

By Air, Earth, and Sea: The Constitution of Identity in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

Andy Verboom

Introduction

The English Patient, which won the Booker Prize in 1992, is Michael Ondaatje's most famous novel. Set at the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the end of the British Empire, it tells the story of a group of war-damaged people who together take refuge in an abandoned Italian villa to study and recover from their wounds, or die from them. War is a time of stark divisions among nations and their citizens, but as Andrew Verboom's paper shows with great delicacy and imaginative insight, the world of *The English Patient* is one that refuses to accept either the absolute nature of those differences or the possibility of their easy abandonment. As Verboom argues by very skillfully moving between Ondaatje's novel and the much more recent work of philosophers such as Anthony Appiah, we enter a state of political and imaginative peril both when we attempt to erase nations and when we passionately embrace them. "Propinquity" – the similarity between things unexpectedly revealed by spatial proximity – is a key concept in *The English Patient*, and Verboom uses it to understand the flawed "identity projects" undertaken by the novel's main characters, arguing that in the end propinquity is as much a political philosophy as a form of perceptual magic.

-Dr. Alice Brittan

In his insightful treatment of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* as travel literature, Darryl Whetter observes that "the subject of storytelling itself is the inseparable companion to any serious literary depiction of travel."¹ When he then explores how "Almásy's body is frequently conflated with landscapes,"² he erects a triad of sorts: storytelling, travelling through landscape, and bodily living emerge as interrelated and inextricable activities. In the spirit of Whetter's article, I propose a similar triadic relationship among three different elements in *The English Patient*: character, vehicle, and the constitution of identity. For example, Almásy not only resembles the desert,³ he also exhibits a striking affinity to the old plane he uses to cross that desert, the same plane in which he and Katharine crash. The result of this crash – Almásy's nth degree burns – enables his project of obtaining liberation from nominal and national bonds through anonymity. Kip, by his own admission, also has "a mystical closeness' [...] 'with machines.'"⁴ One machine in particular, his Triumph Motorcycle,⁵ performs a similar feat of what might be called accidental manifestation: Kip's failure to essentialise the West and the Orient, rejecting the former while retreating to the latter, is signalled by his motorcycle crash. That both men crash into water – either actually or metaphorically – suggests not only a shared flaw in their identity projects but also a cosmopolitan alternative to their attempts to distance themselves from others.

Almásy's identity project, his enterprise to both "[e]rase the family name" and "[e]rase nations"⁶ springs, from his condemnation of these identity markers, both the political and the personal. He denounces "nation-states" as deformers of identity,⁷ and when asked by Katharine what he hates most, he answers "Ownership,"⁸ demonstrating an adamant resistance to personal

obligation. His desire to “not belong to anyone” or “to any nation”⁹ is finally consummated as he plummets from his plane, “burning into the desert,” the oil fire having rendered him anonymous in an instant: the Bedouins find him nameless and amnesic.¹⁰

The crash of Almásy’s unnamed plane begs comparison to Geoffrey Clifton’s crash, and the qualities of the latter serve to emphasise those of the former. Clifton’s plane is named both for its model, The Gipsy Moth, and by affection, “*Rupert Bear*.”¹¹ Almásy’s plane, in contrast, is as anonymous as he becomes. Furthermore, there is “no fire” when Clifton crashes his *Rupert*,¹² and so the deliberate act does not erase Clifton’s identity. Instead, the crash acts as a final romantic assertion of selfhood, his “plane’s crumpled grip” wrapping around Katharine as if it was his own “grip.”¹³ This declaration of self stands in direct contrast to Almásy’s loss of name and nation – yet, Almásy, too, is identified with his own old “rotted plane.”¹⁴ With its “canvas sheetings on the wings ripping open in the speed,” the plane becomes a mirror of Almásy’s own physical state: its age and dilapidation seem conferred onto him as he too “[s]uddenly” turns “old” and becomes “carrion,”¹⁵ as anonymous as the carcass of an animal. Like the “small bolt from a cockpit” that becomes “jewellery,”¹⁶ the Bedouins who find Almásy use him for their own purposes, regardless of his former identity.¹⁷ Considering his severe injury and disfigurement, and his reduction to the status of possession, the extremely literal success of Almásy’s identity project may also be considered as an utter failure; as an invalid, he more than ever belongs to those who care for him. Almásy’s plane, as such, is not simply a means of transport but it is also the vehicle that literally ‘carries over’ his identity project from conception to reality.

Unlike Almásy’s desire for anonymity, Kip’s identity project has a very brief existence in the novel, occurring only in the final section. Kip does not declare a manifesto like Almásy, but his shifting ideologies are evident in his sudden behavioural changes. Before the bombing of Hiroshima, Kip has “assumed English fathers” and is “following their codes like a dutiful son”¹⁸: he serves in the English army, is “charmed by [...] Western invention[s]” and frequently “sings [...] Western songs.”¹⁹ Not only does Kip adopt a Western identity, he also allows himself to be appropriated by it. Rather than attempting to erase or assert his proper name like Almásy or Clifton, he readily accepts the nickname “Kip,” supplied by his English comrades.²⁰ When Caravaggio asks why Kip is “fighting English wars,” Hana accidentally pours “milk over [Kip’s] brown hand and up his arm to his elbow.”²¹ Kip does not attempt to answer Caravaggio’s implications, and he shows no objection to being subsumed in whiteness – whether that whiteness be milk or Western-ness.²² Kip is so ambivalent about India, in fact, that when Caravaggio challenges him again, asking where his home is, Kip cannot answer. He simply “roll[s] his head, half nodding, half shaking it, his mouth smiling.”²³

Granted, this pre-nuclear Kip generalises on the level of ethnicity, claiming that all Sikhs are “brilliant at technology,”²⁴ but he also dismisses his brother’s Asian essentialism by arguing that “Japan is a part of Asia [...] and the Sikhs have been brutalized by the Japanese in Malaya.”²⁵ It is most ironic, then, that when atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kip flies off into an essentialist rage:²⁶ “you” and “[y]our fragile white island,” he

seethes at Almásy, “‘somehow converted the rest of the world.’”²⁷ He treats Almásy not only as a figurehead for all of England but, when Caravaggio insists that Almásy is not even English,²⁸ as a figurehead for the entire white, Western world: “American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman [...] You all learned it from the English.”²⁹ Kip’s essentialising of the West is matched by an equally powerful essentialising of the Orient: when “he closes his eyes he sees the streets of *Asia* full of fire.”³⁰ Kip now thinks of Japan, a nation he once considered at odds with his own, as a representative body for the entire Asian continent. He so readily adopts this essential victimhood that he fears even to light a lamp the night he hears of the bombs, believing “the lamp will ignite everything.”³¹ Kip’s implicit identity project is this division of world experience into two totalities: the white Western world and the brown Orient.

Kip first attempts to distance himself from the West by “[stripping his] tent of all military objects, all bomb disposal equipment, [and stripping] all insignia off his uniform.”³² As he leaves the villa on his motorcycle, however, his changed mentality is most apparent. The pre-nuclear Kip used his rifle scope to get closer to the frescoes he so admired,³³ focusing on the painted faces and noting their individuality, especially that of the “great face” of Isaiah.³⁴ Post-nuclear Kip signals a new, sweeping, essentialist project when he refuses to focus on Almásy’s face, as he stares at him through his rifle scope,³⁵ denying Almásy the currency of individuality. This incapacity to recognise individuality plays out on the road, as Kip begins to lose his ability to approach and appreciate Western works of art:

He rode the Triumph up the steps to the door of the church and then walked in. A statue was there, bandaged in scaffold. He wanted to get closer to the face, but he had no rifle telescope.... He wandered around underneath like somebody unable to enter the intimacy of a home.³⁶

The scaffolding that obscures the statue functions as a ready metaphor for what Kip believes his identity project will accomplish: a deconstruction and rejection of Western ideas. However, by rejecting a Western aesthetic as Western *per se*, Kip is no longer able to appreciate an Italian statue as an individual piece of art. In fact, as his motorcycle carries him forward, Kip “recogniz[es] only the *Black Madonna* shrines” he has seen, catching no glimpse of the *white* “Virgin” statue “emerg[ing] from the sea”³⁷ as he did before.³⁸

Rather than actualizing Kip’s identity project – as the plane crash does for Almásy – the motorcycle crash is an abrupt interruption in Kip’s journey away from the “white” world and to the southeast,³⁹ presumably on the path back to India. This interruption is a symptom rather than the cause of Kip’s failure to leave the West behind. As he approaches “Ortona, where the sappers had laid the Bailey bridges, nearly drowning in the storm in mid-river,” he is haunted both by Hana’s face, around which he literally tries to “swerve,” and by the presences of Almásy and Isaiah.⁴⁰ When he gets to the bridge at Ofanto, he loses control of the motorcycle, sends up a shower of sparks as he slides across the bridge, and plummets through “midair” into the river.⁴¹

The bike's pyrotechnical loss of control recalls Kip's own fireworks of emotion after hearing of the bombings in Japan, as he "scream[s]," "sinks to his knees" (283), and shoots about "like a steel ball in an arcade game."⁴² When finally his bare head comes out of the water," he is once again referred to as "[t]he sapper [...]."⁴³ Thus, Kip is unable to escape or leave behind the West, despite his reliance on essentialism. He only makes it so far before he literally plunges into the shocking realisation that his project is unachievable.

Homi Bhabha suggests that the haunting experienced by Kip is characteristic of colonial subjects who seek to assert their identities. Bhabha writes: "to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness"⁴⁴ – and so the flaw in Kip's identity project stems from his attempt to remove himself from, and remove from himself, everything Western. Kip, the colonial subject, is not a slate to be wiped clean but a "palimpsest"⁴⁵ upon which the coloniser, England, has written "sapper." Kip, seen retrospectively, will always have been a sapper, and he will perhaps always be one. Indeed, total essentialism may be conceivable in rough theory, but the fact is that Kip has lived in the West for some time, and his lived experience there creates a pluralism of identity he cannot escape. On the way to his "country of five rivers,"⁴⁶ he falls into one of the European rivers across which he has helped construct a Bailey bridge, shocking him back into the role of sapper through his memory of the experience.⁴⁷ Just as the colonial man in search of identity is "tethered to [...] the shadow of colonized man,"⁴⁸ the opposite is also true: Kip feels he carries the body of the Englishman with him in this flight" from the West, "the black body in an embrace with his, facing the past over his shoulder."⁴⁹

Almásy is equally haunted by "a figure at the foot of his bed," a "slight brown figure" that makes him think of "the young sapper."⁵⁰ By including such an event at the climax of his novel, Ondaatje suggests that identity formation is indeed reciprocal, that it requires the presence of an *other*. Kip's and Almásy's identity projects are flawed from the beginning, then, as each relies on complete separation from an other – in Kip's case, the entire West, and in Almásy's, it seems, absolutely everyone. Furthermore, Kip's and Almásy's projects collapse any distinction between the personal and the political. Almásy's equation of familial and national identities ignores that, as Anthony Appiah argues, "nationalism posits a relation among strangers"; as opposed to the reasonable "face-to-face social connections" of family and friends, a nation is something "abstract."⁵¹ Nevertheless, Almásy repeatedly pairs the two. While other desert explorers wanted their names passed on to landmarks and tribes, "I wanted to erase my name," he tells Hana, "and the place I had come from."⁵² In his privileging of essentialism over personal experience, Kip makes a similar misstep.

Upon returning to the triadic model proposed at the beginning of this essay, it is important to note that the oversights of Kip's and Almásy's identity projects correspond to certain deficiencies in their modes of transportation. To put it simply, both the plane and motorcycle are quite old. Almásy must dig up from the shifting desert sands "the aging plane of Madox's," which had been "left where it was, covered with a tarpaulin, [and] pegged down."⁵³ Kip too is said to "unearth [...] the motorcycle form under [a] tarpaulin."⁵⁴ That both vehicles were buried during long periods of disuse – the likely cause of the malfunctions leading to their

crashes⁵⁵ – suggests that the two projects of identity they represent are also antiquated. Indeed, there is nothing new about Almásy’s extreme individualism of Kip’s Orientalism; however, the solution Ondaatje offers to their projects is so new that *The English Patient* itself predates it – or at least prefigures it. The water into which both Almásy and Kip plunge in their accidents is imbued with a key characteristic of Appiah’s “partial cosmopolitanism”:⁵⁶ propinquity. For Appiah, cosmopolitanism should emphasise first and foremost the benefit of privileging local and familial relationships over relations with strangers,⁵⁷ of ethnically legitimising propinquity.

When Almásy crashes into the desert, all he can think is that he “must build a raft [...] must build a raft.”⁵⁸ Indeed, the Bedouin who find him do just that, building “a boat of sticks” to drag him across that “Sand Sea.”⁵⁹ For Almásy, the notion of sand as sea evokes not only a historical propinquity⁶⁰ but also the emotional proximity of talking to Katharine in “the Cave of Swimmers” for the first time in a year.⁶¹ Though Kip’s “sense of rivers” is tainted by his time spent constructing Bailey bridges at night, in mid-stream, and under enemy fire,⁶² this sense is wed to the notion of “magic water all over the Punjab.” The stories Kip tells Hana of the “five rivers” of his country evoke such nearness that the two of them can actually move about within the landscape he describes.⁶³ This “propinquity of water”⁶⁴ is corroborated by Hana and Katharine. From Hana’s description of her father’s burns and her anguish at not being near enough to care for him,⁶⁵ it seems likely she adopts Almásy as a surrogate father-patient. Befitting the temporal and geographical propinquity created by this surrogate relationship, she finds in Almásy “a pool for her,” “[a]n ebony pool.”⁶⁶ Katharine, too, finds comfort in water, being “always happier in rain, in bathrooms steaming with liquid air, in sleepy wetness, [...] putting on her clothes while still wet, in order to hold it all”: this affection for water is tightly knit to her love for “family traditions and courteous ceremony.”⁶⁷ Like Katharine, Hana also associates water, the rivers and lakes of Canada, with family.⁶⁸

Unlike Hana and Katharine, who embrace propinquity, Almásy and Kip choose to actively reject it as a viable foundation for identity; however, when their identity projects fail – incidents represented by violent accidents – both men are tossed back into “the propinquity of water” that they have rejected. Thus, it is through his intimate alignment of character, vehicle, and identity theory that Ondaatje critiques individualist and essentialist worldviews and posits instead the pre-eminence of propinquity, prefiguring Appiah’s “partial cosmopolitanism.” Although the novel ends without divulging certain knowledge of Almásy’s fate, it suggests in its final pages the possibility that anyone can revise his or her worldview. Years after the war, Kip lives a life of imaginative propinquity: from across the globe, “he watches Hana,” “sees her always,”⁶⁹ and when she knocks a glass from a cupboard in Canada, he steps into a cosmopolitan world – suspended between geographical distance and emotional proximity – to catch a falling knife in India.⁷⁰

Notes

- ¹ Darryl Whetter, "Michael Ondaatje's 'International Bastards' and Their 'Best Selves': An Analysis of *The English Patient* as Travel Literature," *English Studies in Canada* 23.4 (1997), 443.
- ² *Ibid.*, 446.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 272.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 138, 152.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 173.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 270, 127.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 87-88.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 122-23.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 268.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 272.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 282-84.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 286.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 284, emphasis added.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 287.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 71.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 77-78.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 284.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 292, emphasis added.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 78-79.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 291.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 293-94.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 295.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 283, 282.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 296.
- ⁴⁴ Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative," *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 44.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Ondaatje, 270-71.

-
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ⁴⁸ Bhabha, 44.
- ⁴⁹ Ondaatje, 294.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ⁵¹ Anthony Kwame Appiah, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism,” *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), 238-39.
- ⁵² Ondaatje, 139.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 168.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 289.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 175, 294.
- ⁵⁶ Anthony Kwame Appiah, “Introduction: Making Conversation,” *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), xvii.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xviii.
- ⁵⁸ Ondaatje, 18.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 174.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 129.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 270-71.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 295-96.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 41, 48.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 300.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 302.