

Being and Representation in Michael Ondaatje's "The English Patient"

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J OY KOGAWA'S *Obasan* has been described, by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, as "a series of chronologically scrambled narrative fragments" held together by an "intricate network of recurrent images." Wong's graphic remarks can be applied with equal felicity to Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Of the dozens of "associational clusters" (Burke, *Philosophy* 29-30) that serve to unify Ondaatje's novel, none provides a better clue to its structure or thematic implications than those related to mimesis or representation. At some point in the novel, almost every character becomes preoccupied with his image in a mirror or photograph (38, 50, 52, 90), or with the loss of his shadow (197), or with the echo of his voice (250). Various characters mime or "mock" or reenact some activity or event; they struggle to recapture some "shadow of memory" (197) or "echo of childhood history" (153). Another recurring theme is the need to "map or "choreograph" or "diagram" some aspect of reality, and thus to identify some "original pattern" (193) underlying "the external world of accident and succession" (Foucault 142).

Even more insistent than the references to mirrors, shadows and photographs are those to works of art such as novels, plays, murals, and tapestries. Hana reflects that "a novel is a mirror walking down the road" (91); she, like the other characters, seems drawn by the hope that art can give objective shape or substance to experience. Kip especially seems to be adept at locating in art, substitutes for the relationships he has left behind: thus he can find, in a painting, "contemporary faces" (70) or "parental figures" (280). In fact, paintings and statues seem to provide Kip's primary means of self-definition. As he lies in Hana's arms after successfully defusing one of his bombs, for example, he begins to imagine that he is "within something,

perhaps a painting he had seen somewhere in the last year. Some secure couple in a field" (104). Like the other paintings and statues that help to inform his experience, this one provides the rudiments of a narrative within which he can begin to understand who he is.

Works of art perform a similar function for other characters in the novel, helping them to define their identities, their purposes, their relationships with others. For Hana, the novel *Kim* serves as the blueprint by which she sorts out her relationship with the English patient and Kip (111). Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath*, a double self-portrait of the artist, enables the English patient to come to an understanding of Kip as his younger self, destined eventually to supplant and destroy him (116). In these and dozens of other passages, the work of art provides the "original pattern," the paradigm or model, onto which the tentative, shifting relationships of real life can be mapped, and by which the shifting, evanescent self can be contained or substantiated. The capacity of art to give order or meaning to experience is particularly evident when Hana, as she watches Kip leave the villa for another day of bomb disposal, recalls a mural: her trepidation for him as he strides off "towards bluffs of chaos" is reflected in the fact that, just outside the city walls in the mural, "the artist's paint had crumbled away, so there was not even the security of art to provide an orchard in the far acres for the traveller leaving the castle" (273). Outside "the great maps of art" (70) there is no order, no security, nothing that can define or delimit the self, or keep it from slipping away into another time, place, or set of cultural terms.

In other passages of the novel, however, art objects serve to destabilize the characters' identities. For example, when Katharine begins to read aloud the story of Candaules and his queen, she makes it clear that she intends the story as a lesson for her husband concerning his inordinate pride in her beauty: "Are you listening, Geoffrey?" (232). As she reads, however, a second, unintended meaning begins to suggest itself, the possibility of a different "path" in life, of a self radically different from the "socialite who had married an adventurer" (230). As

the English patient puts it, the story has suddenly opened "a window to her life": jarred by "its familiarity of situation," her voice grows "wary" as she reads, "as if she were sinking within quicksand" (233). Far from helping her to contain or delimit her identity, the story opens up the possibility of new experience, new values and meanings. Instead of passively mirroring her life, as she had intended it to do, the story compels her to "a first errant step" down a path she could never have imagined without its subversive suggestion.

Similarly, though on a different ontological level, the groundwork for Kip's eventual appearance in the novel is obviously laid in large part by the "long nights" that Hana has spent reading *Kim*, coming to appreciate in Kipling's character, precisely those powers of memory and rapt concentration that will also be evinced by "the young soldier, the boy grown up, who would join them" (111). When Kip finally does make his appearance, it is as if he has stepped "out of this fiction. As if the pages of Kipling had been rubbed in the night like a magic lamp. A drug of wonders" (94).

If characters and events in *The English Patient* are depicted at times as having a fictional source or inspiration, and thus as representations of representations, they are presented even more frequently as re-enactments that derive their meaning or significance from some remembered character or event in the novel itself. *The English Patient* can be described, in a phrase borrowed from J. Hillis Miller, as a "pattern of eddying repetition" (34), constantly reduplicating some incident from an earlier page. So pervasive is the "pattern of recurrent motifs" (Miller 30-31), in fact, that Ondaatje's novel, also, can be characterized as a "self-generated web" (Miller 25), a "chain of repetitions" in which no specific incident or episode can ever be identified as "the original ground, the basis on which the others may be interpreted" (Miller 39). As a result, meaning or being or identity is always deferred or displaced. *The English Patient* should be regarded, then, not so much as a representation, than as a simulacrum: a system of signs which, in Baudrillard's words, is "never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (*Simulacra* 6).

The novel "evolves backwards" on itself most obviously through its obsessive repetition of certain key terms or images. In addition to the many references to mirrors and shadows and echoes, to photographs or lightning flashes or "sprays" of light from various sources, there are dozens of other such "networks" in the novel: recurring references, for example, to gardens or orchards; to boats, rafts, or barges; to people as "solitary planets," "planetary strangers," or "another constellation"; to "warrior-saints," "angel-warriors," or "despairing saints"; to anonymity or namelessness; to "invented" cities or armies. Such references give unity to the novel's "scrambled narrative fragments." They also contribute to the feeling that the present is actually only a replica or reenactment, and that genuine identity or meaning is always to be found elsewhere, in some experience remembered from the past, some sort of "original pattern" or prototype. Whatever significance may attach, for example, to the many images of walls, it obviously resides not in any specific instance of the image but in the entire "network" or "cluster" to which the image belongs: this image, like so many others in the novel, is constantly emptied or filled at the novel's "well of memory."

In addition to this "backwards evolution" of images and key thematic terms, entire scenes or episodes in the novel are presented as re-enactments or repetitions, meaningful because they echo some cognate incident from the past. For example, the scene in which Hana climbs onto the table at her twenty-first birthday party and sings "The Marseillaise" (269) recalls Caravaggio's account, near the beginning of the novel (53), of her identical behavior at an earlier birthday party in Toronto. Whatever meaning is finally ascribed to Hana's performance depends in large part on the fact that the performance repeats an earlier version of the event. Practically every episode in the novel conjures up a past, analogous occurrence of this sort; indeed, some incidents seem to have no significance beyond such reverberation. The carafe of spilled wine that prompts Caravaggio's first "flashback" (58-59) and the chemical burn by which Kip is "triggered back" at the end of the novel (299) seem to function almost exclusively as events that "[bring] the

stone out of the water and [allow] it to move back within the air" (300). Even when an incident has independent significance, however, its secondary, referential meaning is usually emphasized. The English patient's satisfaction in matching the Bedouin guns (20-21) and Kip's pleasure in having his back scratched by Hana (225-26) are both derived from childhood associations. Like the imagery in the novel, such episodes belong to a whole "network" or "cluster" of interrelated incidents, a "chain of repetitions" in which "no episode serves as the point of origin . . . but each is, by reason of its analogy to other episodes, a repetition of them" (Miller 33-34).

Nor does the "chain of repetitions" end with the events actually depicted in the novel. There are repeated indications that these incidents too are destined to be recycled into memory, at some indefinite point in the future, by yet further analogous occurrences. Caravaggio, we are told, will recall, "years from now," the friendship he once had with Kip (208); Kip will be reminded "years later" of "the months he spent with Hana and Caravaggio and the English patient north of Florence in the Villa San Giralamo" (299); and Hana, "in the future," will remember "the line of movement Kip's body followed out of her life" (282). Passages such as these reveal that the events of the novel, rather than coming to some final, definitive conclusion, will reverberate indefinitely, conferring significance on a whole succession of subsequent incidents.

If incidents in the novel all resonate with the memory of "a lost reality," if they give the impression, much of the time, of "things which have already transpired, a time which has already occurred" (Baudrillard, *Writings* 155), a similar claim can also be made for the characters. At some point in their relationship with one another, they all wind up taking on an identity from the past, being cast in the role of a father (90-91), a childhood *ayah* (225-26), or an old friend (247). As someone who has "grown up an outsider," Hana realizes, Kip is particularly adept at the art of finding substitutes or replacements: he is able to "switch allegiances" or "replace loss" with ease (280); he can find "parental figures" in a painting (280) or "English fathers" in men like Lord Suffolk and the English patient (217). The

narrator also makes it clear that Kip's relationship with Hana is only one in an on-going series of relations: Kip will continue, "all through his life," to be "drawn outside the family for such love. The platonic intimacy, or at times the sexual intimacy, of a stranger" (226). Like the incidents and images in the novel, therefore, the characters and their relationships also reverberate "backward and forward indefinitely" (Miller 34), to refer "by way of anticipation or recollection" (Miller 39) to a whole network of cognate characters and relationships. In turn, their own meanings depend on mimetic or referential associations.

The characters in the novel also have a distinct gift for merger and identification, a readiness to be "colonized" by all sorts of alien "character roles" (Booth 268). As they are influenced by art objects, the characters become "immersed in the lives of others" (12): they imagine that they are "travelling with the old wanderer in *Kim*" (93) or that they might "lean forward to rest" on the "frail neck" of some "painted fresco's royalty" (70-71). In their everyday lives, they at times think of themselves as though they were "the young boy in the story" (111) or "a hero in a painting" (104). Even the English patient is forced to concede finally that his claims to "self-sufficiency and privacy" are illusory (197), that human beings are in reality "communal histories, communal books." "We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes," he concludes, "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" (261).

Even more striking than their tendency to take on fictional roles and identities is the readiness of these characters to immerse themselves in one another's experience, to be "drag[ged]" by their "listening heart[s]" into a friend's or lover's "well of memory" (4). The relationship between Hana and Kip or between Katharine and the English patient is distinguished especially by "the intimate exchange and echo of childhood history" between them (153), and by the discovery that "in lovemaking there can be a whole civilization, a whole country ahead of them" (225). During their "verbal nights" together in his tent, Kip takes Hana on tours of "his country of five rivers," guiding her into "the great gurdwara" or "through the sil-

ver door to the shrine where the Holy Book lies under a canopy of brocades," walking her "beside a pool to the tree shrine where Baba Gujhaji, the first priest of the temple, is buried. A tree of superstitions, four hundred years old" (270-71). In a similar manner — "word by word, bed by bed" — Katharine reconstructs her "childhood gardens" for the English patient: "the December ice over the fish pond, the creak of rose trellises" (161-62).

So successful is this process of assimilation that it becomes difficult to determine at times precisely where one character's experience ends and another's begins. The English patient is convinced that he was present in the school gymnasium the day Katharine received her childhood vaccination (158), and that he "stood in the room with the two of [them]" the night she and Geoffrey Clifton met for the first time (258-59). He even has trouble distinguishing whether the "English gardens" he remembers from childhood are his own gardens or whether they are Katharine's (236).

The closing paragraph of the novel, in which Kip's hand "swoops down" to catch the fork his daughter has just dropped at their dinner table in India, emphasizes the communal or referential nature of consciousness. Sitting in his garden prior to this scene, Kip imagines that he is actually watching Hana as she goes about her daily life in Canada: "her bending down to children, a white fridge door behind her, a background of noiseless tram cars" (300). When he suddenly "swoops down" at the table, therefore, he is reaching out to catch both his daughter's dropped fork, and the glass that Hana has just dislodged from her cupboard (302). Though he is apparently firmly ensconced again in his traditional cultural roles, seated at a table at which "all [the] hands are brown" (301), it is obvious that Kip has not achieved the state of complete self-containment that he seeks: people and events around him still function, in considerable part, as signs or substitutes for some absent reality, for some portion of himself that has been lost in time.

Considering this emphasis on cultural and psychological assimilation, it is hardly surprising that throughout the novel, the body is described as a text or ledger progressively marked by

successive experiences. The English patient describes human beings as “communal histories, communal books” (261). Hana’s body is said to be “full of sentences and moments” as she emerges from reading one of her novels (121), and “full of stories and situations” as she lies in bed each night reviewing the experiences of the past day (36). These “moments before sleep,” in particular, are periods of “involuntary recollection” and assimilation for Hana, as she “leap[s] across the fragments of the day, bringing each moment into the bed with her like a child with schoolbooks and pencils” (35).

The identification of the body as a text is carried to its furthest extent in the case of Katharine Clifton. The English patient is said to have “translated” her figuratively into the “text of the desert” that he works on in Cairo (235-36). Before leaving her behind in the Cave of Swimmers, the English patient ornaments Katharine’s body with the ceremonial saffrons, ochres, and blues that he copies from the “one cave painting” (248): “Herbs and stones and light and ash of acacia to make her eternal” (261). Undertaken initially to make her “immune to the human” (248) and thus insure her safety until he can return for her, the inscription of Katharine’s body symbolically translates her even more emphatically into a “text of the desert”: “Such glory of this country she enters now and becomes part of,” the English patient declares (261). Her “disappear[ance] into landscape” completed (139), her body is now “totally imprinted by history” (Foucault 148).

If the characters in *The English Patient* are cumulatively inscribed by “stories and situations” from the past, so also, of course, is the body of the text itself. The text follows a “pattern of eddying repetition” not only in its formal design, but also in its intertextual relations, constantly calling attention to some theme or motif recycled from Kipling or Stendhal or James Barrie to remind us, in the words of Baudrillard, that “these are things which have already transpired, a time which has already occurred” (*Writings* 155). Like the “plant-odoured smoke” that the English patient smells “sidling” up from the villa gardens (124), or the “bouquet” of fragrances that Hana’s father teaches her to savor at the base of a dog’s paw (8), *The English*

Patient offers a "concentration of hints" regarding its own background or origins, hints that it could perhaps be "evolved backwards" to some "original identity," some "timeless and essential secret" (Foucault 142).

Of all the recurrent motifs in the novel, the imagery of regression or backtracking is probably the most pervasive. From the scene near the beginning of the novel in which Hana is described as "walk[ing] backwards" out of the villa library, "stepping on her own footprints for safety" (12), to the one near the end in which Kip heads south on his Triumph, "travelling against the direction of the invasion, as if rewinding the spool of war" (290), the characters seem continually to be trying to rewind or evolve something back. They struggle, for example, to "unthread" out of the English patient the truth about his past (247-48), to establish the "original" historical identity of his sick room in the villa (56-58), and to restore to its "original" identity "the maze of wires" in a bomb (239). These allusions to figurative "rewinding" or "unthreading" imply that the "exact essence" of things, "their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities" (Foucault 142) may be discovered if one is patient enough in "choreographing" all the "convolutions of their knots" (101).

The struggle to arrive at what Foucault describes as "the inviolable identity of . . . origin" is also evident in the repeated references to fathers or father-substitutes, to "family traditions" or "the family name." Does an individual have a distinct personal identity of his own, or is identity derived from genealogy? Katharine and her husband Geoffrey Clifton are defined primarily by a "family lineage going back to Canute" (237). Though Katharine for a time can identify with the English patient's passion for the desert, in the end "family traditions and courteous ceremony and old memorized poems" define her existence: "She would have hated to die without a name" (170).

In contrast to Katharine, the English patient regards distinctions of race and class as "walls" or "barriers" (155), as a source of distrust and conflict (138). His main goal in life is "to erase [his] name and the place [he] had come from"; he wants "not to belong to anyone, to any nation" (139). The question, of

course, is whether any individual can ever succeed in becoming, purely and simply, “his own invention” (246). Kenneth Burke explains what he refers to as the “paradox of substance” (*Grammar* 21) by asking, if the meaning or identity of an object really does always reside in “something *outside* the thing, *external* to it” (*Grammar* 23), then what would the pursuit of “self-sufficiency and privacy” amount to finally but complete non-being or non-identity (*Grammar* 35)?

Though the English patient ultimately comes to represent the most complete embodiment of absence and negation in the novel, he is hardly alone in having experienced the spiritual deprivation of being emotionally or psychologically “disassembled” (158). The many references to “rewinding” and “unthreading” indicate that for these characters, identity must be “evolved backwards” from the surviving “hints” or “traces.” When Hana re-enacts her hopscotch game (14-15) or her childhood piano piece (62-64), she is trying to recover some “fraction” of herself left behind in the past. When Caravaggio goes back, over and over again, to the night of his arrest and interrogation, he is struggling to overcome a dismemberment that in his case is physical as well as psychical. All the characters in the novel have suffered some sort of dismemberment, for example, the loss of a father or lover or unborn child; and they are all driven by the need somehow to “reassemble” (126) or reintegrate themselves.

The characters’ urgent need for self-integration is evident in their preoccupation with their shadows and mirror images, and with the echoes of their own voices. When Hana “peers” into her mirror, for example, she struggles to recognize her image, “the little portrait of herself as if within a clasped brooch” (52). The characters are more successful when they search for integrating self-images in the art objects by which they are colonized. Kip and Hana are fascinated by the “character-roles” they find in fiction, paintings and murals: “the old wanderer in *Kim*” (93), the “green-clothed boy” from *Peter Pan* (197), the “Queen of Sheba conversing with King Solomon” (70), a “secure couple in a field” (104) — these provide the illusion of a fixed identity or selfhood. The synecdochic relation between the characters

in the novel and their environment, between their shattered human psyches and the shattered bridges and buildings that surround them, is obvious. The characters struggle to "map" or "choreograph" their environment; they want to understand "how the pieces fit" (121). One reason Kip works so fervently to restore bombs and mines to their "original pattern" (193) is that he, cut off from his ancestral roots, longs for "the inviolable identity of [his] origin" (Foucault 142). By disclosing "forms of structure" in the bombs he dismantles, Kip asserts the possibility of structure or connection in his own disjointed life. Only after he encounters a bomb that baffles all attempts to "diagram" or "blueprint" or "realign" it (282-87), does he turn back finally to the enigma of his own identity, to the task of rewinding or realigning his own life.

Of all the characters, the English patient has the most extensive knowledge of history, geography, literature, religion, and anthropology. When lost in the desert, he claims that all he needs is "the name of a small ridge, a local custom, a cell of this historical animal, and the map of the world would slide into place" (19). He is able to identify the guns brought to him by the Bedouin (20-21); he recognizes his sick room as the one in which Poliziano and Lorenzo and Pico della Mirandola once assembled (56-58); and he locates the Gilf Kebir using a map of India from the frontispiece of *Kim* (167). So extensive is his learning that he seems to transcend time, place, and ethnic origin; he feels equally at home among the English, the Bedouin, and the ancient Greeks or Egyptians (139). When he concludes, at the end of his last torturous narrative sequence, that human beings are in fact "communal histories, communal books" (261), he is thinking of his own composite personality and cultural identity. If, then, we accept the traditional Aristotelian view that equates being with knowledge, understanding, and increased consciousness, the English patient is the character who has most completely developed his human potentialities. According to Caravaggio, that is why the other characters are so strongly attracted to the English patient: like him, they are driven by an instinctive need "to know things" (121).

And yet, despite being so fully developed and actualized in the Aristotelian sense, the English patient is also the most thoroughly negated or nullified character in the novel. He has been stripped of his memory, of his sense of personal identity, of his distinguishing physical features. The other characters think of him as a corpse (62, 93), a ghost (28, 48), or "that dead knight at Ravenna" (96, 135); and it becomes increasingly clear, as Caravaggio "unthreads [his] story out of him" (247), that he tends to think of himself in the same way. The English patient narrates much of his story in the third person (244-50), "giving himself only the voice of the watcher, the listener, the 'he'" (172). In the last section of his narrative, he appears to identify with the god of death, recounting the first meeting between Katharine and Geoffrey Clifton as though he had been a disembodied, spectral witness to the event (258-59). The English patient becomes practically a synonym for absence or anonymity. In order to "slip across borders" as freely as he does (139), assuming one new cultural identity after another, he must "erase [his] name and the place [he] had come from" (139). The English patient is able to identify so completely with Herodotus, Kipling, or Stendhal, he is able to immerse himself in Katharine's English gardens or Poliziano's Italian Renaissance, because, like the demon lover that he eventually comes to identify with (260), he has no defining substance of his own, no containing or delimiting skin (117). The process of accumulating more and more character-roles or cultural identities is paradoxically a process of self-depletion or self-effacement, a process that Pamela Cooper describes as "the evacuation of subjectivity" (372).

As the most ethnically and culturally depleted character in the novel, the English patient shows the least regard for conventional temporal or spatial distinctions. He shuffles back and forth between one point in space or time and another, always collapsing or super-imposing those points: he mistakes Caravaggio, for example, for his old archaeological companion Madox (247), and confuses the guns he is matching for the Bedouin with the cards in a childhood game of Pelmanism (20-21). In "eras[ing] [his] name and the place [he] had come

from," the English patient has simultaneously erased every other spatial or temporal coordinate, freeing himself completely from the constrictions of a phenomenal, time-bound existence.

One indication that the English patient has somehow managed to extricate himself from the grip of time is the fact that he is more or less immune to the genealogical compulsion which drives the other characters. Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio are so preoccupied with time and genealogy, with memories of their childhoods, their homelands, or their lost fathers, because they are still committed to a phenomenal, time-bound sense of identity that nullifies the past, robbing them of whatever meaning or substance they have been able to accrue. Haunted by feelings of psychic fragmentation and alienation, by the "mood of a lost reality" (Baudrillard, *Writings* 155), they are always searching for some way of containing or reassembling themselves, some way of reversing the flow of time and getting back to the "invulnerable identity of their origin."

If Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio remain trapped in "the long, meaningless attrition of time" (Kermode 169), how is it that the English patient has succeeded in escaping? His own explanation is that the desert, like a "trompe l'oeil of time and water" (259), gradually erodes a person's sense of temporal or spatial "demarcation" (18), his sense of national, cultural, or ethnic distinction (138-39). On his long, solitary treks, the English patient tells us, he would come to feel "as if he had walked under the millimeter of haze just above the inked fibres of a map," entering "that pure zone between land chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller" (246). In this strange intermediate space, it was possible to become "unconscious of ancestry" at last, to forget one's determinate, time-bound, phenomenal self and become "one's own invention" (247).¹

Although the English patient associates his "pure zone" with the shifting, indeterminate topography of the desert, it also has obvious affinities with the realm of literary narration, and with the mode of being that Frank Kermode refers to as the *aevum* (70-73). One of the main attractions of narrative, in Kermode's

view, is its power of “temporal integration” (46, 71), its capacity to “charge the present moment with the intangible powers of past and future” (172). In contrast to the depleting, fragmenting mode of time that holds sway in the phenomenal world, a narrative allows access to a “time-defeating” or “time-redeeming” mode of duration (Kermode 52), “a mode in which things can be perpetual without being eternal” (Kermode 72). Genevieve Lloyd associates this mode with novels, such as *The English Patient*, in which past experiences are repeatedly superimposed on those of the narrative present, thereby short-circuiting the linear, chronological sequence. Lloyd maintains that such novels re-create in the reader a sense of being “situated outside time,” with “no fear of the future, no fear of death” (141). In short, such a novel takes us into the realm which Edward Said associates with “demonic artists” such as Adrian Leverkühn, a realm in which “the beginning and the end are finally one” (184-85).

By breaking through to this “time-defeating” narrative mode of experience, the English patient escapes the constrictions of a phenomenal existence. He can then immerse himself in the atemporal, archetypal world of Homer, Herodotus, and Kipling, and in the non-sequential, ceremonial time of Bedouin ritual and myth. He also plunges over and over again into his “well of memory,” dredging up fragment after fragment of his obsessive, doom-ridden romance with Katharine. It is in the process of reclaiming these memories, of circling back again and again to certain “timeless” moments in their relationship, that the English patient gradually frees himself from his specific time-bound identity and comes to identify instead with the self that narrates, the self that incorporates in one simultaneous space all the cumulative experiences of lost time. In this capacity as “the watcher, the listener, the ‘he’” (172), the English patient is to be identified, not with the determinate historical personality of Almasy, but with an indeterminate, archetypal figure such as “the jackal with one eye that looks back and one eye that regards the path you consider taking” (259).² In this capacity, he symbolizes precisely “what stands outside verbal temporality” (Said 186), putting an end to the “infinite regression and progression” of time (Miller 34).

NOTES

- 1 Although I am more interested in the similarities between *The English Patient* and those "novels of memory" discussed by Lloyd, there are obvious similarities also between the English patient's "pure zone" and the "heterotopian zone of postmodern writing" explored by McHale (43-58).
- 2 This is not to dispute the connection between Ondaatje's fictional character, and the historical Almsy, which has been convincingly explored by Tötösy de Zepetnek. I am suggesting merely that the character in Ondaatje's novel refuses to be "contained" by this or any other determinate identity. Even after Caravaggio identifies him as Almsy, the English patient continues to insist on his right to shift narrative point of view and to take on alternative voices and identities.

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