

Teresa Ferreira | **Writing (in) the Margins: postcolonialism as paratext in Ondaatje's *The English Patient***

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“More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold [...], a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text.”

Gerard Genette, *Paratext: Thresholds of interpretation*, 1997

1. French literary theorist Gerard Genette (1930) doesn't require an introduction:¹ his work is well known. In the particular of the very similar epigraphs I've chosen to conduct my reflection, the author defines paratext as a “threshold” which, in pragmatic terms, points out to the literary and printerly conventions that mediate between the world of publishing and the world of the text. According to the same author, the being of the paratext depends upon its liminal site, “neither on the interior nor on the exterior”, and only there should it be studied.

Heading to postcolonialism and *The English Patient* (1992), I would like to say that metaphorical as it may seem, the parallel between the Empire, the marginal place of the Postcolonial, which according to Bill Ashcroft is located in language itself (ASHCROFT,

¹ Gérard Genette (born 1930) is a French literary theorist, associated in particular with the structuralist movement and such figures as Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss, from whom he adapted the concept of *bricolage*. He is largely responsible for the reintroduction of a rhetorical vocabulary into literary criticism, for example such terms as trope and metonymy. Additionally his work on narrative, best known in English through the selection *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, has been of importance. His major work is the multi-part *Figures* series, of which *Narrative Discourse* is a section. His international influence is not as great as that of some others identified with structuralism, such as Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss; his work is more often included in selections or discussed in secondary works than studied in its own right. Terms and techniques originating in his vocabulary and systems have, however, become widespread, such as the term paratext for prefaces, introductions, illustrations or other material accompanying the text, or hypotext for the sources of the text. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%A9rard_Genette.

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1994: 34), and textuality works in this paper as a leit-motif with critical intents, probably another paratext in its essence, that may invite the listener/reader to question names, places, identities, either extra, inter or intrafictional, in Ondaatje's work. An emblematic figure of the "space-between" (BHABHA, 1994), Michael Ondaatje and Ladislaus von Almásy, the main characters of his novel *The English Patient* (EP) (adapted into a film by Anthony Minghella, in 1996), mirror this interstice that inhabits the (power) relationships between self and other.

Ladislaus von Almásy is the interwar expatriate whose story is a blend of documentary and fiction, trying to maintain historical accuracy though in his representation of time and place. Over the course of the novel, Almásy leads us through this brief history of Western interests in the Lybian desert, obviously a consequence of the imperialist struggle for power.² Due to the war scenario, a liminal place between life and death, Hana, Kip, Caravaggio and Almásy are all refugees from home wandering through both concrete and imaginative geographies, ending up, at some point, by suspecting each others' truths. Thus, we intend to demonstrate: 1. how expatriate (intra)fictions, meaning the ones created by the characters themselves, can take us to the edge of what we are and are not; 2. how the gaze of the other can isolate the identity of the self and, simultaneously, perform the need to write (it) back; 3. how this (critical) paratext embodied in the alleged *English P/patient* resists closure by keeping memory displaced.

"Now the paratext is neither on the interior nor on the exterior: it is both; it is on the threshold; [...] this fringe at the unsettled limits that enclose with a pragmatic halo the literary work.

Gérard Genette, "Paratextes", *Poétique* 69, 1987

2. Formally and thematically, the trajectory of postcolonial literatures has always moved along borders, margins, frames and limits; and as such, its cartography has been designed based on texts and paratexts alike. Moreover, its history is very much also a paratextual narrative since it opens a portal for debate and it has provided plenty of critical material to

² In fiction, cartographers are depicted as serving the Empire not only as explorers but would also be used as "moles" as shown in the work at stake: Geoffrey Clifton came to the desert to spy the man the empire suspected to be a spy working for the Nazis.

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(re)think and (re)write the world. Either real or fictional, the mnemonic texture of postmodernity has implied a number of significant cultural shifts. Thus, postcolonial theories, as a place of awareness, have drawn particular features in the cultural scenario from the 20th century onwards. Yet, the urge to write (back) helped develop the idea of mainstream culture as text. If this is so, the possibility of characterizing people in the margins as paratexts does apply, mainly when we speak about writers like Michael Ondaatje.

A Sri Lankan of Dutch-Tamil-Sinhalese descent, the author illustrates in his work how life and art are closely interwoven; even more so when this feature of “ec-centricity” is at stake. Born in 1943, he was educated in England and completed his studies in Canada, the land which Jorge Luis Borges suggested as being almost off the map: “Canada is so far away that it hardly exists” (apud SUGARS, 2006: 79). In recent years, however the map has shifted: Carol Shields won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 1988³ and Michael Ondaatje won the Booker Prize in 1992. His novel *The English Patient* has received the most world wide acclaim, leading to its 1996 film adaptation by Anthony Minghella. The film won nine Academy Awards including the one for best picture.

Both hybrid and eclectic, Ondaatje, took a BA General Arts degree and subsequently an MA in English. He is a scholar at the York University in Toronto and the author of novels, poems, plays, films and pieces in literary criticism, some of them also distinguished.⁴ According to some, his best acclaimed novel served two purposes: it brought Canadian culture into the international literary limelight, while also affirming its participation in a ‘global imaginary’; as Pico Iyer states, “Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* is the defining work of modern Canadian fiction, [...] because it presents us with a stirring vision of what Canada [...] might offer to a world in which more and more people are on the move and motion itself has become a kind of nation” (apud SUGARS, 2006: 81).⁵

³ The Orange Prize for Fiction (known as the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction from 2007 to 2008) is one of the United Kingdom's most prestigious literary prizes annually awarded to a female author of any nationality for the best original full-length novel written in English, and published in the United Kingdom in the preceding year. The BBC suggests that the Orange Prize forms part of the “trinity” of UK literary prizes, along with the Man Booker Prize and the Costa Book Awards.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orange_Prize_for_Fiction

⁴ Michael Ondaatje is adapting his last novel *Divisadero*, about a farming family rocked by violence, for the stage. *When my name was Anna* is a production of the Necessary Angel Theatre Company who claims it to be Ondaatje's first full-length work for the stage in over two decades.

⁵ Although I am not, strictly speaking, dealing with Minghella's film here, this happy formulation makes entire sense to me since film adaptation is in fact a rereading of a book; therefore a

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The internationalization of Canadian literature via Ondaatje was read as an instance of its postcoloniality, and I quote Cynthia Sugars again on this: “[t]hrough its international success and subject-matter, *The English Patient* wrote back to the erstwhile imperial centre” (SUGARS, 2006: 84). Thus celebrated as a “Canadian nationalist intervention” (SUGARS, 2006: 84), East and West seem to clash in the book as in the film (probably more violently in the first than in the latter), tending to assimilate each other by ‘keeping up differences’. Yet, colonial (re)marks such as the main topic of cartography as a means legitimizing (= colonizing) the “blank space” (like the Sahara desert) and also the discrete, although important character of the Sikh sapper Kip, named after Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, do not deny that historical and cultural inheritance do count as fact and fiction.⁶

So, himself a product of hybrid consent, Ondaatje transmits this idea of the paratextual, meaning the postcolonial against imperialism identified as text,⁷ as a threshold for reenactment and further understanding of the textual. Moreover, when such a textual(ity) is pervaded by visual/verbal/kinesthetic signs which reinforce the singularity, as well as the replication, of traumatic memories.

The English Patient occurs during the later stages of World War II in a damaged villa north of Florence. The story revolves around the four occupants of the villa: Hana, the fatigued and dispassionate 20 year old nurse who is mourning a death; Caravaggio, the former spy/thief who was caught by the enemy and is physically maimed; Kip, the young Indian sapper who was instructed in bomb disposal techniques in England before applying his talents in Italy; and the “English” patient, a nameless man who is severely burned in the war and attempting to reconstruct his mysterious past. In the personal recounts of the four occupants of the villa, the intratext(uality) that performs the self before the other, Ondaatje ingeniously asserts the notion that we are all creatures of the past and try to

construct and a place we, the viewers, inhabit through a fusional movement towards the screen. We will refer to the film as filmic text (STAM, 2000).

⁶ In the novel, maps could be considered as paratexts, impressions written on the side of the pages of Herodotus *Histories*, 4th century BC. These *marginalia* are important guidelines for reading *The English Patient* as “historiographic metafiction” a term first coined by Linda Hutcheon for the postmodern variant of the historical novel (HUTCHEON, 1988). Also as Rufus Cook points out in his article “Being and Representation in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*”, Almásy manages to locate the Gilf Kibir using a map of India from the frontispiece of Rudyard Kipling’s 19th century novel *Kim* (EP, 167).

⁷ Questioning: or rather operating in its mainstream thus echoing the famous Rushdie statement “[t]he Empires writes back to the Centre” (ASHCROFT, 1989: 171).

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define future events accordingly by eliciting information from a remote past: as Linda Hutcheon accurately puts it in the *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), "the past time of past time". Again borders are crossed, even abolished by the power of words; words that stage roles and help mime a faked reality: "at some point in their relationship with one another, they all wind up taking on an identity from the past, being cast in the role of a father (90-91), a childhood ayah (225-26), or an old friend (247)" (COOK, 1999: 39).

More striking than their tendency to take on fictional roles and identities is the readiness of these characters to absorb one another's experience, thus immersing themselves in a sort of (paratextual) limbo. So successful is this process of assimilation that it becomes difficult to determine at times precisely where one character's experience ends and another's begins. Like the incidents and images in the novel, therefore, the characters and their relationships reverberate backward and forward to refer, by way of anticipation or recollection, to a whole network of cognate characters and relationships. In turn, their own meanings depend on mnemonic, mimetic or referential associations and constitute themselves as thresholds for continuous reenactment as if they were always wanted to be where they are not.

They are cultural expatriates whose nomadic nature drags them out of H/history and one should remember that writing alternative stories is one of the major aims of postcolonial writers. Cartography is in itself part of postcolonial representation and a very partial one, since the power of fiction can be used as a tool for the maintenance of dominant ideology. Also language (dis)possession and the discursive moments typical of the postmodern narrative flow in parallel to fragmentary discourse. Almásy writes *the margins*, not from the margins. And such marginalities imply intra & intertextuality, intrafiction, metahistory, collage, performative and dialogic aspects of language and relationship. The characters undergo a process of self-translation through the cannibalization (translation/appropriation) of the other, this being particularly relevant when it comes to the relationship between Katherine and Almásy. Ultimately, by burying her in the middle of the acacias, he incorporates the desert: she is the desert, the body of sand and leaves he always wanted to merge with.

Postcolonial as it is usually defined, Ondaatje's novel places itself at the threshold of all stories it conjures, helping make sense of their (dis)similarities. Intertextuality, definitely working as a palimpsest, can also operate here as a new form of paratext from the moment it elicits inter/subtextual references that are deeply rooted in the cultural

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web of questioned nations: "I came to hate nations. [...]. Erase family name. Erase nations. I was taught such things by the desert" (EP, 138-39). The desert is the liminal place where one can merge with the elements and, strangely enough, show a strange readiness to be *colonized* by all sorts of alien *character roles*. Finally, and although claiming this sort of *bastardy* for those who inhabit the desert, the alleged English patient is forced to concede that human beings are in reality interdependent, "communal stories, communal books" (EP, 138-39).

Ondaatje's preoccupation with identitarian issues, most of them centered on the body, permeates his postcolonial text(s), which present identity as a matter of multiple cultural origins and dispersed geographical locations. As a consequence, body and space are sites of conflict, within the self/other, between imperial control and postcolonial resistance. Similarly, the body as a metabolic, flexible map of identity denies official mapping so that the subject may be at a loss. Spatial dispersion renders his writing heterogeneous, fluid and fragmented, constantly moving along borders: a play of words and mirrors, always tracing back and forth, always displaced in the face of others. The other is the one that best choreographs the realignment of the self, thus challenging its original pattern, the enigma of who you/we are.

In the case of Almásy, memory binds self and other together and he personifies this paradox of being both at the time; in the end, he has become a no-body – physically and onomastically. His body has become the landscape of his choice for hybridity so that the drawer of maps has been translated into a map of himself. Kip, on the contrary, evolves in the opposite direction: the physical degradation of the Patient's body corresponds to the psychological self-awareness of the Indian sapper about the place he definitely wants to belong to. Separated by skin colour, cultural attitudes, religious beliefs, these men are two of a kind. Yet, they will miss each other some day. And we feel tempted to agree with Nicola Renger when he suggests that "probably Ondaatje, who is a great believer in the mongrel, wants to show that the world and its inhabitants have entered a period of adjustment" (RENGER, 2000: 122)

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A man not of your own blood can break upon your emotions more than someone of your own blood. As if falling into the arms of a stranger, you discover the mirror of your choice.

Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, p. 90

3. The novel, *The English Patient*, by Michael Ondaatje constructs meaning through the use of tropes, images and symbolism, instead of merely portraying a linear set of events. There are many intertextual references which serve to create and strengthen meaning, as well as bold imagery, which erects another level of significance. Symbolism plays a vital role in the formation of meaning, with fire, religion, the English patients' sacrificed body and the sacred desert being essential to the founding concepts of the novel. The self-awareness of the plot, as well as the multiple relaying of one event, also assist in the creation of meaning, this always deferred or displaced. *The English Patient* should be regarded, then, not so much as a representation, than as a simulacrum: a system of signs which, in Baudrillard's words, is "never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (BAUDRILLARD, 1994: 6).

The writer composes paratexts that "break down the border between the inside and the outside of the text". And yet, in Ondaatje's novel it's all about what could be called (para)texture: senses and (e)motions working as a frame for memory to re-enact their identity search. This is a healing process performed at the periphery of the ongoing world. Far from conforming to the biased world of white and black, the characters tend to mingle in the utopian space of the confined villa, mirroring each other's dreams, projecting their identities in and through discourse. If, according to Bakhtin, the subject is a dweller in language, the four outcasts inhabiting the Villa San Girolamo reinforce such idea by negotiating the boundaries of their discursive (and discursive) differences. In addition, by incorporating a variety of nationalities into the novel (Hana and Caravaggio are Canadian, the last named after a well-known Italian painter; Kip is Indian; and the English Patient is Hungarian), while depicting the last stages of the war in Italy, Ondaatje investigates the perception of "home" and "exile" through the transient movement of the characters mis/(dis)placed identities.

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Moreover, he constructs a fictional individual who, apart from being in-between and peripheral, is also a blank in the map of nomination. Almásy cannot articulate his own name; by the same token, he lies about Katherine's identity. His fragmented life story, as he tells it to his partners in exile, is similar to the shape of his copies of Herodotus *Histories*: stories within stories; "maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing in his own name" (EP 96), thus reinforcing his outcast nature, the traveling metaphor he lives by.

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