

The Effect of Hypermedia upon the Notion of Nation and Culture: A Space of Flows in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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Abstract

According to Ronald J. Deibert, hypermedia technology has changed the post-modern social epistemology from a stable and fixed identity of nations to multiple identities. As a result of this, the Information Age points to a possible end of separate national identities with their dominating cultures. This has already taken place in literature. Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) best illustrates Deibert's hypermedia theory. Although Ondaatje's story itself, which is based on World War II, has nothing to do directly with a change in the mode of communication, "Erase Nations!" is not only the theme of the novel, but also could be a slogan for the Information Age. This essay intends to take *The English Patient* as a test case of Deibert's media theory to show how multiple identities and cultures are created in the new space of flows. As Deibert suggests, this space of flows provides a novel with new possibilities to develop a multiple self in the "pluralities of worlds and multiple realities." Michael Ondaatje creates various writing spaces for the image of a multiple self--situated in multiple cultures in the same way as multimedia do in computer writing. *The English Patient* provides a model for hypertext, which is essentially a 'fit' between social epistemology and a communications environment.

The notion of nation is closely related to the notion of selfhood, which has its origins in Plato's philosophy. Before Plato there was no self as we understand it today; there was only unified collectivity. The self was multiple and plural based on rhetorical roles in oral poetry; one was identified with every speaker. And one became everything that one remembered because there were no printed words or written words. There was no central, unified identity. Oral culture encourages such multiplicities because it is the only way to remember one's culture. As Eric Havelock observes, "Oral verse was the instrument of a cultural indoctrination, the purpose of which was the preservation of group identity" (Havelock, 1963, 100). As long as one deals with the "spell of tradition," one "cannot frame words to express the conviction that 'I' am one thing and the tradition is another; that I can stand apart from the tradition and examine it; that 'I' can and should break the spell of its hypnotic force" (199). One cannot question cultural tradition in oral poetry, because it disappears the moment it is questioned. It is only when one begins to question and doubt that one develops a sense of 'self' apart from tradition. According to Havelock, it was only at the end of the fifth century that the word *psyche* began to take on new meaning, not as a life force, but as soul, individual mind; soon, it carried all the modern connotations of psyche as "the Separation of the Knower from the Known" (197). So what Plato does in the area of writing, while saying that writing

destroys memory, is really to encourage our rejection of oral culture and multiplicity. What writing does is to separate the individual from the culture in which the individual can stand apart, question, criticize, think, reflect, and have an individual point of view. Therefore, the form of communication shapes the identity.

The birth of the Western self may start from Plato, but it actually develops through printing in the modern period. Indeed, print was “a major factor in the development of personal privacy that marks modern society” (Deibert, 1997, 100). And “in print culture, private reading mixed with and encouraged new forms of literary intimacy and exploration of the self.” The notion of individual identity was tied to the notion of a unified, centralized, and single self. At the same time, because of the mass production of printed materials such as newspapers, magazines and books, printing “fostered the emergence of a new, distinctly modern, imagined community: the nation” (104). In his *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson attributes nationalism to the newspaper and the novel. In any event, the modern view of the self and identity is closely related to printing.

If printing cultivates the notion of modern identity as central, unified and fixed, the hypermedia environment of digitalization and networked computing is marked by a very different post-modern epistemology. According to Ronald J. Deibert, “At the heart of post-modern social epistemology is a forceful reaction against the modernist view of the ‘self’ and individual subjectivity” (181). Postmodern identity is featured as disrupted, fragmented, decentered and multiple, whereas modern identity is whole, unified, centered and single. Similarly, “The postmodern imagined community is thus hyperpluralistic and fragmented” (195). As a result of this, the Information Age points to a possible end of national identities with their dominating cultures.

This projected end of national identities has already taken place in literature. Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992) best illustrates Deibert’s hypermedia theory. Before Ondaatje’s book, there were many novels mainly “premised on the fusion of a single ‘national’ identity,” a “singular identity [which is] reinforced by printed vernaculars and national mass television and radio” (195). For example, in Alistair MacLeod’s *No Great Mischief* (1992), an oral culture on Cape Breton Island in modern times is portrayed as the remnant of a lost Highland “nation” belonging to the narrator’s grandparents which is now being mapped and bounded and transformed by the influence of the book.

To the contrary, the burned patient in Ondaatje’s novel declares, “Erase nations!” thus rejecting an identity fixed by print. Although Ondaatje’s story itself, which is situated at the end of World War II, has nothing to do directly with a change in the mode of communication, “Erase Nations!” as the theme of the novel could almost be a slogan for the Information Age. As Anderson suggests, the novel and the newspaper are the most important forms through which the nation is imagined. However, the idea in this novel of erasing the nation completely goes well beyond this explanation. Anderson was not able to assimilate to his theory a postmodern worldview, and thus failed to see the effect of recent changes in communications technology upon our contemporary social epistemology. Analysis of global marketing indicates that business has become transnationalized without geographical and political boundaries because of the new mode of communication. Deibert points out that “Nationalism, the visceral underpinning of modern world order, is giving way to nichelism—a polytheistic universe of multiple and overlapping fragmented communities above and below the sovereign nation-state” (198). David Williams expresses the same idea saying, “the paradigm of mass communications—in print and in broadcast media—has now broken down,

along with other boundaries that have tended to support individual and national identities. The Information Age points to a possible end of the era of nationalism” (Williams, 2003, 226).

If we look at the nature and shape of his book, the effect of hypermedia upon Ondaatje’s writing will be clear. Opening this novel, the reader seems to enter the Internet with one text after another: Herodotus’s *Histories*, *The Last of the Mohicans* (Ondaatje, 1992, 61), *Kim*, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Tacitus’s *Annals* (93), Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (144). Added to these are the English patient’s own supplements to Herodotus’s *Histories*, including his observations on desert history and his own history; Hana’s text on Caravaggio in the blank page at the back of *The Last of the Mohicans*, and her other text about Kip written into the flyleaf in the last pages of *Kim* (118). All these texts are cradled within Ondaatje’s text of *The English Patient*—a postmodernist text with no borders between individual texts and authors. This text is much the same as Deibert’s description of hypertext: “The hypertextual link ‘indicates the implicit presence of other texts, and the ability to reach them instantly... all texts are virtually co-resident’” (189). Meanwhile, all the original authors have lost their final/last word in this postmodernist text, a privilege which has been the mark of “authorship since the advent of printing.” Deibert says “notions of ‘authorship’ and the ‘sovereign voice’ seem to clash in many ways with the digital universe of hypermedia” (182).

As a matter of fact, the boundary of authorship as ownership has broken down in the English patient’s own book. “It is the book he brought with him through the fire—a copy of the *Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observation—so that they are all cradled within the text of Herodotus” (16). As Williams suggests, it is “no longer really a book—that is, a bounded entity, an authorized text, or even an autonomous voice—it has been turned into a figure of hypertext. He has in fact altered the codex form of the book to the point that it is almost unrecognizable” (227). And that is true, because “The book splayed open, almost twice as its original thickness” (94). It is like writing and editing when one uses a computer for writing.

In addition to his figurative use of hypertext in *The English Patient*, Ondaatje does all kinds of magic with words just as the computer does with its multimedia environment. Poems, prose, maps, music, dances, melody, lyrics, paintings, sculptures, architecture, post cards and so on are all put on the same screen with different windows. The functions of all these forms of art are similar to multimedia in communications technology, where “layers of audio, text, and video that supplement with more detail or provide tangential routes for various topics” (191) appear. There are no boundaries between different media in reading this novel even though the narrative varies from story-telling, or poem-reading which belongs to oral culture, to letter-writing, journal-keeping, prose writing, which belongs to printing, or even to cutting, inserting and pasting, which can also be done in computer writing. “As the hypermedia environment melds graphics, text, and audio in the same mode, communications becomes increasingly ‘mosaic’ or pastiche-like—a characteristic most apparent in the surface appearance of a typical multimedia windows program” (Deibert 188).

The consequence of hypertextual media in this novel may be summed up in one phrase—“Erase nations!”—which sets in motion a postmodern view of individual identities and the erasure of identities. As Deibert suggests, “Postmodernists reject the view of individual identity, offering in its place a notion of a ‘decentered’ self;” which favors “the idea of a ‘multiple’ self, one that varies with its social relationships, and is bounded only by the imagination of the individual in different settings” (181, 186). Theorists connect this idea to the notion that “the private sphere is being invaded in the transparent hypermedia

environment” (184). Identities on the ‘net’—such as age, gender, and occupations—are varied according to the different purposes of one’s registration online. If you are not vigilant, you will be flooded with junk mail or threatened by identity theft. Here, we try every means to avoid revealing our true identity whereas commercial agents do their utmost to identify us. That is why multiple identities are created to fit different situations. Ondaatje plays the same game of avoiding disclosing real identities in *The English Patient*. A game is played by four characters, Almásy, Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip: it is “Erase family names. Erase nations” on one hand; on the other hand, each character tries to detect the real identity of the other.

Nationality and identity are thus interconnected in *The English Patient*, functioning together to create a web of inescapable structures that tie the characters to certain places and times despite their best efforts to evade such confinement. At the very beginning, we feel a strong sense of the characters’ anonymity: “She stands up in the garden where she has been working and looks into the distance” (Ondaatje, 3). Following this, we have the “faceless and unrecognized burned patient” (48). We also encounter visual erasure of names using the “---” form (16, 95, 109). Then the patient tells us: “All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand. We left the harbour of oasis. The places water came to and touched...Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf. I didn’t want my name against such beautiful names. Erase my family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert” (138). We might understand that, having traveled and worked in the desert for many years, he finds that the desert cannot be mapped and named. To him, the fact that European explorers try to place their names on the thing they find is to fill the world with writing, to obtain a certain control over the earth. He wants to step out of the print world; and he wants “to walk upon an earth that had no maps” (261). Maps are the things that he most wants to live without. So his real identity as Almásy, once a famous navigator and cartographer whose responsibility is to map, demarcate and name the landscape, has no meaning to him now. He wants to lose himself completely and not belong to any person or any nation: “There were rivers of the desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I’ve met in my life. We were Germans, English, Hungarian, African—all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states” (138). From his incomplete and discontinuous stories, we realize that he loses his lover, Katharine, because of nations: desperate for help to get back to the cave to save Katharine, Almásy is locked up merely because he “didn’t give them a right name” (250). That is why in all his narratives, he tries to erase his name. Now physically, he loses his identification; but emotionally he bears the painful experience of displaying his nationality.

Almásy is not the only victim of nations. The idea of nation also makes his best friend, Madox, disillusioned and hopeless, to the point that he finally commits suicide. Almásy repeats that “Madox was a man who died because of nations” (138, 242). In this sense, Ondaatje aims to deconstruct the notion of nation and nationality because it facilitates the process of war and killing. Certainly there is considerable emphasis on the hatred of nations and on the wish to abolish them. But to erase the nation is only a trope for us to create what Deibert calls a “de-centered” and a “multiple” self that changes in response to different situations. It is this idea that gives the novel its shape and structure.

Structurally, even though *The English Patient* is used as the title, his story is not the center of the novel. His anonymity (139) leaves a blank for other characters to fill in with their curiosity. The curiosity of the four characters to know each other’s identity, especially

Caravaggio's desire to reveal the true identity of the English patient, leads them to tell their own life stories. Literarily, the English patient is only a trope to begin each story; physically he loses his power to be the center. Structurally, there is no central narrator in the novel. The story is alternately seen and told from the point of view of each main character. Every one of the four is the author of his autobiography and biography of the people related to him or her. Each of the four characters conceives of the self much the same as we do on the Internet.

On the topic of the erasure of names, we have already noted the novel's initial reluctance to name Hana. In the whole first section, Hana is referred to only as "she." Her name enters only in the second chapter with the advent of Caravaggio, who has known her since her childhood in Toronto, and who thus recalls her to her former life by naming her. Hana, a Canadian nurse, wants to stay and take care of the burned English patient because of her losses of lover and baby as well as her father who dies of burns in the war. Being together with "a man with no face", Hana is eager to lose her physical identity: "She had refused to look at herself for more than a year now and then just her shadow on walls. The mirror revealed only her cheeks, she had to move it back to arm's length, her hand wavering. She watched the little portrait of herself as if within a clasped brooch" (53). Actually, paying no attention to her physical appearance reveals her deeper desire to change herself. Physically, she tries to make another self by cutting her hair. Emotionally, she has a strong desire for an another identity: "There was something about him (the English patient) she wanted to learn, grow into, and hide in, where she could turn away from being an adult" (52). The way in which Hana falls in love with her saint is almost as same as when we become addicted to the Internet, which can offer information we need. The English patient is a man of immense erudition as he himself claims: "I have always had information like a sea in me" (18). Like surfing in computer navigation, Hana navigates through stories told by the English patient to detect his identity. She sublimates her own need to love, to mother, to be a child.

Kip, a brown man in a white nation, is further identified as a cultural hybrid with his mixed loyalties and dual cultures: "The young Sikh sapper put his cheek against the mud and thought of the Queen of Sheba's face, the texture of her skin. There was no comfort in this river except for his desire for her, which somehow kept him warm" (71). Kip, a man from Asia, takes the Queen of Sheba as his idol. This lover of King Solomon becomes a bridge between the African world and the western world. "He fell in love with her downcast eye. This woman who would someday know the sacredness of bridges" (70). Like this woman, Kip wants to bridge the gap between East and West. The desire to have a plural, multiphrenic self makes him a student hungry for knowledge: "The young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English since he "was most comfortable with men who had the abstract autodidacts, like his mentor, Lord Suffork, like the English patient" (111). Like Hana, "He had no mirror of himself," either. By not looking at the mirror, he wants to lose himself in the western world. His harmonious position between the British for whom he works and the colonized India from whence he came paves the way for his love story with Hana. He seems to have a more fluid sense of the relationship between nation and identity even though the impact upon his life and family has been considerable and, in some sense, damaging. Unfortunately, hatred of the English nation puts his brother in jail while Kip is nurtured by an English education and willingly enjoys service in the British army. It is not a stable self, however. Because of America's bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, emotionally and physically, Kip has grown detached from Hana and white culture. At the end of the novel we see Kip still relating to Hana instantaneously and consciously in his mind, even though they

live on the opposite sides of the globe. Again this instantaneous response across borders is only made possible by a communications environment of satellite technology.

Anonymity links the four characters together; as Deibert notes, “the postmodern self is experienced as more fragmented and incomplete, composed of multiple ‘selves’ or identities in relation to the different social worlds we [they] inhabit” (181). Ondaatje emphasizes the patient as a figure who has no fixed identity in a changing world. His several identities—count, lover, spy, cartographer, loner, poet and ‘saint’ are fleeting, fluid, and difficult to pin down. The unfixed identity of the English patient, as Williams suggests, “would better fit the social epistemology of postmodernism and hypermedia than it does the social context of postwar Europe” (227). How, then, is a multiple self created in terms of a space of flows in *The English Patient*?

If the “postmodern mentalité consists in a novel approach to space,” the space of flows provides the novel with the possibility to develop a multiple self in the “plurality of worlds and multiple realities” (Deibert, 187). Deibert shows how the “use of pastiche and collage, both of which lend themselves to a nonlinear and overlapping spatial orientation featuring discontinuity and depthlessness” develops in his media theory (187); Ondaatje adapts these methods to his writing of the novel. The space of flows in *The English Patient* “embraces discontinuity and juxtaposition, with mutable boundaries superimposed upon one another” in various spaces (Deibert, 191).

Political Space

Deibert insists that although hypermedia do not generate social and political movements, they do create a communications environment in which such activities flourish dramatically. “As computer networks have grown, transnational social movements have exploded, forming complex nonterritorial based links that defy the organization of political authority in the modern order” (158). In *The English Patient*, space literally flows across political boundaries. The setting in time and space is a villa in Italy in the period between victory in Europe and the final end of the war. It is the war that has brought these four characters with different nationalities together, but they don’t care about where the other comes from. The international surrogate family forms a kind of “global imagined community” (Deibert 199). They begin to talk, share their past; secrets are uncovered, wounds healed until the sapper hears of the bombardment of Hiroshima. The so-called English patient, who actually is a Hungarian Count, tells of falling in love with an English woman. He has worked for the Germans, but is saved by Bedouins, Arabic nomads, and later is taken care of by a Canadian nurse and accompanied by a Canadian thief and a sapper from Punjab in India. He is really “an international bastard” as he calls himself (177).

The importance of being together and sharing their past “as a challenge to the modern world order paradigm lies in their willingness to sidestep their traditional political structures and sovereign boundaries to address international problems, and to reflect a global sensitivity” (Deibert 159). National identity is a very sensitive problem, especially during war times. Caravaggio’s thumbs were cut off when his identity was revealed. But when he tells the story, he forgives the woman nurse who cut off his thumbs: “She was an innocent, knew nothing about me, my name or nationality or what I may have done” (55). When the burned patient tells how he is brought to the villa, he keeps silent about his nationality: “Those who claimed to be uncertain of their nationalities were housed in compounds in Terrinia, where the sea hospital was. The burned pilot was one more enigma, with no identification,

unrecognizable" (133). Still, in this politically non-territorial villa of Italy, he is taken as a patient despite his nationality. Even though nationality and identity are crucial during wartime, nationality is unimportant to them now. After having suffered the painful consequence of nationalism in the war, they now imagine their community without borders but with a much more decentered and multiple perspective. This pluralistic community provides the political space in which four people of different nationalities share their losses, love and civilization. There is no sense of hierarchy or race, of colonizer and colonized. Everyone is a "citizen of nowhere or somewhere in one's mind," enjoying a "multiple and multi-layered view that fans out and spills across state-boundaries" (Deibert 187).

Geographical Space

The story starts from a Tuscan villa, goes into the desert in North Africa, to Britain, and ends up in India and Canada. There are no boundaries in the wide and broad space of this novel. Memories of the past bridge the gap. The wide geographical space provides a larger space into which any stable or fixed identity established by print will disappear. As the English patient says, "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" (177). The landscape of the desert also teaches him: "All pilots who fall into the desert—none of them come back with identification" (29). The image of the desert is like an ever-changing kaleidoscope that defies any precise definition. Folding and unfolding itself every single time as an eclectic collection of permutations, the desert refuses to be mapped: "The desert could not be claimed or owned" (138). It denies the validity of any single pattern of understanding imposed by outside observers, by those who create maps of the desert. Almásy's body as a desert landscape is a metaphor for the fluidity of identity. What he desires is to lose his physical identity in the desert.

Even in the church of the villa, where the English patient and Hana lived, the boundaries are exploded: "Doors opened into landscape. Some rooms had become an open aviary"(13). "There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth. To Hana, the wild gardens were like further rooms" (43). Visually, the boundaries between the house and the garden are broken down. Metaphorically, Kip who lives in the garden will lose himself into the openness of other nations, becoming a member of the international surrogate family. Figuratively, the opening between the house and the garden provides all four characters with a geographical outlet to the outside world, but a world which is now seen in global terms.

To Kip, the landscape is also changing, as Ondaatje describes: "The landscape around him is just a temporary thing; there is no permanence to it" (87). He was born into a traditional Indian family in Punjab; but he is fascinated by Western civilization, is assimilated to it, and becomes a bridge between the Eastern and Western world. However, at the end of the novel, he retreats back into his home country and his own landscape.

Narrative Space

The breakdown of narrative order also opens up "a critical space" for the "plural" or "multiphrenic" self. The narrative at the very beginning of the book does not signal the commencement of order, but evokes an anonymous character speaking in dramatic shifts from third to first and even to the second person. Thus we have a speaker who is located both inside and outside the story:

There are stories the man recites quietly into the room which slip from level to level like a hawk. He wakes in the painted arbour that surrounds him with its spilling flowers, arms of great trees. He remembers picnics, a woman who kisses parts of his body that are now burned into the colour of aubergine.

I have spent weeks in the desert forgetting to look at the moon, he says, as a married man may spend days never looking into the face of his wife. These are sins of omission but signs of preoccupation.

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?

...

I fell burning into the desert.

...

I was perhaps the first one to stand up alive out of a burning machine. A man whose head was on fire. They didn't know my name. I didn't know their tribe.

Who are you?

I don't know.

You keep asking me.

You said you were English. (4-5)

This switching of narrative pronouns gives us the same story from different perspectives. When the narrator recounts the story, the third person is used so that we have a man with unrecognizable identity. When the first person is used, we move inside Almásy to explore his will to keep his anonymity. The borders of the narrative are broken down not only by the shifting between the narrative persons, but also by the free indirect discourse without quotation marks. Visually, there is no border at all. In grammatical terms, it allows us to go inside the thoughts of narrator and character alike: the patient tries by every means not to be identified whereas Hana is curious to seek his identity. The borderless narrative space allows him to keep his enigma so that he can create a proper self to fit this situation.

The splitting of the subject into the young self and the old self which is judged from another's point of view opens up an additional space for writing the multiple self:

There's a painting by Caravaggio, done late in his life, David with the head of Goliath. In it, the young warrior holds at the end of his outstretched arm the head of Goliath, ravaged and old. But that is not the true sadness in the picture. It is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man, how he looked when he did the painting. Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand. The judging of one's own mortality. I think when I see him at the foot of my bed that Kip is my David. (116)

The reflection of the younger Caravaggio as a painter and the patient as an older self echoed in the artistic analogy is what the English patient sees in Kip and himself. By going inside and outside the story simultaneously, Almásy tells about his different selves judged in different perspectives. Also the narrative boundary is broken down by shifting the subject and object. Here, Ondaatje writes between the subject of 'I,' and the object of 'him' to give different versions of the same stories. All these shifts contribute to the flow of the narrative space. Of course, in 1945, the English patient couldn't talk about what's happening today. But Ondaatje is able, by means of the expanding Herodotus, to put his text in "cyberspace" in the 1990s. Writing links up the characters' lives with our history and time. Their identities at that time and our sense of identities nowadays are reshaped in terms of cyber-writing so that we

can envision a new, “multiphrenic” self, rather than the old, stable, fixed self-modeled by print.

Imaginary Space

“The idea of ‘reality’ beyond the images—a signified beyond the sign—is irretrievably lost in the swirling maelstrom of the hypermedia environment” (Deibert 194). The boundaries between reality and unreality are mediated by imagination. It seems that Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* is based on historical facts. But as Zepetnek’s research on the historical sources for the novel suggests, “Ondaatje was unaware of the history of any 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 Claydon died in a plane crash one year after her husband’s death” (142). Obviously, the novel is a fictionalized one with the author’s imagination displayed in a fragmented manner. As video games create so-called “virtual” or “simulated” alternative worlds (Deibert 193), Ondaatje creates an imaginary world in which a series of significant moments of the character’s lives are displayed by a writing technique affected by digital technology. For instance, the burnt man projects a series of fictional identities upon Hana’s imagination: “sometime a horse I’ll be, sometime a hound. A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire” (Ondaatje 115). The way in which Hana builds his image is similar to those so-called “virtual” or “simulated” alternative worlds (Deibert 193).

Most significantly, all the plots and characters in the novel are imagined. And in imaginary space, the gaps are filled by fragmented subtexts created by different forms of media: orality, print and hypertext. Each version is done alternately by different characters. It starts from the patient’s telling his story to Hana, which fills the gap in his past. Within his oral story, we have Katharine read a printed story, which leads to their love affair. Hana’s reading from many books fills the gaps as they live in the “simulated” villa. The books for the English patient, “had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms” (Ondaatje 8). Hana’s writing on the blank pages of the books fills up the gaps in the character of Kip and Caravaggio. Finally, we read the novel as a hypertext with all its fullness, complexity, fragmentation, and richness of subtexts, all of which can only be realized by computer writing.

Time Space

Time in the novel ranges from 500 BC, from ancient times to modern times, right after WWII. In an interview, Michael Ondaatje admits: “Originally, I thought *The English Patient* was going to be a contemporary book, set entirely in that one period of the Second World War. But once I got into the desert stuff, and through that, to Herodotus, I began picking up a sense of layers of history. I was going back deeper and deeper in time. That sense of history, of building overlaid with building, was central in my mind--unconsciously, I think. Looking back now, it seems to have to do with unearthing, baring history” (Wachtel, 1994, 251). Therefore, history becomes a bridge across time and space. For instance, the image of Poliziano connects the old world with the new world. Meanwhile, history links the room, where the patient lies, to the wide world of European civilization: “This must be Poliziano’s room. This must have been his villa we are in. It is all the water coming out of the wall, that ancient fountain” (56). Ondaatje imagines time space as “a large number of fragmentary possible worlds,” which include the old world, the new world, the modern world, and the post-modern world (Foucault, 1972, 188). All these worlds are brought into one space.

Only with hypermedia is this possible today. Ondaatje creates such visually evocative images with words that we are brought into “virtual” or “simulated” alternative worlds. We instantaneously get the image of the expansion of the old world by the juxtaposition with the new one. It seems that we see Poliziano, the humanist who first introduced Greek literature into European civilization, “lecture two hours in Latin in the morning, two hours in Greek in the afternoon,” in this room. Also we get a picture of this room full of such luminaries as the Renaissance philosopher, Pico, the Renaissance painter and sculptor, Michelangelo, and the Renaissance geographer, Toscanelli, sitting and arguing “in this room with a bust of Plato” (57). The whole history of Europe is staged, in this cyber-text, in a single room of space-time.

Conclusion

“Erase Nations!” could be a slogan for the Information Age indicating a shift from modern conceptions of a stable and a fixed identity of nations modeled on printing to the postmodern view of multiple identities. This shift arises because of hypermedia technology. Having lived in the new technological world, consciously, subconsciously or even unconsciously, Ondaatje has created a decidedly postmodern text with a decentered self and multiple identities for the characters in *The English Patient*. Through the analogy of multimedia in computer writing, he creates various writing spaces for the image of a multiple self in the same way as multimedia do in computer writing. *The English Patient* provides a model for another version of a postmodern text—hypertext. It is a perfect ‘fit’ between a new social epistemology and its communications environment.

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