

*Post-Apocalyptic War Histories:  
Michael Ondaatje's  
"The English Patient"*

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WHILE THE TRADITION of apocalyptic writing in the US is well documented,<sup>1</sup> only a few critics have tried to identify aspects of this tradition in Canadian literature.<sup>2</sup> This may be because there is no equivalent in Canada to the apocalyptic expectations on which the US was founded, and thus a literature which reflected such expectations and their disappointment was never written.<sup>3</sup> In the latter half of the twentieth century, apocalyptic writing has become popular to a point at which "apocalypse" has lost all its original religious revelatory meaning. It has become a synonym for total destruction, annihilation, and nuclear end of the world. In the often sensationalist novels of this genre, nuclear apocalypse merely serves as a useful structural device for generating tension and suspense, in order to produce a teleologically oriented, linear development of plot and action as well as a dramatically effective, climactic closure. Just a few postnuclear war novels, classics like Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* or Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (cf. Dowling), have ventured beyond such structural simplicity.

It seems as if it has been forgotten that the biblical apocalypse, as recorded in "The Revelation of St. John," is not just a vision of destruction and end of the world. Here, beginning and end coincide, and a New Jerusalem and new life are promised to the happy few. There is a time after the end, even if that "time" is paradoxically suspended in timeless eternity. Literature that reflects these aspects of apocalypse is perhaps not easily identifiable as apocalyptic. Only those familiar with the language and imagery of St. John's vision will recognize the apocalyptic features in such writing. Apocalypse has become cryptic here. In

"Anorexic Ruins," Jean Baudrillard is confirming the existence of such cryptic apocalypses when he suggests

that we have already passed it [the apocalypse] unawares and now find ourselves in the situation of having overextended our own finalities, of having short-circuited our own perspectives, and of already being in the hereafter, that is, without horizon and without hope. (35)

The apocalypses in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*—World War I, World War II, the end of a liberal democracy—may not be easily identifiable as such, despite the numerous allusions to St. John in all these texts. While they (seem to) support Baudrillard's observation that we have passed the apocalypse, these novels firmly locate apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic<sup>4</sup> experiences in history, and thus indicate that his analysis lacks historical depth. The novels show that we have not passed the apocalypse unawares, even though survivors may often want to repress apocalyptic memories in order to keep going—while facing the fact that there is neither hope nor horizon. Identifying their position in the moment of post-apocalypse, the novels generate a fictional "Pastime of Past Time" which fuses fiction and history into what Linda Hutcheon calls "Historiographic Metafiction" ("The Pastime").

In these novels, "everything is suddenly blown into the past" (Baudrillard 35): post-apocalyptic writing reverses the future-orientation of apocalyptic thinking. It rarely considers the future and does not present notions of progress. It rather looks back at the end of the world (cf. Kamper and Wulf), at apocalyptic experiences. As there are no fond memories of such experiences, post-apocalyptic writing has to reformulate "the idiom of trauma" in order to "provide a language for the slippage of trauma from apocalypse into narration" (Suleri 5). Such a language requires subtlety, sensitivity, and artistic restraint, if it is not to partake in the sensationalistic commodification of horror and apocalyptic experiences. To readers saturated in such commodifications, the apocalyptic aspects in post-apocalyptic writing will therefore often remain obscure.

In novels narrating from a post-apocalyptic perspective, nothing is certain or stable. After all, the constructedness and fragility

of reality has just been apocalyptically revealed. Frank Kermode precisely, if *inadvertently*, described post-apocalyptic writing in an essay published as early as 1966, where he wrote that Samuel Beckett

is the perverse theologian of a world which has suffered a Fall, experienced an Incarnation which changes all relations of past, present and future, but which will not be redeemed. Time is an endless transition from one condition of misery to another, "a passion without form or stations," to be ended by no *parousia*. (355)

But what is a "Fall" which "changes all relations of past, present, and future," if it is not apocalyptic? The endless transition from one condition of misery to another is the exact reverse of the divine perfection and stasis promised in St. John's vision; but then, apocalypses that are referred to in post-apocalyptic texts are man-made: no divine intervention, no redemption or *parousia* takes place here.<sup>5</sup> However, the fact that there is "an endless transition"<sup>6</sup> indicates that while there may not be hope, total despair is not called for in post-apocalyptic times, even after the "Fall." As Paul Auster puts it, "the mere fact of moving onward will be a way of being in the world. . . . There is no hope in this, but neither is there despair" (176). Apocalyptic hopes for a perfect world after yet another orgy of destruction may have been disappointed, but life does go on, even if grand expectations of the future can no longer make up for the misery of the present.

However, relations to the past in post-apocalyptic literature are also highly ambiguous: on the one hand, there is a melancholic or nostalgic longing for pre-apocalyptic stability, and an intense interest in history; while on the other, the apocalyptic experiences are so horrific and painful that it is tempting, if not necessary for survival, to repress and forget what happened. Yet, as Simpson pointed out in his essay on *The English Patient*,

the advent of the nuclear age, blasting nations and people on all points of the imperial map past time and space, past a limit in the historical imaginary, renders such forgetting impossible precisely because its apocalypse enflames a rage for mourning. (229)

This rage for mourning permeates Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*. It presents a handful of people who suddenly find themselves in a world after the Fall in which both physical and

psychological reality have become highly volatile. It records the paradoxical attempt of the characters to forget *and* remember their apocalyptic experiences as they try to restabilize their lives in order to find *a modus vivendi* in a post-war *after-world*.<sup>7</sup> This article attempts to identify some of the characteristics of life in a post-apocalyptic world and their mediation in literature.

### I The Abysmal Quest for Identity

Set in the final stages and the immediate aftermath of World War II, *The English Patient* does not tell the story of a war won. As it is, all the characters have experienced their moment of apocalypse and are presented as having lost the war in one way or another. For all but Kip, this moment lies before the beginning of the novel and is only recalled in narrated flashbacks, some of which are told in several versions. These stories cannot be fitted into a coherent linear narrative of war. Instead, different aspects of war experience emerge—left in “unresolved contradiction” (Hutcheon, “The Pastime” 286). Aspects of the history of the Italian campaign are subtly rendered in Hana’s and Kip’s stories; Kip is part of the push north at the front, whereas nurses like Hana receive the casualties. She is the one, however, who criticizes the way the war has been conducted: “Every damn general should have had my job. Every damn general. It should have been a prerequisite for any river crossing” (84).<sup>8</sup>

Caravaggio, the professional thief turned government agent and spy, has experienced a different, stranger war, working without uniform behind the lines. However, the English patient’s war seems to have been even more bizarre. It ended apocalyptically when he crashed into the desert in his burning plane and was severely burnt. He lost his world in more ways than one, and yet survived to tell his story, or rather stories, for he has not just lost the world, but also himself. We do not know who he really is—and he does not seem too sure, either (253). What remains of him are his stories.

Caravaggio thinks the English patient is Almásy (164), but the English patient neither confirms nor denies this. Under morphine and alcohol his narration of Almásy’s story even slips into the third-person, and Caravaggio wonders, “*Who is he speaking as*



now?" (244). He is "amazed at the clarity of discipline in the man, who speaks sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person,<sup>9</sup> who still does not admit that he is Almásy" (247). Perhaps also because the "Almásy" identity has been erased in the flames—or because "a man in the desert can slip into a name . . . [and] be tempted never to leave such containment" (141). The depth of his being seems unfathomable and "each swallow of morphine by the body opens a further door" (247) to the point of *mise-en-abîme* and obliteration of identity: "this is the world of nomads in any case, an apocryphal story. A mind travelling east and west in the disguise of a sandstorm" (248).

Caravaggio realizes that though he is questioning the English patient, he is in turn used by the English patient for his own ends: "This man he believes to be Almásy has used him and the morphine to return to his own world" (251).<sup>10</sup> And in that world, the transition from human to mythological being is as easily made as in a dream. Faced with Katharine's glare, with her death, the narrator of this passage sees himself transformed into "the last image she sees. The jackal in the cave who will guide and protect her, who will never deceive her" (258). As that jackal, he has become timeless: while he is leading her to the afterlife, he also turns into the "early ghost [who] accompanied you, those years before we met," to the Oxford Union Library at 2 o'clock in the morning (258). This imagined, unrecognized presence is "the spirit of the jackal, . . . whose name was Wepwawet or Almásy" (258), but no real person to whom a name is easily attached. Yet, there is this mysterious unnamed friend of Geoffrey Clifton at the periphery of this twice-told story: "In 1936 a young man named Geoffrey Clifton had met a friend at Oxford who had mentioned what we were doing" (142, 229). Is he the unmoved mover, the holder of strings, English? The book does not tell us—and so we may never know.<sup>11</sup>

The transformations are manifold. Self-reflexive, anguished, the English patient wonders: "Am I just a book? Something to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies, loose vegetation, pockets of stones" (253). Perhaps his words: "So you have run me to earth" (252) can be read as an admission, and even the narrator uses

the name "Almásy" (252-61). Furthermore, the English patient's story seems to be confirmed by Caravaggio's information. Yet, both are "citizens of morphia" (243), addicts, dependent on each other and morphine for stories, for making sense of their apocalyptic war experiences, one way or another.<sup>12</sup> Both are spies, professional liars, thieves: are they really to be trusted? Is it not that they need stories to confirm the coherence and significance of their apocalyptic experiences as antidote to complete nihilism and despair? Do they not need such stories to go on after a secular apocalypse such as World War II, which has not revealed a new heaven or a new earth to them, but destroyed their worlds and identities? Are they not in need of the comforting lies<sup>13</sup> of stories now (of the type Hana reads both to herself and the English patient)? Is this need to tell stories of the past ingrained in the desert research the English patient speaks of when he says: "we were interested in how our lives could mean something to the past. We sailed into the past" (142)? And is the researching of that past just a satisfying of curiosity, a quest for wholeness: "Why is that? Because we want to *know* things, how the pieces fit" (121)? That alone explains the need to tell stories and fictions which puzzle the fragments of life, of reality into a coherent whole—and turn it into history.

The desert researcher knows he is out there "to explore a half-invented world of the desert" (150). Sailing into the past and away from a world which has become uncomfortable with the realization of the absurdity and meaninglessness of "The Great War" it has just been through. From this perspective, the reaction against nation and identification (both pressing men into taking sides and forcing them into war) makes sense: "I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation" (139). Ironically, this man, stripped of identity and nation, is referred to as "English."

He has realized that there is no escape. Any discovery of the past will only bring him back to the present. So he uses the jackal as mythological figure, for "in his jaws are pieces of the past he delivers to you, and when all of that time is fully discovered it will

prove to have been already known" (259). The circle closes viciously. The generation who had fully discovered Truth in the Great War undoubtedly had no desire to rediscover further apocalyptic Truths about themselves or others; they already knew more than enough.

In the world inverted by another war, thieves and professional liars are no longer prosecuted by the authorities. As Caravaggio relates: "Here I was, an Italian and a thief. They couldn't believe their luck, they were falling over themselves to use me" (35). Thieves like him have suddenly become an important commodity, a source of unique skills which seem vital to the war-effort:

Thieves like us were used a great deal during the war. We were legitimized. We stole. Then some of us began to advise. We would read through the camouflage of deceit more naturally than official intelligence. We created double bluffs. Whole campaigns were run by this mixture of crooks and intellectuals. (253)

These may be strange bedfellows, though postwar experience has shown that the two go rather well together. Or are they simply hard to tell apart? Crooks and intellectuals were engaged in the production of virtual realities which were to disorient and bluff the enemy: "Working in Cairo during the early days of the war, he had been trained to invent double agents or phantoms who would take on flesh. . . . He had lived through a time of war when everything offered up to those around him was a lie" (117). This seems to be a habit with Caravaggio, teller of tall tales, who, when Hana asks him, "Is that a true story?" replies, "One of many!" (208). Hana "knew enough about him to almost believe it" (209). "Almost believe" is worse than disbelieve here: it reflects the state of fundamental uncertainty that pervades all aspects of post-apocalyptic, postwar life. The agent, the spy, propaganda, and counter-propaganda have made sure that a quest for certainty takes one into the desert, where everything is possible.

When Hana asks for confirmation about the English patient's identity, Caravaggio's reply is evasive (265), and later on the narrator also switches back to "English patient" (267), to return just once to "Almásy" (285) in the confusion at the end of the story, when Kip aims his rifle at the patient. Here Caravaggio intervenes: "He isn't an Englishman" (285). But at that point this

does not matter any more: "American, French. I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman" (286). At this terminal point of the war, "Englishman" no longer seems to refer to nationality only but to attitude; by this logic, it does indeed not matter any more whether the English patient is English. The *mise-en-abîme* is not a mystery of private identity any more. The English patient's rallying cry "Erase the family name! Erase nations!" (139) has been heeded in the novel. In post-apocalyptic times, questions of nationality have become secondary, contaminated; another concept of nineteenth-century stability is shattered in the onslaught of twentieth-century reality.

## II The Shape of Things

Even physical reality is in bad shape in post-apocalyptic times. A walk from the outer to the inner garden opens the novel. But the orchard is "bombed-out" (7), and the villa is a ruin: "One bomb crater allowed moon and rain into the library downstairs" (8); "lightning came into the room, too" (11). Outside and inside, both damaged, are no longer separate: "Doors opened into landscape. Some rooms had become an open aviary" (13). Indeed, "there seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth" (43). The setting may seem most romantic: the ruin, the landscape, thunderstorm and lightning.

But neither is a *locus amoenus*: "what had been an ancient meadow . . . [was] scarred now by phosphorus bombs and explosions. The German army had mined many of the houses they retreated from" (11). Objects of everyday reality are fraught with danger:

The retreating army had left pencil mines within musical instruments. Returning owners opened up pianos and lost their hands. People would revive the swing of a grandfather clock, and a glass bomb would blow out half a wall and whoever was nearby. . . .

Most pencil bombs were hidden in [metronomes]—the easiest place to solder the thin wire upright. Bombs were attached to taps, to the spines of books, they were drilled into fruit trees so an apple falling onto a lower branch would detonate the tree, just as a hand gripping that branch would. (75)

Returning home here has little that is homey. Kip undoes “a fuze wire he had traced to that corner [of the library], hidden above the valance” (74). An innocent walk Hana “had taken numerous times with no sense of danger” had “mine wires all over the place” (100). A box of matches is brushed off a table and a sapper is “enveloped by light” before the sound of the explosion is heard (105). “How could he trust even this circle of elastic on the sleeve of the girl’s frock that gripped her arm?” Kip wonders (105). Experience has taught him “to imagine the worst devices, the capacity for accident in a room” (111). “Mines in wooden boxes were left in homes” (274). But the city is not safe either: “In the harbour scuttled ships were freshly mined underwater” (275), and a German confesses that “there were thousands of bombs hidden in the harbour section of the city that were wired up to the dormant electrical system” (276). After fighting their way through the countryside,

the thirty sappers walked into a city of booby traps. There were delayed-action bombs sealed into the walls of public buildings. Nearly every vehicle was rigged. The sappers became permanently suspicious of any object placed casually in a room. (275)

Despite attempts at making the city safe, the dangers remain: because of delayed-action bombs “four days later the central post office blew up” (275). Even those murdered by the retreating army are still dangerous: “some of the hanging corpses were mined and had to be blown up in midair” (275). Nothing is safe—or sacred.

For Kip, even so real a thing as a landscape has become “just a temporary thing; there is no permanence to it” (87). This experience is echoed in the English patient’s desert, where reality is shaped by different winds (16-17). The most basic, simple actions have become potentially lethal: “He studies the two onions he has pulled out of the earth with care, aware that gardens too have been mined by retreating armies” (87). The idea that the war is over and everybody can simply go home once the fighting has ended, is shown to be plainly absurd. Yet it is not simply a matter of the physical danger from explosives. Like so many of the soldiers “lost from themselves, more innocent than devious” (95), the nurses experienced implosion and “began to believe in

nothing, trusted nothing" (41). This experience is reflected at the end of Almásy's love affair: "Now he began to trust nothing" (172). In all this, loss of world occurs, several ends of worlds.

Such ends may be reached as the result of a gradual process as in Hana's case—or abruptly as in Caravaggio's. He has escaped from the Germans when, "as he lay there the mined bridge exploded and he was flung upwards and then down as part of the end of the world" (60). It is the end Maddox brings about when one bullet ends his war (242). For others, such ends are inscribed into the landscape: "The world ended out there [where there was supposedly no water]" (135). For the desert explorers, such lack of water is "the death of a civilisation" (286). Now this becomes a foreshadowing of the death by evaporation in a micro-second imagined by Kip, but all too real in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, about which Hana writes in her letter to Clara, "*so it feels like the end of the world. From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public. If we can rationalize this we can rationalize anything*" (292).<sup>14</sup>

### III Defusing the End of the World

If there is no returning home after the war, because the war has altered the perception of "world"—and by extension of everything that "home" stands for—then that, too, is a loss of world. The way back in a very literal sense, has been cut off—particularly for Caravaggio: "War has unbalanced him and he can return to no other world as he is, wearing these false limbs that morphine promises" (116). "It is a strange time, the end of a war," as he observes. "A period of adjustment," Hana calls it (54); as "now there is hardly a world around them and they are forced back on themselves" (40). When the novel begins, they are all past the point of return, in a space of (near) timelessness Kip has experienced before: "There seems to be no time here. Each of them has selected the most comfortable position to forget time" (280).

Looking for comfortable positions to forget apocalyptic experiences, they have found a timeless space in a ruined villa where they search for balance in stories in an attempt at stabilizing a volatile reality in acts of defusion. Life "after" seems full of strangeness and thunder, of new vistas, of surprising meetings, of

echoes of past, both recent and distant. There is magic in all this. The inhabitants of the villa are all survivors.<sup>15</sup> Yet, just as “the ends of the earth are never points on a map” (141), apocalyptic ends of the world are not simply physical here. They do not always coincide with the end of life.

Survivors—the unhappy few—have to adjust to the uncomfortable realization that they have moved off the map, into the uncharted territory of post-apocalypse (about which even the Bible has very little to say<sup>16</sup>). This requires a kind of reorientation.<sup>17</sup> While Caravaggio tries “to look for the truth in others” (177)—and finds his Other in the English patient’s oriental stories, Kip seems to have found his in Western rationality: “In the years of war . . . [Kip] has learned that the only thing safe is himself” (218). Kip “is a survivor of his fears . . . [who] will step around anything suspicious” (73). With his affinity for technical things, and his admiration for the rationality of Western tradition, “he has emerged from the fighting with a calm which, even if false, means order for him” (126). He maintains balance: “I had this side to my nature which saw reason in all things” (200). This seems to give him a positive worldview, for “whatever the trials around him there was always solution and light” (272), although this is a light even Hana cannot see. She defends him like a relict, another of her saints from a world that is no more: “[Kip] believes in a civilised world. He’s a civilised man.” “First mistake,” Caravaggio comments (122).

Kip affirms “precise behaviour” (283) and “voices of abstract order” (285); that is what he admires in Western civilization, and England in particular. This is why he engages in “cutting away, defusing limbs of evil” (285). He seems to have escaped it all. He has remained pure: “the sapper’s body allows nothing to enter him that comes from another world” (126). Thus he appears to be unaffected by the horrors of this war. Yet, he carries his brother’s warnings (217-18, 284-85) as a time bomb in him, and explodes when through the porches of his ears is poured the news from that other world which wipes away the false calm and dismantles his idea of order and civilization. The news and his vivid imagination bring home the apocalypse in Asia, the ironical culmination of Western rationality and wisdom (284):

A sudden sunlight of lightning through the tent wall, always, it seems to him, brighter than sunlight, a flash of contained phosphorus, something machinelike, to do with the new word he has heard in the theory rooms and through his crystal set, which is "nuclear." (277)

He to whom "the dangers of being killed by lightning [were] pathetically minimal compared with the danger of his daily life" (278) is caught out by man-made, artificial lightning, betrayed by a new mechanical device, by the very light he had always seen. In a very real sense, Western rationality has re-oriented him, as it presents to his imagination the apex of "enlightenment": two clouds of fire on which our century is centred. Like Almásy, he has now lost everything he had loved or valued (257). His apocalypse is an apocalypse far away, an apocalypse of the mind: "If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire" (284). It is brought to him via technology. Now, "Kip looks condemned, separate from the world" (282). His "promise of some great future" (281) has arrived.<sup>18</sup>

In a moment of timelessness which disrupts the logic of linear narrative, Hana sees him from a "now, in the future" (282). Paradoxically, she is looking back (post-apocalyptically) on what is about to happen. Here, the narrative present is instantly turned into memory, into what Toni Morrison has called "rememory . . . A thought picture" (36). In a double sense, the novel does not end undisrupted: its climax is presented as past from a future perspective, while its end is supplemented by a coda.<sup>19</sup>

Kip's attempts at stabilizing reality have failed. He can no longer trust his own judgement or himself—and takes flight on a Triumph (290), an English motorbike, into a new life, his new (old) world. He rests at the coast at "the end of his first day" (292). His revelation, his apocalypse has reached him from far away. Now that he is past all that, he falls into water to be born again—and saved (295-96).

This may be the end of the story, but it is not the end of the novel. Another "Now . . . These years later" introduces a coda (299). Kip has become Kirpal again. He has resettled in his old world and become a doctor, thus taking up the profession that he was destined for as second son according to the old tradition in his family (182). His "moments of revelation" (300) have be-



come part of the past, of a different world. He remembers Hana and recalls the time they shared (301).

The coda also returns to Hana when, in a magic moment, she dislodges a glass from the edge of a cupboard, and "Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches" (302)—not the glass, but a fork his daughter dropped. Yet, even an ordinary everyday action like that contains echoes of apocalyptic times: it recalls the crucial ease and smooth efficiency with which Kip had earlier saved Caravaggio's and Hana's lives—and his own—when he caught a falling fuze box in midair (208). The apocalypse has literally blown him into the past, back into the tradition he came from, but it has not turned him into a hater or fanatic. He has become a doctor, a professional healer, someone who still is a saver of lives.

For Hana there seems to be less of a tradition to fall back on. Although she is the unifying centre of the novel which joins the characters (and thus takes on the role Patrick played in *In the Skin of a Lion*), she can hold that centre only for the short period between her end of the war and the official end of the Pacific War. Having lost everybody in the war she cared for—her father, the father of her child, her child, the English patient, and Kip, her lover, as well as the numerous unnamed, young dying soldiers she cared for—she is unable to return to business as usual, even after her return to Canada.

At the age of 34, she "has not found her own company, the ones she wanted" (301). Her experience of apocalypse has left her unmarked physically, but it has deeply affected her mentally. She has not been socialized back into "her" society. As "she is a woman of honour and smartness" (301), she may have resisted the easy accommodation of World War II into popular and official history. Like the nurse in chapter one of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, she may have resented the commodification of war as presented "in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men . . . [who make] war . . . look just wonderful" (14). She may also have rejected the reintegration of professional women into home and family, via the pressures of the baby-boom of "the tranquillized Fifties" (Lowell 99). Yet, like Kirpal, we do not "know what her profession is or what her circumstances are" (300).

The magic of the coda of *The English Patient* fails because it cannot account for Hana, who after all is the novel's central character. While established narrative formulae for male war veterans exist (for example, Vonnegut's "Billy Pilgrim" in *Slaughterhouse-Five*), the stories of female veterans are rarely told in war fiction.<sup>20</sup> In untypical awkwardness, Ondaatje acknowledges his failure when his narrator-writer confesses, "She is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life" (301). Perhaps it is apt, because accounting for her would require more than a coda.<sup>21</sup>

Post-apocalyptic novels often end in codas like the one Ondaatje provides in *The English Patient* (299-302). They are used by writers for solving the problem of closing post-apocalyptic novels, which, written from a perspective after the end, are always "fore-closed." In some novels, the coda completes the narrative frame and refers the end back to the beginning of narration (for example, in Findley's *The Wars* and Kogawa's *Obasan*), while in others, the coda takes the form of a postscript (for example, in *The Handmaid's Tale* or in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*).

However, such codas are not just closing devices; they also provide temporal distance to and historical perspective on the apocalyptic experiences which have been narrated. Thus they mark the essential open-endedness of post-apocalyptic writing. Situated after the ends of the story, codas often occupy a space of magic beyond space and time—beyond historiographical fiction and history: the smell of wild roses in *Obasan* (Kogawa 247); the breath "you can" see in *The Wars* (Findley 191), the chilling question which ends *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 293), and the magic of forgetting and remembering that links *Beloved* (Morrison 274-75) to the "Forget, remember!" of the closing section of *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce 614.22; cf. Pesch 406).

The codas thus continue the project of de-totalizing<sup>22</sup> "The End" of popular, political, and religious apocalyptic concepts. A loss of world has occurred, and while the codas recognize and record this, they also acknowledge that life continues—on the surface at least. In post-apocalyptic times, survivors try to restore

stability as fast as they can: it is a matter of survival, after all. Nevertheless, the apocalypse has inscribed itself into their memories just as effectively as it inscribed itself on the English patient's body. It is recorded in Kirpal's reaction and in Hana's isolation. Life may seem to return to normal and continue as it always has, but that is only simulation, though not a simulation that is apparent or easily identified, for often there is no "real," no "other," no "before" to compare it to, unless one does look back—always a dangerous thing to do—and turns to face the documents and memories of horror and destruction that one would rather forget. Most people do not want to take that risk. They have learnt to look forward, go on, and have "unlearnt" seeing: apocalypse has become so much part of their (our) everyday reality, that they (we) do not recognize it any more.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV Conclusion

Michael Ondaatje's novel is part of the tradition of apocalyptic literature; it ends in the destructive climax of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But it also resists this tradition in a double move: not interested in the thrills apocalyptic climaxes offer, Ondaatje presents the climax via Kip's reactions seen from Hana's future perspective. He thus supplements the spatial distance of the events which happen far away in Japan by mediating them through the temporal distance of Hana's memory. Just as the apocalyptic losses of world experienced by the English patient, Caravaggio, and Hana, are situated in a past before the narrated time of the novel, the apocalyptic climax is displaced into a future, which also is outside the temporal frame of the novel.

A second reading of the novel reveals how the effects of the nuclear apocalypse are present throughout the novel, even before that effect has been caused. The timeless coincidence and overlapping of past, present, and future that inform the novel, thus undermine any attempt at reading this novel as a tale of progressive emergence, of linear, teleological progress, which is elemental to apocalyptic thinking. The diverse tales of World War II which its protagonists tell suggest that a History of the War—or of the Italian campaign—can, indeed, no longer be

told as if it were the only one (cf. Ondaatje, *In the Skin*, epigraph). It cannot be reduced to some single truth, some linear history of triumph.<sup>24</sup>

*The English Patient* resists apocalyptic thinking and the “temptation to forget” (Simpson 230). It records the horrors of apocalypses and the failure of apocalyptic promises. In providing counter-narratives, it undermines History as master-narrative and reveals the constructedness of “facts,” “reality,” and “identity.” It generates narrative structures and invents a language for the “unspeakable,” giving voice to those survivors, who do not proclaim themselves “winners” of war.

The apocalypse of World War II has not just destroyed the physical realities of houses, landscapes, and cities irreversibly, and shattered notions of order, coherence, stability, and identity, but also revealed the destructive power and basic instability inherent in matter. There may be nostalgic longings for the world as it was, but that world is lost: no undoing can undo this doing, no spell can make unknown the knowledge revealed, the truths seen in this apocalypse. Although we have passed the end of the world, paradoxically, life goes on. Yet, a serious and sober public debate about the issues involved has not yet taken place. The consequences of such debates in the realm of politics, philosophy, and religion, which depend on apocalyptic thinking would be too serious, perhaps, as such debates would require a basic willingness to engage in an uncomfortable and fundamental reevaluation of values (cf. Alperovitz 627-41).

Such debates are taking place at the margins of power, in the realm of the fictional, the imaginative, the untrustworthy and aesthetic: the arts. Here discomfiting books about the war like *The English Patient*—or disturbing ones like *Gravity’s Rainbow*—grapple with the consequences of apocalypse. Here post-apocalyptic writing and criticism becomes “anti-apocalyptic” in Quinby’s sense as it tries

to struggle against apocalypse, to know its logic, to say no to its insistence on an inevitable end necessary for a new order, its infatuation with doom, its willingness to witness cruelty in the name of righteous justice, and its belief in an elect with access to absolute truth. Rather . . . [it makes] an effort to seek, understand, and foster nonapocalyptic thought. (xxii)

"Something must be at stake in the edgy debates circulating around and about something called postmodernism," Todd Gitlin writes (347). Perhaps this something is a growing awareness that something apocalyptic has taken place. The anxious exchanges between modernist and postmodernist critics as well as the moves towards de-totalization in postwar literary theories (for example, poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism) seem to indicate this. It may not come as a surprise, therefore, that such debates, such theories, such works of art are not particularly welcome in a society ideologically founded on apocalyptic concepts in which the great mass of people are expendable for the sake of an elect, happy few.

Apocalyptic thinking may never have been particularly strong in Canada as apocalypses always seem to have happened elsewhere. The effects of apocalypses were and are nonetheless strongly felt in Canada. I cannot claim that these factors may have contributed to produce a uniquely Canadian tradition of apocalyptic writing. Yet looking at the post-apocalyptic novels referred to in this essay—*The Wars*, *Obasan*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The English Patient*—I suspect that such a tradition exists.<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 See Quinby; Brown; Dewey; Zamora; and Robinson. The bibliographies in the books of these authors reveal the enormous amount of secondary material on the subject.
- 2 See Bailey; Brenner; Wiens; Westfall; and Globe. All these are articles; I have not located any book-length studies.
- 3 See my essay "Aspects of an Apocalyptic Tradition in Canadian Writing," *Proceedings of the 3rd Autumn Summer School on the New Literatures in English in Osnabrück 1996* (forthcoming 1997).
- 4 As far as I know, the first definition of the term is Freese's. In his essay "Exploring the Post-Apocalypse: Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace*," he sums up Malamud's novel and concludes: "*God's Grace* is no traditional apocalyptic novel which climaxes in the evocation of doom, but a post-apocalyptic tale which examines what might come after the cataclysm, a story that begins with the very end and tries to sound out the possibilities of a new beginning" (410; cf. Spencer). I believe that his description of post-apocalypse is not just useful for science-fiction, but also for historiographic writing (cf. Buehrer; Pesch).
- 5 The situation is ideally described in Walter Benjamin's reading of Klee's *Angelus Novus*: "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a single event, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has

got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (qtd. in Dellamora 3). And Benjamin's angel could not yet see the effects of World War II.

- 6 Kermode repeats the quote in *The Sense of an Ending* (115), and tries to save his view of continuity in history and literary tradition by inventing the concept of a "continuity of crisis" (122), even a "perpetual assumption of crisis" (124)—an absurd notion of "crisis." While his claiming of Joyce's *Ulysses* for the great tradition is questionable, it has always baffled me that he does not even mention *Finnegans Wake*; but then one look at this book of multiple postmortems reveals how desperate and absurd his notion of continuity really is (also see Gillespie).
- 7 Whether this is a "settling into a *modus vivendi* without illusion, without bitterness, and without violence," as Baudrillard asserts (42) is highly questionable. Though his essay contains interesting observations, it often is disappointingly shallow.
- 8 Hana's explicit criticism of how the war has been run somehow matches Kip's later outburst. Otherwise both are examples of the "inward withdrawal into silence as the ultimate violence against society," which Bök has diagnosed in Ondaatje's works (112).
- 9 A technique Ondaatje used in *Running in the Family* as has been noted (cf. Hutcheon, "Running in the Family" 311).
- 10 Though it can hardly be clear what "return to his own world" means here. He cannot return home like Ulysses after his journey. That "home," that world, that origin, has been lost; a problem Elizabeth Bishop records in her "Questions of Travel," where she asks, "Should we have stayed at home, wherever that may be?" The "world" Caravaggio has in mind here can only be one of her "imagined places" (94); these may indeed be the only places to which one can return.
- 11 The final question to be asked here is Beckett's, "What does it matter who is speaking?"—as taken up by Foucault in his "What is an Author?" (197). Perhaps the English patient's voice is speaking in that "anonymity of a murmur," which would make redundant questions like "Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse?" (210). His anonymity, however, provokes such questions and they seem to be of importance, not just to Caravaggio. Even a positivistic search for the extra-textual, historical Almásy does not solve, but only deepens the mystery (cf. Tötösy). Foucault's essay may redirect critical investigation, for in the final analysis he is right: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (210)—at least as long as someone keeps the (1001?) stories going.
- 12 Scobie's observation seems to support this: "The patient's anonymity, and his (un)readability, make him the perfect blank screen onto which the other characters can project their own devious passions. Patient, passive, he receives the identities they desire him to have" (97-98). While he is a brother in arms to Caravaggio, Hana and Kip treat him as a substitute father (98-99 and 99 n.10).
- 13 Oscar Wilde praises such lies: "The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake, and the highest development of this is . . . Lying in Art" (990). Kurt Vonnegut calls them "*foma*" in *Cat's Cradle*, "Harmless untruths"—and his novel opens with the paradoxical statement: "Nothing in this book is true" (6).
- 14 And yet attempts at rationalization and justification persist: Ondaatje seems to have touched a particularly raw nerve in the US, and thus receives rather hostile and surprisingly unpostmodern reviews from US critics (Kaplan; Mantel; Seligman). However, reactions in Canada (Draper) and Europe—Belgium (Lernout), Germany (Greiner; Schoeller; Schütte), Switzerland (Sabin), and

Britain (where he was awarded the Booker Prize in 1992)—were generally favourable. Though this is no representative selection, the review in *The New York Times Book Review* (Grossman) seems to be an exception. The novel may overstate the implicit racism of the war against Japan, but even an outspoken defender of the bomb like Fussell acknowledges the racial aspects of the Pacific War (26; 45-62). It is surprising, though—and telling—that one reviewer attributes Caravaggio's mental comment, "He knows that the young soldier is right, They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation" (286) to Kip, and accuses Ondaatje of "racial self-hatred" (Kaplan 16-17). He seems to have forgotten that Caravaggio only echoes the official sentiment, documented by the then Prime Minister of Canada, Mackenzie King, who confided to his diary: "It is fortunate that the use of the bomb should have been on the Japanese rather than on the white races of Europe" (rpt. in Granatstein and Neary 337). Kip objects to the "smell [of] celebration" (25)—and despite the relief about the end of the war (cf. Fussell), this should not be the dominant reaction of a morally superior people. Yet the controversies in the US about the fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki reveal the anxiety—and the unresolved national trauma—that still resists rationalization, despite 50 years of justifications (cf. Alperovitz).

- 15 Professor Herzog writes in Saul Bellow's novel: "*I don't pretend that my position, on the other hand, is easy. We are survivors, in this age, so theories of progress ill become us, because we are intimately acquainted with the costs. To realize you are a survivor is a shock*" (75). The survivors in *The English Patient* are all facing (effects of) that shock. Herzog has an interesting variety of the inside/outside dichotomy in its opening line: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog" (1).
- 16 Only two chapters (21 and 22) of the 22 that make up St. John's "Revelation" tell us about "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21.1). Most of what these chapters describe is the ideal (static) architecture of a perfect city and landscape; people are barely mentioned.
- 17 Literally, "a turning to the Orient, to the east." Middle-age maps were not north-oriented, but east, towards the rising sun/son, where Christians believed paradise to be.
- 18 The "Annunciation of corporeal embodiment of divine light" presented to Kip in the Neapolitan church, is indeed linked to "the apocalyptic endpoint realized by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," as Simpson remarks (229). This ironic link marks the shift from religious to secular apocalypse: while the divine light at least promises salvation, man-made nuclear light brought devastation, radiation, suffering, and death. The (apocalyptic) promises of (some of) the fathers of the nuclear age—peace and plenty for all thanks to nuclear power, were ridiculous—and are almost forgotten, while the deadly legacy of nuclear waste and plutonium accumulates.
- 19 The movement into post-apocalyptic narration is marked by the fact that all the violence in this novel (a war novel, after all) is related from a distance, *post facto*, as history, as belonging to the past. This is surprising in a writer in whose works violence has been foregrounded so much (cf. Bök).
- 20 At best female veterans are marginalized into the foreground, like the nurse Marian Turner and Lady Juliet d'Orsey in Findley's *The Wars*. Furthermore, despite first-hand experience of war, neither Naomi's mother nor grandmother in *Obasan*—nor "Trümmerfrauen" in bombed-out German cities—would normally be identified as "veterans." And this despite the fact that total war erases differences: there is no fighting front (periphery) any more, and no safe rear (centre) neither; fighting and death are ubiquitous and indiscriminate: civilians, women, and children become (legitimate?) targets.
- 21 This aspect of "Gender Politics" is surprisingly absent from Lorraine York's "whirling" (71-91). But perhaps Ondaatje intends to turn this failure of accounting for Hana's life in postwar Toronto into yet another artistic success.

- <sup>22</sup> The contesting of "totalizing order" is one of the functions Hutcheon sees as typical for historiographic metafiction ("The Pastime" 296-97).
- <sup>23</sup> I can only explain this with the help of an analogy, for the simulation is more apparent in the architecture of bombed-out German cities—like Freiburg. The buildings in the centre of town look old—some of them even display the year they were built: two, three, four hundred years ago. But these buildings are only simulating age: besides the cathedral, just a few of them are more than 50 years old, as photographs of the destruction document. Yet, only a trained or experienced eye can read the writing in the walls and will be able to see through the facades (as one could after the destruction; cf. Andres). Most inhabitants—and tourists—take the appearance of age at face value, and do not see the inscribed apocalypse. On the other hand, it is surprising how many postmodern buildings echo structural elements of fragmentation and destruction (cf. Jencks: 197; 223; 225) which can be seen in photographs of bombed-out cities. Is postmodern architecture recording apocalyptic memories in structures, which only those see who know these war-time photographs or remember the destroyed cities, while most others are just dazzled by the bright surfaces of the buildings? At any rate, in both cases, apocalypse has become cryptic. But the damage done to German culture through the physical destruction of war is infinitesimally small compared to the loss the Germans inflicted on German and European cultures when they mass-murdered European Jews. The Jewish communities which existed in German towns, cities, and numerous villages, were annihilated during the war. How can life ever be "the same" without them? But how do you notice something that is not there, if—born after the war—you do not know any other reality? How do you notice the absence of all the Jewish friends you never had, because their parents and grandparents were systematically murdered by Germans in concentration camps? How do you mourn their suffering and this loss?
- <sup>24</sup> Herodotus, at the other end of writing history, will no longer suffice either: the edition the English Patient has in his possession has been supplemented, interleaved. What was published has been reprivatized not only by reading, but by writing. Hana seems to be using books for similar purposes. The knowledge and experiences of the wars recorded in fiction (Findley's *The Wars*, Heller's *Catch-22*, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kogawa's *Obasan*, etc., or New Journalism writing) supplement the narratives of history books and *vice versa* (cf. Hutcheon, "The Pastime" 295-97). No singular narration will do, while a totality of all telling is beyond human comprehension.
- <sup>25</sup> I would like to thank Professor Stephen Scobie (University of Victoria, BC) for an early typescript version of his essay "The Reading Lesson: Michael Ondaatje and the Patients of Desire," which inspired this paper. My visit to Victoria was part of a 1993 "Faculty Enrichment Fellowship" funded by the *International Council for Canadian Studies*. I am grateful for their support and Professor Scobie's kind invitation to lecture at the University of Victoria.

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