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**“We Are Text”: Reading, Dwelling and Narrative Identity in  
Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and *Divisadero***

Outlining two ways of thinking about the relationship between speaking and writing—one which holds speech as anterior and superior to writing, which it sees as a secondary system of representation, and the other which views speech as being a form of writing itself operating within the play of difference and deferral that is language as such; the essay suggests that the two novels in question propose a third position that contains elements of both the previous two. This position is captured in key instances in both *The English Patient* and *Divisadero* of the written word being read out loud in a communal setting.

In view of Lucien and Marie-Neige’s and Hana and the English patient’s practice of reading out loud to each other, *Divisadero* and *The English Patient* suggest that reading—whether it be studious, curious, or otherwise escapist in nature—is a vital act of incorporation, a political act of consumption wherein words become flesh and the stories in books come into confrontation with the texts of our selves in an explosion of intertextuality.

*Reading as Incorporation*

One of the major challenges facing the literary critic working on *The English Patient* or *Divisadero* is that the characters in these two stories are seemingly always already engaged in literary critical

analysis of their own stories. Almásy, for example, in his morphine fueled *tete-a-tete* with Caravaggio, begins his own analysis of Katharine's camp-fire reading of "Candaules and his queen" (232) with the remark, "[t]here are several things one can say. Knowing that eventually I will become her lover, just as Gyges will be the queen's lover and murderer of Candaules" (233). Almásy here seems almost to speak directly to the reader of the text, as if he is anticipating the speculative interpretations that such a rich moment must inevitably invite. But Almásy does not just acknowledge that several interpretations are possible, rather he seems to make an attempt to get ahead of or even discourage the readers' critical activities by offering an authoritative interpretation of his own: "This is a story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story of Herodotus" (233). Almásy's tag-line-like synopsis tells the reader what the story is about, thus making any interpretation that does not meet up with his own definitive reading appear errant. This embedded critical activity is a double edge sword, for as often as it pulls the would-be literary critic in for a closer look it also undermines his secondary critical activity, making it appear a superfluous and violent intrusion of a self-contained inter-textual system.

In *Divisadero*, there is a strong distaste for literary criticism associated with Lucien Segura, who on the Bancroft Library tapes admits: "I love the performance of a craft, whether it is modest or mean-spirited, yet I walk away when discussions of it begin—as if one should ask a gravedigger what brand of shovel he uses or whether he prefers to work at noon or in the moonlight" (192).

In addition to this direct comment by Segura, there are two narrative instances involving the French writer in which a disapproval of literary critical activity comes to the forefront. The

first is occasioned by the elderly writer's chance spotting of a peacock, which reminds him of a "poem from his youth about a strange bird from the foothills [that] had been one of his most famous verses, memorized, explicated, exfoliated in schools until there was nothing left but a throat bone and a claw" (171). The critical activity characterized here is described as aggressively reductive, the bird poem being crudely scraped down to a partial skeleton in an attempt to biographize the poem in terms of the poet's supposed personal experience, as suggested by the narrator's additional comment: "There had been, in fact, no such rare bird in his youth. None had ever flown across his stepfather's fields" (171). The second comment on literary criticism associated with Segura is equal to the first in its disparaging and ironic tone: "Essays were being published in cities about his career, his craft, his psychosis, his landscape, the lack of close friends, his secretive and diverse nature, his soul. They reproduced maps of the town of Bagnères-de-Bigorre, and the Fan of Gascony, and Marseillan. Every local cleric, neighbouring butcher, and mailman came out from the quiet corners of Lucien Segura's world with a story or an insight that would expose his silence". (223)

Once again it is the violent reductions of authorial obsession that are at issue in the above quotation. It is the "his" of "his career...craft...psychosis...landscape" (223), etc., that is the subject of the speculative discourse. It is made clear that the violence of such activity extends beyond the poems and stories: "He saw the disfigured man who was portrayed. He was the nocturnal animal in that night zoo, revealed in the darkness, who growled or bit his fellow creatures and ate his children" (223). The point being made through these two passages that directly comment on the activity of literary critics is that such activity too often seeks out the writer behind the work and reduces the significance of both to whatever

connection can be made between the two. At the risk of doing something very similar here, the point is neatly summed up by Ondaatje in the introduction to his literary study of 1970, *Leonard Cohen*, where Ondaatje raises Cohen's own dissatisfaction with the literary reviews that chose to treat his novel, *The Favourite Game*, as autobiography rather than a work of art, to which opinion Ondaatje sympathetically adds, "Cohen is right of course; nothing is more irritating than to have your work translated by your life" (3). The fact that Ondaatje goes on in the introduction to *Leonard Cohen* to provide his reader, however sheepishly, with the "warm blanket of [Cohen's] biography" (4) is, coincidentally, quite instructive here. For the two passages quoted above that deal with the critical approaches to Segura's work are not presented by some impersonal, omniscient narrator but are written by Anna in her role as Segura's biographer. It is the secondary nature of the ridicule—the literary biographer denouncing literary biography—that is the full source of the ironic tension in the passages portraying the exfoliated, dismembered poem and the disfigured writer.

But what then is the difference, if any, between Anna's treatment of Lucien Segura and the critical activity she mocks? If there is a difference it is not, I think, to be found in answering the question of what motivated her to "[travel] to France, to the last house he had lived in, during the final stage of his life" in order to "[piece] together the landscapes he had written about" (144). Anna herself is "uncertain" about what made her "fall upon the life of Lucien Segura and wish to write about him" (143). Rather, it is in her imaginative recreation of Lucien Segura's story—her attempt to not just tell it how it was but to translate and enter into the "wound" in his voice as if it were her own (143). As has been discussed earlier, what Anna does with her work is to "look into the distance for those [she has]

lost, so that [she sees] them everywhere” (143). In writing about Segura she is in effect writing about herself; he is the “substitution” for herself that she “transcribe[s]” in order to explore her past (143). (If all this strikes the reader of this essay as a great formula for fiction, but a rather dubious methodology for a self-proclaimed “archivist” and “historian” [141], let her not forget that this is very similar to Ondaatje’s approach to the telling of his family’s history in *Running in the Family*). But if it is the imaginative or artistic nature of Anna’s work on Segura that sets it apart from the exfoliating and disfiguring critical activity discussed above, it is not because her transcription/appropriation process is any less violent. Anna herself describes her work as a “plunder[ing of] the past” (141).

In her essay, “War and the Book: The Diarist, the Cryptographer, and *The English Patient*,” professor Alice Brittan of Dalhousie University asks, “what is the connection between reading and writing in books and the forms of national violence, namely war and colonialism, that obsess *The English Patient*?” (Brittan 200). It is a question that cuts to the heart of the present exploration of the violence of reading and writing. Brittan seeks to establish that the diarist—embodied in *The English Patient* by Almásy and Hana, both of whom “[record] private experience by hand[writing]” in and over printed texts—and the cryptographer, who “learns to embed messages of national importance in printed texts[,]” are “antithetical kinds of writers” (202). Underpinning this suggestion of the antipathy that separates these two modes of writing—one belonging to the machinery of war and the other establishing a resistance to it—is the argument that “the rules of wartime reading and writing turn poems and novels into political and military tools” (206). What is at danger of being suggested by Brittan’s analysis of these two modes of writing—contrary, I believe, to her own best insights—is

the belief that somehow it is the politics of war and colonialism that makes reading and writing violent while the nonviolent resistance of the diarist characterizes his resignation from the political battlefield of nations and his peaceful retreat into Marginalia—a private, “erasable” utopia written in the margins of civilization (211). This belief, which I hope to demonstrate is undermined by both *The English Patient* and *Divisadero*, is not Brittan’s as much as it is Almásy’s. Therefore, I turn now to a more specific account of Almásy’s mode of reading and writing.

For Almásy the desert explorer there is a clear separation between the personal and the public spheres of life. The desert, which Almásy sees in the 1930’s as an apolitical utopia, is a geography whose places more appropriately bear “the names of lovers” (140) than names of state authority: “Erase the family name! Erase Nations! I was taught such things by the desert” (139). The anonymous intimacy of a lover’s name symbolizes for Almásy a form of purified “absence” (141) that is characteristic of the desert’s soothing nihilism, “[s]o a man in the desert can slip into [the absence of] a name as if within a discovered well, and in its shadowed coolness be tempted never to leave such containment” (141). In addition, Almásy sees the desert as “a place of faith” where “all of us...wished to remove the clothing of our countries” (139). However, if Almásy’s desert faith is made up (in part) by a belief in the non-political nature of a lover’s name and the desire of all desert initiates to shed their national skins, then he is doubly betrayed by this faith, for as Caravaggio reveals to him it was Katharine Clifton’s name and the political motives of his desert companions doubling as English spies that turned him into “the enemy” and shattered his utopian vision.

Almásy’s conception of the desert is pertinent to a discussion of his reading/writing practices because his view of books is essentially the

same as his purified conception of the dessert. As Brittan points out, Almásy “treats books as though they were immaculate” (206), or beyond suspicion, such that he is caught off guard by Katharine’s reading of the story of Queen Candaules and surprised by the “power” of words (*The English Patient* 233-4). His use of *The Histories* as a commonplace book, filling in the margins and blank pages and covering over the text with handwritten notes, is an attempt to slowly transform the political, printed work of Herodotus into a private manuscript—an attempt to slowly displace the political as such. Thus Almásy glues “brown cigarette papers” over the tales of warring nations in *The Histories*, covering them with details of his love-affair (172). However, what *The English Patient* ultimately reveals is that a text is not so easily disarmed or depoliticized. Though Brittan is right to suggest that “Hana and Almásy resist war by handwriting” (202), Hana eventually realizes the inefficacy and non-reality of mere resistance and, in a letter to her stepmother Clare, *declares* war by handwriting: “From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public. If we can rationalize this we can rationalize anything” (292). The event Hana suggests is beyond her capacity to rationalize is the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan. However, before I examine how the bombing of Japan contributed to Hana’s declaration of war, I want to explore Kip’s function as sapper as a metaphor for the reading/writing practices of conventional literary criticism, for Kip also comes into confrontation with the reality of his reading/writing practices as a result of the bombing of Japan.

Although the narrator states that Kip doesn’t possess a “faith in books” (111), through his activity as an English-trained sapper, Kip perhaps provides the novel with its strongest image of a literary critic. Prior to the war, Lord Suffolk, Kip’s bomb disposal mentor and

instructor in everything English, was a literary critic whose “passion was the study of *Lorna Doone* and how authentic the novel was historically and geographically” (185). Lord Suffolk’s experience as a literary critic seems to have influenced his military pupils, for Kip’s approach to defusing bombs has much in common with traditional literary criticism. Kip’s work is described as “unraveling that knot of wires and fuzes someone has left him like a terrible letter” (76), which suggests that the enemy’s activity of rigging-up mines can be seen as a type of writing, and the job of disarming them as a type of reading. Thus practicing the art of literary criticism as bomb-disposal, Kip searches for clues of the “personality” (99) lurking behind the mine: “People think a bomb is a mechanical object, a mechanical enemy. But you have to consider that somebody made it” (192). In one situation, after successfully disarming a bomb with a new type of fuse, Kip “quickly...[writes] down a few notes and hand[s] the solution for the new bomb to an officer” who makes sure the information is made available to the other bomb-disposal experts (195), an activity that mirrors the practice of literary scholars who publish their solutions to poems and novels so that they may be successfully disarmed in classrooms across the English speaking world.

Kip’s activity as a reader of militarized forms of writing is an example of how in World War Two [t]he ordinary challenges of reading, of understanding how a poem works or interpreting what a novel means, became the cryptographic challenges of encipherment and decoding that led to the deployment of soldiers, the bombing of boats, the capture of spies, and the protection or endangerment of citizens. (Brittan 211)

Kip’s story functions as an exemplary critique of the shortcomings of this “ordinary” and rationalistic approach to texts, which reduces



the practice of reading to a search for hidden meaning and authorial intention. The illusion of the heroic nature of such reading crumbles for the sapper/literary critic when he is confronted with a bomb too big to be disarmed, “a bomb the size...of a city” that reveals the violence of reading as rationalization (287), of “[c]utting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For *this* to happen?” (285).

What I have been attempting to outline above are two distinct reading practices that are both revealed to be seriously flawed in the same historical moment. Hana’s practice of handwriting snapshots of her personal story into printed books—a practice modeled after Almásy’s commonplace book—can be seen as an attempt to make a personal claim on the public field of discourse and to tame or domesticate the political realm. Kip’s rationalized reading of enemy weaponry, modeled after the literary criticism practiced by his mentor Lord Suffolk, seeks to neutralize texts by decoding the authorial intention in their design. However, what both of these reading practices exhibit in common is a desire to disarm the violence of texts, and it is in this regard that both practices are fundamentally flawed. Brittan, in her essay, quotes Jacques Derrida in trying to articulate Hana and Almásy’s desire to “emancipate [print], to let it make its way alone and unarmed” (201). While this quotation, as Brittan suggests, accurately “captures the intention of Hana and Almásy’s desire to transform books with the pencil and the handwritten word” (202), it falls short of articulating the nature of the impasse revealed to Hana and Kip by the bombing of Japan.

*Divisadero* and *The English Patient* suggest that reading—whether it be studious, curious, or otherwise escapist in nature—is a vital act of incorporation, a mystical act of consumption wherein words become flesh and the stories in books come into confrontation with the texts of our selves in an explosion of intertextuality. We

have already looked at the concept of narrative identity at play in *Divisadero* and seen how narrative functions to keep the human subject from dissipating into nothingness. In addition, *The English Patient* abounds with examples of textual descriptions of persons and bodies. Hana's body is "full of sentences and moments" (12), "stories and situations" (36). The English patient refers to himself as a "book" and "something to be read" (253). Passages suggesting the textual origins of the body are also numerous. Kip is described as walking out of "the pages of Kipling" (94); Hana finds her role as the English patient's nurse echoed in the biblical story of Abishag; Katharine reads her affair with Almásy out of his Herodotus; and as Almásy works in Cairo on his book, *Récents Explorations dans le Désert Libyque*, he finds himself "unable to remove [Katharine's] body from the page" (235). The textual nature of bodies and identities means that both are inescapably at play in the word-consuming nature of the reading process.

As Jacques Derrida once stated in an interview, "every act of incorporation is an act of violence, and what is crucial is how to perceive such an act and how to do it well" (qtd. in Kaufman 359). It is the inherent violence of their own attempts at disarming the violence of texts that confronts Kip and Hana at the end of the novel, a confrontation that tears Kip out of Hana's life and thereby initiates Hana's declaration of war. What defines the "do[ing] it well" of reading and writing in Ondaatje's novels is whether the result is creative—in the sense of life-sustaining and productive—as with Anna's biography of Segura, which opens up and expands the writer's story, in opposition to the critical discourse that dissects and disfigures his life and work so that all that survives are the bones.

*“Read to Me”: A Coda*

In the context of a discussion on post-structuralism, Terry Eagleton summarizes two different ways of thinking about the relationship between speaking and writing. The first, which he suggests is consistent with the Western philosophical tradition from Plato to Lévi-Struass, sees speech as superior to writing. According to this view, which post-structuralist thinkers describe as “phonocentric,” writing is merely a “second-hand mode of communication, a pallid, mechanical transcript” of the “living voice” (Eagleton 113). Where writing is an impersonal, alienated, and materialized mode of communication, speech stands out as a medium in which the speaker’s words, which seem “immediately present to [his] consciousness” (113), are seen to “coincide” with his “being” (113). Eagleton suggests that behind this phonocentric interpretation is a belief that “man is able spontaneously to create and express his own meanings, to be in full possession of himself, and to dominate language as a transparent medium of his inmost being” (113). As Derrida states, the phonocentric position is already clearly defined in the formulation of Aristototele: “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words” (*Of Grammatology* 30).

According to the second view, pioneered by Jacques Derrida, speech itself is seen as a form of writing, and “spoken signs, like written ones, work only by a process of difference and division” (Eagleton 113). As a result of this view of language all concepts and ideas are seen as “embroiled in an open-ended play of signification, shot through with the traces and fragments of other ideas” (114). This endless play of signification means that there is no longer any stable ground upon which to build an identity or other constructs of

stabilized meaning. Therefore seeing speech as a type of writing in a Derridean fashion means that not only is the privileged position of speech undermined, but so too the very concept of inner-being or identity.

I begin this concluding section of the present essay by outlining these two views on the relationship between speech and writing—the first which holds speech as anterior and superior to writing and the second which views speech as being a form of writing—because I want to suggest that the two novels in question here propose a third position that contains elements of both the previous two. There is a special significance in these two novels—a type of reverence, one might say—associated with instances of the written word read aloud. It is in the vocalization of the written word that the full power of language is performed. To further explore the significance of this unification of voice and text I turn now to a closer look at some examples from the texts.

In *Divisadero*, the yet adolescent Lucien Segura and the teenage-bride Marie-Neige develop a lasting bond through their shared experiences of reading out loud to one another:

One afternoon when Marie-Neige sat beside him in silence he decided to read the Dumas out loud to her. “On the way to his imprisonment in Buitenhof Prison, our Cornelius heard nothing but the barking of the dog and saw nothing but the face of a young woman....” [She] looked at him with her mouth open. He could not tell whether she believed he was inventing what he spoke or whether she was already hypnotized by the fragment...From then on she wished to share everything he consumed from a book. (200)

The sense of wonder with which Marie-Neige responds to Lucien's spontaneous act of reading out loud to her is characteristic of the mysterious power associated with such acts in both *Divisadero* and *The English Patient*. There is an inherent intimacy associated in these texts with such shared verbal experiences, which more often than not leave Lucien and Marie-Neige "lying on the slim ribbon of porch...[feeling] at times that they could scarcely breathe" (201). But it is not a reclusive intimacy that closes them off from others; rather it is through reading out loud that the two "entered the great world" (221). In fact, it is this capacity for communal acts of oral reading to socialize the reading subjects that is their most striking feature. There is a structural vulnerability and openness of such a gesture, distinctly evidenced when, one month after Lucien's disfiguring loss of one of his eyes, the semi-literate Marie-Neige successfully pulls him out of his solitude, despite his resistance, in a spontaneous decision to read to him: "Everything froze within him. He refused to step out to meet her words" (207). Lucien's initial resistance is demonstrative of his awareness of the strong socializing pull of Marie-Neige's gesture. Despite his resolution that "tomorrow he would simply not come outside" (207), it is in fact Lucien that initiates the continuation of their communal reading:

He asked her if she would clarify something he had missed, not understood within that first chapter. She looked up. 'I don't think I remember, I was too nervous.' There was a sort of response from him. 'Shall I go back and read it again?' 'No, just go on.[]' (208)

Marie-Neige's nervousness reveals the uncertainty and vulnerability associated with the shared act of reading, while Lucien's suggestion to move forward despite their unknowing of what had been read the day before reveals that the significance of their

activity is independent from the meaning of, or their mastery over, the text.

Likewise, in *The English Patient*, Almásy is able to help coax Hana out of her reclusive state of privation by getting her to read to him: “[Hana] was distant from everybody. The only way I could get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me” (253). Their practice throughout the novel is for Hana to read to him from “whatever book she is able to find in the library downstairs” (5). Like Lucien and Marie-Neige, they do not concern themselves with “gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms” (7). Furthermore, the shared reading is not all for Hana’s sake, as Almásy’s confession to Caravaggio might seem to suggest. From the burned man’s perspective, the candle light illuminates the strange connection between “the page and...the young nurse’s talking face” as he “swallow[s] her words like water” (5), suggesting that the former desert explorer, who can appreciate something of the necessity of water, depends on her reading for his survival. But Hana doesn’t just read to her patient, but is read to by him as well, the significance of which is demonstrated twice in the concluding pages of the novel. As Hana senses Kip’s impending departure, she reaches out to him with words that the “Englishman once read [to her] from a book” (288). Hana and Almásy’s shared reading experiences come to comprise such a pivotal part of her character that they are perhaps the central link between the twenty-one year old Hana of the Villa San Girolamo and the thirty-four year old Hana that the narrator gives a glimpse of at the end of novel: “She still remembers the lines of poems the Englishman read out loud to her” (301).

The shared experiences of reading out loud in *The English Patient* and *Divisadero* can be seen as offering a revision of the relationships between voice and text outlined above. Reading out loud to another is

distinguished by a vulnerability caused by an uncertainty regarding the meaning of the text and the boundaries of the idea of text as such that is characteristic of the Derridean view of language. In the act of reading the written word out loud, it is no longer possible to identify where the text begins or ends or where one might draw the line between the inside and outside of the text. Such reading thus orients the participants toward a radical opening up of the textualized world through the destabilization of meaning and a multiplication of possibilities as the illusions of a fixed reality give way to the fluidity of intertextual play. And yet, the voice maintains a crucial, privileged role in facilitating this process of textualization. It is through the vocalization of the written text that the structure of narrative identity is performed par-excellence because, for the duration of such a vocalization, *I am text*, and experience my self as such—not as a controlled, mastered expression of text, but a radically vulnerable, speaking subject opened up to intertextual play. In reading out loud from a written text, rather than just speaking, I break the illusion that my voice originates exclusively from “within” my inner being. For the subject being read to, it is to experience the text as active rather than passive, as reaching out to engage rather than merely waiting to be deciphered. It is also to experience an embodied text that makes the act of reading inherently social.

In *Divisadero*, Anna ambiguously states: “How we are almost nothing” (23). I say “ambiguously” because it is not clear whether the statement is uttered as a lament, or as something more hopeful. But one thing that I think is worth mentioning is that she does not say “I am almost nothing”—she says, “we are” (23). That tiny “we” calls out from the page with a voice of its own, reminding the reader that while embracing the intertextuality of narrative identity means that we must confront the fact that we are less ourselves than we might

have previously imagined, it also means that we are more “we” than we have perhaps yet experienced, that as Anna suggests, “[t]here is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross” (16).



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