

Johan Schimanski. "The Deperiodicized Patient: Ondaatje and the Contemporary". In *Identities and Masks: Colonial and Postcolonial Studies*. Eds. Jakob Lothe, Anne Holden Rønning and Robert Young. Kristiansand: HøyskoleForlaget, 2001. 125-141.

Chapter 8

The Deperiodicized Patient: Ondaatje and the Contemporary¹

Johan Schimanski

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992)² is a complex work of literature, a text woven together of many different themes, narrative viewpoints, lyrical images, and a whole flood of references – explicit or implicit – to other literary and historical texts and works of art: everything from the ancient Greek historian Herodotus to the children's writer A. A. Milne. Despite this complexity, the novel received a warm reception, sharing the English Booker Prize. It was also made into a highly successful film by director Anthony Minghella – successful in filmatic and box-office terms, though not so successful in expressing the postcolonial aspect of the novel.³

¹ This essay is a reworking of a set lecture given on 23 May 1997 as part of my Dr. art. degree. I wish to thank my committee – Jane Aaron, M. Wynn Thomas, and Jakob Lothe – for providing me with the subject, theme, and occasion for this first version of the text, and also the editors of the present anthology for their comments and suggestions. I also want to thank from afar Lisa Mirabile for placing her very practical index to *The English Patient* on the internet, at location <<http://people.ne.mediaone.net/gbirch/epindex.html>>.

² Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (1992; London: Pan/Picador, 1993).

³ For an evaluation from the viewpoints of postcolonialism and of film-adaptation theory, see Hilde Stuve Kjellsmoen, *The Migrant Experience from Novel to Film: Two Post-Colonial Readings of The English Patient*, thesis ("hovedoppgave"), Trondheim: Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, 1999. See also the footnotes to David Williams, "The Politics of Cyborg Communications: Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and *The English Patient*," *Canadian Literature* 156 (1998), 30–55 (53–54).

The reception says something about the interests of a contemporary readership. We allow ourselves to be fascinated by textual intricacy, lyrical intensity and cultural exoticism, in addition to being touched by such central human themes as love and war. The use of other texts and historical background in the novel also supplies more of the literary "education" expected by readers of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*. But I also wonder whether readers of contemporary fiction perhaps now take for granted things which earlier would have been called experimental in terms of narrative technique.

The contemporary critic will thus come to *The English Patient* with a certain amount of preconceptive baggage. The novel reaffirms certain well-publicised trends in contemporary fiction. It belongs to the still-fashionable literary school called postmodernism. On the one hand, it mixes genres: the psychological novel and the adventure novel, that is to say the adventure novel written by the likes of Rudyard Kipling and James Fenimore Cooper, both referred to in the novel. It also incorporates various non-literary texts on bomb disposal and desert exploration, and forms of textual organization, such as lists and games, not usually admitted to the "high" texts of realism and modernism. On the other hand, *The English Patient* mixes levels of fiction, it seems aware of its own fictionality: as metafiction it is about writing, about telling stories, about books, and about reading. While mixing genres and fictional levels is typical of the novel right from its inception, there is a case to be made that such mixings are symptomatic of a postmodernist program for literature.

The English Patient is also symptomatic of another trend, another "post": this time "postcolonialism" in literature. One important element of this literary trend in publishing terms is that much of the most important literature about England and the English is now being written by authors writing in English outside England. In Salman Rushdie's words, "The Empire writes back to the centre." And, as many critics have pointed out, *The English Patient* could only have been written with a disturbed, postcolonial awareness of the global situation.⁴

The villa

The basic narrative frame of the novel is provided by the gathering of four people in a ruined villa in Tuscany in the aftermath of the allied campaign in Italy. Hana, a Canadian nurse, has chosen to stay in the abandoned villa to look after the English patient, the survivor of a plane crash in the North African desert, blackened by burns, a man of unsure iden-

tity. They are joined by Caravaggio, an Italian-Canadian and friend of Hana's father, a thief turned allied spy, recuperating after having his thumbs cut off by the Nazis. The last arrival is Kip, a bomb disposal expert, a sapper, trained in England, a Sikh from Lahore.

Within this frame, there is very little physical action. The narrative concerns itself with the mapping of the complex emotional interfaces between the four, and a steady revealing of their respective pasts, set against the repetitive day-to-day lives of the characters. On this level, readerly desire is led on in a plot structure similar to the whodunit sub-genre of detective fiction, the enigma of the identity of the "English patient" providing the narrative excuse.⁵ Hana, the nurse, makes the house habitable, washes her hair, and reads novels for her patient; then she and the sapper fall in love, after she helps him defuse a mine. The patient lies in bed with his hearing-aid on, listens and also talks, progressively revealing his past first to Hana, and then to Caravaggio. Caravaggio spends his time being irritated by Hana's devotion to the patient and to Kip, and being inquisitive about the patient's identity; he feeds the patient morphine to make him talk, and in the end the patient reveals that he is not an Englishman after all, but the Hungarian Count Ladislaus de Almásy, desert explorer turned spy-helper in the service of General Rommel, thus working for the Germans during the war in North Africa.

Kip's purpose in staying at the villa is to clear away the countless mines which litter the house and its surroundings; his self-sufficiency is disturbed when he falls in love with Hana, whom he tells of his experiences in England during the early part of the war. It is Kip who ends the narrative by introducing into it an alien element of action. Hearing on his radio about the dropping of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he becomes angry, threatens the patient with a rifle, and leaves on his motor-

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, "The Empire Writes Back," *The Nation* 4–11 January (1993), 22–24; W. M. Verhoeven, "How Hyphenated Can You Get? A Critique of Pure Ethnicity," *Mosaic* 29 (1993), 97–116; Lorraine M. York, "Whirling Blindfolded in the House of Woman: Gender Politics in the Poetry and Fiction of Michael Ondaatje," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (1994), 71–91; D. Mark Simpson, "Minefield Readings: The Postcolonial *English Patient*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (1994), 216–37; Williams, "The Politics of Cyborg Communications"; Randi Stangebye, *Den enigmatisk pasienten: Spatielitet, temporalitet og historiefortelling i Michael Ondaatjes The English Patient* [The Enigmatic Patient: Spatiality, Temporality and Historical Narrative in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*], thesis ("hovedoppgave"), Oslo: University of Oslo, 2000.

⁵ Stangebye, 9–14, 110.

bike. Coming to the conclusion that the allies would never have dropped the bomb on a city of white-skinned people, he is disgusted by the legacy of colonialism in the war. This is the bomb the bomb man can't take.

Outside the narrative frame of this stay in an Italian villa, there is plenty of action, partly of the "boy's own" kind, partly in the tradition of oriental (and orientalist) romance, partly with a more in-the-face focus on the horrors of war. We hear of Kip's experiences with bomb disposal in England, of Caravaggio's adventures which end with him losing his thumbs, of Hana's numb outrage at nursing dying soldiers, and of course about Almásy's exploits: his explorations of the desert; his Cairo affair with Katharine Clifton, the wife of an English explorer; his daring journey through the desert so as to smuggle Rommel's "Rebecca" spy into Cairo; and the plane crash which leaves him bodily wrecked in the care of Bedouin tribes.

The textual feel of *The English Patient* is thus the product of a series of fragmented stories and descriptions, regulated by a narrative perspective which moves quickly from character to character and shuttles back and forth between the future and the past.⁶ It is quickly apparent that the wish to know who the English patient really is is supplemented by other vectors of narrative desire. The lyrical, symbolic resonances like that between the fire of the patient's accident and the final fire of Hiroshima help to pull in the reader and create poetic explanations of what happens.⁷ The physical exigencies of the adventure genre grip the reader in a phenomenological projection of bodily constraints. The intertextual references to real literary and historical documents, the use of characters such as Almásy himself, who really existed, and a historically defined situation also give the text a sense of reality.⁸

⁶ For a thorough discussion of the narrative "slippages" of the novel, see Rufus Cook, "Imploding Time and Geography: Narrative Compressions in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33 (1998), 109–25.

⁷ Rufus Cook again gives a detailed analysis of the "associational clusters" of the novel in "Imploding Time and Geography." For this specific example, see however Stephen Scobie, "The Reading Lesson: Michael Ondaatje and the Patients of Desire," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (1994), 92–106.

⁸ For a comparison between the fictitious and historical Almásys see Steven Tötöszy de Zepetnek, "The English Patient: 'Truth Is Stranger than Fiction,'" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (1994), 141–53. W. M. Verhoeven has called this practice, recurrent in Ondaatje's fiction, "historiographic metafiction" – in "Naming the Present/Naming the Past: Historiographic Metafiction in Findley and Ondaatje," in *Shades of Empire: In Colonial and Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. C. C. Barfoot and Theo D'Haen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 283–99.

The configurations of the novel work together to create many inter-related themes. I will mention some of the most important. On the micro level, the novel is an exploration of the labyrinths of love, giving weight to the relationship between Hana and Kip, but also between Almásy and Katharine Clifton. On the macro level, it also appraises the possibility of negotiation and of sociality between the four characters, who represent different identities in a global community; indeed, it hints at the failure of this sociality, ending as it does with Kip's departure. It is not surprising that one of the reviewers asks whether "the characters [are] supposed to represent individuals, or are they abstractions?"⁹

It thus also portrays the failure of Western civilisation. For Kip, Hiroshima is the "tremor of Western wisdom" (284). His disillusionment is preceded by that of Almásy, whose yearning for the desert is an escape from nationalities – that product of Western modernity. Almásy tells Hana of himself and his fellow explorers that "Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states" (138). This desert which erases nations (139) has now been defiled by those very nations: "raped by war ... The Barbarians versus the Barbarians" (257).¹⁰ The irony is here that it is Almásy who is threatened with the rifle by Kip, who is still under the impression that Almásy is English. Betrayed as Kip feels by the English whom he has admired so much, Kip threatens on the basis of nationality somebody who is a hater of nationality, who has been burned "into the colour of aubergine" (4), and who is not even English.¹¹

The Villa San Girolamo, north of Florence, is a calm pocket left behind by the front, where time is suspended. History flows into it in the form of the characters' pasts, each intertwined with the history of the war. But this history is assimilated up until the last chapter, entitled "August."

⁹ Craig Seligman, "Sentimental Wounds," *The New Republic*, 15 March 1993, 38–41, quote 39. Hilary Mantel writes that they are "freighted with abstraction" (23) – in "Wraith's Progress," *The New York Review of Books*, 14 January 1993, 22–23.

¹⁰ Hilde Stuve Kjellsmoen gives a careful description of Almásy's desert in "Mapping the Desert as 'A Place of Faith': A Reading of *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje," in *Postcolonialism and Cultural Resistance*, ed. Jopi Nyman and John A. Stotesbury (Joensuu: Joensuun yliopiston humanistinen tiedekunta / Faculty of Humanities, University of Joensuu, 1999), 110–16. As will become apparent, however, while I will be returning often to the theme of the boundary-less desert, I do not necessarily take it as the primary signifier of the novel.

¹¹ Cf. Scobie, "The Reading Lesson," 99.

August, the name of the month, has become a proper name, the name of the month in 1945 when the bombs are dropped over Japan. Day-to-day life and also the narrative frame of the novel are cut off by a radio message; history explodes into them.

The commonplace book

Another major theme of this novel is reading in its many forms, and books themselves. One of the central objects of the fictional world of the novel is Almásy's copy of an 1890 edition of *The Histories* of Herodotus, "that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations – so they are all cradled within the text of Herodotus" (16). This is the book referred to several times as Almásy's "commonplace book." The term commonplace implies that it is a place for everything or anything, and that a text can thus be a place, that is, a territory, and that this is a book which has opened up the borders of its territory letting everything outside flood in. Almásy's choice of the book of histories and geographies by the ancient Greek historian is particularly appropriate, since Herodotus himself explicitly allows his historical narratives to digress, opening up his text, like Almásy's commonplace book, to all kinds of other material.

To describe this uncertainty about textual territory, I will use a term introduced by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. After the book has become a place, has defined a territory, the ambiguity of its borders makes this place undergo a process of what they call deterritorialization, a term which implies not only a shifting in physical territories but also a denial of what is proper to a book, or to a person and indeed a denial of the area of meaning proper to any word.¹²

When a text becomes as multi-layered as Almásy's commonplace book, as scraps of paper are glued into it, its borders are made ambiguous. Are these supplements to the text purely secondary, or do they imply, in their attempt to make the text complete, that the original is full of gaps

¹² See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (1975; Paris: Minuit, 1989), trans. Dana Polan as *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Annick Hillger approaches *The English Patient* also via Deleuze and Guattari, though from the direction of their (related) concept of nomadism – in "And this is the world of nomads in any case": The *Odyssey* as Intertext in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33 (1998), 23–33. Like Kjellsmoen, Hillger concentrates on Almásy's perspective, though also bringing in Hana's.

which must be filled? Does the book come to include within its territory all these additions? The commonplace book becomes a powerful symbol of intertextuality itself, the way a text cannot avoid overflowing the boundaries of other texts.¹³ It is thus a symbol of the novel itself, for *The English Patient* is itself invaded and deterritorialized by other texts. And the commonplace book is not the only place in the novel which is thus deterritorialized. The villa is also described in similar terms: "There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of earth. To Hana the wild gardens were like further rooms" (43). I have already established the villa's role as the narrative frame of the novel, invaded by the characters' pasts, both ruined and metaphorically exploded by historical events.¹⁴

But the main concern of the commonplace book is the desert which Almásy has been exploring between the wars, searching for places only mentioned in Herodotus and ancient Arabic manuscripts. The desert is a place of shifting sands regulated in *The English Patient* by two major elemental figures: water and fire. On his explorations, Almásy has discovered cave paintings which prove that there was once water in the desert; it is in what he calls "The Cave of Swimmers" that he sees Katharine Clifton alive for the last time. While water is an alien element in the desert, not belonging to its territory, it now seems that the desert as a waterless place has been deterritorialized by the traces of history. Water floods in.

Fire, on the other hand, is what has deterritorialized the patient's skin, making it black instead of white. Drunk, the patient tells Hana that "Sometimes a horse I'll be, sometimes a hound. A hog, a headless bear, sometimes a fire" (115). Thus quoting Puck in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* (Act 3, Scene 1) and making a comedy of his wrecked body in the process, Almásy connects fire's power to deterritorialize with what Deleuze and Guattari often use as the ultimate figure of deterritorialization: the human who becomes an animal. This is, a recurrent device in the novel: for example, when under the influence of morphine Almásy retells Katharine Clifton's death in the cave, he tells it in hallucinatory terms taken from

¹³ Cf. Scobie, "The Reading Lesson", 100, Simpson, "Minefield Readings," and Williams, "The Politics of Cyborg Communications," 35. Williams however, with his communications theory slant, prefers Donna Haraway's cyborg to Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorialization.

¹⁴ I here follow in the footsteps of D. Mark Simpson and Rufus Cook, who both use the ruined villa as the starting point of their essays.

Egyptian mythology, as a play of possessions by a phantasmic jackal. "In the desert," he says, "it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation" (18). In the following, I will be arguing that the deterritorialized desert appeals to Almásy as an alternative way of looking at history.

Allegories of reading

The novel invites us to make allegorical connections between literature, geography, bombs, and buildings: "A book, a map of knots, a fuze board, a room of four people" (111). Here I use the term allegory in its wider meaning.¹⁵ Traditionally, allegories are stories where persons and objects stand for something other (and often more abstract) than what they are, and to read an allegory is to know the key which transforms the story into a story about something else. But the sentence just quoted invites us to establish a circulation of different levels of meaning, with no final underlying story. This is a circulation which also allows us to read allegorically in both directions. A story about books can be read as a story about bombs, and a story about bombs can be read as a story about books. In keeping with the postmodern paradigm, even everyday, banal objects receive the allegorical attention once reserved for more abstract phenomena.

Perhaps all texts will inevitably contain their own theory about how they are to be read, or perhaps different, even conflicting allegories of reading. The way this is done in *The English Patient* tends, however, to reconfirm the claim that the metafictional narratives of postmodernist fiction do this in an especially overt way. Postmodernism is said to be a reaction, or even a celebration, of the failure of civilization's great narratives: progress, the spread of Western culture, etc. – narratives which in *The English Patient* are explicitly seen as problematic. The library in the ruined villa, with its one wall torn by a mortar blast, becomes a symbol of the ruin of Western culture: "The shelves nearest the torn wall bowed with the rain, which had doubled the weight of the books" (11). And that symbol of literary civilisation, the literary canon, has also had its limits shifted, as Hana and the English patient not only read through canonical classics, but also adventures like *Kim* and *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Indeed, as the theme of books and reading proliferate through all the nooks and crannies of the novel – reading books, reading maps, reading

¹⁵ See Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986), 65–88.

characters, reading bombs, reading skin – it is difficult to deny the literary self-awareness of the text. Statements like "There are stories the man recites quietly into the room which slip from level to level like a hawk" (5) are amply suggestive of the structural imagination of modern narrative theory. But the main current of the novel's metafictional flow lies within reading, interpretation, and hermeneutics. *The English Patient* is a novel about four people, and a large part of the work of making these people into individual characters is put into describing the different ways in which they each read books, people, and the world around them.¹⁶

Kip, the sapper, has studied bomb disposal in England under the guidance of the eccentric Lord Suffolk, whose main interest before the war was reading according to the traditional historical-biographical method: "In spite of being Lord Suffolk he lived in Devon, and until war broke out his passion was the study of *Lorna Doone* and how authentic the novel was historically and geographically" (184–85). Turning to bomb disposal, Lord Suffolk "believed his mind could read the motives and spirit behind any invention" (186), and thus Kip learns to read a mine like "a terrible letter" (76). It is precisely to Kip that the novel's narrator attributes the allegorical key: "A book, a map of knots, a fuze board, a room of four people" (111). *The English Patient* envisages books as potentially explosive;

¹⁶ Cf. Stangebye, *Den enigmatiske pasienten*, 20–26, and Scobie, "The Reading Lesson," 101. This reading goes against the grain of a general impression of the characters as vague and partly interchangeable, an impression which has allowed interpreters of the novel to read different character zones as all belonging to a general narratorial ideology. Rufus Cook has indeed shown how the different characters are overcome by the general "slippage" of the novel, merging or fusing together. But his analysis also shows that some characters are more equal than others, so to speak – "the English patient is far more thorough-going" in his assimilatory practice than the other characters. Cook, "Imploding Time and Geography," 122. And it is often Almásy who dominates when the characters are read as mouthpieces of a single narratorial instance. Cf. Stephen Scobie: "In this pattern of personal relationships, then, there is a recurrent theme of deferral or substitution. Each character deflects his or her true desire through the image of another, and the English patient especially – passive, nameless – becomes their screen." Scobie, "The Reading Lesson," 99. Birgitta Johansson recasts this problem of characterization on the novel's thematic level as a "moral dilemma" involving Almásy's desert individualism. See Johansson, "'For Some He Draws Maps That Go Beyond Their Own Boundaries': Border-Crossing Aspects in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*," in *Dangerous Crossing: Papers on Transgression in Literature and Culture*, ed. Monica Loeb and Gerald Porter (Umeå: Umeå University, 1999), 31–43, esp. 38–39.

the retreating Germans would mine everything, so that bombs were even "attached [...] to the spines of books" (75).

In effect, however, the communication between sender and receiver, between bomb-designer and sapper, is like a game. According to Lord Suffolk, bomb disposal is like playing bridge; "you must consider the character of your enemy" (192). In Kip's case, the deadly logic of the game overtakes the reading of character, always unsure and hidden behind masks. Defusing the mine in the villa garden he finds six black wires: "One could of course make a red wire negative. But this opponent had not just concreted the thing but painted all the characters black" (99). Kip reaches "an impasse" (101). Reading is reduced to making a decision "before the theorem faded" (102). He is always surveying things at a distance, following the dictum that "If you are in a room with a problem don't talk to it" (199). Reading the bombs is for him a mode of survival, faced with an ever-developing technology of violence.

Hana has a more phenomenological approach to reading: she relates books to the body. There is indeed an element of gender stereotyping in this attitude which is worthy of further critique.¹⁷ On the one hand, she is constantly fascinated by their physicality: "The book lay on her lap. She realized that for more than five minutes she had been looking at the porousness of the paper, the crease at the corner of page 17 which someone had folded over as a mark. She brushed her hand over its skin" (7). The book, with its skinlike paper, reminds her of the body. She also uses this physicality to her advantage by using books from the library to mend the villa staircase. The library has failed as civilisation, but books may redeem themselves if we see them also as material objects.

On the other hand, she imagines that she may bodily enter into the books she reads: "She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments" (12). She both lets the book fill her body and finds herself immersed in it. The watery metaphor, signalling to us a deterritorialization of the book's borders, is reaffirmed later. Of some books it is said that the readers "slipped into their waters with a silent paddle" (93). Of others: "A door a lock a weir

¹⁷ Cf. York, "Whirling Blindfolded in the House of Woman." Linda Hutcheon touches upon another aspect of this stereotyping when she writes of "the eroticization of [writing], through the novels and poems read by women – by the nurse Hana and the lover Katharine – to the 'English' patient." Hutcheon, "The Empire Writes Back," 23.

opened and they rushed through, one hand holding a gunnel, the other a hat" (93). The word "lock" here could mean both the lock in a door and the floodgate of a canal. It becomes unclear where the fictional waters begin if one is already floating upon them before one enters the book.

The only book Caravaggio has apparently read is Daphne de Mauvier's novel *Rebecca*, which he considers as the key to the messages sent by the so-called "Rebecca spy" from Cairo to General Rommel. Reading only to find the key to other texts, he reconfirms a tendency in *The English Patient* to approach books at an angle, away from their conventional purpose, which would be to present fictional versions of the world.

Almásy uses Herodotus as a guide to his explorations in the desert: "We find jars at Abu Ballas with the classic Greek amphora shape. Herodotus speaks of such jars" (140). Thus, Almásy reads intertextually across history, bringing different times into a "common place" in which borders are washed away. He is a very sensitive reader, tracing back references in a way reconfirmed by his ability, burnt and invalidated as he is, to "translate the guns" (20) for the Bedouin, by touch, blindfolded. But Almásy does not follow his traces in order to establish fixed meanings or traditions in the desert. The geographies and histories of Herodotus are not valued as ways of constructing identity; rather, they reconfirm the desert's status as a place of unstable territories, lacking in demarcation.

Taking these characters as allegorical figures, it becomes clear that in each their own way they define strategies of reading which presuppose that the meaning of every book or corresponding readable object has become deterritorialized. Moreover, reading is exactly a strategy for each character, a strategy of survival, and a way to negotiate with identity: not to construct identity, but to negotiate with a world full of an oppressive movement towards identity. In each their own way, the characters are survivors of a war involving too much identity. Their scepticism to what they read and their reappropriations of literature point to other solutions.

Conflictual and fragmented as it is, the novel's internal theory of literature seems to posit a notion of literature as a shifting territory, a deterritorialized space, where different conceptions of time and history collide and must be negotiated. This negotiation ends, it seems, with the bombs falling over Japan, installing a fault-line between Hana and Kip, across a textualised history, and straight through the space of the Villa, where no clear-cut boundaries existed before.

The contemporary

One way of approaching the problem of history and literature as it is posed in *The English Patient* is through the category of the "contemporary." One might observe, as T. S. Eliot did, that all literature is in a sense contemporary – it can be held within one and the same commonplace book. All of literature is juxtaposed in a single, deterritorialized space, available to allegorical readings in much the same way as the writings Almásy glues in with Herodotus are available to him, or all the intertexts of *The English Patient* are available to the reader.

Or is literature rather a steadily developing art, which must be followed by a steadily developing theory of literature, more like the theory of bomb disposal? "Every six months or so the enemy altered something. You learned the trick, the whim, the little descant, and taught it to the rest of the units. They were at a new stage now" (191). Is literature something one needs to "keep up with" as a literary theorist?

The way in which one handles the category of the contemporary has also wide implications for fiction itself. One may for example argue that the very power of fiction to represent society puts fiction in the position of being able to respond to the contemporary in society, to be responsible to the contemporary. *The English Patient*, however, actually deals with what is now steadily becoming part of the historical past, and thus makes this responsibility problematic. A book about mine disposal of course addresses an urgent contemporary problem, and the strong criticism which the novel has received from some quarters for implying that the atom-bombing of Japanese cities was in some way an illegitimate act shows that it is a novel which addresses contemporary ethical and political debates.¹⁸ But the novel itself finds problematic the very notion of an adequate representation of society. Hana reflects, citing Stendahl, that: "A novel is a mirror walking down a road. She had read that in one of the books the English patient recommended" (91).

But Hana, after her traumatic experiences in the war, has a fear of mirrors; for her they do not simply reflect what is around them, but represent in themselves a problematic negotiation with identity (49–52). And according to Almásy, "When we are young we do not look into mirrors. It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future" (141). He thus acknowledges a delay in representation – allegorically, a temporality in literary mimesis. Set within his reflections on the meaninglessness of nations, this acknowledgement also

¹⁸ See Scobie, "The Reading Lesson," 94–95.

connects the practice of representation to that of identity formation. But it is ultimately subsumed in the deterritorialized space of intertextuality.

The category of the contemporary may also be criticized for its privileging of a logic of avant-gardism, where everything new supersedes and leaves behind that which is old, where the world becomes structured around creative centres where the newest fashion in for example fiction or literary theory becomes an example which all others must follow. The contemporary, thus reduced to what is happening in Anglo-American theory, or in English-language fiction, becomes regulated by a neo-colonial logic whereby the rest of the world must follow what is happening in the West, always behind; the global space of literature is figured as a temporal slope, and the concept of the contemporary becomes indivisible from the articulation of economic power.

Again, *The English Patient* provides an allegorical key. Kip participates in the logic of responding to the contemporary in his time as a bomb disposal expert in England during the early part of the war. This is also a time when he is happy with Englishness, considering Lord Suffolk as a second father (189) and England as a home from home. At this time, "He was one of those never interested in the choreography of power" (195).

But at the end of the novel, after the bombs fall on Japan, Kip becomes aware of this choreography: "Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers" (284). Becoming aware of a wider dimension to the impasses he faces as a sapper, he escapes from the game of bomb disposal. Or to put it another way: by devoting his attention to bomb disposal, Kip has turned his back on Europe; but learning through bomb disposal the art of scanning the periphery (218) and of keeping a problem at a distance, he finally comes to acknowledge the faultlines of power, and turns his back not on Europe, but on the European solution symbolized through the negotiatory space of the villa. History is not a disconnected, textual commonplace or a space in which all literature exists at the same time. Nor is it the empty chronological and progressive succession of situations which historicist models claim it to be. Rather, history is dependent on the explosive *Jetztzeit* or now-time which, in Walter Benjamin's critique of historicism, removes events from such spaces and series,¹⁹

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. I: 2 (1974; Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 691–704. Trans. Harry Zohn as "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (1968; New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 253–64.

bringing them together on other levels and revealing the temporal slopes (differences and deferrals) of representation and identity which the choreography of power involves. The August in which Hiroshima explodes becomes *the* August. *The English Patient* shows very clearly what Fredric Jameson means by his dictum: "History is what hurts."²⁰ At the same time, the novel also suggests a correlative in the form of Caravaggio and Almásy's morphine addiction.²¹

Kip's postcolonialism

Literary theory itself reproduces the ambivalence between the attraction of a contemporary avant-garde and an ever-present accumulation of ideas and techniques. New historicism and postcolonialism, which are now both well-institutionalized within an Anglo-American configuration of literary theory, both presuppose a competence in other schools of literary theory – structuralism, Marxism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, etc.

Both new historicism and postcolonialism have come into being as responses to particular fields of study, specific periods of literature; in the case of new historicism, the English Renaissance, and in the case of postcolonialism, literature after colonialism – a field once called Commonwealth Studies in English literature. New historicism attempts to read the texts of Renaissance literature as texts situated in a wider system or circulation of texts literary and non-literary, and postcolonialism builds also on situating texts in a specific political context in a similarly interdisciplinary fashion, not focusing purely on the literary. Both fields are thus based on a practice which has demanded the subsequent formation of theoretical frameworks.

The alternation from specific fields of practice to a more generalizing theory has in turn produced an expansion of the fields of practice of both schools. The theoretical premises of new historicism have been applied to other periods than that of the Renaissance; while postcolonialism exhibits a globalising tendency, taking an interest in not only the literature of the colonized but also that of the colonizer, ultimately subsuming into its theoretical grasp all literature produced since colonization began.

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989), 102.

²¹ Cf. Simpson, "Minefield Readings," 231.

We all live in a world formed by colonialism; even Norwegian literature may be read with postcolonialist eyes.²²

New historicism got its "historicist" label from its practice of involving the traditional source texts of historical research in the reading of literary texts and thus lumping together literary and non-literary texts on the principles of contemporaneity. The theory of new historicism, however, is too generally designed to be able to function as a way of historicising specific periods. While using historical periods as at least provisional frameworks for interpretation, new historicism cannot say anything definite about differences between different periods. Thus it cannot motivate its own fields of activity. The networks of intertextuality used by the new historicists are too loose for that, loose enough even to include their notorious practice of introducing their interpretations of renaissance literature with anecdotes taken from their own personal experiences of travelling in aeroplanes or reading the texts of modern anthropology. This juxtaposition of modern experience with historical texts again creates, like Almásy's commonplace book, and like *The English Patient* itself, an allegorical space of reading literature as deterritorialized and indeed deperiodicized.

The theoretical response to *The English Patient* has been highly varied, taking many perhaps even unexpected theoretical schools under its wing. Many of the articles however, whatever their framework, end up making postcolonialist statements building on the obvious relevance of that theory to Kip's progression from assimilation to rebellion. D. Mark Simpson's essay "Minefield Readings: The Postcolonial *English Patient*" attempts a rigorous postcolonialist approach. His argument crosses my own at several points, placing more emphasis on "a specifically postcolonial textuality" (222–23) and less on the way history is handled in the novel. It might be suggested that paradoxically a "deperiodicized" New Historicism might work hand in hand with a postcolonialist reading of the novel's metafictional and intertextual space. However, as the allegorical implications of the metafictional aspects of the novel make apparent,

²² Kaisa Lindbach, "Skjønnlitteratur – et etnisk spill? Kvenlitteratur i Nord-Norge" [Literature – an Ethnic Mirror? Kven Literature in Northern Norway], *Nordlit* 5 (1999), 55–72; Kristin Jernsletten, *Going to the City: Ghosts in the Fictional Life of a Native Woman: Annok Sarri Nordrø's Ravnas vinter*, thesis ("hovedoppgave"), Tromsø: University of Tromsø, 1999; Eivind Røssaak, "Fløgstad's orientalisme" [Fløgstad's Orientalism], *Vinduet* 52 (1998), 16–23.

this sociality of theories must at some point fail, as does the sociality between Kip and his companions in the Villa San Girolamo.

Because allegory is here understood as circulatory, this reading of the novel – in which the characters are figures for different literary theories – has something to say about both the literary theories (for example, postcolonialism) and about the novel itself. The ready applicability (by way of Almásy's commonplace book) of Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of deterritorialization to texts and to a textualized history within the novel allows us to read the novel as a postcolonial critique (by way of Kip's renunciation of Europe) of this very notion.²³ A reading of Kip as representing postcolonialism also allows us to see the novel's ambivalence about its own appropriation of the "boy's own" adventure story (Almásy in the desert, Kip defusing bombs), with all its colonialist and orientalist provenance, in order to pull the reader into the text.²⁴

Yet if the novel provides any resistance or new turn to this specific allegory, it is within the final chapter, which takes place "years later" (299). The time of war in the novel has Kip placed on the juncture between colonization and decolonization. In the final chapter however Kip is safely placed in postcolonial India – but in an uncanny "telepathic" synchronicity with Hana which somehow crosses the faultline which had once broken the sociality of the villa and which breaks off the novel's main narrative. When the narrator and writer break into the narrative right at the end of the final chapter – "She is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wings, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest

²³ "Deterritorialization" belongs to a theoretical formation which has been problematized in some of the key texts of postcolonial theory, precisely for covering over problems of power and representation. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313. Homi K. Bhabha's critique (in his essay "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation") of Fredric Jameson's reliance on the spatial and the visual is not unrelated to this issue since deterritorialization also implies a disavowal of the disjunctive temporality of postcolonial history. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 212–35.

²⁴ As D. Mark Simpson observes, "these concerns attest to an important itinerant sensibility enervating Ondaatje's attempt to reckon with those imperial signs he must nevertheless represent, to unwrite as he inscribes one pattern of empire." Simpson, "Minefield Readings," 227. Though this challenges the postcolonial with the intertextual rather than the other way around – perhaps because he has bypassed the allegorical reading I suggest here.

of my life" (301) – it becomes clear he also has problems with the woman Hana. This raises the question of how to read her phenomenological way of reading – rather than Almásy's deterritorialising textualization – against Kip's postcolonialism.²⁵

²⁵ Starting points for this possible venture are provided by Hillger, "And this is the world of nomads in any case," and York, "Whirling Blindfolded in the House of Woman," with their recenterings of Hana's gaze.

