

Maps in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.

By Ahmad M.S. Abu Baker

The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever. (p.141)

Introduction

The English Patient is a novel which richly encapsulates the past within its folds. The novel refers to Almásy's book of Herodotus *The Histories* which, the narrator notes, is "twice its original thickness" (pp.94-95). Almásy "added to [it], cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations—so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus" (p.16). It was "his commonplace book" which contained "other fragments—maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books" (p.96). Ondaatje's novel is similar in its structure to Almásy's book. He takes "fragments" and "paragraphs cut out of other books" and includes them in his novel. The novel is so rich with intertextuality including references to portraits, statues, myths, Christian imagery, and desert images. Ondaatje's novel is swollen with these different images just like Almásy's commonplace book is swollen to twice its original thickness.

In one scene, Hana fixes the steps in a staircase in the villa. "The staircase had lost its lower steps during the fire that was set before the soldiers left." She brought "twenty books and nailed them to the floor and then onto each other, in this way rebuilding the two lowest steps" (p.13). Hana's use of the books to fix the stairs parallels the readers' and critics' attempt to "nail" all the different books and images Ondaatje refers to in his novel to reach, as if climbing a staircase, into the 'room' where knowledge is stored. Ondaatje leaves clues to the thematic importance of some references to help his readers dig, like archaeologists, into the history of this reference or that. For instance, while the book of *Kim* lay on Hana's lap, "she realized that ... she had been looking at the porosity of the paper, the *crease* at the corner of page 17 which *someone has folded as a mark*"(p.7, my italics). The importance of this book is revealed later, upon the arrival of Kip.

In *The English Patient* the emphasis on the importance of maps is evident. People, books, faith, and works of art are all reduced to maps, to their skeletal structure. This reduction is a form of deconstruction similar to the deconstruction of bombs in the novel. Almásy is considered a traitor for giving the Germans the desert maps. His ‘treason’ justifies the novel’s preoccupation with maps. The gravity of his ‘crime’ is evident in the following analysis which highlights the importance of maps.

Maps, Colonization, and Identity

Maps, as a form of knowledge, give power to those who have them. Almásy claims that his ability to draw maps motivated the Bedouins to save him. He explains that “[t]he bedouin were keeping me alive for a reason. I was useful, you see I am a man who can recognize an unnamed town by its skeletal shape on a map” (p.18). The Bedouins try to make use of Almásy’s vast reservoir of information. “For some he draws maps that go beyond their own boundaries and for other tribes too he explains the mechanics of guns” (p.22). Almásy claims that he has “information like a sea” in him, and that he “knew maps of the sea floor, *maps that depict weaknesses in the shield of the earth*, charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades” (p.18, my italics). These maps have the power of great destruction since they depict “weaknesses in the shield of earth”. These “weaknesses” would be exploited to create a destructive earthquake or to erupt a volcano in the enemy’s land.

Heble observes Ondaatje based his character of Almásy on that of a real person. “Almásy’s slippery identity, [is] an analogue to the ‘English’ patient’s in the novel” (Tötösy, p.145). Tötösy argues that “Almásy’s fictional position, that is, his indeterminacy, overlaps his ‘real’ position of historical marginality and otherness” (Tötösy, p.148). Almásy’s knowledge of maps is his ‘compass’. He only needs “the name of a small bridge, a local custom, a cell of this historical animal, and the map of the world would slide into place” (p.19). He boasts, “[g]ive me a map and I’ll build you a city. Give me a pencil and I will draw you a room in South Cairo, desert charts on the wall” (p.145). Indeed, maps give him great navigational abilities. Hence, he relies on maps, even ancient ones, while crossing the desert (p.167). David Roxborough points out that when “[c]onsidering the theme of mapmaking and orientation in the novel, Isaiah 40:3 is especially relevant: ‘The voice of him

that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Roxborough 1999).

Almásy’s knowledge made him a very dangerous traitor when he joined the Germans. His vast knowledge worried the Allies. Foucault explains that “power and knowledge directly imply one another ... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault 1977:27). Caravaggio claims that Almásy “knew every water hole and had helped map the Sand Sea. He knew all about the desert. He knew all about dialects”. The Germans relied on Almásy’s knowledge in 1941. Almásy “became a guide for spies, taking them across the desert into Cairo” (p.163). His knowledge of the desert, especially of the location of water holes, means life or death to those who want to cross it. His knowledge of the dialects guaranteed a safe cover for the spies among the Bedouins.

Almásy and other explorers give lectures at the Geographical Society in London about their expeditions. These explorations are supposedly conducted for scientific purposes. However, they are performed for military and colonial purposes. The introduction of longitude and latitude lines reduced Earth to “measured boxes”. According to Anderson, explorers, surveyors and soldiers have the task of “filling in” these boxes, a matter which generates an “alignment of map and power” (Anderson 1991:173). Simpson considers mapmaking as a type of “the imperial arts, where by territory, property, empire are imagined, inscribed, maintained” (Simpson 1994:225). Further, maps are an exclusive discourse, a “paradigm which both administrative and military operations worked within and served” (Anderson 1991:173-74). “One names the land in order to obtain a certain control over it through the framing operation of language” (Penner 2000). Hence, mapmaking suggests a future military invasion of a geographical area that is being mapped to facilitate the movement of the invading troops and to highlight the strategic points of defence/attack for these troops. Consequently, Almásy wonders, “[t]his country—had I charted it and turned it into a place of war?” (p.260).

The colonisers constantly gather information about the geography of the land and the characteristics of the people who live in it. This knowledge guarantees the ‘smooth’ dominance of the coloniser, and it functions to alienate the colonised in their own country by

changing its geographical and even ecological identity. Edward W. Said warns that “[i]mperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control.” He notes that for “the native, the history of his or her colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose concrete geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored (Eagleton *et al.* 1990:77).

Almásy uses an 1890 edition of Herodotus’ *Histories* as a “commonplace book” in which he keeps “other fragments—maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books” (p.96). This book is his “only connection with the world of cities”. It is “his guidebook, ancient and modern, of supposed lies” (p.246). Herodotus’s *Histories* “becomes the metaphoric bridge across time and space that replaces simple historicist conceptions of time” (Walder 1998:203-4). Simpson claims that the “marvelous discourse generating the *History* serves to bridge the explicitly colonial divide of metropoly and periphery, and to gloss problems of truth and falsehood in ways that only intensify the difficulty of distinguishing one from another” (Simpson 1994:222). According to Stephen Batchelor, the origin of the enmity between East and West is found in *Herodotus* and is due to “the epic conflict between Hellenes and Persians, giving rise to the mythical contrast between heroic, liberty, loving and dynamic west and the despotic, stagnant and passive East” (Clarke 1997:4). Clarke’s claim renders *Herodotus* a focal point, a ‘centre’, or a vortex in which all history, especially that of East and West, is condensed. It also invokes the colonial crusades, which are depicted on maps that reveal “the various routes of the Crusades” (p.18). Further, it invokes wars as old as those of Hellenes and Persians which are fought for imperial reasons. The book itself is a proof that history repeats itself, and that the present is an echo of the past.

Almásy and other explorers use literary legends and Herodotus’ *Histories* to explore reality. Almásy imagines that “he had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone between distances and legend between nature and storyteller. Sandford called it geomorphology” (p.246). The use of an ancient book of history in these explorations testifies to the strength of knowledge that outlives its own time. Herodotus’ book remains, according to Almásy, useful even in modern times not just for scholarly study but for colonial exploration and exploitation of the natural resources of other

countries. The explorers of the desert are “men of all nations”. They are described as “sunburned, exhausted men, who, like Conrad’s sailors, are not too comfortable with the etiquette of taxis, the quick, flat wit of bus conductors”. They “cling” to their old maps and lecture notes (p.133). Further, they have entered into their own heart of darkness by going to the desert. Their experiences in the desert makes them, like Conrad’s Marlowe, wise, sad, and uncomfortable with the city way of life.

The desert erases people’s identities. Almásy loses his white skin, a race marker, when he falls into the desert. “All pilots who fall into the desert—none of them come back with identification” (pp.28-29). To other Europeans, he resembles one of the “mad desert prophets” (p.251). Katharine, too, loses her race marker (her blue eyes) when she dies in the desert. “Only the eye blue removed, made *anonymous, a naked map where nothing is depicted*” (p.261, my italics). The desert strips them of any form of identification. It makes them like its own nature, without defining contours and without race markers. Tom Penner remarks that a “desire for erasure is present throughout the English patient’s narrative” (Penner 2000). Simpson suggests that “[i]dentity, nationality, and acts themselves all provide an occasion for torture, for a rewriting of the body by way of pain” (Simpson 1994:230). Hence, Caravaggio’s body was “rewritten” after the discovery of his identity by cutting off his thumbs. Caravaggio “had been trained to invent double agents or phantoms who would take on flesh” (p.117). Therefore, he is trying to “invent” a skin for the English patient. The “desire for erasure” foreshadows the ultimate erasure, that of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which is a wiping out of a nation. Simpson notes that “the adumbrations and irradiations of this apocalypse, those shadows seared onto ground, align nuclear ‘photography’ as a killing inscription with imperial, racist methods of repression and erasure” (Simpson, p.230). Further, David Williams claims that Almásy tries to “atone for his earlier mistake in charting the desert, or erasing the past” (Penner 2000).

The characters in the novel live in a desert both metaphorically and/or literally. The metaphorical desert is implied in the reference to Stephen Crane’s poem (p.97). All the characters are living in their own metaphorical deserts trying to cope with their traumatic war experiences. The description of the places Kip and his fellow sappers walk through seems to echo that of the desert with its anonymity. “Every river they came to was bridgeless, as if its name had been erased, as if the sky were starless, homes doorless”

(p.129). See the introduction for more details on the effects of war on the characters.

Almásy, however, experiences both types of deserts. Hall claims that when people search for their identity they “tend to isolate themselves ... as if they are running to the desert.” They can also “make their homes the deserts they run into”. Hall suggests that:

[T]he desert is thought of as nothingness waiting to become something, if only for a while; meaninglessness waiting to be given meaning if only a passing one; space without contours, ready to accept any contour offered if only until other contours are offered; space not scarred with past furrows, yet fertile with expectations of sharp blades; virgin land yet to be ploughed and tilled; the land of the perceptual beginning the place-no-place whose name and identity is not-yet.” (Hall 1997:3)

Almásy has a desire to return to a ‘pure’ state like that of the desert in which his ‘self’ is not marked by nationality, race, and other social frames which limit, label and frame him.

Almásy’s love for the desert reveals his wish to live in similar conditions. He states that:

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map ... We are communal histories, communal books *All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps.* (p.261, my italics)

It is a strange wish for a mapmaker to live on “an earth that had no maps”. The desert reduces people to their common humanity. Its “cartography” is the ‘true’ form of labelling to Almásy, who is against the racist labelling of others. This “labelling” echoes Madan Sarup’s process of labelling which affects the way people think of others (Sarup 1996:14). Rufus Cook notes that “[i]n contrast to Katharine, the English patient regards distinctions of race and class as ‘walls’ or ‘barriers’ (155), as a source of distrust and conflict” (Cook 1999:43). The English patient “seems to transcend time, place, and ethnic origin”. He becomes “a synonym for absence or anonymity” since “he has no defining substance of his own, no containing or delimiting skin (117)”, and this allows him to assume “one new cultural identity after another” (Cook, p.46). Ondaatje constructs “a fictional individual, who is inbetween and peripheral”. Tötösy also refers to “Almásy’s rejection of homogeneity, national self-referentiality and its exclusionary results” (Tötösy 1994:235). Almásy’s opposition to other forms of labelling stems from his realisation that sciences including

Anthropology and Ethnology are colonial practices used to legitimise the colonisation of races on the basis of their ‘natural’ or ‘genetic’ inferiority.

A map is a form of order, control, and deconstruction. Almásy sees everything in the shape of maps. This could be related to his profession as a mapmaker, but it is also related to the importance of maps. He “rides the boat of morphine. It races in him, imploding time and geography the way maps compress the world onto a two-dimensional sheet of paper” (p.161). Even works of art do not escape being mapped. For instance, the map which shows the path Kim and the lama take in Kipling’s *Kim* (p.167). This map helps Almásy control his understanding of *Kim*. Missing something of the plot does not obstruct or limit his understanding because he is “familiar with the map of the story” (pp.94-95). Other references to maps include “the great maps of art” (p.70), “the various maps of fate” (p.272), and “mapped ... sadness” (p.270). Rufus Cook notes the “the need to ‘map’ ... some aspect of reality, and thus to identify some ‘original pattern’ (193) underlying ‘the external world of accident and succession’” (Cook 1999:35). He explains that works of art help the characters “define their identities, their purposes, their relationships with others” (Cook, p.36). He adds that “[t]he characters struggle to ‘map’ or ‘choreograph’ their environment; they want to understand ‘how the pieces fit’”. “Outside ‘great maps of art’ (70) there is no order, no security, nothing that can define or delimit the self, or keep it from slipping away into another time, place, or set of cultural terms” (Cook, p.44).

Maps play an important role in Kip’s life. To him, they mean the difference between life and death. He uses them in deconstructing bombs and mines which he reduces to their skeletal shape. They represent an order without which anarchy and “deluge” would follow. After the death of Lord Suffolk, “Kip had suddenly a map of responsibility”. Maps give those who have them power—a matter that echoes Foucault’s knowledge/power binary. Hence, Kip feels uncomfortable with his newly acquired power because he was “never interested in the choreography of power” (p.194). He is accustomed to being invisible and having such power means becoming visible.

The loss of maps could cause disasters, even Armageddon. The narrator refers to a “deluge” that sweeps away “free will, the desire to be elegant, fame, the right to worship Plato as well as Christ.” He also refers to “bonfires—the burning of wigs, books, animal hides, maps” (p.57). This “deluge” sweeps away everything and denies restoring order by

destroying maps. Further, following the nuclear bombing of Japan, Kip imagines “the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map” (p.284). Kip tries to rationalise the extreme power of the colonisers. To him, knowledge is what gave them the upper hand. He informs the English patient that “[y]our fragile white island ... with customs and manners and books and perfects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world.” It is knowledge, especially knowledge of maps, which made the white race stand “for precise behaviour”.

The statements which Kip makes about the global effect of the British echo those of Clarke who remarks on the West’s “systematic” process of “imposing its religions, its values, and its legal and political systems on Eastern nations” (Clarke 1997:7, my italics). His words also echo Said’s who maintains that “a white middle-class Westerner believes it his human prerogative not only to *manage* the nonwhite world but also to *own* it, just because by definition ‘it’ is *not* quite as human as ‘we’ are” (Said 1987:108, my italics). Kip’s questions highlight and link knowledge and power:

Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had *the histories and printing presses*? ... And Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be *pukkah*. You had wars like cricket. How did you fool us into this? (p.283, first two italics mine)

The English “had the histories and printing presses”. Hence, they have a power, like that of Almásy, which is a concomitant of knowledge. The colonisers knew the first rule of colonisation: “*know thy enemy*”. The need for knowledge justifies the studies in Anthropology and Ethnology for colonial purposes.

The colonisers’ possession of the “histories and the printing presses” leads them to regard themselves as “custodian[s] of the values of civilisation and history, [with the mission of] bringing light to the colonised’s ignominious darkness” (Memmi 1974:74-6). This “mission” must be carried out regardless of what the colonised races think of it. Most colonisers believe that the colonised do not know what is good for them. Hence, when the colonised resist to adopt the colonisers’ values and religion, they are bombarded, as in the “incomprehensible, firing into a continent” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (Kimbrough 1971:14). In Conrad’s novel, “thunder and lightning” (Memmi, p.57), which reflect the enlightenment the colonisers supposedly bring to the colonised, are transformed into cannons and fires.

Similarly, in Ondaatje's novel they are transformed into the nuclear bombing of Japan. Said explains that "[a]pparently benign Orientalising ethnocentrism becomes bloody, repressive ethnocentrism, violent positing action of 'the West' which works to assert its plenitude through caricature, suppression, or *obliteration* of the other" (Said 1978:180-2, my italics). Imperialism and capitalism also necessitate finding new markets and guarding them militarily. The colonised races are the consumers of these new markets, and they have to be guarded from competitors by all means. The nuclear bombing of Japan invokes Said who maintains that Europe's "role in the non-European world was to rule, instruct, legislate, develop, and at the proper times, to discipline, war against, and occasionally *exterminate* non-Europeans" (Eagleton *et al.* 1990:72, my italics).

Further, Kip's questions suggest that history is written by the strong. Historians can/have depict(ed) the colonised races negatively. The power of the printing presses helps them promote the stereotypes and myths the colonisers generate about the subject races. It also helps them promote a discourse aimed at legitimising to the world the inhuman practices colonisation inflicts on the colonised races. In addition, the association between war and "cricket" suggests that the colonisers enjoy these wars as if they are games. It also implies the frequency of these wars. In both cases, the value of the life of the colonised races is undermined substantially. Kip's words demonstrate to what lengths the colonised might go, sacrificing their life for the colonisers in the hope of being admitted into their camp.

In *The English Patient* all wars prove to be the same. Ondaatje links the Medieval wars with those fought in Italy in 1943-44. The same towns "had been battled over since the eighth century", and "if you dug deep beneath the tank ruts, you found bloodaxe and spear" (p.69). To Ondaatje, past events remain 'alive', and history repeats itself. The idea of modern wars being similar to past ones is echoed in Field Marshal Kesselring's idea of "pouring hot oil from battlements" (p.69). The expertise of Medieval scholars is also used though they "kept forgetting the invention of the airplane" (p.69). Further, the references to "the stone pulpit where Hercules slays the Hydra" and to "the Tree of Good and Evil inserted into the mouth of the dead Adam" convey the effect that modern war fair are echoes of past events.

Furthermore, the English patient tells the interrogators that "the Germans have barracked themselves into villas and convents and they are brilliantly defended. It's an old

story—the Crusaders made the same mistake against the Saracens. And like them you now need the fortress towns” (p.96). J. Hillis Miller describes the novel as a “pattern of eddying repetition”, and Rufus Cook maintains that it is “constantly reduplicating some incident from an earlier page” (Miller 39 in Cook 1999). Hence, “meaning or being or identity is always deferred or displaced” (Cook 1999:37). In addition, Cook explains that “[b]y breaking through this ‘time-defeating’ narrative mode of experience, the English patient escapes the constrictions of a phenomenal existence. He can then immerse himself in the atemporal, archetypal world of Homer, Herodotus, and Kipling, and in the non-sequential, ceremonial time of Bedouin ritual and myth” (Cook, p.48) Brian Johnson suggests that “Ondaatje sees the past under the surface of things”, and that his “fiction deciphers identity and bleeds through borders.” Johnson also claims that Ondaatje “writes with the compassion of a literary peacekeeper, exploring the aftermath of violence in narratives that telescope back through time” (Johnson 2000). *The English Patient* presents the reader with the danger of colonial sciences, such as mapmaking, and the concomitant power they give to the colonisers. After all, were it not for the importance of maps, Almásy would not be labelled as a ‘traitor’.

Conclusion

Ondaatje introduces the Indian Kip as a revolutionary version of Kipling’s Kim. Like Kim, Kip begins as a devoted colonised who serves the British Empire. Kim remains the devoted servant of the empire and works against his own people, whereas Kip rebels against it after the nuclear bombing of Japan and casts away his ‘colonised shell’. He evolves from the ‘cocoon’ of colonisation and flies away like a ‘butterfly’, back into the country he was born in. Ondaatje depicts the racism which Kip was subjected to and allows his reader to view the ‘Other’ point of view, unlike Rudyard Kipling, for instance, who does not touch upon such issues. Indeed, in the final analysis, Almásy’s ‘crime’ of giving the Nazis the maps of the desert is not so grave. The Nazis are abhorred for their racism, but what they did is very small when compared to the scale of what the Allies’ nuclear bombs did to the ‘brown’ races. Kip and Caravaggio believe that such a bomb would not have been dropped on a white nation. The bombing becomes an embodiment of imperial racism, which is much stronger than that of the Nazis.

Almásy's stay with the Bedouins allows him to 'erase' his identity, his sense of a nation, and he 'sinks' into anonymity. Nationness and nationality are tantamount to sins in Ondaatje's work. They are reasons for conflict and for wars, and they stop people from assimilating. Almásy becomes another Kip; he devoted his life to chart the desert for the Royal Society thus turning it into a war field. However, like Kip, he has a turning point. He becomes the English patient who refuses to admit his identity and who wishes to live on a land that has no maps. This image is emphasised by the reference to Caravaggio's painting of David with the head of Goliath. "Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand" (p.116). The English patient sees in Kip his former state as a devoted servant of the Empire. He can also see the potentiality of Kip's revolution against the Empire.

The English Patient presents the reader with the danger of colonial sciences, such as mapmaking, and the concomitant power they give to the colonisers. After all, were it not for the importance of maps, Almásy would not be labelled as a 'traitor'. The novel concludes with Kip learning that it does not matter how close one gets to the colonisers, for one remains treated as an outsider/'Other'. Kip resembles Turkey to a certain degree, which has been trying to be admitted into the European Union for so many years now but its request is still denied. The novel leaves us to "swallow [our] history lesson" (p.285). Eventually, in Ondaatje's novel "all that remains is a capsule from the past" (p.33).

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The English Patient: Introduction

When Ondaatje was 11 years old, he moved to England to live with his mother and siblings. After high school, he attended Dulwich College in London before immigrating to Montreal, Quebec, Canada in 1962. In Quebec, Ondaatje enrolled at Bishop's University, where he began to publish his poetry through the university press. Ondaatje graduated from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1965, and in 1967, he earned a Master of Arts degree from Queen's University in Ontario.

Acclaim for MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *The English Patient*

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