

# The English Patient and His Narrator: “Opener of the Ways”

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According to the desire of my heart I have come forth from the Island of Nesersert, and I have extinguished the fire...

Give thou unto me my mouth that I may speak with it. I guide my heart at its season of flame and of night.

— E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Papyrus of Ani: The Book of the Dead*

Countisbury and Area. Mapped by R. Fones. Drawn by desire of Mr. James Halliday.

— Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

**M**ASTER OF REFLEXIVE NARRATIVE, Michael Ondaatje has emerged as a modern-day Chaucer who reveals the secret lives of his characters in their acts of storytelling. But as Roland Barthes has argued, storytelling also reveals readers or, more correctly, “undoes” them through the act of decoding texts. In Peter Brooks’s terms, the reader is “virtually a text, a composite of all that he [or she] has read, or heard read, or imagined as written” (19). What animates us in this undoing of readers, Brooks continues, is desire: “the passion *for* meaning and the passion *of* meaning” (19). In Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, such desire is assuaged and meaning captured only at the end of the novel when readers recognize the distinct identity of the speaker — not of the enigmatic and mysterious patient, but of Ondaatje’s Narrator.

Despite the voluminous scholarship on *The English Patient*, little has been said about Ondaatje’s Narrator. Some critics have even referred to Ondaatje as “the utterer” (Heble 110), arguing that his novels are as much about Ondaatje as about his characters.<sup>1</sup> Tom Penner, in fact, makes no mention of the Narrator, referring instead to Herodotus as a “silent fifth” character (81). But it is Ondaatje’s Narrator who is the fifth presence — relatively silent, but not entirely so. Since Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of*

*Fiction*, it has been rudimentary to distinguish between the real author (the “real man”) and the implied author (“the inferred, ideal, literary, created version”) as well as between the implied author and the narrator (74-75). So it seems neither radical nor problematic to read Ondaatje’s Narrator as “a demonstrable, recognizable entity immanent to the narrative itself” (Chatman 33) as opposed to the novel’s implied author revealed in the “design of the whole” (148).

However, *The English Patient* reflexively complicates this binary distinction between implied author and Narrator by incorporating the stories of both character-narrators and author-narrators, the latter filtered through the former. That is, readers are hosted not only by the Narrator’s story, roughly co-terminus with the pages of the novel, but also by oral stories within that written story, stories told by one character to another. Characters, in turn, are reading novels told by other narrators and penned by authors such as Kipling and Herodotus. How do readers, eager to know and to be undone through the knowing, navigate the complex fabric of oral and written narratives?

The key, we will argue, is the Narrator, who for most of the novel remains effaced until his self-disclosing confession about the young nurse, Hana: “She 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” (301). According to Ondaatje, this intrusive comment marks “a complete shift in design” (qtd. in Stone 251),<sup>2</sup> a shift that deliberately reveals the Narrator and the desire that prompts his storytelling moment. It is also a “shift in design,” we will argue, that ascribes to the Narrator the attributes of an oral storyteller. Readers, as a consequence, are fashioned into listeners. So just as the patient and his oral stories are absorbed and interpreted by his three companions, readers are drawn into the warp and weave of the Narrator’s oral tale: “that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller” (*English* 246) — in other words, that dynamic and fluid place between reality and its translation where (like the patient) we can become “our best selves” (246).

In this essay on *The English Patient* we will offer two arguments. We first claim that there is an analogy between the burn patient as a self-fashioned Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead, and the novel’s Narrator, who functions as an “Opener of the Ways” for readers. The patient’s sequence of stories serves as an “ebony pool” in which an ensemble of characters — Kirpal Singh, David Caravaggio, and Hana Lewis — find reflected their own, subterranean lives. In the same way, the Narrator’s account offers a reflective surface that allows readers to ponder complex

truths about desire and storytelling. This analogy between the patient and the Narrator provides a springboard for our second claim, that Ondaatje challenges readers to consider acts of narration as expressions of desire and “a kind of wisdom that itself concerns transmission: how we pass on what we know about how life goes forward” (Brooks 9). Such wisdom comes with this novel in two kinds of narrative moments: the transmission of stories between the patient and his companions, and, more importantly, the interaction between Narrator and readers, so that when the narrating event has ended and the temporal narration is (seemingly) completed, readers consummate the novel through their own retrospection and undoing.

### Interlacing Stories and Lives: Ondaatje’s Narrative Craft

For Michael Ondaatje, the novel is a forum wherein the author engages in an argument *through* his characters, *with* himself. He notes how each successive novel is a revisiting of what he left incomplete in the preceding one (Welch; see also Dafoe 16). Analyzed in the context of Ondaatje’s earlier novels, *Coming Through Slaughter* and *In the Skin of a Lion*, it becomes clear that the Narrator in *The English Patient* marks a significant advance in style and theme; the later Narrator solves the conundrum generated in the earlier novels. *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) is structured as a mosaic of historical and fictional accounts of cornetist Charles “Buddy” Bolden using varied centres of consciousness: Bolden himself, his life-long friend Webb, and various friends and lovers in Bolden’s life — or this is what readers initially assume. But in the closing pages of *Coming Through Slaughter* we learn that the fragmentary record of Bolden’s identity registers more fundamentally the identity of the Narrator, whose presence is kept hidden until this point. There is a kinship, the Narrator believes, between himself and Bolden, both of whom would stand in front of mirrors and lacerate their bodies as if to defile people “we did not wish to be” (*Coming* 133). But such kinship may exist only in the Narrator’s imagination as he attempts to “think in [Bolden’s] brain and body” (134). The narratives that the reader believed were “privileged” — those of Bolden’s own experiences — are in fact fabrications by an unconnected individual who is trying to enter into the musician’s mental and physical world. How true these stories are, generated seventy years after the events themselves<sup>3</sup> and based on the thinnest scattering of historical evidence, is open to question. Since on the final page it is impossible to discern whether the consciousness is

Bolden's or the Narrator's, the very authenticity that readers admired up to this point is undermined.

How to retain a sense of authenticity and immediacy that a Narrator can disrupt? Ondaatje attempts a solution in *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987). The novel opens and closes with a young girl listening and asking questions of a man who attempts to carry "various corners" of the story "in his arms" (Preface). As Gordon Gamlin notes, the novel is framed so that we understand that the entire account is "gathered" from discussions between Patrick and Hana Lewis (Gamlin 69). But this gathering of corners is performed by an effaced Narrator whose presence is marked only by the framing of the book via the rhetorical setting. In other words, the bulk of the novel is a retelling of events, a written narrative based on the stories told by Patrick to Hana on the long road to Marmora. As in *Coming Through Slaughter* there is a "doubling" of temporal events, with Patrick's relationships between Clara and Alice becoming narrative moments some years later. But this narrative occasion is not clear to readers until the closing pages, when they are then able to identify the situation captured in the half page of italics that opens the novel.

Despite this "trick" at the end, Ondaatje is successful at crafting a coherent centre of consciousness in Patrick Lewis. Ironically, the character who holds in his hands the fate (or stories) of all others is the very man who is called "the most unverbale of men" by his daughter (*English* 296). Facing the choice between silence and isolation on the one hand, and speech and human community on the other, Patrick realizes he has always been "alien, the third person in the picture" (*Skin* 156). There is a hollowness about such isolation. Patrick can almost hear himself rattle from the space between himself and other human beings. However, when he meets Clara, and later Alice, he becomes "aligned"; he falls into a story that bridges that "gap of love" (157). Instead of remaining "a watcher," he will receive the skins of wild animals and take responsibility for the story (157).<sup>4</sup> In truth, Patrick is driven to take such a path, for in *telling* his life he *makes meaning* of it. Only the best art, he realizes, can order "the chaotic tumble of events" (146).

If readers are able to forget the Narrator's presence, it is in part because Patrick's effort to make a story of his life is so compelling, and in part because Ondaatje emphasizes the power of storytelling itself. As Gamlin argues, the private lives of marginalized characters (mostly immigrant workers) are given voice through oral narratives, which allow them to "overcome the danger of being obliterated by official histories" (69). Ondaatje clearly values oral narrative,<sup>5</sup> using it structurally and themati-

cally in such a way as to avoid the problem of *Coming through Slaughter*, wherein readers may feel duped by the story rather than drawn into it. This Narrator does not shatter the reader's sense of authenticity and immediacy precisely because he, like the readers, is not omniscient, but rather has "shifting limited access" (using Seymour Chatman's term; 216). That is, the Narrator's understanding is dependent upon the oral narratives of characters he "gathers" together.

In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje fuses the strengths of his previous narrators. As in *Coming Through Slaughter*, this Narrator deliberately self-discloses in the final pages of the novel. He (our choice of male referent is deliberate) also identifies himself as a "writer" in the business of representing events. But rather than omnisciently surveying the drama from a distance, he is dependent upon the disclosure of characters for his information. Such disclosure takes the form of stories exchanged between characters (who thereby function as narrators with a small "n") or interior monologues within characters. In this way, the Narrator reflects the technique of *In the Skin of a Lion* as he unobtrusively allows characters to tell their stories or, more accurately, "gathers" their stories together in his own narrative. It is vital that the Narrator gather these stories, since Ondaatje's characters are developed "from the inside out" (qtd. in Slopen 48) and so are accessible only insofar as they are speakers or storytellers.

As in the previous novels, this Narrator functions on two temporal levels. The narrated events occur in the later spring and summer of 1945. It seems, at first, that readers enter a fixed, stable point in time wherein Kirpal Singh or Kip, David Caravaggio, Hana Lewis, and the burn patient come together for a few brief weeks, then are driven apart. But the date — 1945 — is not fixed. Instead, it is a fluid marker in a continuum of texts and stories that stretch back to Herodotus's tales of the Persian Wars before him. The English patient's stories are part of this *narrated* event of 1945. But the *narrating* event is some fourteen years later,<sup>6</sup> when Hana is thirty-four and living in "her own country" and Kip (now a doctor with a wife and two children) is living in his. Ondaatje refers to this structure as "double time," wherein 1945 is the *topic* but feels like the present (qtd. in Stone 251). Readers are not aware of the temporal slippage until the closing pages of the novel, which explains, in part, why it is so difficult to recognize the Narrator's voice that weaves into the narrating voices of the characters. The end point of the novel is therefore not Kip's departure in August 1945 but the end of the Narrator's tale in 1959.<sup>7</sup>

Viewing events within this "double time" creates several challenges

for readers. It is understood that the idyllic days in 1945 are fragile and fleeting from the very first because the death of the patient is announced as the novel begins. Such foreknowledge could create an ironic rift between readers and the patient. Ondaatje's temporal layering also makes it impossible for the Narrator to have known the patient (just as the Narrator in *Coming through Slaughter* could not have known Bolden). Such centrifugal pressures (or fault lines) are counterbalanced by the design of the Narrator, who in maintaining the oral quality of the characters' stories, allows the past events of 1945 to feel like the present — unfinished and unmediated. As a writer, separate and distinct from the four characters, the Narrator makes his presence explicitly known (unlike the Narrator in *In the Skin of a Lion*) because he seeks a relationship with his readers. He functions more as an intermediary and — this is Ondaatje's "trick" — more like a *storyteller in the oral tradition*. *The English Patient* therefore functions not as a metanarrative but, and more precisely, a meta-oral narrative.

The remainder of this essay thus turns on the nature or dynamics of oral narrative. It is appropriate, therefore, that we identify those dynamics before proceeding.<sup>8</sup> In the oral tradition, a story is not told until some trigger in the present situation calls for it (Bauman 2). The teller senses a need on the part of the listener; the audience might ask a question or pose a problem. This leads to a second dynamic: "*the teller is always the protagonist*" (Haswell 187). No matter what the subject of the story is, the teller sets out to resolve a need through his/her story. That need goes beyond wanting to be entertained. The listener can position him/herself in various ways: being schooled by a master, critiquing an alternative, reflecting on a possibility. Third, listeners "open up their lacks and misfortunes to the healing charm of the teller's story" (188). Oral tales change over time because the circumstances change. But the complicity of the teller and listener ensures that the tale is never meaningless (189). Fourth, the storyteller always takes a chance — of misinterpretation, of disbelief, of rejection, of ridicule, of self revelation. But the deeper risk is that the story won't work as a story (190). It may not meet the need or fill the lack in the listeners. It might not bridge the gaps or "faultlines" that exist between teller and listener — conflicts in the telling moments that are revealed as the story unfolds (190). Despite such possibilities for failure, the teller can make his/her story work by convincing listeners that the tale emerges out of personal experience, leading to hard-earned wisdom (190). And the final dynamic: "The telling itself tells a story ... and that story is the *ongoing life history of the teller*" (190). The story can be told only if

the teller's experience can meet the present need of the audience. Telling the tale allows the teller to continue to grow as a person; it adds to his or her sense of self, corroborates his or her identity. Once it ceases to do that, the teller will cease to tell that tale. As Richard Haswell summarizes: "The stories we choose to tell, the way we tell them, the position we form for ourselves in telling them, and the particular experience we project as an answer to the needs of our listeners all fit the image we are creating of ourselves traveling through life" (191).

### The Patient-Narrator as Anubis Figure

The travel metaphor is an apt one for the four characters in *The English Patient*. Fate has thrown them together in this temporary oasis where (significantly) they feel themselves inside a story, or perhaps a painting (see 94, 104, 116). They are refugees from the war, all of them wounded. The characters assume the functions of both storyteller and audience, hoping that stories will record thoughts and feelings, reveal past events, even divulge identity. But stories have a far more restorative power, marking the characters' chances to break free of the alienation that comes with trauma. Just as Hana reads so that she can feel she was "immersed in the lives of others" (12), just as Kip is overwhelmed by the need to touch something human (102), stories are the avenue whereby the characters are able to fall into the arms of a stranger — in this case, the patient — who *as a stranger* "can break upon your emotions more than someone of your own blood" (90). This situation — characters meeting, then becoming aware of their need to reform and re-enter a community — is the "trigger" for the series of stories that comprises the narrated event.

All of the characters in the novel have stories to tell. Those stories prove revelatory, though often in ways the tellers do not intend. Much could be gleaned from studying Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio as storytellers. But here we must focus on the patient as the primary character-narrator.

No one understands the danger and power of words better than the patient, who fell in love with a voice recounting the story of Candaules and Gyges (see 144, 233). Physically the most damaged, the patient becomes a still centre that draws in the others. Though immobile, his ability to tell stories allows him to "take off in any direction" (120), so much so that Caravaggio notes, "we're in a huge field when we talk to that guy" (121). More exactly, each character finds him/herself in a different field, because the patient recounts his stories differently, depending upon the

specific trigger from his listeners. Hana, for instance, quietly accompanies her patient during his nightly ramblings to understand what brought him to this point, but also to find refuge in him. She travels with him “like a squire” (135). At other times she thinks of him as her “despairing saint” in need of her protection (45). In both cases, she obviously envies him as the protagonist of his tales; there was “something about him she wanted to learn, grow into, and hide in” (52). Unlike Hana, who is uninterested in the patient’s identity (Penner 80), Caravaggio needs to connect the mystery of the patient’s name to the saga of his own arrest and torture. Initially viewing the patient as his personal antagonist, Caravaggio induces what he believes will be self-incriminating explanations by administering continuous doses of morphine to open “a further door” to the patient’s past (247). Kip’s interests at first seem less demanding, less personal; with the patient he discusses weaponry, fuses, and the Virgilian man (88-89). But Singh, called “Kip” (a hybrid of Kipling and Kim, as noted by Don Randall and J.U. Jacobs), seeks tutelage from his “Uncle” in his desire to assimilate into his adopted culture.

Perhaps from self-delusion, physical trauma, painful recovery, or his habitual choice to “sink below the surface” (238), the patient only gradually remembers events, only slowly understands his actions. Herein lies a profound paradox: the patient tells his stories not to reveal his identity but to understand it. As Ondaatje explains, “He doesn’t understand what’s happened to him until he starts to tell it” (qtd. in Taylor). In the act of telling, his understanding (of himself, of his love for Katharine) gradually deepens. Like Patrick Lewis in *In the Skin of a Lion*, the patient assumes the role of reader (or co-reader), decoding the “sentences” of his life along with his fellow characters.

At San Girolamo there are deep fault lines in the situation, fault lines that surface in substories, or stories embedded within the primary tale (Haswell 189). There are the fault lines between Caravaggio (tortured prisoner) and Almásy (German collaborator), and between Hana (who would hide her past) and the patient (who would not allow her to languish in isolation). Ultimately, however, all four characters “open up their lacks and misfortunes to the healing charm of the teller’s story” (188). Let us consider Hana as the first example. As a nurse, her identity is grounded in her capacity to heal and nurture. But war has ravaged Hana so that even her ability to nurse soldiers in “propinquity” has been reduced to waiting for them to die. By the time she meets the patient, Hana has learned to survive by distancing herself from other people, stepping “so far back no one could get near [her]” (85). Even in her secret game of hopscotch “she



walked backwards, stepping on her own footprints, for safety, but also as part of a private game, so it would seem from the steps that she had entered the room and then the corporeal body had disappeared" (12).<sup>9</sup> Hana has made herself untouchable, and it is the patient who draws her back into a human community, first by getting her to *speak* by asking her to read Kipling aloud to him. "She was distant from everybody," he observes. "The only way I could get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me" (253). Then he makes her *listen* to his stories, to enter them as she does the pages of *Kim*, so that she no longer feels isolated from the living (Kip, Caravaggio, and later, Clara), the dying (the patient), or the dead (her father). For his part, Caravaggio is also withdrawn, feeling most comfortable cloaked in anonymity, believing that the greatest betrayal would be "to reveal one more inch of [his] character" (174). In recent years he had come to believe that no one could be trusted: "He had lived through a time of war when everything offered up to those around him was a lie" (117). By the time he reaches the villa, German thieves had stolen Caravaggio's identity. It is time, then, to shed skins, for "the only way to survive is to excavate everything" (44).

Perhaps the most vulnerable of the characters, Kip only temporarily finds healing. For a brief month he and Hana are equals in darkness (225). He sleeps in her arms, feeling once again the comfort and peace of his childhood when his most profound experience of love was with his ayah — also a stranger outside the family (226). The "continents" of Kip and Hana meet but cannot remain congruent because of the more serious fault line that divides Kip (as the racial and cultural Other) from his companions. Despite his efforts to be a "dutiful son" (217), Kip's assimilation into the West is a source of dehumanization. He is valued for his talent in understanding machines and is used first by the British, then by the Americans. As Caravaggio nettles him, "You are being used, boyo" (121).<sup>10</sup> With the news of the atomic bombing of the "brown races of the world" (286), Kip/Kirpal Singh constructs a counter story of his own: that the English, not the German bomb makers, are his enemy, and that "Indian soldiers wasted their lives so they could be *pukkali*" (283). Then he severs ties with those gathered at the villa.

The patient's stories reveal deep fault lines within his own character. He had grown up in a "fully named world" but chose to eschew ownership (21). He feels suitably at home in the desert, where there are no lines of demarcation, where nothing is "strapped down or permanent, everything drifted" (22). Yet the patient allows himself to be "disassembled" by Katharine Clifton, a woman with "an unconquerable face" (144, 155).

It is this very unconquerability that drives the patient to want to “yoke” her, in direct opposition to his hatred for ownership (149). He maps her body, naming and laying claim to a hollow in the neck, a shoulder. “This is my shoulder, he thinks, not her husband’s” (156). Nonetheless, the patient’s stories mark a formulation of “the *ongoing life history of the teller*” (Haswell 190). His listeners travel to the heart of his story: the patient’s experience of human love, his belief that relationships should transcend the self-interest of nations, the violation of wars, the possessiveness of individuals. In essence, the patient has learned the hard lessons of Patrick Lewis: there is a hollowness to isolation, and the only antidote is “alignment” or entering a story that bridges that “gap of love.” Now that the patient has lost (and had a hand in destroying) Katharine Clifton, he offers his heart (that “organ of fire”) for weighing (97), and in doing so, extends to others an opportunity to weigh their own hearts as they judge his. In Caravaggio’s words, “there was no defence but to look for the truth in others” (117).

In this way, the character without a face, the one most unreadable, the person most in need of confession, is paradoxically the teller who works through his experiences to offer the others a profound insight: narrating and loving are near of kin. In his book about people and places of the desert, he has etched the likeness of a woman “who misses moisture” (153). Why is he unable to remove Katharine’s body from the page (235)? Why has he “translated her strangely into my text of the desert” (236)? He offers a reason:

I believe this. When we meet those we fall in love with, there is an aspect of our spirit that is historian, a bit of a pedant, who imagines or remembers a meeting when the other had passed by innocently . . . all parts of the body must be ready for the other, all atoms must jump in one direction for desire to occur. (259)

The patient believes that he is “marked” by the people and places in his past, an insight revealed and understood as he narrates his experiences in the desert. He will 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” (261). Everything, everyone has been a “gift” to him, including the four people gathered at the villa (257). In the same way, Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip are “marked” by each other: “We are communal histories, communal books” (261).

Readers must consider the patient’s role as an Anubis figure in this light. For the inhabitants of the villa, the patient is a blackened mummy,

anointed and preserved in oasis grass.<sup>11</sup> His blackness signifies his ruined body and imminent doom. Indeed, he is already dead, or as Hana thinks of him, “eternally dying” (115). But black was the colour of fertility for the ancient Egyptians, symbolizing the god Anubis and his role as the awakener of souls in the afterlife. Anubis (also Anpu), the black, jackal-headed deity, was the god of the displaced: travellers, orphans, and the lost. He was also the Lord of Embalming, a process wherein the human mummy was rendered a statue that the soul or “ka” of the deceased could inhabit in the afterlife (Budge; see also “Anpu”). In some texts, Anubis was also called Wepwawet, “The Messenger of the Road” and “The Opener of the Ways.”

The patient makes explicit the mythological connection between himself and the Egyptian gods. As the last image that his lover Katharine will see in this life and the faithful guide who accompanies her on her final journey, the patient takes on the spirit of the jackal. He addresses his lover:

There are a hundred deities associated with animals, I tell her. There are the ones linked to jackals — Anubis, Duamutef, Wepwawet. These are creatures who guide you into the afterlife — as my early ghost accompanied you, those years before we met. . . . the spirit of the jackal, who was the “opener of the ways,” whose name was Wepwawet or Almásy, stood in the room with the two of you. . . . The jackal with one eye that looks back and one that regards the path you consider taking. In his jaws are pieces of the past he delivers to you, and when all of that time is fully discovered it will prove to have been already known. (*English* 258-59)

The deeds of the past will be named as the heart is finally weighed on the Scale of Truth, and the blackened jackal god, in making the past known, provides the words that will allow his beloved to pass into a new life. In this metaphoric sense, the patient can rightly be called “Almásy,” which means “jackal.”<sup>12</sup>

In sum, the English patient delivers his narrative — his own Book of the Dead — in which his friends can immerse themselves.<sup>13</sup> The four wounded and battered characters, all with secret, subterranean lives, gather at the villa for healing, but to look into mirrors is too painful. Thus, the patient offers his charred body as an “ebony pool” in which the characters see reflections of their own truths (48). His confession offers a narrative for the others to enter into and reflect both on and in, and one that illuminates their own characters. The English patient “opens the ways” for Caravaggio, poised between artful dodger and cripple; Hana,

selfless nurse and self-contained machine; Kip, adopted son and alien foreigner. Caravaggio comes to understand that he has been *playing* himself on the stage of the moonlight. But the true challenge of his life is to play himself, *sans* thumbs. Hana, who at sixteen is “someone with a dangerous will” (32), realizes that “tenderness towards the unknown and anonymous” is meaningful because it is “a tenderness to the self” (49). While Kip feels estranged from the others, he has mapped Hana’s sadness more than any other (270), and perhaps for that reason thinks of her, years later, whenever he sits in his garden. Indeed, Hana is inscribed into his memory and consciousness, much like Katharine is inscribed in the patient’s book. Every month or two he “witnesses” her. “This is a limited gift he has somehow been given” (300).

It is possible that aligning himself with Anubis is the patient’s desperate attempt to cast his love affair (life-giving but fraught with anguish) in a positive light. But readers might also conclude that the patient in his version of the story — as jackal who surveys past and future — has resisted the war’s impact on his life the only way he can. His story affirms a truth the Germans and the Allies cannot violate: he has entered “the communal book of moonlight” (261). He has met his fellow travellers at the moonlight, “a place where the weak can enter the strong” (82).

### The Narrator as “Opener of the Ways”

If the patient’s acts of narration provide an opportunity for the characters to reflect on and understand their own lives, what then does the Narrator provide his readers? How does the Narrator take on the role of “Opener of the Ways”? To address this question, we must examine the motif of scenes that (using Geert Lernout’s term) are stroboscopic in nature. The first of such moments occurs in Caravaggio’s account of his capture, precipitated by a chance accident at a party. A woman was taking pictures of German officers, and “I was caught in mid-step, walking across the ballroom,” he tells Hana. “In mid-step, the beginning of the shutter’s noise making me jerk my head towards it. So suddenly everything in the future was dangerous” (35) — dangerous because of that stolen image. As he attempts to retrieve the film (and thus protect his identity), he is caught in the light of a car beam: “he pauses once again in mid-step, seeing that same woman’s eyes on him[,] ... the same man she photographed earlier in the crowded party. ... by accident he stands the same way now, half turned in surprise at the light that reveals his body

in the darkness" (36). Again, this darkness-seeking man is suspended in light. Hana can see this frozen image of him in her mind, the *story* of that moment suspending Caravaggio a second time.

In the same way, the Narrator gazes at the Piedmont landscape during a thunder storm. "Lightning falls upon the steeples of the small alpine chapels," he notes, and the tableaux of biblical scenes are illuminated in flashes of light (277). The villa of San Girolamo is also illuminated in the storm. "Perhaps this villa is a similar tableau," the Narrator muses, "the four of them in private movement, momentarily lit up, flung ironically against this war" (278). The Narrator has in fact "illumined" these characters through (not just in) the narrating event. In the context of 1945 and the closing, chaotic days of the war — violence, panoramic drama and incalculable suffering, nations against nations in mechanized and dehumanizing destruction — this Narrator privileges the personal side of the war rather than the public. Nations write the stories of war. The Narrator uses the war as a foil to tell another story so that for us, Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the patient are suspended, not momentarily but permanently in a written text. This is what Patrick Lewis realized is the gift of literature: the ability to turn the pages "backwards" as if Alice Gull were not dead. These are moments of luxury, "those few pages in a book we go back and forth over" (*Skin* 148). And what precisely does the Narrator seek to sustain for his readers?

If Peter Brooks is correct in observing that the opening paragraph of most novels provides the image of a desire taking on shape, then the central character of the novel is not the patient but Hana. The Narrator begins with an image of her, unnamed and unconstrained: "She stands up in the garden where she has been working and looks into the distance" (*English* 3). As the Narrator recounts events of 1945, he comes to understand the image of *his* desire, just as the patient in telling his life story understands his. In addition, the Narrator keeps Hana present to him by telling her story. Recall that there were traditions the patient had "discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them eternal — a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing" (248). Upon returning to Katharine's body in the Cave of the Swimmers, the patient steals the colours of the cave paintings: "The ochre went into her face, he daubed blue around her eyes. He walked across the cave, his hands thick with red, and combed his fingers through her hair. Then all of her skin" (248). Just as the patient colours Katharine, the Narrator paints a portrait of Hana,

telling her story, sustaining her presence, perpetuating her life in “a Scheherazade-like postponement of death” (Penner 87) or, in Ondaatje’s words, locating and holding her in a world that makes her eternal (*English* 248) — the narrative we now read.

Hana is “drawn by the desire” of the Narrator, as Kip’s ordinance map is “drawn by desire” of Lord Suffolk (190, 198). Just as Katharine’s body is imprinted upon, inscribed within the patient’s book about the desert (235, 236), Hana is woven into the pages of this narrative about the English patient. “Only desire makes the story errant, flickering like a compass needle,” the Narrator observes (248). Hana enralls him, though he may have realized his desire only in the course of recounting events at San Girolamo. Once this desire is understood, the Narrator completes his tale to eternalize his lover in his own “stroboscopic” moment. Such a narrating strategy, Brooks would note, is life-giving “in that it arouses and sustains desire” for both Narrator and reader (Brooks 61). The Narrator shows us Hana, patiently allows us to consider her, listen to other stories of passion, note the love bestowed upon her by Caravaggio and Kip, all the while seeking “to seduce and to subjugate the listener” (61). And why? The Narrator needs readers to accomplish his goal as an oral storyteller. Without them as accomplices, his story is a monologue that ends with the telling. Involving readers in the storytelling act is a transformative gesture (60) in the sense that the telling moment is perpetuated within the listener. Hana will live as a text that readers enter. We become, as Ondaatje says, immersed in her life, our bodies “full of [her] sentences and [her] moments” (*English* 12).

If this is the Narrator’s purpose, why does he seem to displace Hana for the patient at centre stage? The patient and Narrator act as doubles for each other: both “open the ways”; both love women who lean out of windows to catch the rain (141, 297); both make desire their narrative theme; both set out to write one kind of book (the patient’s about the desert, the Narrator’s about the patient) but end up telling another (the life of Katharine, the life of Hana). In using the patient to say what he himself cannot or will not say, the Narrator leads readers to his meaning, “spinning out its movement toward a meaning that would be the end of its movement” (Brooks 56). And so he confesses: “She 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” (*English* 301). This revelatory moment, when the Narrator finally makes readers aware of his presence, discloses his desire without making it explicit. As Brooks notes, desire “cannot speak its right name” (58). But in resisting his

impulse to bind Hana in his wing, the Narrator extends an invitation to the reader to live in, and perpetuate the telling of, Hana's story.

This narrating event ends with the image (caught in the light of words) of Hana dislodging a glass from a cupboard. At the same instant, Kip catches a fork dropped by his daughter, "a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles" (302). This is a conflation of space but also of time, since Kip's gesture in 1959 mirrors his gesture in 1945. Then Caravaggio nudged the fuse box off the counter, but "Before it reaches the floor Kip's body slides underneath it, and he catches it in his hand . . . . He thinks suddenly he owes him a life" (208). By suspending and therefore sustaining the characters in the stroboscopic light of his narrative, the Narrator saves Hana the only way he can, in ritual words of his own *Book of the Dead*. The characters are saved not by their deeds or their virtue, but *in their telling*. Moreover, in repeating Kip's redemptive gesture from earlier in the story, the narrative seems to come full circle, creating a sense of wholeness through an open-ended image that literally ends the story (Cook, "Being" 48 and "Imploding" 118). As Jaqui Sadashige reminds us, "narrative closure emerges, finally, as a function of desire" (247).

This the Narrator does for Hana. What does the Narrator provide his readers? What is their need? The narrating event, appreciated for its structure and oral dynamics, is like the patient's copy of Herodotus's *The Histories* — a commonplace book whose spine contains the Narrator's story wherein Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the patient have added their memories, their feelings, their reflections, their amendments. That is, the Narrator has provided a text that grows with its reading, that *readers* can inhabit: a labyrinth of narratives that might continue (well after the pages are closed) to remain as the sentences, images, and characters of *our* lives (see Brooks 19). Perhaps, like Hana reciting *Kim* aloud, readers need a gentle reading lesson. Because all texts are incomplete, our reading and interpretation of them must be unfinished as well (Penner 85). As Wolfgang Iser reminds us, our interpretations also "write" us; they are part of the ongoing development of our self-identity as readers (noted in Sumara 170). Ultimately, the fault lines exposed in the narrative (between maps and fluidity, between water and desert, between names and anonymity, between public and private, between light and darkness, between texts and lives) uncover the dilemma that the Narrator (and his readers) faces. For we are caught by the desire to "read the inscrutable" (Clarke 19), to make whole the fragmentary, to render perpetual Hana's life, but do so without mummifying her into a parody of a living being. We explore these fault lines that are embedded in our own desires, whether we

read this novel as postcolonialists, feminists, or orientalists, as men or women, as masters or apprentices.

Here readers certainly encounter “the design of the whole” (Chatman 148), crossing the line from narrative to novel, from Narrator to author. Here we confront the question that weaves all of Ondaatje’s novels together: “The issue is what these characters, or anyone, will do with the truth” (qtd. in Welch; see also Jaggi 11).<sup>14</sup> Truth is surely a difficult landscape to chart. In Ondaatje’s textual terrain positions are mapped, alternative views remapped, melodies hummed, counter-melodies offered. As readers we are like Kip, learning the trick, “the little descant” at each turn (*English* 191). What will *we* “do with the truth”? Scholars confront this question as authors who write *their* own texts, stepping into a continuum of narratives and adding to “communal histories, communal books” of literary scholarship. In the spine of *our* discussion we have inscribed our reading of the novel. We have folded in texts that harmonize with our interpretation, along with counter-melodies, making of this essay a commonplace book of our own. Were it possible, we would inscribe this article in the flyleaf of *The English Patient*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While Heble’s argument is based on *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Coming Through Slaughter*, his approach typifies scholarship that conflates author and narrator.

<sup>2</sup> Ondaatje admits that in fact he had to go back and insert similar disclosing passages in the novel so that this voice fit in: “Because of that line I had to go back and do over a couple of the moments to, in a way, justify that” (qtd. in Stone 251).

<sup>3</sup> Ondaatje thereby creates two temporal levels in a structure he calls “double time.”

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Gamlin draws out the parallels between *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Gilgamesh*. Hana’s mother had once described to Patrick a play wherein a matriarch (like Gilgamesh, the possessor of animal skins) passes her skins to other women in the circle: “Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story” (*Skin* 157). Through her tale, each actor offers an alternative view or voice. In the same way, the characters in Ondaatje’s novel provide an alternative and private version of history (Gamlin 72). The novel’s title, then, captures the storytelling moment or situation wherein Patrick Lewis stands before us, speaking “in the skin of a lion.”

<sup>5</sup> In many ways, the written word is eclipsed in the novel: official history proves misleading or sterile; letters lie frozen in the mailbox. In contrast, oral communication (like square-dancing calls) is both ritualistic and life saving (Gamlin 69). In Patrick’s case, written language can shut him out: “All his life Patrick Lewis has lived *beside novels* and their clear stories” (*Skin* 82; emphasis added). Even so, there is a value to written literature. It works like revitalized memory. Patrick can turn back the pages of his life and re-envision his days with Alice. It is analogous, Patrick realizes, to rereading the pages of a book. That is “the real gift” of literature — we can “retreat from the grand story and stumble accidentally upon a



luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still" (148). Despite what appear to be distinct discourses, Ruth Finnegan rightly notes that oral and written narratives should not be perceived as opposites: "To assume that one *always* drives out the other ... is to let an initial theoretical model take us far beyond the actual evidence" (145). This is especially true in *The English Patient*, when (for instance) Hana reads aloud from *Kim*, turning Kipling's novel into an oral performance.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bauman defines the important distinction in oral narratives between the narrated and narrative event (noted in Haswell 187).

<sup>7</sup> The second effect of this double layer of time is a seer-like quality of the Narrator's account. There are times, for instance, when the Narrator — seemingly located in 1945 — displays knowledge of the "future." He says of Hana: "Later she will realize he [Kip] never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him. She will stare at the word in a novel, lift it off the book and carry it to a dictionary. *Beholden. To be under obligation.* And he, she knows, never allowed that" (128). Or again: "Caravaggio will remember the slide. He could walk away, never see him [Kip] again, and he would never forget him. Years from now on a Toronto street Caravaggio will get out of a taxi and hold the door open for an East Indian who is about to get into it, and he will think of Kip then" (208). Or this: "Wherever Hana is now, in the future, she is aware of the line of movement Kip's body followed out of her life. Her mind repeats it. The path he slammed through among them. When he turned into a stone of silence in their midst" (282). Readers feel that their attention has been turned from present to future. But the Narrator is looking at the characters fourteen years after the narrated event and weaving that knowledge into events of 1945. He cannot see the future, but he knows the present of the narrating event. Several critics have misread the time frame of the novel, believing that such shifts in perspective are in fact from present to future. See Rufus Cook ("Imploding" 111) and Josef Pesch ("Globalized" 105) as examples.

<sup>8</sup> The patterns that follow are adapted from Richard H. Haswell's analysis of oral storytelling, gathered from a variety of fields: anthropology, cognitive science, communications, ethics, folklore, history, literature, personal development, psychotherapy, sociolinguistics, and organizational communication. The ease with which these patterns can be adapted to *The English Patient* attests to the value Ondaatje places on storytelling as well as his skill in crafting oral narrative.

<sup>9</sup> What Penner erroneously says of the patient-as-narrator is actually true of Hana: she tries to absolve herself "of authorial responsibility" (see Penner 78).

<sup>10</sup> The faultlines prove more adamant than the connections between Kip and the patient, both "international bastards — born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere" (176). As Shannon Smyrl argues, Kip is free to self-invent only when he ceases his "unsuspicious cultural consumption" and rescinds the "authority of the West to legitimate his actions and define his identity" (10, 33).

<sup>11</sup> Note that our interpretation of the patient's black skin runs contrary to other commentaries. Marlene Goldman calls the patient's body "an allegorical fragment — a living emblem of catastrophe." Geetha Ganapathy-Dore translates his blackness as a sign for the "dying empire" and "ailing humanity," "the death of a civilisation," and "a spiritual void" (97). Richard Van Oort interprets the patient's appearance as "devoid of demarcation, a black hole completely unreadable" (qtd. in Scobie 97), while Stephen Scobie sees him as patient, passive, and ultimately empty, black, and nil (see 98, 99). Their reading of blackness reflects (oddly) the initial response to the surface of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a "black gash of shame" (Sturken 51-52) rather than a reflective surface that includes the viewer.

<sup>12</sup> See Josef Pesch on Ondaatje's strategic application of the name Almásy, only after Caravaggio's assertion that he is Rommel's spy ("Post-Apocalyptic"; see also Scobie 99).

<sup>13</sup> The Egyptian Book of the Dead was known as The Chapters of coming forth by day,

a text commissioned by the dying (Deurer). As a sort of "guidebook to a happy afterlife," the book maps what to say, where to go, and whose divine name(s) to invoke on the journey. Here is a typical excerpt:

Homage to you, O ye gods of the Dekans in Anu, and to you, O ye Hememet-spirits in Kher Aha, and to thee, O Unti, who art the most glorious of all the gods who are hidden in Anu, O grant thou unto me a path whereover I may pass in peace, for I am just and true; I have not spoken falsehood wittingly, nor have I done aught with deceit. (Budge)

<sup>14</sup> For readers who are aware of Ondaatje's use of John Berger's observation that "never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (epigraph to *In the Skin of a Lion*), the word "truth" may seem contradictory. But the danger, power, and verisimilitude of words is certainly one of Ondaatje's themes. The patient carries a copy of Herodotus, the father of "supposed lies," gluing in his own corrective "when he discovered the truth to what had seemed a lie" (246). Caravaggio, master of deception who invents double agents and whole platoons in the desert, fears a lie as much as he fears discovery (117). Katharine hates a lie most of all (152). If, as Caravaggio argues, human beings "want to *know* things, how the pieces fit" (121), they must navigate and weigh all stories, testing them for veracity like souls in judgment. This is clearly what Ondaatje is asking of his readers.

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