired dance, the street silent but for us her tired breath I can hear for she's near me as I go round and round in the centre of the Liberty-Iberville connect. Then silent. For something's fallen in my body and I can't hear the music as I play it. (130)

What is evident here is the way in which the emphasis on tempo, disharmony and inversions, through the use of language, punctuation and conjugation, imitates the qualities of the music. With Bellocq this discord may be stirred by the disconcerting task of representing women in photographs, in the ways that he does. When Webb unlawfully enters his place he finds a cabinet filled with photographs. Many of the photographs have been scarred by a knife. The narrator insinuates that Bellocq may be troubled by what he does: “The cuts add a three-dimensional quality to each work. Not just physically, though you can almost see the depth of the knife slashes, but also because you think of Bellocq wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the photographs”. (55) This quotation records the simultaneous repulsion and attraction that motivated Bellocq. The projection of the photograph as a duplicitous production is also evident in the futile attempt by Bellocq to re-enter or re-claim the absent space it represents. It could be argued that the photograph functions as an indication of Bolden's absence.

Berger explores this concept in relation to the importance of photographs to migrant workers in Europe three decades earlier: “The photo defines an absence. Even if it is ten years old it makes no difference. It holds open, preserves the empty space which the sitter’s presence will, hopefully, one day fill again”. (Berger 1989: 16) While we recognise that Bolden does not literally fill the space which the photograph of him and his band defines, it may be argued that Ondaatje’s fictional construction goes some way in doing so. In both characters the momentum of their artistic pursuits propels them into a manifestation of insanity. Bolden impulsively attacks Tom Pickett with a razor in the barber-shop after the latter has come there for a shave and a haircut. Whereas Bellocq sets fire to his room: “[E]verything has gone wrong. The wall is not there to catch or hide him. Nothing is there to clasp him into certainty”. (CTS 1984: 67) In the end it is perhaps more significant that both characters seem to dissolve; merging perhaps into their music and their images, respectively.

In In the Skin of a Lion, the main protagonist, Patrick, undergoes a metamorphosis of character. Patrick’s role in the novel imitates the epic hero Gilgamesh, from whose mythic tale the first epigraph and the book’s title are taken. In the epic tale Gilgamesh follows an odyssey in search of eternal life. Patrick’s odyssey takes him from rural Canada to the city of Toronto where he encounters several people who have a profound effect on his life. In this journey he makes his idea of self changes drastically from having little self awareness to an acute sense of self at the end of the book. The female characters Clara and Alice assist him considerably in actualising this idea of himself as they function as the conductors of his making of identity. Through his actualising of his own identity, Patrick begins to recognise the identities of others. His primary confrontation with these identities of the other is through his experiences of work. He begins to acknowledge the existence of a broader community of which he forms only a part:

The street-band had depicted perfect harmony, with an ending full of embraces after the solos had made everyone stronger, more delineated. His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night web – all of these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of a day. A nun on a bridge, a daredevil who was unable to sleep without drink, a boy watching a fire from his bed at night, an actress who ran away with a millionaire – the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned. (ITSOAL 1988: 144)

The idea of the mural equates with the composite nature of the narrative, the order that is reconstituted by what has been broken and brought back together again. I would argue that this depiction can be aligned with Said's assertions about the shift from relations and arrangements based on "filiation" to those based on "affiliation". Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin provide a useful summary of Said's use of these terms when they state "that patterns of 'filiation' (heritage or descent) that had acted as a cohering force in traditional society were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain in the complexity of contemporary civilization and were being replaced by patterns of "affiliation." While "filiation" refers to lines of descent in nature, affiliation refers to a process of identification through culture". (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1998: 105) According to Said, "affiliation" refers to "that implicit network of peculiarly cultural associations between forms, statements and other aesthetic elaborations on the one hand and, on the other, institutions, agencies, classes, and amorphous social forces". (Said 1983: 174)

He elaborates on this concept by stating that the shift from relationships based on "filiation" to those based on "affiliation" is "the transition from a failed idea or possibility of 'filiation' to a kind of compensatory order that, whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world-vision, provides men and women with a new form of relationship". (19) In Patrick's case he recognises a different order. One that is not organised by filial arrangements but by affiliation. The concept of the street-band which appears in this extract is therefore not merely coincidental. It connects with the image of the street-band in Coming through Slaughter where it represents the spontaneous and improvised gathering together of people. The street-band could also be a representation of the informal and improvised social relationships occurring by means of affiliation, the coming together of humans to perform an unscripted composition. A metaphor of this reconstitution of identities is the description of the workers from various parts of Eastern Europe, representing different ethnic origins, in the leather tannery:

Dye work took place in the courtyards next to the warehouse. Circular pools had been cut into the stone – into which men leapt waist-deep within the reds and ochres and greens, leapt in embracing the skins of recently slaughtered animals. In the round wells four-foot in diameter they heaved and stomped ensuring the dye went solidly into the pores of the skin that had been part of a live animal the previous day. And the men stepped out in colours up to their necks, pulling wet hides after them so it appeared they had removed the skin from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries. (ITSOAL 1988: 130)

What occurs here is the reconstitution of identities of the workers through their immersion in the vivid yet poisonous dyes. The notion of the animal hides as a skin to conceal one's identity, repeats the metaphor of the book's title. It also suggests the interchangeability of identities brought upon, particularly, by the demands of labour. The conventional markers of identity such as language and ethnicity become indistinct and there is the institution of more hybrid selves. In an intimate conversation while watching the immigrant workers leaving their homes for work, Alice says to Patrick: "You're a mongrel, like me". (127) What is depicted is the emergent disparate population of the city of Toronto, constituted not only of Anglo-Saxon and French colonials, but of various other immigrant populations from Central and Eastern Europe as well. There is also the influx of the rural population, of whom Patrick is one, who have begun to add to the composite mix of identities. The value of the novel's illustration of the shifts in relationships are succinctly argued in an essay by Ajay Heble. According to Heble these relationships "attest to the importance of establishing new forms of cultural association, and to the possibility of alleviating the negative effects of a filiative tradition: gaps in history are filled in; suppressed stories do get told". (Heble 1995) He argues that the examples of affiliation in In the Skin of a Lion portray "the difficulty of disentangling filiative traditions from the writing of Canadian history," and "offers...not a denial of the colonial past, or even a simple substitution of one kind of history or model for another," but "provides us with an altogether different way of theorizing the complex relations both within Canadian cultural and political history and between Canadian and other histories". (ibid.) Moreover, Lamia Tayeb says that "Ondaatje's re-writing of Toronto's history from an immigrant and working class perspective can be interpreted as a spreading out of Canada's national genealogies and a rejection of colonial ties in the context of a radical heterogeneity of national participants". (Tayeb 2006: 133)

Furthermore, she adds that the novel advances this “through a deliberate impoverishment of kinship relations and their replacement with constructed forms of family or (general) human ties,” and that “characters repeatedly lose kinship ties and compensate their loss through constructive relations of affiliation”. (ibid.) The communities represented in Ondaatje’s novels are those who arise out of the margins of society. They are constituted from origins beyond the confines of nationality. In his important work on the construction of national identity, Benedict Anderson posits the definition of nation as “an imagined political community”. (Anderson 1991: 5) He argues that it is imagined “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”. (6) He makes the point that this sense of community abounds “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship”. (7) The community encouraged under the domain of national identity is thus premised upon a dubious foundation. It is a fallacy camouflaging the deep divisions within society. While the depictions of human co-operation in In the Skin of a Lion, The English Patient and Anil’s Ghost, resonate more convincingly and powerfully with the clarification provided by Baumann. According to him, community is “woven together from sharing and mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the equal right to be human and the equal ability to act on that right”. (Baumann 2001a: 140-150)

In the character of Caravaggio we have an even more enigmatic identity. There are direct allusions to the early 17th century Italian painter of the same name. The artist’s birth name was Michelangelo Merisi but he took his name from his place of birth, Caravaggio, a village near the town of Bergamo. In this detail there is already the suggestion of him possessing a constructed identity. It implies that there a significant aspect of artifice not only in the nature of his work, but also in the persona that he presented to the world. These qualities are evident in the character named Caravaggio in The English Patient who operates as a spy deliberately involved in a disguise of identity. Similarly, Caravaggio in In the Skin of a Lion maintains a duplicitous identity in the sense that he operates as a thief who disguises himself in order to escape from prison. This occurs when he has his whole body painted blue after he, Patrick and another prisoner, Buck, are tasked with painting the prison roof. Caravaggio disguises himself against the blue of the roof and the blue of twilight sky to escape.

He therefore manipulates his identity to evade the dictates of social order and as a fugitive from justice. The latter point, in particular, coincides with the circumstances which relates to the life of the Italian painter.

As in Coming through Slaughter, detection functions as a pursuit of identity in In the Skin of a Lion. Upon his arrival in the city Patrick eventually takes a job as a “searcher”, a person who investigates the disappearances of known or wanted people. A millionaire, Ambrose Small, disappears in 1919 and Patrick joins several people in the search for him. Small’s disappearance generates a great deal of publicity which leads to the cultivation of urban legend around his life.¹⁴ In searching for Small, Patrick embarks upon a simultaneous journey of self-discovery aligned to that of Gilgamesh. In the course of these events Patrick becomes more intrigued by the mistress of Small, Clara Dickens, with whom he has a curtailed romantic liaison. Patrick’s shift from rural to urban is a concurrent shift in his awareness of others; of a growing perception of community. He has been socialised in an environment where social contact was minimal and discouraged. His life with his father is marked by a lack of self-actualisation through others. He imagines experiences beyond the confines of his present existence and uses school geography maps to evoke an identity which exceeds the one he has: “He sits down at the long table and looks into his school geography book with the maps of the world, the white sweep of currents, testing the names to himself, mouthing out the exotic”. (ITSOAL 1988: 9) His father is described as an “abashed man, withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus. He would step up to his horse and assume it, as if it were a train, as if flesh and blood did not exist”. (15)

His father, Hazen Lewis, is described as someone unaware of selfhood and others. He did not “teach his son anything, no legend, no base of theory”. (18) He is perhaps a representative of the utilitarian pioneers who settled in rural North America, motivated by a strong work ethic and characterised by a severe perspective on human emotion. Patrick has to discover his own awareness of self in a silent environment where there is the most minimal exchange of speech between him and his father who is “taciturn” and possesses an “unemotional tongue”. (19)

¹⁴ See the Wikipedia entry for Ambrose Small www.wikipedia.org

Patrick's recognition of the existence of people outside of his father's world is the first step in his awareness of his own identity. In venturing out from the house one night he encounters what is later to be revealed as a group of Finnish workers skating on the ice. What appears to Patrick as a "druidic ritual", is a watershed moment in the beginning of his recognition of community:

To the boy growing into his twelfth year, having lived all his life on that farm where day was work and night was rest, nothing would be the same. But on this night he did not trust either himself or these strangers of another language enough to be able to step forward and join them. He turned back through the trees and fields carrying his own lamp. (22)

It is ultimately through his relationships with Clara and Alice that he learns to "trust" both himself and others, and therefore establishes affiliations with other characters, such as Temelcoff and Caravaggio, as opposed to the tenuous filial connection that exists with his father. After Alice reveals some historical details about Cato, the father of her child, Patrick ties together the mystery of the ice-skaters of the forest. They are revealed as the Finnish workers, like Cato, and his response to this revelation is described "as if a riddle old and tiresome had been solved, a burr plucked from his brain". (151) In this moment of recognition he confirms an awareness, not merely of himself, but also of himself as connected with a community of others. In the intimate companionship of Alice he affirms that, "[S]he has delivered him out of nothing", and that, "now he was the sum of all he had been in his life since that boy in the snow woods, her hands collapsing to hold him against her harder". (152) This new sense of himself leads him to a meditation upon his past. There is the insertion of irony in the fact that his place of birth is associated with his nature:

He was an abashed man, an inheritance from his father. Born in Abashed, Ontario. What did the word mean? Something that suggested there was a terrible horizon in him beyond which he couldn't leap. Something hollow, so when alone, when not aligned with another – whether it was Ambrose or Clara or Alice – he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community. A gap of love. (157)

This seemingly hollow identity is also symbolised in the notion of geographic obscurity when, as a boy, Patrick consults a school atlas and finds that “the place is pale green and nameless”, and the region of his birth, “did not appear on a map until 1910”. (10-11) There is here the recognition of the correlation between place and social identity. Patrick’s social identity only becomes evident when he arrives in the city and is amplified by his growing affiliation to a community represented firstly, by his circle of friends, and secondly by broader associations such as the Greek, Italian, Macedonian and other immigrants he works with, and the group of workers planning subversive acts against the ruling classes, whom he meets through Alice. In a moment when they are out on the fire escape of the building they are living in, and are surveying the surrounding neighbourhood, they are acknowledged in greeting by their neighbours. The narration here records an important disclosure for Patrick: “They would wave now and then, formally, to Alice and her companion. He was suddenly aware that he had a role”. (126)

In her paper referred to earlier, Rochelle Simmons explores the idea of physical and social space as a marker of Patrick’s development of self. Simmons suggests that the city provides Patrick with a spatial nexus for the establishment of relationships that he was unable to realise while living in the undefined space of the country. She identifies the Union Station, in particular, as a space which Patrick uses as a junction for arrival and for departure. In the station he notices a sign titled, “HORIZON”, (209) and Simmons argues that the sign in the station “serves as a symbol of aspiration, for it is only after Patrick has literally raised his sights that he discovers the horizon and extends his vision, in both senses of the word”. (Simmons 1998: 710) Alice is the facilitator of Patrick’s transformation having herself, experienced a change of identity. Before being introduced in the book as Alice Gull, actress and friend to Clara, she is the nun who is saved in her fall from the bridge by Temelcoff. After they recover from their ordeal on the bridge at the Ohrida Lake Restaurant, both she and Temelcoff exit the story and reappear later in different guises; Temelcoff as the bakery owner; and, the nun as Alice. We are alerted to the nun’s shift in self when she “takes the first step out of the Ohrida Lake Restaurant into the blue corridor – the narrow blue lane of light that leads to the street. What she will become she becomes in that minute before she is outside, before she steps into the six-A.M. morning”. (ITSOAL 1988: 41)

She becomes a person with a secular identity but still retains the ability of further conversion; into a Virgin-Mary figure, medieval or regal character, or anonymous functionary. This transformative ability is described in her relationship with Patrick:

In the midst of his love for Alice, in the midst of lovemaking even, he watches her face waiting to be translated into this war bride or that queen or shopgirl, half expecting metamorphosis as they kiss. Annunciation. The eye would go first, and as he draws back he will be in another country, another century, his arms around a stranger. (154)

In her assessment of Alice's influence over Patrick, Linda Hutcheon suggests that "Alice's death causes him...to cease being 'nothing but a prism that refracted' the lives of others". (Hutcheon 1988: 101) If Patrick's self grows more substantial in the novel then the figure of Ambrose Small provides the contrary path. As a personality he initially occupies a significant space in the life of the city. He owned a total of ninety-six theatres and was a formidable presence in the emerging economy of the country:

Each morning he rose and walked to his offices at the Grand Theatre on Adelaide Street. He got there at least an hour before any of his staff and plotted out the day. This was the time he loved most, choreographing his schemes, theorizing on bids and counter-bids and interest rates and the breaking point of his adversaries...The machine of Ambrose Small began to tick across the city. (ITSOAL 1988: 58)

By the end of the novel, though, the presence of Small is dissolved into a representation of his character as a senile man: "He had imploded, had become a Gothic child suddenly full of a language which was aimed nowhere, only out of his body". (214) The certainties and confidences that were Small's character in the beginning, unravels into inchoate expression, and his identity diminishes as Patrick's attention shifts from seeking out Clara rather than Small. Small becomes an object of acquisition; a commodity, an ironic inversion of that which he himself sought as a virulent capitalist: "The search had turned the millionaire's body into a rare coin, a piece of financial property". (59) Furthermore, through his interactions with Alice and with Caravaggio, Patrick learns to manipulate the ways in which he presents himself. In Alice, the actress, with whom he is reacquainted through her disguised performance in an unusual puppet show, he observes the skill of theatricality.

From Caravaggio he gains the ability to camouflage identity and merge unsuspectingly with others. This new sense of self aids him in his insurrectionary mission to explode the “R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant”. (226-227) After he, Caravaggio and Giannetta, Caravaggio’s wife, sabotage a yacht, he embarks upon his plan to destroy the plant: “He is like a bullet that has been sleeping”. (227) He employs anonymity out of pragmatism for the purposes of disguise, as opposed to the abashed identity which he initially possessed: “Patrick is invisible except by touch, grease covering all unclothed skin, his face, his bare feet. Demarcation”. (228) The word “demarcation” here suggests that he became more conscious of the boundaries between his own identity, and the one he had assumed to assist him in the commission of this act.

In his study of Patrick’s role in the novel, Rod Schumacher suggests that his path in the narrative is the quest for recognition. He states that the reader performs an important parallel role in that “we gain a fuller understanding of what it means to be an attentive listener, and we also become better acquainted with the importance attached to sharing our experiences in an intimate atmosphere”. (Schumacher 1996: 19) In a sense, he regards Patrick’s “gathering” of the story in the prologue of the novel as “a gesture which, when placed within a Lacanian reading, is an attempt to unify the mediating realm of language/narrative with the wholeness that is associated with the female/mother role”. (ibid.) Hana’s role as the recipient of the story, therefore, becomes significant in that she represents “an idyllic figure for the safeguarding and regeneration of language, and the fantasized site of the longed-for resolution of the lost mother”. (ibid.) The narrative is thus bequeathed to Hana who proceeds to carry it into the story of the English patient. There may be some value in extending this analogy through to Anil Tissera’s narrative journey if we recognise the presence of Kirpal Singh’s daughter at the end of The English Patient, as emblematic of Anil.

An intriguing note on the mature personality of Patrick is provided as a subtext in The English Patient when Hana reflects on him: “Her father loved a city of his own invention, whose streets and walls and borders he and his friends had painted”. (TEP 1992: 91) The assumption here is of course based on the notion that the character spoken of is the same character as in In the Skin of a Lion. The sense of Patrick’s identity as a construction is confirmed by the idea of invention and art, linking with the prominence of dye colour, paint and performance in In the Skin of a Lion.

The representation of Patrick as possessing an Anglo-Saxon rather than a 'non-white' identity, has been critiqued for advancing the notion that his 'whiteness' is equivalent to a neutral identity rather than one invested with privilege, violence and hegemony. In separate articles Jodi Lundgren and Glen Lowry argue that Patrick's 'whiteness' is presented as an impartial marker of identity rather than a problematised and subjective construction. Lowry states that "the assumption that 'whiteness' signifies some kind of neutral position in opposition to various 'racialized' identities is itself one of the master tropes of modern 'racist' thought," and that "the tendency to assume that racism is solely concerned with the construction of others...obfuscates or again naturalizes the fact that 'whiteness' is itself a construct". (Lowry 2005: 69)

In her article, Lundgren states that Ondaatje's novel undermines its own prospects as a comprehensive critique of the construction of modern Canadian identity, and "its patterns of emancipatory imagery naturalize and reinforce a racialized vertical mosaic that compromises its vision of human liberation. Ultimately, the images of social mobility in In the Skin of a Lion, depending as they do on the ability to adopt or disrobe oneself of skins, coloured paint, dark grease, or white flour, unfortunately signify that the mosaic's verticality will not be dissolved as easily - or at least it will happen as "naturally" - for non-white people in Canada as it has for those of European descent". (Lundgren 2006: 29) While there is some value in both arguments, when applied to the character of Patrick specifically, it becomes less convincing to claim that he obtains any socio-economic advantage from his identity. Although it may have been the case that his 'white', or Anglo-Saxon identity did indeed offer the opportunity and access to privilege, he chooses instead to align himself with the marginal communities in the city. The arguments by Lowry and Lundgren only apply in the sense that Patrick has the privilege of exercising this choice, whereas the 'non -white' and non-Anglo-Saxon individuals, are not able to do. There is nothing in the novel to suggest that this discrepancy is obscured, ignored or erased though.

The troubling of identity is also featured in the other novels. The English patient in the eponymous book remains unnamed for most of it. There is in fact no decisive confirmation in the text that he is indeed Almasi, the person who Caravaggio suspects him to be. He is the sole survivor of a plane crash in the desert and is rescued by a Bedouin community who treat his wounds until he finds himself in a military hospital.

It is here that he begins to be cared for by Hana, the nurse, who eventually decides to remain with him in the abandoned villa. The novel opens when they are ensconced in the villa and Hana is attempting to make the place more hospitable, as it were. The patient's identity is thus constructed posthumously in the story and is akin to a project of restoration as his personality gains more substance as the story proceeds. The Bedouin who rescue the patient from the scene of the crash are represented as a community without national borders. They are nomads who traverse the desert in which "it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation", and are not constricted by boundaries. (TEP 1992: 18) They thus offer an alternative to communities bound up within the constructions of national identities. This depiction of communities either outside or beyond the definitions made by ethnic and/or national classification can be connected to the representation of the dye workers in In the Skin of a Lion.

The patient we are introduced to in the beginning of the novel is already in a state of limbo, hovering between life and death after suffering severe burns to his body: "Every four days she washes his black body, beginning at the destroyed feet". (TEP 1992: 3) After Caravaggio has arrived at the villa he requests Hana to tell him about the patient. Her reply is that he is "still in Africa". (33) This response may be a suggestion that the person she attends to in the villa merely represents a wounded body while the consciousness of the person is still located on another continent where the aeroplane crash occurred. In addition, the naming of him as the English patient occurs through a more oblique process than through firm confirmation, suggesting too, that the patient is not entirely present in the villa. He recalls that he "...was perhaps the first one to stand up alive out of a burning machine. A man whose head was on fire. They didn't know my name. I didn't know their tribe. Who are you? I don't know. You keep asking me. You said you were English". (5) The patient does not assert this identity but is instead allocated it by default, based on an apparent recollection. This, of course, becomes significant later in the book when his identity is a matter of dispute with Caravaggio, who is adamant that he is in fact a Nazi spy and not an English patient. He is, though, violently stripped of the obvious signifiers of identity because of the severe burns to his body. The consequences of these injuries have given him a darkened skin. The skin as a marker of identity is ruined and he is thus more without an obvious identity, than in possession of a particular one.

When Hana first sees him in the Italian hospital he is, “[A] man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet. There was nothing to recognize in him”. (48) The use of the tannic acid and the veneer of “gentian violet” on his skin, suggest he presents an artificial appearance; that the skin is a disguise, or mask, that hides the truer self beneath the surface.

The English patient could be said to possess a lapsed identity; a self that only refers to the past tense rather than any identity that can be connected to the burnt body in the villa. He is a phantom figure. While making enquiries about the whereabouts of Hana, Caravaggio learns that she is at the Villa San Girolamo. Moreover, he is told that “she’s got her own ghost, a burned patient. There is a face, but it is unrecognizable. The nerves all gone. You can pass a match across his face and there is no expression. The face is asleep”. (28) The mirror that he uses to gaze at himself, serves as an instrument of self-reflection: “The Englishman wanted to see himself”. (100) In addition, it also operates as a mechanism for self-detection in that he wishes to use it to try to ascertain his identity. The question is whether he is indeed the “Englishman”, or whether he is not someone else. It may be said that he wishes to use the mirror to confirm his ‘Englishness’. A further irony in this event is that his physical appearance now is at a remove from the archetypal idea of an Englishman.

According to Stephen Scobie, the patient’s scarred body presents him as “unreadable” with “his body reduced by fire to one all-encompassing scar,” making him “all scar, all mark”. (Scobie 1994: 99) Quoting an unpublished seminar paper by Richard Van Oort, Scobie suggests that the direct alternative is that the patient’s body is a duplicitous text. Van Oort states that the patient “is at once signified and signifier: he is, on the one hand, a burnt body, devoid of demarcation, a black hole completely unreadable; but for that very reason he becomes a signifier infinitely interpretable, an anonymous text to be read”. (quoted in Scobie 1994: 99)

In her dissertation which explores notions of 'white' identity in selected texts by Keri Hulme, David Malouf, Peter Carey and Ondaatje, Antje M. Rauwerda investigates the apparent evacuation of identity in the patient. She argues that the novel "presents us with a black English patient (who is neither black nor English). The patient's Englishness relies, to a large extent, on the assumption that under his blackness he is white," and that he, "is perceived as white...and English because "habits of perception" link white Englishness with the language the patient speaks and the colonial knowledge he reveals". (Rauwerda 2001: 92) Furthermore, she argues that "the blackening of the patient's skin does not indicate racial transformation, or even hybridity", but that his "blackness becomes ... a blankness upon which his faux Englishness can be imposed". (94) She makes an important and significant argument in stating that "the patient's identity is not 'genuine' but deferred. We can only understand him by reference to the memories and histories with which he is associated". (98) The other characters in the novel are therefore also complicit in the construction of the patient's identity as they invest their own ideas about 'Englishness' in the vacant identity of the anonymous body. After Hana brings him a mirror to see his reflection, they are interrupted by Kip's pleas for help as he tries to defuse a mine. The Englishman's wish to view himself as he now appears is therefore incomplete; another indication, perhaps, of his unstable identity.

Although there is no confirmation in the novel that the character named the English patient, and the one known as Almasy, are the same person, we are able to recognise a similar undermining of self when the novel deals with the relationship between Almasy and Katharine Clifton. There is the sense that Almasy is disabled by the affair he conducts with her, and he states that "[H]e has been disassembled by her". (TEP 1992: 155) The disintegration of his identity is activated by the tempestuous nature of their encounter with each other. Their relationship is constituted of illicit meetings, violent passion and subterfuge, which is exacerbated by the surrounding traumas of the war. The distress of the situation they find themselves in, contributes to the degeneration of their selves. Their relationship is fundamentally a clash over the possession of the other. Almasy seeks to assert some claim over Katharine, while she contests and resists this. These contestations are apparent in several scenarios, including when they are amongst others. The symbol of the wall is used to describe this developing separation between the two of them: "But now he cannot bear this wall in her. You built your walls too, she tells him, so I have my wall". (ibid.)

This contestation is occasionally manifested as an aggressive exchange as portrayed in the following narration: “Their bodies had met in perfumes, in sweat, frantic to get under that thin film with a tongue or a tooth, as if they each could grip character there and during love pull it right off the body of the other”. (173) Their relationship suffers from the strains placed upon them by the “paranoia and claustrophobia of hidden love”. (238)

This distrust degenerates into an opposition between the two of them regarding the recognition of their respective pasts. Katharine accuses Almasy of an evasion of responsibility when she says that, “[Y]ou slide past everything with your fear and hate of ownership, of owning, of being owned, of being named. You think this is a virtue. I think you are inhuman”. (*ibid.*) Almasy and Katharine also present differing approaches to the value of personal history. Katharine is described as wanting to cherish her personal history while he wishes to sever the connections with his past: “[S]he loved family traditions and courteous ceremony and old memorized poems. She would have hated to die without a name. For there was a line back to her ancestors that was tactile, whereas he had erased the path he had emerged from”. (170) Where Katharine is seen to represent the filial connections of family, Almasy is depicted as concerned with non-filial connections between people within society.

Almasy’s concerns with the self and community, however, take the presiding conflict between nations into account. His experiences of living with the nomadic tribes of the desert and recognising its unbounded expanse, gives him a different understanding of community and affiliation: “Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert”. (139) He understands the impact of this knowledge in relation to the impending war and holds the war responsible for the erosion of his community of friends that was cultivated during their exploratory expeditions researching the desert prior to the outbreak of the war: “Someone’s war was slashing apart his delicate tapestry of companions. I was Odysseus, I understood the shifting and temporary vetoes of war”. (241) Almasy asserts that the construction of nationalities is detrimental to people finding community with each other; of seeking an affiliation with others that is not based on the idea of nation.

Moreover, he regards this as the primary reason for his friend Madox's suicide during a "jingoistic" sermon in an English church: "Yes, Madox was a man who died because of nations". (242) These concerns and preoccupations culminate in a declaration as he buries Katharine's body in the desert after she dies in the "Cave of Swimmers":

And all the names of the tribes, the nomads of faith who walked in the monotone of the desert and saw brightness and faith and colour. The way a stone or found metal box or bone can become loved and turn eternal in a prayer. Such glory of this country she enters now and becomes part of. 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 like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. I carried Katharine Clifton into the desert, where there is the communal book of moonlight. (261)

In her burial Katharine is significantly separated from her 'line' of 'ancestors'. The filial genealogy which establishes identity is thus disconnected. There are highly symbolic allusions to the significance of naming and mapping as exercises of hegemony and possession; important strategies in imperial conquest. This declaration by Almsy disputes the value of these strategies and proposes instead the conviction that our histories are interconnected or 'communal'.

Furthermore, he argues that it is nature that defines us, rather than an intangible identity such as nationality, and, in an act that confirms this assertion, he buries Katharine in the desert where she is under the surveillance of the moonlight which is transmitted over all of the earth. The woman with the parochial past, Katharine Clifton, is thus buried in a place where she is connected to all of the world rather than only with her English heritage. It is in the pre-historic cave that they are reconciled as companions before Almsy leaves her to seek help after she is severely injured in Geoffrey Clifton's suicide-murder mission: "In the cave, after all those months of separation and anger, they had come together and spoken once more as lovers, rolling away the boulder they had placed between themselves for some social law neither had believed in". (171)

The rigid constrictions of walls and boulders which they had figuratively placed between them could now be moved away and they could restore their relationship with each other. In his trek back into the desert in his quest to save Katharine, who is lying wounded in the cave, he is confronted by the overwhelming presence of the landscape. In the midst of this confrontation with the immense desert he begins to lose his own identity and senses that he is beginning to merge with the elements which surround him:

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 nature and storyteller. Sandford called it geomorphology. The place they had chosen to come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry. Here, apart from the sun compass and the odometer mileage and the book, he was alone, his own invention. He knew during these times how the mirage worked, the fata morgana, for he was within it. (246)

These events are narrated at the end of the book when the English patient is relating the story of Almasy, and is receiving several doses of morphine from Caravaggio. While listening to the story being told, the narration switches to Caravaggio, who enquires mentally, “[W]ho is he speaking as now?”. (244 *emphasis in the original*) The question is significant for two discernable reasons. Firstly, it conveys the lack of clarity regarding the identity of the patient, namely whether he is indeed Almasy, as Caravaggio suspects. And, secondly, there are the effects of the drug which may be seen to induce this confusion of narrative voice. There also the indication that this alternating between narrative voices signifies the diminishing presence of self.

The sense is conveyed that he has already entered an indeterminate state; being transported, transcendently, elsewhere: “He holds out his arm, the bruised veins horizontal, facing up, for the raft of morphine. As it floods him he hears Caravaggio drop the needle into the kidney-shaped enamel tin. He sees the grizzled form turn it’s back to him and then reappear, also caught, a citizen of morphia”. (243) Caravaggio asks: “Who was talking back then?” The reply is: “*Death means you are in the third person*”. (247 *emphasis in original*) The fact that the reply is in the form of a quotation, suggests that the patient has ceased speaking himself or for himself, as it were, and that the quotation is sufficiently emphatic to indicate his demise.

It is not only the English patient who is presented with a displaced self. The character of Hana, too, is in the midst of psychic turmoil at the beginning of the novel. Several events in her life, revealed later, have had an impact on her. She has recently aborted the birth of a child, severed a relationship and learnt of the death of her father, Patrick Lewis. In addition to this she has also experienced the violations of the body that the war has inflicted. She has suffered severe mental and emotional trauma and has chosen to stay with the English patient in the villa rather than continue with the military contingent with which she is registered. She defies the orders of the military authorities and breaks any allegiance she may initially have held. She thus separates herself from the immediate implications of the conflict and seeks to resolve her own concerns: “She stepped away from the war. She had moved back and forth at their desire. Till the nuns reclaimed it she would sit in this villa with the Englishman”. (52) Moreover, her care of the patient through reading to him becomes a cathartic therapy for her too and not only a form of healing for him. She immerses herself in her dedication to the patient and this devotion to him may be regarded as an attempt to avoid the tribulations she recently endured. There is also an interesting symbolic gesture here which links Hana’s imitation of a nun’s devotion to the care of the patient and her mother’s past life as a nun, as it is featured in In the Skin of a Lion. The war experience has transformed her. Caravaggio, the person who knew her as a child, recognises the changes in her when he arrives at the villa: “Her face became tougher and leaner, the face Caravaggio would meet later”. (50) The anonymity of the patient provides her with the solace to seek reconciliation with her own identity: “There was something about him she wanted to learn, grow into, and hide in, where she could turn away from being an adult”. (52)

She embarks upon a selfless existence where she avoids looking at herself in mirrors. When she eventually does so, she recognises herself as a friend: “She had refused to look at herself for more than a year, now and then just her shadow on a wall. The mirror revealed only her cheek, she had to move back to arm’s length, her hand wavering. She watched the little portrait of herself as if within a clasped brooch. She...Hi Buddy, she said. She peered into her look, trying to recognize herself”. (52) The care with which she provides the English patient and the intimate relationship she shares with Kip, contribute largely to the healing of her injured self. The impromptu community who gather at the villa also adds to the partial restoration of her personality.

A reflection on her past remains a painful exercise, though and it appears that she is not comfortable when Caravaggio relates stories from her past: “But what he was really interested in were the clues to Hana’s nature, though she was evasive, veering Caravaggio away from stories that involved some moment of her life. She wanted Kip to know her only in the present”. (268)

The end of the novel portrays her as not entirely satisfied with her present circumstances and there is the sense conveyed that she found the divergent community who lived at the villa the most gratifying encounter with others. She is described as moving “possibly in the company that is not her choice. She, at even this age, thirty-four, has not found her own company, the ones she wanted”. (301) During a moment of convivial celebration when Kip had prepared dinner, Caravaggio recalls Hana’s singing of the “Marseillaise”, the national anthem of the French Republic, sometime in the past. At the dinner Hana does a rendition of the song which she dedicates to Kip: “This is for you. This is how you must learn to sing it, Kip. This is for you”. (269 *emphasis in original*) In making the dedication to Kip it may be argued that Hana is expressing a wish for him to embrace the idea of an internationalist community which she may believe had been nurtured amongst the small group of people who lived for a short while in the sanctuary of the villa. It may also be an invitation to him to consider her as a long-term companion; to defy the obligations demanded by his familial and national identities. His reaction to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki shatters any prospect of any future relationship that Hana may have envisaged. The events of the world intervene once again in her life, as it had done previously with the untimely death of her father, with the death of her mother in In the Skin a Lion, and with the abortion of her child and the death of Patrick, her step-father, earlier in the war.

If the self of the English patient is one in decline through the trajectory of the book, the self of Kirpal Singh, the Sikh sapper in the British army who arrives at the villa, is an emerging self. It may be argued that his is a postponed identity. The war has interrupted a family tradition: “He was the second son. The oldest son would go into the army, the next brother would be a doctor, a brother after that would become a businessman. An old tradition in the family. But all that had changed with the war”. (182) His role as the outsider is an interesting one.

He is effectively the framing narrator of the story which unfolds as it is his initial recollection of his relationship with Hana while sitting in his garden that ignites, as it were, the narrative. The semantic similarity between his nickname in the novel, Kip, and the name of the writer, Rudyard Kipling, and the name of the main character in the latter's book, Kim, suggests that Kirpal or Kip is a composite character or a character yet to become himself.

The connection with Kipling's *Kim* also implies a double identity, something which Kip is burdened with during his time in the army where he is labelled as "the foreigner, the Sikh". (105) Hana also draws the analogy when he considers the developing relationship between Kip and the English patient: "In recent days, Hana had watched him sitting beside the English patient, and it seemed to her a reversal of *Kim*. The young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English". (111 *emphasis in original*) There are also connections with J. M. Barrie's character, "Peter Pan", whose maturity is postponed by his desire to prolong his childhood.¹⁵ During a Christmas leave from the army Kip chooses to see the theatrical version of Peter Pan and in remembering this he regards himself as a Peter Pan-figure in his relationship with Hana:

He held her with the same strength of love he felt for those three strange English people, eating at the same table with them, who had watched his delight and laughter and wonder when the green boy raised his arms and flew into the darkness high above the stage, returning to teach the young girl in the earth-bound family such wonders too. (197)

Kip is forced to adopt a submerged identity as a strategy of survival while he is in the British army. He makes a pragmatic decision to assume an anonymous persona for the sake of endurance: "It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world. He had built up defences of character against all that, trusting only those who befriended him". (196-7) Lord Suffolk's mentorship offers a circle of friendship that sustains him during the war. Lord Suffolk, Miss Morden and their associates ensure a community of secure relations for Kip which counters the hostility he experiences as an outsider.

¹⁵ "Peter Pan," a character in J.M. Barrie's play of that name (1904). See Chambers Concise 20th Century Dictionary, Edinburgh: W & R Chambers Ltd. (1985), p. 732.

It is this outsider status which the English patient recognises in Kip when he comments that, “Kip and I are both international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere”. (176) In this environment Kip cultivates a privacy and insularity that is his defence. This separation continues during his stay at the villa where he sleeps in a tent on the grounds rather than inside the building. The intimate relationship which develops between him and Hana fails to dissolve these barriers and ultimately frustrates Hana in her attempts at breaching it: “There isn’t a key to him. Everywhere she touches braille doorways”. (270) He describes his brother as a fervent anti-colonialist who is opposed to the imperial rule of empire in all its manifestations around the world. The memory of his brother, who is presently jailed in an Indian prison by the British, serves as Kip’s political conscience in the midst of this disparate community of survivors of the war. He presents a shield before his self to serve as a bulwark between him and others, including Hana. He is wary of the intentions of Europe as a ruling power in the world. After he hears the news of the dropping of the atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the war, he confronts the prone English patient and threatens to shoot him with a rifle to appease the rage the events have instilled in him.

Kip aligns himself with all oppressed people around the world by registering his anger at this outrage. He regards his brother’s views as having been vindicated by what has occurred: “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) Kip disowns his friendships with this group of people and deems them as complicit in the oppression of the “brown races of the world”. (286) He leaves the villa in a rage and drives his motorbike towards the south-eastern coast of Italy where he eventually crashes into a river.

At the end of the novel we find him settled in bourgeois comforts as a doctor in the country of his birth, and he, thus, accomplishes the postponed aspirations of his family tradition. The poignant and evocative remembrances of Hana, that he indulges in while sitting in the garden, suggests that he has revised his belligerent attitude towards her, and those he shared time with in the villa.

Discussing the representation of identities in the novel, Eleanor Ty states that it questions “racial otherness and the concept of national identity”, and that “otherness is deliberately displaced through characterization, through ideologically disruptive images, through exotic scenery, and through structure”. (Ty 2000: 10) Furthermore, she argues that the book “not only critiques imperialism, war, and violence, but also gives us examples of alternative communities, other ways of constituting self and society”. (11) The notion that the novel offers the possibility of alternative communities is highly significant. It circumscribes and simultaneously supersedes the criticism that Ondaatje’s work has encountered from certain commentators cited in the Introduction.¹⁶ In her critique of the representation of masculinity in The English Patient, Susan Ellis argues that the novel marks the progressive shift in Ondaatje’s move from depicting the isolated, individualistic and violent male figure in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Coming through Slaughter, to a representation of masculinity that recognises the importance of female companionship and of community in In the Skin of Lion and The English Patient. According to Ellis the later novels “begin to demonstrate models of individuality that emphasize the connectedness of central characters with, rather than their separation from, other people”, and that the latter novel “takes the evolution toward relational values a step further, with the elimination of the hero, a single romanticized protagonist, in favour of a quartet of balanced and strongly interrelated characters”. (Ellis 1996: 25)

The role of language in establishing community and facilitating communication between people is also significant. In In the Skin of a Lion Patrick’s relationship with his father is hampered by a lack of communication. As a result he seeks a communicative relationship with the natural world around him: “He knows the robust calls from the small bodies of cicadas, but he wants conversation – the language of damsel flies who need something to translate their breath the way he uses the ocarina to give himself a voice, something to leap with over the wall of this place”. (ITSOAL 1988: 10) Living with the immigrant workers in the city, he begins to acquire a rudimentary skill in communicating with the people. The immigrants themselves, though, are still unable to establish a community through communication.

¹⁶ See footnote number 2.

The narrator argues that it was popular entertainment that cultivated a shared appreciation of the English language which began to bring people together: “The event that will light the way for immigration in North America is the talking picture ... North America is still without language, gestures and work and bloodlines are the only currency”. (43) However, affiliation through labour supersedes the establishment of community through language. As an immigrant worker himself, Temelcoff is bound within this fledgling community. After leaving the nun at the restaurant he is back on his way to work: “Six in the morning and he’s already lost to that community of men on the bridge who are also part of the fairy-tale”. (39) This community comprises the workers who share the hardships of labour and their families who are dependent upon them for their survival. The experiences they share begin to establish an emerging community. One of the ways in which these commonalities are recognised is through the shared experiences of work: “As the day progresses heat rises in the tunnel. The men remove their shirts and hammer them into the hard walls with spikes. Patrick can recognize other tunnellers on the way home by the ragged hole in the back of their shirts. It is a code among them”. (107) The relationship between the workers and authority is marked by tension and defiance. The novel’s first introduction of the character of Caravaggio describes him as just having had “[A]nother fight with the foreman”. (28) The passage detailing this, confirms the contending claims on authority, property and public space:

During the political ceremonies a figure escaped by bicycle through the police barriers. The first member of the public. Not the expected show car containing officials, but this one anonymous and cycling like hell to the east end of the city. In the photograph he is a blur of intent. He wants the virginity of it, the luxury of such space. And the cyclist too on his flight claimed the bridge in that blurred movement, alone and illegal. Thunderous applause greeted him at the far end. (27)

The cyclist trespassing upon the bridge is a symbol of the defiance of the general public, against the governing class in the city. What this passage also suggests is the anarchist counter to the impositions of hegemonic authority. The appropriation of urban space is a significant and highly contentious matter. This act serves therefore as a prelude to Patrick’s subsequent actions in the novel and to the actions of the workers who perform an *agit prop* theatrical performance on the site of the half-built waterworks. Language thus becomes an increasingly central conduit for affiliation and the construction of a new community amongst the immigrant workers.

Temelcoff understands this and makes a special effort to learn English, the common language of communication between all the different groups: “If he did not learn the language he would be lost ...During this time in the Sault he had translation dreams – because of his fast and obsessive studying of English”. (46) The formalities of language are also something that Patrick has to adapt to during the complex process of learning the names of new friends, thereby simultaneously affirming the formation of a new community: “And then he had to remember new names. Suddenly formal, beginning with Elena. The women shook his hand, the men embraced and kissed him, and each time he said Patrick, Patrick, Patrick. Knowing he must now remember every single person”. (113-114)

Anil's Ghost details the experiences of Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist, who returns to Sri Lanka to assist in the recovery of human remains as a part of an international group investigating abuses of human rights. Anil was born in Sri Lanka but left to pursue her higher education in the United Kingdom and the United States. The Sri Lanka she returns to is in the throes of a vicious civil war involving the state which is dominated by the majority Sinhalese ethnic group, and the opposing insurgents made up of the minority Tamil ethnic group. Anil no longer has any direct family relations in the country following the deaths of her parents in a road accident: “My parents died in a car crash after I left Sri Lanka. I never got a chance to see them again...I didn't want to come back here after my parents died”. (AG 2001: 47) Anil is thus estranged from the place she returns to and has to re-acclimatise her senses to it: “Suddenly Anil was glad to be back, the buried senses from childhood alive in her”. (15) Her identity as an exile from the country of her birth is complicated by the fact that she possesses a duplicitous identity:

Her name had not always been Anil. She had been given two entirely inappropriate names and very early began to desire ‘Anil,’ which was her brother’s unused second name. She had tried to buy it from him when she was twelve years old, offering to support him in all family arguments...Her campaign had caused anger and frustration within the household. She stopped responding when called by either of her given names, even at school...The parents threw their hands up and finally the siblings worked out a trade between them...Everything about the name pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name. (67-68)

When she is collected by an official at the airport upon her arrival he remarks that her return to Sri Lanka is the “return of the prodigal”. (10) She responds immediately that she is “not a prodigal”. (*ibid.*) Anil therefore refuses a filial connection which the official wishes to impose upon her. The return to the country of her birth is not directly related to a search for belonging and is instead more a search for a self. She admits that, “[A]fter she had left Sri Lanka at eighteen, her only real connection was the new sarong her parents sent her every Christmas (which she dutifully wore), and news clippings of swim meets”. (*ibid.*) Her return to the country occurred under the auspices of the “Centre for Human Rights in Geneva” and “[S]he did not expect to be chosen, because she had been born on the island, even though she now travelled with a British passport”. (15-16) She has now acquired an international identity and thereby establishes a distance from her past. The senior medical officer at the “Kynsey Road Hospital”, Dr Perera, recognises Anil’s cosmopolitan identity when he remarks, “[Y]our dress is Western, I see”. (26) In a recollection about her first meeting with Cullis, the man who becomes her lover, she tells him, “[I] live here, ’... In the West”. (36) In appearing as a cosmopolitan, Anil travels around the country, both, as a tourist observing from a distance, as well as a forensic anthropologist investigating sites. It may be argued that this dual identity provides her with a lateral view of the country in the first instance and a vertical view in the manner of her digging for information.

On a drive with Sarath, they stop at a place which overlooks a valley where Anil recognises a bird and assumes its perspective of the landscape: “She put herself into the position of the bird as it took off, and was suddenly vertiginous, realizing how high they were above the valley, the landscape like a green fjord beneath them. In the distance the open plain was bleached white, resembling the sea”. (45)

In his analysis of cosmopolitanism, Timothy Brennan argues that the contemporary version of the term “involves not so much an elite at home, as it does spokespersons for a kind of perennial immigration, valorised by a rhetoric of wandering, and rife with allusions to the all-seeing eye of the nomadic sensibility”. (Brennan 1989: 2) This vertiginous position that Anil temporarily occupies may, therefore, be attributed to her cosmopolitan identity. Her association with Sri Lanka is complicated by the exilic nature of her identity. She returns as a person who has become accustomed to the places she experienced in her journeys away from the country:

In her years abroad, during her European and North American education, Anil had courted foreignness, was at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fe. She felt completed abroad...she had come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries...But here, on this island, she realized she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere. There was less to hold on to with that one arm. Truth bounced between gossip and vengeance. (AG 2001: 54)

She is disorientated by the environment in which she finds herself and relates to it with the attitude of an exile. Although she is not strictly a political exile, she could be said to be an exile from the restrictions of the country of her birth, defined above, as the “uncertain laws” and the pervading “fear”. Her life is marked by a nomadic existence detailed in the recollection of travels from Guatemala, to the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

In his description of exile, Said states that it is “life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it that its unsettling force erupts anew”. (quoted in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999: 41) In his memoir he elaborates on this by stating that it is a sense of being “out of place... [with] all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each... [A] form of freedom”. (Said 1999: 295) It may be said that Anil experiences the country as an enthralled tourist rather than as an engaged citizen. It is a privilege she alone possesses compared to the predicaments in which the other characters in the novel find themselves.

For example, Sarath undergoes an examination of his personal loyalties amidst the ordeal of the civil war. Anil questions whether he is a “neutral” in the conflict or “just an archaeologist who loved his work”. (AG 2001: 29) She observes that he appears “as if he were a gifted and natural finder of things...found the social world around him irrelevant”. (ibid.) This description of Sarath suggests that he is an outsider figure who operates as a loner. Apart from the forensic work through which she would seek to detect the identities of victims of the civil war she would also be engaged with a simultaneous detection of her own identity. Soon after her arrival, Anil visits Lalitha, an elderly woman who worked in the household during her childhood. There is a recognition of “a lost language between them”. (22)

The old woman and granddaughter communicate in Tamil which is a language that Anil does not understand. (It is not clear whether she was previously able to understand it and had lost a proficiency in it, or whether she was never proficient in at all.) This space of inarticulateness between the two women may not only be because of the linguistic limitations experienced by Anil, but also due to the psychic distance which she has secured between herself and the country of her birth. Considering the distance between her and Lalitha, she acknowledges that the elderly woman is the only connection with the country that survives: “Just Lalitha. In a way she was the one who brought me up. Anil wanted to say more, to say that Lalitha was the only person who taught her real things as a child”. (24) In searching for the outline of the skeleton, ‘Sailor’, she is seeking to find her own outline. She is assisted by Sarath in her investigation of the murder they have uncovered. Shortly after her arrival in Colombo, she contracts an unidentified fever and during what appears to be a fever-induced dream, Sarath appears to mark out her outline, as well as those of the four skeletons, on sheets of newspaper placed on the floor. The fever is seemingly also symbolic of the difficulty she experiences in finding a sense of psychic balance back in the country of her birth.

She is portrayed as struggling with her immediate environment: “All evening she kept discovering herself stilled, unable to think. Even reading she’d gotten entangled sleepily in arms of paragraphs that wouldn’t let her go... She feared wild electricity somewhere in the wire. She could hear the noise of waves outside... Everything was suddenly heavy and slowed down”. (62) In their attempts at establishing the identity of the murder victim, they are directed by Palipana to Ananda Udugama, a gem-pit worker and artist.

They have set upon the idea of reconstructing the head of the skeleton from which they could obtain more clues to his identity. Ananda, who has become an alcoholic following the disappearance of his wife, eventually completes the task. Anil observes Ananda’s reconstruction of the face of the skeleton and considers how he lifts and carries it. She recognises that she had done the same “to remind herself he was like her. Not just evidence, but someone with charms and flaws, part of a family, a member of a village who in the sudden lightning of politics raised his hands at the last minute, so they were broken”. (170) In making this connection she is of course not only restoring the skeleton’s humanity but also re-establishing his connections with his family and his affiliation to a community.

The process also affects her sense of self. They are isolated and her solitude is exacerbated by the fact that she cannot communicate in any language with Ananda: “She needed communication with the outside world. There was too much solitude in her head”. (180) This drives her to contact her father’s former colleague, Dr Perera, by telephone. There is a confession that “[S]he had wanted to talk to him about her father, knew she had been skirting the memory of him since her arrival on the island”. (ibid.) During one of the mornings in the secluded environment she listens to music in her earphones and dances. The dance, however, is conveyed as a ritualistic ceremony in which she seeks to explore the expressive aspects of her personality. The movement she is making,

is not a dance, does not contain even a remnant of the courtesy or sharing that is part of a dance. She is waking every muscle in herself, blindfolding every rule she lives by, giving every mental skill she has to the movement of her body...She needs music to push her into extremities and grace...It feels as if she could eject herself out of her body like an arrow. (181)

Anil is also aware that she is in an altered state; that “in this state,” she is “invisible to herself, though it is the state she longs for”. (181-182) Sarath watches her from a window and concludes that she is now “a person he has never seen. A girl insane, a druid in moonlight, a thief in oil”. (182) What is interesting here is that she is seen to be imitating a similarly ritualistic dance which Clara and Alice perform in In the Skin of a Lion. In her analysis of the novel, Victoria Cook argues that Anil represent a “transnational” identity, and that the portrayal of Anil

offers a tri-phasic model of the process of acculturation, as examined through the construction of Anil Tissera’s personal and cultural identity. Anil is initially dependent upon the cultural and individual identity given to her by her parents; however, she moves into an independent phase signalled by her desire for another name and her adoption of a different culture. Finally, Anil moves into the third phase of interdependency, when she returns to Sri Lanka developing a multicultural perspective that is transnational rather than global or universal in its construction. (Cook 2004: 13)

While Cook tracks the trajectory of self-actualisation in a convincing manner, I do find the privileging of a “multicultural perspective” problematic.

It is an argument that claims that the cosmopolitan personality that Anil represents is able to retain all of the attributes of her national identity while she migrates to the metropolitan centre. I would argue that Anil indeed represents a cosmopolitan identity, but, in acquiring the qualities associated with it, she relinquishes the qualities that would connect her with her national identity. One obvious example of this sacrifice is the loss of fluency in the language of her childhood and the alienation this causes between her and characters such as Lalitha. In other words, while Anil's relationships with others are now based mainly on a community of affiliation instead of filiation, there is a sense of loss in this shift. It may be said that Anil's development of an independent identity comes at a cost, namely the loss of a language and perhaps a closer connection with the country of her birth. In acquiring her cosmopolitan identity she becomes an exilic wanderer in accordance with the interpretation of Said, rather than a transnational personality as described by Cook. Apart from the effects of the international odyssey that takes her to various places around the world, Anil returns to a society which is violent and fractured. A sense of self is undermined, curtailed or destroyed. Detailing the consequences of the hostilities in the civil war upon the hospital staff in particular, there is the sense "[T]hat you were without self in those times, lost among the screaming. You held on to any kind of order". (AG 2001: 118)

By the end of the novel we witness Anil as someone who has undergone a catharsis; an odyssey of identity, during which she experiences several transformations, from a childhood in Sri Lanka, a student and then a wife in England, an archaeologist in the Americas, and finally a returning cosmopolitan. As she departs, all objects which may mark her identity are confiscated. There is a suggestion too that she is violated physically during her walk through the government building, which serves as a purgatory passage before she reaches the dockyard. This incident is focalised through Sarath as he waits to meet her, briefly before she eventually boards the ship. Her experiences here could be read as a miniature representation of her larger journey:

He knew she would be searched, vials and slides removed from her briefcase or pockets, made to undress and dress again. It would take her more than forty minutes to pass the gauntlets and escape the building and she would, he knew, be carrying nothing by the end of the journey, no scraps of information, not a single personal photograph she might foolishly have carried with her into the Armoury building that morning. But she would get out, which was all he wished her. (277)

There is an earlier moment though, in which there is a significant declaration of affiliation which is witnessed by Sarath. In her presentation she aligns herself with the country in the most emphatic way yet:

Sarath in the back row, unseen by her, listened to her quiet explanations, her surefootedness, her absolute calm and refusal to be angry. It was a lawyer's argument and, more important, a citizen's evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, 'I think you murdered hundreds of us.' *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*. (271-272 *emphasis in the original*)

The significance of this statement is doubled by the paradox that while it confirms her citizenship, it simultaneously ensures the impossibility of her being able to remain. Her accusation of government-authorised murder renders her continued stay in the country a dangerous, if not fatal, endeavour.

There are further examples of complicated identities in the novel. The artistic representation of the head that Ananda finally produces resembles his disappeared wife rather than an approximation of the image of the skeleton's true identity. This event in the novel indicates the difficulties of representation and suggests that, while Anil and Sarath are seeking a trace of 'Sailor,' Ananda is simultaneously attempting to trace his wife. The skeleton and the reconstructed head thus become simulacrum images of both identities being pursued. Ananda though, is changed by the process, and seems to gain a measure of closure. The image he projects in the face seems at peace with itself: "There was a serenity in the face she did not see too often these days. There was no tension. A face comfortable with itself. This was unexpected coming from such a scattered and unreliable presence as Ananda". (184) Anil soon realises that a different method of identification is necessary: "She knew it was not the head that would give the skeleton a name but his markers of occupation". (205) They eventually discover that his name was Ruwan Kumara, a miner in a plumbago or graphite mine. He was seized by unknown people after he was identified by a disguised local: "They brought a *billa* – someone from the community with a gunnysack over his head, slits cut out for his eyes – to anonymously identify the rebel sympathizer. A *billa* was a monster, a ghost, to scare children in games". (269)

It is, therefore, the nature of the labour he was involved in, which would finally identify him above all else. This notion equates with the ways in which the immigrant labourers are identified in In the Skin of a Lion. In other words, labour and identity become indelibly linked.

Gamini's identity is also submerged in the nature of his work. He devotes himself entirely to it with the result that the "boundary between sleep and waking was a cotton thread so faintly coloured he often crossed it unawares". (211) In the sibling rivalry which exists between the two brothers it is Gamini who regards himself as the one who suffered in the relationship. Gamini's feelings are intensified by the fact that, through circumstance and coincidence, he falls in love with his sister-in-law. It is perhaps ironic therefore that it is Sarath who appears to be submerged under the final sequence of events in the book. There is a poignant reconciliation of the brothers in the end when Gamini, who describes himself as the "unhappy shadow" in the relationship, communicates with the dead body of Sarath. There is the recognition that there "had never been a tunnel of light between them," and that they had instead, "searched out and found their own dominions". (288-289) The relationship between the two brothers could also be interpreted as being emblematic of the idea of fraternity in the country as a whole. It could be argued that the society would not have been plagued by the sectarian violence it was subjected to, if the various partisan groups were allowed to search out and "find their own dominions". (288-289) The character identified merely as "R—" is significant here. (292) He is the suicide bomber who is portrayed as on a mission to assassinate President Katagula. In being described as "R—" his identity has already been deleted and he is seen to have been transformed into weapon: "He was not just the weapon but the aimer of it. The bomb would destroy whomever he was facing. His own eyes and frame were the cross-hairs". (293-294) His identity may therefore be viewed as anonymous, as clandestine and as erased.

Considering all the depictions of identity, at the conclusion of the novel though, it is Ananda, the rehabilitated character, who projects the greater prospect of individual endurance. While he completes the restoration wearing Sarath's shirt as a gesture to his memory, he acknowledges the light of the sun on his body and the fact that "[H]e and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyesena". (305)

While Sarath is indeed one of the ‘ghosts’ evoked in the book, there may be said to be several others too. All of the different identities which Anil has assumed and discarded in the course of her life could also be said to be her ‘ghosts’. The skeleton, Sailor, is of course another who haunts her, while there are the assassins on all sides of the conflict who operate as spectres, including “R—” and the disguised person who gives Ruwan Kumara up to his murderers.

Finally, in In the Skin of a Lion, The English Patient and Anil’s Ghost, there is the representation of communities founded in the midst of seemingly apocalyptic scenarios. These relationships traverse the boundaries of nation, class, gender and history. They provide alternative possibilities for the development of convergence based on more equitable and just foundations. In an essay in which he addresses these possibilities, Berger states the following as an intriguing summation of what the tentative attempts at community in Ondaatje’s novels evoke:

First, an horizon has to be discovered. And for this we have to refind hope – against all the odds of what the new order pretends and perpetrates. Hope, however, is an act of faith and has to be sustained by other concrete actions. For example, the action of *approach*, of measuring distances and *walking towards*. This will lead to collaborations which deny discontinuity. (Berger 2001b: 214 *emphases in the original*)

Ondaatje’s novels present the occasions for these acts of approach to be made. The disparate individuals who explore new ways of establishing communal bonds, notwithstanding their modest and fragile constitution, allow for the opportunity of collaborations beyond the restrictions and limitations of the “new order”.

In the conclusion to his paper, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History”, Dipesh Chakrabarty asserts that it may be necessary “to see the modern as inevitably contested, to write over the given and privileged narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of ‘tradition’ that ‘modernity’ creates”. (Chakrabarty 1995: 388) I would claim that the individuals, and tentative attempts at community which are depicted in the novels I have discussed, provide examples of “human connections” that may be aligned with that which is envisaged by Chakrabarty’s statement specifically.

CHAPTER THREE:

COMPASSION, REHABILITATION AND REDEMPTION

It may be argued that the history of the novel is aligned with the development of modern society through the emergence of the bourgeoisie. Ian Watt's, The Rise of the Novel, provides a valuable synopsis of the generally secular environment out of which the novel developed. Both the French and the English novel dealt primarily with concerns in social history rather than religious faith and as such concentrated on personal relations and human actions. As Watt states it is "therefore likely that a measure of secularization was an indispensable condition for the rise of the genre". (Watt 1957: 87) In his survey, A Short History of French Literature, Geoffrey Brereton writes "[O]ne looks to the novel less for its significance in the history of ideas than for its connexions with social history, of which it is often a transposition or a more or less deliberate commentary". (Brereton 1954: 108) Both assertions confirm the argument that the novel parallels the development of bourgeoisie society and, whether coincidental or not, the decline in religious practice as a structuring formation in society. Jonathan Culler makes similar claims about the novel: "[M]ore than any other literary form, more perhaps than any other type of writing, the novel serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world". (Culler 1975: 189) While in her study of the themes and strategies in postmodernist British and American, Marguerite Alexander argues that,

novelists of the nineteenth century shared with their readers certain assumptions – about the ultimate value of society, whatever specific criticisms of it might be made; about the place of the individual within that society; about the existence, if not of God...then of a body of universal truths which included an agreed concept of human nature – but that concord can no longer be said to exist. (Alexander 1990: 4)

In literature described as postmodern, there is a questioning and thereby an undermining of the assumptions Alexander elucidates.

I reiterate the point made in the Introduction that scepticism within what is termed postmodernist literature, has led to a concurrent, yet incorrect, interpretation of the representation of salvation and redemption in fiction. There has been a direct inference drawn between scepticism about philosophical meaning and the manifold complexities of determining meaning in the text. This collapse of two distinct yet separate concerns relating to literature, has encouraged the thesis that most, if not all contemporary fiction, evades matters of spirituality, and is necessarily devoid of philosophical substance. In an essay dealing with some aspects of this subject, Iris Murdoch says, “[W]e live in a scientific and anti-metaphysical age in that the dogmas, images, and precepts of religion have lost much of their power”. (Murdoch 1977: 23) Regarding the state of the twentieth-century novel, she adds that it

is usually either crystalline or journalistic; that is, it is either a small quasi-allegorical object portraying the human condition and not containing ‘characters’ in the nineteenth-century sense, or else it is a large shapeless quasi-documentary object, the degenerate descendant of the nineteenth-century novel, telling, with pale conventional characters, some straightforward story enlivened with empirical facts. (27)

I would argue that in Ondaatje’s fiction these two particular avenues are avoided, while connections between the redemptive and the imaginative are, indeed, examined. In all four novels there are depictions of compassion and rehabilitation, and the possibilities of salvation and redemption. In Coming through Slaughter, Bolden’s emotional and mental breakdown provides for the portrayal of compassion. There is, also, the argument that the novel itself rehabilitates the memory of Bolden; that fiction here offers a version of salvation. While in In the Skin of a Lion, Patrick undergoes a rite of passage that involves recognition of compassion and the pursuit of redemption. The English Patient, moreover, details destructive scenarios during, and after, the Second World War, and is thus directly engaged with the rehabilitation of both the psyche and landscape. Here too compassion is a fundamental component of the story. A similar scenario is represented in Anil’s Ghost, where the concern is with the recent civil strife in Sri Lanka. In addition, there is Anil’s journey of personal redemption which may be recognised as analogous to the pursuit of salvation of the country, in the aftermath of civil strife.

The possibility of mental liberation from the restrictions placed on communities through oppressive labour practices is depicted in the fate of the dye workers in In the Skin of a Lion. A moment which represents this possibility is at the end of the day's work:

For the dyers the one moment of superiority came in the showers at the end of the day. They stood under the hot pipes; not noticeably changing for two or three minutes - as if, like an actress unable to return to the real world from a role, they would be forever contained in that livid colour, only their brains free of it. And then the blue suddenly dropped off, the colour disrobed itself from the body, fell in one piece to their ankles, and they stepped out, in the erotica of being made free. (ITSOAL 1988: 132)

However, the washing away of the blue dye is the tenuous liberation from the constraints they are subjected to, and offers only a fleeting sense of triumph over their harsh circumstances. The toll of labour on their bodies is permanent though: "... even if they removed all pigment and coarse salt crystal, the men would smell still of the angel they wrestled with in the well, in the pit. Incarnadine". (ibid.) They are likened to incarnate figures whose work involves a struggle with morality as much as with the physical demands. Patrick is represented as a character who grapples with the moral, while he shuns the political: "I don't believe the language of politics". (122) He commits himself, nevertheless, to the cause in which Alice is involved: "I'll protect the friends I have. It's all I can handle". (ibid.) Alice saves Patrick from the emotional discord that afflicts him. In his relationship with Clara he is described as being hampered by a restrictive secret:

There was a wall in him that no one reached. Not even Clara, though she assumed it had deformed him. A tiny stone swallowed years back that had grown with him and which he carried around because he could not shed it. His motive for hiding it probably extinguished itself years earlier. Patrick and his small unimportant stone. It had entered him at the wrong time in his life. Then it had been a flint of terror. He could easily have turned aside at the age of seven or twenty, and just spat it out and kept on walking, and forgotten it by the next street corner. So we are built. (71)

Alice comforts Patrick from his emotional distress after Clara leaves him to return to Ambrose Small. In the preceding narrative which details this, Patrick addresses three letters to Clara in which he confesses to his obsessive preoccupation with her.

The sense is conveyed that he accepted his predicament as his fate: “Patrick believed in words like *befall* and *doomed* ...The words suggested spells and visions, a choreography of fate”. (83 *emphasis in original*) His thoughts and his dreams are dominated by reflections of her, while Alice visits him in order to console him:

They stood together feeling each other’s spines, each other’s hair at the back of the neck. Relax, she said, and he wanted to collapse against her, be carried by her into foreign countries, into the ocean, into bed, anywhere. He had been alone too long. This was a time when returning from work he would fall nightly into a cave of dreams, so later he was not sure it happened. It had been sudden, nothing was played out to conclusion, nothing solved by their time together, but it somehow kept him alive. She had come that day, he thought later, not for passion, but to save him, to veer him to some reality. (88)

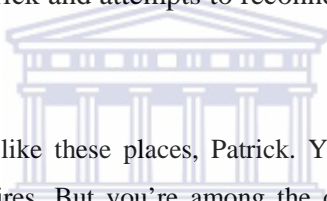
Patrick establishes a close friendship with both Caravaggio and Giannetta, and is seen to treasure these personal bonds beyond any political affiliation which he may be drawn into. In a conversation with Alice, he remarks that “[T]he trouble with ideology, Alice, is that it hates the private. You must make it human”. (135) His subsequent actions, namely, setting fire to the “Muskoka Hotel”, and then embarking on the plan to sabotage the “Water Treatment Plant”, seem to be motivated by the will to act in solidarity with Alice, rather than out of a definite commitment to a particular political cause. CAPE

The sabotage plan follows Alice’s death in what appears to be an accidental explosion in which Patrick may, fatefully, have been culpable. His fervour to fulfil this objective appears to be a result of his grief and remorse over her death. The section of the book describing his setting fire to the “Muskoka Hotel” is titled “Remorse”, a further indication that this may have been the emotion that motivated him above all. After Patrick enters the nerve centre of the whole operation, he starts to prepare the explosive device for detonation. As he steps into the office, he encounters Harris. They engage in a conversation during which Harris attempts to defuse Patrick’s rage, as well as convince him to relinquish the plan to explode the bomb. The suggestion is that Harris disarms Patrick by communicating with him, rather than confronting him:

Harris knew he had to survive until early morning. Then a column of sunlight would fall directly onto his large desk, the pad of grid paper, his fountain pen. His gun was by the bed. He had to survive till the first hint of morning colour came through the oculus above him, eight feet in diameter, made up of eight half-moons of glass. He leaned forward.

- One night I had a dream. (237)

Harris presents himself as a dreamer who has had to imagine the construction projects he initiates before they became reality: “It turned out I was dreaming about projects for the city that had been rejected over the years”. (*ibid.*) In the course of this conversation Harris recognises both Patrick’s physical strength and his strength of will to have been able to penetrate the building: “My god he swam here, Harris suddenly realized. That’s how he got in, through the tunnel. What vision, what dream was that?”. (241) Harris recognises a will within Patrick that he likens to his own in wanting to build the “Water Treatment Plant.” He proceeds to speak directly to Patrick and attempts to reconnect him with the personal heritage that he has disowned:



You must realize you are like these places, Patrick. You’re as much of the fabric as the aldermen and the millionaires. But you’re among the dwarfs of enterprise who never get accepted or acknowledged. Mongrel company. You’re a lost heir. So you stay in the woods. You reject power. And this is how the bland fools – the politicians and press and mayors and their advisers – become the spokesmen for the age. You must realize the trick is to be as serious when you are old as when you are young. (238)

Harris is seen to entice Patrick into accepting the privileged position that his identity as an Anglo-Saxon seemingly ensures, as opposed to rejecting it in the ways he is seen to have done. Harris, it would appear, wishes to convince Patrick that dreamers, like themselves, are required to build the city, not the “bland fools” who are currently in power. It may be argued that Harris assumes the role of paternal figure here, substituting the role of Patrick’s father who failed to establish a means of communication between him and his son. Harris, therefore, succeeds in some way, eliciting some muted responses from Patrick before he eventually relates how he discovered Alice’s body: “Patrick was almost inaudible, whispering. If he were writing this down, Harris thought, his handwriting would be getting smaller and smaller”. (239) In narrating the incident, Patrick is allowed some recourse to alleviate his grief and his guilt.

After Patrick falls asleep in the office, Harris displays compassion in allowing him to sleep and calls on his staff to treat his wounds: “Take that blasting box and defuse it. Let him sleep on. Don’t talk. Just take it away. Bring a nurse with some medical supplies here, he’s hurt himself”. (242) Harris’ compassionate gesture may be seen as an act of honour and admiration for Patrick’s physical accomplishment. It may also, though, be regarded as an expression of his power. This interpretation is alluded to in an earlier exchange between Alice and Patrick. He suggests that he was attracted to her performance in the subversive puppet-show because she stirred his “sense of compassion”. (123) She replies that, “Compassion forgives too much. You should forgive the worst man. You forgive him and nothing changes. You can teach him, make him aware... Why leave the power in his hands?”. (*ibid.*) It may be argued that Harris indeed retains the power by being in the position to make the benevolent gesture towards Patrick.

Alice is, in several ways, a martyred figure, certainly in respect of the way she dies. She is the unnamed nun who falls from the unfinished bridge and is miraculously caught by Nicholas Temelcoff. She undergoes a change from a life of religious devotion to devoting her life to a political cause. Moreover, Temelcoff’s acrobatic act represents a version of salvation and marks the beginning of her conversion from a devout woman to that of shamanistic earth woman who, in turn, comforts Patrick with her love. The shift is charted from the moment Temelcoff holds her in his harness and he recognises her as “a black-garbed bird, a girl’s white face,” to where she “removed her veil and wrapped the arm tight against his side”. (32-33) After they reach safety, Temelcoff takes her to the Ohrida Lake Restaurant. The following passage indicates the transformation from anonymous nun to Alice Gull:

She saw herself in the mirror. A woman whose hair was showing, caught illicit. She did what he had wanted to do. She ran her hand over her hair briefly. Then turned from her image. Leaning forward, she laid her face on the cold zinc, the chill there even past midnight. Upon her cheek, her eyelid. She let her skull roll to cool her forehead. The zinc was an edge of another country. She put her ear against the grey ocean of it. Its memory of a day’s glasses. The spill and the wiping cloth. Confessional. Tabula Rasa. (38-39)

The illicit act of vanity which she commits here makes the shift incontrovertible. This transformation from a nun to an everywoman is also symbolised when she recognises the possibility of a clean slate, the “Tabula Rasa”, in something as ordinary and functional as the zinc. The next time she appears in the book is as Alice Gull the actress friend of Clara Dickens with whom Patrick is involved. Clara and Patrick are staying at Alice’s farmhouse and she returns to it while they are still there. The three of them share anecdotes about their respective childhoods and at the end of the exchange Alice proposes a toast to “holy fathers”, an ironic gesture in retrospect when she is later revealed as the nun. (74) Another irony is Patrick’s perception that the farmhouse resembled “the quarters of a monk”. (65) During the night Clara and Alice perform a trick on Patrick when they trace an image of his face while he is sleeping. The traced image is regarded as a spirit painting by them and they perform a prehistoric, shaman-type ritual around his sleeping figure. The two women change into atavistic characters:

“Are we witches?” Alice asks. Clara begins to laugh. She moans like a spirit looking for the keyhole out of the room. She places her hands on the frail walls, then her mouth explodes with noise and she tugs Alice out into the Ontario night. They crash down the wood steps, Clara’s growls unnamable things, their bodies rolling among the low moon flowers...There is no moon. There is the moon flower in its small power of accuracy, like a compass pointing to where the moon is, so they can bay towards its absence. (76)

Patrick is described as being mesmerised by Clara: “He found himself at this hour in the spell of her body, within the complex architecture of her past”. (66) Clara is thus endowed with a hypnotic power that leaves Patrick prone. The transformation of Alice, from nun to earth woman and performance artist, suggests her liberation from the constraints of organised religious practice. Her salvation and redemption is thus through her realisation of the emancipatory powers of art. It may be pointed out that Alice resembles the goddess Ishtar, from the Epic of Gilgamesh. Where the character of Ishtar is represented as a vindictive goddess, but where she also appears as a goddess of love, fruitfulness and fertility in other incarnations.¹⁷ Alice also reveals a belief in the transient nature of human existence when she replies to Patrick that Hana is “loaned” to her. (125) “We’re veiled in flesh. That’s all”. (ibid.)

¹⁷ See the notes in Epic of Gilgamesh, The (1989), p. 122, and the entry in The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Volume 6, Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica (2007), p. 407.

This belief can also be construed as acceptance of human mortality without the prospect of the afterlife as espoused by religious doctrine. Alice could therefore be expressing a secular idea about human existence's ephemeral and diffident qualities. We recognise in this statement, too, the shift from the religious to the secular in the motif of the veil. The veil she wore as a nun signified her devotion to a life of spiritual contemplation, while in recognising the flesh as a veil, she is accepting the idea of the carnal, which stands in diametric opposition to the concept of 'original sin'; a foundational tenet of Christian theology. Temelcoff, too, is successful in liberating himself from the constraints of labour he endures while working on the bridge. After performing tortuous and dexterous feats of manual work, he changes his nature of employment to do something more benevolent: "In a year he will open up a bakery with the money he has saved. He releases the catch on the pulley and slides free of the bridge". (49)

The women in the photographs by Bellocq in Coming through Slaughter are compared to Christ-like figures of human suffering: "Compare Christ's hands holding the metal spikes to the badly sewn appendix scar of the thirty year old naked woman he photographed when she returned to the room – unaware that he had already photographed her baby and her crucifix and her rug". (CTS 1984: 54) The women are the prostitutes he photographed in the Storyville district in New Orleans. This connection between the concepts of sublime and the profane, equates with the Italian artist Caravaggio's decision to use people of questionable morality as models for his religious paintings. In Bellocq's work the women are photographed while engaged in childhood reminiscences, which can be read as an attempt to reclaim their innocence. Despite the fact that these remembrances are fleeting and possibly futile efforts to return to innocence, the sense of "grace" they appear to have projected in the photographs are/is what survives: "What you see in the pictures is her mind jumping that far back to when she would dare to imagine the future... Then he paid her, packed, and she had lost her grace". (54) The exploration of the links between the sublime and the profane are also evident in the music that Bolden plays. Bolden is depicted as troubled by both the obsessive demands of the music and the desire for a stable existence. It is as if the subversive effects of the music place him beyond redemption. He acknowledges the debt he owes to his musical predecessors by naming them as his fathers: "My fathers were those who put their bodies over barbed wire. For me. To slide over into the region of hell. Through their sacrifice they seduced me into the game". (95)

Inherent in this extract is the perspective that the music which they played demanded a large measure of physical and psychic sacrifice. As related genres, jazz and blues have often generated ambivalent responses in society. In an anecdote communicated to Gertrude Stein, novelist Richard Wright relates that “his grandmother had forbidden the playing of swing records on the family phonograph”. (Campbell 1995: 1) While in an essay about the gospel music vocalist, Mahalia Jackson, Ralph Ellison remarks that although she “knew something of the painful experiences which go into the forging of a true singer of the blues,” but that “in her religious views the blues and jazz are profane forms and a temptation to be resisted”. (Ellison 1994: 214-215)

Blues, in particular, is regarded as a secular or crude version of spiritual music in which the subject of devotion is no longer the divine but the object of the individual’s own longings or desires. It is often the case that this object of desire is predominantly a sexualised woman-figure.¹⁸ The connections between woman as sexualised and irredeemable are further elaborated upon in the descriptions of the street prostitutes outside of Storyville “who drop their mattresses down and take men right there on the dark pavements...taking anything so long as the quarter is in their hands...These women so ruined they use the cock in them as a scratcher”. (CTS 1984: 118)

Perhaps Bolden sympathises with their plight because he regards himself as being in a irredeemable situation through both the performance of his music and the need to earn money from it. He, indeed, becomes a victim of a sexual assault later, during his incarceration in the mental asylum. In a state of delusion he is described as taking “rapes from what he thought were ladies in blue pyjamas”. (148) His acceptance of these assaults is akin to the acquiescent behaviour of the prostitutes. His sympathy may also be related to the emotional burden of being beyond redemption. He states later that, “[M]y brain tonight has a mattress strapped to its back”. (119) A narration attributed to one, Dude Botley, describes the conflict arising out of Bolden’s mixing of spiritual music with the non-spiritual:

¹⁸ See Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., (2000), p. 32, and Gregory R. Staats, “Sexual Imagery in the Blues,” in Campbell (1995), p 40.

I'm sort of scared because I know the Lord don't like that mixing with His music. But I still listen because the music sounds so strange and I guess I'm hypnotised. When he blows blues I can see Lincoln Park with all the sinners and whores shaking and belly rubbing and the chicks getting way down and slapping themselves on the cheeks of their behind. Then when he blows the hymn I'm in my mother's church with everybody humming. The picture kept changing with the music. It sounded like a battle between the Good Lord and the Devil. Something tells me to listen and see who wins. If Bolden stops on the hymn, the Good Lord wins. If he stops on the blues, the Devil wins. (81)

This conflict between “trying to play the devil’s music and hymns at the same time”, is proposed as one of the reasons for Bolden’s mental derangement. (134) This would highlight the conflict between the sublime, or exalted, and the profane at the heart of the tension between the acceptance of spiritual music and the rejection of blues and jazz. The music may though be interpreted as the redemption of Bolden, despite the fact that no recordings of his music remain. In choosing to make Bolden the subject of this book, Ondaatje redeems something of Bolden, and it is perhaps instructive that the book opens with the only existing photograph of Bolden and his band, and a sonograph of dolphins; an attempt perhaps to imitate the sound of the music. Moreover, at the end of the book there is the final narration by Bolden in which he declares: “You see I had an operation on my throat. You see I had a salvation on my throat. A goat put his horn in me and pulled. Let me tell ya, it went winter in there and then it fell apart like mud and they stuck it together with needles and they held me together with clothes”. (CTS 1984: 139) The “salvation on my throat” is the music, I would argue, and is the only surviving substance of the individual and, moreover, which survives his disintegration.

Near the end of the novel the narrator summarises the life of Bolden. The commentary takes the form of a contemporary survey of the New Orleans in which Bolden lived: “This is where he lived seventy years ago, where his mind on the pinnacle of something collapsed, was arrested, put in the House of D, shipped by train to Baton Rouge, then taken north by cart to a hospital for the insane. The career beginning in this street of the paintless wood to where he gave his brains away. The place of his music is silent”. (133)

I would suggest that Ondaatje's novel is an act of restoration; an act of salvaging the figure of Bolden from silence and erasure. In addition to this there is the sense that Ondaatje depicts Bolden as an example of the modern artist as a "dismembered Orpheus", which Ihab Hassan examines in his study, The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature.¹⁹ In it Hassan exploits the myth of the dismemberment of Orpheus as symbolic of the various disintegrations of the artist figure within modern literature. The reference to Hassan's analysis is taken from Annick Hillger's reading of the modern subject as a splintered and alienated phenomenon in Ondaatje's writing. In her discussion of this particular novel, she states that Bolden represents "the figure of the artist as a subject in process". (Hillger 2006: 219) Moreover, she claims that Bolden "experiences the dilemma of the modern subject, caught between the urge to lose himself in the flux of sense impressions and the need to hold on to certain structures that may provide a sense of being grounded". (ibid.) She cites a narration from the text to confirm this point. Bolden is depicted in a sequence of paranoid reflections and questions the fidelity of his wife, Nora: "If Nora had been with Pickett. Had really been with Pickett as he said. Had jumped off Bolden's cock and sat down half an hour later on Tom Pickett's mouth on Canal Street. Then the certainties he loathed and needed were liquid at the root". (CTS 1984: 78) Bolden may therefore be said to symbolise the fate of the modern artist who attempts to articulate her or his existence in the midst of the evacuation of certainties and the loss of the word as divine and incontrovertible.

However, Bolden is evoked as an ethereal presence, suggested by his experience while sitting in the sun in the company of an unnamed friend: "Later in the day he moved following his path. He washed his face in the travelling spokes of light, bathing and drying his mouth nose forehead and cheeks in the heat. All day. Blessed by the visit of his friend". (148) The tenuous blessing of the friend may be read as a final redemptive act towards him. Here again the act of consecration is performed by an anonymous friend, rather than by a priest. The friend's gesture occurs, therefore, between the ordinary and the exalted, the sublime and the profane. The representation of Bolden in this novel also marks a shift from the depiction of the tortured, isolated, masculine figure, to the evocation of fragile, yet surviving community in Ondaatje's later work.

¹⁹ Ihab Hassan, The Dismemberment of Orpheus, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1982, cited in Hillger, 2006.

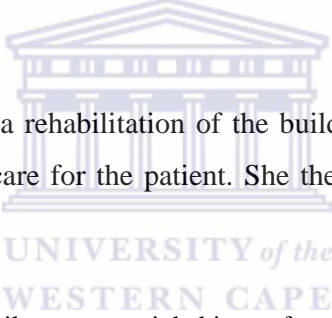
In The English Patient there are multiple uses of religious symbolism. The patient is described by Hana, the nurse, as having the “[H]ipbones of Christ,” and being “her despairing saint”. (TEP 1992: 3) Apart from the care which the nurse provides to him in the villa, the patient is also treated compassionately by the Bedouin tribe who discover him in the desert after the plane crash. In a narrative flashback his treatment is described as an anointment, as the Bedouin daubed his burnt body with oil. While the hammock upon which he is laid out is described as “an altar”. (6) The Bedouin man who tends to his wounds is described as a figure resembling “most of all those drawings of archangels he had tried to copy as a schoolboy”, and as a “merchant doctor, this king of oils and perfumes and panaceas, this baptist”. (9-10)

My suggestion is that the patient is being re-baptised into life after his rescue. He has assumed another identity, both physically and mentally, and is being initiated into this new self by the medicine man. Elsewhere in the novel, Almsy is seen to reject the dictates of organised religion, particularly after the suicide of his friend Madox who shoots himself during a sermon. To him the desert is “a place of faith”. (139) He regards the desert as a place where “you have time to look everywhere, to theorize on the choreography of all things around you”. (150) In short, to him the desert is a place for contemplation and spiritual deliberation. He appreciates the effects of other religions apart from the conventions of Christianity. His own attitude to religion, though, is that he is unsuitable or unworthy of direct participation in any religious practice, as he flouted the commandments by committing adultery. In his view, he and Katharine are sinners and thus beyond redemption. Almsy is tested by his conscience in the face of the infidelity he and Katherine are involved in. General religious practice becomes to be seen as an admonition of their adulterous acts:

Sometimes when she is able to spend the night with him they are wakened by the three minarets of the city beginning their prayers before dawn. He walks with her through the indigo markets that lie between South Cairo and her home. The beautiful songs of faith enter the air like arrows, one minaret answering another, as if passing on a rumour of the two of them as they walk through the cold morning air, the smell of charcoal and hemp already making the air profound. Sinners in a holy city. (154)

There are several acts of compassion and communal sharing in the novel. In some instances these acts imitate the religious practice of the sharing of the sacrament. One of these moments is witnessed by Hana: “When she enters she sees Kip and the English patient passing a can of condensed milk back and forth”. (176) Caravaggio dispensing the morphine drug to the patient is described as a procedure similar to the act of administering the holy sacrament: “He pauses and holds out his hand. Caravaggio places a morphine tablet into the black palm, and it disappears into the man’s dark mouth”. (174) The villa in which they find refuge also has both a religious and a recuperative history, having being a nunnery and then a hospital in the past. It is, thus, a place of sanctuary, and a place of convalescence. It is here, then, that all of the disparate characters explore the possibilities of establishing an alternative community based on human compassion and healing. While its structure may have been severely damaged during the war, it survives and offers the disparate community, who seek refuge within its confines, a possibility of salvaging themselves, if not the building and the land upon which it is erected.

Hana, moreover, embarks upon a rehabilitation of the building and the surrounding natural landscape, while continuing to care for the patient. She therefore performs multiple acts of hospitality:



The Villa San Girolama, 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 shellings. 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. She worked along the edges of them aware always of unexploded mines. In one soil-rich area beside the house she began to garden with a furious passion that could come only to someone who had grown up in a city. In spite of the burned earth, in spite of the lack of water. Someday there would be a bower of limes, rooms of green light. (43)

I would suggest that Hana’s aspirations for the flourishing of a garden of lime trees around the villa, are more broadly symbolic of the possibilities of rehabilitation and redemption. The restoration of a garden of lime trees may suggest that the redemption of both the devastated earth and the damaged psyche is only possible through the regenerative powers of nature and humanity’s more intimate relationship with it.

There is also the recognition in this metaphor of the part played by human labour. The garden will only be restored through painstaking work, similar to the diligent approach that Kip takes to his task of de-mining the landscape. This notion of labour as an arduous, yet aesthetic and self-actualising process is also a prevailing idea in the other novels. In Coming through Slaughter, Bolden is devoted to his music, despite its painful consequences. Temelcoff, Patrick, Alice and the immigrant workers in In the Skin of a Lion, perform their tasks with great skill and endurance. Anil and Sarath are required to perform meticulous activities in their endeavour to establish the identity of the skeleton in Anil's Ghost. In short, in all these novels labour forms an integral part of the physical and mental trajectories of the characters.

At the beginning of the The English Patient, Hana makes a decision to separate from the medical detachment of the army and to remain at the villa. Apart from wanting to care for the English patient, Hana also expresses her moral opposition to the consequences of the war. After experiencing the physical trauma of the soldiers while working as nurse, “[S]oldiers were coming in with just bits of their bodies, falling in love with me for an hour and then dying”, she feels a sense of outrage at those who she deems responsible for the war. (83) Hana’s anger is directed not only towards the generals in the army, but also towards the role of organised religion in its rationalising of the casualties of the war:

Every damn general should have had my job. Every damn general. It should have been a prerequisite for any river crossing. Who the hell were we to be given this responsibility, expected to be wise as old priests, to know how to lead people towards something no one wanted and somehow make them feel comfortable. I could never believe in all those services they gave for the dead. Their vulgar rhetoric. How dare they! How dare they talk like that about a human being dying. (84)

Hana thus disassociates herself from organised religion. The suffering she has experienced, both directly and indirectly, have made her akin to the statue of “a grieving angel”, which Kip had come across as he travelled across the country. (90) She is, however, located outside conventional religious practices and, it may be argued, that she has begun a secularisation of religious symbolism by regarding herself, and by being regarded by the Sikh army sapper, Kirpal Singh or Kip, as a grieving angel.

Kip is described as an expert at the disposal of unexploded bombs and mines. The villa and its surrounds have apparently been heavily mined by the retreating Italian troops, and Kip takes up the task of uncovering and disabling as many of the unexploded devices as he can. He is thus involved in a similar process of the rehabilitation of the land. Kip is a heroic figure in his quest to defuse the mines and bombs. He is described as “a survivor of his fears, will step around anything suspicious”. (73) He is also represented as possessing some monastic modesty in the application of his task: “He never speaks about the danger that comes with his kind of searching”. (74) The monastic qualities of his approach to his task are evident too in his devotion to it, and this despite the complications and obstacles he faces: “Bombs were attached to taps, to the spines of books, they were drilled into fruit trees so an apple falling onto a lower branch would detonate the tree, just as a hand gripping that branch would. He was unable to look at a room or field without seeing the possibilities of weapons there”. (75) Furthermore, the act of locating the mines is compared to the act of divination. For example, “[Hana] sees him in the distance of a defunct garden with the diviner or, if he has found something, unravelling that knot of wires and fuzes someone has left him like a terrible letter”. (76)

While working in the Sistine Chapel, Kip also experiences a moment of epiphany when he views the representation of the prophet Isaiah: “But the young sapper was already on his back, the rifle aimed, his eye almost brushing the beards of Noah and Abraham and the variety of demons until he reached the great face and was stilled by it, the face like a spear, wise, unforgiving”. (77-78) He experiences a similar moment of revelation during the celebration of the Marine Festival of the Virgin Mary in the town of Gabicce Mare. He uses the rifle sights to view the effigy of the Virgin Mary as it is carried through the streets of the town. He recognises something familial in the face which suggests he shares a feeling of communion with this expression of faith, despite the fact that he practices another religion: “He swung the sights up to her face and studied her again. A different look in the fading light around her. A face which in the darkness looked more like someone he knew. A sister. Someday a daughter. If he could have parted with it, the sapper would have left something there as a gesture. But he had his own faith after all”. (80) During one of the nights they share in the tent, Kip takes Hana through a metaphysical initiation into his religion. In doing so, he makes an attempt to appease her emotional disquiet:

He guides her into the great gurdwara, removing her shoes, watching as she washes her feet, covers her head...They move through the night, they move through the silver door to the shrine where the Holy Book lies under a canopy of brocades...Kip walks her beside a pool to the tree shrine where Baba Gujhaji, the first priest of the temple, is buried...Hana is quiet. He knows the depth of darkness in her, her lack of a child and of faith. He is always coaxing her from the edge of her fields of sadness. A child lost. A father lost. (271)

Through this transcendental journey Kip attempts to rehabilitate Hana from the unsettled state of mind which she experiences. He tries a version of salvation of her through an encounter with the ceremonies of his particular faith. Hana, though, is not able to find redemption in this shared experience of Kip's faith. For her, the material injustice of the world determines the fate of people's emotional conditions: "There are those destroyed by unfairness and those who are not". (272) For her it is the influence of worldly events and incidents that have an influence on the states of people's minds. Hana could thus be said to be espousing a secular perspective of individual destiny based upon chance, circumstance and coincidence rather than on divine guidance and intervention. For example, her rendition of the "Marseillaise" at the villa conveys a sense of poignant resignation. The tone of the narrative describing this incident, suggests a defeat of the ideals the song espouses in the wake of the war. Hana's rendering of the song is altered into a prayer for salvation from the destruction wrought by recent events:

She sang up into the darkness beyond the snail light, beyond the square light from the English patient's room and into the dark sky waving with shadows of cypress trees...She was singing it as if it was something scarred, as if one couldn't ever again bring all the hope of the song together. It had been altered by the five years leading to this night of her twenty-first birthday in the forty-fifth year of the twentieth century. Singing in the voice of a tired traveller, alone against everything. A new testament. There was no certainty to the song anymore, the singer could only be one voice against the all the mountains of power. That was the only sureness. The one voice was the single unspoiled thing. A song of snail light. (269)

The "five years" referred to here is of course the five years of the Second World War and the song is thus an expression of hope in the face of the violence. This war is regarded as a "mediaeval" conflict: "Fortress towns on great promontories which had been battled over since the eighth century had the armies of new kings flung carelessly against them". (69)

The moral judgement of the war is that both sides involved in it were equally uncivilised: “[T]he Barbarians versus the Barbarians”. (257) The reference, in Kip’s observation, to the “remnants of Pompeii and Herculaneum”, suggests that the catastrophic consequences of the war are akin to the devastation suffered by the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum following the eruption of the volcanic Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. (278) The dropping of the atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki is regarded as, “[A] terrible event. A new war. The death of a civilisation”. (286) The description of Kip’s departure from the villa suggests that any possibility of salvation from the situation which the war has bequeathed to its survivors, is dependent upon a transcendence of the existence that this “civilisation” had instituted. The prophecies of the biblical figure Isaiah are evoked through Kip’s reflections as he passes through the Italian countryside on his motorbike. The insertion of verses from the Old Testament book of Isaiah is interesting in that the prophecies contained therein relate to the restoration and redemption of the earth.²⁰

Kip recalls these prophetic words prior to, and during, his accident in which he is thrown from his motorbike into a lake. The application of the lines, “*He will toss thee like a ball into a large country*”, from the biblical text, becomes even more significant for Kip because his next appearance in the text is in India, his own place of restoration. (295 *emphasis in the original*) The accident is seen as an action that propels him, miraculously, across time and place. The biblical verses reinforce the interpretation of the novel as an imaginative representation of the possibilities of post-apocalyptic restoration. To Hana, Kip is a “warrior saint”, a heroic figure who is the eternal outsider, not only in terms of his physical appearance and his religious allegiance, but also as the figure most capable of triumphing in a world which has been devastated by the war. (273) She determines that Kip, though, is someone with the capacity for survival. She regards him as possessing the means for salvation in the following remarks about the sense of resolution and enlightenment to which he seemed to be connected:

²⁰ The three quoted verses from the Book of Isaiah in the Bible, namely chapter 59, verse 21; chapter 22, verse 18; and, chapter 51, verses 6 to 8, deal with the liberation of the Israelites from their captivity and the redemption of the earth in a post-apocalyptic epoch.

He could be all day in a clay pit dismantling a bomb that may kill him at any moment, could come home from the burial of a fellow sapper, his energy saddened, but whatever the trials around him there was always solution and light...He moved at a speed that allowed him to replace loss...Each morning she watched him, seeing his freshness towards the world perhaps for the last time. (272)

I would suggest that it is not merely his credentials as the seemingly archetypal post-colonial subject, namely, his ethnic identity and his awareness of the operations of the colonial powers, which make him suitable for this heroic role. For Hana, Caravaggio and Almsy, their pasts may be too much of a burden to carry them beyond the possibility of liberating themselves from it. Kip is therefore destined to leave them, as he could be said to be the one character who is in possession of some agency to change his circumstances: "It was the moment he left them all behind. The moment the drawbridge closed behind the knight and he was alone with just the peacefulness of his own strict talent...The Englishman had called him *fato profugus* – fate's fugitive". (273 *emphasis in original*) Whereas the other characters may be caught in the bind of their respective colonial identities, Kip offers the prospect of challenging the status quo from a position outside colonial boundaries.

Despite his dramatic departure from the villa and his censure of contact between himself and Hana, he finally reconciles with her existence, even though it is only at a metaphysical level. It is the moment in which his memory is redeemed, while sitting in garden many years later:

He sits in the garden. And he watches Hana, her hair longer, in her own country...This is a limited gift he has somehow been given, as if a camera's film reveals her, but only her, in silence...It seems every month or two he witnesses her this way, as if these moments of revelation are a continuation of the letters she wrote to him for a year, getting no reply, until she stopped sending them, turned away by his silence. (300)

The role of art in inducing a process of personal redemption is explored through the references to the Italian painter, Caravaggio. In The English Patient the patient uses the name of the Caravaggio character to reflect upon a particular work of art by the artist Caravaggio. As an artist Caravaggio is also known for his work using the effects of chiaroscuro, the play of light and shadow, in his work. He was also known to have used people from the 'lower classes' to pose for paintings which depicted religious figures.

The painting, “David with the Head of Goliath”, depicts a scene from the biblical tale of David and Goliath. A youthful David holds the beheaded head of Goliath in his outstretched left hand. The painting dates from 1605-6 or 1610. The date is significant because the painting was done after Caravaggio was “condemned to death and banished, which meant that any member the Corte could at any time execute the sentence without further ado”. (Lambert 2006: 78) The sentence was imposed for the fatal wounding of Rannuccio Tommasoni de Terni, his opponent “during a game of royal tennis”. (ibid.) Caravaggio accused Tommasoni of cheating and killed him in the ensuing fight. He was forced to flee Rome and was a fugitive from justice in the subsequent years until his death on a beach at Porte Ercole in July 1610.²¹ In the painting both figures resemble Caravaggio himself; David has features similar to the young Caravaggio seen in the self-portrait, “Ill Bacchus” (c. 1593-1594), while the beheaded Goliath bears a resemblance to the self-portrait which appears in the background of his “The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew” (1599-1600) and in the “Portrait of Caravaggio” (c. 1621-1625) by Ottavio Leoni.²² The painting is therefore interpreted as a reflection on Caravaggio’s own mortality with the youthful self gazing upon the older, beheaded self. This act of self-reflection may also include remorse for the murder he has committed as well as an act of contemplation upon the travails of his notorious life. The English patient appropriates the painting as an act of contemplation upon his own life. The painting provides the English patient with the reference to consider his own mortality. It also, though, offers him the thought that his life could be continued through the life of Kip, another exile and wanderer:

There’s a painting by Caravaggio, done late in his life. David with the Head of Goliath. In it, the young warrior holds at the end of his outstretched hand the head of Goliath, ravaged and old. But that is not the true sadness in the picture. It is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man, how he looked when he did the painting. Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand. The judging of one’s own mortality. I think when I see him at the foot of my bed Kip is my David. (TEP 1992: 116)

²¹ Lambert 2006, p 89.

²² See Lambert 2006, pp. 78, 17, 48-49, & 92, respectively, for the relevant reproductions.

In Anil's Ghost the central character is confronted with physical and emotional devastation greater than that which confronts the characters in The English Patient. As mentioned above, Anil returns to her native country as an international forensics investigator in order to determine who may be culpable in the numerous disappearances and murders committed during the savage civil war in Sri Lanka. She is described as someone who “lives in contemporary times”, and represents therefore a modern, worldly character. (AG 2001: 95) There are suspicions that the government forces are complicit, if not directly responsible for these atrocities, and her task is to establish the validity of these claims.

The war caused severe trauma to the population and at least three of the characters, namely Sarath, Gamini and Ananda, have experienced grief following the death of a loved one. In the case of Sarath it is the death of his wife who committed suicide. His brother, Gamini, who was also in love with her, is also affected by her death and devotes a great deal of his time to tending the wounded as a doctor in the hospital. Ananda's wife, Sirissa, apparently witnesses a terrible atrocity on her way to the school where she works as a cleaner and is abducted. He attempts to assuage his grief with alcohol which hampers his work in reconstructing a facial image of “Sailor” for Anil and Sarath.

In the course of their work, Anil and Sarath save two people from certain death. Firstly, while driving along a road they encounter a man seemingly asleep in front of a parked truck. After turning back to revisit the scene they discover that the man “by the truck was alive but couldn't move. He was almost unconscious. Someone had hammered a bridge nail into his left palm and another into his right, crucifying him to the tarmac”. (111) They treat his wounds and transport him the hospital in Colombo where he is, coincidentally, attended to by Gamini. In a later incident, Anil discovers Ananda after he has attempted suicide by cutting his throat. After failing to stall the flow of blood with shredded sheets, she injects him with the drug epinephrine, which she keeps as a medication for her allergic reaction to bee stings. The drug revives him, his wounds are treated, and he is able to recover. Gamini operates on a boy with a congenital abnormality of the heart while also having to deal with the consequences of a massacre in a nearby village. The operation is successful and the parents rename the boy after him as a gesture of gratitude. During this operation he is assisted by an anonymous nurse who is later revealed as the sister-law with whom he is in love.

Anil is shown to have an intuitive predisposition for her profession. While asleep she is observed by her lover Cullis: “She was deep in the white linen bed. Her hand moving constantly, as if brushing earth away”. (34) This incident may also be interpreted as a premonition of her decision to abandon her life with Cullis and return to Sri Lanka to perform a version of rehabilitation by literally uncovering what is buried in the earth. This uncovering of the truth upon which she embarks is found to be a complex and elusive procedure. During this course of action, she obtains a less precise measure of what may be constituted as ‘truth.’

While she is at the “Kynsey Road Hospital” she recognises that “[S]he could walk around the table watching a body from the corner of her eye, then sit on the stool and time would be forgotten,” and that she has “an awareness of someone in the distance hammering a floor, banging through ancient concrete with a mallet as if to reach the truth”. (66) This search is also described as an arduous and fluctuating exercise when it is compared to her experiences swimming competitively as a child: “In some ways her later obsessive tunnelling toward discovery was similar to that underwater world, where she swam within the rhythm of intense activity, as if peering through time”. (69) If *The English Patient* depicts the conflict of “[T]he Barbarians versus the Barbarians”, (TEP 1993: 257) then *Anil’s Ghost* details a “more complicated world morally”. (AG 2001: 11) In making an analogy with the medieval war which was the setting for the former novel, the situation in contemporary Sri Lanka is described in more intense terms. According to the narrator, “the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here”. (ibid.) The situation is compared to a surreal experience: “In the shadows of war and politics there came to be surreal turns of cause and effect”, and where, “Sometimes law is on the side of power not truth”. (42-44) There are connections made with other human catastrophe such as Pompeii, Laetoli and Hiroshima, and Anil reflects that “there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time”, and that, “those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of logic”. (55)

These comments suggest that a rational understanding of the violence being perpetrated by all sides would not be possible while they are caught up in the midst of it. Upon meeting Sarath at the government offices, Anil remarks that there has been a “lot of blood under the bridge” since she left the country. (16)

There is of course a sharp irony in the use of the word “blood” in the common phrase, considering the hostilities which prevailed. It may be argued that the conflict involved people who were closely related, suggesting that they may have been connected by ‘blood’. The word also confirms the ‘bloody’, or extreme nature of the war.

Despite participating in religious ritual, Palipana, the epigraphist and former teacher to Sarath, provides a sense of the worldly and of mortality, as opposed to the possibilities of infinitude which religious practice advances. We are introduced to his character in a reflective narrative at close to the beginning of the novel, in the section devoted to Sarath:

‘Nothing lasts,’ Palipana told them. ‘It is an old dream. Art burns, dissolves. And to be loved with the irony of history – that isn’t much.’ He said this in his first class to his archaeology students. He had been talking about books and art, about the ‘ascendancy of the idea’ being often the only survivor. (12 emphasis in the original)

He also provides Anil with an example of someone who sought the certainties of truth and discovered them to be imprecise. Initially, he “was for a number of years at the centre of a nationalistic group that eventually wrestled archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans,” and “always seemed to be saving himself for the language of history”. (79-80) He changed his attitude and “as he grew older he linked himself less and less with the secular world.” (81) Palipana becomes a monastic figure who lives an ascetic existence in the “forest grove with his books and writing tablets,” and as still writing “in cursive script, racing the truth out of himself”. (84) He is, thus, a pastoral recluse who is separated from the complexities of modern society and “governed only by the elements”. (*ibid.*) Anil learns something about the reverence for plain functionality associated with an ascetic lifestyle when she wishes to bathe after the long journey to visit Palipana: “She understood how wells could become sacred”. (90) Despite having established some distance from the secular world, Palipana is not severed from it entirely. Indeed it may be argued that he provides the most convincing portrayal of a secular humanist in the novel. In an exchange between himself, Anil and Sarath, he states that he has “lived around graven images” for all of his life. (96) He remarks though that he does not believe in them”, and that, “[T]emples have secular heroes too”. (*ibid.*)

As a sort of ‘secular hero’ to Anil and Sarath, Palipana provides them with an understanding of his philosophical approach while he discusses the results of his work examining the evidence of ancient existence. He remarks that, “[E]ven then there was nothing to believe in with certainty. They still didn’t know what truth was. We have never had the truth...[M]ost of the time in our world, truth is just opinion”. (102) The fact that he is losing his sight because of glaucoma serves as an example of an ironic inversion in that he is portrayed as a person of vision, wisdom and knowledge. His decision to rescue his orphaned niece, Lakma, from “a government ward run by nuns”, is a further act of redemption in the novel. (103) It is instructive too that Lakma is described as “[A] child who knew the falseness of the religious security around her”. (*ibid.*) She is, thus, aware of the deception that faith in a religion would secure her from the fears which she suffered after witnessing the murder of her parents. She is rendered a mute by this traumatic experience. Palipana “wished more than anything to deliver her from the inflicted isolation”. (104) He begins “to educate her on two levels – gave her the mnemonic skills of alphabet and phrasing, and conversing with her at the furthest edge of his knowledge and beliefs”. (*ibid.*) The relationship between uncle and niece is seen as a relationship of mutual compassion, and with his failing sight, Lakma assumes more responsibility, caring for him as a nurse: “As his vision left him he gave more and more of his life to her...With his blindness she gained the authority he had been unable to give her”. (106) I would argue that in isolating language, he is identifying it as crucial to her liberation from the isolation which has been inflicted upon her. Language is therefore regarded as a fundamental instrument to counter human isolation and mend the consequences of trauma.

Gamini, the medical doctor, is similar in nature to the character of Hana in The English Patient. Both are connected to hospitals in their respective professions, and are actively involved in acts of compassion and hospitality. Gamini is a direct witness to the horror of the war in the emergency rooms of the hospital. After his wife, Chrishanti, leaves him, he devotes almost all of his time to his duties as a medical doctor. Witnessing “grown men scream for their mothers as they were dying”, changes his perspective on modern society. (119):

This was when he stopped believing in man's rule on earth. He turned away from every person who stood up for war. Or the principle of one's land, or pride of ownership, or even personal rights. All of those motives ended up somehow in the arms of careless power. One was no worse and no better than the enemy. He believed only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night. (*ibid.*)

One may read this as a critique of the nation-state, patriarchy and private ownership. It is interesting that he is sceptical about "man's rule on earth", while expressing faith in mothers' care for their children. This suggests that he regards care and compassion for loved ones as a far more valuable sentiment than more pointed considerations about power and politics. This implies that he disavows belief in any ideological position but is moved, instead, by a conviction that modest gestures of care between people are more important. This is sentiment shared by Patrick in *In the Skin of a Lion*.²³

He also makes the point later in the novel, that the violence raging in the country is not due to backwardness. For him the country had a long and progressive history, "[T]his was a civilized country. We had 'halls for the sick' four centuries before Christ...[B]y the twelfth century, physicians were being dispersed all over the country". (191-192) There is also an important statement about the recounting of history here. It defies the conventional chronology which charts the development of the modern as beginning in Europe and subsequently occurring in what is termed the 'second world' and the 'third world.' Ahmed provides a comprehensive critique of this teleological approach to history, and describes it as the "three worlds theory". (Ahmed 1994: 290)²⁴ The passage suggests that what one may associate with the modern, namely, sophisticated health care for citizens, was available in the country, a long time ago. Gamini himself is in need of the kind of care that he dispenses in his occupation. It could be said though that his wounds are of a more psychological nature. After working himself to near exhaustion, he is ordered to take a break and eventually arrives at a forest monastery near Arankale, a place he apparently visited on a regular basis in the past.

²³ see *ITSOAL* 1988, p. 135.

²⁴ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, for a more nuanced engagement with the subject.

The place provides him with a sanctuary from the traumas he has experienced: “As a war doctor he had come to have little faith, but he always felt a great peace here”. (AG 2001: 217) His relationship with religion is also marked by a quotation from a book on Carl Jung: “*Jung was absolutely right about one thing. We are occupied by gods. The mistake is to identify with the god occupying you*”. (230 *emphasis in the original*) The quotation is attributed to Leonora Carrington, from an interview with Rosemary Sullivan. (311)²⁵ It appears to be a paraphrase of Jung’s thoughts on the relationship between the idea of God and humanity, which he explores in much of his work. This can be supported by an extract from an interview Jung conducted in 1955, where he comments on the relationship between God and humanity: “Without knowing it man is always concerned with God. What some people call instinct or intuition is nothing other than God. God is that voice inside us which tells us what to do and what not to do. In other words, our conscience”. (Jung 1980: 241) One may suggest that what Jung is asserting here is the idea of God within the psyche of humanity, and how this idea functions as a focal preoccupation, determining a great deal of occurrences in human existence. It is an argument, perhaps, for the way in which the idea of God is constructed by humanity, rather than by the incontrovertible presence of an omnipotent being. Moreover, I would suggest that the quotation acknowledges that religious devotion may be, overwhelmingly, a manifestation of the human psyche. Religion exists adjacent to Gamini’s own life, like the “small Buddha lit with a low-watt bulb in nearly every ward”, in the village hospital where he operates on the boy. (242) He and his colleagues perform numerous medical procedures which result in a “solution and victory for all”. (245) Gamini is later found by guerrillas who persuade him to help them treat their wounded. While he assists them, he considers the ramifications of his actions and wonders, rhetorically, about the role of morality within this conflict. He also expresses a scepticism about symbols of nationalism: “Some of the boys were delirious when they emerged from the influence of the pills. Who sent a thirteen-year-old to fight, and for what furious cause? For an old leader? For some pale flag?”. (220) His relationship with his brother, Sarath, is a troubled one. They are brought together, initially, when Sarath and Anil bring Gunesena to the hospital. Their final reunion, as it were, is when Gamini discovers the body of Sarath among those bodies brought in after a crackdown by the government forces, and following Anil’s escape from the island with the skeleton, “Sailor”.

²⁵ The Leonora Carrington who is referred to here, may be the British Surrealist artist. See the relevant Wikipedia entry at www.wikipedia.org.

Sarath ultimately sacrifices his life for Anil and the scene in which Gamini identifies his body is described as “a pietà between brothers”. (288) In the end, he redeems his relationship with his brother when he recognises that this “would be the end or it could be the beginning of a permanent conversation with Sarath. If he did not talk to him in this moment, admit himself, his brother would disappear from his life. So he was too, at this moment, within the contract of a pietà”. (*ibid.*) Sarath is seen to have prepared himself for this sacrifice prior to his appearance in the Armoury Auditorium, where Anil confronts the government authorities over the death of Ruwan Kumara, the man identified as the skeleton. He is depicted as unable to find any possibilities of personal salvation after the series of tragedies he both witnesses and experiences: “Since the death of his wife, Sarath had never found the old road back into the world”. (277) He is later described as, having hidden “his life in his work”. (278) He seems to have already established a connection with death through his work. In other words, he appears to have separated himself from human community, and finds comfort with archaeological objects. This would suggest that death would soon transform him into a mute object. He, therefore, finds an affinity with a living stone:

Patterns of death always surrounded him. In his work he felt he was somehow the link between the mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of an image on rock, or even, more strangely, its immortality as a result of faith or an idea...He would hold statues two thousand years old in his arms. Or place his hand against old, warm rock that had been cut into a human shape. He found comfort in seeing his dark flesh against it. This was his pleasure. Not conversation or the education of others or power, but simply to place his hand against a *gal vihara*, a living stone whose temperature was dependent on the hour, whose look of porousness would change depending on rain or a quick twilight...But now, this afternoon, he had returned to the intricacies of the public world, with its various truths. He had acted in such a light. He knew he would not be forgiven that. (278-279 *emphasis in original*)

The final symbolic act of redemption in the book is performed by Ananda, whose life was saved by Anil’s swift actions following his attempted suicide. He is tasked with reconstructing the “120-foot-high statue” of the Buddha that had fallen and shattered after thieves had sought to plunder it for valuables and toppled it over in the process. (299) There is forgiveness for their actions as it “was for once not a political act or an act perpetrated by one belief against another. The men were trying to find a solution for hunger or a way to get out of their disintegrating lives”. (300)

The reconstruction of the large statue is described as an immense task, and Ananda's work as "complex and innovative". (301) He concentrated on working on the head and when he completed this he discovered, that "[U]p close the face looked quilted. They had planned to homogenize the stone, blend the face into a unit, but when he saw it this way Ananda decided to leave it as it was. He worked instead on the composure and qualities of the face". (301-302) The shattered statue of the Buddha, I would suggest, graphically represents the fall and the shattering of religion's lofty moral position in society. By deciding to retain the composite quality which is evident in the reconstructed face, Ananda is submitting the idea that the statue's symbolic representation of religion can never be reconstituted in its original form, thus implying that religion, itself, can never again occupy the elevated position in society. The fissures in its façade are therefore now visible or self-evident. It is significant too that Ananda, the artist who paints eyes, performs this task. The reconstituted statue representing religion is, significantly, constructed by human hands. This suggests the involvement of the worldly and the humane, which elicits connections with the arguments for a democratic humanism, as espoused by Said.

In their critical study, Ashcroft and Ahluwalia describe the "essential characteristics" of his vision of humanism as, "secular, oppositional, interested in the new rather than tradition, it is culturally all-embracing and it is grounded firmly on the practice of critical reading". (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999: 142) I suggest that a secular space has been made between religion and society following the fall of the statue. The position that religion has previously held within society is, therefore, permanently altered. Ananda himself recognises the re-constructed nature of the work: "He stood over what they had been able to re-create of the face. It was a long time since he had believed in the originality of artists". (303) The statue is profiled in a revised position: "All its life until now the statue had never felt a human shadow. It looked over these hot fields towards green terraces in the distant north. It had seen the wars and offered peace or irony to those dying under it". (304) The vertical representation of religion in this passage implies that it had functioned from an elevated and austere position, offering only the sparse solace of "peace or irony to those dying under it". (*ibid.*)

Following the fall and the reconstruction of the statue, it is returned to its original position but is transformed into something less potent and austere. Whereas the final assignment of painting the eyes would previously have been regarded as investing the statue with a conscious presence, the process is reversed here. In a moment of both self-reflection and a reflection upon faith, Ananda looks “at the eyes that had once belonged to a god. This is what he felt. As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation”. (*ibid.*) Becoming an artificer thus saves him from being directly involved in the retaliatory conflict of the civil war. As he is completing the painting of the eyes, he feels “very tired. As if all his blood had magically entered into this body. Soon though, there would be the evolving moment when the eyes, reflected in the mirror, would see them, fall into him”. (306) It is thus Ananda, the artificer, or one who creates skilfully, who is invested with greater perception, with the statue retaining the ability to “witness figures only from a great distance”. (*ibid.*) The statue is reduced to something “that was no longer a god, that no longer had its graceful line but only the pure sad glance Ananda had found”. (307) In the process, though, it gains “human sight...seeing all the fibres of natural history around him”. It is transformed into a human and, perhaps, humane witness, in that it is able to recognise “the smallest approach of a bird, every flick of its wing, or a hundred-mile storm coming down off the mountains near Gonagola and skirting to the plains”. (*ibid.*) Ananda is also able to see “this angle of the world”. (*ibid.*) He observes the birds and acknowledges the “tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she loved and in the dark she feared”. (*ibid.*)

In the final act of the novel he feels his accompanying nephew’s “concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world”. (*ibid.*) This new perception of the world makes it possible for him to find relief from his grief over the disappearance of his wife, Sirissa. He is consoled, and comes to terms with her absence by the invention of a story which links her departure to the flight of a bird. The “sweet touch” of his nephew’s hand represents both the expression of human compassion and the gift of human endurance to a successive generation. It is also the extension of concern and care from a fellow human being within the world.

It may be said that this image represents the argument for the redemption of humanity through the expression of compassion outside the dictates of austere religious practice. It is the modest touch of an innocent youth that ultimately comforts Ananda. While faith may be understood to be an individual preoccupation, organised religion is seen as being complicit with the perpetration of regressive violent acts.

Marlene Goldman asserts that the novel “does not promote a transcendent, unified vision of Buddhism free from the fetters of politics”. (Goldman 2004: 36) Moreover, she argues that it “registers a shift from the unifying and protecting image of the thread of the pirit ceremony to the image of quilting, a form of stitching that likewise unifies yet, at the same time, acknowledges separation and difference”. (ibid.) I would expand on this by regarding the notion of the crafting or quilting, which describes the reconstructed appearance of religion, as a description of it as something made, or constructed, through human agency, rather than divine providence. Goldman, in fact, makes a similar point in an essay devoted to The English Patient. Remarking upon the novel’s ending where Kip and Hana are depicted separately, yet somehow still engaged with each other’s lives, she says that “the text’s final emblem, the entropic force of decline and the image of him, conveyed by Hana’s ‘regret’ and the falling glass that will presumably shatter, are countered not by divine intervention, but by human action – a timely, skilful and compassionate profane gesture”. (Goldman 2001: 922)

Although all of Ondaatje’s novels contain detailed allusions to religion, the possibilities of rehabilitation and of redemption relate to a clearly defined secular existence. I would argue that the novels depict communities bound not only by connections based upon affiliation, but, primarily, by secular relationships as opposed to any discernible religious associations. I rely once again on Said to provide a concise explanation of the secular. His concept of the secular is premised on the understanding of what constitutes “worldliness”: “Worldliness originally meant to me, at any rate, some location of oneself or one’s work, or the work itself, the literary work, the text, and so on, in the world, as opposed to some extra worldly, private, ethereal context”. (Said 2002: 335) In a different interview he makes the point that the “notion of secularism”, is based on the idea of “actual living beings”. (129-130)

Moreover, he asserts that it is based upon the understanding that “[M]en and women produce their own history, and therefore it must be possible to interpret that history in secular terms, under which religions are seen, you might say as a token of submerged feelings of identity...But religion has its limits in the secular world”. (ibid.) Said’s views about the place of religion in society, therefore, coincides with the concluding resolutions of the characters in Ondaatje’s novels who recognise the value of faith to human existence, but who, simultaneously, question the role that organised religion performs.

This point is reinforced by a recent study of contemporary fiction, where John McClure argues, for a re-evaluation of our understanding of postmodern fiction. His study questions the associations made between postmodern fiction and its apparent scepticism, and/or non-religious content. He introduces the thesis of a postsecular fiction and substantiates this with detailed readings of novels by contemporary writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Don De Lillo, Toni Morrison and Ondaatje. He argues that society in general is still concerned with religious practices and their concomitant exercises in spirituality, and that the writers he engages with “seek at once to evaluate the culturally dominant modes of postsecular innovation and to develop their own religiously inflected alternatives to secularism”. (McClure 2007: 7) While McClure, in addition, clarifies a notion of current religious and/or spiritual practices which he terms partial belief, I remain unconvinced of the necessity for the use of the prefix in the term he employs. I would contend that his thesis is based on a misunderstanding of the secular, and that it does not involve the absence of the religious, but that it is an understanding of that which relates to the world, without the promise of an existence beyond that. In the chapter devoted to an examination of Ondaatje’s novels, McClure states that The English Patient and Anil’s Ghost,

feature secularized characters...who turn back towards religion. Both depict the creation of fragile spiritual communities at the very edge of society. And both sketch new modes of religiously inflected seeing and being based on monastic models. But the novels also question two prevalent features of postsecular thought: an aversion to organized faith and an exclusive commitment to partial faiths and experimental communities. (163)

There are several disputable issues within this claim. The most obvious one is the suggestion of a prior, possibly natal, association with religion implied by the term “who turn back towards religion”. I differ too with his conclusion that the characters acquire a “religiously inflected seeing and being” in each of the novels. There is no evidence that any of the characters undergo a conversion to formal religion. I would suggest that the principal characters in each of the novels recognise and acknowledge the influence of the religious and the spiritual which they experience in their lives. Whatever salvation and redemption they are preoccupied with, though, relates to their selves, to other human beings and to the world, and not to the recognition of divine manipulation which determines their various destinies.

In an essay dealing with the concept of the secular imagination in contemporary society, Stathis Gourgouris makes an argument for the recognition of the idea of transformation as opposed to that of transcendence. In his conclusion he suggests that “the tradition of transcendental thinking has never offered humanity anything better than a blissful pill of oblivion, while a transgressive, transformative thinking takes one’s individual finitude as the point of departure and draws from it the energy to combat whatever forces might risk humanity’s irreversible end”. (Gourgouris 2004: 79)

There have been several assertions made about the resurgence of religious practice, particularly in postcolonial societies. For example, McClure makes much of this apparent phenomenon in his thesis about the content of current fiction and its reflection of the issues these societies are grappling with. Chetan Bhatt’s valuable analysis of the reported revival of religion in postcolonial societies offers a conclusion that differs pointedly with McClure about the role religion may or may not play. Bhatt observes the resurgence in religious practice as a modern phenomenon; as contemporary manifestations of foundationalist arguments, rather than as revivals of previous religious conventions. He suggests that these current movements are responses to the present conditions prevailing in these societies. He encapsulates this situation in the following comprehensive and insightful conclusion to his book:

the newness of authoritarian religious movements is also a demonstration of their contingent nature and thus the possibility is open for their political defeat. The political space that neofoundationalist ideologies have exploited is one that demonstrates a deep longing for justice, equality and liberation...This liberation impulse is genuine, a utopian passion that has also influenced socialism and feminism. Its tragedy is its articulation of emancipation through the themes of transcendentalism, purity, absolutism, an authoritarian masculinism, a fear of the sexual body and a will to power. Many of these themes are Enlightenment strands and their unfolding in neofoundationalist ideologies emphasizes in a different way, that we cannot turn back from the Enlightenment, even if we wanted to...Neofoundational themes of liberation and purity can be opposed by stressing the value of human impurities, human dependencies and human solidarity. (Bhatt 1997: 270-271)

It may be argued that Bhatt's concluding statements resonate with the depictions of humanity found in the novels by Ondaatje. In his own consideration of what constitutes the secular, the novelist and poet, Amit Chaudhuri, asserts,

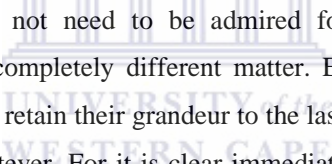
that the history of the 'secular' as a cultural, humane, interstitial space in the midst of logos, rather than logos itself, has lost out to the idea of the 'secular' as a fundamental manifestation of the rationality of the nation-state, just as the histories of modernity and cosmopolitanism in India have been subsumed in our time, for a variety of reasons, by a history of the nation. (Chaudhuri 2008: 27)

This understanding of the secular resonates with the portrayal of what may be termed secular humanist communities in In the Skin of Lion, The English Patient and Anil's Ghost. In each of these novels human compassion, care and love, occur within a luminal or interstitial domain. These exchanges arise outside of, or beyond, national boundaries and delimitations.

In each of the novels considered within the scope of this thesis, there is compelling evidence of human fallibilities in the behaviour of the various characters. In addition to this though there are numerous instances in which mutual care and compassion is portrayed. The overwhelming sense in a reading of the novels, though, is the predominance of solidarity in the relationships of affiliation and the promise of the salvation of humanity determined not by divine intervention but by the actions of humans themselves.

CONCLUSION

The subject of this thesis has been an examination of the individual self, of community and of human redemption, as it is represented in the fiction of Michael Ondaatje. His fiction is not merely a fixation on the preoccupations of post-colonial difference and assertions of subaltern perspectives. In evocative ways his work conveys the potential for a reconciliation of the splintered individual and the possibilities of new forms of community in contemporary society. By using the novel as the form in which these concerns and preoccupations are mediated, there is the concomitant suggestion that this genre of literature is salvaged from the occlusions of postmodernist strategies. Milan Kundera has commented about the erosion of aesthetic value within the novel. He states that it “is ravaged by the termites of reduction, which reduce not only the meaning of the world but also the meaning of works of art”. (Kundera 1988: 17) He offers a similar commentary in his recent seven-part essay on the novel, when he writes,



[C]haracters in novels do not need to be admired for their virtues. They need to be understood, and that is a completely different matter. Epic heroes conquer or, if they are themselves conquered, they retain their grandeur to the last breath. Don Quixote is conquered. And with no grandeur whatever. For it is clear immediately: human life as such is a defeat. All we can do in the face of that ineluctable defeat called life is to try to understand it. That – that is the *raison d’être* of the art of the novel. (Kundera 2006: 9-10)

This assertion is eloquent and compelling, yet fundamentally austere. It coincides with the assertions of Barthes that the novel “is a Death; it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientated and meaningful time”. (Barthes 1983: 52) I would argue that there may be a collapsing of philosophical resignation about human existence into a resignation about the vitality of literature and, specifically, the novel. I do not think it is completely valid to suggest, as Kundera certainly seems to do, that the novel fundamentally charts the inevitable mortality of human life.

An intriguing question which surrounds the work of Ondaatje is whether in his reconfiguring of the novel, he is merely depicting his own multicultural hybridity; a static and fetishized portrayal of the marginal figure in modern society, or whether he is in fact articulating the case of the individual, unencumbered by national affinities. It may also be possible to argue that he is offering a reconstituted aesthetic of fiction, in which new modes of identity and community are required. While his work confronts violence, death and devastation, it includes, simultaneously, the possibilities of redeeming both humanity, and the world. I would argue that these prospects of rehabilitation coincide with that of the novel as a creative enterprise and that in his manipulation of the conventions of the genre, Ondaatje offers the promise of its reconstitution.

Where some commentators have considered whether his fiction can be classified as postmodern, there have been others who have questioned the notion of a postmodern fiction and whether it does indeed exist. Hart Devitt's thesis examines the supposedly postmodern features of Ondaatje's work and contends that it conforms to "more traditional, modernist intentions", where, "the symbol of the mural is a regulating force that controls...dynamics of identity". (Devitt 1998: 85) In an essay dedicated to an examination of the state of postmodern tendencies in literature, Gerald Graff determines that it has produced two modes, namely, "the apocalyptic and the visionary". (Graff 1977: 218) He says that these two modes "may operate separately or in conjunction":

The more negative of these strains manifests itself in its purest form in the so-called 'literature of silence', a literature which breaks with the traditions of romanticism and modernism by undermining the quasi-religious awe with which these earlier movements invested the creative imagination. The more positive strain involves not only a break with the past, but an attempt to envision and create a revolutionary future. (218)

He concludes, though, that what may seem to be a "radical movement in art and culture forfeits its radicalism and impoverishes itself to the degree that it turns its back on what is valid and potentially living in the critical and moral traditions of humanism". (249) While Graff provides a valuable summation of postmodernism's, ultimately, conventional qualities, an exploration of these debates is far beyond the limitations of this modest exercise.

In the midst of these debates I am drawn instead to the theoretical approach developed by Kearney, in his study of theories of imagination, Poetics of Imagining. In this book he proclaims the radical potential inherent in the human imagination and asserts an optimistic perspective of the postmodern intervention: “If the post-modern wake of imagination is to mark a passage to other ways of imagining, rather than a dead end, our culture must devise means of reaching through the labyrinth of depthless images to the other”. (Kearney 1991: 214) Moreover, he argues that postmodernity may be separated into that which leads to nihilism, or that which leads to revitalisation. For Kearney, it is to the latter that we should direct our focus. He suggests that in attempting to bring together poetics with ethics it may be within our reach to have “...old clichés of fraternity, belonging and community be revived, empty slogans transmuted into lived conviction”. (226) I would argue that this radical potential is similarly available in Ondaatje’s fiction where the restoration of humanity and of literary expression is examined concurrently. I reiterate the claim, therefore, that Ondaatje explores and examines important moral questions about the place of fiction in society; about the reconstitution of the self and community in the world; and, about the possibilities of salvaging and redeeming humanity.

I have set out these arguments in the three specific chapters above, and sought to prove that, in the first instance, there is a recognition of the complexities of fiction and representation inherent in the act of writing. In the second instance there is the tension between history and fiction which Ondaatje is cognizant of and which he explores in his representations of historical figures in his work. I have also attempted to demonstrate the ways in which he details the development of marginal individuals and apparent hybrid communities, and the methods by which society determines the formation of new identities and new alliances, based on the premise of affiliation, rather than on ethnic and/or nationalist allegiances. There is, finally, an investigation of the philosophical concerns which occupy much of the thematic content of his novels. In his deliberate engagement with history there is the acknowledgement of it as an overwhelming presence. All of the characters in his fiction are defined, and at times, confined, by the dictates of society and institutions of power. There is, thus, no evasion of history in the novels I have discussed. The significant operation which needs to be discerned in the Ondaatje’s fiction is the distinction made between fiction and history.

It is a distinction fraught with the complexities inherent in the connections between language, story and history. He represents the historical as open, equivocal and contestable. His depiction of Bolden in Coming through Slaughter is a fictional construction not intended as a biographical portrayal. In In the Skin of a Lion, historical detail is the foundation upon which his fictional account is made. The description of the Herodotus book, The Histories, in The English Patient, conveys the sense that history is a narrative. This notion is repeated in Palipana's approach to his archeological work in Anil's Ghost.

In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison relayed a story about an old woman, a group of young people and a bird. She explained the allegorical nature of the story in the following manner:

I choose to read the bird as language and the woman as a practiced writer. She is worried about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes. Being a writer she thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency - as an act with consequences ... Language can never "pin down" slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable. Be it grand or slender, burrowing, blasting, or refusing to sanctify; whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet, the choice word, the chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction ... Word-work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference - the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives. (Morrison 1993)

I would suggest that Morrison's symbolic tale provides us with an instructive and valuable sense of the ways in which language is not only an instrument of power, but also a phenomenon possessing an inherent agency. Responding to Morrison's lecture, Jesse Matz considers that "[W]ithout what creative language does in and through the imagination, history would remain a matter of trauma; the vitality of culture would drain away, into what ignorance and violence would prefer to make of it". (Matz 2004: 166) He argues, in addition, that "Morrison's writing embodies this conviction". (ibid.) I would suggest that Ondaatje's writing performs a similar restitution through language and the imagination.

Moreover, I would argue that he regards the kinetic potential of the aesthetic as an important component of his work. In The English Patient, the narrator comments that “Madox said Odysseus never wrote a word, an intimate book. Perhaps he felt alien in the false rhapsody of art”. (TEP 1992: 241) I would offer the view that, in contrast to this, Ondaatje does not feel “alien in the false rhapsody of art”, and that his novels are indeed intimate; that they are compelling in the manner in which they deal with the physical and emotional predicaments of the characters contained within them. Despite the recognition that the art is false; that it, therefore, makes no claim as an extra-discursive reality, it is instead the rhapsodic quality of it that is more significant. My final point would be that it is this focus on the expression of sentiment that is the enduring attribute of his fiction. It is, therefore, in its reach for this emotional connection through language and the imagination, that his work shares the aspirations that Morrison clarifies in her lecture.



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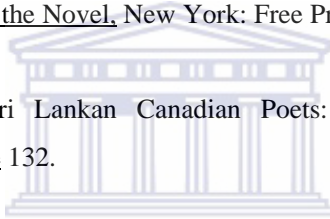
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