

The PseudoHerodotean Origins of *The English Patient*

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THE STORY OF HOW HERODOTUS came into Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is of some interest in its own right, especially since it appears to have been by a "pseudoHerodotean" path of inquiry carried out by the author in light of a poetic vision that he pursued as a quasi-historical event. While the term "pseudoHerodotean" has pejorative overtones, it is meant primarily as an accurate descriptive: "pseudoHerodotean" attempts to catch the complexity of Ondaatje's self-conscious exercise in historical inquiry (Herodotean *historia*), in a way that ultimately abuses *historia* for the sake of *poetica*. It is this unHerodotean abuse of *historia* that makes it "pseudoHerodotean." Ironically, it was Ondaatje's pseudoHerodotean use of *historia* that led him to discover Herodotus, the father of Western history, in the hands of the Hungarian explorer, László Almásy. And it was clearly this discovery that proved crucial to the writing of the *Patient*, where it gave rise to the enigmatic figure of Almásy-Herodotus. This figure of Herodotus in the hands of Almásy provides an "object correlative" for Ondaatje's (postcolonial) *ambivalence* toward the "grand narrative" of Western history.¹ Such ambivalence informs Ondaatje's abuse of historical

1 "Ambivalence," a key term in postcolonial theory, "describes the complex mix of

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research, historical narrative and historical fiction that is here characterized as pseudoHerodotean.

Our concern is not so much with a textual study of the *Patient*, as it is with an examination of the author's account of its origins in several interviews, his historical research connected with the Royal Geographical Society in the 1930s, and a historiographic comparison on key points with *The Histories* of Herodotus. Several minor points of speculation in the paper might be resolved by asking the author—for instance, whether he actually read Almásy's monograph, *Récentes explorations dans le Désert Libyque*. Personally, I am reluctant to ask the author, partly because I do not wish to intrude into his (busy) private life, and partly because I enjoy the freedom to speculate upon what the author has made public without recourse to authorial verification.² (Look at how “upstairs” verification of a goal has ruined hockey!)

Our reliance on the author's commentary on his own work and its origins also raises the question of how far we can trust him to speak knowingly or truthfully about it. Ondaatje's reluctance to speak straightforwardly about himself and, in a lesser way, about his work is well-documented (Jewinski 10; Solecki 321).³ His penchant for personal mythology (at least as a younger author) is equally well-known (despite his criticism

attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 12).

- 2 Tom Penner has made an insightful study of the problem of authorial status that occurs *within* the *Patient* in light of Foucault's “Author-Function,” which (among other things) demands that we name the writer in order to understand the text” (78). Penner concludes his study by suggesting that the *Patient* offers “a newly reconceived notion of the author within writing,” in which “some sort of post-authorial anonymity is presenting itself as an alternative to the hegemony of the name” (92).
- 3 Ondaatje's authorial reluctance to explain his work is at odds with George Woodcock's perception of Ondaatje's place in literary history as part of a (“premodern postmodern”) movement whose work “challenges an elitist critical supposition that was evident well into the 1950s and inspired the New Critics and their kin. It was that the work of art, whatever its medium, acquired an autonomy that detached it—as a total artifact—from the artist and his background, and even more from the reader or viewer or listener who contemplated it. Essentially, if one accepts such an attitude, the creator of the object takes on a semi-divine aloofness. His role has ended with the production of the artifact which then lives by and in its own light. But, going back in spirit to the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century masters of open fiction, writers like Ondaatje ... place themselves in the position of conspirators with their readers, and in a true sense community—which we have often been told is the end of literature—exists as we share the writer's intensity of discovery and irony at his own pretensions” (136).

of Leonard Cohen on that score [*Leonard Cohen* 14]), and novelised in *Running in the Family* (Barbour 136; Bush 239; Jewinski 112–17; Hutcheon, “Running” 307). It could even be that he mythologizes (habitually or unconsciously) his own *modus operandi*. (After all, personal memory, Ondaatje reminds us, is constantly subject to revision [Wachtel 258].) But based on its remarkable consistency in different tellings, and its consistency with earlier accounts of how his works originated, his account of the *Patient’s* origins are quite believable.⁴ *Caveat lector*—it may not be the whole truth and nothing but the truth. (For example, he never mentions a rather obvious debt to Robertson Davies’ *Fifth Business* for the basic conceit of an “English patient,” and the use of the Herodotean story of Candaules, which must have come into play at some point.) Hopefully, the insight gained by our study of his authorial commentary justifies our use of it “as is.”

§1

“I fell burning into the desert.... It was the time of the war in heaven.” (5)

Of the genesis of the *Patient* Ondaatje insists that it originated with an image: “It began with this [image of a] plane crash and it went on from there” (Kamiya). “I had this little fragment of a guy who had crashed in the desert. I didn’t know who he was, or anything” (Scobie 92).⁵ The creative process by which a single poetic image evolved into a complex work of “historical” fiction began with a compulsion (characteristic of the author) toward historical inquiry, what Herodotus calls “*historia*”: “Almost the first image I had was of this man who was a complete mystery to me. I had to find out who he was” (Wachtel 253–54). The origins of the *Patient* lay precisely in Ondaatje’s pursuing an artistic vision as though it were a historical event, whose truth he felt compelled to “uncover” not in the subjective realm of his own imagination, but in the objective realm of history.

4 Ed Jewinski (131–33) appears to accept the veracity of Ondaatje’s story. Besides, if we suspect Ondaatje of intentionally misleading us, why concern ourselves with anything he says about his work?

5 “It is typical of Ondaatje,” explains Scobie, “that he would begin his book with an image, rather than a character or a plot; his sensibility as a writer is grounded in poetry, and all his ‘novels’ may be described as poetic novels” (92). Mundwiler’s study of “word, image, and imagination” in Ondaatje’s earlier work analyses the texts in light of Continental philosophy; it concerns itself with the “imaginative force of his work” (50) rather than the imaginative process involved in creating it.

Now, why did this plane crash? What did that have to do with this guy in the plane? Who was the guy? When was it happening? Where was it happening? All those things had to be uncovered or unearthed, as opposed to being sure in my head. (Kamiya)⁶

As in his earlier novels, then, the *Patient* arose from Ondaatje's search for a "history" in which to ground his poetic vision.⁷

EW Whether it's Billy the Kid, or a New Orleans jazz musician, or your own father, you often start with historical individuals in your fiction. In *The English Patient* you started with an image in your mind of a man crashing a plane in the desert. But then during your research you found a historical figure on whom to base that dream. Why do you turn to fact for your fiction?

MO I find the world around me more interesting than what I can come up with inside my own head.... Writing links up one's own life with the history of our time, which may go back

6 Cf. Scobie: "I didn't know who he was," Ondaatje confesses, so the business of the novel becomes the telling of a story to explain who he was. How did he get there? Why was he burning? What happened next" (93)? Carrie Dawson infers that Scobie is suggesting here (rightly, in her view) that "Ondaatje toys with the genre of detective writing" (67). Dawson, however, disagrees with Scobie about Ondaatje's purpose: "Whereas I have suggested that Ondaatje alludes to the detective genre as a means of provoking the reader's desire for conclusiveness, Stephen Scobie argues that *The English Patient* fulfils its generic mandate as detective fiction and 'answers the questions implied by Ondaatje when he remarks, "I didn't know who he was, or anything"' (68). Since Scobie never refers to the detective genre (note 11 on page 105 refers to the genre "spy fiction"), it would be safe to say that his remark only coincidentally suggested to Dawson that Ondaatje was alluding to the detective genre. Although in the *Patient* Carravagio pursues the identity of the English patient like a detective, Ondaatje pursued the identity of his visionary man more like a historian. Detectives and historians share some things in common, but the forensic tools of the detective were not employed by Ondaatje in his research, but those of the historian—researching archives—were. Ondaatje's recent work, *Anil's Ghost*, which centres on the work of a forensic anthropologist, better fits the detective genre than the *Patient*.

7 *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) treats of Western gunfighter William H. Bonny; *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), of 1920s New Orleans jazz musician Buddy Bolden; *Running in the Family* (1982), of the Ondaatje family history in Ceylon; *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), of the influence in 1920s Toronto of wealthy developer Ambrose Small and powerful politician R. C. Harris. His latest novel, *Anil's Ghost* (2000) treats of the Sri Lankan civil war of the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s.

to the fourth century. You place yourself against the cave wall, where hundreds of years of art have been inscribed, then you link yourself to it in some way. For me, that's the relationship between history and writing, all contemporary writing. I'm always more fascinated by minor characters in history, people who don't usually get written about ... In *The English Patient* I drew on Count Almásy the spy, but mostly on the explorer, a really respected explorer. (Wachtel 257)

Published in 1992, the novel had its unconscious origins much earlier, perhaps in a 1978 trip to Cairo, cited in close conjunction with his seminal vision of a plane crash.

WD Where did you get the central image of the plane crash, do you even remember?

MO I just got the image and it was there. The artist, Joseph Beuys, was in a plane crash in the far north, not in the desert, but I already had this image in my head. It was one of those things where I'd heard about Beuys and his obsession with felt and that worked its way in too. That was enough. I didn't need to know anymore. The medicine man ...

WD Yes, where did that come from?

MO That was an adaptation of something I'd seen in Cairo. I was there in 1978. You pick up a gesture or an image from a long time ago. You put yourself in a position where you come up with those more subliminal references, and you have to keep writing in order to find those sorts of things. (Dafoe)

It is interesting that Ondaatje knew, when he heard of Beuys' crash, that he was not the man of his vision. But how did he come to recognize his man as the (relatively unknown) desert explorer, László Almásy, who, though a pilot, was not involved in a plane crash? How did he know that his poetic image of a man who crashed a plane into the desert was not of the artist who did crash a plane, but of the explorer who did not? While Beuys' "obsession with felt" would contribute something to the realisation of Ondaatje's vision, he seems to have been disqualified as a possible suspect on the basis that he crashed "in the far north, not in the desert." More important than where Ondaatje's man fell from, it seems, was where he fell to: whereas one aviator fell from the sky, the other explored the desert.

By his own account, Ondaatje's intuitive search for the identity of his man meant turning his gaze away from the mythic reaches of the sky from

which he fell, like Lucifer or Icarus, archetypes of artistic *hybris*,⁸ and looking instead to the ground where he crashed, the desert, a land with a geography and a history into which he could inquire.

First came a sense of place, the North African desert.

I had to find out who he was. And then a lot of the landscapes and situations that had been in my mind for a long time, that had to do with the desert and with exploration, entered the book. I'd been to parts of the desert in North Africa, which had always fascinated me, but I hadn't really thought about its staying with me. Once I started writing this book, though, I realized that this guy had crashed in the desert, and had been involved with the Bedouin. So where in the desert was he? Which desert? Libyan? Egyptian? (Wachtel 254)

Then came a sense of time, the great age of desert exploration of the 1930s.

When I was writing *The English Patient*, what became really interesting was how the patient evolved. At first, I didn't know if I liked him at all. I wasn't sure if he was a villain or what. And after about three years, I discovered a voice for him, and once he had a voice.... At one point, the patient talks about an aerodrome, as opposed to an airport, and, bang I realized I was in another era, writing alongside him. (Dafoe)

Having grounded his vision in the historical particularity of time and place, he could begin the historian's job of "research," of Herodotean *historia*.

I had to do some research at the Royal Geographical Society in London—a wonderful place. My first day there, a Mr Trout came down the stairs. He said, "What can I do for you?" I said, "I want the desert in 1935," and he took me to a room, which was covered with newspapers, just scattered on the floor for about the last hundred years. I started to read about explorers from that period. (Wachtel 254)

§2

Herodotus' *Histories* begins with a prefatory section called the "proem" that puts the mythic past of Greek epic into the mouths of certain Persian *logioi*, chroniclers or storytellers. Why Herodotus does this is unclear, but it likely has to do with his need to reject this mythic past, somewhat hal-

8 Yet, this aspect of his vision remains crucial: when the patient falls from the sky, it was "the time of the war in heaven" (5).

lowed in Greek tradition by the unofficial authority of the “divine Homer” and other epic poets, as simply beyond the reach of historical inquiry (Lateiner 38–43). At least, that is how his proem ends, and his historical narrative begins.

That is how the Persians say [the wars of the fifth century BC between Greece and Persia] came to be, finding the source of their hostile relations with Greece in the sack of Troy.... But I am not here to pronounce judgement on these stories and say whether things came about in this way or not. Instead, I shall begin with what *I myself know* [*oida autos*], moving on with my own account of the matter only after I have marked out the man who first initiated the acts of injustice towards the Greeks. (*Hdt.* 1.5–6)⁹

Herodotus turns away from the poetic world of myth at the beginning of *The Histories* to deal only with the truth he can verify by way of *historia*. Like Herodotus, Ondaatje undertakes *historia* for the truth of his vision by turning away from the realm of imagination to the world of historical individuals circumscribed by time and place. On the other hand, it was never the historical Almásy Ondaatje was in search of per se, but only the historical counterpart of his vision. Characteristic of Ondaatje’s work is a certain “playful” engagement with the historical that was operative when he researched his vision.

All these things grew out of this one image of a burned man. And the research at the Geographical Society put me in touch with certain stories that were half fiction, half fact. (Wachtel 254)¹⁰

9 Translations of Herodotus are my own, of the Oxford text, *Herodoti Historiae*, prepared by Hude, except for passages quoted from *The English Patient*.

10 Barbour observes of *In the Skin of a Lion* how, “In a processual *mise-en-abyme*, Patrick performs the authorial research authenticating the story of ‘The Bridge’ we have already read, except that the photographs and letters of Cato, Hana’s father, are inventions within the text placed at the same level of ontological reality as the photographs and newspaper stories on the building of the Bloor Street viaduct. The juxtaposition of ‘real’ and invented documents creates another instance of ‘ontological flicker’ ... in the text, implying the instability of all writing” (195).

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Unlike Herodotus, Ondaatje's "objective" research serves a "subjective" vision that makes him quite irresponsible as a "historian" in an academic sense, as he himself is the first to admit.

WD You work from a central idea, or image, and it sounds like you do a certain amount of research. How does research lead to invention and where does it get in the way of invention?

MO That's still a very difficult thing to know. You can always fuck up by having too much research. You can paint yourself into a corner by finding out everything about 1926. Or you can hear someone on a bus say something that happened to somebody, and that's enough to keep you going for 50 pages. It's difficult to know what's right and wrong. The kind of research I do, as a result, is quite intentionally random.... Sometimes it's not real research, but an invented research. With *The English Patient*, I did go to the Royal Geographic Society but I didn't spend that long there, a couple of afternoons actually. They weren't very friendly. "What specifically do you want?" they asked, and I didn't know what I specifically wanted. I went away and came back and said I want to find out about something or other in the desert in 1935, and then they let me in. And once I was in, then I could look around in a more random way. It is a defensive kind of research, I don't want to know everything about the desert in 1935. I needed space to invent, choreograph. (Dafoe)

The unHerodotean character of Ondaatje's literary approach to history, his exercise of poetic license in the subjective appropriation of the methods of *historia* for the aims of *poetica*, is fundamentally at odds with the nature of Herodotean inquiry, whose stated aim is to abandon the poetic world of a mythic past for the objective world of scientific inquiry (however much Herodotus might occasionally abuse that aim himself.)

Like Herodotus, and so far "Herodotean," Ondaatje turns away in his quest for the "truth" of his image from the poetic realm as uncertain to the objective (outside his head) realm of historical fact. Unlike Herodotus, however, and so far "unHerodotean," his interest in the historical is subordinated to his literary aim, which ultimately sacrifices historical fact to literary fiction.¹¹ Thus, as both Herodotean in its initial abandonment of

11 "I have argued throughout this study [of Ondaatje's work]," writes Barbour, "that Ondaatje's texts are indeterminate, and that nothing, not even the documentation upon which they are based, escapes the rough if loving hands of change and chance. When everything is in flux and ambiguity rules over all, neither

poetica for *historia*, and unHerodotean in its final abandonment of *historia* for *poetica*, Ondaatje's use of *historia* is pseudo-Herodotean.

At this point, we wish to pay less attention to the “pseudo” aspect than to the “Herodotean” aspect of Ondaatje's *historia*. What we want to recognize here is the degree to which he felt compelled to engage in historical research, and how essential that engagement was to the creation of the English patient, the character in particular, and the story in general. At this point in the creative process, his was a poetic vision in need of a historical reality, even if in the end that historical reality would be sacrificed to his poetic vision.

§3

It was certainly his study of the desert that led Ondaatje to discover that his man belonged to the Royal Geographical Society of the 1930s, but it would seem that the trip to London was not all that was required for him to discover that the particular man he was looking for was Almásy (since he did not request information on him by name). Indeed, it may be that he went to London to research, rather than discover, Almásy. Whatever the precise chronology of steps taken in his *historia*, the particular information required to differentiate Almásy among the other desert explorers did come from another source. Like Herodotus, often characterized as an “oral historian,”¹² Ondaatje supplemented his *historia*, based so far on what he could learn for himself about the “history” of his man from the desert (Herodotean *opsis*), with what he learned about him by hearsay (Herodotean *akoe*) (Lateiner 190–91; O. Murray 220). For Ondaatje, “Herodotus’ sense of history is great because it’s very much based on

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new writing nor the old upon which it is superimposed can be fixed. History as fiction and fiction as history keeps writing over each other in the palimpsest of the novel. Ondaatje's cavalier distortion of his sources simply signals one more level of fictional invention working in the text” (180).

12 Herodotus' *Histories* marks the transition from oral to written history, with his own sources being principally oral (Gould 40–41). As the Greek historiographer, Oswyn Murray explains, “it is clear that he did not regard written documents as an important source of information, indeed that he knew no language but Greek. Herodotus' own characterization of his sources is always the same, and is consistent with the types of information he gives. He claims to practise that most modern of historical disciplines, oral history, the collection and interpretation of the living, spoken tradition of a people: his sources are ‘sight and hearing’ what he has seen and what he has been told; the two of course interrelate, since monuments and natural phenomena preserve and call forth verbal explanations” (220).

rumor.¹³ If he heard a story in the desert, he wrote it down” (Dafoe). Just so did Ondaatje’s research bring to mind a “rumour” (Herodotean *logos*, O. Murray 222) that helped him finally to piece together his man’s “history.”

I originally found out about Almásy through a friend of mine’s parents who were in Cairo during the war. Rommel had sent a spy to Cairo to send information back to the Germans. And he used a copy of *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier as the code book. Ken Follet wrote a book about it called *The Key to Rebecca*.¹⁴ The spy was finally captured by the British, and my friend’s parents were involved with his capture. So I was asking them about it. And in a non-fiction book about the episode, there was this paragraph of how the spy got to Cairo. He was taken across the desert by Almásy, an explorer. Almásy seemed much more interesting to me than the spy. Who was this guy? What was he doing there? So I found out more about him.... So that’s how I got interested in this man. And it opened up a whole world of explorers, and a way of seeing the world. (Dafoe)

The discovery of Count László Almásy, a desert explorer with one foot firmly rooted in the world of history, the other dangling in the land of fiction, must have made Ondaatje wonder if this was not his man, the one he “saw” crash into the desert.

According to his Hungarian biographer, Zsolt Török, Almásy is by all accounts an exciting figure, “one of the last romantic explorers.” Ironically, as a result of the *Patient’s* success, first as a novel but enormously more so as an Oscar-winning film, we now know more about him than even

13 Ondaatje has a pseudoHerodotean interest in oral history. For Herodotus, the principal task of the historian is to preserve oral history in writing. Herodotus thus uses oral history to construct a written history, which becomes the “official” historical narrative of the West. Ondaatje is noted for his use of (at times fictive) oral history to deconstruct “official” written history (Barbour; Heble; Hutcheon *Canadian*).

14 “Before being portrayed as a explorer, soldier, lover, spy, in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient* ... Almásy had been immortalized in several fiction (fiction-action) works including Ken Follett’s *Key to Rebecca* where he was portrayed as a Libyan desert explorer in the service of the German Wehrmacht. When ww2 broke out, Laszlo Almásy, a veteran pilot from the First World War, joined the pro-German Hungarian air force. In view of his background and language skills he was seconded to the service of Lieutenant General Waldemar Kenese who in turn passed him on to Rommel’s Afrika Korps where he was promoted to flight lieutenant teaching the German flyers rescue, first aid, and survival tactics in desert warfare” (Raafat).

Ondaatje cared to know.¹⁵ In Török's view, "László Almásy (1895–1951) the important Hungarian desert explorer is a real person, while his character in the Oscar-winner film, *The English Patient* is mostly fictitious [sic]." How much Ondaatje learned about Almásy we don't know;¹⁶ but we do know that he was interested neither in knowing everything about him, nor in using all that he knew.

In *The English Patient* I drew on Count Almásy the spy, but mostly on the explorer, a really respected explorer. I used the first part of his life and then moved on into fiction. (Wachtel 257)

Despite Török's misgivings and Ondaatje's nonchalance, Ondaatje's Almásy remains remarkably consistent in the main with Török's biographical profile. Poetic license is chiefly exercised in his fictionalization of Almásy's inner life and his romance with Katherine Clifton. The only contradiction of his public profile is the account of his death. According to Török, László Almásy died in 1951 "of dysentery in Salzburg as the nominated director of the Desert Institute of Cairo."¹⁷

Granted that all the details of Török's biography of Almásy were not available to Ondaatje at this time, at least two details must have been available to suggest that Almásy was his man: that he explored the desert and flew a plane. The only historical detail to oppose his identification was

15 Barbour observes about Ondaatje's earlier work that "Ondaatje has always been lucky in his choice of subjects, insofar as the documents about each of them have been few and fragmentary at the time he was writing through, around, and beyond them. This is true not only of Mrs Fraser, but also of Billy the Kid (where there was a plethora of material but almost all of it was hearsay) and Buddy Bolden. In all three cases, works of historical scholarship appeared after his books, possibly granting them an even greater fictional autonomy" (34).

16 Ondaatje acknowledges that his research was intentionally limited, and by no means exhaustive (Wachtel 257). By Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's account, it did not go beyond what he found out in London: "Ondaatje explained to me during two telephone calls in 1993 that, beyond the sources he cites in his acknowledgements in *The English Patient* (304–06), he was unaware of the history of any of the characters in his novel. He was unfamiliar with the questions concerning Almásy in Hungarian and German sources, and he did not know that Lady Clayton East Clayton [sic] died in a plane crash one year after her husband's death" (Truth 142). "On the other hand," Zepetnek has since noted, "Derek Finkle, in an article entitled 'A Vow of Silence' suggests that Ondaatje has always been cognizant in most exacting terms of historical backgrounds in his writing" ("History"). He concludes: "We simply do not know whether or how much Ondaatje researched Almásy."

17 Details of Almásy's controversial biography are available on-line from Török; much is covered in Zepetnek, "History."

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the nature of his death. It is probable that he read Almásy's obituary as reported in the *Geographical Journal*, June 1951, of the Royal Geographical Society: "Ladislav [sic] Almásy.¹⁸ The Egyptian press announces the death in Innsbruck last March of the well-known Libyan Desert explorer, L. E. Almásy" (G. Murray 253–54). Assuming he learned the circumstances of his death (whether from this or another source), Ondaatje must have been disappointed that it did not somehow relate to crashing a plane in the Libyan desert. How, then, could this man become his English patient, the historical persona of the archetypal vision of a man who "fell out of the sky" during "the war in heaven"? If Beuys, the artist, could not be this figure because he did not crash in the desert, how could Almásy, the explorer, become this figure when he did not fall out of the sky?

Well, obviously, this detail did not stand in the way. (Ondaatje would invent a fictional death for *his* Almásy.) So it must have been the case that Almásy fit the bill well enough in other ways. There does remain one more detail of Ondaatje's research on Almásy to take into consideration, which best explains how he clinched the role of the English patient. Since Almásy was a member of the Royal Geographical Society, the Society would have archived some of his papers, at least those published by the Society. So it is likely that while researching in the Society's archives in London, Ondaatje discovered (whether directly or indirectly) the existence of Almásy's monograph, *Récentes explorations dans le Désert Libyque*. And there, too, did he most likely make the momentous discovery that I believe "marked" Almásy as his man, and transformed the historical Almásy into the pseudohistorical English patient: the final chapter of Almásy's monograph was entitled, "Hérodote et les récentes explorations dans le Désert."¹⁹

As we saw earlier, it belongs to the nature of Herodotean *historia* to determine the proper starting point of a historical narrative. For Herodo-

18 As Dawn Barclift points out, "Almasy's [sic] name has never been Ladislaus. This is a Slavic (part. Polish) rendition, and Hungarians/Magyars have absolutely no connection either racially or linguistically with the Slavic peoples. The correct name is Laszlo, and, according to Almasy family records, he died in Salzburg—not Innsbruck." Yet, Almásy's British colleague, Richard Bermann, refers to him as "my Hungarian friend Ladislaus Edward de Almásy," and that is the name by which he is finally identified by Caravaggio: "The last person I expected to find here was Count Ladislaus de Almásy" (252). Ondaatje seems unaware of the controversy, despite Almásy's diatribe against names: "Erase the family name!" (139).

19 "Almásy's chapter on Herodotus is, of course, an important element of Ondaatje's novel itself" (Zepetnek 145).

tus, this was obtained by turning away from the poetic tradition which would root the historical origins of the war between Greece and Persia in the Homeric mythology of the Trojan war. In his role as *histor*, arbiter of history, Herodotus chose instead to begin with “what *I myself know*, moving on with my own account of the matter only after I have marked out the man ... Croesus, a Lydian by birth, son of Alyattes, *tyrannos* of those peoples who lived this side of the river Halys.”²⁰ Ondaatje exercises a similar role as pseudohistor in deciding to anchor his poetically inspired narrative in the historical details of the career of László Almásy. What Ondaatje found in Almásy, and what marked him out as his man—though he never fell from the sky nor crashed in the desert—was precisely his acquaintance with Herodotus.

By the time he discovered Almásy, Ondaatje was already somewhat familiar with Herodotus: “I already read some of him before” (Dafoe). It would seem that, in his research at the Geographical Society, he first came across Herodotus not among Almásy’s papers, but those of another of the desert explorers.

Then there was a reference to him in one of the explorer’s desert journals; one guy who said, “I was responsible for our library on one of our expeditions. But our library was only one book, Herodotus.” (Dafoe)

Ondaatje is referring to a paper that Richard Bermann had read at the “Evening Meeting of the [Geographical] Society on 8 January 1934.”

As the expedition’s official chronicler I was in charge of our travelling library, which, I am sorry to state, mainly consisted of one book: the “Histories” of old Herodotus, the best Bae-deker of the Libyan Desert still existing. (458)

Bermann was a close friend of Almásy, whom he accompanied on a 1933 expedition in search of the fabled Wadi [Valley] of Zerzura in the Gilf Kebir.

20 As the Herodotean scholar, James Romm, has pointed out, “it would have been easier and more natural to start book 1 with [the Persian king] Cyrus and then give an account of Croesus at the point in Cyrus’ life where the Persians conquer Lydia” (64). But for reasons of historical causality as well as thematic narrative, Herodotus chose to begin with the story of Croesus, partly because this allowed him to begin his historical narrative with the story of Croesus’ ancestor, Candaules. (Likewise, Katherine’s recitation of the story of Candaules in Herodotus before her husband and Almásy sparks the adulterous affair which sets in motion the main plot of the *Patient*.)

My interest in the Libyan desert was first excited by my Hungarian friend Ladislaus Edward de Almásy. For a number of years he used to spend his winters in Egypt and the Sudan; he had become one of the pioneers of motoring in the desert. When he came back he used to tell me about his latest exploits and his further plans. Soon he had become fascinated by the old Zerzura problem, and he would discuss it with me. (456)

There are several references to Bermann in the *Patient*.²¹ For the most part he shows up in chapter four, “South Cairo 1930–1938” (131–145), which incorporates bits of the proceedings of the Geographical Society, and opens with Ondaatje’s own summary statement of the history of desert exploration—which begins with a significant nod to Herodotus.

There is, after Herodotus, little interest by the Western world towards the desert for hundreds of years. From 425 BC to the beginning of the twentieth century there is an averting of eyes. Silence. The nineteenth century was an age of river seekers. And then in the 1920s there is a sweet postscript history on this pocket of earth, made mostly by privately funded expeditions and followed by modest lectures given at the Geographical Society in London at Kensington Gore. (133)

Ondaatje’s brief account of the Geographical Society in the 1920s and 1930s is succeeded by Almásy’s personal recollection of it (135–141). Almásy’s recollection draws heavily on information from Bermann’s paper, which Ondaatje cites in the list of “Acknowledgements” (305). It begins with a list of explorers of the Gilf Kebir that ends with mention of Bermann.

In 1930 we had begun mapping the greater part of the Gilf Kebir Plateau, looking for the lost oasis that was called Zerzura....We were desert Europeans. John Bell had sighted the Gilf in 1917. Then Kemal el Din. Then Bagnold, who found his way south into the Sand Sea. Madox, Walpole of Desert Surveys, His Excellency Wasfi Bey, Casparius the photographer, Dr. Kadar the geologist and Bermann. (135)

Almásy’s recollection comes to focus on the 1933 expedition (139–141), in which they possibly discovered Zerzura. Ondaatje is following Bermann so closely here that one can almost see the artist at work revising the original historical document into a dramatic piece of fiction. It presents yet another aspect of Ondaatje’s pseudoHerodotean *historia*: his use of Bermann’s historical account of the expedition to furnish Almásy’s personal recollection. ²¹ “Bermann (explorer), 135, 136, 168, 240, describes Asian gardens to English patient, 170” (Mirabile).

lection of it, freely adapting the memory of one explorer to furnish that of a partially fictionalized other:

1933 or 1934. I forget the year. Madox, Casparius, Bermann, myself, two Sudanese drivers and a cook.... We leave Kharga on March 22. Bermann and I have theorised that three wadis written about by Williamson in 1838 make up Zerzura. (139)

Almásy would explain to me that his own belief in the existence of Zerzura was largely based upon the relation of I. G. Wilkinson ... [who] said there are three wadis forming Zerzura.... Almásy had come to the conclusion that Wilkinson's mysterious three wadis ... must lie somewhere in the interior of the Gilf Kebir.... (Bermann 457)

His decision to include Bermann's references to Herodotus in the English patient's remembrance also provides evidence suggestive of how Herodotus came to be worked ever more deeply into the narrative:

We find jars at Abu Ballas with the classic Greek amphora shape. Herodotus speaks of such jars. (140)

Having this book only I had come to know it rather well, and so, in the sight of the jars of Abu Ballas, I read to my companions the following passage from the sixth and seventh chapters of the Third Book of Herodotus: ... Looking at the amphora-shaped vessels of Abu Ballas we remembered that army of the Persian king which had perished in the desert on its march to Siwa.²² (Bermann 458–459)

Bermann and I talk to a snakelike mysterious old man in the fortress of El Jof—in the stone hall that once had been the library of the great Senussi sheik. An old Tebu, a caravan guide by profession, speaking accented Arabic. Later Bermann says “like the screeching of bats,” quoting Herodotus. (140)

I shall always remember a conference we had in the old Senussi fortress of Djof, in the hall which once had been the library of the Freat Senussi Sheikh. Almásy was asking questions of Ibrahim, an old Tebu who was by profession a caravan guide: a snake-like mysterious old man. He spoke Arabic with a strong accent, which made us nickname him Nyiki-Nyiki. For the first

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22 Omitting Bermann's quotation of Herodotus 3.6–7.

time I heard that language “like the screeching of bats” which Herodotus mentions. (Bermann 459)

Oddly enough, *Récents explorations dans le Désert Libyque* is not listed in the “Acknowledgements”—perhaps because it appears in the novel. What does receive acknowledgement is “R. A. Bagnold’s review of Almásy’s monograph on his exploration in the desert” (305; Bagnold). It may be that Almásy’s monograph, because it was too technical, terse, or written in French, was not as easy to draw on directly as Bagnold’s review. Or it may be that Ondaatje simply never read it; that he only had Bagnold’s review, which is cited in Almásy’s obituary in the *Geographical Journal* (G. Murray). Published in an earlier volume of the journal, the review would have been at hand, whereas Almásy’s monograph, published in Cairo and long out of print, may have required more research, which Ondaatje was not interested in doing. What Ondaatje describes in the novel is not the contents of the monograph, but its style.

In the novel, Almásy writes his monograph suffering in the throes of his passion for Katharine.

I worked in the Department of Egyptology on my own book, *Récents explorations dans le Désert Libyque*, as the days progressed, coming closer and closer to the text as if the desert were there somewhere on the page, so I could even smell the ink as it emerged from the fountain pen. And simultaneously struggled with her nearby presence, more obsessed if truth be known with her possible mouth, the tautness behind the knee, the white plain of stomach, as I wrote my brief book, seventy pages long, succinct and to the point, complete with maps of travel. I was unable to remove her body from the page. (235)

The result is to have written a passionless account that suffers by comparison with the accounts of others.

Men had been the reciters of poetry in the desert. And Madox—to the Geographical Society—had spoken beautiful accounts of our traversals and coursings. Bermann blew theory into the embers. And I? I was the skill among them. The mechanic. The others wrote out their love of solitude and meditated on what they found there. They were never sure of what I thought of it all.... For them I was a bit too cunning to be a lover of the desert.... And my own monograph, I must admit, had been stern with accuracy. The fear of describing her presence as I wrote caused me to burn down all sentiment,

all rhetoric of love. Still, I described the desert as purely as I would have spoken of her. (240)

Ondaatje himself was quite taken with the style of writing he found in the *Geographical Journal*, which he allegedly found more “useful” than their information about desert explorations.

What was useful in the Royal Geographic was not so much the information, as it was their manner of writing; very low key, not at all self-aggrandizing, or chest beating, or beautiful sunsets or flies. No complaints. No praise. It was just, you had to get from here to there.... So many kilometers. There’s a waterhole here. That kind of laconic Robert Creeley voice. (Dafoe)

A reasonable conjecture, then, is that Ondaatje was familiar with Almásy’s monograph from Bagnold’s review, and thus aware of the chapter on Almásy’s use of Herodotus in desert exploration, and also perhaps of its stylistic shortcomings, its lack of passion compared to the accounts of Bermann, Bagnold, and the others. While the degree of Ondaatje’s familiarity with Almásy’s monograph is unclear, it is fairly clear that he has used Bermann to furnish his Almásy with a deep familiarity and love for “the ‘Histories’ of old Herodotus, the best Baedeker of the Libyan Desert still existing.” It may indeed be the case that he imports from the writings of the other desert explorers an expressed passion for their work and landscape that the historical Almásy simply did not possess. In other words, he seems to have used Bermann to romanticise Almásy, and also to make central to his character a passion for Herodotus, the English patient’s hero.

§4

To sum up our speculations about the genesis of the English patient: characteristically compelled to unearth a historical source for his poetic vision, in this case a single image of a man crashing a plane into the desert, Ondaatje is led to research the archives of the Royal Geographical Society in London for information about the North African desert of the 1930s. Buried in his memory is a story about a certain Count Almásy, explorer and spy, with a small part in the spy novel, *Key to Rebecca*, and also some familiarity with Herodotus. His research in London puts him in touch with the desert explorers of the first half of the twentieth century, from Bell to Bermann and Almásy. In Bermann, he finds exciting references to the use of Herodotus, whom he remembers as the father of history. Then he uncovers the life and work of Almásy, which brings the old spy story to mind, and makes him wonder if this is not his man. Finally, he discovers

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(directly or through Bagnold) Almásy's treatise on the exploration of the Libyan desert, which includes a chapter on their use of Herodotus. As a result of these findings, Almásy is identified as his man, and Ondaatje leaves London with the "history" of the man who will fall from the sky as the English patient.

Whatever the exact chronology of steps in Ondaatje's *historia*, it undoubtedly required the specific identification of Herodotus with Almásy for Ondaatje to identify him as his man, and successfully transform him into the English patient. We know this must be the case, for the English patient is nothing less than the historical Almásy transformed into the man who not only falls from the sky and crashes into the desert, but also survives with one sole mark of identification, one obscure clue from his past: an English copy of Herodotus.

In the Pisa hospital she had seen the English patient for the first time. A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire.... There was nothing to recognize in him. (48)

And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus' *Histories*, are other fragments—maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing is his own name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless, without rank or battalion or squadron. (96)

If that is how Herodotus came to find a place in the *Patient*, we have yet really to explain why. Why was it Herodotus that, in a pseudoHerodotean sense, "marked" Almásy as the English patient? To begin with, Ondaatje makes it clear that the discovery of Herodotus in the possession of the desert explorers proved a joyous moment, with momentous significance for the theme of his novel.

And I thought that was great, because [Herodotus] was an *historian* writing about a place where these guys are many hundreds of years later. The idea of a contemporary history and an ancient history that links up.... These explorers in the 1930s were out of time. I love the idea of them checking out sand dune formations. I love historical obsessives.... And this wonderful, heroic era of exploration that was then ignored, while the twentieth century became more mercenary or mercantile. (Dafoe)

Herodotus was such a meaningful and fruitful find for Ondaatje because he is himself something of a "historical obsessive," obsessed

above all with what might best be called (to use a favourite word of the author) the “choreography” of history. Ondaatje’s novels are fictionalised histories, which have carved out their own niche in the landscape of Canadian literature precisely by their overt concern with “the problem of history.”²³ Some of the problems with which he deals are the relation of history and fiction;²⁴ the problematic character of historiography; the marginalisation of persons and whole peoples as a by-product of official historiography;²⁵ and the possibilities of recovering the truth of history by means of a historical fiction that intentionally fictionalises the historical to arrive at its “truth.”²⁶ Ondaatje’s work is so characterized by his concern with the “choreography” of history, that one might refer to its as quintessentially “Ondaatjean.”²⁷

With the discovery of Herodotus in *Almásy*, Ondaatje’s obsession with history’s choreography could be addressed more directly in this novel than his earlier works.

Originally, I thought *The English Patient* was going to be a contemporary book, set entirely in that one period of the

23 “Ondaatje’s texts, through their selection and interpretation of past events, are engaged in an examination of this problematic relationship between history and fiction” (Heble 98). “Unlike the traditional historical novelist,” Heble points out, Ondaatje “directs our attention to the fact that we are reading a textual—and, by extension, a subjective and autobiographical—account of history” (97–98).

24 “Ondaatje has always been fascinated by history—seen as a series of arcane stories about the past.... [H]e has cobbled together history’s idiosyncrasies into luminous and complex *bricolages*. Because history itself can be defined as a kind of invention, Ondaatje has taken great pleasure in reinventing various episodes that have caught his fancy. In his hands, even the documents of history slide away from factual representation toward a haunting apprehension of indeterminacy” (Barbour 206–07).

25 “Ondaatje has repeatedly been engaged in an attempt to incorporate marginal figures out of the historical past into a non-historical genre” (Heble 97).

26 Siemerling observes something of the same in *In the Skin of a Lion*: “The juxtapositions and mutual framings of moments normally perceived as isolated in time ... emphasize the simultaneity of different historical and subjectively accessible spaces and times in the novel. Ondaatje answers thus John Berger’s call that serves as a second epigraph: ‘Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.’ *In the Skin of a Lion* interprets effectively some of the possibilities of this manifesto by interweaving different planes of reality and time, thus opening the space for another dimension that coexists with the realities of Toronto (and Ontario) that we may be aware of. Worlds meet in a fluid choreography of possibility and actuality, dream and prophecy, versions of the past, of the present, and possibility of the future” (169).

27 “Of all the Canadian poets who have turned to fiction in the last few decades (Cohen, Atwood, Kogawa, Musgrave, and so on), Ondaatje is the one who seems

Second World War. But once I got into the desert stuff, and through that, to Herodotus, I began picking up a sense of the layers of history. I was going back deeper and deeper in time.... That sense of history, of building overlaid with building, was central to my mind—unconsciously, I think. Looking back now, it seems to have to do with unearthing, baring history. (Wachtel 251)

This act of “baring history” was to be accomplished by “unearthing” the English patient, by way of a pseudoHerodotean *historia* that marked Almásy as the man who fell out of the sky. Though seemingly a matter of circumstances, it was really no accident. It was Ondaatje’s characteristic obsession with grounding his poetic sensibilities in historical reality, in order to uncover the untold truth of history by way of fictionalising the lives of those marginalized by it, that drew him to Almásy as a man of Herodotus. The same pseudoHerodotean obsession with the historical that led Ondaatje to Herodotus in the creative process of writing the *Patient* is what makes Herodotus such a central, symbolic figure in it, representing as the “father of history” the complex character of history itself with which Ondaatje wishes to wrestle here. In particular, it allows Ondaatje to wrestle with the character of his own “metahistorical” approach to

most aware of generic borders, and of how they can be usefully trespassed.... Other writers have played about with the borders between the novel and the short story and even poetry and fictional prose, but Ondaatje takes such play one step further ... he takes it outside the boundaries of what we conventionally accept as *literary* genres (i.e. fictional) and into the discourses of history and biography, even autobiography” (Hutcheon *Canadian* 82). In Hutcheon’s view, history and fiction are inseparable even in Ondaatje’s earliest work: “In writing of both Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden in the self-consciously metafictional way he does, Ondaatje too chooses this middle ground of reference, creating what we might call a ‘historiographic’ referent. Unlike the historical (or real) referent, this one is created in and by the text’s *writing* (hence, *historiographic*). The referent here is doubled; it partakes of two ‘realities’... History, like narrative, becomes therefore a process, not a product.... Here the processes of recording and narrating history becomes part of the text itself” (86). Heble sees the same sort of process: “Through a playful generic questioning of the traditional boundaries between history and fiction, and historical fiction and autobiography, *Coming Through Slaughter* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* reveal themselves to be both imaginative reconstructions of history and self-conscious meditations on the nature and scope of Ondaatje’s own art. For Ondaatje, history, like fiction, is a form of discourse, a reservoir of potential meanings but also a playground for an endless proliferation of revisions and re-interpretations” (98).

Western historiography, an aspect of which we have identified as “pseudoHerodotean.”²⁸

§6

We have so far noted that Ondaatje “marked” Almásy as his man for several reasons: he was an aviator, a desert explorer, and, most importantly, he brought Herodotus into the picture. There were other aspects as well: his fictional appearance in *The Key to Rebecca*, and the historical notoriety which gained him a minor place in literary history as a traitor and Nazi spy. It is not that we have been remiss to emphasise Ondaatje’s interest in Almásy’s association with Herodotus as a desert explorer over his association with Rommel as a Nazi spy. Ondaatje himself has testified that Almásy the spy was always less of interest than the desert explorer (Dafoe; Wachtel 257). On the other hand, given the controversy raised over Ondaatje’s romanticization of an alleged traitor and a fascist (Hurka; Offman), we might wonder if Ondaatje was not simply deflecting unwanted criticism in his account of how he came to write about Almásy. This seems unlikely. There is no attempt in the novel to ignore Almásy’s role as a Nazi collaborator—the acceptance of that public fact is crucial to the narrative. It is the *historical* significance and meaning of the same that is questioned: not the public deed, but its private reason, is what fuels Ondaatje’s fictionalization of Almásy’s memoir. The narrative is propelled by the race toward the point of convergence of the parallel paths of Caravaggio’s interrogation into, and Almásy’s voluntary confession of, his past. By the time Almásy confirms his identity as a Nazi collaborator as a result of a series of narcotic confessions induced by Caravaggio, we have learned of his private reasons for doing so, of a love betrayed by war, and a war betrayed by love. Consequently, as Caravaggio recognizes, “It no longer matters which side he was on during the war” (251).

Almásy’s justification of his treason rests upon his condemnation of the grand narrative of Western history that stems from Herodotus and lends justification to European warfare. It doesn’t matter to Almásy which side he fights on: he is on the other of either side of the nationalist interests invested in the war. Whether he is justified in holding that position is really the whole matter that the novel sets before us. There is evidence that he is, and evidence that he is not. It would seem that we are being

28 See Hayden White’s *Metahistory*, which defines history as “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (ix). (Cited by Hutcheon, *Canadian* 74, n. 15; “Running” 313, n. 5.) Almásy’s commonplace Herodotus is a powerful symbol of White’s view of history as narrative.

Taken in its most literal sense, then, the effect of Ondaatje's choice of his Herodotus-laden Nazi collaborator is to push his reader toward a metahistorical standpoint.

driven to a standpoint which can allow for and reject both judgments. Almásy's personal treason against humanity in siding with the Nazis is contextualised within the West's treason against humanity in the American bombing of Japan. Almásy's guilt as a Nazi collaborator resides within the context of European history—he is the modern counterpart of Herodotus' Croesus, an Eastern enemy of Western freedom. But the guilt incurred by Europeans in its long, dark history of practicing genocide upon non-Europeans, repeated on an unimaginable scale in the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, such guilt condemns the Herodotean narrative of nations that condemns Almásy's treason. Ironically, Almásy is made to bear the burden of guilt for both the Nazi atrocities, as well as those of the American bombing of Japan: "I'll leave you the radio," says Kip to Almásy, during the broadcast of the bombings, "to swallow your history lesson" (285). Taken in its most literal sense, then, the effect of Ondaatje's choice of his Herodotus-laden Nazi collaborator is to push his reader toward a metahistorical standpoint, which would attempt to transcend the standpoint of the Herodotean *histor*; the Herodotean arbiter of historical narrative, who judges whom and what is recorded and how.

This man, Croesus, was the first *we ourselves know* [*he^meis idmen*] among *barbaroi* to have subjected some among Greeks to the payment of tribute.... Before the rule of Croesus, all the Greeks were free. (*Hdt.* 1.6)

For Herodotus, it is the specifically historical fact that Croesus was the first non-Greek to have subjected the Greeks, which endorsed the story of Croesus as the proper starting point for his narrative. As Christ would do centuries later for Christendom, Croesus marks a crucial moment in the Hellenic (view of) history: "before the rule of Croesus, all the Greeks were free."

It was precisely this historical division of time by Herodotus that gave birth to Western historiography. The Herodotean origins of Western historical narrative lie in the historian's judgement that time's endless flow is constituted of specific events, "the great and wondrous deeds of humankind," that we should recognize and record as "historically" significant. Croesus was the *first*. What made Croesus historically significant is that his subjection of the Greeks living in Asia Minor marked the historical beginnings of the war between East and West, a war in which, from a Herodotean standpoint, the cultural divide between East and West was manifested. As such, it marks the beginning of a history that is distinctively that of the "West" against that of the "East."

Ondaatje's appreciation of this fundamental aspect of Western historicism is evidenced in Almásy's rejection of Eurocentric history as composed of such moments as "the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever" (141). As one can tell, Ondaatje's appreciation of this fundamental aspect of Western historiography as the history of (*white*) *firsts* takes the form of a profound rejection of it as *Western*. Indeed, the proper starting point for any further inquiry into Ondaatje's use of Herodotus in the *Patient* would be the postcolonial attitude of *ambivalence* exercised toward Herodotus as the object of both admiration and contempt.²⁹ This ambivalence exists also in Ondaatje's pseudoHerodotean approach to historical research in the writing of the *Patient*, and his earlier works. It is the essential ambivalence of his own attitude toward (Western) history that informed Ondaatje's creation of the figure of Almásy-Herodotus as an "object correlative" for his fascination with and repulsion by the grand historical narrative of the West.³⁰

If we go back to the original image, of a man falling out of the sky into the desert, we find that its Luciferan and Icarian symbolism of human transgression are answered here as well. It is not the transgression against a divine order that directly concerns Ondaatje—another aspect in which he mirrors the *historia* of Herodotus. For in the Herodotean narrative, direct or inspired knowledge of the divine order (divine revelation) is declared off-limits to the historian, the province of poets and soothsayers. Upon the poets' claim to a knowledge of divine intervention in human affairs, the historian makes no judgement, except insofar as to exclude their perception from his own account.³¹ History, as defined by Herodotus, is concerned with the human record of what humans have done, the human achievement. Ondaatje's identification of the falling man with Almásy-Herodotus makes the same judgement: it is not the transgression against divinity with which he is concerned, but the transgression against human-

29 Ondaatje's ambivalence toward Herodotus provides the starting point for my textual study of Ondaatje's use of Herodotus in the *Patient*, "Sleeping with Herodotus in *The English Patient*."

30 "To the extent that the character assumes the function of an 'objective correlative' for the internal world of the narrator, he 'both is and is not' this narrator. In the self-reflexive text, the historical figure begins to address interior aspects of the speaker, who thus becomes another referent" (Siemerling 140). It was, of course, T. S. Eliot who coined the phrase, "objective correlative" as a way of explaining his poetry.

31 While Herodotus rules divine revelation out of history's domain, he does not rule out the possibility of the real or perceived presence of divine intervention,

It is as though
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or conflated.

ity. Thus it is the desert, rather than the sky, that proved the determinant factor in deciding upon his identity.

So far, then, is his *historia* Herodotean. But even here—especially here—there is an unHerodotean aspect to it as well. For Herodotus, the purpose of history and the task of the historian are to preserve the record of human achievement from the endless destruction of time: “*I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, set forth my history, that time may not draw the colour from what Man has brought into being*” (240). Time is our enemy, history our salvation. For Ondaatje’s Almásy-Herodotus, (Western) history is our enemy, time our salvation:

The desert could not be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East. (138–39)

We knew power and great finance were temporary things. We all slept with Herodotus. (142)

It is as though time and history become inverted in the *Patient*, or conflated. For Ondaatje’s Almásy-Herodotus, time *is* history, in the sense that when Almásy reads Herodotus it is the destruction of human achievement, rather than its preservation, that most strikes his mind:

For those cities that were great in earlier times have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before.... Man’s good fortune never abides in the same place. (142)

Ultimately, then, it is Ondaatje’s unHerodotean ambivalence toward history that informs his *historia* and makes it pseudoHerodotean. His latest novel, *Anil’s Ghost*, replaces the enigmatic Western figure of Almásy-

nor the historian’s need to record it. A thematic reason for choosing Croesus as his starting point has precisely to do with this most characteristic aspect of Herodotean history: the fall of Croesus to the Persians is perceived and recorded as the result of divine jealousy and vengeance (*phthonos* and *tisis*). Ondaatje’s narrative shares this aspect of Herodotus as well, as evidenced by how Almásy, like Croesus, is brought by his fate to acknowledge the divine: “When we parted for the last time, Madox used the old farewell. ‘May God make safety your companion.’ And I strode away from him saying, ‘There is no God’” (240–41). “May God make safety your companion, Madox had said. Good-bye. A wave. There is God only in the desert, he wanted to acknowledge that now” (250).

Herodotus with the even more enigmatic Oriental figure of Palipana. Whether Palipana takes Ondaatje beyond the pseudoHerodotean *historia* of the *Patient* is a subject for further study. Astonishing, however, is how accurately Ondaatje's characterization of Palipana's life work as a kind of *choreography*, in which the distinction between history and pseudohistory is transcended, applies to his own:

The detailed verses Palipana had published seemed at first to have ended arguments and debates by historians; they were confirmed by his reputation as the strictest of historians, who had always relied on meticulous research. Now it seemed to others he had choreographed the arc of his career in order to attempt this one trick on the world. Though perhaps it was more than a trick, less of a falsehood in his own mind; perhaps for him it was not a false step but the step to another reality; the last stage of a long, truthful dance. (81)

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