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Identity and War in Michael Ondaatje's
The English Patient

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of identity in relation to war through a close reading of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. It investigates the connections between war and the construction of identity, focusing on aspects such as violence and death. In his novel Ondaatje uncovers private histories alongside the framing events of World War Two. Kip's perception of war and his way of living through it suggest that the engagement on the world's battlefield is riddled with inner conflicts separating people or bringing them together. In *The English Patient* what is at issue is the quest for a redefinition of the self: Hanna, Kirpal Singh and Almásy attempt to liberate the self through an investigation of the past. Thus, the novel problematizes the convolutions of human interaction zooming in on ideas of movement and metamorphosis as thematized in the war plot, functioning as the fundamental mechanisms that shape identity.

Keywords: Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, Paul Ricoeur, identity, war, death, oneself, the other, memory, time, history

War is a theme that has been explored from different perspectives and in different times from Heraclitus to Karl von Clausewitz or Jean-Paul Sartre, being simultaneously a field of study and a seminal issue addressed in modern and contemporary intellectual debates. In his introductory article to the *PMLA* thematic volume on war, Srinivas Aravamudan cites Heraclitus according to whom war is a universal human condition breeding the emergence of hierarchies, of 'status' as such, and determining the masculinization of societies. Its pervasiveness transgresses societies and ages collocating with "the layered histories of

the lives – and deaths – of individuals and collectivities, states and sovereignties” (Aravamudan 1505).

The idea of war as a practice transgressing geographical territories as well as epochs is central to Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient* (1992). The Second World War triggered dramatic changes on social, political and cultural levels. It entailed unprecedented shifts in both private and public spheres through violent acts of invasion and genocide. In what follows I explore the way in which war influences the construction of identity. Enlistment in the army generates large nomadic movements and therefore a temporary migrant condition assumed by individuals in the hardest and most challenging circumstances. Each person taking part in military campaigns may or may not find a reason to participate in combat. However, geostrategic as well as political interests exclude manifestations of private needs and desires. They cancel or even destroy the future as an individual project modifying human relationships and acting upon processes of constructing identity through the most traumatic of experiences.

My analysis raises the issue of the quest for a redefinition of the self within the complex, world-shattering context of war by relying on French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s conceptualization of identity. In his book *Oneself as Another* (1992), Ricoeur develops a comparative theory of a twofold identity encapsulated in the terms *idem* and *ipse*. He argues that the *idem*-identity relates to the concept of sameness, similitude and the permanence in time (Ricoeur 116). The “*ipse*-identity involves a dialectic complementary to that of selfhood and sameness, namely the dialectic of *self* and the *other than self*. As long as one remains within the circle of sameness-identity, the otherness of other than self offers nothing original” (3). It follows that the Ricoeurian perspective on identity is deeply rooted in the idea that “the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought without the other, that instead one passes into the other” (3). This viewpoint is at the core of the present study of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*.

Identity is a construct based on a complex of narrative structures appealing to multiple selves and temporal levels. It is a project subject to the incompleteness of life as such and based on the tridimensional scheme

past-present-future. It is therefore fundamental to give careful consideration to a representational fictional model that helps understand the convolutions of one's existence. Narrative topology holds an important place in Ricoeur's analysis of the self. He considers the question "who?" as crucial to such a hermeneutics, insisting on its polysemous nature, i.e. on the various forms it can take: "Who is speaking of what? Who does what? About whom and about what does one construct a narrative? Who is morally responsible for what?" (19). Acting, action and actors are crucial in reflecting on both self and identity.

In this respect, chapters II and III of *The English Patient*, "In Near Ruins" and "Sometime a Fire," are of major significance in the economy of the novel. Not only do they offer the framework for a self-reflecting analysis that the four characters gathered in the Villa San Girolamo perform in order to make sense of their lives, but they also offer the grounds for a set of pairs constitutive of the narrative structure of the novel: war and history, war and love, war and art. These articulate a background for representing the quest for identity. The former monastery, transformed into a hospital, ruined and emptied by uncountable bombardments during the war, epitomizes a neutral territory and a shelter for Hanna, Caravaggio, Kip and the patient. At the end of the war and the beginning of the transition to peace, their recent histories are recalibrated by memories. Retrieving the recent traumatic past is an action meant to elucidate the meaning of the present, enabling them to relocate themselves within the war and post-war contexts.

As French philosopher Jean-Yves Lacoste mentions in his book, *Note sur le temps: Essai sur les raisons de la mémoire et de l'espérance* (1990), the interest in both oneself and the other is an intentional act that unfolds in a present encapsulating both the past and the future (Lacoste 11). It is within this space that identity is continuously re-enacted. In this respect, Ricoeur's philosophical pattern provides a reading strategy informed by the idea that self-knowledge is a project to be undertaken in relation to the world and the others (Dauenhauer and Pellauer).

In Ondaatje's novel, identity is similarly relational: Hana, Kip, the patient and Caravaggio come to understand their identities in terms of their war experiences. The quest for identity takes the shape of a

hermeneutic process, an interpretation and reinterpretation of reality. The characters negotiate the meanings of otherness; they record the changes occurring in the processes of discovery and rediscovery of the past retracing their own routes and remapping their selves. Books, maps, guns or bombs underpin the search for identity being at the core of a complex process of decoding meant to enable the functioning of the cognitive mechanisms through which past experiences are retrieved.

Kirpal Singh, a Sikh enrolled in the British army as a sapper, has a crucial role in articulating the multiple stories the other characters have to put together in order to understand the complicated puzzle of war and its tremendous consequences on their lives. Kip epitomizes the portrait of the colonized, the perfect servant in a foreign army, going through the inevitable hardships of war, being far from home, in a nomadic search for and fight against death.

Was it a sapper or was it a civilian? The smell of flower and herb along the road wall, the beginning stitch at his side. An accident or wrong choice? The sappers kept to themselves for the most part. They were an odd group as far as character went, somewhat like people who worked with jewels or stone, they had a hardness and clarity within them, their decisions frightening even to others in the same trade. Kip had recognized that quality among gem-cutters but never in himself, though he knew others saw it there. The sappers never became familiar with each other. (Ondaatje 110)

He is a refined observer with a flawless gaze, always ready to track down microscopic details, catch on the most profound aspects of life and efficiently reorder disparate things: “he found out he had the skill of the three dimensional gaze, the rogue gaze that could look at an object or page of information and realign it, see all the false descants. He was by nature conservative but able to imagine the worst devices, the capacity of accident in a room” (110-11). He has as well an innate ability to penetrate reality intuitively and takes pleasure in the thoughtful observation of the Italian Renaissance. In his case the experience of bomb disposal or a Bailey bridge erection is coupled with an uncommon experience of European culture. Apart from rendering safe explosive devices, thus rescuing human lives, and before falling in love with Hanna, he falls in love with the representation of an iconic figure in Hebrew tradition, the

Queen of Sheba, in the Gothic church in Arezzo. Once, while trying to disarm a bomb in a river, he remembers her face,

the texture of her skin. There was no comfort in this river except for his desire for her, which somehow kept him warm. He would pull the veil off her hair. He would put his right hand between her neck and olive blouse. He too was tired and sad, as the wise king and guilty queen he had seen in Arezzo two weeks earlier. (70)

He identifies her with an imaginary lover, anticipating his unfulfilled love affair with Hanna.

The war makes him aware of the process altering human relationships as well as the impossibility of finding valid solutions to the multilayered conflict that he is involved in, “character, that subtle art, disappeared among them during those days and nights, existed only in a book or on a painted wall” (70). Yet during wartime, splitting lives and destinies sometimes co-occurs with solidarity. Finding himself near an old medievalist whom he talks to, he spontaneously feels the need to share with him the magnificence of the church in Arezzo. In a passage depicting Kip’s emotions when he gets closer to the frescoes, Ondaatje uses cinematic techniques of lightning in order to render the gradual progression of his feelings. The small flares are light sources flashing over the high-tones of Piero della Francesca’s *Legend of the True Cross*.

Looking down he saw the medievalist sitting on a bench, exhausted. He was now aware of the depth of this church, not its height. The liquid sense of it. The hollowness and darkness of a well. The flare sprayed out of his hand like a wand. He pulleyed himself across to her face, his Queen of Sadness, and his brown hand reached out small against the giant neck. (72)

The nearness of such a masterpiece as well as its zooming in and out epitomizes the play of perspectives within which Kip’s identity is configured. It is an epiphanic moment emphasizing ideas such as the power of history over the present and the force of visuality in modern times.

For both Kip and Almásy war means learning not only the alphabet of warfare and weaponry but especially that of otherness, encapsulated in the image of the enemy, the stranger or the friend. Having gone through

the adversities of World War Two, identifying the other becomes part of the process of self-identification. Travelling around Italy to defuse bombs turns into an uncommon experience of the Quattrocento that makes Kip understand one of the multiple meanings of war: “It was always raining and cold, and there was no order but for the great maps of art that showed judgment, piety and sacrifice” (70). The negotiation of one’s identity, in this context, becomes another way of ordering, clarifying and mapping out experience.

The patient knows Tuscany and the Italian territory as well as the North African desert and questions the presence of the Germans and the Allies in this region. He outlines the image of the other by anchoring himself in both present reality and a represented past. The Bedouins are no longer the desert nomads but complex figures, the carriers of a culture that is rooted in pre-dynastic times, before streams and rivers were replaced by sand dust. Geographical landmarks are replaced by cultural references that travel just like the caravans toward the present:

So I knew their place before I crashed among them, knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age, for this cause or that greed. I knew the customs of nomads besotted by silk or wells. One tribe dyed a whole valley floor, blackening it to increase convection and thereby the possibility of rainfall, and built high structures to pierce the belly of a cloud. (18)

The patient’s memories take the shape of the stories that he tells Hana. They are disrupted by his reflections and questions on the war: “What did most of us know of such parts of Africa? The armies of the Nile moved back and forth – a battlefield eight hundred miles deep into the desert. Whippet tanks, Blenheim medium-range bombers. Gladiator biplane fighters” (19).

When the patient questions the reason why the Allies are in the desert, he reflects on the very idea of enemy: “But who was the enemy? Who were the allies of this place – the fertile lands of Cyrenaica, the salt marshes of El Agheila? All of Europe were fighting their wars in North Africa, in Sidi Rezegh, in Baguoh” (19). The word “enemy” has an ambiguous referent: the Nazis or the Allies. Europe moves its borders and implicitly its wars onto the desert areas apparently empty. The war turns

the desert into a battlefield where former scientific discoveries turn into dangerous weapons, while those who have them become potential enemies. It disrupts the idea of enemy, blurring the opposites and obscuring the targets one has to attain. Once the combatants withdraw, the desert is reclaimed by the Nomads, the caravans crossing the dunes being its legitimate inhabitants. Having been found by these nomads and with no recollection of his identity, Almasy becomes a nomad himself, living beyond geographical borders and outside conventional conceptions of morality.

In times of war helping the enemy survive a plane crash is not an act of humanity but a strategic move that transforms him into a decoder. Before being Hana's patient, he was the Bedouins' patient, a lost unrecognizable body who deciphered and taught the Bedouins the art of modern guns, who could 'read' the guns by touching them; a price one has to pay for staying alive: "In the morning they took him to the far reach of the siq. They were talking loudly around him now. The dialect suddenly clarifying. He was here because of the buried guns" (20). While it is all the time clear that he is the "other" in this context, to the extent that he defines his identity dialectically, Almasy's amnesia, further compounded by this unavoidable complicity with the enemy, makes it all but impossible for him to recuperate a sense of self.

His past – and thus his identity – is further fictionalized later on in the nickname he gets after the accident: the English patient. The past that he tries to retrieve before his death is a fragmentary construct where colonial history and literature mingle, but also an impossible love story that culminates in the accident which causes his partially assumed amnesia:

Now, months later in the Villa San Girolamo, in the hill town north of Florence, in the arbour room that is his bedroom, he reposes like the sculpture of the dead knight in Ravenna. He speaks in fragments about oasis towns, the later Medicis, the prose style of Kipling, the woman who bit into his flesh. And in this commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus' Histories, are other fragments – maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing is his own name. (96)

The inability to attach a name to this fragmentary and eclectic identity narrative makes it possible for other characters to assign multiple names and ostensible allegiances to the suspiciously faceless patient.

Each character sheds light on the other. They turn into a gallery of invisible mirrors, rendering the novel polyphonic. The patient's lost identity, rendered irretrievable by his burnt body, epitomizes the innumerable losses that may occur during wars, the fact that neither the color of the skin nor the name may be reference points for understanding, judging or validating the other. Hana likens the patient to a ghost:

A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet. There was nothing to recognize in him. (48)

Nonetheless, in a conversation with Caravaggio, she talks about him with profound respect and an attitude of devoted reverence: "He is a saint. A despairing saint. Are there such things? Our desire is to protect them" (45). The burned body of the patient reminds her of her dead father, thus suggesting another layer of identification. At the end of the war and after leaving the Villa, she states in a letter about the strange coincidence of his death:

And how was my father burned? He who could swerve like an eel, or like your canoe, as if charmed, from the real world. In his sweet and complicated innocence. He was the most unverbally of men, and I am always surprised women liked him. We tend to like a verbal man around us. We are the rationalists, the wise, and he was often lost, uncertain, unspoken.

He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. Do you understand the sadness of geography? (296)

According to Ricoeur, identity is related to actions, selves and agents. Each event in one's life takes the form of a story, it enters the realm of the past being retrieved and reshaped later into the present. Identity means more than 'identical'. It is the self that through a complex act of remembering reconsiders both the past and the present. The fluid nature of time as well as the momentous crossing of others is crucial in

constructing identity. The identity-time relation includes a multitude of experiences that determine the creation of a self in relation to the other. In this respect, reading is a self-defining act and books are the carriers of multiple, reiterable stories. The peaceful, private activity of reading is opposed to war and post-war realities in Ondaatje's novel. The patient is a mentor initiating Hana in the art of reading, thus opening the archives of history but also the sources of aesthetic pleasure more suited for peace-time leisure:

“Read him slowly, dear girl, you must read Kipling slowly. Watch carefully where the commas fall so you can discover the natural pauses. He is a writer who used pen and ink. He looked up from the page a lot, I believe, stared through his window and listened to birds, as most writers who are alone do. Some do not know the name of birds, though he did. Your eye is too quick and North American. Think about the speed of his pen. What an appalling, barnacled old first paragraph it is otherwise.”

That was the English patient's first lesson about reading. (94)

Reading books is the most sensitive exercise one can undertake in order to understand the others. Hana's gaze on Kip differentiates him from the others and reveals the portrait of a trained soldier and a sensitive mind:

There are ornaments he places around himself. Certain leaves she has given him, a stub of candle, and in its tent the crystal set and the shoulder bag full of the objects of discipline. He has emerged from the fighting with a calm which, even if false, means order for him. He continues his strictness, following the hawk in its float along the valley within the V of his rifle sight, opening up a bomb and never taking his eyes off what he is searching for as he pulls a Thermos towards him and unscrews the top and drinks, never even looking at the metal cup.

The rest of us are just periphery... (126)

His presence covers the emptiness of a recent past when “she never looked at herself in mirrors again” (50). The body is a text Hana has to decipher and make sense of in the same way in which she has to make sense of the readings she does alone or for the patient:

She learns all the varieties of his darkness. The colour of his forearm against the color of his neck. The color of his palms, his cheek, the skin under the turban. The darkness of fingers separating red and black wires, or against bread he picks off the gunmetal plate he still uses for food. Then

he stands up. His self-sufficiency seems rude to them, though no doubt he feels it is excessive politeness. (127)

The other characters relate to reading very differently. Kip, whose name was forgotten and replaced by a nickname derived from “kipper,” does not trust books. Caravaggio, a thief, whose professional skills are validated during wartime and a spy in search of the unknown burnt man, considers words to be “tricky things,” as one of his friends told him, “much more tricky than violins” (37). He believes “books are mystical creatures” (81). Their suspicion of books is in fact an act of resistance directed against all totalizing narratives, national identities and allegiances included.

War encapsulates the irony of history and has a repetitive nature: “The last medieval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944. Fortress towns on great promontories which had been battled over since the eighth century had the armies of new kings flung carelessly against them” (69). At the end of the novel, Kirpal Singh, enraged by the fall of the atomic bomb, identifies the irreversible damage that injures an entire world, anticipating both its falling apart and the beginning of a new world order. What is at stake here is his definition of Englishness as a source of conflicts: “When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English” (286). He loses his faith in a world organized by the English system of values searching to redefine the landmarks he desires to follow:

He feels all the winds of the world have been sucked into Asia. He steps away from the many small bombs of his career towards a bomb of the size, it seems of a city, so vast it lets the living witness the death of the population around them. He knows nothing about the weapon. Whether it was a sudden assault of metal and explosion or if boiling air scoured itself towards and through anything human. All he knows is, he feels he can no longer let anything approach him. (287)

In *The English Patient* Ondaatje reflects upon the paradigm shift occurring in the colonial world after the Second World War. Multilayered and with a polyphonic structure, the novel explores this theme by looking at identity as a construct based on the relation to the ‘other,’ whether a

different person or an earlier avatar of one's self. Identity is built around the changes that war brings into each character's life, and is grounded in the subject's inquiries into the past, as a strategy to comprehend a discontinuous present. Thus, war is an experience that demystifies and revalues the past.

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