Humanity and Savagery at the Crossroads

Rickford Grant

*The English Patient* has been described as a novel consisting of four narratives: the story of each of the characters and “how war has made each a patient, and how suffering has brought them all together…” (Hjartarson, 1994; p.234). And yet the novel takes its name from a character immobile; a cigarette motionless on the side of an ashtray as the streams of brown, blue, and steel colored smoke weave their stories around it. Lives merely unfold in the periphery. Almasy, the English patient, floating between reality and a junction of fantasy and history, seems, at first, an odd protagonist for the story.

And yet beyond the superficial lives of the characters themselves, Ondaatje throughout the story focuses on the destructive nature of man which exists in communion with, and even as a result of, his art and science. Ondaatje, perhaps subconsciously, juxtaposes images of the artistic nature of man and his accomplishments with that of his destructiveness — a contrast between man’s humanity and his savagery. The patient is used as a metaphor for this dichotomy that Ondaatje is exploring, for Almasy, although grotesquely burned and lifeless, seems to be an embodiment of man’s knowledge as well as a victim of his science. The knowledge contained within the covers of the volume that is his collective being have befallen Savonarola’s call for repentance; the burning of books and maps — and the desire for elegance.

Almasy lies as if on a shelf like a book of history, culture, and art, opened only occasionally by Hana, his nurse at the Medici palace, now serving as a military hospital. For the gaffer, Kip, he is referenced as a volume on small arms and explosives, footnoted with references to Botticelli and Michelangelo.

Ondaatje’s interest in this dichotomous facet of man in not newly found in *the English Patient*. As Bok (1992; p.109) points out, “...Ondaatje has repeatedly demonstrated a writerly interest in violent male protagonists who exhibit aesthetic sensitivity.” This is especially clear in the *Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, in which Ondaatje contrasts a violently criminal and murderous Billy with this description of his gentle demeanor:

I suppose it sounds absurd to speak
Of such a character as a gentleman, 
but from the beginning to the end
of our long relationship,
in all his personal relations with me, 
he was the pink of politeness 
and as courteous a little gentleman 
as I ever met.

(*Collected Works of Billy the Kid*; p.87)

The savage is often portrayed as the beautiful by Ondaatje. Steven Scobie (cited in Smythe, 1995) points out that this often realized by Ondaatje as fire in his writings and that the “arresting, violent, beautiful image of a burning man falling from the sky dominates” in *the English Patient*.

This fascination with man’s brutality is not restricted to Ondaatje, however, and is, in fact, a product of the “postmodern milieu in which Ondaatje operates” (Hutcheon as cited in Bok; p. 111). This focus, whether conscious or subconscious, is also somewhat less than surprising given the cold-war time frame of his upbringing. As Ondaatje himself states:

...I grew up essentially in the ’50s, so that the Second World War was a huge mythology around us. It was there... in the art we saw, in the films, the books and paintings. I think that’s one of the subliminal reasons I was probably drawn to writing *the English Patient*. (Fichtner, 1996)

While the treatment of brutality and sensitivity in *the English Patient* is not specifically tied to the protagonist or any one of the other characters, it is represented throughout the story and realized in locational, temporal, and even human form. The most immediate of these contradictory images is the villa itself. The Villa San Girolamo, originally a Renaissance palace of the Medici, serves as a nunnery and then a military headquarters before it is blown to pieces and then becomes a military hospital. The English patient, perhaps in delirium, fills its crumbling walls with life, history, philosophy; art:

Yes, I think a lot happened here. This fountain a wall. Pico and Lorenzo and Poli- ziano and the young Michelangelo. They held in each hand the new world and the old world. The library hunted down the last four books of Cicero. They imported a giraffe, a rhinoceros, a dodo. Toscanelli drew maps of the world based on correspondence with merchants. They sat in this room with a bust of Plato and argued all night

(*The English Patient*; p.57)

Ondaatje builds the contrast here with his description of the physical state of the villa in the story: its walls crumbling, its upper floors locked off, the whole building still laced with mines. And then there is the nature of the mines. Ondaatje does not merely mention the existence of the mines, but calls attention to the perversity of their construction and deployment, thereby taking the reader past the anesthetized reactions that many have toward the media of war. He confronts them with the thoughtful cruelty in their design. The most striking of these deployments is the placement of pencil mines within books and musical instruments so that an unsuspecting reader might be removed from the picture upon opening Thackeray or a musician while striking middle C. Death by culture.
Ondaatje’s detailed descriptions of the construction of the mines and the, as he puts it, ‘jokes’ within them serves to focus the reader on the intellect and personality... the ‘humanity’ that went into their design and construction. Lord Suffolk, an expert on defusing, is described as “brilliant.” And the English patient, fading back and forth between medieval Tuscany and modern mine fuses, is admired by Kip for his knowledge. Man’s perverted sense of genius is again addressed in the following passage:

...they came up with the answer. Ignore the fuse entirely. Ignore the first principle, which until then was “defuse the bomb.” It was brilliant. They were laughing and applauding and hugging each other...  

( The English Patient; p.139 )

Again “brilliance.” And yet Ondaatje has the colonial Kip coming to love the British, ironically “drawn by desire” in “a heroic age of bomb disposal.”

Ondaatje uses classical art, as well, through juxtaposition with its incongruous settings or the violence of the themes within the works themselves. Kip, a sapper, sleeps at the feet of terra-cotta angels. Almasy paints the face of his dying Katherine with the colors of cave frescoes. Soldiers sleep by the pulpit where Hercules slays the Hydra. And in the painting by Caravaggio, David with the Head of Goliath, “the young warrior holds at the end of his outstretched arm the head of Goliath, ravaged and old” ( The English Patient; p.116 )

Books are another way in which Ondaatje addresses this strange celebration of destruction and creation. In some ways the books are mere objects, bricks to be used in stopping doors: “She had gone into the library, removed twenty books and nailed them to the floor and then onto each other, in this way rebuilding the two lowest steps” ( The English Patient; p.13 ) This strictly functional use of this product of man’s creative spirit is again shown in the use of Rebecca as a code book by which messages on troop movements were shuttled across the North African desert.

The titles of the books themselves also echo this theme, as in the use by Almasy of Herodotus’ the Histories as a commonplace book. The Histories, despite being a classic dealing with the conflict between absolutism and free western institutions, and despite being from a period considered to be of high culture, is a book of war.

I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, set forth my history, that time may not draw the colour from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds manifested by both Greeks and Barbarians... together with the reason they fought one another.  

( as cited in The English Patient; p.240 )

Hana selects as hers the Last of the Mohicans, a tale of romance and duty set against a backdrop of savagery and death, illustrated by N.C. Wyeth. Ondaatje, though his selection of these particular volumes as commonplace books — one an ancient classic from an ancient land, the other a modern classic from a new land — shows how ingrained violence and war are in our cultural identity and reality; these are so much ingrained, in fact, as to go largely unnoticed. As Hutcheon ( cited in Bök ) states, the depiction of such brutality in postmodern literature can be used to “shock an audience into a recognition of its own implication in violent ideological processes” ( p.111 )
This implicit participation of both the reader and the characters within the story is realized in the dropping of the atomic bomb. The crystal headset that had kept Kip’s mind off the danger around him and his own mortality suddenly becomes the messenger of death. The culture of Michelangelo, which he, an outsider, has dared into through his fantasies of Sheba, his affair with Hana, his attachment and devotion to Lord Suffolk, and his defense of empire, has produced the ultimate device of destruction — “this tremor of western wisdom.”

The English patient, burned and immobile, lies in his bed as a prophecy of doom.

REFERENCES


Michael Ondaatje, winner of the Golden Man Booker prize with The English Patient. Photograph: Teri Pengilley/The Guardian. Michael Ondaatje, winner of the Golden Man Booker prize with The English Patient. Photograph: Teri Pengilley/The Guardian. The novel has been translated into 38 languages and the film scooped nine Oscars. On Sunday night, Michael Ondaatje stepped on to the wide stage of the Royal Festival Hall in London. He found a lectern and, white head bowed, reached into his pocket for a small piece of paper. “It began with a small night conversation between a burned patient and a nurse,” he said. “I did not know at first where it was taking place, or who the two characters were. I thought it might be a brief novella all dialogue, European-style, big type. The English Patient is not really English. He, the central mystery of the novel, a mystery to be discovered by the surrounding world, is languishing in a monastery turned hospital in Northern Italy at the end of World War Two. The monastery is a bombed-out ruin, but still a haven from the wrecked and hurting outside world. Having crashed in a burning airplane in North Africa, his whole burned body is bandaged and his face covered and unrecognizable. With him he has Herodotus' Histories, a book which he has studied forwards and backwards and which also has become his personal diary full of idiosyncrasies She crosses the loggia and quickly enters the house. In the kitchen she doesn't pause but goes through it and climbs the stairs which are in darkness and then continues along the long hall, at the end of which is a wedge of light from an open door. She turns into the room which is another garden this one made up of trees and bowers painted over its walls and ceiling. 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. The English Patient book. Read 4,911 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. With ravishing beauty and unsettling intelligence, Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize-winning novel traces the intersection of four damaged lives in an Italian villa at the end of World War II. Hana, the exhausted nurse; the maimed thief, Caravaggio; the wary sapper, Kip; each is haunted by the riddle of the English patient, the nameless, burned man who lies in an upstairs room. With ravishing beauty and unsettling intelligence, Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize-winning novel traces the intersection of four damaged lives in an Italian villa at the end of World War II.