

A WORLD WITHOUT MAPS: POST-NATIONAL, ENGLISH-LANGUAGE
LITERATURE IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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A consideration of a constellation of authors working in the fiction marketplace of the late twentieth century. The works of Michael Ondaatje, Jhumpa Lahiri, Aleksandar Hemon, and Anne Michaels are considered. The works are particularly analyzed for the way that they choose to depict the process of crossing borders and refugee life. The authors are grouped together along certain broad critical lines – particularly along the way that they present the refugee experience with the voice of *interiority*. Links are then provided to the textual predecessors of these texts and writers, many of whom belong to the Modernist moment: Forster, Conrad, Kipling, and others. Some work is done to establish and define the term, *post-national*.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Pauls Harijs Toutonghi was born in 1976. He received his MFA from Cornell in 2003.

His novel, *Red Weather*, was published by Random House in 2006.

For my mother and father, with love

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of the fiction marketplace has created a literary environment that thrives on the international work of fiction. While the novel has always been a remarkably international form – novels have been written in hundreds of languages over the past three centuries – the world of fiction has never been as complex as it is today. In the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, major publishers have issued a wave of titles with post-national, displaced protagonists – protagonists whose crossings over borders and journeys of immigration make up the bulk of their fictional texts. These are works written, in English, about the process of moving lives. They are written from the inside, written by authors whose own experiences have resonance with the lives of their characters.

This *interiority* is not typical of much of the American or Canadian literature of immigration of the twentieth century. Even landmark works of fiction about the process of immigration – works such as Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, or Henry Roth’s *Call it Sleep* – tended to be written from an exterior point of view. Both Sinclair and Roth were observers of the process, not participants in the process, themselves. In today’s fiction marketplace, these post-national writers are producing work – in English – that embraces the crossing of borders, the disruption of social strata through immigration. The work of fiction about immigration, when translated, loses much of its unique, interior landscape. Writers writing, in English, about the process of moving to an English-speaking nation, then, are the focus of the dissertation.

Besides interiority, there were a number of other important things I looked for in texts. Another significant criterion was an understanding of the brutalities of modern life – present in the text chiefly through a willingness to consider the brutal image. The mechanization of death, the vagaries of warfare, the physical impact that mechanized suffering can have on the material body and the psychological being – all of these were important to the texts considered. Why? Without question, the twentieth century was a century of unprecedented brutality and *nation-sponsored* violence. Many critics have noted that in the aspects of this brutality, in the pain inflicted on the body of the individual during warfare, language breaks down. Elaine Scarry, in particular, notes that the “unmaking” of language that occurs in moments of violence is a direct corollary of the act of “making” language – writing.¹ In the same way that love or extreme religious fervor can be sublime – beyond language – the moment of violence, and the sorrow it provokes in the individual, are also crucial to any text that wishes to faithfully represent the known world.

Furthermore – beyond the interiority of the language, the crossing of borders, the susceptibility to memory of the brutal image, and the willingness to absorb the new nation of residence into the self – these texts are almost always concerned with the matters of language, particularly the matter of naming. Names are a point of postmodern disputation, anyway, with numerous experimental authors focusing on names as a part of the literary paradigm that can be questioned and subverted. Thus, these texts will consider the importance of names, and offer this question: What happens to a name, what happens to language itself, when it is stretched by the pressures of global migration?

¹ See, especially: Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

In this light, I engage in close readings of the works of four contemporary writers: Michael Ondaatje, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anne Michaels, and Aleksandar Hemon. While this may seem to be an odd grouping of authors, I believe that these writers are firmly linked by their texts – by the worlds that their texts create and inhabit. All of these authors, I argue, are creating work that transcends national boundaries in a specific and unique way. I have tried to find texts whose English is unusual, or tinged with something other than the standard, stripped-down prose of contemporary, mainstream American realism. I have tried to find texts that were created, perhaps, with an international audience in mind.

The dissertation is evidently not exclusively a consideration of American literature, since two of the four authors are Canadian, at least in their country-of-residence. The literary antecedents towards which the dissertation reaches are firmly European: Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, Nikolai Gogol, and E.M. Forster have an important place in the critical strata that this analysis establishes. Kipling influences the text of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* in a significant way. His novel, *Kim*, serves as a keystone to which the narrative returns again and again. Forster's work serves as fertile inspirational soil for Lahiri's writing; she uses *A Passage to India* as the point of inspiration for several of her stories in the collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Gogol also influences Lahiri, serving as a background-voice to her novel, *The Namesake*. Conrad – and Bruno Schulz – are important forces in Aleksandar Hemon's work. Anne Michaels struggles – in her poignant Holocaust memoir – with the whole of Holocaust literature.

Though many writers are voracious readers – or at least claim a large number of influences – these texts are produced by writers whose influences come from a range of cultures and languages. The hypertext, with its ability to link to a variety of

instantaneous references, is the quintessential form for the new work of fiction. Yet, most works are not available in hypertext format. The process of tracing the allusions and references and influences of a text, then, is the critic's duty.

Of the four authors whom I discuss, Ondaatje's work has garnered the most mainstream commercial success. This is perhaps unexpected, since his early career was avowedly experimental – consisting of a series of unusual books for the small Toronto publisher, Coach House Books. From his early collections of poems – books such as *Elimination Dance* and *The Man with Seven Toes*, books which have more affinity with the work of concrete poets than with the traditions of poetic form – it is a long road to the Michael Ondaatje of *The English Patient*. Yet he traverses this road and works to help in the adaptation of his novel into a screenplay – where the book is changed dramatically and altered to fit the Hollywood formula. Certainly, Ondaatje himself is a transnational being; the path of his life has shuttled between nations and cultures. The characters in *The English Patient* hope only for the freedom from nationality, the freedom from the national ties that inevitably lead them to sorrow and suffering. It is quite a brutal book; the body of the central character – a Hungarian count – has been damaged beyond repair in the war. While it does have something of an exteriority to the narration, it also has a delirious poetic quality to the prose, a quality that brings the reader into this wound, into this suffering. Importantly, the count is also never truly named, and lives the remaining months of his life without a name, without a national identity. He speaks many languages, and in his morphine-induced delirium, the reader is never sure what part of the narrative is “actual” and what part is hallucination.

The book that Ondaatje reaches towards in this text is Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, a story about an orphan in what is modern-day Pakistan. Kipling – infamous for his poem, “The White Man's Burden” – is among the most hotly debated authors in the

cannon of British literature, primarily because of his unquestionable racism, which lies close to the surface of his texts. Also, though, *The English Patient* features an interracial friendship between Kip, an Indian-British bomb disposal man, and the book's central character. The text of the book deals with racism. It is conscious of its main character's racism; using this, however, the text offers an interesting update on Kipling's work. Still, it is almost as if Ondaatje relishes overcoming this influence on his writing, relishes taking the text and changing it to something else entirely. This is not unlike the process that Hollywood will force Ondaatje to endure with his book – altering its content dramatically and shifting the emphasis from the post-national to the 'love story,' changing *The English Patient* into a star-vehicle for Ralph Fiennes, Kristin Scott Thomas, and Juliette Binoche.

Yet the tie to the colonial past is strong in Ondaatje – and cannot quite be broken. The film does retain some elements of the colonial struggle in it, elements which simplify the transition, herein, to the work of author – Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri's text has unquestionable interiority, as the world that Lahiri considers is, in some respects, the world in which she lives. Frequently, her stories feature Americans with Indian heritage living in Boston – a biographical detail that matches her own life. Her work details the struggle between the competing ethnic ties – the tie of the past, the tie of the new America. Nations and ethnic nationalism form the foundation of many of her stories. The close reading of her collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* focuses especially on the stories that exist in this border space. The connection to the past comes in the form of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Lahiri offers what is, essentially, a twenty-first century update of this text. She takes the book's central moment – the confrontation in the Marabar Caves – and morphs this confrontation into the basis of a new story about tourism in India at the end of the twentieth century.

Yet it is Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, which sparks an even more piquant interest. In this novel – released in 2003 – Lahiri draws specifically on Nikolai Gogol, incorporating his work, “The Overcoat,” directly into her plot. This permutation of cross-national literature is a gesture that must be noted. She is willing to incorporate a wide-range of sources for her text – a voracious, gourmand's appetite for international allusion. She uses Gogol as a point of departure; much like the journey in the pages of *The English Patient*, the journey on which *The Namesake* goes is constantly surprising and interesting.

A parallel tie to Ondaatje's novel comes in the form of Anne Michaels' novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, winner of the 1997 Orange Prize for Fiction. The consideration here again touches on the trope of the orphan, one from which Michaels extracts a great deal of creative energy. Again, the orphan is the *tabula rasa* upon which any language or identity can – at an early age – be projected. Here, Michaels has her characters – an older man and a boy – crossing over borders and establishing lives in Canada. The boy – a Jew fleeing the Holocaust that has claimed his parents and his sister – must learn to negotiate the difficult and brutal memories of his past. His identity is newly established against a backdrop of terror and suffering. This is the international protagonist at his most fully-expressed, the member of the “International Bastard's Club” (to use a phrase that is crucial to Ondaatje's *English Patient*). The boy – like most of Ondaatje's explorers, like the miserably torn characters of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* – only wishes to live in a world free from maps. Michaels allows her characters to express this; her poetry, like Ondaatje's, reveals the interiority of the language that she uses to describe these events. Not only does Michaels have a direct familial tie to the events of the Holocaust, she has the poet's empathy for the victim of brutality – an empathy that is, perhaps, the most important part of the novel.

Finally, I will consider Aleksandar Hemon's refugees. The refugee is perhaps the quintessential international being. Much scholarship has gone into the explication of refugee life – especially Eastern European refugee life – and Hemon's fiction can be added to this list of scholarship. His characters balance carefully between the past and the present, torn, in many cases, by their memories of life in former-Yugoslavia. Hemon has a tie to Lahiri in that many of his stories have an autobiographical ethnicity; he tends to create characters who share his background and national heritage. Two aspects of Hemon's work, I believe, make it especially relevant to this critical study: 1) Its willingness – like Lahiri's work – to take on influences beyond the scope of its 'national' purview. 2) Its consideration – unlike many other texts being issued by the power structures of publishing – of the sorrows of consumer culture, and particularly, the food service industry. It details, with a deliberate exposition, the difficulties and humiliations of wage-slavery in contemporary American culture, offering a counterpoint to the hegemony of global capitalism. I will offer a critique of Joseph Conrad's novel, *Under Western Eyes*, and try to show the ways in which Conrad serves as the baseline for Hemon's character, Jozef Pronek.

These authors, then, have a variety of intertwining ties, ties that would not seem evident, perhaps, upon a first reading. Yet, while they make up a diverse and new body of work in the field of literary fiction, they also have strong ties to writers of the past. It is the way that these writers update the work of their predecessors that interests this dissertation. The constellation of authors debated in these pages are significant primarily because of the passionate way in which they debate the merits – in their own texts – of the writers who came before them. These novels and short stories – though still emerging – have made a significant mark on the vast fiction marketplace. The subject of this next, first chapter, Ondaatje, is, at sixty-one, the oldest of the writers. The characters of his novel, *The English Patient*, are ardent in

their desire to free themselves from the demands of nationality. They are international, firmly international, and in this international attitude, they expose a number of things about the ways that the texts of the past live in the texts of the present.

CHAPTER TWO
SUCH AN EARTH THAT HAD NO MAPS: *THE ENGLISH PATIENT* AND THE
POST-NATIONAL IDEA

“If a spirit of nationalism gets into literature, it stops being literature.”

William Faulkner, *Faulkner at West Point*²

A writer’s work is essentially solitary. Though the writer may have an imagined audience – an audience that could be one or ten or hypothetically infinite – the fact remains the same: The writer works alone. The creation of the text depends on a single act. Without the steady progress of ink over paper, or the clatter of typewriter keys, no text can be produced. Even the dictated work must be transferred to type at some point. The book that shimmers and flickers through the air – all spoken language – may perhaps be a thing of the future.

The creation of a Hollywood film could not be more different. From the moment of its genesis, a movie must be a work of collaboration. Samuel Goldwyn, Cecil B. DeMille and D.W. Griffith – three of Hollywood’s earliest filmmakers – were enamored with the assembly line and its methods of division of labor. Their films were shot out-of-sequence by a team of employees, and then edited into final form by a second group of production workers. Growth of the industry led to growth of

² Faulkner, William. *Faulkner at West Point*. Robert Paul Ashley and Joseph Fant, ed. Oxford, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2002, page 50.

specialization. Today's Hollywood movie requires hundreds of employees, many of whom have significant input into the final form that the work will take.

The English Patient

The English Patient was a remarkable success. In both of its incarnations – as book and film – it snared a rare combination of critical applause and commercial triumph. The novel won Britain's prestigious Booker Prize, and had favorable reviews in an overwhelming number of periodicals. The movie grossed over 78 million dollars at the box office. This meant, of course, a substantial profit for its producer, Saul Zaentz, as well as for the firm of Miramax Pictures (a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company).

Yet judging a film's success by its box office receipts is a difficult matter. Of all films released in 1996, *The English Patient* had the twentieth-largest gross. Movies such as *Twister*, Eddie Murphy's *The Nutty Professor*, and *Star Trek: First Contact* were all more profitable than *The English Patient*. The largest-grossing film of the year, *Independence Day*, hauled in over three hundred million dollars. So, by purely financial standards – by the standards of the Hollywood blockbuster – *The English Patient* was only a moderate achievement.

The English Patient, however, took quite a different place in the annals of popular culture than these so-called “blockbuster” films. The language that mainstream critics used to describe this particular movie varied significantly from the language used to describe other multi-million dollar grossing offerings. This was – critics maintained again and again – a unique cinematic experience. Peter Travers, writing in *Rolling Stone*, called the movie, “shimmering,” and “startling,” two

adjectives that he did not use for *The Nutty Professor*.³ The film, then, was widely believed to be a reified thing of beauty. Travers concluded that it had, “rare grace and incendiary feeling.” This flood of enthusiasm continued at the Academy Awards, where *The English Patient* won nine Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Cinematography, Best Original Score, and both the Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay awards for Anthony Minghella.

Janet Maslin’s review in the *New York Times* is perhaps indicative of the type of press that greeted the film⁴. In the first paragraph of her evaluation, Maslin calls *The English Patient*, a “fiercely romantic, mesmerizing tour-de-force.” These particular statements, of course, quickly made it into the advertising copy for the *English Patient*, which I will consider shortly. But – perhaps most importantly – Maslin makes the point that she believes the film to be, “a stunning feat of literary adaptation...” The fact that the movie, *The English Patient*, has been derived from the novel, *The English Patient*, is clearly important for Maslin.

But isn’t every film, in a certain sense, an adaptation? True, some filmmakers (such as Mike Figgis, for example) refuse to work from a script. Instead, they allow the actors to improvise dialogue – dialogue that is based largely on the actors’ intuition of how their characters would react to certain broad ideas. (Your characters are in love. Go.) In this way, a script can be avoided. Most movies, however, arise from the printed page.

What is the relationship between this cinematic adaptation of a book and its textual precursor? What happens to a text when it loses its status as a text, and becomes something else entirely? Is the film an expansion of Ondaatje’s novel, or is

³ *Rolling Stone*, November, 1996.

⁴ *New York Times*, November 15, 1996.

the possibility for a film folded somehow into the book, a visual component of the written word?

Finally, I would like to look at these questions through the lens of nations and nationalism – that is, allegiance to, or *belief in*, a nation. I argue that the movie – as a cultural product – differs tremendously from the film, in ways that are both expected and unexpected. Certainly no one would anticipate that movie and book be identical – but matters of nation and nationalism are central to both, and differ in both.

Of course, any successful work of prose depends on some hidden spring to keep its energy going. The reader's interest must be captured somehow. The reader must be roused to some emotion – whether that emotion is love of the characters, or dislike of the characters, or interest in the time or place in which the novel is set. In Ondaatje's *English Patient*, this interest is kindled in part through gruesome detail and constant suspense.

The disturbing visual images are manipulative in a sense, simply because they summon empathy and pity for the burned man. Even though nothing substantive about the patient has been betrayed, he is immediately linked with martyrs – with religious figures who possess an aura of victimization and suffering. The reader yearns to know more about how he reached this burned state. Sentences such as this one, on the second page of the novel, also give the book a powerful sense of death, one which hovers over and entralls any reading: “He whispers again, dragging the listening heart of the young nurse beside him to wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died.” These words, then – the pages of this book – seem to be the whispers of a dying man. The phrase, “those months before he died,” would seem to communicate that this is a dying man, and that this book will be the book of his death.

Yet the narration will only partially fulfill this promise in the subsequent three hundred pages. It is a notable difference between the film and the book that – in the book – the patient does not die. In the film, the nurse, Hana (her name is a version of *Hannah*, which means, “full of grace, mercy, and prayer”), administers a fatal dose of morphine, and the viewer witnesses the patient’s death. This will be a critical thing to remember, later – in light of some of the advertising materials for the film-version of *The English Patient*.

The Brutal Image

Beginnings are especially crucial to any critical study of a novel. A beginning contains the text’s first voice. Any beginning also contains (coded beneath its surface, not even perhaps explained with language) instructions on how to read itself. Most beginnings give to the reader a sense of both the literary characters and events which will arise in the course of a book, as well as a broader, perhaps more intuitive understanding of the creative presence that drives, or narrates, the novel. *The English Patient* is no exception. Within pages of its prologue, the reader has learned that: 1) This will be a brutal novel. The brutal image will be crucial to the text. 2) This is a novel where the bodies and minds of characters have been shattered by the violence of war. It will be a sobering assessment of the role of the state as a violent force in modern life. 3) In this book, time will be fluid and non-linear, an important point. This non-linear time will be ordered by the narrative presence of the book in an unusual way. 4) The text will be littered with references to other texts, a constant scattering of secondary sources.

The novel opens with two nameless characters, a man and a woman, identified only by their gender. Within several paragraphs it becomes obvious that the woman is a nurse, and that she is caring for this man – he is her badly burned and disfigured patient. Ondaatje uses omniscient narration to deliver these first scenes to the reader. This narration describes the burned patient’s skin with elaborate detail⁵:

...Every four days she washes his black body, beginning at the destroyed feet... Above the shins the burns are worst. Beyond purple. Bone.

She has nursed him for months and she knows the body well, the penis sleeping like a sea horse, the thin tight hips. Hipbones of Christ, she thinks. He is her despairing saint... (3)

These details are telling because they contain four of the senses: Sight, sound, touch, and smell.

The sight of the burned patient’s skin is unquestionably powerful. The visual image reels off of the page – skin charred beyond purple, charred all the way to the bone. The sensation of the water on burnt skin, as well as the sensation of the nurse’s caress (the imagined movement of her washcloth over his legs and chest and arms) – these are the elements of touch. The sound of this scene is the sound that the washing of his body must make, the water sloshing into the basin, dripping off of a washcloth. The scent is the scent of fire, of burning – the smoldering burn of martyrdom. Importantly, all of these senses are implied by the first sense, by sight, by the simple and carefully described visual image of the burned patient. The effect of the novel’s opening scene depends on its ability to imply.

What follows this section is a brief scene of the still-nameless nurse attending to her patient. She rubs his chest with calamine lotion. She blows cool air onto the

⁵ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

burnt skin of his neck. Then, she provides the final sense, the one that was missing from the first few paragraphs: Taste. “She puts her hand into her pocket. She unskins the plum with her teeth, withdraws the stone and passes the flesh of the fruit into his mouth.” (4) This act is the act of a lover. It is sensual and unusual. It crosses the normal boundaries of the patient-nurse relationship. The narration has betrayed – without stating it outright – that the nurse loves her patient.

Interestingly, in this paragraph Ondaatje creates a word. The word, *unskins*, is a simple creation, but technically it could be replaced with the word, *skins*, which would have the same meaning. Yet in this unusual beginning to a novel – which does not offer any of the standard things that a reader could expect from an introduction, such as character names, geographical setting, or placement in time – the language matters more, in a way, than anything else. This moment demonstrates for the reader that the vocabulary of the book will be unusual, and that many of the rewards of *The English Patient* will be the rewards typically reserved for the reader of poetry.

Perhaps more importantly, the reader sees that this is a book where even the language itself will be invented. The invention of words is a hallmark of Modernist art of all sorts. Creating words such as *lowskimming* or *heaventree*, Joyce and other Modernist writers signified that their break from the expectations of the English language was complete. Gone were the expected limits of the dictionary. In painting, Duchamp and Picasso and countless others destroyed the expected stability of perspective, calling into question the fundamental tenets of their art. Ondaatje aligns himself with these inventors, and seems to be implying that his conception of the novel, as novel, is fluid and many-sided.

Indeed, the attention to specificity of language is the only constant. It spans the entire opening scene. Its single simile is carefully chosen. The burned man’s penis “sleeps like a sea horse.” Isolated on this page, in the context of this chapter, the

choice seems almost ridiculous – an unfortunate poetic gamble that doesn't quite work. But in the context of this passage it is something else. It is intimate – terribly intimate – and it conveys the idea of dormant male sexual power. Here, the profane image contrasts with the holy image – the image of the martyred Christ-figure, the despairing saint.

Language has broken down. Religious imagery has broken down. Hannah's relationship with the English patient has transgressed the boundaries of standard nurse-patient dynamics. What remains? Very little. The individuals in the story float without mooring – they have none of the standard affiliations which can stabilize characters, give them a center.

In the Skin of a Lion

It would possibly be important to note, as a sidebar, the connection between the first few scenes of *The English Patient*, and the first page of *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje's earlier novel. In *The English Patient*, after the text offers the image of the nurse caring for her patient, it then proposes, in a new paragraph:

There are stories the man recites quietly into the room
which slip from level to level like a hawk. (4)

The text then moves into the first of a series of biographical flashbacks. We learn that the year is 1944, and that the man's burns came from an accident he had in 1939 in a biplane, from which he "fell burning into the desert." This, then, is the marker of the

beginning of the more conventional part of the book, to the part which will (in part) satisfy the questions of *why* and *how*. Why and how was this man burned? In fact, the text continues, presenting this very question:

His eyes lock onto the young woman's face. If she moves her head, his stare will travel alongside her into the wall. She leans forward. How were you burned? (4)

But compare this to the beginning of *In the Skin of a Lion*:

This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. (1)

There are distinct similarities between these beginnings, both of which involve certain parallel words. Importantly, both texts indicate that they are meant to be perceived as "stories." Indeed, storytelling is a critical part of much of Ondaatje's work, and these two novels will be no exception. *In the Skin of a Lion* begins with the phrase, "This is a story," and the narration of *The English Patient* maintains – very early on – that its identity is that of "stories," recited by a dying and disfigured man. (The symbolic value of this image – the enormous number of interpretive possibilities that it presents – must be kept in mind. It will serve a touchstone for other considerations later in the course of this dissertation.)

Both books open with this basic relationship – one man, one woman. The man speaks; the woman listens. Key words to these passages are "gathers," and "recites," both of which connote a sort of speaking which is not entirely standard, or usual. Indeed, both of these words have an undercurrent of religious implication. The language has the precise diction of scriptural writing. *In the Skin of a Lion* continues:

She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through darkness. Outside, the countryside is unbetrayed. The man who is driving could say, “In that field is a castle,” and it would be possible for her to believe him. (1)

In the passage from *The English Patient*, the speaker resides in a state of utter powerlessness. He cannot care for himself on a physical level. His body has been destroyed and his only remaining strength is his voice. The nurse, Hana, would seem to possess all of the power in their relationship. Without her attentions the patient would die. He is helpless.

Yet the reader willing to interpret the relationship between the nurse and patient in this way must pause at the fact that the entire story – the entire entity which arises under the name, *The English Patient* – is a recitation, a written text that seeks, in its essence, to be spoken language. Although the patient’s body is powerless, his voice still has the power to build worlds, to create the texture of a story, to entertain.

In the passage from *In the Skin of a Lion* – the young girl again is the one who lacks power. She is at the mercy of the nameless, older man who tells her a story. He could lie to her and she would believe him. She would be easily deceived by the darkness outside of the car, and her willingness to put faith in a storyteller.

The Film

The film, of course, begins with the most time-honored convention of the film industry – the credits. Though Anthony Minghella does not have to open with the names of his cast and crew, he chooses to follow this expected protocol. The names appear in a conservative white font in the lower-right quadrant of the screen. As a

backdrop to the names, Minghella offers an extreme close-up of a brush – a brush that applies paint to a canvas.

In film, the use of the close-up can be seen as roughly the same thing as the moment of attentive detail in prose or poetry. It serves to focus the viewer's attention on the smallest fragment of something, on the minor elements of the whole. While Aristotle famously contends that a thing's beauty depends upon its magnitude, the close-up could be interpreted as either refuting this dictum, or as agreeing with this idea, but still maintaining that even the smallest details are capable of having great magnitude.

Whatever the case, paint of this shot initially appears to be black – colorless – and the stroke seems to suggest a letter. Will this be an alphabet? If so, what sort of alphabet? As the credits continue, however, light catches the brush and the paint. The paint is betrayed as maroon in color, and the shape clearly becomes a human figure. This figure has its arms and legs extended, and would seem to be the body of a swimmer.

The entire scene has – as an aural background – a folk song of indistinct linguistic origin. Arguably, this song will be unfamiliar to much of the film's English-speaking, American audience. It is a solitary woman's voice, and the melody is plaintive and mournful. The movie will never reveal the source of the singing. The viewer must wait until the end of the film – and the end of the credits – to discover the name of the song, or the name of the woman singing it. (There is an element of mystery here. Of course, this mystery can be approached in a rather cynical light. The soundtrack of the film, after all, is a multi-national commodity, one which is part of a large-scale, million-dollar advertising campaign.)

To the first-time viewer unfamiliar with the “story” of *The English Patient*, the image of the swimming figure will have little resonance. It is, however, a moment of

foreshadowing. The Cave of Swimmers – as the film indicates in its credits – is not wholly fictitious. It is an actual (if somewhat disputed) location in the Gilf Kebir, near the border between Egypt and Syria. Indeed, in its existence in the “actual” world, the cave shares something crucial with many of the central characters of *The English Patient* – Almásy, and others – many of whom are not wholly fictitious, either. Ondaatje has appropriated a cave as the locus of his plot (though its prominence in the novel is not nearly as pronounced as it is in the film). Katherine Clifton, the novel’s primary love interest, will eventually die in this cave, and the action of the book and film will return to the cave several times. Much can be made, of course, of the metaphorical resonance of the cave, in general, and its inevitable link with images of birth and death.

The important point, perhaps, is that the film – at a very early stage – admits its reliance on numerous individuals (the actors, the director, the producer, the casting director, the director of photography) to reach a state of completion. The book makes no such claims because in order to reach its completed state it had to rely primarily upon the work of only the single author. (Or so it would seem. The agents and publicists and editors who invariably work to publish a novel at a major, mainstream publishing house are not usually acknowledged at the beginning of a text.)

Thus the film offers, as its beginning, an image of great beauty and what can be interpreted as an attempt at exoticism. Imagining that very few of the film’s initial American viewers will be fluent speakers of Magyar, the word that is sung again and again by the Hungarian folk singer will not be readily understandable. This word, *szerelem*, means “love,” in Magyar. The woman’s lament, then, is a love song. But how critical is that to what the filmmakers hope to accomplish with the image of the swimmers and the song? Instead of the *brutal* image, the filmmakers have substituted the *image of beauty*. It is a significant compromise. It is, furthermore, a compromise

that will occur again and again, in slightly different forms, culminating with a final loss of the text's complex valence of allusions and reference points.

A Note on Method

A note on method: Throughout this chapter, I have meandered between discussions of the film and the novel. I have done this not because I feel that the novel and the film are entirely identical cultural objects. Despite their obvious similarities, the novel and the film have many critical differences. These differences will become more pronounced as I consider the theme of the second chapter – the role of the “nation” in the cultural product that bears the name, *The English Patient*.

Even at a basic level, the characters in the film have been further infused with the identity of the actors portraying them. Almásy is, in some sense, Ralph Fiennes, and Katherine Clifton becomes, at least partly, Kristin Scott Thomas. Hana, in some very real sense, is Juliette Binoche – and her hometown has been changed from Toronto to Montreal to accommodate Binoche's French accent. Though it could be argued that the affinity that a viewing audience will feel for these actors is incidental – the same thing that the audience of a play would feel for members of a familiar repertory ensemble – there cannot be any argument that the “star quality” of the actors has somehow infused their characters.

Yet many of the points regarding the brutal image – as well as the way in which the film works to establish the setting of *The English Patient* as an “Other” – have relevance to both the book and the film. This relevance (whether direct or associative), is perhaps best analyzed by a close analysis of the progress of the film, from its first few scenes onward.

In the film, what follows the opening image is an action sequence – one in which we see the man who will become the English patient, Count Lazlo de Almassy, picking up the body of a woman. The woman is clad in white, and appears to be either asleep or dead. Almassy is still nameless at this stage. He carries the woman to a plane – a decrepit, World War One-era biplane. At this stage of the film, the characters have not been named. There have been no lines of dialogue. It is necessary, then, to ask what the viewer is watching, exactly.

Though the action is interesting – though it is melodramatic enough to snare the attention of a casual observer – for the most part the film survives (at this point) based on the cinematic presence of its two stars. Ralph Fiennes and Kirstin Scott Thomas are quickly established by means of sequential close-ups. The viewer is manipulated, in a way, into caring about these recognizable figures. When Almassy and Katherine Clifton (the woman) get into the plane – the implication is clear. This is a figure that deserves empathy. He is in great distress, and is trying to seek out help. His biplane, then, is the same biplane that figures prominently into the beginning of the book; the image of the plane – of the mechanical thing – seems to transfer its importance from written to visual text.

But in the visual text – in the film -- the next cut is to an open expanse of sky. The plane sputters from left to right, and the natural momentum of the aircraft brings the camera to rest on a group of soldiers. The audience has arguably come to the cinema to see the movie star, Ralph Fiennes. Nothing stimulates public interest more piquantly than the fear of death. Fiennes and Thomas are clearly now in grave danger. The soldiers scramble to ready their anti-aircraft gun. Within seconds, they will fire on the plane. But who are these soldiers?

By choosing such a scene for the opening of the movie, Minghella has cast the beginning in binary terms. The struggle he presents is no less than the struggle of life

vs. death. Fiennes and Thomas hope to survive; the soldiers hope to kill them. Why? The film gives us only one clue. It is not a visual clue – the perspective of the shot is necessarily distant. It must encompass a broad swath of desert and sky. This, of course, presents a problem for the filmmakers. How to give the scene meaning? How to give it the broader frame that will move the story forward?

It is at this moment that the viewer hears – just above the musical score and the roar of the biplane’s motor – one phrase: “Der Englander!” Importantly, the struggle is now given a national character. Though we know little (nothing, really) about the nature of the characters, we now know that the soldiers are German and that Fiennes and Thomas are the enemies of the German army. The mystery has been solved. In the standard, reliable, Hollywood trope, the German army is always the enemy. Most moviegoers will instinctively react with panic – the Germans clearly mean to shoot down the plane. They do just that, strafing the cockpit with bullets. Flames consume Ralph Fiennes and Kristin Scott Thomas as they plunge to earth in a spiraling wreck. At the last moment, Fiennes ejects from his seat – though he has clearly been consumed by fire.

The screenplay itself reads in this manner:

LATE 1942. THE SAHARA DESERT.

SILENCE. THE DESERT seen from the air... An old AIRPLANE is flying over the Sahara... INSIDE the airplane are two figures. One, A WOMAN, seems to be asleep... The plane shudders over a ridge... Beneath it A SUDDEN CLUSTER OF MEN AND MACHINES, camouflage nets draped over the sprawl of gasoline tanks and armored vehicles. An OFFICER, GERMAN, focuses his field glasses. The glasses pick out the MARKINGS on the plane. They are in English. An ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN swivels furiously... Shocking bursts of GUNFIRE... (3) ⁶

⁶ Minghella, Anthony. *The English Patient: A Screenplay*. New York: Hyperion, 1996.

What is most striking about the screenplay is simply a matter of its convention to the form in which screenplays are written. To guide the director and cinematographer, Minghella has suggested critical components of each scene – and highlighted them by placing their names in capital letters. What the reader is left with, then, is a text in which a visual sequence is carefully described, and also a text where certain elements intrude boldly on the reader's attention. The list is humorous, in a way: Silence, the desert, an airplane, inside, a woman, a sudden cluster of men and machines, an officer, German, an anti-aircraft gun, and gunfire. In some ways, this is an accurate summation of the second scene of the film. Reduced to this list, the film becomes something more basic.

Clearly, it was Minghella's intention to highlight these specific elements. Without this highlighting, in a way, the technical aspects of the film could not be properly executed. But for the reader, what remains are a set of simple entities. First, there is the desert – which can be read here as the exotic Other, the milieu which seems different or unusual or inhospitable. Second, there is gender. The characters have been reduced to a fundamental genetic level. They are prototypes of man and woman, and little more. Third, there is nationality. The soldiers are German; the markings on the plane (and the man and woman, by extension) are English. Finally, there is the brutality of gunfire – which is calculated to shock the viewer. Textually, then, the screenplay seems to support what the viewer guesses by watching. It is a window into the making of the film – a replica, in a way, of the action that has been created in visual images⁷.

⁷ Though I quote the screenplay extensively, it does differ slightly from the visual document of the film, as I have noted earlier. So, I will attempt to discuss only those aspects of the screenplay that were included in the final cut of the movie. My reasoning for this is that – though it is an important text on its own – a discussion of the difference between screenplay and film would be the province of another chapter. I will keep in mind the difference, however, and note any changes when they seem important.

Crossing National Boundaries

Readers of the book, of course, will know that there is irony in this seeming binary opposition of nationalities – English against German, Allies against Axis. *The English Patient* is a book that struggles deeply with questions of the nation. Its primary move is one of confrontation – confrontation with any principles of violent nationalism. The characters in the novel, then, are characters whose lives have been destroyed, in a way, by war. They resent the nation, as an institution, and wish to be free of its constraints. While it is perhaps too simplistic to look at war as the work of nations (violent conflict certainly is in no way a result of the idea of the nation-state), there can be no doubt that the conflict in which the characters of *The English Patient* are embroiled has its roots in expansionary nationalism.

While the institution of the “nation” is not explicitly blamed for the pain and suffering of these characters, the concept of “national identity” plays a large role in the book. In the novel, the characters are quite proud of their international, cosmopolitan identities. They seek to refute their identity as national subjects, forming the “International Bastard Club,” a group of explorers who meet in South Cairo and share resources in their quest to map the desert. They strive to be post-national. In the years leading up to the Second World War, these explorers refuse to be divided by linguistic or cultural barriers.

While the movie does address questions of nationalism and “nation belonging,” it does so in a manner that does not approach the depth and breadth of Ondaatje’s work in the book. The film focuses more exclusively on the love affair between the two central characters – Katherine Clifton and Count Almásy. This is, in many ways, a classic Hollywood gesture. The novel that is not primarily a love story

becomes – before the demands of the imagined popular audience – a melodramatic love story.

Yet what does this heightened focus on the “love story” mean? In the preceding chapter, I noted that an emergency frontline field hospital was used as one of the settings of the movie’s opening scenes. What the movie neglects to mention, of course, is the fundamentally open nature of all frontline hospitals. By rules of warfare that would have been in place during the Second World War, doctors must treat all critically wounded patients equally, regardless of nationality. This fact was dramatized most recently by Dr. Sanjay Gupta, who reported for CNN from the field hospitals of the 2003 war in Iraq. Gupta claimed that “up to seventy percent” of the patients the doctors were treating were in fact Iraqi soldiers or civilians.

In a March 24, 2003 article written for cnn.com – an article titled, “Devil Docs Operate on Friend and Foe: In field operating room wounds matter more than sides” – Gupta detailed the process of triage going on in a field hospital.

The most badly wounded fighters from the front lines are treated first, regardless of whether they are friend or foe.

“It’s a medical decision based on the patient’s physiology and the wound,” said Capt. John Percibelli, the chief surgeon. “That’s how we decide who goes first.”

The most important point to be gained here, perhaps, is that a setting which could very well be used as a setting for emphasizing the “cross-national” tendencies of the book becomes, instead, a locus of the love story. Instead of dramatizing the field hospital in any sort of “realistic” way, it becomes the site where Hana learns that her love-interest has been killed.

Comparing this scene to the book is impossible, since the setting and the action have been added during the process of writing the screenplay. Indeed, the novel stresses the cross-national nature of medicine in any health-care scene. Of these (there are many), perhaps none is more telling than the section in which Almassy is nursed by a Bedouin doctor. Of course, the Bedouin civilization is one which transcends national boundaries. In fact, one could argue that the chief characteristic of the Bedouin civilization is its status as a nomadic confederation of traders, one which wanders from country to country, making national borders unimportant. After his crash, Almassy awakens to the care of the Bedouin:

What great nation had found him, he wondered. What country invented such soft dates to be chewed by the man beside him and then passed from that mouth into his? During this time with these people, he could not remember where he was from. They could have been, for all he knew, the enemy he had been fighting from the air. (7)

Of course this is a moment of heightened irony. No *nation* has found him, at least no nation in the sense of *nation-state*. If “nation” can be taken in its most archaic sense – meaning, a confederation of tribes⁸ – then the Bedouin can be considered to be a nation. More importantly, though, they are a people – a tribal alliance, a closed society – and they show great compassion for the downed pilot. They do not ask his nationality. Instead, they put soft, chewed dates into his mouth, allowing him to eat when he would not otherwise be able to. They save his life, such as it is.

It is interesting to read the English patient’s reemergence from Bedouin society as indicative of his rebirth, as the realization of his desire to live free of nations. Importantly, his identity has been wiped clean. He can’t remember who he is, yes, but

⁸ Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary. Tenth Edition.

more critically, he “can’t remember where he’s from.” Later, doctors in a hospital in Rome discuss Almásy. They say:

There is a face, but it is unrecognizable. The nerves all gone. You can pass a match across his face and there is no expression. The face is asleep. (28)

He has no identity, no persona, no national past. Though he is only a shell of a man – though he lives in the constant expectation of death – he has managed to free himself from the yoke of his nationality. The compromised nature of his existence, however, leads to questions of author intent? Is part of Ondaatje’s message here that the only existence – in the modern world – that can be free of the nation-state is one in which the individual has been badly damaged and scarred?

Post-national?

Is *The English Patient*, then, a post-national novel? Furthermore, is the film version of *The English Patient*, then, a conscious gesture away from post-nationality and towards the “Hollywood” love story? If anyone could write a post-national novel, it would seem to be Ondaatje. Born of Russian parentage in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), Ondaatje attended Dulwich College in London, and now lives in Toronto, Canada, where he has married the American writer and editor, Linda Spalding. Yet this mix of addresses and heritage is in some sense simply that – a colorful background on the author of *The English Patient*. The background of the author should not be considered – in any way – to *determine* the text. Far more important are the words of the novel

themselves, obviously (though the multi-faceted nature of Ondaatje's persona must be noted).

The "nation," in the book, can certainly be seen as something that the characters struggle against. This struggle is implicit at first, but becomes more explicit as the novel continues. By the end of the book, the reader sees what destruction national identity can cause in a tension-fraught atmosphere – an atmosphere such as a war between nations, the Second World War.

The destruction is such: Katherine Clifton (Almassy's beloved), lies injured in the Cave of Swimmers. She has been hurt in a plane crash (not the crash that features prominently in the beginning of the film). She cannot walk; she has possibly broken her leg. Almassy leaves the cave and walks across the desert for several days and nights. He arrives – battered, exhausted, and incoherent – at an outpost controlled by the British army. He plans to get a jeep and, with the assistance of the British, return to the Cave of Swimmers and rescue Katherine. Yet when he arrives he has no passport. He gives his true name – Count Laszlo de Almassy – and he is immediately taken into custody as a German spy. Despite his protestations, he is imprisoned. Katherine dies in the desert, a victim of dehydration.

His national identity has caused, then, the death of the woman he loves. He curses his luck and his unawareness of the fact that, in a desert now traversed by opposing armies, national identity has become a matter of life and death. Almassy has no desire to live in this sort of a world. He has loved the desert; indeed, love for the desert has been the animating force of his life:

The deserts of Libya. Remove politics, and it is the loveliest phrase I know. (257)

Even the name of the desert, the word describing the place, is invested (in Almassy's psyche) with a sense of "loveliness" and allure. Yet this loveliness has been appropriated and destroyed by the work of national armies. Almassy is indeed a bitter man. The narration offers this declaration: "Everything I have loved or valued has been taken away from me" (257). He blames the institute of the nation – and the vagaries of war – for his own personal destruction.

A side note on the narrative structure of the book. The narration moves in a smooth, fully-disclosed way. Formally, Ondaatje employs an omniscient perspective. There is no part of Almassy that the reader does not experience. Little differentiation is made between external events (action and dialogue) and internal events (thoughts). In the preceding chapter, I have discussed Ondaatje's notions of structure – and his love of the cubist form. The representation of thought in *The English Patient*, then, follows directly in this tradition. Ondaatje's unwillingness to differentiate between the external and the internal is important in a number of ways. First, it is important to the text – from the standpoint of the richness of its symbols and symbolic structure. This free-flowing, spilling, seemingly boundary-free way of writing mimics the experiences of the morphine addict, in which morphine-induced dreams take on the appearance of reality. Second, it is important to Ondaatje as writer. It gives him the leverage to do whatever he wants to. He can present large passages of thought and not worry about giving them an artificial frame. They do not need a "reason" for "being" in the book.

Thus, there is a lengthy passage which is not necessarily identified as arising from any of the characters, though it is implied that these are the thoughts of Almassy, as he drifts through morphine-sharpened memories. This passage can be seen as the narrative climax of a book that has few narrative climaxes:

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 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 buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. (261)

This is, of course, an ironic thought for an explorer to have. By its very nature, his profession sought to catalogue and demarcate the desert. Exploration and mapmaking go hand in hand, as disciplines. For an explorer to say that he simply wanted to live in a world without maps – this marks a significant reversal, the largest such reversal in the book. Relying on the Aristotelian conception of recognition and reversal as the central points of any tragedy, this moment of anger against maps gains an even greater level of significance.

Many words from this passage have particular relevance when thinking about questions of nationalism and the global, post-national literary environment. In many ways, this is a grim assessment of the post-national being. It is, essentially, a body – a corpse. The purpose of living – Almassy seems to indicate – is so that the evidence of life can be marked on the body of the deceased. “We die containing...”, the passage begins, and, indeed, *The English Patient* is a book about the ways in which humans die, and whether the actions of humanity mean anything if they are invalidated by the wars of competing nation-states. Clearly, Almassy posits some sort of broad, human identity. He uses the pronoun “we” in the most universal sense possible. With “we,” he indicates the whole of the human species.

Beyond this “we,” the critical word in this passage is clearly, “cartography.” Almassy lists the kind of cartography that he can “believe” in – a map on the dead

body that has been “marked by nature,” and not by a human hand. He rejects wealth and worldly power, rejects the idea of identity and national belonging. “We are communal...” we should not, “label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings.” The key word here is “rich.” Wealth, which can mobilize armies and cause suffering, is attacked as something that artificially divides people from each other. It is not a sophisticated Marxist critique – but then again, it isn’t intended to be.

What is also fascinating about this passage is the way that it has been appropriated and altered in the film version of *The English Patient*. In the film, Katherine Clifton writes these words as she is dying. They become her final note, a note to Almassy, a missive for him to find when he returns. Also, the passage is edited somewhat. It becomes:

I want all this marked on my body. We are the real countries, not the boundaries drawn on maps with the names of powerful men... I know you will come and carry me out into the palace of winds... That’s all I’ve wanted – to walk in such a place with you, with friends, an earth without maps. (172)

It is indicative of the film’s desire to tell a “love story,” above all else, that the words are so dramatically altered. Instead of the image of the lone, post-national survivor, Minghella (through Katherine) offers the viewers an image of love. The critical phrase, “with you,” has been added, and perhaps more absurdly, so has the phrase, “with friends.” Katherine, then, wishes for a post-national life, but one in which love and friends and community (non-national community) figure prominently.

Interestingly, for the production of the text version of the screenplay, the graphic designers at Hyperion – Minghella’s publishing house – created a physical

duplicate of this note. This note is featured as an added illustration in the text, and the handwriting of the document has been constructed to seem as if it were written in the dark – quite possibly by a dying woman. That the publishing company would go to such lengths to make the script seem “authentic,” or based on “actual” events is rather amusing. It is another layer of artifice added to the text of the screenplay, another buffering layer of cultural production.

Clearly, Almassy believes that the only world in which he would like to live is one in which national boundaries are erased. This character, then, is not a hybrid nationality – like Ondaatje himself – but rather a post-national, an individual who believes that the common elements of human life cannot be based on the whims of a political map. In the novel, it makes sense that he would express these sentiments.

However, in the film Katherine Clifton softens this message somewhat. She focuses on the love-aspect of her life. “I know you will come and carry me out into the palace of winds,” she writes, and this image is indeed the one reinforced by the movie’s images. It is the film’s opening sequence, actually – Ralph Fiennes carrying Kristin Scott Thomas out of the Cave of Swimmers, her long white robe unraveling and billowing like a sheet across the desert floor. The viewer remembers this image after the movie has ended – especially because the scene recurs, and is played in exactly the same way. This moment of “love” that remains in the memory after the film closes. The passage has been robbed – to a certain extent – of its anti-national power.

The Global Soul

Pico Iyer offers an insightful critique of *The English Patient* in his book, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home*.⁹ Iyer discusses *The English Patient* in the context of his travel to Toronto – Ondaatje’s primary city of residence. Iyer travels to Toronto as a participant in the Harbourfront Writers’ Festival, as “one of more than three thousand writers who traveled to what is now the largest literary festival in the world.” His book concerns the questions and encounters that arise in the cities of the contemporary world – when numerous nationalities, religions, and ethnicities jostle with each other for space and access to a means of cultural production.

He makes two important points about *The English Patient*, points which are both vital to the process of figuring out its place in the literature of the late twentieth century. “The most radical thing about the people in *The English Patient*,” Iyer writes, “is, quite simply, that they are not hybrid beings so much as post-national ones...” (146) The distinction between a hybrid and a post-national being may seem slight, but it is an important one, nonetheless. Implicit in the name, *post-national*, is the rejection of the role of the nation in individual identity. The individual is not a hybrid of different nationalities, but rather works to eliminate the idea of nationality – wholesale – from his or her identity. Almassy’s thought that, “we are all communal histories, communal bodies,” certainly seems in line with this way of thinking.

Iyer writes that, “one of the extraordinary things about reading *The English Patient*, which sets it apart from all of the traditional works of English literature I read at school, is that it has no central figure, really...” This is an interesting assertion, and one that would certainly support some of Ondaatje’s ideas about the application of the

⁹ Iyer, Pico. *The Global Soul*. New York: Vintage, 2001.

cubist form to the novel – ideas that I discussed in the previous chapter. It also would work towards explaining the crucial thing that these characters seem to be lacking. They are all doomed to tragedy – each character has his or her own, personal tragedy occur over the course of the novel’s pages – because they lack some critical element in their constitution of self.

Simply put, these characters are all characters in a war. This war demands, above all other things, a full measure of national allegiance. But the characters of *The English Patient* are unable to give this crucial allegiance. They are unable to maintain a stable, nationalist center. In the book, the characters uniformly wish to move beyond national constraints. They demonstrate that they understand the political climate of the Second World War, but they refute this political climate and yearn for something beyond it. In the movie, national constraints are, in some ways, assumed. There is no questioning the idea of the nation. It is simply the thing that drives the war. What’s really important – to the film – is the love story between Almassy and Clifton. In this way, then, much of the richness of the text is lost. The two things which Iyer notes – the lack of center and the post-national nature of the major characters – are both overlooked in favor of a more traditional “romantic” storyline.

But the key loss is perhaps more subtle than that. In his introduction to the volume of essays, *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha writes that there is a tendency, within literary communities, to:

...read the Nation rather restrictively; as the ideological apparatus of state power... or as the... emergent expression of the ‘national-popular’ sentiment preserved in a radical memory. (3)

There is no doubt that Minghella (in the fashioning of his screenplay) does precisely this. He interprets the ‘nation’ as not only an ‘ideological’ apparatus but as ideology

made concrete – made into violence and the machinery of war. Nations equal soldiers. Soldiers shoot at one another because of the nations to which they belong.

In choosing this path, the film loses some of the subtlety of the book. While the book does have this passage in it – the long passage in which Almassy yearns for a world without maps – that passage is counterbalanced by other factors. In the film, because of the primacy of the Hollywood stars and the “love” story, there is no counterbalance. Gone is any richness of meaning, any complexity of textual referencing that enhances the novel. The complexity of the relationship between two written texts – something which could have (perhaps) been mimicked with buried references to other films – is almost entirely lost. A perfect example of this is the role of Rudyard Kipling’s novel, *Kim*.

Kipling’s *Kim* and Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*

Yet the film has something else – it has a level of anger and nationalistic passion that the book does not possess. This conflict is straightforward. It arises between Kip (who is identified by Minghella as “Sikh Soldier”), and Almassy, the English patient. In Almassy, Kip finds what he believes to be a dying representative of the colonial power that has ruled over his nation, India. Throughout the movie, their relationship is fraught with tension – a tension which is mitigated somewhat by Kip’s compassion for the patient’s poor physical condition.

These are the basic facts about Kip. His job is dangerous and thankless. He works as a bomb sapper for the Allied armies. He defuses the mines that the German army has left throughout the Italian countryside. In the movie, of course, there is a

straightforward romance between Kip, the Sikh sapper, and Hana, the English patient's nurse. In the book, this relationship is somewhat more complicated – since Hana has just lost her father, and shares her grief with Kip, as well as her passion.

While Kip's unit is based in the area in which the English patient and Hana now reside, Kip moves into the villa along with them. Previously, I discussed the allusive nature of Ondaatje's text; he constantly refers to a series of writers, foremost among which are Herodotus and Kipling. The Kipling novel, *Kim*, plays a significant role in the book, and this role is felt even more strongly in the movie. The movie script cuts into the scene abruptly, with the voices of Kip and Almassy appearing mid-argument:

THE PATIENT

Because you're reading it too fast!

KIP

Not at all.

THE PATIENT

You have to read Kipling slowly. Your eye is too impatient—think about the speed of his pen.

(quoting Kipling to demonstrate)

What is it? "He sat *comma* in defiance of municipal orders *comma* astride the gun Zamzammah on her brick..." (78)

Kip states that he does not enjoy reading *Kim*, and claims that the book is poorly written.

In the subsequent scene, then, Almassy assumes the role of impatient colonizer. He lectures Kip about the book, claiming that Kip's dislike for the novel is simply a matter of poor taste and a lack of patience. After this discussion continues for

some time, Kip states outright his reasons for refusing to read the Kipling. He mimics Almassy's strident tone – and does not hesitate to reveal his feelings on nationalism and the colonial project. Throughout this scene, Kip and Almassy refer to each other as “boy,” and “uncle,” respectively, terms that are hallmarks of colonial naming:

THE PATIENT

“—The Wonder House *comma* as the natives called the Lahore Museum.”

KIP

It's still there, the cannon, outside the museum. It was made of metal cups and bowls taken from every household in the city as tax, then melted down. Then later they fired the cannon at my people *comma* the natives.

THE PATIENT

So what is it you object to—the writer or what he's writing about?

KIP

What I really object to, Uncle, is your finishing all my condensed milk.

(snatching up the empty can)

And the message everywhere in your book—however slowly I read it—that the best destiny for India is to be ruled by the British. (79)

Minghella clearly develops the conflict in this scene – perhaps at the expense of the subtlety of the text as a whole. Two of the key sentences of this scene belong to Kip. First, he objects to the hypocrisy of a state that would charge its subjects for the production of a cannon – and then turn this cannon on them in battle. “Then later,” Kip says, “they fired the cannon at my people *comma* the natives.” He mocks

Almassy's didactic and condescending tone, using the same phrase – the same invocation of the comma – to sharpen the rhetoric of his position.

Kip continues: “What I really object to... is... the message everywhere in your book... that the best destiny for India is to be ruled by the British.” Kip's objection to Kipling, then, is based on his dislike of Kipling's political beliefs, and his subscription to the British colonial project. Kip does not directly answer Almassy's critical question: “So what is it you object to—the writer or what he's writing about?” Instead, he answers through implication. Kipling, the writer, is bound up inextricably within the texts that he has produced.

Yet much subtlety is lost in the screenplay. The scene becomes is stripped-down in a way that would have troubled Edward Said, whose frequently-anthologized essay, “Kim as Imperialist Novel,” has become a staple of postcolonial critique¹⁰.

Said, who died in 2003, writes:

To read these major works the imperial period retrospectively, then, is to be obligated to read them in the light of decolonization, but, we must immediately add, it is neither to slight their great aesthetic force, nor to treat them reductively as imperialist propaganda. (349)

The key word here is *reductively*. While the imperial, British colonial project cannot be separated from Kipling's work – it still must be read as fiction of tremendous imaginative power. In light of decolonization, Kipling can be seen as a racist, xenophobic individual. But his writing, which also displays racism and xenophobia, also has importance as a text, as a point of reference for writers of the future.

Ondaatje's placement in the oeuvre of colonial writing has long been debated. His memoir of his Sri Lankan childhood, *Running in the Family*, has been criticized

¹⁰ Kipling, Rudyard. *Kim*. New York: Norton, 2002.

for its light, almost playful take on the country's violent civil history¹¹. Subsequently, Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* dealt explicitly with the residual concerns of the island's civil war.¹² But the fiction version of *The English Patient*, such as it is, only takes up political questions with great care and reluctance. His characters are post-national. As I've stated before, they dislike the boundaries of nationality and consider themselves to be – like Ondaatje himself – “mongrels,” members of the “International Bastards' Club.”

The place of *Kim* in *The English Patient* is indicative of Kipling's subtle impact on this novel. But first – an examination of the film's changes. Here is the scene with Kip and Almassy, as Ondaatje writes it. In this scene, Kip and Almassy discuss the virtues of condensed milk. Then, Hana enters the room. Kip, seeing that his can of milk is empty, says that he will leave:

...Kip peers into the can. “I'll get another one,” he says, and leaves the room.

Hana looks at the man in the bed.

“Kip and I are both international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives...”
(176)

Much of the drama – much of the confrontation in which Kip accuses England of colonialism – is gone. Instead, Almassy and Kip seem to be friends, unified rather than divided by the diverse backgrounds. As for the information about the cannon, about

¹¹ As recently as 12/23/01, Gail Caldwell criticized *Running in the Family* as “searingly unemotional,” in a piece published in *The Boston Globe*. (Ondaatje, Michael. *Running in the Family*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

¹² *Anil's Ghost*. New York: Vintage, 2002. This book deals explicitly with the ways in which trauma can be reconstructed and reclaimed in the years after a violent civil war.

the way the cannon was built and then used against the native Sikh population – this comes much earlier in the book.

In this scene, which has a marvelous subtlety, Hana is browsing through the library, looking for books to read to Almassy. *Kim* is, of course, one of the texts that she reads to Almassy – creating the cubist collage of references and bits of text, as discussed previously:

She pulls down the copy of *Kim* from the library shelf and, standing against the piano, begins to write into the flyleaf in its last pages.

He says the gun—the Zam-Zammah cannon—is still there outside the museum in Lahore. There were two guns, made up of metal cups and bowls taken from every Hindu household in the city—as jizya, or tax. These were melted down and made into the guns. They were used in many battles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against Sikhs... (118)

Hana, then, writes a new text on the blank, last pages of the book. This is a powerful image, one which is saturated with metaphoric resonance. She actually takes the beginning of Kipling's text, and writes a new version of this beginning – a more honest, post-colonial beginning – in the end pages of *Kim*. It is as if she takes control of the body of *Kim*, and invades it with her own, revisionist history. This is the second such instance of writing (or re-writing) that Hana has undertaken. Earlier in the book she has used James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* as a sort of journal – she has written in its back pages as well. Critically, however, Hana writes the words that Almassy, himself, has told her. It is not Kip who speaks these anti-colonial sentiments. Rather it is Almassy, the would-be post-national, who voices the concerns of the subaltern.

Once more, the reader is reminded of Berger's sentence, the one which Ondaatje has chosen as the epigraph to *In the Skin of a Lion*: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one." Hana clearly redefines the nature of the text of *Kim* with her addition to its pages. Seen through the lens of 1944, the text suddenly seems alive with possibilities of alternate readings. The movie loses this richness, this depth of feeling. While the information is essentially the same – the stridency of the film sacrifices the intricacy of the novel.

This is not, however, a "simple pattern of influence," as Daniel Schwarz says in his essay for the volume, *Narrative and Culture*¹³. Indeed, the subtlety of Kipling's place in the *English Patient* is almost beyond analytical explanation. The list of Ondaatje's references and debts and influences can be extended to even include *The Key to Rebecca* by Ken Follett. Follett – a popular espionage-fiction writer whose novels sell primarily in supermarkets – wrote a book on the subject of the Rebecca code (published in 1985). Almassy appears in this book, as well. Yet Ondaatje's explorations as a writer move into territory not demarcated by Follett. Ondaatje does take some facts from this book (and other sources), but ultimately he focuses on something entirely different – an exploration of the substance of Almassy's memories.

The complexity of the relationship between Kipling and Ondaatje is further illuminated in Ian Rankin's excellent work, "The Survey of India."¹⁴ In this article, Rankin gives historical perspective on the process of mapping the subcontinent of India – a process which was of great import to the British colonial endeavor. Kim, the young protagonist of the novel that bears his name, eventually becomes a member of this mapmaking corps. He takes part in an effort that Rankin believes was, "a vital element in the English attempt to control the empire less by occupying it than by

¹³ *Narrative and Culture*. Daniel Schwarz and Janice Carlise, ed. Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1994, page 121.

¹⁴ Kipling, Rudyard. *Kim*. New York: Norton, 2002.

knowing it, classifying it, and rendering it visible” (351). Furthermore, Kim gives body to the notion of national demarcation. He embodies a critical colonial impulse. “The importance of the imperial urge to extinguish the nomadic cannot be overestimated,” Rankin writes (353).

The significance of Kim’s eventual profession cannot be ignored when considering the text of the novel, *The English Patient*. Almassy and his band of international bastard-geographers are also in the mapmaking business. Whether they know it or not, their efforts extend the maps of empire over the sands of the desert. The very nomadic, post-national existence which Almassy prizes is doomed, in part, by his efforts. This tragedy – the tragedy begun in Kipling’s *Kim* – stands like a shadow behind the text of *The English Patient*.

In the Press

The review staff of *salon.com*, at least, seem to agree with this supposition. In a 1996 review of the film, the anonymous reviewer writes that:

Inevitably, much is lost: there are colors, moods, ideas in the novel that the film simplifies or simply fails to convey. The young Indian soldier, Kip, is so severely truncated that the film has to veer ever so slightly into sentimentality to replace his redemptive function. And, also inevitably when dealing with translated poetry, certain images that had hovered in the mind's half-known shadows disappoint when they appear in all their vulgar visual finality.

But where to look for a definitive example of the loss of subtlety between book and film? Perhaps it can even be seen in the advertising which promoted Minghella's version of *The English Patient*. While it may seem odd to examine the advertising materials attached to a film, I believe that a consideration of the images that promoted *The English Patient* can provide a significant insight into the 'nature' of the film. Advertising is undoubtedly a growing and increasingly prevalent force in global culture. Advertisements are – in some instances – treated as works of public art. They are discussed and critiqued by the popular media, and often their success is measured in their visceral impact on large groups of people.

The promotional budget for a Hollywood film, of course, can run into the millions of dollars. The final bill for television and print ads supporting the film adaptation of Ondaatje's *The English Patient* totaled close to six million dollars¹⁵. Saul Zaentz's production company took out advertisements in every major metropolitan newspaper in America, as well as in magazines such as *Esquire*, *the New Yorker*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Almost invariably, the advertisements featured one image. It was, not surprisingly, the image of a kiss. In the ad, Fiennes and Clifton are kissing, and the 'camera' has locked in on a close-up of their face. There can be no doubt of the message here; the advertisement has clear visual intentions. It wants to use sex appeal to sell the film. Beneath the image of the kiss are the words: "In memory, love lives forever."

To prospective moviegoers without exposure to Ondaatje's work, the text here is simple. This will be a love story, the advertisement promises, and one in which something called 'love,' will linger long after the credits have ended. Contrary to actual life, in which all temporal things have definite limits – the love in this movie

¹⁵ The pre-Oscar advertising strategies of studios such as Miramax are ably discussed by Sharon Waxman in her March 12, 1999 Washington Post article, "The Price of Reeling in an Oscar."

will last “forever.” It is a simplification of Ondaatje’s work, and one which seems to neglect all of the complexity of the book. Arguably, advertising is a medium which lacks depth and density. There is no chance to ask, as the reader can: What kind of text is this? Instead, the love story suspends critical judgment and flattens the cultural field in which the text – so variegated – moves.

CHAPTER THREE

BUYING THE GLOBAL IDEA: *THE NEW YORKER* AND POST-NATIONAL FICTION

In January of 2003, Deborah Treisman took over the position of fiction editor for *The New Yorker* magazine. Her assumption of this position came at a time of perhaps unprecedented influence for the magazine. Numerous times during the 1990s, fiction writers had their manuscripts bought by major New York publishing houses based primarily on the strength of stories published in *The New Yorker*. Nathan Englander, Zadie Smith, Nell Freudenberger and Jonathan Safran Foer – recipients of four of the most notable book deals of the late 1990s – all had their careers fueled by early sales to *The New Yorker*.

In an interview for Book Magazine that appeared in the January/February 2003 issue of the periodical, Treisman assessed the current global fiction marketplace.

There were a lot of really interesting writers coming out of Eastern Europe in the '90s. You know, just a sudden release of them, particularly in the second half of the '90s. At the moment I'm not sure. There seems to be some interesting writing in China which is trickling out.

This awareness can be said to transfer to a buying strategy for the magazine. The senior fiction editor, to a large extent, can control the process of acceptance or

rejection of stories. Though Treisman works with a team of readers and associate editors, she does have a significant amount of weight in the publishing process. Her awareness of the global marketplace can be seen as a signal that publishing – in the twenty-first century – will focus on the work of writers from around the world. *The New Yorker* is in an enviable position. It is cognizant of global fiction because it receives story submissions from many countries. It is also considered to be a starting point for the careers of young writers.¹⁶

Darkness and Onions

Jhumpa Lahiri was thirty-one years old when she published “A Temporary Matter” in *The New Yorker*. Though she did have a history of publishing short fiction in magazines such as *Agni*, *Epoch*, and *Story Quarterly*, the publication in *The New Yorker* fueled her career in a dramatic way. In an interview that appeared in *Newsweek International* on September 20, 1999, Lahiri characterized the process as one that moved extremely quickly:

It's all been a surprise – getting an agent, an editor, a book contract. It was all so fast. I feel extraordinary gratitude and amazement. Writers need time, some money, and a little encouragement. This book has given me just the right amount of all three.

Lahiri was overwhelmed by the speed with which her career progressed after placing her story in *The New Yorker*. Within months, she'd sold the text of her collection, *The*

¹⁶ For an interesting take on the influence of *The New Yorker*, see the essay on this subject by Seymour Krim. Krim – who is always entertaining – charts the pattern of influence that the *New Yorker* has had since its inception. Krim, Seymour. *What's This Cat's Story?* Peggy Brooks, ed. New York: Paragon House, 1991.

Interpreter of Maladies, to Houghton Mifflin, which agreed to issue the book as a Mariner Original. Though this line is published exclusively in paperback format, a number of major contemporary authors – ranging from Paul Theroux to Howard Frank Mosher – have had their books issued in this way.

From that original collection, Lahiri had two stories in *The New Yorker*, “A Temporary Matter,” and “Sexy.” An interesting component of both of these stories is their setting; they both take place in America, in Boston, a city in which Lahiri herself lived for many years. Of the nine stories in *The Interpreter of Maladies*, four are set in the United States, and five – the slim majority – are set in India.¹⁷ All but one of the stories (“The Third and Final Continent”), were published in periodicals before they appeared in book format. As a general rule, stories that appear *The New Yorker* are set in America, and these two pieces are not an exception. They deal with the lives of educated, middle- and upper middle-class Americans, and their romantic entanglements. Lahiri has given this formula a subtle variation, situating her characters in a space between cultures – surrounded by (and living in) America, but ethnically bound to their Indian roots.

The critical element of “A Temporary Matter” is the dissolution of a marriage. Lahiri carefully catalogues how two people fall out of love, detailing the precise emotional problems that arise in a marriage following the death of a child. Lahiri’s central character, Shoba, delivers a stillborn son, and this experience haunts her, erodes her sense of purpose and her confidence in her marriage. The narrative has a clinical, precise tone, and Lahiri presents the story in an omniscient third-person voice (though this voice conceals some things, preserving a sense of interiority to some of the characters, an aspect of the prose which I will address shortly). The words are small; an emotional scene is portrayed without emotional language.

¹⁷ Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep, in a private room so small there was barely enough space to stand beside her, in a wing of the hospital they hadn't been to on the tour for expectant parents. Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a cesarean, though not quickly enough. The doctor explained that these things happen... There was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future. (4)

The tone here is simple, but deceptively so. The crushing sentence, “there was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future,” comes without any warning. It bears a burden of emotional weight, yet its verb construction – mostly in the passive voice – seems calculated not to betray emotion. The key assumption here – that Shoba and Shukumar will want to have children again – turns out to be false. Instead, Shoba suffers through a difficult period of depression. This period of depression eventually makes the marriage unravel, but not before the central device of the plot – a power brownout in Boston – takes place.

The device unravels in this manner: The electric company notifies all of its clients that for a period of five days their electricity will be cut for one hour each evening, beginning at eight pm. Shoba and Shukumar – submerged in a relationship that has become increasingly silent since the death of their child – at first see this interruption as an inconvenience. Shoba has burrowed into her work as a copy editor. She no longer wants to interact with her husband; it is clearly implied (though never stated) that Shoba blames Shukumar for the death of their son. However, with the electricity cut, she cannot work at home.

Thus, the married couple is forced to eat together, in darkness. They have a few candles, but the house is essentially lightless. In this dark – a dark which is such an evocative metaphor for the ways in which a relationship negotiates the cusp of the

interior and the exterior life – Shoba and Shukumar rediscover their closeness, their relationship as husband and wife. They realize that they’ve fallen into a routine of separation, a routine that has exacerbated their sense of division since the death of their child:

Tonight, with no lights, they would have to eat together. For months now they’d served themselves from the stove, and he’d taken his plate into his study, letting the meal grow cold on his desk before shoving it into his mouth without pause, while Shoba took her plate to the living room and watched game shows, or proofread files with her arsenal of colored pencils at hand. (8)

The relationship, it is clear, is teetering on the brink of dissolution. With the sharing of a meal, however, a partial love arises once more. They are surrounded by the darkness, and eat with a renewed sense of communion, a sense of sharing a past, a historical cord. They decide, by mutual agreement, to use this darkness to restore their intimacy. Shoba and Shukumar agree to share with each other stories from their past – stories that neither of them have heard before.

As Angana and Basudeb Chakrabarti write in their 2002 article in *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*, “the darkness becomes something other than itself – an overflow of meaning within a space that has been previously evacuated” (28).¹⁸ It is interesting to conceive of the darkness in this way – as a rich and bountiful substance, as something that erases identities and allows language to exist in its own space, a space of power and primacy. The words are the only thing that matter. In this text, then, there is little beyond the act of storytelling. Perhaps the most telling aspect of this structure is its ‘layered’ nature. The onion comes to mind as a symbol of this sort

¹⁸ Chakrabarti, Angana and Basudeb. “Context: A Comparative Study of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *A Temporary Matter* and Shubodh Ghosh’s *Jatugriha*.” *Journal of Indian Writing in English*. No. 30 (2002 Jan): p. 23-29.

of striated arrangement; interestingly, the meals that Shoba and Shukumar cook invariably feature onions.

What, then, do these voices reveal in the dark? Ultimately, Shoba informs Shukumar of her decision to end their relationship and seek a separation. She is overwhelmed by the sorrow of her lost child; she cannot see a future with Shukumar that is not compromised by their communal past. Even with the stories told in darkness, she feels that the burden of the dead baby is too much to bear. This is a drama, then, a tragic drama of manners. The focus of the plot is the question of whether the marriage will survive. The focus of the story, in turn, becomes the focus of the plot. There is little in addition to these exterior layers.

“A Temporary Matter,” concludes with the demand, by Shoba, for a separation, on the night after the electricity has been restored. This request stuns Shukumar; he has felt a new and growing closeness in the relationship with his wife, a closeness that has been buoyed by the intimacy of the stories that they have told each other in the dark. She shocks him, and he reacts, stunning her with news about their stillborn child:

Now it was his turn to speak. There was something he'd sworn he would never tell her, and for six months he had done his best to block it from his mind. Before the ultrasound she had asked the doctor not to tell her the sex of their child... Later, those few times they talked about what had happened, she said at least they'd been spared that knowledge. (21)

Shukumar wavers on the brink of telling her what happened to him on the day that the baby was born. The doctors, the reader learns, gave him the dead baby to hold, as a way of easing his grief. Now, he feels betrayed by his wife, by her ability to discard

him seemingly at will. He makes the decision to hurt her, a decision that – it is implied – may bring a permanent end to their relationship.

“Our baby was a boy,” he said. “His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night.” (22)

Nothing could be more devastating for the mother of a dead son than the knowledge of these specific details. Yet Shukumar shares them with his wife; it is his wish to inflict, in her, the kind of emotional pain that he has just felt. The details are the most painful part of this entire series of sentences. His description of the skin, hair, and weight of the child is clearly a description born of anguish. The final blow – that the boy curled his hands in the way that Shoba curls her own hands in her sleep – brings Shoba to tears. The story ends with the image of the distraught husband and wife, sitting at their kitchen table, weeping.

This conclusion was altered by the dramatic adaptation of the story, an adaptation that was first staged at the *Alliance Francaise* in Madras, India on the 15th and 16th of September, 2003. This is an interesting image of alteration and return; though the characters in “A Temporary Matter” are not Indian, their parents have both come from India, and their marriage has been shaped, to a certain extent, by the forces of cultural similarity. The idea of the text as having an origin beyond the visible page – and then returning to this origin through dramatic adaptation – is certainly one that merits further investigation. But there can be no doubt that the exterior ‘message’ of the story was changed by this play, even if its production helped complete the circular (perhaps rhizomatic) structure of its roots. Interestingly, in this adaptation, the husband’s name has been changed from Shukumar to Siddarth.

In a review published in *Indiavarta*¹⁹ on September 19, 2003, the editorial board of the paper discusses the final scene of the play. This is how the anonymous review encapsulates the action of the play's last few moments:

Shoba is plunged into tears, even as Siddharth (says) that he had hidden this from her because 'he loved her'. The last scene in which they hug and cry on each other's shoulders leave us with the assurance that their love for each other would not disappear, that it is still deep-seated and would go on for long.²⁰

The conclusion of this review has a very odd tone, as well as the awkward construction of "for long," which seems to be a compromise, and an avoidance of the phrase "forever." This would seem to indicate an unwillingness to imply the presence of eternity in the affairs of courtly love; the reasons for this unwillingness cannot be guessed. The review continues, offering this interesting footnote:

The play deviates a little from the original story in its general tone and more importantly at the ending. The play has a strain of positivism and hope, unlike the short story. It ends with a hope that the couple would find their lost love for each other and get back to a normal life, while the original story does not leave the readers with such positive thoughts.²¹

Yet the despair that this tragic breakup leaves in the mind of the reader is a crucial part of the story. Indeed, it is Lahiri's willingness to provide the reader with an example of

¹⁹ *Indiavarta* is an English-language newspaper based in the largely Tamil speaking state of Tamil Nadu.

²⁰ A remarkable interpretation of the story – even for an adaptation. It changes the meaning of this passage entirely.

²¹ The change is ascribed to the director and the producer of the play.

a broken relationship that gives the story its piquant value. With its dark ending in place, “A Temporary Matter” becomes valuable as a critique of relationships – and as a critique of love, itself. This is not a new idea; a work of art will invariably change once its cultural context is changed. This is the subject of a number of recent, insightful studies, including Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Yet the change here seems quite drastic, and points to the cultural difficulties of re-interpreting a work of fiction in a new social context.

The other story from this collection that appeared in *The New Yorker*, “Sexy,” is also a story of broken marriage, told in a sharp, disillusioned tone by a third-person, omniscient narrator. *The New Yorker*’s tastes in fiction, then, are quite definite. Frequently, the stories in the magazine will be stories of love gone badly wrong, stories in which sex is depicted graphically – but in an emotionally detached way. In “Sexy,” the central character is Miranda – an educated, thirty year old woman living alone in Boston. She begins the story by counseling a friend about the dissolution of her marriage. In the situation for which Miranda acts as counselor, the husband has left the wife, struck by love for another woman. The atmosphere of the story, then, is steeped in adultery. The act of cheating on a spouse is the fulcrum around which the body of the piece revolves.

Miranda is shopping at Filene’s Basement – a Boston department store – when she runs into an Indian businessman. He is confident, and slightly forward, and clearly quite attracted to her. She gives him her phone number and they begin a relationship. Before they sleep together, Miranda discovers that Dev – her Indian suitor – is married. But she discards any sense of guilt; her relationship with him, she convinces herself, is entirely separate from his relationship with his wife. All of this occurs within the space of a few paragraphs. There is little in the way of pause – as the story dives from one scene of infidelity to the next.

Despite the problems that her close friend is having with a cheating husband, Miranda enthusiastically embraces her relationship with the married man.

While Dev was (gone)... Miranda went to Filene's Basement to buy herself things she thought a mistress should have. She found a pair of black high heels with buckles smaller than a baby's teeth. She found a satin slip with scalloped edges and a knee-length silk robe. Instead of the pantyhose she normally wore to work, she found sheer stockings with a seam. (92)

This paragraph continues, lingering with lascivious detail on these items of consumer wealth, these clothes that become – with Lahiri's choice of adjectives and verbs – imbued with the crackle of sexual appeal. All of the words reinforce the sense that consumer wealth can be imbued with emotional value. “Baby's teeth,” “silk,” “satin,” and “scalloped,” are all evocative words, rich with s-sounds and sensuous vocalizations. Filene's then, is the place where Miranda goes to buy herself into the role of mistress – to harness the power of the consumer culture in defense of what she knows is a lack of moral strength.

The dénouement of the piece comes in the unspoken decision – on Miranda's part – to end the affair. She spends a day with her friend's adolescent son. This is a pre-arranged day of babysitting, one that is intended to give her friend some extra time – time to help straighten out some of the difficulties with her estranged husband. Though Lahiri resists the urge to harness the forces of coincidence, and perhaps tie the two stories together explicitly (Miranda could actually be having an affair with her friend's husband, for example), she still uses them as point and counterpoint. During her day with her friend's son, Miranda gradually comes to understand the pain that this affair has caused in her friend's marriage. Though she doesn't say so outwardly – or

even come to the realization in literal terms, internally – Miranda decides to stop seeing Dev.

After the boy, Rohin, goes to sleep, Miranda imagines her friend confronting her husband, asking him if he loved this woman with whom he was sleeping. Miranda imagines the husband saying yes. She then imagines her friend's words:

...“How could you,” she'd ask, sobbing, “how could you love a woman you don't even know?”

As Miranda imagined the scene she began to cry a little herself... Miranda cried harder, unable to stop. But Rohin still slept. She guessed that he was used to it now, to the sound of a woman crying. (109)

The indignity of this, the indignity of the idea that a boy could grow accustomed to the sound of a woman's sorrow, seems to impress Miranda deeply. When Dev calls the next day, she refuses to see him. Eventually, she lets him pass out of her life. They had grown accustomed to spending Sundays together; now, she fills her Sundays with solitude, a solitude that is preferable to the sense of impropriety inspired by the affair.

The third Sunday she got up early and went out for a walk. It was cold but sunny, and so she walked all the way down Commonwealth Avenue, past the restaurants where Dev had kissed her... She bought a cup of coffee and sat on one of the benches in the plaza outside the church, gazing at its giant pillars and its massive dome, and at the clear-blue sky spread over the city. (110)

This image of the sky concludes the story. This conclusion is interesting in many respects, not the least of which is the sense of moral rectitude that it gives to Miranda.

She denies herself the (admittedly questionable) pleasures of illicit love. The psychological burden of carrying on an affair – when confronted with the pragmatic reality that this affair will invariably hurt someone – overwhelms Miranda. She cannot choose to continue seeing Dev. Instead, she chooses solitude. None of this is made explicit by the narrative; the interior mind is something, instead, that the text explores through implication and allusion.

These two stories, then, are set in America. The other stories, stories that appeared in a variety of small periodicals, vary in their setting. Though *The New Yorker* does not make explicit its desire to publish works set within the milieu of contemporary American society, this desire cannot be questioned. Despite the fact that a significant portion of its subscription base comes from overseas, the magazine is still steeped in American culture; it maintains a listing of events going on in New York City, ignoring events in other nations. Its reporting on international issues is nearly always seen through the lens of American presence or absence. In the year since the occupation of Iraq, for instance, the number of stories about the nation have risen dramatically. Though it could be argued that this is simply a reflection of a societal desire to read stories about war, or a widespread societal concern over the results of American foreign policy abroad, *The New Yorker* has been preoccupied with American affairs – much more so than a magazine such as *The Economist*, for instance.

Though this fact is not a definite source for any sort of conclusion about editorial bias within *The New Yorker*, the fact remains that the magazine did not publish any of the stories within *The Interpreter of Maladies* that depend – for their central effect – on the large-scale collision of ‘American’ and ‘Indian’ cultures.²² This

²² Of course, notions of cultural identity are themselves difficult to pinpoint or explain. A great deal of scholarship has been produced on this topic (the formulation of national and cultural identity). As previously noted, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, is an excellent resource (among many

approach, then, is perhaps changing under the guidance of Deborah Treisman. Perhaps she – when presented with the stories in Lahiri’s collection – would have chosen to publish a different set of pieces. It is impossible to say. Yet, perhaps with *The New Yorker*’s new, globalized buying strategy, the stories printed in the magazine will no longer focus so exclusively on the dynamics of love affairs, infidelities, and interpersonal relationships.

E.M. Forster and “The Interpreter of Maladies”

Though E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* concerns the clash (rather than the collision) of the English and Indian cultures, a strong parallel can be established between this text and *The Interpreter of Maladies*.²³ England was, of course, India’s colonial ruler. The explosive dynamics of this colonial dominance – when applied to the relationships of individuals – serves as the subject of *A Passage to India*. Late twentieth-century America’s relationship with India, it could be said, has a bit of this colonial flavor. Instead of a colonial government, however, American corporations are re-enacting the core-periphery relationships of colonialism, serving as the power that rules from abroad – but this time as the monetary power. In the atmosphere of corporate outsourcing overseas that has come to characterize today’s economy, India

others) on this subject matter. In the age of instantaneous global communication – an age inaugurated by Cyrus Field’s financing of the transatlantic cable in 1866 – notions of identity are increasingly malleable. Forms of media tend to be global, these days, much like the global corporations that create them.

²³ Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India*. New York: Harcourt, 1924.

has become the site of numerous call-centers and manufacturing plants for American corporations. These corporations employ workers at the local site, in India. This is mimicry of the colonial relationship, a colonial relationship that is not predicated – exclusively – on national or racial lines. Yet it is important to stress the fact that this relationship is not entirely a detrimental one to the Indian populace. The jobs provided by manufacturing or, for instance, customer service call-centers have spurred on tremendous growth within the Indian economy. This influx of capital has had noticeable effects on Indian life; it has worked to establish a new and burgeoning Indian middle class, and pulled many of India’s poorest residents from poverty. Like any complex political issue – or, for that matter, complex literary text – the issue of corporate development of third-world labor markets has many valences and complexities.

Yet the memory of colonial rule is still fresh in India. In his article on Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*, Simon Lewis draws the comparison to *A Passage to India*. He sees the connection in explicit terms, saying that the title story of the collection:

...is likely to become a classic... not just because of its great narrative and verbal craft, but also because it updates E. M. Forster's 1924 novel *A Passage to India*. The plots of both texts hinge on a misconceived tourist excursion – to the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*, to the monastic cells at Udayagiri and Khandagiri in "Interpreter of Maladies" – during which a male Indian guide and a female visitor misinterpret each other's verbal and nonverbal signals. (Lewis, 121)

This articulation of the plot is a capable summary, although – like any generalization – it ignores some of the smaller details and variegations of the text. The term “updates” implies that the plot of the new story is essentially the same as the plot of the old story,

which is not the case. It would be possible to argue that the colonization by corporations is entirely different than the colonization by a state, insofar as individual citizens are not responsible (in all cases) for the actions of a corporation. When the British crown colonized India in the name of every British citizen, then every British citizen traveling in India shared, in some sense, the guilt for this colonization. Thus, the connection between the two texts is more of a matter of a shared theme, rather than a directed update of an old colonial story.²⁴

Lewis dwells on one, further, critical difference between the two texts. In Forster's work, Lewis elucidates, the central character is white. Adela Quested comes from an English genealogy; her entire presence in India is that of an outsider. Her relationship with the book's central Indian character is a relationship founded on cultural difference. She sees Dr. Aziz as the Other:

As for Ms. Quested, she accepted everything Aziz said as true verbally. In her ignorance, she regarded him as "India," and never surmised that his outlook was limited and his method inaccurate and that no one is India.
(Forster, 76)

Lewis then says that Lahiri's central character, Mrs. Das, is Indian, and that this changes the nature of "The Interpreter of Maladies." It becomes a story that depicts a:

...contemporary postcolonial nation more concerned with dialogue with its own Diaspora than with its former colonizers... The world of "Interpreter of Maladies" is an exclusively Indian one, in which Indians define notions of self and other, in which Indians move freely among countries and cultures, and in which India itself is an object of scrutiny by Indian eyes. (Lewis, 122)

²⁴ Lewis goes so far as to call Lahiri's text a "rewrite" of Forster's work – a needlessly reductive reading.

Thus the “update” comes in the switch of races and ethnicities. For Lewis, the fact that the characters in “The Interpreter of Maladies” are exclusively Indian is a critical difference.

Indeed, “The Interpreter of Maladies” does take time to fix and describe the ethnic origin of its characters. Critically, perhaps, Lahiri highlights that the Das family looks Indian – in their physical characteristics. “The family looked Indian,” Lahiri writes, “but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors” (44). The reader is reminded, perhaps, of Alison Lurie’s *Clothing as a Sign System*, which posits the idea that the clothes that people wear are indicative of their inner selves. Lahiri certainly seems – both in the story “Sexy,” and in this story – to focus on sartorial matters, to give them great significance. Yet she also allows her characters to establish this difference through their words:

“You left India as a child?” Mr. Kapasi asked when Mr. Das had settled once again into the passenger seat.

“Oh, Mina and I were both born in America,” Mr. Das announced with an air of sudden confidence. “Born and raised. Our parents live here now, in Assansol. They retired. We visit them every couple years.” (45)

Indeed, Mr. Das seems willing to stress his distance from India and all things Indian. He repeats the word, “born” twice, and tries to make it clear that he is not accustomed to spending time in the country. The narrative structure of the passage further sharpens this sense. Lahiri chooses the word, “announced,” to describe his voice. This word makes Mr. Das seem even more disconnected from his environment; he becomes the caricature of a loud American.

But is this really a difference between the texts? In Forster's work, the omniscient narrator – whose voice asserts itself at the story's beginning – declares that “no one is India,” but that Ms. Quested is possessed of this mistaken cultural thesis. Thus dramatic irony gives the reader a sense of perspective on Ms. Quested, a point from which to understand her actions. The gulf between her and Dr. Aziz is predicated on her lack of understanding of Dr. Aziz, as a person. The notion of “India,” and the nature of the racial divide between them – this is a small part of their problem. Only later, when the courts become involved – and the racist laws of India's colonial judiciary threaten to claim Dr. Aziz's life – does the racial divide move into the center of the novel. At the beginning of the book, however, in the interpersonal relationship between Ms. Quested and Dr. Aziz, the misunderstandings are grounded in their own flawed characters, their characteristics as individuals.

There is a direct similarity here to Lahiri's text. The tour guide, Mr. Kapasi, lacks an understanding of Mrs. Das – and builds an imaginary relationship with her in his mind. This lack of understanding does not, however, seem to be couched in national or racial terms. Rather, Mr. Kapasi acts inappropriately by nearly any standard. His fantasy life is unusually vivid; Lahiri does not identify this fantasy life as a characteristic of any single group of people. Here, Mr. Kapasi imagines his relationship with Mrs. Das far into the future, basing this scenario on nothing more than a few sentences they've exchanged in the capacity of tour guide and client:

She would write to him, asking about his days... and he would respond eloquently, choosing only the most entertaining anecdotes, ones that would make her laugh out loud as she read them in her house in New Jersey. In time she would reveal the disappointment of her marriage, and he his. In this way their friendship would grow, and flourish. (55)

Mr. Kapasi is a desperate man. He is unhappy in his home life, in his marriage, and this is the defining characteristic of his personality. He has much in common with a stock character from contemporary American fiction, set in America – the lonely male, seeking to imbue his ordinary days with sexual intrigue and excitement.

Indeed, this story is firmly post-national in its relationships. The characters could interact in any country of the world; they could be any mix of cultures and languages. In the excellent study of Creoleness – their term for the postcolonial intersection of societies that is currently occurring in the Caribbean – Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant write that:

Creoleness is not monolingual. Nor is its multilingualism divided into isolate compartments. Its field is language. Its appetite: all the languages of the world. The interaction of many languages (the points where they meet and relate) is a polysonic vertigo. There, a single word is worth many.
(Bernabé, 109)

One word is worth many. Bored, and sitting in the back of Mr. Kapasi's cab, Mrs. Das asks Mr. Kapasi simple questions about his other job – a job at a doctor's office, where he works as a translator of patients' questions, an 'interpreter of maladies.' Mr. Kapasi, not used to anyone asking him questions about his life, falls deeply in love with Mrs. Das. This love is not hidden.

Ruins vs. Caves

In the multilingual, post-national environment of the story, Mr. Kapasi's fantasies are portrayed in a straightforward manner. The tour arrives at its destination – the monastic cells at Udayagiri – and Mr. Kapasi walks behind the Indian-Americans as they negotiate the ruins. The walls are covered with engravings of naked women, as well as illustrations of sacred sexual positions, and the provocative subject matter turns Mr. Kapasi's mind towards sex.

(There were)... countless friezes of entwined naked bodies, making love in various positions, women clinging to the necks of men, their knees wrapped eternally around their lovers' thighs... Though Mr. Kapasi had been to the temple countless times, it occurred to him, as he, too, gazed at the topless women, that he had never seen his own wife fully naked. Even when they had made love she kept the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat knotted around her waist. He had never admired the backs of his wife's legs the way he now admired those of Mrs. Das, walking as if for his benefit alone. (58)

This is a voyeuristic narrative standpoint, and relies on the depiction of sex to provoke response in the reader. This, of course, differs tremendously from Forster's work, which is a masterpiece of subtle sexual allusion. Though this following passage is quite lengthy, it illustrates the degree of sublimation and burial which the text's sexuality endures. *A Passage to India* is, as Quentin Bailey demonstrates (drawing the parallel to Forster's novel of homosexual love, *Maurice*), a "novel of unspeakable

love” (Bailey, 324).²⁵ That it must use language to explicate the unspeakable is one of the primary ironies of this text.²⁶

In this selection, the narrative voice of *A Passage to India* describes the Marabar Caves. This description comes at the beginning of the twelfth chapter of the novel (as well as its second part), and comes from a perspective designed, intentionally, to seem authorial. Forster wants to exert control over the book – and provide what could, essentially, function as a stand-alone travel piece. This is very different from Lahiri’s authorial presence, which limits itself drastically, and refuses to offer any detached narrative passages. What follows this section, in Forster, is the main action of the book. This description of the caves acts as a moment of stage-setting, a *mise en scene* for the bulk of the drama.

They are dark caves. Even when they open towards the sun, very little light penetrates down the entrance tunnel into the circular chamber. There is little to see, and no eye to see it, until the visitor arrives for his five minutes, and strikes a match. Immediately another flame rises in the depths of the rock and moves towards the surface like an imprisoned spirit: the walls of the circular chamber have been marvelously polished.

The two flames approach and strive to unite, but cannot, because one of them breathes air, the other stone. A mirror inlaid with lovely colours divides the loves, delicate stars of pink and grey interpose, exquisite nebulae, shadings fainter than the tail of a comet or the midday moon. All the evanescent life of the granite, only her visible. Fists and fingers thrust above the advancing soil – here at last is their skin, finer than any covering acquired by the animals, smoother than windless water, more voluptuous than love. The radiance increases, the flames touch one another, kiss, expire. The cave is dark again, like all the caves. (137-38)

²⁵ Bailey, Quentin. “Heroes and homosexuals: education and empire in E. M. Forster.” *Twentieth Century Literature*. Fall 2002, v48: p324-49.

²⁶ Indeed, this is the primary irony of any serious literary text – any text devoted to explication of the subconscious mind. It uses the invisible to reveal the invisible.

The caves, then, are deeply evocative of the human psyche. Like any richly evocative passage, these sections can be interpreted in a number of ways. Particularly important – and, again, reminiscent of the Lahiri story, “A Temporary Matter” – is the darkness which surrounds the text. The “dark caves,” could be seen to symbolize the separation that exists between Ms. Quested and Dr. Aziz – a separation that can only be a darkness, since it obscures one from the other’s understanding.

The language of this first paragraph, when considered carefully, remains partly dark, much like the cave, itself. Particularly the phrase, “there is little to see, and no eye to see it,” confounds interpretation. The caves themselves are the object of extensive tourist exploration; they are held to be wondrous by many of the book’s characters. Perhaps Forster is saying that the deepest reaches of the psyche are basic, unglamorous urges, and that – displayed for the viewer – they are not pleasant objects of observation. The dark spaces of desire are not to be displayed, in public. Perhaps some reference to Forster’s own deeply guarded sexuality would be significant here. It is of course salient that Forster’s first trip to India – following his widespread success in 1910 with the novel, *Howard’s End* – produced the manuscript of *Maurice*. Homosexual relationships, in Forster’s time, were much more likely to follow the fatalistic trajectory of “touch, kiss, expire,” simply because their marginalized position allowed them no presence in the annals of British culture.

If indeed the reader takes the cave as a literary representation of desire – then the visitor’s flame is particularly interesting, as a secondary symbol. The tourist party is about to ‘quest’ into the heart of the darkness – deep into the Indian subcontinent – and Forster demonstrates how neatly the tourist’s path mirrors the path of sexual conquest, of conquering, of vanquishing. The vocabulary of this passage has a deeply erotic valence. Flame seeks to “penetrate,” it calls up a second flame from “the depths

of the rock.” Indeed, the way that the flame is described seems to be couched in the momentum of the sexual act; the passage builds towards a delirious conclusion, in which standard uses of the comma break down.

What then, are the two flames in this passage? Answering this question seems quite important to Forster’s text. Understanding the cave in *A Passage to India*, in turn, helps to explicate Lahiri’s ruins. If the British novelist of 1924 selects the ‘cave’ as the critical image of India, then the Indian-American writer of 1999 selects the ‘ruin.’ For Forster, India is unknowable; it is a darkness that corresponds with a number of interior permutations of darkness. For Lahiri, India is quite knowable. Indeed, it is crossed with telecommunications wires and mapped by satellite and extensively filmed and written about and analyzed. The ruins of the colonial empire are everywhere, and the language – the English language – still hangs over the country, a legacy of the past.

The two flames, then – one summoned by the tourist, the other answering, deep within the rock, a reflection – could point to any number of referents. Lacan would, of course, see these flames as the self and the mirror-self, striving to unite with each other but failing. Another interpretation would be as the self and the other – as two beings in love or desire – who cannot quite experience reunified bliss. One of the flames breathes air, the other stone, and this difference is critical. Importantly, the two flames are divided by a mirror, a “lovely” mirror. Is this mirror love itself, which separates (perhaps for its own good) the self from a true, and honest understanding of the beloved? What is important is that the language of this passage conceals its ultimate meaning; it has the poet’s predilection for allusion. In Lahiri’s fiction, the prose is frank and quick to betray its sexual aspects. It fully articulates Mr. Kapasi’s interior life. There is no need to guess at the motivations of his actions. This frank sexuality is a characteristic of post-national fiction. It has absorbed the brutality of the

process of immigration and war; it frequently does not have the subtlety of modernism's most densely psychological works of fiction.

Yet this analysis of the flames must go deeper. In order to assess Forster's success and failure – and also assess the value of his text in a context that links up with *The Interpreter of Maladies* – it is possibly necessary to turn towards voices of Indian scholarship on this novel. In his essay, "The Marabar Caves in the Light of Indian Thought," Chaman L. Sahni crafts a persuasive consideration of the discourse of the caves.²⁷ He writes that understanding the section set in the caves is central to understanding the longevity of Forster's work, and the intellectual curiosity which went into the creation of the text. The moments that the book's characters are in the caves can be seen as Forster's conceptualization – Sahni argues – of the movement of the individual into contact with the absolute. Forster presents this movement in the only way possible:

Since the Absolute is beyond any fixed notions of empirical knowledge and valuation, it can be expressed only in negative terms... (107)

The cave passage, then, to Sahni, is Forster's take on the presence of the Absolute in the life of humanity. Read in this way, the passage gains dramatic weight, moving from the realm of the fictional text into the realm of the text which is willing to engage in earnest metaphysical speculation. Sahni continues – using the lens of Hindu and Janist philosophy to further examine Forster's text:

From the Vedantic point of view, the match flame is the symbol of Atman; the pure space of the cave represents Brahman; the walls of granite suggest the phenomenal

²⁷ Sahni, Chaman L. "The Marabar Caves in the Light of Indian Thought." *Focus on Forster's A Passage to India: Indian essays in criticism*. V.A. Shahane, editor. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1975.

world; and the flame mirrored in the wall symbolizes the world of appearances... which displays universal consciousness as duality by separating the self from the true reality (108).

The Vedas – the sacred texts of Hindu thought – serve as the foundation for Sahni’s interpretation. While the term, atman, has a variety of definitions, a good definition here would be the ‘self,’ or that which is distinct from brahman, the ultimate foundational truth of reality. In some ways, then, this interpretation would agree with a Lacanian reading of the passage.

Plato’s Cave

What is perhaps most important here is the fertility of Forster’s imagery. It can be read in this manner, or it can be read through a number of other lenses. What sort of reading does this text inspire? It inspires a nearly boundless creativity of reading, and offers images which can be harnessed to a variety of philosophical, or speculative, texts. Certainly Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’ must be discussed. The central idea of the allegory, put forth in Socrates’ conversation with Glaucon about the nature of philosophy, posits that the philosopher can guide the uninitiated into the world where true things – not false images of things – make up the sum of experience²⁸.

The release from the bonds, the turning around from shadows to statues and the light of the fire and, then, the way up out of the cave to the sunlight... has the power to awaken the best part of the soul and lead it upward to the study of the best among the things that are (532 b6-8, c3-6).

²⁸ Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.

Yet in Forster's text, the flame is inaccessible. It remains imprisoned behind a wall of rock. Forster certainly sensed the importance of this section of his novel; for him to imprison the flame eternally, he seems to be indicating that the methods of philosophy are not, ultimately, the way to ultimate truth. (The Republic would have been a seminal text for Forster, one which he encountered at a young age, in his primary education.)

Whether or not Forster is making a statement about the inaccessibility of truth in human endeavors, the text remains open to this possibility, giving itself over to a range of interpretations. Regarding his own process of writing *A Passage to India*, Forster indicated that:

I began the book after my 1912 visit, wrote half a dozen chapters of it and stuck. I was clear about the chief characters and the racial tension, had visualized the scenes, and had foreseen that something crucial would happen in the Marabar Caves. But I hadn't seen far enough (127).²⁹

The scene in the caves, then, was the central part of the book in its earliest incarnation. Forster then allowed the work to rest, leaving it untouched for nearly ten years. What was germinating, however, was his own visit to the Barabar Caves in Bihar, about sixteen miles north of Gaya, in 1913. Excerpts from Forster's diary indicate that these caves were the root of his description of the caves in the novel; the transposition of his own life into the pages of his major work give this scene even more weight when calculating the centrality of the passage to Forster's artistic endeavor.

²⁹ Forster, E.M. *Selected Letters of E.M. Forster*. Philip Nicholas Furbank and Mary Lago. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press, 1983.

Yet, at its core, the Marabar scene remains undefined, trapped in a realm of negation. Perhaps this is where Forster intended to lodge it. As Theodor Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*³⁰:

The question is whether metaphysics as a knowledge of the absolute is at all possible without the construction of an absolute knowledge... (52)

Adorno argues with Plato; he begins his prologue to *Negative Dialectics* with a dismissal of the power of dialectical thought. But yet Adorno's project remains one that is firmly grounded in dialectics; he simply arrives, at the end, at a place of negation, as a result of a dialectical project. This, then, is the tie to Forster's novel. The section in the caves is a buried dialectical endeavor; the critical space at which it arrives is one that is metalinguistic.

Indeed, Forster focuses – with great consistency – on what is internal or unspoken. The interior lives of this Forster's characters – not evoked specifically on the page – animate and intensify his work. In the series of lectures that Forster delivered to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1927 (lectures which were subsequently consolidated into the print-text, *Aspects of the Novel*),³¹ he stresses the importance of the psychological aspects of character.

We believe that happiness and misery exist in the secret life, which each of us leads privately and to which (in his characters) the novelist has access. And by the secret life we mean the life for which there is no external evidence, not, as is vulgarly supposed, that which is revealed by a chance word or a sigh. (83)

³⁰ Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: The Seabury Press, 1973.

³¹ Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt, 1927.

There can be no outward expression of Dr. Aziz's discomfort with the discussion of his marriage with Ms. Quested; there can be no solid manifestation of Ms. Quested's sanguine desire for Dr. Aziz; Forster will not permit these sort of articulations to enter the text. Instead, they are present in the form of deeply symbolic writing. The two central characters plunge, madly perhaps, into the caves, the darkened caves – each of them alone – each of them isolated from expression of their full selves.

In Forster, Ms. Quested accuses Dr. Aziz of rape. This accusation follows closely on the most personal discussion that the two central characters have had. They have discussed marriage, and the intimacy of this discussion – held in an isolated environment, distant from any other people – overwhelms both Dr. Aziz and Ms. Quested. They “plunge” into separate caves and, overcome with dread over her impending marriage to someone she does not love, Ms. Quested runs down the rock face and back to her English companions. She is distraught. She claims that she has been violated. Importantly, the text does not use the word, “raped,” at first. Instead, it prefers the word, “insulted” (180). The rest of the novel is a courtroom drama, as this charge of rape is disproved, and Dr. Aziz is, in some respects, exonerated. In Lahiri's “Interpreter of Maladies,” however, there is no accusation of rape. Rather, Mrs. Das is attacked by monkeys – wild monkeys that inhabit the ruins at Khandagiri. Mr. Kapasi has not been vigilant; he has allowed his fantasy of falling in love with Mrs. Das to get in the way of his duties as tour guide. In a final, mock-heroic moment, Mr. Kapasi fends off the monkeys, saving the Das family.

Yet the chief dramatic weight of this passage is implied. It is in the detachment, the ironic tone which is crucial to Forster, as well. Forster's intense dialectical speculation is not performed without irony; in this same way, Lahiri ironically offers a scene where the reader knows that Mr. Kapasi is behaving in a ridiculous way. It is a modern update of the caves-passage in Forster's novel. There is

no overflowing lyricism, because Lahiri's style will not permit it. Yet there can be no doubt that the two stories are in dialogue, and that Lahiri's work has been inspired by Forster's.

The Namesake

Perhaps even more interesting – in a post-national sense – than any of Lahiri's stories, is her first novel, *The Namesake*.³² This novel follows the life of its protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, who grows up to Bengali parents in the suburbs of Boston. His name is a hybrid of cultural references. Gogol's father, Ashoke Ganguli, has named his son after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol. The reason for this gesture is rooted in a childhood trauma. On his way to visit his grandparents in Jamshedpur, the young Ashoke is caught in a terrible train accident. He has been reading Gogol's collection of short stories, rereading "The Overcoat," when the train derails.³³ He is flung partly through the window. The book he has been reading saves his life:

He remembers the acrid odor of flames, the buzzing of flies, children crying, the taste of dust and blood on his tongue. They were nowhere, somewhere in a field. Milling about them were villagers, police inspectors, a few doctors. He remembers believing that he was dying... The pages of his book, which had been tossed from his hand, fluttered in two sections a few feet away from the train. The glare from a search lantern briefly caught the pages...

³² Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

³³ Interestingly, the Russian word which is the title of this story can also be translated as "cloak," which would heighten its obscuring nature, its ability to leave things in darkness. Furthermore, the subtitle of this story has occasionally been printed as, "Shine!" This would be especially significant given the way in which the Gogol book figures in the plot of Lahiri's *Namesake*.

... But the lantern's light lingered, just long enough for Ashoke to raise his hand... He was still clutching a single page of "The Overcoat," crumpled tightly in his fist, and when he raised his hand the wad of paper dropped from his fingers. "Wait!" he heard a voice cry out. "The fellow by that book. I saw him move." (18)

He is saved, and he must spend months in the hospital, recovering from blood loss and a broken back. Everyone else in this section of the train dies; for the rest of his life, Ashoke will credit his survival to Gogol.

If Forster serves as the literary antecedent for Lahiri's collection of stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, then the Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol, serves as the genesis for this text, for *The Namesake*.³⁴ But how does Gogol's "The Overcoat" influence Lahiri's *The Namesake*. It would initially seem unrelated to Lahiri's story of an Indian-American boy and his father. But consideration of *The Namesake* reveals two strong similarities: 1) The importance of naming, both in *The Namesake* and "The Overcoat." 2) The ways that the central characters of both texts haunt the page after they have died, giving a spectral, otherworldly air to the works.

In Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the protagonist, Ashoke, is plagued with restlessness after the train wreck. He decides to make his way to the United States, where he will try to make his career in the university system, as a professor of economics. The style of the book is quite provisional – as if Lahiri is overwhelmed by the breadth of the story she is trying to tell – and many years pass in the space of several pages. Ashoke gets his graduate degree and lands a teaching job at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Boston. He marries and brings his bride to the United States. Ashoke's wife, Ashima, gets pregnant. The name for their child – a

³⁴ Gogol, Nikolai. *The Overcoat and Other Tales of Good*. New York: Norton, 1957.

son – is supposed to be sent from India, in a letter from a beloved and respected grandmother. Yet the letter does not arrive. The baby comes, and he has no serviceable name. At the hospital the parents are confronted with a quandary. They must name the child something – for the birth certificate – and wait for his actual name to arrive in the mail. Neither Ashoke, nor Ashima know what to do.

The door shuts, which is when, with a slight quiver of recognition, as if he'd known it all along, the perfect pet name for his son occurs to Ashoke. He remembers the page crumpled tightly in his fingers, the sudden shock of the lantern's glare in his eyes. But for the first time he thinks of that moment not with terror, but with gratitude.
(28)

They name the boy Gogol. In this act of naming, then, Ashoke conquers the difficult memories of his past. He has literally empowered himself through the text; not only has the text been his salvation, but it has provided him with a way to overcome the terror of thinking of the accident. This is an interesting commentary, then, on the role that any literary antecedent takes in the life of a writer. In a way, the spaces illuminated – or perhaps even left dark – by previous writers are the spaces that subsequent generations of writers explore. An example of this is the way that Lahiri's sexually frank story, "The Interpreter of Maladies," surges into the vacuum left by Forster's sexual elision.

Yet Gogol's father does not tell him of the reason for this gesture.³⁵ The boy grows up and develops an ambivalent relationship with his name – a name which results in merciless playground taunting throughout elementary school. He is horrified by a high school English teacher's story of the author Gogol's death – which was

³⁵ From this point forward, any references to "Gogol" will be references to the character in Lahiri's *The Namesake*. If I am referencing the Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol, I will specify this, contextually.

horrific, as he was a victim of self-starvation and mental illness. Ashoke does nothing to educate him about the importance of the author to his very survival. In this, the reader sees the central challenge facing any writer whose territory is the interstitial territory ‘staked out’ by the literature of immigration: How to denote the ways in which the knowledge and information of the older generation of immigrants does not get transmitted to their children, within the United States.³⁶

The gift is covered in red-and-green-and-gold-striped paper left over from Christmas the year before. It is obviously a book, thick, hardcover, wrapped by his father’s own hands... it is *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*... but he would have preferred *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, or even another copy of *The Hobbit*... he has never been inspired to read a word of Gogol... he has never been told why he was really named Gogol, doesn’t know about the accident that had nearly killed his father. He thinks his father’s limp is the consequence of an injury playing soccer in his teens. He’s been told only half the truth about Gogol: that his father is a fan. (75)

In this case, of course, the situation is complicated by the fact that the Russian writer, Gogol, is simply that – a Russian writer. His cultural identity is vastly different from that of Ashoke; Ashoke has read his works in translation, translation from Russian to English. All of these degrees of separation from the text make this a fascinatingly fertile symbol of inheritance. To what degree does Ashoke possess Gogol’s text? Is it his to give? Should the gift of the short stories of Gogol be seen as similar to the gift

³⁶ As a child of two immigrant parents, I had a first-hand experience with the ways in which traditional customs are or are not passed on from generation to generation in a new country. On my mother’s side, the family was concerned about transmitting the language, and keeping the rituals and customs of the Latvian past alive in the American present. On my father’s side, the Arabic language and the customs of Egypt were not embraced in the same way. I have often wondered about this. My mother’s family were refugees; my father’s family chose to come to the U.S. How much of a difference did this make?

of a native language, which immigrant parents choose to give – or not give – to their children?

On his eighteenth birthday, before he leaves for college, he changes his name officially, discarding the name ‘Gogol’ in favor of his middle name, Nikhil. It is an act that pains his father, yet, with the understanding of a parent who loves a child, Ashoke remains mute. He does not take the opportunity to confess the story of the train wreck to his son. In order to avoid unnecessary plot summary, it can perhaps simply be noted that the truth behind the name does serve as a critical narrative device, driving the momentum of the plot by establishing silences and ironies in the text – silences and ironies to which the reader is privy. Ashoke does finally confess the truth; months before he dies of a heart attack, he tells his son the reason that he named him Gogol. The revelation, of course, has a significant emotional impact, as does the untimely death of the father due to a heart attack – a death which frames the final eighty pages of the narrative.

The Namesake concludes with the image of the man, Gogol, returned to his childhood home in Boston at Christmas. It is immediately before the family holiday party, and Gogol is packing up the contents of his room; the house is about to be sold. His mother will be spending six months of the year in India, and six months in the United States near her children. He is saddened by the loss of the house in which he spent his childhood – it has seemed permanent to him, a relic from the distant past, always available to him, a space in which he could access lost time. Shuffling through his belongings, he comes across the book by the author, Gogol, and notices – for the first time – its inscription.

“For Gogol Ganguli,” it says, on the front endpaper in his father’s tranquil hand, in red ballpoint ink, the letters rising gradually, optimistically, on the diagonal toward the upper right-hand corner of the page. “The man who

gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name.” (288)

The emotional impact of the image is heightened by the language of the passage, which characterizes the dead father’s handwriting as “tranquil,” with the letters “rising gradually, optimistically” upward. This is, of course, difficult for the son to bear. He and his father have not had a relationship free of struggle. His handwriting, which seems so gentle – has a deep and shocking impact on both the reader and Gogol, himself, as Lahiri allows the narrative to move into the interior spaces of Gogol’s mind. She does this in a way that nearly mimics Forster, divulging little except factual, clear prose:

He turns to the first story. The Overcoat... He has salvaged it by chance, as his father was pulled from a crushed train forty years ago... In a few minutes he will go downstairs, join the party... But for now his mother is distracted, laughing at a story a friend is telling her, unaware of her son’s absence. For now, he starts to read. (291)

These are the final words of the novel. The idea of a novel that ends with the principal character just beginning to read is a humorous – if not especially productive – irony. It does, however, indicate that Gogol is possibly about to embark on a reader’s journey, and one that may bring him closer, emotionally, to his dead father.

Despite the extensive plot summary involved in this analysis, it has only touched on one segment of the narrative. Many other plot events occur over the course of *The Namesake*.³⁷ Yet none have the emotional resonance of this particular part of

³⁷ Excerpts from *The Namesake* were published in *The New Yorker*. Yet by far the largest section was the section dealing with the train wreck – and its string of brutal images.

the text. The use of the Russian writer, Gogol, in a book that is partly about naming is a remarkably deft textual move – and one that shows the wide range of Lahiri’s influences. In “The Overcoat,” the story that is so central to this text, a government clerk saves all of his money to buy an overcoat – only to have it stolen soon after its purchase. Shortly thereafter, the clerk dies, and he haunts Moscow eternally, pulling the coats from pedestrians’ backs, fluttering through alleys at night, scaring Muscovites. It is a transliteration of the nature of the human condition, in which freedom – freedom from desire, freedom from a name – is seen as illusory and impossible to attain. Gogol, the boy, can never free himself from the name that his father gives him. With time, he learns to understand the value of this post-national gift.

In Berndt Ostendorf’s insightful article in the journal *Callaloo*, the critic states the case that:

The very act of emigration forces a disintegration of self, culture and society, and its subsectors. The self is pushed into marginality, and has to deal, from a situation of reduced political participation, with two cultures in a stratified social relationship which assigns to his old heritage the role of subculture within an alien dominant context. As “subculture” his heritage is placed under excessive strain and shows divisions and cracks along the lines of language, kinship, and religion...³⁸

The act of emigration, of course, can be an act of splintering and destruction of self, just as Ostendorf writes. Lahiri’s characters, then, seem to be barricading themselves in an armament of names. Ashoke tries to tame the terrifying memory of the train wreck by naming his son after the writer whose book has saved him. In this way he is

³⁸ Of course, other critics mentioned in the other chapters of this dissertation – such as Homi Bhabha – would paint emigration in a much more positive, and less disruptive, light. But my critical take on the matter is closer to Ostendorf’s. See: Ostendorf, Berndt. “Literary Acculturation: What Makes Ethnic Literature Ethnic.” *Callaloo*. No. 25. Autumn, 1985: 577-586.

trying to give his heritage a new, and stronger, place within the culture of America. This new culture that he creates – within, of course, the scope of Lahiri’s fiction, which in turn is an object created by an author – is a mix of influences, a post-national jumble, a confusion of origins and outcomes.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INHERITANCE OF EXILE: ALEKSANDAR HEMON AND THE POST-NATIONAL MOVEMENT

I dream in English, but I write in French. –Samuel Beckett³⁹

The war in the Balkans in the early 1990s easily ranked among the most expensive and violent civil clashes of the Twentieth Century. It was also a tremendously intricate conflict, partly since its combatants fought along both ethnic *and* national lines. It further involved the splintering of a state-Yugoslavia's schism into Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro — and the end of Yugoslavian communism. The war also prompted the largest displacement of people on the European continent since the Second World War. Demographers have agreed that quite possibly as many as 1.3 million people — 720,000 Bosnians, 460,000 Serbs, and 150,000 Croats — lost their homes to the fighting.⁴⁰ A significant number of these refugees continue to live in exile today, seven years after the violence has — for the most part —ended.

Considering the subject of exile, Edward Said writes that:

³⁹ Dukes, Gerry. *Samuel Beckett*. New York: Overlook Press, 2002.

⁴⁰ *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention*. Stephen L. Burg and Paul S. Shoup, ed. London: M.E. Sharp, 1999.

In a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience...(52)

Said, of course, is a highly politicized critic, and his involvement with the Palestinian cause has polarized opinion regarding his critical work.⁴¹ Yet he is of primary interest to me as an exile, as a product of Egypt's British and French schools (as was my own father), and a theorist, in some sense, of the displaced person, the post-national literary being. In this quote – particularly relevant to the evaluation of post-national fiction – Said wishes to separate the exile from the non-exile, to denote the exile's condition as something remarkable, unusual.

A fiction which can “cross borders,” and “break barriers of thought and experience,” can be seen as valuable, in part, because it delineates new territory in the world of fiction. Some of the most exciting fiction – from the standpoint of the critic – is the fiction which creates seemingly new forms, or gives new energy to old forms. Aleksandar Hemon, with his first collection of stories, *The Question of Bruno* (2000), and his subsequent novel, *Nowhere Man* (2002) – has established himself as exactly this kind of writer. Hemon writes from a space of exile, of displacement. His identity as a Bosnian immigrant to Chicago complicates his fiction (but does not characterize it). He is at the forefront of an emerging group of young, displaced writers – many of them writing in English – who work in the post-national vein.

⁴¹ Said, Edward. *An Edward Said Reader*. Moustafa Bayoumi, ed. New York: Vintage, 2000.

Of the 1.3 million refugees from the Balkans, many have turned up in the United States – where the government has allowed them to apply for refugee status.⁴² Officially, the Immigration and Naturalization Services (recently absorbed into the Department of Homeland Security) defines a refugee as a person who, “is outside their country of nationality...and who is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”⁴³ (112.a) Hemon fits this statutory definition. He arrived in Chicago at the beginning of 1991, and adjusted quickly to American life. By 1996, his stories were appearing in periodicals such as *The New Yorker* and *Ploughshares*. Hemon still writes in both languages. He writes a weekly, current events column for the Sarajevo-based Bosnian magazine, *Dani* (*Days*, in Serbo-Croatian).

Reviewers have been quick to draw the comparison between Hemon and Conrad. Yet these comparisons are often made quickly, in an offhand manner. Hemon’s first language was Serbo-Croatian, and he only learned fluent English upon coming to America. There is, of course, a deep parallel here between the two writers. Conrad’s vocabulary was an impromptu, instinctively fashioned substance. I hope to demonstrate, through the course of this chapter, the deep affinities that Hemon has with Conrad – focusing particularly on his ties with Conrad’s novel of pre-Revolutionary Russia, *Under Western Eyes*. I will move from Conrad into the other author that forms a dual sphere of influence for Hemon: Bruno Schulz.

⁴² Statistics on immigration to the United States are reading available from the Office of Immigration Statistics. In the years since 1994, over 200,000 Bosnians have come to the United States.

⁴³ Immigration and Nationality Act, Section 101 (A)(42).

The Influence of Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*

The bounty of scholarship on Conrad's novel provides a useful lens for examining the text of *Under Western Eyes* – as well as exploring its possible links to (influence of) Hemon's two major works. In Volume 45, no. 2 of *The Slavic and East European Journal* (Summer 2001), Daniel C. Melnick offers a persuasive critique of Conrad's goals in this novel⁴⁴. It is through examining *Under Western Eyes* (as well as the literary criticism which surrounds the novel) that the contemporary reader of Hemon can get a good sense of the way in which Conrad's text lives in the present day, the way it continues to be read, and re-enact itself through the work of its descendants, its literary progeny. In this way, we can get a sense of the linguistic energy present in Conrad's text, and note some of the important insights that Conrad has to offer about the way in which language exists in the world, and the functions of the written word when it comes into contrast with the totalitarian state. In turn, this illuminates the strengths of Hemon's work, its possibilities as writing that will endure in the way that Conrad's work has lasted throughout the centuries.

Melnick's article focuses around two central contentions – the first of which is by far the most interesting. Melnick imagines that Conrad's novel works to, “provoke and challenge an art made of words, a society based in language, for at its core this novel confronts us with the opposition between speech and silence, between language and its potential erasure by society” (231). The events of Conrad's existence – the fact that he was essentially orphaned because of his father's belief in the power and importance of a Polish national life and language – certainly contributed to the novelist's sense of the power of government over free speech. Indeed, much of *Under*

⁴⁴ Melnick, Daniel C. “Under Western Eyes and Silence.” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 2. (Summer, 2001), pp. 231-242.

Western Eyes can be read in this way; it can be seen as Conrad's attempt – through the use of layered narration and irony – to provide documentation of the ways in which language breaks down when confronted by violent oppositional force. The tie to Hemon here is explicit; later, I will touch on the short story “Blind Jozef Pronek and Dead Souls,” where consumer culture (modern Western consumer culture) serves as the oppositional force seeking to denude and destroy the power of free language.

The two main betrayals in *Under Western Eyes* are *spoken* betrayals. First, the central character, Razumov, betrays the anarchist Haldin. Taken into Haldin's confidence after Haldin assassinates a police chief, Razumov proves unworthy of the burden of trust. He goes to the authorities and reports Haldin; Haldin is executed for his crime. Conrad's narrator does not present the betrayal, itself, in language. He merely alludes to it. Yet the betrayal happens, nonetheless. Because of his fears of persecution, Razumov turns in the student-activist to his benefactor, a member of the Russian aristocracy. The betrayal itself is interesting, but more interesting is the way that Conrad's narrator (an English professor), moves onward from the betrayal into the body of the rest of the story. He writes:

The task is not in truth the writing in the narrative form a *précis* of a strange human document, but the rendering—I perceive it now clearly—of the moral conditions ruling over a large portion of this earth's surface; conditions not easily to be understood, much less discovered in the limits of a story, till some key-word is found; a word that could stand at the back of all the words covering the pages; a word which, if not truth itself, may perchance hold truth enough to help the moral discovery which should be the object of every tale.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Conrad, Joseph. *Under Western Eyes*. New York: Modern Library Classics, 1996. Page 51.

He seeks to render “the moral conditions ruling over a large portion of the earth’s surface.” Through the specifics of this story, through the specifics of Razumov’s tale, the narrator seeks to illustrate the ways in which society, in the words of Melnick, seeks to “erase” free language. The “moral conditions of society” are also the moral conditions of the totalitarian state; here, “totalitarian state,” could function as an able replacement for the word, “society.”

What happens to Razumov? He falls in love with Haldin’s sister. She does not know that he is the one who denounced her brother. This fact slowly opens a gulf between them, until Razumov must admit his actions to her. Again, the actual admission does not make it into the text of the story. Instead, Razumov points his finger at himself, implying that he is the guilty party. “He pressed a denunciatory finger to his breast with force – and became still” (262). His language has been erased and – moreover – he has lost his beloved because of the necessities of living under a repressive regime. Conrad proves to be a persuasive explicator of the ways in which this must occur – detailing the tragic aspects of Razumov’s story with care. As Melnick writes: “Russia represents negation for Conrad; it is the region where the human vanishes into nothingness... In such a totalized society, all acts of questioning become hobbled or corrupt, and all answers driven into silence. Language becomes invalidated” (232). Invalidated and erased are strong words; they point at the intense conflict that Melnick correctly perceives behind the creation of this novel. Indeed, Conrad’s biographers have detailed the ways in which Conrad broke down, psychologically, following the production of this text.

The critic George Goodin has detailed how Conrad himself saw the destruction of Razumov as coming directly from his moral choice to betray his friend to the police. In his article, “The Personal and the Political in *Under Western Eyes*,” Gordon

provides excerpts from Conrad's letters, where he states his aims for the novel⁴⁶.

Conrad wrote:

The student Razumov gives up secretly to the police his fellow student, Haldin, who seeks refuge in his rooms after committing a personal crime... The student Razumov (then) meeting abroad the mother and sister of Haldin falls in love with that last, marries her and, after a time, confesses to her the part he played in the arrest of her brother..." (329)

Goodin notes that Razumov's choice is one of necessity; the political environment in which he lives forces him towards this act of betrayal. The things which could make his life happy are thus taken from him. He has been stripped of love, in part, because of the demands of his totalitarian government.

The tie to Hemon is quite explicit. There are two stories in *The Question of Bruno* which tackle this specific idea, couching it against the backdrop of Slavic life (the former Yugoslavia instead of Russia). The first is "Jozef Pronek and Dead Souls," which details the travails of a Bosnian immigrant in Chicago. The second is "The Sorge Spy Ring," in which a man who might – or might not – be a spy is taken from his family and imprisoned by the Yugoslav government. It would be needlessly reductive to say that both of these authors are linked because of their affinity for describing subjects who have fallen victim of totalitarian regimes. The roster of authors who are linked by this thematic element would be too long to detail in the pages of this dissertation. Undoubtedly, Jozef Pronek is displaced and linguistically-stripped by the actions of his government. A student from Yugoslavia, he is trapped in the United States when war breaks out in his home country. He must learn a new

⁴⁶ Goodin, George. "The Personal and the Political in Under Western Eyes." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Dec., 1970), pp. 327-342.

language, learn how to avoid silence, learn how to avoid the sort of compromises that doom Razumov in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*.

What is the dominant force that seeks to quiet Jozef Pronek's ability to express himself? As will be discussed later in this chapter, it is the force of American (or perhaps Western) consumerism; the difficulties of being on the lowest rung of the capitalist socio-economic order. Despite his tremendous amount of erudition and ability for complex thought, Pronek gets slotted into the most menial and mind-numbing jobs, simply as a result of his linguistic alienation. Much like Razumov, Pronek must struggle against elements of society which would like to turn his language into silence.

The link between these two authors goes much deeper than this superficial link of subject matter, however. The narrative structure of both Conrad's and Hemon's work have strong ties, as well. In his article for *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Melnick describes the ultimate moment of Razumov's erasure, the moment when he loses the woman whom he loves. He notes that this moment is described *twice* within the text of *Under Western Eyes* – once by the narrating professor, and once by Razumov's journal. He says that this is indicative of a certain narrative breakdown in the book. "This crisis in narration also affects the novel's overarching structure... a sensation of vertigo is intentionally produced for the reader by this contradictory, even self-destroying narrative structure" (234). This is the key word, then, that binds the two writers together. Both work towards an extreme sense of vertigo within their texts – a linguistic kind of vertigo that results from the process of being immersed in languages or environments that are entirely foreign to everyday, mundane experience.

In the Conrad, this vertigo is achieved through the use of a fairly unreliable narrator. The relationship between the English professor and Razumov is one that is

openly hostile at times. Take, for instance, the professor's description of Razumov as he makes the central, heartbreaking confession of his involvement in Haldin's apprehension. The narrative voice of *Under Western Eyes* does not express any sympathy for Razumov's situation. Razumov is characterized in a variety of negative ways. As he confesses, the narrator states that, "he looked at her with an appalling expressionless tranquility" (262). Knowing the intense, introspective nature of Razumov's character, knowing the extreme anguish with which he chose to turn Haldin over to the Russian authorities – the reader must be dubious at best that his features have any aspect of "tranquility." It is more than like a state of comatose paralysis – a moment of extreme sorrow which cannot translate, in this case, to any sort of facial expression.

In this way, Conrad provides the reader with a disorienting sense of perspective. The omniscience with which Razumov's thoughts have been narrated earlier in the novel contrast dramatically with the way that he is narrated at this critical point in the book. It is narratological vertigo, then, that Conrad presents in the text of *Under Western Eyes*; the text teems with complexity and the distorted sense of perspective which is a hallmark of Modernism. Hemon inherits this technique and offers his readers the same split in narrative perspective. The attentive reader of Hemon's fiction – especially "Jozef Pronek and Lost Souls" – is conscious of the many levels of narrative expression present in the text. There is the external narration, which is tremendously ironic, and assesses the elements of consumer culture which are having the greatest effect of Pronek's life. Then, further, there is a second layer of irony, an irony that realizes how badly Pronek is removed from the mainstream of American society. This is the classic anomie of the isolated individual, the one who *never truly fits*, never is at ease.

In the thorough essay, “Conrad’s Influence on Modern Writers,” which appeared in the Summer 1990 issue of *Twentieth Century Literature*, Jeffrey Myers writes that Conrad is a vital part of the current fiction scene⁴⁷:

His techniques and themes, his passionate concern with the tragedy of existence, the weakness of human nature, political violence, fidelity to lost causes, human dignity, the weight of moral responsibility, and the rigid demands of art... have profoundly appealed to the modern sensibility, which he helped to create (186).

While this is quite a long list of elements of fiction, many of them directly apply to Conrad’s influence on Hemon. Hemon is particularly concerned (as is Conrad in *Under Western Eyes*) with the “weakness of human nature,” and “political violence.” Indeed, both Pronek and Razumov are characters marked – in many ways – by their weakness. With Razumov, it is a weakness before the difficult situation into which he finds himself thrown at the beginning of the novel. With Pronek, it is a weakness before the demands of a market economy (a weakness which this chapter will subsequently explore). In the novel, *Nowhere Man*, which takes the character of Jozef Pronek and follows him further throughout the world, this weakness is expanded to the world of love. Pronek is weak in his dealings with women; he loses his self and his identity; he lapses into the silences and absences of the deserted lover. These two works are comprehensive studies of the ways in which immigration can bring the individual into an arena where his or her language is erased.

⁴⁷ Meyers, Jeffrey. “Conrad’s Influence on Modern Writers.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 2. (Summer, 1990), pp. 186-206.

The Influence of Bruno Schulz

The central story in *The Question of Bruno* is, “Blind Jozef Pronek & Dead Souls.” This piece narrates the unexpected emigration of its main character – Jozef Pronek – to the United States. The story begins with a quote from the writer Bruno Schulz. It is a shocking and beautiful quote, but its relevance to the story is only elliptical. At no point in this volume does Hemon explain the relationship between Schulz and his text. The reader must make an associative leap, applying the quote to the text of the stories in a way that doesn’t necessarily make interrogative sense. This is not dissimilar to the way that Pound expects the reader to make the connection between the two lines of his much-anthologized poem, “In a Station on the Metro.” Both Hemon and Pound seem to indicate that the text has meaning and life beyond the page, a penumbra of association that somehow encircles the printed word.⁴⁸

The quote is rather lengthy – it occupies an entire page, in a long and narrow column. It is an excerpt from a story of Schulz’s, an excerpt which describes a man quietly getting ready to leave his house in the morning. Schultz follows the man as he prepares himself, cataloguing the mundane details of his morning. Then, he offers a flowering of anguish and vibrant lyricism:

He walked toward the door slowly, resignedly, hanging his head, while someone else, someone forever turning his back, walked at the same pace in the opposite direction into the depths of the mirror, through the row of empty rooms which did not exist. (135)

⁴⁸ Numerous other authors, of course, would agree with this approach to writing. I only cite Pound because his example is so well known, as perhaps representative of this *type* of imagistic writing. Pound, Ezra. *Selected Poems*. San Francisco: New Directions, 1988.

The meanings of this passage expand outward from the text, almost as numerous as the reflections in the mirror named by Schultz. Lacan, again, comes immediately to mind. But like nearly any passage seriously considering the mirror as an object of attention, this sentence offers to the reader the mirror's primary function: betraying, with great accuracy and seemingly infinite detail, a space that does not exist.⁴⁹ This is, of course, much like the process of writing. Furthermore, this betrayal becomes more powerful when read in the context of Pronek's (and Hemon's) move from the ruins of Yugoslavia to the United States.

The image of the mirror conjures the associative image of potential lives, of fragmented selves that the author – or his characters – could have lived, under different circumstances. The destruction of human life is carefully portrayed throughout *The Question of Bruno*. Vivid brutal images (not unlike those in *The English Patient*) assault the reader, especially in those stories which directly touch on the fighting in Sarajevo. But how much more powerful does this destruction become when it is evident that it has been essentially meaningless? How much more powerful is it, when the reader realizes that Hemon's characters could have easily lived different lives – could have easily moved through any one of a number of identical, mirror-reflected rooms?⁵⁰

With this title, Hemon indicates that the work of Bruno Schulz is important – vital, even – to the text. Born in Drohobych, in what is now the Ukraine, Schulz wrote

⁴⁹ The mirror, of course, has been valuable in psychoanalytic theory, as well as literary criticism. Lacan – and many others – have mined the so-called 'mirror-stage' in human development for a trove of ideas about the nature of thought and language. It would not be improper, perhaps, to propose that much like the way in which Lacan formulates the mirror-stage (the glimpse of one's reflection in a mirror in infancy creates an imago, a basic image of self, towards which all human beings strive but can never quite reach), the *meaning* of a text is also an asymptote (never quite reached, never definitively established). An interesting discussion occurs in Jean Michel Rabate's *Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁵⁰ I think here of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," in which the last line (...And that has made all the difference...) achieves more power if it is read with irony – as the inverse of what it seems to mean, in plain speech.

in Polish. He was shot by a Gestapo officer in the Drohobych ghetto in 1942, and at the time of his death, Schulz was not known outside of Poland. His reputation grew only gradually, and the first English translation of his masterpiece, *The Street of Crocodiles*, appeared in 1963.⁵¹ Schulz's stories are firmly in the surrealist tradition; they mix the worlds of the plausible and implausible, giving everyday objects a fantastic side that would seem more suitable for magical realism. The narration is trance-like and nearly breathless:

...Matter has been given infinite fertility, inexhaustible vitality, and, at the same time, a seductive power of temptation which invites us to create as well. In the depth of matter, indistinct smiles are shaped, tensions build up, attempts at form appear. The whole of matter pulsates with infinite possibilities that send dull shivers through it. Waiting for the life-giving breath of the spirit, it is endlessly in motion...(112)

This particular quote resonates tremendously throughout Hemon's work, in both *The Question of Bruno* and *Nowhere Man*. In these works – as I will consider shortly – Hemon invests a great deal of power and 'life-giving breath' into the most common material objects. The sheer possibility inherent in the material object – the ways it can be shaped and changed by anyone in an infinite number of ways – this is what concerns Schulz here.

This is the sort of referencing and reinterpretation that occurs in *The English Patient*, when the nurse, Hana, writes her name in the blank pages at the end of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. Hemon can be seen as choosing his literary antecedents through force of will. His work should be read alongside the work of Bruno Schulz

⁵¹ Cynthia Ozick has published a fascinating novel, *The Messiah of Stockholm*, in which Schulz plays a major role. In the novel, a man in Stockholm who claims to be Schulz's son displays a manuscript of Schulz's last, lost work of fiction, *The Messiah*. A team of researchers attempt to verify the man's claim, which appears to be false (New York: Vintage, 1988).

not because they share a common identity, but because of the similarities of their texts. Indeed, Hemon uses Bruno once more in his next book, this time as the epigraph for *Nowhere Man*: Again, I will only quote partially:

...Yet what is to be done with events that have no place of their own in time; events that have occurred too late, after the whole of time has been distributed, divided and allotted; events that have been left in the cold, unregistered, hanging in the air, errant and homeless.

These could be words describing Hemon's characters. Many of the central figures in his fiction have been "left in the cold...errant and homeless." They have been cut from their moorings of nationality and homeland, displaced by the war.

Perhaps the best way to assess the contact between the themes raised by these epigraphs is through consideration of the role of absence in Hemon's work – particularly the role of human absence. Recalling the "row of empty rooms that did not exist," Hemon offers this meditation in the story, "A Coin," first published in *Chicago Review*.

I bought a Polaroid camera to explore my absence, to find out how space and things appear when I'm not exerting my presence on them. I took snapshots – glossy still moments with edges darker than the center, as if everything is fading away – I took snapshots of my apartment and the things in it; here's my ceiling fan not revolving; here's my empty chair; here's my futon, looking like somebody's just got up; here's my vacuous bathroom; here's a dried cockroach; here's a glass, which still water not being drunk; here are my vacant shoes; here's my TV not being watched; here's a flash in the mirror; here's nothing. (134)

This quote is rather extensive, and it becomes overwhelming to pay close attention to its linguistic components. Yet the modifiers, the adjectives which do so much to contribute to the beauty of this passage, cannot be ignored. The chair is “empty,” the cockroach is “dried,” the shoes are “vacant.” Hemon’s work, written in exile, is a mediation of the relationship of memory and empty spaces. Using this artifact of contemporary consumer culture – the disposable Polaroid camera – he simulates the seemingly impossible, a record of absence. More importantly, the narrator is speaking to the value that material objects can have, once human bodies have surrendered them. His language is precise and scientific. The phrase, “exerting my presence,” conjures associations to inertia and Newton’s laws.

In *Nowhere Man*, Hemon again approaches a similar theme. The central character of the book, Jozef Pronek, returns home to his apartment after a significant absence. He has been working as a grassroots organizer for Greenpeace and, after months and months on the job, he has fallen in love with one of his coworkers, a woman named Rachel. On a trip to Kentucky to protest the ongoing operation of a nuclear power plant, the two of them sleep next to each other and kiss. The courtship is the first human contact that Pronek has had since his exile; his emotions, which he cannot express in English, rage within him. He returns to his apartment, leaving Rachel on the subway.

Love mixes here with a palpable sense of nostalgia – but this is nostalgia for the present moment. Again, a character in Hemon’s fiction considers the effect of his absence on his material possessions.

When he unlocked the door of his studio, everything was in its place... The amazing thing was, he thought, that when he wasn’t there, nobody was there – the space he occupied was empty when he was elsewhere... He imagined someone sneaking into his place and browsing crassly and

impatiently through everything in this little museum of his life... (194)

These, then, are the events, “left in the cold, unregistered, hanging in the air, errant and homeless.” It is irony that the elements of home – the material objects with which Pronek surrounds himself – can be seen, in this case, as “homeless.” This speaks to one of the most interesting possible obligations of the writer – the role of the writer as observer and, particularly, as witness.

It is important to note that Hemon chooses to focus on the continued existence of everyday objects in the absence of their human points of reference. The text, of course, is describing an impossible moment. Pronek could certainly never consider his own absence. The nature of absence would preclude this possibility. Though convincing, then, the text must be read as an ironic puzzle. It is a series of mirrors, receding infinitely towards an unreachable vanishing point. What it seems to be saying is this: Objects have extreme poignancy after they have been used and discarded by other people. In any country ravaged by war – a country such as the former Yugoslavia – this understanding is easy to come by. In a country such as the United States, however, this realization must arise in a different manner. Thus Pronek’s odd photography of absence. Thus the enigmatic declaration of the narrator in the story, “A Coin.” “Here’s nothing,” the narrator offers, and it is difficult to conceptualize what, exactly, this “nothing” is.

Dominant models of realistic fiction

This emptiness (or nothingness) mimics, in some real sense, the emptiness felt by those who lose a loved-one in war. In the context of the bloodshed in Bosnia, any

absence must be read as eternal absence, and any emptiness as the emptiness of death.⁵² The war, then, is constant background noise in Hemon's fiction. It determines the actions of his characters, haunts their memories and fuels their fruitless worrying over the fate of their distant families. The exiles of *The Question of Bruno* and *Nowhere Man* – particularly the young refugee, Jozef Pronek – must make their way through the detritus of American consumer culture, all the while inhabited by the war that will not leave them. I will discuss, shortly, the specifics of Jozef Pronek's experiences in the body of American consumer culture. But first, I would like to note a moment when the world that he has left intrudes directly into his present.

Throughout the 20th century, exiles from Eastern Europe were confronted by the reality that they would be unable to communicate with the homeland once they left it. For the most part, channels of communication did not exist between ordinary citizens of the Soviet Union and the United States. In Eastern Europe's Soviet satellites, the situation was not much different. Emigration meant an end to personal ties, a complete unmooring from the stabilizing structures of family. Read in this light, it is interesting that the first story in *The Question of Bruno* is "Islands," a piece that concerns memories of childhood, of a family vacation.

After the UN-brokered conclusion of the war in Yugoslavia, however, this situation changed somewhat. The mail came with greater frequency, and international telecommunications companies began to haggle for the rights to repair and update the region's splintered communications infrastructure. The results of this communications-revival are evident in Hemon's fiction, particularly in the novel, *Nowhere Man*.

⁵² The effect of this relentless burden on the writer cannot be conclusively measured. Language, especially poetic language, depends on silence and implication to communicate its deepest kinds of meaning. See Walter Benjamin's piece, "The Task of the Translator," for a consideration of silence and its role in language, and the extreme pressures put on silence by the process of writing. Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

The fourth chapter of this novel is a letter. Jozef Pronek receives the letter in December of 1995, after the end of the war in Bosnia. It comes from his best friend in Sarajevo, a friend whose fate – until the letter arrives – Pronek does not know. The letter, in fact, begins with an allusion to this. “Here I am writing you,” Mirza’s text reads, “maybe you thought I am dead, but I am not.” Importantly, there is little context given for the letter. The reader does not see Pronek returning home, retrieving his mail from the mailbox, exclaiming in surprise at the little, red-and-blue bordered international envelope. Rather, there is only the date – December, 1995 – and the small note: “Translated by Jozef Pronek.”

This note helps explain the broken state in which Mirza’s letter rises into view. It is a curious choice – this presentation of the letter in broken English, rather than in fluent prose, prose similar to the rest of the novel. Originally ‘written’ in Serbo-Croatian, the letter is unquestionably compromised when ‘translated’ into English. It ‘loses’ some of its conventional, grammatical understandability. An example of the language follows. In this section, Mirza narrates his experiences in downtown Sarajevo, which has been transformed by the fighting:

This horse was walking on street, free, and five minutes ago there was grenading, everywhere dust and pieces of glass. I was guarding hospital and horse was standing in front of the big window that didn’t break and he was looking at himself, like in the mirror. He turned to one side, he turned to another side and he was thinking, Look how beautiful I am. He was turning and he was liking himself. Then the shell rocked an explosion broke the window and horse run away. He was beautiful, big eyes, pretty face, he was white and high, with black tail. He ran away like those horses in American films. (131)

One particular interpretation of the appearance of Mirza’s letter in Jozef Pronek’s mailbox is articulated in the article entitled, “Nationalism in a global world,” by Philip

Spencer and Howard Wollman. This article appears in their collaborative work, *Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Sage, 2002). The text defines a new and emerging, “transnational social space,” in which certain Diaspora communities use new communication technologies to establish social structures that transcend national borders. In this regard, Mirza’s letter can be seen as a linking of Jozef to the culture that he has left. His life becomes transnational, simply because his *present* is suddenly and powerfully linked to the *present* of his friend, thousands of miles away. While this letter is certainly a rather minimal tie to life in Bosnia, Pronek has devoted a large amount of time to ‘translating’ it, and in doing so, has changed the voice of the piece, made it a reflection of his own voice.

Transnational life would at first seem to be at odds with post-national life, since a transnational group – by definition – still clings to national ties in the midst of exile. This would seem to be the classic concept of Diaspora, which Spencer and Wollman consider further:

The concept of Diaspora is an old one, deriving from the Greek words for, *to sow or scatter*. It is defined in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘the dispersion’. It originally was applied to the scattering of the Jews after the fall of the Temple, and for many centuries Diaspora and Jewry were interwoven terms. (163)

But actually, the concepts of transnationality and post-nationality (and Diaspora) must be seen as fluid. The very point of having post-national cultural identity, then, is having the ability to be – at times – wistful for the nationality-steeped past. Why not? In rejecting the polarizing tendencies of nationalism, post-nationals must be accepting of many mutations of national identity. Nostalgia for the nationality-steeped past, then, must be accepted.

A list of the grammatical flaws of this passage would be quite extensive. There are no articles. “Walking on street,” “guarding hospital,” “and horse was standing,” are all examples of incorrect usage, usage which betrays the text as “foreign” or “Other.” Why does Hemon choose to couch the text in this sort of language?

Until this point, Hemon has used broken English primarily for comic purposes. It is sad, perhaps, but the misuse of English is, in many of the circumstances of the novel, quite humorous. The *why* of the humor can be approached from various perspectives. Of course, any attempt to explicate humor writing risks destroying the thing that makes humor writing so precious: the buoyant, emotional moment of laughter, the moment at which the individual is moved to an unplanned, visceral response.⁵³

It is possible, of course, to aggressively interrogate the power structures of broken English – as it is presented in both *The Question of Bruno* and *Nowhere Man*. The speaker of this broken language, it could be argued, becomes the focus of an unspoken, but implied, derision. His (or her) inability to form “proper” sentences makes him (or her) a target of vicious lampooning. The “Otherness” of the individual is thus highlighted through humor; this can lead to exclusion and discrimination in a variety of situations. Any literature which highlights these elements, it could be argued, contributes to the overall balance of discrimination in society.

Yet, a counter argument could be that for characters such as Pronek, English is a third or fourth language. So what if his grammar is not perfect? His ability to read and write English can be taken as a remarkable intellectual accomplishment. Also, though, the use of broken English provides Hemon’s text with a powerful series of ironies. Pronek seems to know, at various points in *Nowhere Man*, that his English is far from conventional. He seems to enjoy this however, and chooses to exploit the

⁵³ Freud, Sigmund. *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

humorous aspect of his linguistic delivery. It is also, in a way, Hemon's means of infusing otherwise sad moments with small amounts of levity, thus avoiding melodrama or bathos.

Finally, though, Hemon's abuse of "proper" English puts him in a tradition stretching from Joyce and Svevo to Sarduy and Calvino, in which language itself is an important part of the text, as finished form. In an interview for the magazine *Bold Type* (a periodical funded by the publisher company Random House, Hemon discusses language that is conscious of itself:

Speaking of dominant models, in the tradition of American "realism," language is but a tool that allows the writer to convey the common, unquestionably experiential, often psychological "reality." Hence the language that points at itself and its own artifice is a big no-no in "realist" writing, because all that matters is how "we" live (for some reason, that's a huge mystery).

Hemon's sarcasm is withering, yet his broader point is significant and serious. The broken English of *Nowhere Man* calls attention to the role of language in communication – both in oral communication and in writing. In the atmosphere of the former Yugoslavia, this is a vitally important endeavor. In a political climate where doublespeak and euphemisms rule, consciousness of language is the individual's only defense against propaganda.⁵⁴ Attention to language – Hemon knows – is a necessity for those who hope to live free of empty political rhetoric.

In his introduction to "The Secret Sharer," Schwarz points out that Conrad, "understood the potential of the novel for political and historical insights and thus

⁵⁴ *All language is irony in the exile's world.* An excellent discussion of the wartime atmosphere of Sarajevo – and the ways in which political parties abused language to incite masses of people to ethnic cleansing – can be found in *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention*, Burg and Shoup, especially 62-127.

enlarged (the) subject matter...” of the novel (3). If the legacy of Conrad is read in this manner, then a persuasive argument could be made for numbering Hemon among Conrad’s inheritors. There can be no doubt that Hemon’s fiction is political fiction. Yet, since it is post-national by nature, it does not privilege a particular nation (or even ethnicity) above others.

In a 2000 interview for the Swedish publisher, Kolofon, Hemon replies to the question, “Do you find yourself in a clearly defined literary tradition?”

No, and thank God for that. I’d like to think that I branch out of the traditional writing of Eastern European Jews: Kafka, Babel, Schulz, Kis, but I am not Jewish.

I write fiction in English, but I write a lot in Bosnian—not just e-mails to my friends, but a bi-weekly column for *Dani*. Were those columns to be compiled they would constitute a hefty book. I dream bilingually.

Importantly, Hemon, the author, would certainly qualify as the transnational being. He reaches for the linguistic tie to his past – keeping his language alive in the midst of the contemporary American world of letters.

Hemon’s major characters, on the other hand, experience a wholesale submersion in this new language and culture. Except for occasional contacts – such as the letter from Mirza – they must function solely in this new linguistic environment. They have adopted a language and culture as their own, but they move within this language and culture as outsiders. They do not truly have an American cultural identity. Hemon emphasizes this by accentuating the difference between their speech and the speech of the Americans who surround them. It is interesting that Hemon, the author, sees his written work as part of an adopted tradition, as well – “the tradition of

the writing of Eastern European Jews.” The author of post-national fiction would seem to believe in the malleable nature of religious identity, as well.

Indeed, *Nowhere Man* begins on Passover – a day that seems to have symbolic importance, rather than direct, plot-based importance to the text. The first-person narrator of the novel goes on an interview to teach English as a Second Language. In the classroom he encounters Pronek – his childhood acquaintance – now learning English in Chicago, Illinois. They have both been displaced by the war in Bosnia. They are, by definition, post-national beings. Their collision in the ESL classroom belies the fact that language (both the ways in which language is spoken, as well as the simple fact of which language is being spoken) will be a critical element of the book. In an ESL classroom, language is the object; it is studied, it has a life of its own, a weight of being.

After this encounter with Pronek, the narrator disappears. The voice of the book, however, switches from first-person to third-person. What is offered then, is something along the lines of the novel’s subtitle: “The Pronek Fantasies.” The hypothetical life presented for Pronek, then, is not one that bears the definitive mark of truth. Rather, it is one of many possibilities, one of many reflections of an object, glimpsed as the object recedes into the depths of a mirror.

The New World of Consumer Culture

The narrator recedes, and Pronek asserts himself as a narrated-presence. But before this happens, the reader has the opportunity to view contemporary Chicago through the eyes of the narrator. It is a glimpse into the being whose perspective –

whose storytelling, in a way – will drive the book forward. Taking the bus to his interview, the narrator looks out the window at the passing city.

We moved on, passed the Inner Light Hair Sanctuary, AutoZone PartsWorld, Wultan Monuments, Land of Submarines; crossed California, gliding by Barnaby & Scribner Family Dining, Mt. Sinai Medical Center, Eastern Style Pizza – I got off the bus across the street from a Chinese restaurant. New World, it was called, and it was empty, only a sign in the window saying FOR LEASE. (10)

The landmarks and streets which the narrator offers to the reader are actual ones. Mt. Sinai Medical Center is located across California Street in downtown Chicago. But the names of these places have become, in Hemon's roster of business names – deeply ironic. Beginning with the "Inner Light Hair Studio," the names of the businesses are imbued with richness of meaning. The idea of inner light – or illumination of the interior self, understanding of the individual and the individual's role in the world – becomes ridiculous when it is used as the name of a hair studio. The cutting and styling of hair, of course, is a superficial activity. The very idea of meaning – of a world with significance and purpose – becomes trivialized when it is matched with the cutting of hair. The word, "sanctuary," furthermore, loses its holy connotations in this context.

After the names of the first three businesses, nearly all of the storefronts that Hemon notices are restaurants. This pattern is indicative of several things. First, it connotes the shift in industry which has occurred in the United States over the past fifty years.⁵⁵ As manufacturing jobs have moved out of urban areas, they have been

⁵⁵ A good discussion of this can be found in: Frank, Tom. *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from the Baffler*. New York: Norton, 1997.

replaced primarily by service industry positions. Restaurants – a wide variety of restaurants – are now staffed by the urban poor. (Jozef Pronek, actually, takes a job in the Boudin French Sourdough Bakery, in the story, “Blind Jozef Pronek & Dead Souls – a story which I will consider momentarily.) Also, though, the restaurants that the narrator observes in this passage vary widely by type of cuisine. This suggests the range of national groups making their homes in Chicago.

Finally, the passage reaches a devastating emotional conclusion. The narrator climbs off the bus, “across the street from a Chinese restaurant.” The name of this restaurant is the “New World,” a name which carries tremendous metaphoric resonance. In the clichés of media language, the words “New World,” are frequently seen in two ways: Brave New World, and New World Order. The former, of course, conjures images of totalitarian life, images spawning from Huxley’s widely read novel of this name. Of course, there are also associations with the hallmark of post-colonial analysis – *The Tempest* – from which the phrase originated.

The second cliché, New World Order, also has political overtones. Used frequently by American politicians in the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became a sort of shorthand for the American view that the collapse of communism meant a worldwide hegemony for capitalist structures. These structures, of course, in the popular view, would be monitored and guided by interests from within the United States.

But “New World” is also a phrase of hope. It reminds the reader of the immigrant’s struggle to make a new home in an unfamiliar locale. There is poignancy in the fact that this Chinese restaurant, so hopefully named New World, has failed. The new world, the text seems to suggest, is a world of failure. It is a world where economic progress does not materialize, where the dusty, abandoned storefront denotes the end of dreams of prosperity. Also, importantly, this new world is for

lease, available to anyone who will tender the currency to buy it. There is quite a sense of bitterness in the image, but Hemon has buried it beneath the surface of his nameless narrator's perceptions.

The Boudin French Sourdough Bakery

This bitterness is a theme of *Question of Bruno*, Hemon's first collection of stories. Again, Jozef Pronek figures prominently in the collection. The story, "Jozef Pronek & Dead Souls," catalogues Pronek's woeful attempts to find gainful employment in the United States. His English is poor, at best, and though he is fiercely intelligent, sardonic, and well-read – his formal education has been minimal. Thus he is trapped in a situation where he has many of the elements of which a successful social life can be made – charisma, wit, sensitivity – but none of the qualifications which would make monetary success possible.

Pronek's experiences with the 'fast-food nation' follow a pattern familiar to those who have worked in this segment of America's economy. Desperate to pay his rent, he goes out in search of a service-industry job. The way that he emerges from his apartment to go on interviews is utterly absurd:

Pronek got up, put on his best clothes: a gray silk shirt, once upon a time smuggled from China by a family friend, with an ameba-shaped grease blot in the left nipple area...the well-known orange-stained beige pants; a tie with a Mickey Mouse pattern...a peach colored jacket...so Pronek, with his arms protruding, looked like a sad forklift...(176).

The clothes do not match. They do not follow any accepted pattern of dress; the colors are outlandish and inappropriate for a business setting. The clothes offer Hemon no sense of legitimacy. His shirt is “smuggled,” not purchased. His tie is emblazoned with one of the foremost symbols of global consumer culture, “Mickey Mouse.” The comparison of his body to an inanimate object makes him seem even less human. He becomes entirely foreign, a different species of being. The irony of this is not lost in the story’s narration. “This is the attire in which Pronek entered the American labor market,” it states (176). Jozef Pronek becomes a caricature.

Pronek goes on an interview at the Boudin French Sourdough Bakery. A woman named Dawn interviews him – a name that again reaches for irony, with its connotations of hopeful beginning, and sunrise – and their exchange has the same truncated English described earlier in the course of this dissertation.

“Well... tell me why you would like to work for us?”
“I like European touch here,” Pronek said.
“Right,” Dawn said and routinely smiled. There was a shade of lipstick on her white teeth. “We like to provide something different, something for the customer with sophisticated taste and international experience.” (179)

It is clear, of course, that the Boudin French Sourdough Bakery does not provide this service to its customers. None of the customers whom Pronek encounters display either “sophisticated taste” or “international experience.” Yet the product – the entire Boudin Sourdough ‘package’ – is marketed in this way. What this marketing gesture belieis is that the language of advertising has something in common with the language of corrupt politics: It has no meaning on an immediate level. It is, essentially, a morass of untruths and manipulations of sound.

The scenes in the Boudin French Sourdough Bakery span several pages. They are tremendously funny – and tremendously sad – as Hemon uses the character of Pronek to expose the failings of the American food service industry. This section is perhaps the most critical section of the book. Since Pronek must devote a significant majority of his waking hours to his low-wage job, this job becomes the totality of his experience. The narrative has already followed Pronek for thirty-five pages. He has been exposed as a funny, irreverent, intelligent character. Seeing him reduced to this level illustrates the sadness of wage-slavery in the American marketplace. Nothing more clearly illustrates the abuses inherent in the food service industry than seeing Pronek struggle to make a living. At the Boudin French Sourdough Bakery, Pronek’s humiliations occur on a consistent basis.

The first glimpse that the narrative offers of Pronek’s work is broken up by a gruesome moment of physical violence.

He cut croissants open, spread Dijon mustard all over their insides (“Not too much,” Dawn would suggest in passing), and then passed them on to the sandwich person (“This is the sandwich person. This is the kitchen help,” Dawn introduced them to each other). He was taken off that job, after he nearly sliced off his left thumb and passed on a series of blood-soaked croissants to the sandwich person. (180)

Not only is the work physically dangerous, but Pronek has been reduced to a title; the manager does not introduce him by his name, only by the menial tasks which he must perform. Pronek is, in many respects, the quintessential example of the exploited innocent. He does not stop working even after he nearly severs his thumb. He does not want to seem lazy or unwilling to work, even under adverse conditions.

Throughout this paragraph, which continues for much of the page, Dawn's suggestions to Pronek are relayed in parentheses. The result is a pattern that mimics the way that a food service manager will relay "training" to his or her employees. In reality, Pronek performs a series of tasks that are woefully simple. Common sense would instruct him on the way to slice open a croissant and cover its surface with a layer of mustard. Yet Dawn must instruct, because if she does not, she would be forfeiting her right to the title of "manager." Her intrusions into his work methods are unwelcome and annoying. The way they are presented parenthetically only serves to amplify their intrusion into the world of the text. They range from the instructive to the absurd:

("Small bowl—large gumbo. Big bowl—jumbo gumbo,"
Dawn succinctly explained the essence of the gumbo
situation). (180)

Dawn does not, of course, realize the ridiculous nature of the phrase, "jumbo gumbo," and Pronek offers no narrative comment. He does, however, react visibly to the amount of food waste that occurs in the kitchen. Seized with guilt upon throwing out the stuffing from loaves of bread, Pronek eats pounds of sourdough and is rewarded with severe intestinal cramps. He also gets locked in the freezer.

Pronek is eventually unable to perform most of the tasks assigned to him at the Boudin French Sourdough Bakery. He is reduced to the task of taking out the trash. This is a task which he cannot perform alone – and so a new character is introduced into the text:

From that point on in his food-service career, Pronek was firmly in charge of garbage disposal. He became an apprentice to a man named Hemon. Pronek didn't know whether Hemon was the man's first or the man's last name, but he was from the Dominican Republic, and came

to the United States to become a professional soccer player.

Pronek inferred Hemon's soccer dream, after he pointed at himself and kept repeating: "McMannaman," and then made the motion of kicking a soccer ball. (182)

Thus the author, Aleksandar Hemon, has written a character into his fiction with the name "Hemon." This recalls Michaels' character, Michaela, and is, of course, a common, postmodern trick. It demonstrates a certain playfulness, and an unwillingness – on the part of the author – to take the barrier between writer and audience seriously.

However, the character "Hemon" has biographical affinity with the writer, Hemon. In numerous interviews, Aleksandar Hemon has described his love of soccer. He has stated that he would – if he had the opportunity to choose his profession again – become a professional soccer player. Interviews given by an author, of course, do not have to be taken as "truth." Instead, they can be seen as a parallel version of the story told through the author's fiction. It would be simplistic and reductive to think of the character "Hemon," as some sort of secret version of the author's self, exposed in bare literary format. But the link must be acknowledged. Perhaps the Dominican version of Hemon can be seen as a pre-linguistic being, a version of what Hemon might be if he were stripped entirely of English. It is noteworthy that this character points at himself and says the name of another person; even in the most basic identifications of self, he is too disembodied to come to any sort of definition or conclusion.

The irony of this passage is also significant. The idea of the author as essentially a body who takes out the trash – the trash, in this case, being the detritus of the subconscious mind – has been explored by both writers and theorists. Most

notably, Beckett, with his *Endgame*, in which two of the four characters spend the entire performance in ashcans. Though this is a link of the quickest, symbolic sort – it shows that the move of self-deprecation is not new to Hemon. Beckett’s writings – among the foremost ironic texts of the modern era – are certainly points by which Hemon’s work can be situated. This irony has its subtleties, however. Set apart from the rest of the section is this solitary paragraph:

To their simple minds, this was the supreme garbage bin, to which they were compelled to offer daily oblations. (182)

It is clear from the preceding pages that Pronek’s mind is not “simple.” Almost without exception, any immigrant has faced significant decisions in charting a course to the United States. Hemon knows this, having completed the journey himself. This paragraph, then, is perhaps included to lure the inattentive reader into making a quick judgment about Pronek or the character, “Hemon,” based on their form of employment.

Deceptive Appearances

Appearances are perhaps most unreliable in the profession of espionage – a particular favorite subject of Conrad’s. Conrad, of course, visited and revisited espionage, both in short stories and the novel-length form. Hemon moves easily from the irony of the trash bin to a parody of a history of espionage. Though the fake history has its roots in ancient tradition, Borges can be seen as a modern antecedent

for Hemon's work. His influence can clearly be felt in the story, "The Sorge Spy Ring," in which Hemon concocts a variety of false documents to make the story seem like an intelligence briefing.

The text of "The Sorge Spy Ring," as published originally in *TriQuarterly*, includes fake passports, photographs of the spy, Richard Sorge, and a swath of footnotes. These footnotes are more extensive than the story itself, and indeed could be read as a self-contained unit. They chronicle the life of this spy, giving snapshots of his existence at different moments in history:

Sorge's grandfather, Adolph Sorge, had served as the secretary for the First International during Marx's lifetime. Grandpa Adolph told Sorge, throughout his childhood, Marx stories: about Marx reading Shakespeare (in English) and the Greek tragedies (in Greek) every July; about Marx and Engels playing tennis (Marx always losing), as the officials of the First International watched them... (63)

This detail, of course, has no relevance to the story itself – yet there it is, minute and wholly falsified, in the footnotes. Indeed, the footnotes initially do not seem to have a definitive "point," other than the offering of a fictional life, in exhaustive detail. The move of writing a biography of a fictional character, in which the biographical detail serves as the most important part of the writing – is an interesting one. The tangential pieces of information – the idea that Marx read Shakespeare and the Greek tragedies in July, specifically, or the idea that Marx would lose to Engels at tennis – are delivered with an eye towards the humorous.

By the conclusion of the story, the text reveals that there is a possibility that the author's father was a spy in Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s. The government

imprisons the narrator's father; his absence and eventual return as a cancer-stricken old man serve as the emotional core of the piece. There is no traditional conclusion – other than the death, on May 4, 1980, of Tito.

On the black TV screen white letters emitted: “Comrade Tito has passed away” – no voice over, no images shown. Sirens stopped wailing. I looked at the street and everybody and everything was gone, as if the ground had gaped open and swallowed it all. “I suppose this is Judgment Day,” my father said and turned off the TV. “I suppose this is the end of it all.” (86)

The subtext here – that Tito was, in a real sense, the father of Yugoslavia – gives the illness an implication that it would not otherwise have. It is a sobering end for what has been primarily a lighthearted story. There is even a footnote to this passage, however. The footnote is affixed to the phrase “swallowed it all,” and contains the story of the spy, Sorge, and his eventual death in Shanghai. It is an odd counterpoint to the text – and its subtleties (beyond its amusing wink towards the postmodern) are perhaps too developed to have a strong impact on the reader.

A final, intertextual tie between Hemon's two books exists in the city of Shanghai and the subject of espionage. This tie exists between the short story, “The Sorge Spy Ring,” and the final chapter of the novel, *Nowhere Man*. From a critical standpoint, this final chapter is a difficult one to understand. What was a gritty, realistic depiction of an immigrant's post-national life in the United States becomes an odd story that is written – once again – in the manner of the scholarly biography. This time, however, the character profiled is Evgenij Pick, an all-purpose con-man and grafter, who makes his living off of the nostalgia of expatriate Russians living in Shanghai in the 1930s. Pick is also a spy, and he serves multiple governments. When

the narrator of the novel goes to Shanghai on his honeymoon in the year 2000 – and in this scenario, the narrator is supposedly the writer, Hemon – he comes into contact with the legend of Pick. His hotel room is haunted by apparitions of Pick; he wonders about this spy and his story.

False Endings and Endings

But perhaps this is a false ending to the book, a distraction added on a whim, an extra distraction from the moment when the novel has its greatest impact – the conclusion of the preceding chapter. In this conclusion, the barrier between narrator and reader breaks down. The text focuses on Jozef Pronek, and his relationship with his girlfriend – a relationship which has been put under a great deal of stress because of Pronek’s lack of work. They fight, and he is handicapped by his inability to express his emotions in English. Finally, he breaks down into tears, frustrated by this lack of language:

...A hand touches his face, tenderly, delicately, sliding its tips across the hollow of his cheek. He gasps and slowly, one sob at a time, he starts to cry.

But he doesn’t know that the hand stroking his cheek is mine. He cannot hear me saying to him: “*Ne placi. Sve ce biti u redu.*” Calm down, I’m telling him, everything will fall into place. Let us just sort through this destruction. Let us just remember how we got here. Let us just remember. (221)

The “mine” of the passage belongs to the narrative voice of the piece. Of course, it is impossible for the narrator to actually comfort Pronek in this situation. The multilingual text incorporates Bosnian – the language which Pronek would probably most like to hear. Yet, he is the post-national being, he has taken up residency in another nation. The linguistic difficulties of his status as a post-national have overwhelmed him completely.

Aleksandar Hemon continues to publishing his fiction in the leading magazines of today’s global literary marketplace – including a story in the June, 2004 fiction issue of *The New Yorker*. The themes he examines are varied and quilted with a mix of nationalities. His texts are ironic, funny, and conscious of the realities of life in the working class in America’s late-capitalist, service-industry economy. In his critical work, *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks analyzes a section from Faulkner’s *Absalom!* *Absalom!*:

To the question, Who is speaking here? the text replies, Everyone and no one... the voice of the reader has evicted all other voices from the text... ultimately the voice that speaks in the text is that of the reader. (304)⁵⁶

This assessment is interesting when applied to *Nowhere Man*, because it pinpoints the text’s power. In a post-national world where linguistic borders are fluid, the reader feels capable of articulating the Serbo-Croatian sentence, and comforting Pronek. In the post-national text, then, borders seem to have somehow lost their ability to divide.

⁵⁶ Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANNE MICHAELS AND THE LITERATURE OF LOSS

Perhaps no figure is more appealing to the writer than the orphan. The orphan floats in the ether of social life, bereft of the most basic comforts and assurances. He or she can be molded and changed to an infinite degree – cast or recast in a variety of figures. The fiction writer can employ the orphan as a metaphoric device, giving the text a range of representative meanings and valences. Nearly all of the authors discussed in the previous three chapters have written works in which orphans – children separated from their parents, or their past, by acts of luck or violence – figure prominently. Kipling’s *Kim*, of course, stands as one of the foremost examples of this branch of writing, and the importance of *Kim* to many of Michael Ondaatje’s postcolonial texts cannot be doubted.

In her *ELH* article, “Incarnations of the Orphan,” Nina Auerbach discusses the trope of the orphan in the history of the English novel. Her study is quite comprehensive, and her historical analysis serves to situate the orphan in an historical context. “The figure of the wandering orphan,” she writes, “searching through an alien world for his home, has fascinated generations of novelists” (395).⁵⁷ This search is a compelling one, and the substance of the search throughout history proves to be – in Auerbach’s eyes – quite mutable. She isolates the evolution of the novel of the orphan

⁵⁷ Nina Auerbach “incarnations of the orphan” *ELH*, Vol. 42, No. 3. (Autumn, 1975), pp. 395-419.

into three distinct classifications, grouping these classifications around broad dates – the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The orphan moved, she holds, from the central figure in a rough picaresque (a figure who is – whether male or female – at odds with the society in which he/she lives) to the saintly, sincere victim of poor fortune, whose redemption reflects the power of Providence and the general social good.

Much of Auerbach's critique of the role of the orphan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is quite useful. She charts a continuum of evolution, one that moves from Defoe's *Moll Flanders* in 1722 and Smollett's *Roderick Random* in 1748 towards Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Dickens' nineteenth century Victorian London orphans – notably Pip in *Great Expectations*. Though Auerbach does not state it explicitly, she implies that *Tom Jones* and *Great Expectations* were, to a certain extent, replies to the previously existing body of orphan literature. Writing of *Roderick Random*, she says:

Throughout the eighteenth century, the orphan is a shadowy, manipulative, cloaked figure, who finally achieves possession of an identity through the social category he attains... Smollett's novel hints at a slight fissure inherent in the attempt to blend criminality and gentility, the multiple picaresque self with the... structure of society. (401)

Kipling's Kim, who is always struggling to reconcile his criminal mind with the necessity of abiding by society's laws, is a perfect example of this "type" of orphan. But then, Auerbach holds, the orphan changes. In works like *Tom Jones*, he is transformed. *Tom Jones* was published immediately following the publication of *Roderick Random*; Fielding could not have been working with Smollett's text in front of him, except during the process of final revision. Yet, Auerbach finds that:

Tom Jones' orphanhood is just the opposite: a guarantee of integrity... As a young man, Tom is infallibly sincere... he is honest, open, and whole, unlike the mutable rogue. (402)

She then includes Dickens (who demonstrably read both Fielding and Smollett while at Chatham School⁵⁸) and states that, with the advent of the nineteenth century, the orphan's literary manifestations had fundamentally changed:

His social rise no longer "makes" him, as it did in the eighteenth century, but establishes him as the agent of a providential spirit working through history... (this) transcendentalizing of the orphan and the yoking of him to a mysterious Providence working through history reflect Victorian cultural needs. (409)

Perhaps because she was writing in 1975, Auerbach's sense of the twentieth century's body of orphan literature is less comprehensive. She simply touches on Joyce's Stephen Daedalus – who chooses to reject his drunken father – as exemplary of a new century of orphan literature.

Looking at the novel as a series of textual arguments with a traceable timeline and sequence is perhaps an unfashionable form of analysis. Yet charting the relationship between the orphan and the society in which the orphan must live can lead to some fairly revealing conclusions about contemporary texts of orphaning. Arguably, the central question of any book focusing on the life of an orphan is: How does a society treat its most impoverished members? Frequently post-national texts focus on these very individuals – the immigrants at the margins of social life, immigrants who are isolated, in some respect, because of their language and culture.

⁵⁸ Dibble, R.F. "Charles Dickens: His Reading." *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 35, No. 6. (Jun., 1920), pp. 334-339. This is a good source for information on what Dickens read.

In the novel in English, then, the relationship of social power to the individual orphan can be said to have charted this course: First, the individual orphan typically moved outside of society, struggling with sexual or social transgressions. Next, the idea of the orphan changed – he or she changed into a textual being who was accepted into “society” as an innocent. Finally, then the Dickensian text, in which Providence worked through the orphan to reinforce the idea, textually, that society was objectively “just.” This would bring the reader to the brink of the twentieth-century.

Discussions of the effect of the Holocaust on literature have focused on the nature of the Holocaust as a unique event, a tragedy so immense in its scope – as well as state-sponsored and mechanized, two important differentiations from previous large-scale genocides – that it cannot be grouped with other important tragedies. The Holocaust, many theorists have held, is a line of demarcation, an event that irrevocably alters the sequences of linear time. Considerations of twentieth-century literature cannot help but assess its importance – especially considerations of a literature that features the trope of the orphan.

Adorno’s well-known dictum that writing poetry after Auschwitz is “barbaric,” must be considered as a point of departure for analysis of any text which centers itself around the Holocaust. In his work, *Imagining the Holocaust*, Daniel Schwarz counters this point, saying that, “it is the artistic rendering of the Holocaust that will keep it alive in the imagination particularly as memoirists dwindle.” (23)⁵⁹ Critical interpretations of Holocaust literature must, in some way, acknowledge the fact that there is a danger of “domestication and naturalization” in any attempt to study the Holocaust, but that this study is also an important part of the reclamation and understanding of the event, itself. Schwarz, again: “The imaginative energy of Holocaust fictional narratives, transmuting facts in the crucible of art, has become

⁵⁹ Schwarz, Daniel. *Imagining the Holocaust*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999.

more and more a prominent part of how the collective memory of the Holocaust is shaped and survives.” (33) The field of “collective memory” is currently provoking a great deal of scholarly work; the role of literature in the creation of collective, cultural memory cannot be doubted.

Perhaps the best study of the literature of the Holocaust and its importance in constructing a post-national sense of memory is Yael Zerubavel’s “The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors.”⁶⁰ In this article, Zerubavel argues that:

Even so-called “modern society,” despite its ever-expanding obsession with historical documentation, continues to nurture shared memories of the past through multiple commemorations of certain historical events. And even today, poets and writers, journalists and teachers, may have more decisive roles than historians in shaping popular images of the past. (73)

This analysis speaks directly to Canadian author Anne Michaels’ widely-read and critically lauded novel, *Fugitive Pieces*. *Fugitive Pieces* was first published in 1996 by McClelland & Stewart, and subsequently issued in 1997 by major American and British publishing houses. It was the recipient of the 1997 Orange Prize – a prize given to the strongest work of fiction published in English during the preceding year by a woman author.

⁶⁰ *Representations*, No. 45. (Winter, 1994), pp. 72-100.

The Orphan and Post-national Language

Fugitive Pieces is a unification of several of the *topoi* previously discussed in the course of this article. It adds its voice to the historical progression of novels in which the central protagonist loses his or her parents – that is, the novel centering around the orphan. Furthermore, this orphan – Jakob Beer – has been created by the Holocaust. The definitive moment of historical crisis in the twentieth century – the definitive trauma of the historical record – is a point of contact for this fictional text, a “real-life” antecedent for the events of this novel. In an article published in 2000 in the *Journal of European Studies*, Ann Parry considers the way that poets and novelists such as Michaels can help the process of healing, social healing, with the artificial, imagined texts that they produce. Parry comments that literature is valuable that allows social memory to expand and contain more images of mourning for the tragically murdered:

Fugitive Pieces recognizes that the boundaries of learning, growth, and knowledge may be re-articulated in an exploration of their anxiety and ambivalence... (it is a) presentation of mourning appropriate to the Holocaust, and offers a challenge to the more familiar postmodern directions of philosophy and fiction about the Shoah. (372)⁶¹

The parallel journeys – of social memory towards a just commemoration of the Holocaust, and of the orphan, Jakob Beer, towards a fictional place of rest – correspond. The text is centered in a social environment; it is not produced in a vacuum of language.

⁶¹ Parry, Ann. “To Give Death a Place: Rejecting the ‘ineffability’ of the Holocaust.” *Journal of European Studies*. Dec 2000. v30. pp. 353-76.

The orphan, then, in the prototypical work of twentieth century, post-Holocaust orphan-fiction, is one who relies greatly on the historical elements preceding him or her. The Dickensian sincerity – the sense that the orphan is a victim, a victim of urbanization and industrialization – can be said to foreground the orphan’s character. The central orphan in *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob Beer, is fully a victim; he survives the tragic murder of his entire family, simply by chance. He happens to be playing a child’s game – hiding from his family, spying on them – when the Nazis break into their apartment, intent on killing the fugitive Jews:

The burst door. Wood ripped from hinges, cracking like ice under shouts. Noises never heard before, torn from my father’s mouth. Then silence. My mother had been sewing a button on my shirt. She kept her buttons in a chipped saucer. I heard the rim of the saucer in circles on the floor. I heard the spray of buttons, little white teeth. (7)

This chilling detail, the rim of the saucer, rolling, rolling on the floor, and the comparison of buttons to teeth – these two elements make the prose brutally realistic, forcing the reader into this situation, this situation in which Jakob is nothing else but a victim. The story here, then, is the central story of the orphan narrative; historical forces, in this case personified by the (imageless) soldiers, take away everything that Jakob loves. They desiccate and denude him, as an individual. The reader witnesses this act, and cannot help but feel empathy for Jakob.

The important point here is that the orphan would seem to be the ‘blank slate,’ the individual without a past, the pure victim of a difficult fate. Yet, here, Jakob is given a past that will haunt him for the rest of his life. He becomes an orphan at an age that he can remember; the sum total of his memories will be sorrow and loss. All of his memories – even the smallest ones, the remembrance, for instance, of his mother

sewing buttons on his shirt – are touched with the veneer of sorrow. After this moment of trauma, Jakob escapes from the ghetto, in body, and flees to the woods. For many days – an indeterminate number of days – he survives by burying himself in the ground of the forest, until he is “unearthed” by Athos, the geologist, the man who will serve as his protector over the next ten years of his life. There is a remarkable metaphor in this.⁶² Jakob, the ‘blank slate,’ is found by an archaeologist, an archaeologist who is working on a dig in the ancient city of Biskupin.

A grey fall day. At the end of strength, at the place where
faith is most like despair, I leaped from the streets of
Biskupin; from underground into air.

I limped towards him, stiff as a golem, clay tight behind
my knees. I stopped a few yards from where he was
digging – later he told me it was as if I’d hit a glass door,
an inarguable surface of pure air – “and your mud mask
cracked with tears and I knew you were human, just a
child.” (12)

This is the reenactment of the passage of birth. The child is born, crying, and through this cry – *infans*, meaning, without language – displays his humanity. The “leap” from underground into air can be said to resemble the leap of birth, in which the child first emerges from the “ground” of the mother’s womb.

What kind of a child is born with memories intact? Numerous Holocaust narratives have stressed the effect of the internment in the death camps on parental relationships. Furthermore, any parental relationship can be taken as a metaphorical representation of the relationship – in the text – between a generative God and the people who believe they are His creation. Wiesel’s *Night*, particularly, focuses on the

⁶² The reader recalls, perhaps, Seamus Heaney’s remarkable poem, *Digging*: “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun. / Under my window, a clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father, digging.” The trope of digging becomes something which connects father and son at the end of the poem.

relationship between fathers and sons – both the narrator and his father, as well as the other parent-child relationships that the narrator observes at Auschwitz. Yet the novel’s central moment is a rejection of God, the ontological father, on Yom Kippur – a rejection that is urged by the narrator’s biological father. Perhaps the novel’s best-known quote, that “in the depths of (my) heart, I felt a great void,” comes from this scene. It amounts, essentially, to the rebirth of the narrator, in a new world, one in which traditional relations – father-son, God-individual – have lost their traditional meaning. The rebirth endured by the young child who is plunged into orphanhood – the rebirth with memories intact – gives the orphan a versatility that is not available to other characters. Jakob, in the case of *Fugitive Pieces*, must relearn the entire process of language.

This fact – and its post-national possibilities – is not lost on Michaels. She pays specific attention to it in the first few pages of the novel.

Gradually Athos and I learned each other’s languages. A little of my Yiddish, with smattering of mutual Polish. His Greek and English. We took new words into our mouths like foreign foods; suspicious, acquired tastes. (21)

Then:

I listened to Athos’s stories in English, in Greek, again in English. At first I heard them from a distance, an incomprehensible murmur as I lay face down on the rug, anxious or despondent in the long afternoons. But soon I recognized the same words and began to recognize the... emotion in Athos’s voice when he talked about his brother. (25)

Unlike the orphan in Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, (another significant story of Holocaust orphanhood) Jakob finds a receptive individual – someone who treats him with great care and love. Kosinski's orphan, who is subjected to a series of abuses, who is prodded with sticks and pelted with rocks when he goes in search of his parents, differs drastically from Jakob, who finds a father-like presence in the geologist, Athos. It is with Athos that he relearns the process of speaking. Importantly, it is an international kind of vocabulary that he learns, one that is beyond the specifics of English or Greek or Polish or Yiddish. Importantly, the language begins in incomprehensibility, a “murmur as I lay face down on the rug.” Something beyond the matters of nationality draws the man and the boy together. They will take this new language that they've created – and emigrate to a new country, Canada, where they will remake their lives after the horrors of the Holocaust.

What kind of lives will they make for themselves in the new world? This is, then, the journey of immigration, the common thread in so much of the fiction created in today's global, displaced marketplace. Athos gets a job as an archeology and geology instructor at the University of Toronto; for some time, they live happily within their academic world. This fictional migration corresponds with the actual migration – following the Second World War – of scholars from European universities (especially Eastern European universities) to Canada, Australia and the United States.⁶³ But then, after several years in Toronto, Athos dies suddenly of a heart attack. Jakob is deserted once again, stranded entirely in this new and unfamiliar world. He is of college age, now, and so gradually, over the course of many years, he builds himself a life within that same university system – first as a teacher, but then as a scholar and a poet.

⁶³ An excellent resource on the Ukrainian emigration of faculty members is available in: Prymak, Thomas. “Ivan Franko and Mass Ukrainian Emigration to Canada.” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 26. 1984 December. Pp. 307-17.

The Figure of the Writer

This frees Michaels to speculate on a wide range of topics – most prominently on the nature of language and poetry. A student of Jakob’s describes his poems in this manner: “In your later poems, it’s as if history reads over our shoulder, casts its shadow on the page, but is no longer in the words themselves.” (207). Michaels herself is a poet, and her books of poems – which will be addressed shortly – cover many of the same themes as *Fugitive Pieces*. There is an interesting relationship in this – in the poet, writing a fictional text in which the central character is a poet, a poet who is haunted by many of the same themes as the author, herself. The fictional poet, Jakob Beer, constructs his identity through writing. Yet, in his writing, which occurs in his adopted language of English, he cannot free himself from the historical themes that have shaped his life. “History reads over your shoulder,” giving the language a valence of sorrow and suffering that it cannot quite escape. This is among the central components of post-national life, then – the existence of the past in the present, the shadow of memory reaching out and touching current, waking life. Hemon’s characters are all haunted by memories of trauma, as are Ondaatje’s characters in *The English Patient*. It is the memory of the train wreck – present in all of Ashoke’s actions – which moves Lahiri’s *The Namesake* forward. Michaels uses the device of poetry to comment on the fact that Jakob lives a post-national life; surrounded by a new culture, yet also tied, intermittently, to the past – through language and memory.

In his book, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home*, Pico Iyer writes about the nature of “home,” in the modern world, and addresses the question of whether one can ever truly be “at ease” in today’s society.⁶⁴ Iyer himself is a transplant; he lives and writes in Japan, where he finds himself more comfortable than in the English-speaking world. He maintains, however, numerous points of contact with his past, most notably in the form of English language books. Here, he comments on his experience of reading in his Kyoto apartment.

That this is my home, I realize now in incidental ways; I can tell when the trees in the park are going to change color, and when the vending machines will change their offerings from hot to iced. I know when my girlfriend will bring out the winter futons from the cupboard, and when her daughter will change her school uniform from white to blue. I read Thoreau on sunny Sunday mornings, as Baptist hymns float over from across the way, and think that in our mongrel, mixed-up planet, this may be as close to the calm and clarity of Walden as one can find. (296)

The rhythms of living are regular – the changing of the seasons, the alteration of life to match these changing seasons – but they are touched with the presence of the past. Since Iyer’s life has not been touched with tragedy of a globally-significant scale, his points of contact with the past are centered around books. In this passage, Walden serves as a point of “calm and clarity,” a point for which the character Iyer – the invented self of the memoir – strives. He seeks the calm of reading the text, the book. Reading *On Walden Pond* offers for Iyer a sense of refuge from the shopping mall, from the sense of jet lag and dislocation. While his personal traumas have included a devastating fire that destroyed his house, as well as a life-long struggle with depression, Iyer is battling to live in the modern world. The way that he relates his

⁶⁴ Iyer, Pico. *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home*. New York: Vintage, 2000.

battle – creating a character named Pico Iyer in a “non-fiction” written piece – reminds the reader of the post-national character, trying to adapt to a new country of residence.

This is the way, then, that Jakob struggles to overcome his memories of trauma. He has lost his sister, Bella, by an accident of fate. She is too large, physically too large, to fit in the crawl space between the walls of the apartment. Thus, in the world of the text – in the world of *Fugitive Pieces* – Bella dies when the Nazis discover their hiding place. Bella is captured, taken by the soldiers and interned in a concentration camp, where she meets an unknown, and anonymous, fate. Jakob Beer, living and writing in English in contemporary Toronto, must struggle to overcome this memory. He must adapt. Michaels’ text centers around this process of adaptation. The language of it is tremendously poetic; it mimics the patterns of poetry; it shifts perspectives and uses language in a dense and allusive manner.

Towards the end of a section that is written in first-person, the narrator (in this case, Jakob Beer), uses a text, in this case a musical text, in the same way that Iyer uses Thoreau. He is trying to free himself from his moment of trauma, trying, unsuccessfully, to forgive himself for surviving at the expense, perhaps, of his sister. Sitting in his study, working on his memoirs, Jakob tries to understand his past. He wants – in a state that is typical, perhaps, of the post-national individual – to retain ties to his past.

I want to remain close to Bella. I read. I rip the black
alphabet to shreds, but there’s no answer there. At night,
at Athos’s old desk, I stare at photos of strangers. (167)

This is a cryptic passage, but it touches on many of the central themes of *Fugitive Pieces*. Much like Pico Iyer in his Kyoto apartment, Jakob looks towards the written

word for solace. There is a short, declarative sentence – one of the few short, complete sentences in the book. “I read,” the text says, and the reader’s act is replicated here, once more. But, in this incarnation of reading, there is a buried sense of anguish and violence. The verb choice, “rip,” implies the sense of desperation that Jakob must feel, after so many years of torment by guilt and memory. Importantly, Michaels gives Jakob the word “alphabet,” rather than “book,” or “text.” The alphabet is the base element of language; it is irreducible. ‘Ripping the black alphabet to shreds’ is an act of violence against the most basic part of expression and, critically, “there’s no answer there.” Violence against language cannot erase the violent, traumatic memory. There is only the act of voyeurism, the “staring” at the “photos of strangers,” from which no real solace can arise. But what strangers are these? The text of *Fugitive Pieces* does not specify.

It becomes evident (though it is never said), that Jakob is looking at photographs of the victims of the Holocaust, possibly the victims of the gas chambers, and remembering his own sister, imagining her life in a Nazi concentration camp.⁶⁵ What follows is a lengthy passage in which Jakob imagines his sister, sleeping on a wooden bed, crowded together with other inmates, suffering the deprivations of life in the barracks. This section contrasts, simultaneously, with a second text – presented in italics – the image of Bella practicing her cello in these same death camps, practicing it to ward off the despair of her circumstances. Again, it is not entirely clear whether or not these images are third-person omniscient textual directives (a statement of fact, in the fiction/non-fiction world of the text), or if they are the imaginings of Jakob, who

⁶⁵ Of course, implicit in looking at the photos of “strangers” is the point that Jakob has no photographs of his family – something that typifies the refugee, but also separates the refugee from the majority of modern society. So, written on the image of him looking at the photographs of strangers is the image of him *not* looking at photographs of his parents, his sister. He must imagine these images – and often they are horrific.

is creating an imagined life for his sister. What is clear is that even the imagining of her daily life in the camp is enough to provoke extreme guilt in Jakob:

I want to remain close to Bella. To do so, I blaspheme
by imagining. (167)

Bella, beautiful one – the sad irony of this name hangs behind every mention of the departed sister. There is sadness behind every image of beauty in the book. This sadness comes in repetition, as well, in the poet’s device of repetition. “I want to remain close to Bella,” repeated, becomes almost like an incantation, a funereal chant that has value primarily through its sound, alone.

But, here, Jakob also considers his imaginings as ‘blasphemy,’ a powerful word, a word that has strong religious connotations. To blaspheme is to slander God – to desecrate – and Jakob clearly believes that he is desecrating his dead sister’s spirit. Yet, he continues. These memories are his refuge. The two texts are presented in alternating sections.

At night the wooden bunk wears through her skin. Icy feet
push into the back of Bella’s head. *Now I will begin the
intermezzo. I must not begin too slowly. There is no room
Bella’s arms cover herself. At night when everyone is
awake, I will not listen to the crying. I will play the whole
piece on my arms. (167)*

This, then, is the substance of Jakob’s imagining. The question as to whether or not the sections in italics are imagined by Jakob is, in some ways, an unimportant one. The italicized sections arise, in a textual way, from the non-italicized sections. The matters of perspective and orientation are not as vital if the passage is examined as a holistic section of writing, as a merger of imagination and research into testimony.

Jakob believes that this work of imagination is blasphemy – but, in many ways, it is necessary blasphemy. He cannot survive without it. The parallel sections continue, offering more images of Bella, stripped of everything, crammed into her wooden bunk, enduring the deprivations of the camps:

Her skin is coming apart at her elbows and behind her ears.
Not too much pedal, you can spoil Brahms with too much pedal, especially the intermezzos, the opening must be played clear as – water. Bar 62, crescendo, pay attention, but it's hard because that's where he's so – in love. The first time he played this for her, she listened knowing he wrote it for her. The cuts on Bella's head are burning. She closes her eyes... Against her scalp, the feet are wet and send the ice into her. (168)

The specific details of cello play – the reference to Bar 62, to the pedal, and to the minute vocabulary of classical music – these are not the words that Jakob would use, as he has no demonstrable familiarity with music. So these must be taken as the thoughts of Bella, herself, the specific words she is thinking, combined with the imagined horrors of the barracks, the wet, cold feet on her shaved head. The pauses here – signified by the dashes – are also critical. These are the moments when Bella is clearly overwhelmed by the emotion of the words that she is thinking. Especially in the environment of the camps, the ideas of water and love would be difficult to imagine without pause, without weeping – which is what Bella says, in an earlier passage, that she hopes to avoid.

Of course, the section of *Fugitive Pieces* reminds the reader, again, of Wiesel's *Night*, and the fragment of Beethoven played by Juliek to the warehouse of dying inmates – the fragment of the violin concerto that floats through the air, played by a

dying man.⁶⁶ Along with Beethoven, Brahms was a prohibited composer; the Third Reich considered him “German,” and decreed that Jewish musicians could not play his works. In 1933, the Nazi regime created the *Reichsmusikkammer* (RMK – Reich Music Chamber), as a means of ensuring that non-Aryans did not play the compositions of “Aryan” figures from musical history. Bella’s act, then, becomes an act of defiance. But its presence in the text – at the point where Jakob is writing his memoirs – is somewhat problematic. Is the reader to assume that Jakob had access to the imagined moment? The boundaries of the text seem to blur, here, and the authorial control breaks down. Perhaps, then, this is Michaels’ final concession to the difficulties of history. She cannot control the sorrow that arises from these images, and she cannot specify where they come from, and precisely to whom these memories belong. Perhaps they are collective memories, then?

Redemption and Language

Can language – can speculation of this sort, when written down and transmitted to another through language – have redemptive power for Jakob? In the case of *Fugitive Pieces*, the answer is no. He finds no redemption in these details, only more sorrow and obsession. His memoirs are – at the time of his death – unwritten. This is actually the first detail that the reader learns. In the short preface to the novel, a preface which is written from a detached scholarly perspective, the reader discovers the circumstances of Jakob’s death:

⁶⁶ Though it is not specified, by far the most famous of these concertos is the Violin Concerto in D Major, Opus 61. It was likely this composition, first performed in 1806, to which Wiesel refers. The New York Philharmonic recorded a famous version of this concerto in 1968, with Leonard Bernstein conducting, and Isaac Stern on lead violin.

...stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken. Still others are recovered, by circumstance alone.

Poet Jakob Beer, who was also a translator of posthumous writing from the war, was struck and killed by a car in Athens in the spring of 1993, at age sixty. His wife had been standing with him on the sidewalk; she survived her husband by two days. They had no children.

Shortly before his death, Beer had begun to write his memoirs. (1)

It is only as the novel progresses that the magnitude of this tragedy becomes evident. No, Jakob is not on the brink of finding redemption through his written work. But he is slowly attempting to come to terms with his memories – difficult memories – and he is starting to find, for the first time in his life, a path forward. Is the novel, then, in some respect, the result of his word – the unfinished memoir, finished, in some sense, by his death?

The last segment of the text written in Jakob's voice is the revelation that he and his second wife are hoping to have a child. Through the process of writing the memoir, Jakob has realized that this must be his course of action. By having a child he will come to terms with the traumas and tragedies of his own childhood.

Child I long for: if we conceive you, if you are born, if you reach the age I am now, sixty, I say this to you: Light the lamps but do not look for us. Think of us sometimes, your mother and me, while you're in your house with the fruit trees and the slightly wild garden, a small wooden table in the yard. (194)

Jakob has decided to name the child after his sister. If it is a boy, his name will be Bela; if it is a girl, then, Bella. Yet this paragraph completes the circular patterning of

the book. Jakob has reached sixty, and the preface has stated that this is the age at which he dies. The details, then – the fruit trees and the slightly wild garden and the small wooden table – act as further emotional wounds, opening gulfs of sorrow in the reader, as each specific detail enacts another unrealized desire or dream. These are analogous to the specifics which elicit sorrow in the imaginary Bella – the pedal, the sixty-second bar of the Brahms piece.

The Last Pages

The last pages of *Fugitive Pieces* mark a notable departure in the narrative perspective of the book. They are told by Ben, the son of a Holocaust survivor. A former student of Jakob's, Ben is designated, in the will, to settle the affairs of Jakob's estate. Yet Ben's life – the reader learns through quick summary – is a mess. He is in the midst of a separation from his wife; his father has just killed himself; he is having an affair with a second woman, Petra. He travels to Greece in order to reconstruct the final details of his teacher's life and settle the estate; he brings his girlfriend with him. This choice seems unusual at first, but it proves to be crucial, crucial to the final circuit that the novel makes – a circuit of lives and generations.

Ben and Petra are overwhelmed by the sadness of the process; they reach the island outside of Athens where Jakob and his wife, Michaela, spent their final days.⁶⁷ While there, they must sleep in the foldout bed that also serves as a couch. Opening this piece of furniture, they find a note that Michaela left for Jakob, on the day that they went to Athens, on the final day of his life.

We found Michaela's note where she'd left it. Planned as the surprise ending to a perfect day. Among the cushions, waiting for your discovery, the night you and Michaela never returned from Athens. Two lines of blue ink.

If she's a girl: Bella

If he's a boy: Bela (279)

The "you" in this paragraph is not the reader, obviously, but rather Jakob. The entire conclusion of the novel, then, has become a letter to Jakob, an open letter, since he has died. Addressing the dead in written form – this is the convention which Michaels adopts and uses in this paragraph. Also, Michaels relies on the sorrowful irony of a word like "perfect," when it is used to describe a tragedy of the sort that befell Jakob and Michaela. Life, the text implies, will frustrate any attempts to control or predict it.

After many months of trying to conceive a child, Michaela has finally become pregnant. She reaffirms – to Jakob – something that they have discussed numerous times. With this child, they will commemorate Jakob's sister, will pass her name along

⁶⁷ It would be an oversight to ignore the fact that Michaels has chosen this name for a character in her novel. Yet what can she mean by this? Michaela's role in the novel is essentially a passive one – she is the person who unlocks the joy in Jakob's heart, the one who prompts him to yearn for a child. Perhaps, then, Michaels is drawing a parallel between the world of the text and the 'actual' world, where she creates these possibilities for her characters – giving them life and hopes and desires. It is truly a postmodern gesture, though, and accompanies the gesture of the 'scholarly preface,' which precedes the text of the book. The preface, like this character name, creates a second frame for the story – a structure from which it may be viewed that is not quite the structure of the reader's reality.

to another generation. That Michaels would choose to thwart this desire is surprising. Yet it must be taken as an intentional gesture, a creative decision taken by the artist. The naming of the child after the dead sister – she has decided – is not enough of a gesture of closure, of completion, for the plot. Instead, there must be another significant tragedy, and this tragedy must, in turn, draw more characters into the plot. Perhaps there is a larger point being made here, a point about the impossibility of redemption beside the events of the Holocaust, a point about the way that the survivors are trapped – even by fate – to live their entire lives with the sorrows of their internment. Despite this, however, the last few lines of the novel – which will be discussed in a moment – seem slightly hopeful, and offer some small sense of deliverance.

But here – after the discovery of the note – what follows is a graphic, sexual passage, a passage notable for its violence and its sexual pain. Ben and Petra, the girlfriend, have sex on the floor of the house, immediately beside the fold-out couch. The sex seems to be a direct response – on Ben’s part – to finding the note. It is an unexplained outpouring of emotion, of anguish. Until this moment, the vocabulary of the book has been a vocabulary of trauma; there has been little room for any sort of lightness or love. The only exception to the darkness has been Jakob’s relationship with Michaela. He has – in his old age – finally found something to quench the series of sorrows that have marked, and ultimately defined, his life. The passages detailing Michaela and Jakob’s physical relationship have been tender and intricately-wrought; their words have been the words of intense, loving prose, the careful descriptions and breathless intoxications of the lover. Now, the language could not be more different.

I stripped away the rest of the bedcover and Petra and I
lay on the floor.

Petra, perfect, not a blemish or a scar. I pounded myself into her until I hurt us both. Tears streamed down her face. I clenched my jaw and poured myself onto her belly, into the air. (279)

The tears are significant; they are the result of emotional damage, of the brutality of the sex that Ben and Petra have. Ben realizes how wrong it is – in his moral sphere – to desecrate Jakob’s house by having sex there with a woman to whom he is not married. Ben comes to understand that his love for his wife, though flawed, is a remarkable bond in a difficult – and endlessly changeable – life. The rough sex, when placed beside the counterpoint of the tender note left by Michaela for Jakob (as well as the deep sadness that they never lived to see their child), seems even more loveless. It seems like a desecration, a true desecration, of Jakob’s space. By comparison, the gesture, on Jakob’s part, of imagining Bella’s conditions in the camps, seems like a minor gesture, a small transgression.

In the world of conventional literary fiction – literary fiction which strives, above all else, to tell a story and to retain some sense of “truth” or “historical accuracy,” rather than simply prizing experimentation with the limits of the fictional form – it is always difficult to introduce characters near the end of a novel. The danger is that the reader will not empathize with these characters, will not feel that they are fully drawn and convincing. The reader will possibly feel that these characters are “flat” rather than “round,” (to cite E.M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* once more), that they do not possess the full range of traits and characteristics that human beings possess. In some ways, this danger plays itself out with the characters of Ben and Petra (as well as Ben’s wife, Naomi, who has an even more limited role). Yet the vivid nature of the prose, as well as the prolonged presence of Jakob, and even Athos, long

after their deaths, works in the novel's favor. The process of settling Jakob's estate changes Ben, somehow, and the relationship with the girlfriend ends. He resolves to return to his Naomi.

The "present" moment of the book's last pages occurs on Ben's flight home to Canada. He remembers an image from his childhood: His father, eating compulsively at the kitchen table, crying, eating to satisfy an unquenchable hunger, a hunger that is fueled by memories of his starvation in the death camps. Ben remembers this image – even as he heads home to Naomi – and takes something hopeful from it:

But now, thousands of feet in the air, I see something else. My mother stands behind my father and his head leans against her. As he eats, she strokes his hair. Like a miraculous circuit, each draws strength from the other.

I see that I must give what I most need. (294)

With these words, the novel ends. It is a dramatic moment of return – much like the ending of Lahiri's *The Namesake*, in which a badly scarred individual (an isolated, wounded, post-national individual), finds solace in the memory of the past. Though Michaels would not allow Jakob to find redemption – either through his memoirs, through language, or through the child that he and his wife were about to have – there is some sort of larger redemption at work here. The pattern seems to be a generational pattern; the suffering of the past can be redeemed, Michaels is perhaps suggesting, but not within the scope of the present.

In his often perplexing, yet often deeply rewarding, works *The Coming Community* and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben

reflects on many of the same questions that animate Michaels' text. He writes of redemption and loss and language, three elements that are crucial to *Fugitive Pieces*.

Redemption is not an event in which what was profane becomes sacred and what was lost is found again. Redemption is, on the contrary, the irreparable loss of the lost, the definitive profanity of the profane. (101)

This passage helps explain why the redemption in the novel must be put off to a future time, to an imagined reunion between Ben and his wife, Naomi. There can be no redemption for Jakob's character, because if there is to be broader redemption within the course of the novel, the 'irreparable loss of the lost' must occur. Jakob must die.

To further quote Agamben:

Seeing something simply in its being-thus – irreparable but not for that reason necessary; thus, but not for that reason contingent – is love.

At the point you perceive the irreparability of the world, at that point it is transcendent. (105)

Ben sees his wife simply as she is – as the person with whom he must live, with whom he has chosen to build a life. Their relationship is damaged, it is probably not reparable, but he decides to try again, anyway, in the invisible future of the unwritten novel. In a way, this is love's greatest victory in the book; one victory against a constant, relentless succession of defeats.

The Traces of the Poet

Much of the text of *Fugitive Pieces* is written in a careful, precise kind of prose. It is an unusual prose, in that it seems to be conscious of itself, conscious of the desire for ornamentation, for unusual phrasing, for the capacity of unexpected language to unlock beauty. The ‘chapters’ of the novel are not numbered. Instead, they have interesting names, names that often relate to a keystone image in the course of the chapter. Yet these titles are a secondary level of distance; they provide a second perspective from which to look upon the text. These are the titles:

Part One

The Drowned City

The Stone-Carriers

Vertical Time

The Way Station

Phosphorous

Terra Nullius

The Gradual Instant

Part Two

The Drowned City
Vertical Time
Phosphorous
The Way Station

Of the eleven divisions within the text of the novel, only seven are unique. All of the division – or chapter – titles for the second part of the book are repetitions of titles in the first part. Is this supposed to be an indication that nothing new can come from the story of Ben? Or that Ben's tale, while critical to the book – in its repetition of important topics – is merely a variation on a theme, a different permutation of the same numerical set?

In the new version of "The Drowned City," the action of the book shifts to Athens, rather than Biskupin, which is the archaeological site in which the story begins. In Biskupin, the metaphor is obvious; the city is literally "drowned," buried under layer upon layer of mud. Is Athens, then, a drowned city, in the sense that Ben arrives to uncover his own memories – to uncover the final moments of Jakob's life? The meaning is ambiguous. A rich bit of symbolic language situated in a position of complexity within the text, "drowned city," has several referents. Its meanings multiply with further excavation of the text. The three other chapter titles have this resonance, as well. "Phosphorous," is one of the elements that Athos studies, in his work as a geologist. It also glows in the dark, providing illumination where there previously was none – which is the function of the literary text, as well. "Vertical Time," and, "The Way Station," are also richly symbolic titles, titles which can be adapted to a variety of meanings. "Vertical Time," in particular, has significance when it is related to the process of memory, which can assemble time without regard to vertical structure, without regard for past, present, or possible future. "The Way

Station,” can be any one of the many pausing points within the text, interstitial moments that can offer connection between narrative themes.

This sort of linguistic flexibility characterizes Anne Michaels’ body of poetic work, work which has appeared in numerous periodicals, both in Canada and the United States. Michaels has three collections of poems – *The Weight of Oranges* (1986), *Miner’s Pond* (1991), and *Skin Divers* (1999). Many of the themes that are explored in *Fugitive Pieces* are present in *The Weight of Oranges*. Michaels offers confessional poetry, much of it written in the first person. Whether or not the “facts” of the poems are “authentic,” they are presented in this way, with an earnest, autobiographical tone. The first poem in *The Weight of Oranges* is “Lake of Two Rivers,” a childhood remembrance of driving on a family vacation with her parents.

My father told two stories on these drives.

One was the plot of *Lost Horizon*,
the other: his life.

This speeding room, dim in the dashboard’s green emission...

Spirit faces crowded the windows of a ’64 Buick.
unknown cousins surrounded us, arms around each other,
a shawl of sleeves.

The moon fell into our car from Grodno.
It fell from Chaya-Elke’s village,
where they stopped to say goodbye. (7)

Her father is leaving Poland, in 1931, and his story is relayed over the course of the poem. All of the things that he observes – and that he takes from his memory to

present to his daughter – are touched by the sorrow of the subsequent massacre of the Jewish population in Poland during the Second World War. Most of the relatives named in the poem – the cousins, aunts, and uncles of the poem – died in German concentration camps from 1941 to 1944. Thus, every “goodbye” has an added sense of poignancy, an added valence of sadness.

Importantly, also, the moonlight shining into the car is falling from Chaya-Elke’s village. There is no distance, no narrative space; the first-person voice of the poem feels the immediate presence of the moonlight, feels that the same moonlight that fell on her father in 1931 is now falling on here. The trauma is palpable, present in the present moment. The legacy of the Holocaust marks itself on the young girl; biographically, this adds an element of immediacy to *Fugitive Pieces*. The book, perhaps, came from the intensely-lived experience of hearing, as a child, Holocaust survival stories. Later, in “Lake of Two Rivers,” Michaels elaborates on this heritage:

My mother’s story is tangled,
overgrown with lives of parents and grandparents
because they lived in one house and among them
remembered hundreds of years of history. (10)

Again, the sense of generational intimacy is present – an intense connection between the past and the present hangs over the poem. This connection is almost organic, with Michaels employing the language of biological growth, choosing both “tangled,” and “overgrown,” words which suggest vines, or some other sort of creeping plant. The sense of connectedness is the most important element of the text, an element which Michaels directly explains in a subsequent section of the poem:

We do not descend, but rise from our histories.
If cut open, memory would resemble
a cross-section of the earth's core,
a table of geographical time. (11)

This, then, is the ground from which a book such as *Fugitive Pieces* could come. The sense that memory is something physical – a material substance that could be cut open – certainly pertains to Athos' work as a geologist and archaeologist, as an excavator of rocks. The characters rise, in a way, from these poems, carefully sketched out in poetic work over a decade before the novel began.

Much of *Fugitive Pieces* focuses on the process of unearthing; as mentioned previously, digging is an important part of the book's central structure of metaphor. Michaels' second collection of poems also focuses on this process, especially in its title poem, "Miner's Pond." The physical environment to which the title poem refers, Miner's Pond, is a small lake buried deep within a series of caves in the Canadian interior. This pond is a site to which Michaels' family returns, numerous times over the course of her childhood, to take vacations and explore the area's caves. Michaels remembers, once again, stories and confidences exchanged between parents and children, between brothers and sisters. Both *Miner's Pond* and *The Weight of Oranges* are dedicated to family members; the importance of blood relations cannot be overstressed with either of these collections, collections which have numerous poems about Michaels' family. Indeed, in the title poem of *Miner's Pond*, Michaels writes:

Overhead the geese are a line,
a moving scar. Wavering

like a strand of pollen on the surface of a pond.
Like them, we carry each year in our bodies.
Our blood is time. (67)

This messianic proclamation – *our blood is time* – would seem to suggest a complete concentration of the world into the blood of a group, a group to which Michaels belongs. To a writer obsessed with the process of memory, “time” would surely be the total of all existence, the vertical structure in which memory moves.

Delving into the poems in this way provides an interesting insight into the interior workings of the novel. It provides a sense of the separation of the narrative voice of the piece – the variegated, multifaceted “I” of the novel’s several sections – and the author’s narrative presence behind the text. It gives an interesting, secondary sense of the book, a sense that a text-only reading would not provide. The notion of studying all of the works of a single author – rather than single books as reified and solitary objects of analysis – seems startlingly like common sense. In his work, *The Transformation of the English Novel, 1890-1930*, Daniel Schwarz writes:

Deconstruction believes that all reading is misreading because no reading can take account of all the possibilities of a text. Humanistic formalism believes that reading is a quest towards the goal of an accurate reading, even though... it is a goal which we can only approach but never reach. (149)

Thought this passage focuses more exclusively on the difference between two significant branches of literary criticism, it also focuses on the textual methods that give the reader a fuller sense of *Fugitive Pieces*. Knowing the importance of family to

Michaels – knowing, particularly, the connection between storytelling and father-child relations in Michaels’ poetry – gives a fuller sense of the sorrow behind the orphanhood of Jakob Beer. It also helps to understand Ben’s choice, at the end of the book, to return to his wife. His character – though roughly sketched – has roots in the soil of *Miner’s Pond* and *The Weight of Oranges*. If the reader is to follow Derrida, and “minimize the authority of the producer,” he or she would entirely lose this connection.

Structural Questions

Both *Miner’s Pond* and *The Weight of Oranges* have a similar structure. The two collections both begin with a single poem as Part One, and, in each case, this single poem is the title poem of the collection. Notable, also, in the form of the poems of these books, are the quotations that serve as epigraphs. The reading that Michaels has done spans the globe, ranging from Osip Mandelstam to Johannes Kepler to Fyodor Dostoevsky to Charles Baudelaire to Elisabeth Borchers. These, then, are not simply poets, poets whose poetic works stand as influences for Michaels, and have been cited for this reason. Instead, there is a Russian novelist, a Dutch mathematician, a Parisian *flâneur*, and a host of other, international figures. This is the ‘post-national anxiety of influence,’ then, where the poet selects her anxieties from a global assortment of characters.

Lastly, there is Michaels' latest collection, *Skin Divers*, published in 1999, to wide critical acclaim. Many of the poems in *Skin Divers* are tremendously personal, following themes that will be familiar to readers of *Miner's Pond*, *The Weight of Oranges*, or *Fugitive Pieces*: family, memory, and nature. Perhaps the most important poem in the collection is "Last Night's Moon," a poem that Michaels dedicates to Tu Fu, the ancient Chinese writer. Michaels selects, as this poem's epigraph, two lines from Tu Fu's "Country Poems," a selection of love poems written about the countryside, and the presence of love in its landscapes. The line Michaels chooses – "When will we next walk together / under last night's moon?" – is an ironic twist, a classic poetic invocation of the moon, coupled with the impossibility of walking with someone in the past (except in memory). This poem continues to elucidate themes that are familiar to the reader of Michaels, in a language that has direct ties to the rest of her poetic oeuvre.

The past
is not our own. Mole's ribbon of earth,
termite house,
soaked sponge. It rises,
keloids of rain on wood; spreads,
milkweed galaxy, broken pod
scattering the debris of attention.
Where you are
while your body is here, remembering
in the cold spring afternoon.

The past
is a long bone. (152)

The first notable thing about this passage is the isolation of the two words, “the past,” at the top of the stanza. This separates the object of discussion from the body of the poem, allows Michaels a certain freedom and ability to explicate. This explication, however, will not be a pure definition of “the past.” Michaels is conscious – as the reader must be conscious, in the definition of humanistic formalism, excerpted from Schwarz’s work above – of the fact that her gifts as a poet will only take her so far. She will ultimately fail, in this figurative attempt to define the past, and yet (aware of this failure, but still willing to offer her linguistic exposition of it) she moves forward.

“Last Night’s Moon” offers a string of complex, allusive definitions of the past. For Michaels, as the reader learns in *Fugitive Pieces*, the past is a complex substance, and crucial in the way memory ensnares it; the characters of the novel, particularly Jakob, cannot overcome their memories of trauma, cannot live productive, post-traumatic lives. The obsession with the past, then – with what can be remembered and pictured and described in language, but cannot be lived again – attains a new primacy in this poem. In the first of the two stanzas, Michaels offers five images to describe the past (and, by extension, memory). “Mole’s ribbon of earth,” “termite house,” “soaked sponge,” “keloids of rain,” and, finally, “milkweed galaxy,” are all images that are supposed to offer, to the reader, a sense of definition, a sense of possibility. Examining these images offers some revealing ideas. Since the past, and memory, must be attached, in a very real sense, to an individual, Michaels is offering a dim assessment of humanity.

If the past is a “mole’s ribbon of earth,” then humanity can be read as moles, blind to all illumination, burrowing through the dark, limited. If the past is a “termite’s house,” then humanity is the termite, parasitic, an insect that destroys the environment in which it lives. The image of the “soaked sponge” is somewhat more difficult to

decipher, except perhaps as a transition into the image of “keloids of rain,” an elegant bit of language, language which ensnares the reader with its individuality. A keloid, defined as a “thick scar resulting from excessive growth of fibrous tissue,” is a remarkably evocative description, first of all, of rain – beading and rising from a wooden surface. There are also the added references to scarring and trauma, which, given much of Michaels’ other subject matter, are critical associative points. The image of a “milkweed galaxy,” is also fruitful. The idea of a ‘galaxy’ conjures the classic picture of the Milky Way – a smear of white, milk-colored stars on a black background. Saying that the past, ‘rises and spreads like milkweed,’ further evokes some of the biological, generative images that Michaels has used in other places to describe the connection between generations.

Finally, the poem offers a fragment of a sentence, defining the past as “where you are / while your body is here, remembering.” This is the most clear and plain language of the poem, thus far, and although the “you” is once again unmoored, once again without a clear referent, it can be taken as the ‘universal’ you. Then, the text offers a line break, and, “The past / is a long bone.” The line break must be read as a pause, as an attempt on the part of the poet, delirious with this out-of-control language, delirious with the five metaphors in ten lines, to take a breath, to make a delineation in her text. This break is also an admission of failure, in a way, because the poem realizes that the definitions and images that it has offered up until this point have not succeeded in defining that simple – yet chimerical – substance: the past. This particular stanza is crucial to Michaels’ body of poetic work because it covers territory that is so crucial to her. These are the things – memory, the past – with which she is obsessed. Yet, like the characters in her novel, she must relinquish control over the very substance of her expression, over the ability of her poem to accurately define the subjects it seeks to define.

Post-national Notes

In 2000, Alfred A. Knopf collected all three of Michaels' books of poems into a single volume. Published under the Borzoi imprint, the austere titled, *Poems*, met with significant critical acclaim. In recent years, it has become unusual for a poet to follow a commercially successful novel – a novel such as *Fugitive Pieces* – with another collection of poems. This has been primarily an economic matter; books of poems are far less fiscally successful, in today's literary marketplace, than novels. Yet, with this edition, Michaels reaffirmed, in a way, her commitment to poetry. Even though a major New York press issued it, the collection sold far fewer copies than a novel could have – potentially – sold.

At the conclusion of these three books, Michaels offers a two-page appendix, entitled, "A Note on the Text." In this 'note,' she elucidates some of the less well-known associations made by her texts, giving thumbnail biographies of many of the figures who provide the epigraphs for the poems. The post-national nature of this note cannot be ignored. The roster of names swings wildly across the map of Europe and Africa, settling on artists whose lives have somehow been valuable to Michaels' writing process. Though the international commitment of an artist who writes about a time – and place – removed from her own is obvious, the interior, personal manner in which Michaels writes makes her work unique. She is, in some sense, the quintessential "border writer," writing in the space between past and present, between

cultural identities. Her work, while touched by the work of nations and nationalism, is in no way defined by it. *Fugitive Pieces*, cobbled from the dark spaces of memory, offers a voice of testimony, a new interpretation of a significant – and seemingly unspeakable – sorrow.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

These, then, are four authors whose remarkable work has, perhaps, created a small new branch of literary study. What are the directions that post-national fiction could take in the future, both critically, and as an offshoot of American, or international, literature? Hopefully, it will not be transformed in the way that *The English Patient* was transformed in Hollywood (though, in a way, the critic could argue that this transformation did, in some way, serve to help the plight of the post-national individual). Perhaps more socially critical fiction – fiction that has the teeth of Hemon’s condemnation of the fast food industry – will soon appear in the pages of *The New Yorker*. Perhaps the deepest areas of language and sorrow will be articulated with more precision, much in the way that Michaels strive to explicate what has previously been worldless. Perhaps Lahiri’s wide-ranging set of influences will expand to include another culture, another nationality.

What is perhaps most interesting about these works, however – and what will be interesting to see in post-national works of the future – is how they delineate a new, interior space: The multilingual place of refuge. In many cases, these writers start with the blank slate – the new love affair, the orphan, the refugee, the badly-wounded

amnesiac or trauma survivor – and then build new identities for their characters. These are individuals who must build something *of* themselves, and who seek, for the most part, to build without the help of nationality, or national identity.

In his essay, “Conrad’s Quarrel With Politics in *Nostramo*,” Daniel Schwarz writes about Conrad’s life.

An orphan since childhood, an expatriate living in an adopted country with a tradition of strong family ties, a man who did not become a father or husband until middle age, Conrad was preoccupied with the value and meaning of traditional family ties and figurative variations of them within interpersonal relationships. (566)⁶⁸

We see traces of Conrad’s experiences in his work, in the questions he battles and debates – many of which are similar to questions posed by post-national fiction. Conrad’s aversion to political questions came from his need to express, in part, the anguish of the orphan; these post-national writers – orphaned from the social whole by their solitary profession – seek to heal their own idiosyncratic locations of wounding. This healing takes place, in a way, in the literature, in the fiction, itself. Bakhtinian heteroglossia – this is the quintessential expression of the post-national text.⁶⁹ The interior, moral and psychological worlds of the characters compete with the exterior, political worlds of the text. These worlds, in turn, compete with the imagination of the author. Unraveling the knots of this narrative – making the voices diverge and be heard – this is perhaps the goal of the post-national critic.

⁶⁸ Schwarz, Daniel. “Conrad’s Quarrel With Politics in *Nostramo*.” *College English*, Vol. 59, No. 5. (Sep., 1997), pp. 548-568.

⁶⁹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

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