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In Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*, the eponymous narrator retells how he witnessed a small plane crash of a man and his wife in the desert of North Africa. The wife was the illicit lover of the narrator. He pulls her body from the wreckage and carries her to a cooling cave in the dim hope of reviving her. Now dying and drugged with morphine, the narrator says, "We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings...All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps." (261) Here the narrator intermingles nature, cartography, and human relationships, but he does so in a way worthy of Romantic poets such as P.B. Shelley. Not only has the narrator sunk into an opiate-induced vision of a lost time in an exotic desert, but also he understands Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian and travel writer who tried to chart the great deserts. In these ways, the narrator of Ondaatje's modern novel mirrors the narrator and poet in Shelley's lengthy allegorical poem *Alastor*. Just as the narrator, the English patient, wishes to wander deserts that have no name, the poet wanders through vast landscapes in a compressed narrative space, "through Arabie/ And Persia, and the wild Carmanian waste,/And o'er the aerial mountains which pour down Indus and Oxus from their icy caves..." Here one sees the difference in orientation between Ondaatje and Shelley. Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka and his book is a classic of contemporary fiction; perhaps the narrator's wish for unmarked borders hints at the author's thematic wish to dissolve colonial boundaries. One can sense this in the setting and the characters gathered there: a ruined Renaissance villa populated by the mysterious burned

“English” patient (who is in reality Hungarian), a Sikh from India, and two Canadians. Shelley, meanwhile, approaches these exotic locales firmly entrenched in English Romanticism; the desert sands and icy caves so foreign to Europe may represent the haunting emotional terrain of desire and imagination. One can hear an emotional echo in the cave of *The English Patient*, where the narrator lays his lover to rest.

Like the narrator in Ondaatje’s novel, who drifts between a waking state and a morphine haze, the poet crosses not only geographic boundaries, but also more diaphanous veils: “...He eagerly pursues/ Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade; He overleaps the bounds...Lost, lost, for ever lost,/In the wide pathless desert of dim sleep...” One also sees subtler threads to the English patient in the poet’s hair, seared by Autumn, who gazes “a wan light through the reflected lines in his thin hair.” Notably, after the death of his lover, the English patient tries to fly out on the damaged plane but crashes, his hair on fire. Ondaatje has poetically resurrected the figure of Shelley’s poet, whose gaze seeks to interiorize the world and even the otherworldly, to fix the temporal and therefore fleetingly beautiful into a lasting image. In the present narrative time of *The English Patient*, the badly burned narrator has been reduced to a charred trunk of a man—yet his grey eyes remain lucid and captivating. Through his stories, he brings the beauty of the desert expanse into the ruined villa, wandering between the boundaries of dream, myth, history, and reality.

The poet follows a light that is at once external and internal to him, just as he projects his desire outward and seeks to interiorize the imagistic world. He engages in a direct address with water, which is at once natural but immaterial and reflective: “O Stream! Whose source is inaccessibly profound,/ Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?/ Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,/ Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulphs...Have each their type in

me.” One hears echoes of the rivers of wisdom in *The English Patient*, how the narrator actively commingles human and natural forms. In *Alastor*, the poet seeks a gnostic glimpse into the source of the abundant waters, and commingles his flesh with flowers and wood: “Tell where these living thoughts reside, when stretched/ Upon thy flowers my bloodless limbs shall waste/ I’ the passing wind!” This poet dies, if only to be born again in the pages of *The English Patient*. Imagistic parallels abound in the narrator’s memory of his fiery plane crash, which he recounts to a thief named Caravaggio: “Acacia and bone...Caravaggio reflected in the black lake of his eye...He is exhausted not from the desert but from solitude...the woman translated into leaves and twigs, the broken glass to the sky like a jaw above him.” (175) In this fractured, hurtling moment, Ondaatje encompasses the images and the themes of *Alastor*. One thinks of the bitumen lakes that open the poem, of the intermingling of human limbs and boughs, and of the poet wandering in solitude, seeking to bring the ideal and the real into a lasting and ultimately impossible alignment. Though the allegory in *Alastor* seems antiquated, after his death the poet’s search still lingers. He tries to defy the ravages of time and distill fleeting imagery, and in this way, he almost creates a singular moment of beauty. This desire still lives in the voice of any storyteller and wherever the themes of love and loss lay buried.