

## Four Characters in Search of An Author-Function

Foucault, Ondaatje, and the “Eternally Dying” Author in *The English Patient*<sup>1</sup>

“**W**hat does it matter who speaks?” asks Samuel Beckett via Michel Foucault’s essay. “What is an Author?” “. . . Am I just a book?” asks the burned Englishman in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient*, in response to Caravaggio’s attempts to reveal his past as the cartographer/spy Almásy. Both questions are germane to a central tension in the novel: What are the implications (for texts) of an absent/anonymous narrative creator? In this novel, the issue of “who speaks” is not an innocent one. The English patient would like, for various reasons, to absolve himself of authorial responsibility for his narrative. The most apparent of these reasons is certainly to avoid the repercussions of his being identified as Almásy. Yet the “black body” of this “despairing saint” gives no clue to his identity, and therefore to the “origin” of the discourse of which he is the source. He is an unreadable enigma, with “all identification consumed in a fire” (3), whom the inhabitants of the villa must nonetheless translate into their own narratives.

This absence of locating identification poses a problem for anyone who seeks to “read” the English patient in the terms of what Foucault names in his essay the “Author Function,” which (among other things) demands that we name the writer in order to understand the text. An anonymous narrative is problematic, since it stands outside the framing operation which for the modern reader provides a comfortable (if voyeuristic) view into the mind of the writer. According to Foucault, however, the operation of author construction also serves to limit/constrict/confine the discourse which it frames. In various ways, then, Ondaatje’s novel offers the reader an enigma

who is filing for divorce from his narrative, yet cannot leave the uneasy relationship behind.

Why should a discourse become confined, limited, or otherwise handicapped by the Author Function? According to Foucault, the need to inscribe texts with the name of an author derives from a particular set of historical and cultural circumstances, variously connected with the rise of a “system of ownership for texts” (108). Significantly for the discourse of the English patient, it is only when the “possibility of transgression” becomes inherent in what we would now call “literary” discourse that the Author Function is made a requirement of its dissemination (109). His “transgressions”—of nationality, of identity, of marital arrangements—clearly qualify his narrative for receipt of the Author Function. It would conveniently enable his audience to place him (and hence, his story) within the parameters which his history provide. He is a spy, so it is a spy story. He was in love, so it’s a romance. He is not English, and so he lies about the gardens at Kew. Yet for Foucault this too-convenient inscription of the narrative within the name of its author serves only to “impede the free circulation . . . of fiction” (119) within the false parameters of biography.

How, then, can we move from the “brakes on meaning” (to use Barthes’s term in *The Rustle of Language* 53) this inscription represents to a “proliferation of meaning” (Foucault, “Author” 119) unconstrained by the Author Function? Foucault suggests that the answer begins with the divorce of textual signification from the “game of writing” (103), a game at which the writer is already, sadly, dead. Where narrative (the Greek epic is his example) once offered the hero immortality, it has become an arena for the “voluntary effacement” of its writer, an effacement which is inherent in the writer’s “very existence” (102). The rise of the notion of writing as *écriture* (and the coincident re-evaluation of the status of the author in relation to writing) offers the opportunity to analyze the characteristics which condition its production, rather than its idiosyncratic manifestations. Here Foucault is building on and adapting Roland Barthes’s seminal work on the “death of the author” in Barthes’s essay of the same name. Unfortunately this “death” has not, suggests Foucault, been a final one, for the drive to resurrect a subject position that corresponds eerily to the writer still distorts (in collusion with the Author Function) the reception of a narrative. Foucault claims that the same questions are still asked of texts in the ‘post-author’ critical world: “From where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, or beginning with what design?” (109) The agenda which drives these questions,

argues Foucault, is the basis for the classification of certain types of discourse as “speech that must be received in a certain mode and . . . must receive a certain status” (107). Yet our culture still has difficulty with writing that fails to provide these answers, which is one of the reasons why anonymous discourse is “intolerable” and initiates the “game” of “rediscovering the author” (109). This is certainly a game that the reader of *The English Patient* can appreciate.

What are the hermeneutical implications of an anonymously produced text? Can there be an understanding of it without a historically locatable author? Or is the map, in this case, the territory? The problem for the characters in *The English Patient* is how to receive the narrative of this “bogman from history” (96) who tells them he wishes to “erase [his] name and the place [he] had come from” (139). The English patient is sweeping his tracks from his narrative even as he relates it. This self-effacement makes the meaning of his narrative more mobile, more slippery, and poses a problem for the audience (most notably Caravaggio) that receives it. His story, then, must be somehow placed within the confines of an Author Function, in order to map its geography, the geography of the Hungarian Count Almásy and his historical role in the war.

This “faceless, almost nameless man” has three interlocutors, each of whom for various reasons resists or insists upon the responsibility of the writer for his narrative discourse. Hana, the nurse, is content to let him remain anonymous, since she is “not concerned about the Englishman as far as gaps in the plot [are] concerned” (8), and, as she later tells Caravaggio, “[i]t doesn’t matter what side he was on” (165). Caravaggio, the thief and detective, wants to “invent a skin” for the “man in the bed” and “reveal him for Hana’s sake” (117), suggesting that the story is not fully understandable at face value. Finally, there is Kip, who does not “yet have a faith in books,” the Sikh sapper who remains “an anonymous member of another race” (197), whose work defusing bombs depends on locating the mind that created it. Yet he is less concerned with identifying the English patient than with the “meadows of civilisation” (294) he represents as the spokesman of “English” culture.

Open to all of them at various times is a shared text, *The Histories of Herodotus*, which has gone from “commonplace” to “communal” book as Almásy has gone from adapting it to sharing it with his interlocutors. One begins to see how Foucault’s theory of unconfined discourse might have its harbinger in this text which has swollen to “almost twice its original thickness” (94) with the various additions of the English patient. Herodotus,

then, stands over the villa's occupants like a silent fifth, an "eccentric" non-centre within the narrative who acts synecdochically for an open discourse released from the constraints of the Author Function.

Further complicating these operations in the novel is a profound tension between the terms "English patient" and "Almásy." While it is not difficult to locate the English patient "as" Almásy, the correspondence is not strictly equivalent. There is a profound shift in agenda between the storytelling "Englishman" and the navigator and geographer whose narrative he relates. The English patient longs to "walk upon such an earth that had no maps" (261) while, in his incarnation as Almásy, maps were his *raison d'être*, a way to translate the world into two-dimensional space, to "fill the world with writing." These maps serve a framing purpose for the geographies which they re-present very similar to that of the Author Function in its relation to textual discourse. One names the land in order to obtain a certain control over it through the framing operation of language:

Still, some wanted their mark there. . . . Fenelon-Barnes wanted the fossil trees he discovered to bear his name. He even wanted a tribe to take his name, and spent a year in the negotiations. Then Bauchan outdid him, having a type of sand dune named after him. *But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from.* (139, emphasis added)

Naming conflates the individual and the thing named, the plain, the oasis, the *Djebel Almásy* (de Zepetnek 143). And maps are the things that the English patient most wants to live without. Even in this passage we see how Almásy seeks to avoid the hegemonizing functions of these Geographer-Gods, who would fill the desert with their own name.

Whereas Almásy sought to fix geographies within the publishable framework of the Royal Geographic Society, to have his name attached to monographs and maps, the English patient seeks to efface himself from the discursive operation. "We become vain with the names we own," he says (141), and this vanity is a thing he seems to want to move beyond as he tells the story. As a narrator, the English patient seems to embody (if you like) the thanatoid nature of the author within his discourse: "I didn't want my name against such names . . . Erase the family name! Erase nations!" (139). One might just as easily imagine him proclaiming, "Erase the presence of the author from his work!" This desire for erasure is present throughout the English patient's narrative, as he attempts to cover his footprints from the story he tells, just as Hana disguises her entry into the library—that temple of writing—to give the impression that her "corporeal body had disappeared" (12).

The English patient's drive to self-erasure is also echoed in the frequent obscuring of the narrative voice. "Who is he speaking as now," thinks Caravaggio, as the English patient switches seamlessly between the first and third-person position in his own narrative (244). "Death means you are in the third person," the English patient later tells Caravaggio, suggesting perhaps that it is possible to represent yourself in a narrative position that has meant your own demise. This ability to "speak sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person" (247) is also indicative of the ability of the English patient to stand outside his own discourse, to absent himself deliberately at the point of its creation. This ability is foregrounded in a curious passage in which he steps out of his narrative voice into that of the public observer:

In those days he [Almásy] and she [Katharine] did not seem to be getting on well . . . He was loud at the tables with us. When Almásy was like this we usually dispersed, but this was Madox's last night in Cairo and we stayed. (244, emphasis added).

The interchange of subject positions, this slipping between "we" and "I" and "he," contrasts with the other, more frequent, first-person narrator whom the English patient deploys in the telling of his story. Just as a "man in the desert can slip into a name as if within a discovered well" (141), the English patient can slip into a new position within his own discourse, thus frustrating attempts to inscribe him with a name and an Author Function. The English patient clearly understands "that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller . . . [how] he was alone, his own invention . . ." (246). Narrative and its *trompes l'oeil* are familiar to this fabulist, who knows "how the mirage worked . . . for he was within it" (246). Switching narrative position is one more example of the prestidigitation that contributes to the blurring of the origin of his discourse.

Almásy's fluid relationship with language is further illuminated by comparison with Katharine's. Where words give Katharine "clarity . . . reason, shape," for the English patient they "[bend] emotions like sticks in water" (238). Yet he still seeks to "translate" her into his "text of the desert" (236), and is "unable to remove her body from the page" (235). She has maintained a "line back to her ancestors that was almost tactile, whereas he had erased the path he had emerged from." Here, again, there is a marked difference between the English patient in the villa and the earlier Almásy, for, as David Williams points out, the burned man is clearly trying to "atone for

his earlier mistake in charting the desert, or erasing the past” (41). Where Almásy’s maps “compress the world into a two-dimensional sheet of paper” (161), the English patient’s narrative seeks to open up the world to new possibilities of meaning and remembering. They, too, share the *Histories*, and their differing approaches to it are also suggestive of their divergent relationship to the written world. While Almásy “would often open Herodotus for a clue to geography . . . Katharine had done that [that is, read the story of Gyges and Candaules] as a window to her life” (233). For him a text will reveal the physical world existing outside the writing, while for her a narrative reveals as much about the teller/reader as the tale. In this, she is paralleled closely with Hana, who seeks signs of herself both within the texts of the library and in the anonymous tabula rasa to whose deathwatch she has dedicated herself.

And so Almásy’s stature as the “dead man” at the heart of the narrative is never far away. Hana dislikes the “deathlike posture” (62) of this “eternally dying man” (115), who seems to have been erased from his own life, who “reposes like the sculpture of the dead knight in Ravenna” (96). Although she is the first audience (at the villa) of this “despairing saint” (45) of “pure carbon” (109) and his most forgiving, she is too absorbed in her own narrative of personal reconstruction to inquire too closely about his own. She is “secure in the miniature world” she has built: “the other two men seemed distant planets” (47). Caravaggio feels she has “chained herself to the dying man upstairs” (40). The English patient is to her “like a burned animal . . . a pool for her” (41) who reflects, it seems, her own desire for anonymity and escape from history.

For Hana is also both reader and script in the novel. Her body is “full of stories and situations” (36), “sentences and moments” (12), yet she is also the reader—of books, the “summer night” (49), the English patient. She, too, writes in books, filling them with her own language and opening them to the communal production of discourse which lies at the centre of the novel. Her triple role as reader, writer, and inscribed text suggests an interplay within the process of signification, an interplay that the Author Function seeks to shut down. Perhaps this is why she is never terribly interested in locating the English patient as an historical figure within his narrative, for she (consciously or not) recognizes that the dialogic possibilities of the narrative he relates would be constrained by any effort to delimit them within biographical parameters. He fascinates her, for “there is something about him that she wanted to learn, to grow into, and hide in, where she

could turn away from being an adult" (52). Being an adult, for her, means cutting one's hair and avoiding mirrors (50). At the same time, she embraces writing, which has at its heart an author whose corpse is only propped up by an Author Function that refuses to acknowledge the mortality of the writer within discourse.

Without spending a great deal of time on mirrors, to touch on their role in *The English Patient*, particularly the ways in which they reflect the mortality inherent in writing for Hana:

She had refused to look at herself for more than a year, now and then just her shadow on the walls. The mirror revealed only her cheek . . . She watched the little portrait of herself as if within a clasped brooch. She. . . Only those who were seriously ill were still indoors. She smiled at that. Hi Buddy, she said. She peered into her look, trying to recognize herself. (52)

The phrase "Hi Buddy," which she had previously used with the dying soldiers placed under her care, here suggests that she, too, is "seriously ill" and the reflection she sees is of her own mortality. This reflection is, of course, echoed in the artistic analogy that the English patient sees in Kip:

There's a painting by Caravaggio, done late in his life. *David with the head of Goliath*. In it, the warrior holds at the end of his outstretched arm the head of Goliath, ravaged and old. . . . It is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man, how he looked when he did the painting. Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand. The judging of one's own mortality. I think when I see him at the foot of my bed that Kip is my David. (116)

Compare this description of the painting to the physical posture of Hana as she recognizes her own mortality in the mirror which "revealed only her cheek, she had to move it back to arm's length, her hand wavering" (52). Hana, because she believes she "would have nothing to link her, to lock her, to death" (50), refutes the Author Function, for to admit that discourse could be delimited in such a way would be a sort of suicide for the sort of discursive possibilities she represents. The discourse must stand outside of the mortality of the author in order for it to avoid the life-in-death that the Author Function offers as an alternative.

It is Caravaggio who persistently asks the question which is at the heart of the operation of the Author Function—Who is 'behind' this narrative? He is convinced that there is "more to discover, to divine out of this body on the bed, non-existent except for a mouth" (247), and is determined to "unthread the story out of him," to travel "down the code of signals" that will reveal the historical man behind the story. It is Caravaggio who names

the English patient's narrative as "apocryphal," the discourse of a "mind travelling east and west in the disguise of a sandstorm" (248). He uses Herodotus to locate the English patient's story alongside that of Almásy, to follow the "flickering" of the narrative "compass needle" that makes the story "errant" (240).

Caravaggio knows about secrets, and he knows about the repercussions of revelation. His thumbs were removed when his identity was revealed, and he is like a detective attempting to ensure that the English patient does not elude the ramifications of his past by slipping into a comfortable anonymity. Yet by the end of the book Caravaggio, too, seems to have come to a different understanding of the role of the "Author-God" (the phrase is Foucault's) in relation to narrative. "We can let him be" (265), he tells Hana after hearing the poignant final installment of his narrative: "It no longer matters which side he was on during the war" (251). He feels he has "been in deserts too long" and perhaps has learned from them some of the same lessons that the English patient did: there is no author, only discourse. The English patient "learned everything [he] knew there" (177), after all.

Yet the question "Who is behind a 'work'" presupposes the non-problematic existence of a 'work' that is closed to further discourse. The presence of Herodotus' *Histories* demonstrates the principle of a 'work' that is somehow incomplete, or at least open to the very act of supplementation it claims as a guiding principle. Foucault makes it clear in his essay that the idea of a 'work' is very much under pressure in the absence of the classificatory functioning of the Author. Remove the various characteristics of a text that allow us to assign authorial integrity (an exegetical function he calls "religious" in nature) and what is left? In the absence of an acceptable "theory of the work" it is difficult to apply conventional notions of criticism, since we lack a tool by which to delineate adequately just what it is that is being criticized. The distinctions made between various manifestations of discourse (novel, textbook, poem and soon) are shown by Foucault to be arbitrary classifications rather than inherently unitary distinctions. Foucault has elsewhere remarked that the "frontiers of a book are never clear-cut . . . it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (*Archaeology* 23). A work per se has never been satisfactorily defined, yet 'books' which are of a 'finite' nature exist.

The problematic presence of the *Histories* in the novel is an example of just such a work "under pressure." As a history made up of "supposed lies" which opens itself up to the various pastings and writings of Almásy, it



offers a prime example of the “communal book” that the English patient will later name as an alternative to the fixed codifications of Almásy, his compatriots, and the nation states that govern, define, and destroy. It is the first example in the novel of a text which is freely open to emendation as its reader sees fit. Just as Hana will later on keep a diary within *Kim*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Almásy has insinuated himself and his own narrative of “supposed lies” into the *Histories*. He pastes in cigarette papers in the sections that are “of no interest to him,” and when he “discover[s] the truth to what seemed a lie . . . he paste[s] in a map or a news clipping” (173). The book, when Hana sees it, is “almost twice its original thickness,” evidence of the extent to which Herodotus’ text has opened itself to Almásy’s co-authorship. The presence of the *Histories*, with their curious blend of “skeletal act . . . and imaginative reality” (Greene 12), also underscores how the English patient presents his audience with what Ondaatje (quoting Vargas Lhosa) describes as the “truth of lying” (Wachtel 258). Not only do they challenge the notion of a text as a “fixing” of discourse between two covers, but they also both present and subvert the classificatory operations of the Author Function, since *The English Patient* is neither wholly fictional nor (in any “real” way) “historical.”

It is relevant, too, that the English patient refers to himself several times as Odysseus, the product of a communal discursive act that our culture has conflated under the authority of the name Homer. “I was Odysseus. I understood the shifting and temporary vetoes of war” (241). Odysseus, a man who Madox says “never wrote a word, an intimate book,” “felt alien in the false rhapsody of art” (241). Almásy is “too cunning to be a lover of the desert. More like Odysseus,” he is the great navigator, who also sought to name and to map. Within this model of hegemony through nomenclature, the ineffable desert represents a negation, an emptiness which needs to be made a part of the “fully named world” (21) that Almásy and others seek to create through maps. By placing himself within the framework of *The Odyssey*—a touchstone of our culture’s drive towards the classificatory operation of the Author Function—the English patient makes explicit the connection between Almásy’s “will to name” and the attempt to invoke a sort of closure on the world “outside” the text. As well, the connection reinforces his affinity with Odysseus’ ability to slip into anonymity when necessary, as he does when confronting the cyclops Polyphemus and escapes by adopting the name “Nobody.” Just as Homer’s name was devised to frame the problematic tradition of anonymity from which it sprang, Almásy’s

name is invoked to deploy the operations of the Author Function onto the narrative of the English patient.

Foucault also compares the modern drive towards the Author-God with the oral, anonymous production of discourses that we would now consider literary—poems and plays and so on. It is in oral narratives (the Greek epic is a useful case in point) where the redemptive function of narrative is most apparent. The sacrifice of the hero within the story is redeemed by the immortality provided by the concomitant epic narrative—Icarus may die but his cautionary tale affords him some measure of consolation. Herodotus' introduction to *The Histories* states as much. He is writing them so “. . . that time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being”—in other words to provide immortality to the “great and wonderful deeds” of the “Greeks and barbarians” of whom he writes. The Author Function “subverts” this redemption, and replaces it with the “voluntary effacement” of self-sacrifice, a subversion which provides narrative with the “right to kill” (102). As Williams notes (40), the English patient's narrative becomes, from this perspective, an attempt to translate Katharine's death into a representation similar to those he found 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” (249).

Herbs and dyes aren't all that he is using to “make her eternal” (260). Storytelling, as Foucault notes, often represents a Scheherazade-like postponement of death, which for the English patient will “locate and hold” Katharine in a “world” where the redemptive power of discourse has not been subverted by the thanatoid drive of the Author Function. Yet he later recognizes as flawed this attempt to immortalize his lover in art. Williams draws our attention to the way in which the English patient-as-narrator “has abandoned . . . fixity and embraced the flow of borderless text” (40). This “flow of borderless text” has a correlative in the “authorless discourse,” free of the framing operations of the Author Function, that Foucault is proposing as a new model of representation. It also resonates within the language of the English patient's final narrative:

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 of 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 like the names of rich men and women on building. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. (261)

We do not own, nor are we owned by, our narratives. Our experience is not reducible to an idiosyncratic manifestation of name or label. What's in a name, after all is said and done? The hollow necro-nomenclature of the Author Function.

Yet a problem remains: How do we locate Kip within this attempt to free narrative from the grips of the Author Function? What is the textual role of this sapper with the "rogue gaze" who can see all the "false descants" in a "page of information" (111)? His "body allows nothing to enter him that comes from another world" (126), so that he stands apart from the inhalations of writing that typify both Hana and the English patient. In fact, he seems to stand apart from much of the narrative process in the novel. His existence on the "periphery" (80) denotes a relationship with language that is not coincident with any of the other inhabitants of the villa. He does "not yet have a faith in books"; at least, not in the book as a repository of a closed meaning. "He has his own faith after all" (80), we are told. And we are reminded again that his culture is not that of the Westerners with whom he shares the villa. Kip listens to the oral narrative of the English patient, becoming the "young student" in the presence of the "wise old teacher," since he is "most comfortable with men who had the abstract madness of autodidacts, like Lord Suffolk, like the English patient" (111). For Kip, knowledge is present yet never fixed, for in his work of defusing bombs, the text (of both the bombs themselves and the directions for defusing them) and knowledge are fluid, changing constantly as new wrinkles are found in the "jokes" which animate the connection between fuse and explosive. Knowledge is not contained within the authority of texts, but is mutable, open to change as new elements come to light.

The "communal book" that Kip shares with the sappers—the constantly shifting text of fuses and technique—reinforces the sense that for Kip, knowledge/discourse is not limited to or by an author; it simply is. Yet there is a personality behind the fuse/text, whose mentality must be approached in order for the creation to be intelligible. In this sense, Kip cannot refute the presence of an originating mind in the narrative of ordnance, because it would tie at least one of his hands behind his back. In this sense, perhaps, the bomb-maker/author is closer to Foucault's "functional principle by which . . . one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation . . . of fiction" (119). These are, however, fictions that perhaps should have their circulation severely impeded. For Kip, "the successful defusing of bombs ended novels," creations of an "enemy who had made

the bomb and departed brushing his tracks with a branch behind him” (105). When a text has its author uncovered, it is defused, harmless, inert. But when the bomb-maker succeeds in becoming anonymous to the sapper/reader, in “brushing his tracks with a branch behind him,” then the ending becomes a little more problematic. It seems that Hana and the English patient are not the only ones with motivation for disguising their entries into narratives.

There is another accounting for Kip’s presence as a refutation of the author function. He is presented continually as a man on the periphery, a “loose star on the edge of their system” (75), and so offers the viewpoint of the ‘other’ to their narrative process. And he also has a personal interest in the ‘will to name,’ having been variously “translated” into a “salty English fish” (87), David the giant killer, and a variant on Kipling’s Kim. The English have attached names to Kip in various forms since he entered the army. He draws the connection between the text on bombs and the yellow chalk that was “scribbled onto our bodies in the Lahore courtyard,” the first naming operation of the colonial military. After Suffolk’s death he is “expected to be the replacing vision,” an expectation which he compares to “a large suit of clothes that he could roll around in . . . he knew he did not like it” (196). This is the point where Kip understands that he is “capable of having wires attached to him” (197). It is this capability, to be suffused within English (and by Kip’s logical extrapolation White/European) culture, that he rejects, and leaves the unit for the more ‘comfortable’ environs of Italy, free from the threat of unwanted discursive penetration. As an “anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world” (196), it is only logical that he would refuse this wiring, which is really only an extension of the hegemonic drive which wrote on his body and translated him into an “English fish”—out of water, one supposes. The rejection of this drive is also an implicit rejection of the Author Function, for the will to name is really an extension of the will to construct a misleading unity out of disparate discourse.

What occurs at the end of the novel, with the explosion of the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, seems to represent the initiation of a discourse that is un-solvable for Kip, for there is absolutely no “joke” to be found in the fuses of the Atomic era. Where bombs had previously posed problems of logic and personality to him, his role as a ‘reader’ of their somehow-humanized ‘text’ is obliterated with the introduction of bombs that refute any attempt to defuse them through an utter lack of personalization. The

bombs fill the streets of Asia with fire, rolling across cities “like a burst map” (285, emphasis added). “He knows nothing about the weapon” (287) that has been dropped, only that “[h]is name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here” (287). This “author-less” weapon comes to signify, for Kip, a conflation of power with anonymity, a conflation that holds out the possibility of annihilation. And so he re-appropriates his name, shedding those other names he has been given, and rejects, finally, the wires of culture that they represented. With the Author absent from the work (textual or atomic), Kip loses his *raison d’être*, and his departure from the “meadows of civilisation” that the English patient tended is a foregone conclusion. The Atomic bombs are infused with Western cultural codes (which have sanctioned the eliding of personal responsibility in an act of mass destruction), and so he rapidly takes aim at the most emblematic representative of those codes of “precise behaviour” (283): the English patient. It is the “death of a civilisation” (286), but this is ambiguous: Whose, exactly? The Japanese or English/Western?

Kip has, to this point, been a lover of chapels, with a closely felt attachment to the icons found there. He has come to Western culture through Suffolk and the face of Isaiah painted on Chapel ceilings, and found comfort sleeping in a familial triptych with chapel statuary while facing possible death. As he reaches a chapel near the beginning of his journey home, however, he merely “wander[s] around like somebody unable to enter the intimacy of a home” (291). Yet still he “carries the body of the Englishman with him in this flight . . . the black body in an embrace with his” (294), a touchstone, perhaps, for the knowledge that the English patient imparted to him. While this knowledge may seem to be simple and unproblematic (“the author is dead, and we Westerners have killed him”), it must also be seen in the conflicted light that the English patient’s confession sheds upon it. In his final (self-) interrogation he questions the anonymity he had so dearly achieved: “Was I a curse upon them? For her? For Madox? For the desert raped by war, shelled as if it were just sand?” (257). And, later, “What had I done? What animal had I delivered into her? . . . Had I been her demon lover? Had I been Madox’s demon friend? This country—had I charted it and turned it into a place of war?” (260). The idea that the English patient is able to admit his complicity within the Almásy narrative is, in some way, a refutation of the comforting anonymity which he had sought through his denial of the author-function. The insistent “I” that marks these passages points to an authoritative personal voice behind what had been, to this

point, a talking absence. Perhaps this partial admission of guilt is what makes it possible for Kirpal Singh to “embrace” the “black body” and carry it with him in his journey out of Europe.

Finally, much of the novel takes place against the backdrop of the desert which appears as a kind of discourse that confounds the reductive attempts of the ‘Geographer-Gods’ to name and control it. The ones who survive are those who understand that in the desert “a man can hold absence in his cupped hands,” and find their way through the sandstorms and heat to the hidden wells. What is absent is the power to name, the drive to constrict meaning within the hollow man of an eternally dying author. Here we get a sense of the whispering of writing that Foucault has been pointing us towards, in which discourse may be understood in modes other than those which valorize the continued existence of the author:

What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? (120)

The Bedouin have no problem “reading” the burned man who falls from the sky. They are able to ask and answer at least a few of Foucault’s questions to arrive at a practical response to his arrival. He is used as a Rosetta stone for the deciphering of armaments. As desert dwellers they understand that a name is a useless appendage in the nation-less expanse of sand and wind. One gets the sense that the European presence in the desert is only a mirage, which will disappear into the vast ‘absence’ of this whispering discourse, for the desert makes “tribes . . . historical with sand across their gasp” (18).

This discourse also resonates with Foucault’s notion that the game of writing is “a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (“Author” 102). It cannot be “claimed or owned” (Ondaatje 138) or, by extension, framed by the operations of either geographers or the Author Function—“all pilots who fall into the desert—none of them comes back with any identification” (29). Where Kip stands as a rebuke to the Author Function from the standpoint of the outsider to the hegemonic naming process, the desert answers the shouting of the name with a vast, often deadly, indifference. The mystery of the Senussi raiders is offered several times as perhaps the most lucid example of a people who are enigmatically able to survive in the desert without the obvious aid of Western technologies or the cartographical drive which is its close cousin.

Of course, the concept of the “Author Function is not without problems.

As Sean Burke has cogently pointed out, Foucault's elision of the author from the work relies on a dextrous misreading of Descartes and a willful "inversion" of Nietzschean exegesis (83). Foucault seems deliberately to evade questions of authorial power when it concerns those whom he terms "founders of discursivity"—Freud, Marx—individuals whose writing is inherently unique within the discursive formation from which it arose. Thus, within his own essay, Foucault contradicts his deterministic assertion that narrative production can always be located within an anonymous space. By attempting to deny the active *cogito* any role in the writing process, while simultaneously asserting that brilliant individuals may somehow stand anterior to their own writing, Foucault seems, like Almásy, to apply a double standard to those writers whose existence is deemed necessary for his elaboration of his archaeological theories. It is difficult to deny, too, the "Author-God" status that Foucault himself has assumed within post-structuralist circles. Like the English patient at the end of the novel, the elusive author thereby slips back into the act of writing, although perhaps in an unaccustomed subject position.

So "What does it matter who speaks?" The answer may prove as slippery as Foucault himself. While not without trenchant critics, Foucault's thesis remains an evocative one for a culture undergoing massive displacement in modes of narrative production. While the author may not be able to achieve full erasure from the text, it is clear that some sort of post-authorial anonymity is presenting itself as an alternative to the hegemony of the name (the seemingly endless flow of electronic text on the Internet is perhaps the most salient example). This reconfiguration of the role of the author in relation to text is echoed throughout Ondaatje's novel, and the "stirring of an indifference" (Foucault, "Author" 120) is both a reality and a site of conflict for the four inhabitants of the villa. They have faced the possibility of a discourse in the absence of a Foucauldian "regulator of fiction" (119), and found it variously unsatisfactory on its face. Some trace of this elusive writer remains, chastened perhaps, within a newly reconceived notion of the author within writing, a notion which may yet allow (over Foucault's objection) for the speaking subject of Kip's quotation from Isaiah to say with some assurance: *And my words which I have put in thy mouth shall not depart from thy mouth. Nor out of the mouth of thy seed* (Ondaatje 294).

NOTES

- 1 Grateful acknowledgement must be made to Professor David Williams of the Department of English, University of Manitoba, whose suggestions and cogent criticism were invaluable in the drafting of this paper.

WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. NY: Hill & Wang, 1977. 142-48.
- . *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley: U of California, 1989.
- Burke, Sean. *The Death and Return of the Author*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992.
- de Zepetnek, Steven Tötözy. "The English Patient: 'Truth is Stranger than Fiction.'" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (Summer 1994): 141-53.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. York: Pantheon, 1972.
- . "What is an Author?" *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. Trans. Josué V. Harari. New York: Pantheon, 1984. 101-120.
- Greene, David. Introduction. *The History*. By Herodotus. Trans. David Greene. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987. 1-32.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992.
- Wachtel, Eleanor. "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (Summer 1994): 250-61.
- Williams, David. "The Bias of Communication: Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and *The English Patient*." *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998): 30-55.

