

The Unstable Earth:

Landscape and Language in Patrick White's *Voss*, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Patrick White's *Voss*, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* depict landscape in a manner that reveals the inadequacies of imperial epistemological discourses and the rationalist model of subjectivity which enables them. The study demonstrates that these novels all emphasise the instabilities inherent in imperial epistemology. White, Ondaatje and Malouf chart their protagonists' inability to comprehend and document the landscapes they encounter, and the ways in which this failure calls into question their subjectivity and the epistemologies that underpin it. One of the principal contentions of the study, then, is that the novels under consideration deploy a postmodern aesthetic of the sublime to undermine colonial discourses.

The first chapter of the thesis outlines the postcolonial and poststructural theory that informs the readings in the later chapters. Chapter Two analyses White's representation of subjectivity, imperial discourse and the Outback in *Voss*. The third chapter examines Ondaatje's depiction of the Sahara Desert in *The English Patient*, and focuses on his concern with the ways in which language and cartographic discourse influence the subject's perception of the natural world. Chapter Four investigates the representation of landscape, language and subjectivity in Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*.

Finally, then, this study argues that literature's unique ability to acknowledge alterity enables it to serve as an effective tool for critiquing colonial discourses.

Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter One: A Theoretical Foundation	13
Chapter Two: The Dead Heart	33
Chapter Three: Fire, Sand and the <i>Fata Morgana</i>	55
Chapter Four: An Imaginary Landscape	75
Conclusion	105
Bibliography	109

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Introduction

For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. (Schama 5–6)

The beautiful, the sublime, and, for a while, the picturesque were three great categories under which specimens of European landscape were classified; these categories, or at least the first two, remained so fundamental to European aesthetic experience that they even organised the ways in which landscape was seen. (Coetzee 52)

We know the world by naming it. (Malouf, qtd. in Papastergiadis 93)

In the epigraphs to this introduction, David Malouf and J. M. Coetzee explain that our perception of the natural world is guided by the words we use to describe it. When in an unfamiliar environment, however, we may find that our vocabulary does not correspond to the setting; our words seem unfit to describe our surroundings. Likewise, for the European colonial subject in a foreign country, the natural world often exceeds the constraints of the aesthetic categories to which Coetzee refers. While much literature has been devoted to exploring this phenomenon, this thesis will focus on the relationship between the subject and the natural world as it is depicted in Patrick White's *Voss* (1957), Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), and David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978). The protagonists of these novels, as colonial subjects in foreign climes, fail to recognise the landscapes in which they find themselves. They appear to have imported a "language of landscape" which "does not fit the landscape" they inhabit (Malouf, qtd. in Spinks 10–11). Given the insufficiency of this language, the protagonists are alienated from the natural world, which proves to be wholly "indifferent" to their imperial pursuits (10). The once-familiar world seems unstable to them because these lands exceed their geographical and historical knowledge. This thesis undertakes to investigate the authors' depiction of these inhospitable landscapes.

In these novels, the landscape produces a tension between the protagonists' cultural perspective and their unfamiliar physical environment. It is, to use Mary Louise Pratt's term, a "contact zone" of sorts (8). This, she argues, is "the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other" (8). Pratt uses the term "contact" because it "foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions" of the contact between coloniser and colonised (8). Although her emphasis is placed upon "subjects [that] are constituted in and by their relations to each other" (7), the "contact zone", I would argue, might also refer to a realm of encounter in which subjects are affected by their relations with the natural world. This thesis argues, then, that the perception of landscape is a fundamental aspect of the contact zone. As part of my analysis of the protagonists' relationship with the natural world in these novels, I shall trace their attempts to write of, speak of, and map out the places they encounter. In each of the novels, the protagonist is placed in opposition to a setting that exceeds his attempts to integrate it into a cultural body of knowledge. After experiencing this alienation, he begins a journey of transformation that is initiated by a changed perception of the landscape.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines landscape as "a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view", as well as "the object of one's gaze" ("Landscape"). Rather than describing an aspect of the physical world, the term refers to both a perspective of the world and the artistic representation of that view. It originated in relation to seventeenth-century Dutch painting, which prioritised the natural world as its subject matter. Subsequently, this subject matter was taken up in the literary arts, most notably by the Romantics. Importantly, the noun 'landscape' emerged in the English language as an artistic term, and therefore had no prior existence as a reference to the physical world. The word implies "an outside view, a separation, even a basis of criticism" (Wright 32).

While the concept of landscape introduced a focus on the non-human world, it also imposed certain limitations on its representation. As Denis Cosgrove observes, it is a *visual* term "that arose initially out of Renaissance humanism and its particular concepts and constructs of space" (46). From its beginning, therefore, it functioned as a representation of human perception. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin

explain, “the idea of ‘landscape’ is predicated upon a particular philosophic tradition in which the objective world is separated from the viewing subject” (“Place” 345). A landscape therefore provides “a partial, inadequate, and temporal vision [of the world], reflecting our own interests” (Wright 32). It can be understood as a representation of a culture or, as John Wylie argues, a “way of seeing” (8). Since its inception, the word itself has framed the ways that artists, writers and readers understand the natural world.

Given that it is impossible to speak of landscape without considering the subjective gaze that constitutes it, it must be emphasised that landscape, as a term, idea, genre and cultural perspective, is distinctly European (Wylie 124). In writing landscape, the writer constructs the world textually for the purposes of a literary project. Accordingly, when English writers began to write of foreign worlds, particularly those that were the site of colonial activity, their representations constructed the land within European discourse. The construct of landscape became one of the many ways in which the European subject attempted to understand the natural world and her or his place in it. Since language is inextricably linked to culture, we, in using words like ‘landscape’, “see the world from particular cultural perspectives” (Wylie 7). According to Wylie, “our gaze, our way of looking at the world, is always already laden with particular cultural values, attitudes, ideologies and expectations” (7).

When the natural world did not meet the expectations of colonial travel writers and novelists, this challenged their modes of representation. Consequently, European ways of seeing and writing landscape were often inappropriately applied to the world that travellers encountered. Although unsuited to these environments, “genres of landscape aesthetics such as the picturesque, the pastoral and the sublime were used by European travellers and colonists as a means of understanding, evaluating, inhabiting and *making knowable* non-European landscapes” (Wylie 124). In his thesis entitled “The Sublime, Imperialism and the African Landscape”, Hermann Wittenberg argues that the sublime aesthetic in early colonial South African literature was “one of the ways in which an alien, remote and incomprehensible social and natural landscape could be imaginatively mapped, visualised, and brought under the ambit of colonial reason” (4). He investigates classical theories of the sublime, such as those of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke and notes their role in “the production of [. . .] autonomous subjectivity” (41). For Kant, the

subject is “autonomous and pro-active: its rational inquiring mind creates sublime sensation by observing, comprehending and organising the visual and mental field” (Wittenberg 37–38). Because it “must be produced by the observer’s autonomous exercise of reason” (37), the sublime becomes “a form of stability or closure that attempts to establish rational order over dark, immense and threatening experiences” (231). To attain order and control, then, aesthetic categories such as the Kantian sublime were used to inscribe the supposedly unknown world with terms that rendered it familiar and known. After the initial discomfort of encountering the sublime, the subject experiences the pleasure of controlling it. Wittenberg thus contends that Kant’s containment of it by reason enabled writers to use the sublime to “manage [. . .] the contradictions inherent in the aesthetic appreciation and appropriation of contested colonial landscapes” (6)

For those postcolonial authors who write of travellers in ‘foreign’ landscapes with the intention of subverting imperial narratives, a different mode of representation seems necessary. In response to imperial attempts to categorise and possess the land, postcolonial literature strives for an approach to writing landscapes that will speak back to the discourses used in travel writing and early colonial fiction. As part of this project, discourses such as geography and history, and more specifically cartography and language, are often problematised in these works. Consequently, the way in which the subject relates to, conceives of, and represents the natural world is a key concern in postcolonial fiction and literary theory. Moreover, the emergence of poststructural theory greatly influenced postcolonial literature and critical studies, since it draws attention to the manner in which representational systems function. The most influential of these representational systems is, of course, language. Postcolonial theorists acknowledge that the subject approaches the natural world from within a cultural framework that is created and supported by language. For example, in their seminal study, *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin identify language as “the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established” (7). Since language mediates our perception of the natural world, thereby inscribing it with cultural values, the landscape appears to conform to Western epistemology once it is named. Yet, in postcolonial settings, European languages often fail to secure knowledge. At times, the

natural world cannot be contained within the cultural framework of the percipient. And, as it exceeds this paradigm, the natural world is invested with radical difference or otherness.

In order to counter linguistic colonisation, it is imperative for postcolonial writers to draw attention to the aspects of the world that European words fail to describe. To this end, postcolonial literature emphasises what is, to the imperial eye, inscrutable, ineffable and other. Novels like *Voss*, *The English Patient* and *An Imaginary Life* depict colonial settings in which European characters encounter the sublimity of the colonised land. In this thesis, I investigate the role of alterity and the sublime in postcolonial literary landscapes. The three novels I examine articulate an understanding of the sublime that differs sharply from that outlined by Kant, and which has much in common with Jean-Francois Lyotard's conception of it as "an aesthetic of excess liberated from the Kantian rule of reason" (Wittenberg 39). Unlike Kant, Lyotard claims that the sublime is "an event enmeshed in language" (Shaw 127), a linguistic phenomenon that decentres the subject. He defines it as an idea "of which no presentation is possible" because "the imagination fails to present an object which might [. . .] come to match [the] concept" (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 78). Importantly, then, the sublime inheres not in an object, but in the subject's exposure to language's failure to present, and therefore the failure of precisely the Kantian "capacity to conceive, [. . .] to present an object corresponding to the concept" (*The Postmodern Condition* 77). Each of the novels under discussion here frequently gestures toward the sublime in a depiction of its protagonist's immense difficulty in documenting colonial space. Since European words and ideas are destabilised in the setting of the colonised landscape, their contrived and limited nature is exposed. This thesis argues, therefore, that a postmodern aesthetic of the sublime is used in these novels to undermine, rather than aid, colonial discourses.

I have elected to examine *Voss*, *The English Patient* and *An Imaginary Life* because of their similar treatment of landscape. In each of these novels, the landscape is arguably as significant, if not more so, than the characters. Instead of framing human activity, it affects the protagonists' ways of seeing and knowing. In this regard, it is noteworthy that all the novels feature a desert as their primary setting. Each text thereby contributes to an ancient literary tradition in which deserts are represented as places

where epistemological categories such as geography and history “are suspended” and “notions of time and space change and disintegrate” (Jasper 72). David Jasper argues that “the romance and the lure of the desert lie ultimately and precisely in its total and inescapable and fascinating *otherness*” (73). The desert’s harsh climate is other to the European subject, and so “breaks down the epistemology of the Enlightenment” (76). Significantly, in this regard, deserts were originally named in relation to other, European, landscapes. The English word *desert* originates from the Latin *dēsertum*, meaning an abandoned place or “something left waste” (“Desert”). To the European perceiver’s eye, the desert appears empty and desolate. Like their many fictional antecedents, the protagonists of the novels under discussion here attempt to document the desert through European discourses, only to find that a “new kind of narrative begins to emerge, on the edge of [their] language and experience” (Jasper 93).

Initially, it appears to be ironic that White, Ondaatje and Malouf should explore the limitations of language in literature, that is, through the medium of language. Since authors writing in English operate within a certain discursive system, is it possible for them to succeed in their attempts to challenge and perhaps subvert European discourses? My contention is that these authors are profoundly aware of this problem, and I shall examine and compare the varying ways in which they seek to counter it. To begin with, all three authors resist the tradition of writing landscape as a comfortable setting or supportive background, and instead emphasise the tension between the subject and the natural world. Since much of this tension derives from the role that language plays in perception, they thematise representational processes, and, in the process, acknowledge that which cannot be represented. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the protagonists of all three novels are based on historical figures that travelled to foreign lands. Through fictionalising the accounts of these travels, White, Malouf, and Ondaatje provide what Ondaatje refers to as “the unofficial story”, and “give a personal, complicated version of things” (Bush para. 38). In doing so, they stage their protagonists’ negotiation of difference and alterity, making explicit the ideas that inform their approach to the natural world. By re-imagining these historical journeys, these novels complicate and critique the imperial discourses which mediate the protagonists’ perception of landscape.

This thesis argues that landscape functions in two fundamental ways in *Voss*, *The English Patient* and *An Imaginary Life*. Firstly, the novels undermine European structures of knowledge such as history and geography, which are depicted as inadequate in ‘foreign’ settings. Commenting on the discursive construction of knowledge, whether European or otherwise, Malouf has argued that we “know the world by naming it”, and through the particular “language we [use to] name it” (qtd. in Papastergiadis 93). If this language is limited, then so too is the knowledge it constructs. Accordingly, these three novels demonstrate a “status of knowledge [that] is altered” and raise the “problem of legitimation” of knowledge (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 3, 8).

Secondly, White, Malouf, and Ondaatje depict their protagonists as being shaped and transformed by their environments. Since the natural world they encounter exceeds their language and ways of seeing, they are forced to re-evaluate the discourses which inform their perception. In doing so, they all undergo a transformation: unsettled by their encounter with the desert, they are affected by, rather than acting on, it. Due to their interactions with the desert, the protagonists of these three novels come to understand that the boundaries between the self and the world are constructed in language, rather than inherent in nature. In analysing the transformations in their perceptions, I shall investigate the conception of subjectivity that informs these characters’ approach to the natural world.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will establish a theoretical framework for my discussion in subsequent chapters. While the relationship between language and landscape in postcolonial literary theory will prove an invaluable resource in my examination of the selected novels, I shall also draw on the linguistic theories of Jacques Derrida. Since this philosopher’s work emphasises the other of language, or that which the perceiver fails to recognise and name, it will prove vital for my consideration of the interaction between subject and world.

Chapter Two analyses the representation of landscape, discourse and subjectivity in White’s *Voss*. Given that the protagonist of this novel sees his attempt to map the Australian Outback as a means to exercise his will, the desert “becomes a challenge to [his] strength and pride” (Garebian 562). Ultimately, it exceeds his attempts to signify and contain it, and so is crucial to White’s “literary critique of the Western Eye” (Giffin 8).

Chapter Three develops this discussion of discourse and landscape in postcolonial literature through an analysis of *The English Patient* – a novel which foregrounds cartography and language. This novel, I argue, evinces Ondaatje’s concern with acknowledging what Graham Huggan refers to as “the relativity of modes of spatial (and, by extension, cultural) perception” in his depiction of his protagonist’s transforming experience of the desert (358). Prompted by their encounter with the sublimity of the desert, Ondaatje’s characters are suspicious of Western history and geography. Like *Voss*, then, *The English Patient* “questions the very idea of rational progress” (Hillger 135).

Building on the examinations of *Voss* and *The English Patient* in earlier chapters, Chapter Four examines Malouf’s foregrounding, in *An Imaginary Life*, of the role that language plays in the individual’s interaction with, and conception of, landscape. This novel explicitly deals with “the idea of landscape itself” (Malouf, qtd. in Papastergiadis 84). My emphasis falls on the way in which the text calls attention to the sublime by exploring “the transformative potential of an embodied [and silent] interaction with the environment” (Grogan 7).

Throughout the thesis, then, I reflect on the ways in which White, Ondaatje and Malouf use literature, and therefore language, as a means of undermining hegemonic Western language and discourse. I demonstrate that their awareness of the inability of language to signify adequately, and therefore their sensitivity to the sublime, enables precisely this critique. Ironically, these authors succeed in finding “words to articulate” that which “doesn’t come mediated through language except through the language that the writer finds for them” (Malouf, qtd. in Papastergiadis 91). In other words, their literary language paradoxically opens language to that which it necessarily excludes. Overall, then, this thesis intends to show that White, Ondaatje and Malouf deploy this ‘writer’s language’, a resonant and subversive form of representation, to depict landscapes in a manner that facilitates their critique of hegemonic discourse.

Chapter One **A Theoretical Foundation**

This chapter will outline the theories that inform my readings of Patrick White's *Voss*, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*. It is primarily concerned with adumbrating the poststructural understandings of language and subjectivity that ground these analyses. These authors demonstrate their awareness that landscape presupposes a perceiving eye: that is, a subject for whom a particular perspective of the natural world is significant. They are also concerned with the role that language plays in the perception of landscape. For that reason, I find postcolonial and poststructural theories useful in elucidating how discourse mediates perception. This chapter will also assess some of the ideas and discourses that contributed to the constitution of the colonial subject, and which influenced this subject's treatment of the natural world. My analysis includes an investigation of imperial and postcolonial constructions of landscape in the discourses of geography and history, and focuses particularly on the role of language and cartography in this process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the ways in which works of literature may critique such discourses.

The Poststructural Subject

In each of the novels under consideration, the natural world is not depicted in isolation, but in terms of its relationship to human beings. As such, I focus on the various texts' representation of subjectivity. Significantly, White, Ondaatje and Malouf depict their respective protagonists as rational subjects at the start of their individual journeys into the desert. In doing so, they draw on a particular understanding of the subject that developed in Europe, beginning with René Descartes in the Renaissance and continuing in the Enlightenment with thinkers such as Immanuel Kant. Descartes argues that the subject's mind is distinct from its body, a separation that supposedly enables the subject to free

itself of external determinants, and therefore sensory experience, and to assume autonomy. The notion of the rational subject therefore refers to a human being possessed of a unified identity or character who knows and controls its self.¹ This rational subject is always seen in relation to objects, which do not possess this ability, and, being separate from such objects, is able to control them. It is precisely this illusion of autonomy that enables the model of the Cartesian subject, for whom rationality is paramount. As Anthony J. Cascardi argues in *The Subject of Modernity*, “insofar as its ‘founding’ is based on the ‘overcoming’ of history”, the rational subject “is unable fully to comprehend the process through which its own historical emergence takes place” (57). Its supposed autonomy allows the subject to perceive itself as de-historicised or unaffected by culture. This understanding of the human individual ignores the role of external socio-historical influences, such as discourse, in the formation of the subject. By ‘discourse’, I mean those representational systems which communicate socio-cultural knowledge – my particular emphasis in this study, though, is on those discourses that communicate knowledge about landscape, and therefore influence the constitution of the subject. Importantly, the protagonists in the novels under consideration assume autonomy and a possession of *a priori* knowledge. These novels challenge this notion of the subject in various ways and depict subjectivity as a cultural process. As I will go on to argue, the subject’s access to knowledge of the world, and its perception thereof, is influenced by its use of discourse.

Already implicit in what I have said is poststructural theory’s critique of rational subjectivity: its argument that the subject is vulnerable to, and largely constructed by, external forces. Ultimately, this conception of the subject erodes the distinction between internal and external, inside and outside, private and public. This is important for this thesis, since I argue that the characters in the novels selected for discussion are affected by their interactions with the natural world. According to the poststructuralists, the subject is divided and unstable, a site where selfhood is constructed and performed rather than the location of an original or inherent self. The subject is therefore not a centre of

¹ The terms ‘subject’ and ‘self’ are not synonymous: the subject is defined by culture and its discourses, while the self is individual. However, it becomes impossible to determine the point at which the social formation of the subject is distinguishable from individual selfhood. For that reason, I use the terms somewhat interchangeably in this thesis.

knowledge, but rather a site at which such discourses meet. Jacques Derrida, for instance, opposes the humanist premise that the subject can possess *a priori* knowledge when he states that the Cartesian *cogito* “is not something that is natural or given” (“Following Theory” 25). Instead, he understands the subject to be “constituted through histories” (25). Like many poststructuralists, Derrida claims that the subject results from a continuous process of identification via discursive practices. Ultimately, he opposes the naturalisation of the self, claiming that “there *is* no identity, there is only identification or self-identification *as a process*” (25). This process of identification is never complete, and enables the formation of selfhood to occur despite the absence of any inherent origin of identity.

Because the subject is positioned in discourse rather than located in a persisting self, discourse affects the individual’s perception of landscape. Defined as “the process of becoming aware of something” via the senses or the mind, perception guides our vision of the world (“Perception”). However, it is impossible to distinguish between the world and one’s perceptions thereof because the individual’s experience is filtered through its consciousness. Hence, perception is “a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting” the world; it is synonymous with cognition or understanding (“Perception”). In other words, perceiving something amounts to knowing it. Moreover, perception is subject to media like language in its functioning. The subject accesses the world via language: sensory experience is refracted by language, which translates rather than reflects the objects of perception. This is because perception is a recognition that is premised on the subject’s ability to name what it sees. Furthermore, certain aspects of the world originate in the mind rather than in physical reality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance, maintains that the subject brings into being aspects of the natural world such as the horizon, which would not exist “if I were not there to scan it with my gaze” (ix). As I have already noted, the term ‘landscape’ itself is the result of the subjective perception of the natural world: it indicates a quality of the world that does not exist independently of human consciousness.

This section of my chapter has argued that ‘landscape’ connotes a relationship between the subject and the natural world. What is more, it presupposes a relationship that is affected by discourse, since that which the subject sees and knows is guided by

language. If the subject is unable to recognise that which it sees, this is because it is unable to represent it in language. When the protagonists in the novels under study fail to recognise the lands they encounter, it is because they lack the vocabulary to represent that with which they are confronted. Since they cannot identify the landscape, they are able to describe it, either to themselves or to others. In these depictions, the subject's perception is interrupted by that which it cannot name.

A World of Subjects and Objects: Landscape as Conceived in Language

Since language mediates perception and hence conceptualises landscape, it is necessary to examine this medium. In accordance with its poststructural stance, this thesis accepts Derrida's dismissal of the notion of a pre-linguistic consciousness. Drawing on the writing of Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida famously advances the argument that "[w]e think only in signs" (*Of Grammatology* 50). Before investigating Derrida's claims, however, it is necessary to note the structuralist premises from which he is working. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure describes language as a semiotic system. Each linguistic sign unites, "not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image" (66). Since the sign is comprised of a sound-image, or signifier, which refers to a concept, or signified, the physical entity, or 'referent', is absent from language. It follows, then, the sign's attempt at representation is perpetually incomplete. Given its inability to represent the particularity of the physical world, the signifier's meaning lies only in its location in a semiotic system "of interdependent terms[,] in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (114). In other words, the signified is constituted by its relation to, and difference from, all other concepts. Accordingly, the relationship between the signifier and signified is "arbitrary": "it follows no law other than that of tradition" (74). The sign functions only through the relationship of the signifier to the signified and, without social consensus, the meaning "vanishes" and "instead of a concrete object we are faced with a mere abstraction" (102–103). Words, then, are given their meaning by the linguistic communities in which they are used; these communities reach consensus regarding which signified should be

assigned to which signifier. Without this linguistic community, “the individual is incapable of fixing a single value” or meaning to a word (113). In fulfilling its function as a means of communication, language “becomes the property of everyone” and the subject’s “control is lost” (76). Accordingly, Saussure sees language as a social, rather than a natural, phenomenon.

Like Saussure, Derrida takes “the indefiniteness of reference as the criterion that allows us to recognise that we are indeed dealing with a system of signs” when attempting representation (*Of Grammatology* 49). Although he accepts Saussure’s claims about the limitations of language, he abandons structuralism on the grounds that it is logocentric. Given that Saussure argues that signs are “constituted out of the unity of a signifier [. . .] and a signified” (Salusinkzky 10), structuralism participates in the ‘metaphysics of presence’, which Derrida explains as the process of locating a meaning, a centre, a “fixed origin”, or a “point of presence” in language (*Writing and Difference* 279). Deconstruction fragments this unified centre by taking “the notion of a differential relation *between* signs” and reinscribing it “*within* them” (Salusinkzky 10). Derrida maintains that the sign does not refer to a “point of presence” or referent, but is haunted by the absence of origin at the heart of all signification (*Writing and Difference* 280). This absence occurs because the centre has “no natural site”: it is “not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into play” (280).

Rather than referring to a particular referent, each word signals only its difference from all others. Since it is a process rather than a presence, the signified is continually deferred and is never stable in its location. This continual deferral of meaning is a linguistic phenomenon Derrida termed *différance*, a neologism that refers to the process of *difference* and *deferral* within signification. Each word indicates its difference from all others, and marks a perpetual delay of presence. *Différance*, then, is “the movement according to which language [. . .] is constituted” (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 12). Importantly, this “weave of differences” known as *différance* is constructed historically, in language (12). Since the signifier bears no natural relation to the referent, all meaning is derived from within the semiotic system. A signifier’s meaning, which one understands to be the “‘objective’ exteriority [. . .] we believe we know as the most familiar thing in

the world”, is made possible by the non-presence of all the signifiers that are different from the chosen signifier in the utterance (*Of Grammatology* 70–71). The signified’s meaning is premised on the absence of all other signifieds, which invests the word with the *effect* of singular meaning. “[L]eft by a chain of infinite and unstable re-signification”, as Imre Salusinkzky puts it, this cumulative effect is known as the “trace”, which invests the utterance with a seeming presence or meaning (11). The trace is haunted by the absence of all other significations, because these signs present themselves “as [an] irreducible absence within the presence of the trace” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 47). Infinite re-signification is key to *différance*, since “the notion of the trace marks the presence of the sign with an absence in the form of [perpetual] internal difference and deferral” (Salusinkzky 11). Consequently, Derrida believes that “the signified always already functions as a signifier” because there is “not a single signifier that escapes [. . .] the play of signifying references that constitutes language” (*Of Grammatology* 7). Significations, therefore, “have meaning only after the possibility of the trace” (47). Importantly, the trace “has no ‘natural attachment’ to the signified within reality” (47). Since it is cultural rather than natural, Derrida explains, the trace is “[l]ike the word ‘arbitrary’ according to Saussure” (47), in that it “should not imply that the choice of signifier is left entirely to the speaker” (Saussure, qtd. in *Of Grammatology* 47). Derrida ultimately claims that reference is only the result of a textual effect, and that there can be no access to meaning that is not subject to the interplay of signifiers.

This lack of direct or specific reference led Derrida famously to claim that “there is nothing outside of the text” (*Of Grammatology* 158). He argues that reading and writing “cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent [. . .] or toward a signified outside the text, whose content could take place [. . .] outside of language” (158). In his study of Derrida’s philosophy, James K. A. Smith notes that this statement is often misread as a denunciation of the referent, and argues that “Derrida is not out to deny the reality of a world outside of texts” but “only to point out its conditions and limits” (45). As Smith explains, these conditions presume that “there is no aspect of our ‘experience’ – that interpretive way in which we navigate our being-in-the-world – that escapes the play of signifiers or the conditioning of *différance*” (44). In other words, our experience is inextricably bound up in language. Approaching

interpretation of the world, the subject, in search of an origin, “dreams of deciphering a truth [. . .] which escapes play and the order of the sign” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 292). However, as Derrida asserts, the origin of meaning is also subject to textual instability; the trace “is not only the disappearance of origin”, but an indication that the origin “was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace” (*Of Grammatology* 61). The origin is therefore absent in language. Derrida names it a mere concept, which has “a relative function within a system situating a multitude of origins” in which each origin is “capable of being the effect or the offshoot of another origin” (217). Even so, he does not presume that language fails entirely to communicate meaning. As Carrol Clarkson argues, “the referent may indeed be absent from the linguistic event, but that is not to say that the referential function is denied” (38). Derrida himself claimed that it is “totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the ‘other’ of language” (Derrida and Kearney, “Deconstruction and the Other” 172–173). While critics may see his “work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language”, he argues that “it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite” (173). The referent, then, is “the other of language”, and hence “to deny reference would be to shut down alterity” (Smith 61–62). It is precisely the limitation of writing, or the fallibility of language, that allows for the other. Consequently, an utterance cannot communicate without being haunted by the absence of the other. Alterity will always interrupt the subject’s perception and description of the world.

Derrida speaks of the absence of the referent in language as an abyss of presence, which demands that the subject must always say more than intended (and thus supplement the utterance) in an attempt to describe the alterity it encounters. This absence of origin does not presuppose that representation is randomly based, though: as he notes, “representation in the abyss of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is [. . .] born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation”, which carries this trace (*Of Grammatology* 163). This abyss haunts the subject, who perpetually attempts to speak of that which cannot be said in a bid to name the other. Smith describes this haunting as provocative: the abyss invites the subject “to see things otherwise, and then to participate in effecting a transformation” of perception (67). This is why Derrida views Deconstruction as “a positive response to an alterity

which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it” (Derrida and Kearney, “Deconstruction and the Other” 168).

The abyss of presence is very similar to the sublime, which also haunts the subject, and motivates it to respond to alterity. For Lyotard, as I have already noted, the sublime refers to an idea or feeling which cannot be represented (*The Postmodern Condition* 78). Unable to name precisely that which has affected it, the subject loses control of its perception and is therefore unable to familiarise the world by identifying it. Importantly, the sublime is a product of perception rather than simply an inherent aspect of the environment or any other physical entity encountered. As Lyotard argues in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, “there are no sublime objects but only sublime feelings” (182). Since it cannot be captured in representation, the sublime is a symptom of the limitations of language – an indication that words are inadequate tools for communication. Despite this, allusions to the sublime paradoxically alert readers to the ineffable: the sublime “marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits” (Shaw 2). In his study of the sublime, Philip Shaw argues that sublimity “refers to the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated” (3). “Through this very defeat”, however, “the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language” (3). Once the subject loses its ability to familiarise the world in language, its subject position is compromised or decentred. It is its desire to re-establish its position of centrality that motivates the subject’s attempts at representation. Paradoxically, then, it is precisely this momentary decentring of the subject that inspires the representational gesture. The subject is inspired perpetually to attempt representation, precisely because representation is always in need of supplementation.

Derrida explains supplementation as a process in which the “sign”, “image”, or representation seeks to compensate for the absence of the referent (*Of Grammatology* 154). As he puts it, the sign “is always the supplement” of the referent (145), which is to say that the referent’s absence is an originary lack that begs for constant supplementation. For this reason, the signifier is “*supplementary* [in] character”; it is “the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*” (*Writing and Difference* 290). Crucially, this supplementation never reaches a stable point of reference, due to the aporetic “movement

of supplementary representation [that] approaches the origin as it distances itself from it” (*Of Grammatology* 295). Ultimately, Derrida argues that the supplement takes the place of the origin, that it is a “sign” that replaces the centre’s “absence” (*Writing and Difference* 289). The supplement thus engages in a process that is two-fold: it functions as both an addition and a replacement. Derrida describes the supplement as “a surplus” (*Of Grammatology* 144), which, paradoxically, “adds only to replace”, and also as a “substitute” that “produces no relief, its place [being] assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness” (145). The perpetual re-signification inherent in the interminable process of supplementation explains why one “cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization” when attempting representation (*Writing and Difference* 289). Because writing is “wounded” and always “bears the stigmata of its own proper inadequation” (*On the Name* 61), the writer is caught in the play of continual supplementation and différance.

Through their use of an aesthetic which foregrounds the ineffable, the authors under discussion in this study evince an awareness of these representational problems. While *Voss* predates much of Derrida’s work, White seems to anticipate the poststructural concern with the referential inadequacy of language, and the novel demonstrates how language can be a problematic tool for communication. In all of the novels, the desert setting haunts the protagonists, and invites them to write, map, and speak of it. Differently put, the desert inspires the “desire for presence” of which Derrida speaks, and constantly requires that these characters say more than they intend to, because there is always a remainder or excess that is left unsaid. Their attempts to document the desert must therefore always be supplemented. Because these novels employ “an aesthetic of the sublime”, they foreground “the unrepresentable in presentation” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 81).

Hospitality in the Desert: Attempting to Approach the Absent

How can Voss, Almásy or Ovid respond to the desert immediately, that is, in the absence of European discourse? Derrida’s theory of hospitality, which will be outlined in this

section, details an approach to alterity that offers a response to this question. These characters' approach to the desert, I argue, can be read in terms of Derridean hospitality.

In a discussion of the other of language, Derrida accuses Western philosophy as a whole of employing the “metaphysics of presence” (*Of Grammatology* 49), in terms of which, a phenomenon, to be recognised, “must submit itself and conform to the conditions of the knowing subject” (Smith 31). Whatever lies outside the subject's knowledge is rendered absent and remains unrecognised. This dismissal of alterity led both Emmanuel Levinas and Derrida to challenge the phenomenologists in particular. Levinas begins his critique of phenomenology by drawing attention to flaws in Western epistemology, which bases knowledge “on things given in a world that is given, which Edmund Husserl will call the life-world, the famous *Lebenswelt*” (*Basic Philosophical Writings* 152). In Levinas's view, phenomenology understands the world as made up of that which makes itself present to the subject. The otherness of that which is absent from the *Lebenswelt* is not taken into account. This is because, as Derrida claims in his essay on Levinasian ethics, the “infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept” (*Writing and Difference* 95). Rather, the other is “that which does not reveal itself” to the subject (103). By definition, “alterity is absolutely irreducible, that is, infinitely irreducible”; it lies beyond the scope of the subject's discursive knowledge, and is absent from what it understands (104). However, the subject is compelled to make present what seems absent when faced with alterity. As I have already noted, the subject will supplement its description of the world in an attempt to negate otherness. This results in the attempted reduction of the other to the ‘same’ (Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 48), since comprehension of the particular is always gained by comparing it to already existent knowledge, “which is always knowledge of the universal” (Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* 5–6). By reducing the other to the same, the subject attempts to elide alterity: it recognises otherness only in relation to an already-existent body of knowledge.

Derrida's theory of hospitality is rooted in his reading of Levinas's ethical formulations. In *Of Hospitality*, he uses the metaphor of hospitality to describe the way in which the subject responds to alterity. After describing a scenario in which a host receives a stranger in its home, he argues that hospitality is always conditional because the host maintains control in its welcoming of the stranger: the host is hospitable only to

that which it identifies and thus acknowledges as present. In being identified, the stranger's strangeness or alterity is reduced by being assimilated into the classificatory systems of knowledge that inform the invitation that the host extends. In other words, the other is related to on the subject's own terms. In inviting, and so naming, the stranger in language, the host makes the other present (by representing it), and reduces the other to an object, which is thus comprehensible. Derrida argues, therefore, that the attempted control of the other begins with the host's language, which "is the ensemble of culture" as it is inhabited by "values", "norms", and "meanings" ("Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality" 133). Since it is inseparable from our culture and history, language is "the home that never leaves us" (89); it is the context within which all things are perceived. However, if the host assumes itself to be a rational subject, it conceives of language as natural, rather than embedded in culture, and so believes that its perception of the world is unmediated. Accordingly, the rational subject assumes that it is able to name and categorise the world. In doing so, it attempts to ignore the other, because it does not fit into familiar categories. Hospitality is thus executed in language, and "[a]s Levinas says from another point of view, language *is* hospitality" (135).

However, alterity cannot be dismissed entirely, since the host's knowledge of the stranger is, by definition, reductive. The host "could not possibly speak of the other" because it does not "reveal itself" either conceptually or in language (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 103). The other is not reducible to an object and therefore can never be present. For the host, then, alterity is never finally eliminated, but remains as a haunting absence. Since it is haunted by this spectral presence, the host is never quite in control of its relationship with the stranger. It also follows, ironically, that the host is affected by the stranger. Consequently, it is the "master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage" ("Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality" 125). Derrida therefore challenges the traditional formulation of the subject as autonomous, since the host too is "prisoner of his place and his power" and ultimately "of his subjectivity" (123). This is why he argues that hospitality "make[s] everyone into everyone else's hostage" (125). While the host continues to attempt to name the stranger, the stranger's alterity continually exceeds the name.

Since hospitality is enacted in language, it is always conditional, and thus is not hospitality at all. Hospitality must become unconditional in order to be what it claims to be. Nevertheless, this is impossible as the host, to be truly hospitable, would have to receive the other *as* other, that is, unconditionally. Unconditional hospitality would have to “begin with the unquestioning welcome, in a double effacement, the effacement of the question *and* the name” (“Foreigner Question” 29). Derrida contends that “absolute, hyperbolic, unconditional hospitality” consists in “suspending language” (“Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality” 135).² However, the host cannot do this since it is located in language; it cannot willingly offer the stranger unconditional hospitality. Instead, moments of unconditional hospitality occur when the host or subject is unable to name the stranger. When the host is unable to comprehend the stranger, it encounters the stranger’s otherness or sublimity. Such moments decentre the subject, who is then affected by the other. This state is temporary, however, since the subject thinks and perceives in and through language.

In *Voss*, *The English Patient* and *An Imaginary Life*, each of the protagonists takes on the role of the host, relating to the natural world as a stranger, and attempting to elide its alterity by naming and mapping it. However, the protagonist is unable to render the stranger entirely familiar. His discourses fail to account for the particularity of the desert, and he is forced to reassess his perception of it.

The Postcolonial Place: A Re-vision of Landscape

White, Ondaatje and Malouf’s representations of landscape are fundamental to their critiques of imperial epistemology. In each of the novels studied here, the author foregrounds the protagonist’s approach to a landscape that is foreign to him. Significantly,

² As Smith argues, Derrida understands that “*ethics is hospitality*”, and “*deconstruction is ethics*”, and thus his theories on language and ethics are inextricable (70). Deconstruction is premised on “making room for the other, and so [it is] fundamentally a kind of hospitality and welcome” (15). Accordingly, deconstruction brings to light the way in which “texts, structures and institutions marginalise and exclude ‘the other’” (12).

each is an imperial subject who attempts to document the landscape and participates in a colonial endeavour. It is therefore important to investigate the Eurocentric discourses and cultural knowledge that inform the protagonists' perception of landscape. Significantly, in this regard, all the authors position their protagonists as rational subjects, and thus demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which the Enlightenment informed the coloniser's perception. Voss and Almásy, for instance, intend to map landscapes they regard as unknown – the Australian Outback and the Sahara Desert. By the same token, Malouf's Ovid, although an exile rather than an explorer, a poet rather than a cartographer, and located in a period that predates the Enlightenment by many centuries, is nonetheless a subject situated within an imperial culture, and his creator has invested him with Enlightenment attitudes. He is a *cogito*, a knowing subject, who perceives Tomis to be a place "at the ends of the earth" because it is absent from Western history or geography (Malouf, *Imaginary Life* 15). This section of my chapter outlines the European conceptions of 'place' to which these characters subscribe at the start of their respective journeys. By interrogating these conceptions, and the discourses which aid them, White Ondaatje and Malouf undermine the manner in which imperial subjects approach, document and understand landscape. In doing so, they reveal inherent flaws in colonial discourses and epistemological methods.

One such flaw is the imperial assumption that the individual is a rational subject who possesses absolute and universal knowledge. Earlier in this chapter, I noted that Enlightenment thought assumed that the subject is autonomous or independent from external influences. Enlightenment thinkers mistrusted the methods of the empiricists, who valued experience as an epistemological tool and argued instead for the subject's individual, rational interpretation of the world. Kant, for instance, formulates knowledge as *a priori*, or pre-experience. His opposition to empiricism is premised on the idea that the subject is intellectually capable of acquiring authoritative knowledge of the world by using what he termed "the categories" or "pure conceptions" of understanding (*The Critique of Pure Reason* 60). These categories, he argued, "apply necessarily and *a priori* to objects of experience, because only through them can an object of experience be thought" (73). In other words, he claimed that the rational subject interprets the world using twelve *a priori* categories or concepts. By using these categories and relying on

“one’s own understanding without the guidance of another”, the subject is capable of achieving enlightenment (“What is Enlightenment?” 57). One should “*Sapere aude!*” or ‘dare to be wise’ since, in Kant’s view, all that lies between the subject and knowledge of the world of objects is “immaturity” or lack of ambition on the individual’s part (57). For Enlightenment thinkers, then, the subject is the centre of all meaning-making.

The notion of the autonomous subject influenced imperial activity extensively. Colonial subjugation of foreign lands evinced the colonisers’ unquestioning belief in their ability to understand and control the objective world. Any place encountered in the colonies was identified in Western discourses and re-named in European languages – which rendered them familiar and known (see Pratt 31). As I have already mentioned, Enlightenment philosophy does not acknowledge the influence that discourse has on the formation of the subject. Similarly, it fails to recognise that discourse mediates the subject’s perception of objects. While the Enlightenment subject believes that it gains knowledge through reason and the categories of understanding, in reality it can only know that which can be identified in Western discourses. When such a subject encounters that which is not identified in these discourses, it encounters otherness. Couched in terms of Derrida’s notion of hospitality, the coloniser arrogantly assumes the role of host and attempts to appropriate the otherness of the colonised or stranger. This is ironic as the coloniser, being in a foreign place, should assume the role of the stranger and thus submit to the hospitality of the indigenous host. Remaining ignorant of the already-existent language and knowledge present in the colonised world, the coloniser is able to maintain an illusion of autonomy. As host, the coloniser relates to colonised landscape on her or his own terms.

As W. J. T. Mitchell explains in *Landscape and Power*, in order to identify the colonised landscape, agents of imperialism employ “a variety of symbolic or representational levels whose relation to the concrete is rarely mimetic or transparent” (9). The discourses of geography and history are two such examples, both of which are critiqued by the novels under discussion in this thesis. *Voss*, for instance, is set in the nineteenth century, that is, in Europe’s period of colonial expansion, in the course of which geography proved “indispensable to [. . .] territorial acquisition” (Ashcroft, *Transformation* 145). In *The English Patient*, Almásy is a cartographer and member of

the Royal Geographic Society (RGS) in the 1930s. Founded in Britain a century earlier, this society played a fundamental role in Britain's colonial endeavours. The institution believed that geography was, as David Livingstone states, "paramount" for "Britain, with its numerous and extensive foreign possessions" (qtd. in Ashcroft, *Transformation* 146). On their many expeditions, the explorers of the RGS were inevitably accompanied by texts such as Carl Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, which provided "a descriptive system designed to classify all the plants [and later animals] on the earth" (Pratt 24). According to Pratt, this system "launched a European knowledge-building enterprise", which amounted to "a global classificatory project" that extended to all Europe's colonies (25, 27). As part of this "knowledge-building enterprise", agents of imperialism were tasked with discovering 'new' variety in the natural world: that is, foreign entities that need to be categorised in terms of existing geographical and historical discourse. In these 'new' landscapes, Pratt argues, the "eye that held the [imperial] system could familiarise ('naturalise') new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system" (31). This taxonomical system sanctioned the naming of elements of the natural world and allowed the subject to possess these elements as objects. Naming, representing, and possessing functioned as one process (Pratt 33). Indeed, the taxonomical process to which Pratt refers placed the European subject at the top of a hierarchy in which all things were classified by European discourses. Western history and geography thus enabled a power structure in which those at the centre dominated those at the margins.

The coloniser's naming of the natural world was therefore anything but innocent. It must be noted that the power structures created by language are not unique to the colonial situation. Derrida's writing shows the potential damage involved in the system of nomenclature. In *Of Grammatology*, he identifies naming as a form of violence which consists in inscribing difference, "in classifying" (112), and argues that this inscription occurs because the proper name is only possible "through its functioning within a classification and therefore within a system of differences" (109). The power of writing is thus to be ascribed to "the violence of difference, of classification, and the system of appellations" (110). In other words, to name is to assume the power of representing the other. More specifically, the subject objectifies the natural world by perceiving it through

language and naming it as landscape. It becomes an object in relation to its subject and is assimilated into the subject's knowledge. This assimilation process, which is represented in all of the novels under consideration, is, of course, related to the procedures through which the host invites and names the stranger in Derridean hospitality. Being other to the coloniser, the landscape is welcomed on the coloniser's terms and approached under her or his conditions (that is, within her or his discursive context). Naming is thus the means through which the coloniser elides the alterity she or he encounters in a foreign setting.

Once named, a landscape is known, and given a presence in Western discourses on space and place. This constitutive, rather than merely referential, function of language emerges in Paul Carter's analysis of the naming of landscape. After discussing the coloniser's tendency to inscribe, and thus create, landscapes in language, he notes that, in the colonial act of naming,

the criteria of differentiation were not simply empirical, naively describing the nature of 'things' already there – it was precisely such objects that names served to constitute. [Names] were determined not empirically but rhetorically. They embodied the traveller's directional and territorial ambitions: his desire to process where he had been as a preliminary to going on. And this desire was not placeless, it did not resemble the equal square of map grid. It depended on positing a 'here' (the traveller's viewpoint of orientation) and a 'there' (the landscape, the horizon). And where such viewpoints did not exist, they had to be hypothesized, rhetorically asserted by way of names. Otherwise, the landscape itself could never enter history. (354)

Carter states that landscapes were named so that they could be located in the traveller's conceptions of geography and history. As I have argued in the introduction to this thesis, the natural world must be distinguished from the concept of landscape, which emanates from "a particular philosophic tradition" – one which presupposed a subject that is separate from the world of objects (Ashcroft et al., "Place" 345). In other words, the idea of landscape was largely created by the rational subject. Since the "visual, bounded, objectification of nature [. . .] was a fundamental feature of European settlement" (Ashcroft, *Transformation* 190), the very concept of landscape in itself contributes to imperial epistemological structures.

The authors under consideration in this thesis engage with this construction of landscape as an object to be possessed by placing their principal characters in settings that exceed the names with which they are bestowed. In thus drawing attention to the limitations of the language used to name the natural world, these authors critique the colonial system of nomenclature as a whole.

Cartography, Language, and the Map as a Narrative

While this thesis focuses on the thematisation of language in the selected novels, the concern with cartography evident in these texts should not be overlooked. In *Voss* and *The English Patient*, the protagonists are involved in the colonial endeavour of mapping and naming the desert. Cartography is presented as a means to gain discursive knowledge of, and hence exert discursive power over, the natural world. In discussing “the prevalence of the map topos in contemporary postcolonial literary texts”, Huggan notes “the frequency of [the map’s] ironic and/or parodic usage” (355). Both White and Ondaatje depict the map ironically and thereby deconstruct colonial cartographical practice. In the two novels in question, the failure of the protagonists to map the desert implicitly undermines the effectiveness and representational power of this imperial discourse. Moreover, White and Ondaatje reveal cartography as a discourse which functions similarly to language and is subject to comparable limitations. This section of my chapter will discuss the parallels established by postcolonial theory between language and cartography, and reveal how landscape is constructed in imperial discourse.

Once colonial space is mapped, it is contextualised by the classificatory systems of history and geography and participates in “European ways of constructing space and place” (Ashcroft, *Transformation* 125). Such concepts of space and place were enabled by the “emergence of the Mercator *Atlas*, and other universal maps” that created a distanced perspective of the colonised landscape, and “established space as a measurable, abstract concept independent of any particular place or region” (*Transformation* 152). When an unexplored region needed to be depicted, it was left blank, a practice which Simon Ryan argues “is integral to the cartographic representation of knowledge”

(*Cartographic Eye* 117). Both Voss and Almásy embark upon just such an attempt to ‘fill in the blanks’ on their maps. Ovid, too, is forced to travel to the edge of the Western map, and confront the uncharted world. For these protagonists, knowledge is communicated through European textual discourses, and a blank space represents an ‘unknown’ area (see *Cartographic Eye* 117). Blank spaces on the map signify the lack of Western presence and represent “the absence of modernity, of ‘civilisation’”, which, it implies, “must be ‘filled’ by exploration, mapping and naming” (*Transformation* 131). Moreover, that which is not recognised on a European map is other to the cartographer and explorer, as it is absent from geographical discourse.

Since it was a discursive tool which generated Western knowledge, the *Atlas* “not only represented space, [but also] the power of the fixed, all-seeing viewpoint: the power to create a universal space” (Ashcroft, *Transformation* 129). For Ashcroft, the coloniser’s treatment of the colonised place is informed by “ocularcentrism”, which he argues is “the way in which the West has perceived vision and spatiality since classical times” (125). In developing this line of thought, Ashcroft draws on Thomas Seifrid, who contends that ocularcentrism has been prevalent in human culture throughout history:

One of the defining eras of modernity is called the Enlightenment [, which] merely underscores ocularcentrism’s persistence since the Greeks, as do a multiplicity of cultural forms belonging to the twentieth century, from our now thoroughly visual everyday vocabulary (including [. . .] *evidence, insight, shed light on, obvious, appears, brilliant*) to the rampant videoism of popular culture. (qtd. in Ashcroft, *Transformation* 127)

In his discussion of ocularcentrism, Ashcroft notes that “the verb ‘I know’ in classical Greek is the perfect form of the verb *eido* ‘I see’” (126). Seeing was equated with knowing, and, for Western society, “vision, knowledge and reason were inextricably tied to each other” (126). A region was regarded as unknown if it had “never been seen by the organ of knowledge-generation, the European eye” (Ryan, *Cartographic Eye* 24). This is precisely why maps, which “represented an ability to *see* the world as a whole”, also represented “an ability to *know* the world” (128–129). In other words, the map provides the coloniser with the illusion that he possesses absolute knowledge of the land. This

cartographical knowledge of the landscape enables him to assume power over it. For this reason, postcolonial critics and authors acknowledge what J. B. Harley refers to as “the omnipresence of power in all knowledge, even though that power is invisible or implied” (233).

Since it too is textual, cartography functions in similar ways to language. Both media purport to be transparent, reflecting the world accurately and authentically. John Pickles argues that “maps have the character of being textual in that they have words associated with them, that they employ a system of symbols with their own syntax, [and] that they function as a form of writing (inscription)” (193). Like words, then, the pictorial elements of the map are signifiers attempting to represent a referent. Just as writers cannot find words that correspond mimetically to a referent, so too cartographers cannot represent “objects that correspond unproblematically to things in the world” (194). Rather than a transparent reflection of the world, the map, Itala Vivan points out, “is a representation” and, accordingly, its “mimetic origin” is “an illusion” (49). At a fundamental level, this medium adopts “fictional techniques” that are “not dissimilar from that of narrative discourse” (50). Similarly, Harley claims, “the steps in making a map – selection, omission, simplification, classification, the creation of hierarchies, and ‘symbolisation’ – are all inherently rhetorical” (243). Viewing maps as “innocently mimetic” thus endorses their “claim to show the real”, precludes one from reading them as “productions of complex social forces”, and enables an authority premised on their “claim to show the ‘real’” (Ryan, *Cartographic Eye* 102).

Accordingly, maps encourage a cartographic way of seeing landscape, which privileges the ideologies of mapmakers and Western subjects in general. Together with language, cartography invests the world with “spatial meaning” and thereby grants the map an “ideological” and “hierarchical [. . .] specificity which establishes Europe as the centrepoint around which the symbolic status and character of the rest of the world revolve” (Ashcroft, *Transformation* 132).

Through mapping and naming the natural world, the European traveller elides its alterity and thereby renders it knowable within metropolitan discourse. In effect, the landscape in question becomes a palimpsest in which “the names and languages of the

indigenes are replaced by new names, or are corrupted into new and Europeanised forms by the cartographer and explorer” (Ryan, “Inscribing the Emptiness” 133–134).

Conclusion

The latter half of this chapter has examined the discursive tools that are employed in the colonial representation of landscape. The critique of these discourses in the novels under consideration will be the subject of the rest of this study. In their representations of the desert, *Voss*, *The English Patient* and *An Imaginary Life* undermine colonial discourse in two ways. Firstly, they draw attention to the subject’s attempt to domesticate the land through language and cartography. In the next two chapters of this study, I demonstrate that both White and Ondaatje depict the map as a problematic medium of communication and foreground cartography as a mechanism of control. Thereafter, I discuss Malouf’s emphasis on the limitations of language.

Secondly, all three writers emphasise that landscape, in Mitchell’s words, is “a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other” (5). Indeed, these authors think of landscape “not as an object [. . .] but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed” (1). With this in mind, I intend to analyse the ways in which the protagonists in these novels approach the natural world. When these characters, all of whom are implicated in imperial conceptions of land, encounter its sublimity, “the signifier and referent fail to connect – [and] the notion of land as a decipherable text is put under some stress” (Ryan, *Cartographic Eye* 123). Accordingly, they find that their attempts to inscribe the desert with meaning from within imperial discourse fail. Since they do not comprehend the desert, these characters are forced to reconsider their trust in words and maps as epistemological tools and therefore to interact with the natural world differently than expected. Rather than inscribing the land, they are transformed by their interaction with it.

Chapter Two The Dead Heart

Patrick White's *Voss* depicts the relationship between nineteenth-century explorers and the foreign environments they intended to tame. This chapter will examine the explorers' expedition across 'the dead heart' of Australia, a term used to signify the harsh and desolate environment of the central deserts of this continent, in which few Europeans survived. The desert's impact on the characters' perception is a crucial feature of the text: White depicts the Australian desert as a place which continually exceeds the explorers' comprehension, and the experiences of the eponymous protagonist are noteworthy in this regard.

In part, White's protagonist, Johann Ulrich Voss, is modelled on Ludwig Leichardt – a German explorer who led one of the first European expeditions across Australia. Set in the 1840s, *Voss* describes a period in Australia's history in which the continent's interior was largely uncharted. People were encouraged to believe that "the outline of Australia, once formed in maps by a thin line and a halo of names", needed to be "filled in by the terrestrial explorers" (Ryan, *Cartographic Eye* 117). Explorers were tasked with providing historical and geographical data for uncharted areas, which would allow Australia to be documented in the body of European knowledge. Charles Sturt, Leichardt's contemporary, proclaimed that his journey would "complete the discovery of the internal features of the Australian continent", thereby providing Europe with a hubristic promise of scientific success "for the cause of Geography and Natural History" (qtd. in Ryan, *Cartographic Eye* 124). Mirroring Leichardt and his party, the explorers in *Voss* intend to map the interior and document their findings. This endeavour fails, however, because, White suggests, European epistemological methods are unsuccessful in an Australian environment. He portrays the Australian interior as inhospitable to colonial invasion. So, for instance, Voss finds that the desert is neither empty (as his map with its blank spaces has suggested) nor accommodating. Ironically, it is ultimately the desert that penetrates the characters, thereby rendering them powerless. The expedition fails because the explorers are unable to survive in the desert. White's depiction of landscape in *Voss* is therefore intrinsic to his postcolonial critique.

Moreover, this writer's treatment of language and subjectivity is fundamental to his depiction of landscape. In this regard, Michael Giffin argues that White's thematic concerns are informed by "a philosophy of consciousness and a philosophy of language" (9). In the novel, the imperial explorers attempt to situate the desert within the categories of European history and geography. Since they lack the vocabulary to name it, they are confronted with an otherness that exceeds the limits of their discourse. White's novels frequently depict such encounters with alterity, which are "beyond the possible entrapment of language" (Ashcroft, "Presence of the Sacred" 96). For this reason, Bill Ashcroft situates him amongst Australian artists who have a "sense of the sublime", and argues that the presence of the 'sacred' in White's work is located in his representation of "material things, and the persistent inability of language to fully apprehend [them]" (96). The characters in *Voss* frequently experience this "sense of the sublime" when faced with the disorientating desert. In both style and content, White's writing evinces "a deep dissatisfaction with language" (107), and so anticipates the poststructural concern with the referential inadequacy of this medium. While his work predates poststructural theory, it thus seems appropriate to examine it through this lens.

This chapter will examine Voss's response to alterity, and the way in which it contrasts with the experiences of the other characters in the novel. In doing so, it will demonstrate that White's work points to "ways of experiencing, responding to, of 'understanding', the world apart from structures of meaning: that is, apart from the kind of interpretation that can be fixed in language" (98).

The Enlightened Voss: A Naturalist and a Cartographer

Voss approaches the natural world from within a cultural context that informs his perception. Being a nineteenth-century colonial explorer, he exemplifies the Enlightenment attitudes that informed the European imperial project and promoted the idea that knowledge is gained through the subject's faculty of reason. His subscription to these ideals of the Enlightenment and imperialism motivates his journey into the desert.

While not referring to *Voss* specifically, Giffin's discussion of White's representation of Enlightenment subjectivity is noteworthy. Giffin describes the "intellectual position" of the Enlightenment as being characterised by "a commitment to reason as a final authority; a stress on [human] 'nature'" and "widespread acceptance of the idea of progress" (217). Voss is, in many ways, an Enlightenment figure,¹ who believes that reason or rationality is necessary for gaining knowledge. Norbert Platz argues that both Voss and his patron, Bonner, adopt Enlightenment philosophies. They are characters who locate authority within the subject who takes control "at both a cognitive and a practical level" (174). What Platz has in mind here is the rational subject's assumption of control of its existence, and therefore assumption of control of its environment. When "the natural properties of the world are looked upon as the result of subjective ideas", the subject "is not only the creator of his self but also the creator of the world" (173). From this position of power in autonomy, Voss sees the expedition as a means to remake himself and his environment in his language. He believes that control is achieved via the will, which he values as "a royal instrument" and as a tool for achieving his potential (*Voss* 297). Moreover, his belief that "[e]very man has a genius" (35) is premised on the notion that "genius" is an attribute of human nature that the subject can develop by striving toward a fulfilment of individual potential or "progress". In his case, this entails an "attempt [at] the infinite" in the Outback (35). Significantly, his belief in the authority of the subject is central to his approach to the desert. Gaining knowledge through reason, he disregards any indigenous knowledge of Australia. Since no European conceptualisation of the interior is available to him, he refers to Australia as "virgin country" (46). Moreover, his commitment to progress motivates his journey: he sees the expedition as one of the "voyages of discovery" that will further the development of the Western world (135).

Voss's expedition is quite explicitly placed in the historical context of the colonial mission to domesticate the supposedly undiscovered spaces within Australia. The explorers are responsible for mapping the interior and classifying the natural world,

¹ White alludes to the influence that the Enlightenment has on the protagonist through the use of Voss's name: the German pronunciation of Voss is *phos*, which means 'light' in Greek.

including all fauna and flora. Palfreyman, a naturalist, has been commissioned by an English peer who “collected all manner of things, from precious stones to musical instruments, to stuffed birds and tigers” (46). The English collector assumes possession of these elements of the natural world because he has incorporated them into his system of classification. Interestingly, Palfreyman only partly subscribes to this taxonomical practice. Unlike his English patron and Voss, he is not led by his own will, but by “the will of God” (47). Because of this faith, he believes that science is an insufficient means of gaining total knowledge. Positioned “between fact and faith” (Green 299), he is humble in his approach to the unknown and other – an attitude which Voss will only come to later.

Like Palfreyman, Voss is a naturalist who intends to document and classify the natural world. Along with most of the characters in the novel, he views the Australian interior as passive and empty: a blank space on the Western map that he needs to fill. When Bonner asks whether he has studied the existing map, Voss proclaims that he will draw his own (*Voss* 23). He has confidence in his ability to create a definitive map of the desert, and therefore in his ability to produce knowledge of the land. Given that the existing map is described by the narrator as “presumptuous where it was not a blank” (23), this conversation is represented ironically. The implication is that maps are not, as Bonner presumes, able to provide knowledge of the interior. Clearly, White’s narrator is critical of nineteenth-century maps,² which, in representing areas of European settlement on an otherwise empty canvas, fail to acknowledge the particularities of the land itself. In this scene, therefore, White emphasises the “disconnection between the map as a sign and whatever it may signify” (Tabron 207). Judith Tabron reads the narrator’s criticism of Voss and Bonner as White’s attempt to “desanctify the map, to remove it from the terrain of the hero with special access to knowledge” (207). Voss believes that he possesses this knowledge because he is the first to map the area, and thus “the creator of the sign” (207). Through the map and the “official journal of the expedition”, he attempts to create signs

² The ironic narrator significantly influences the reader’s interpretation of the novel by subverting Voss’s statements and actions, and thereby foregrounding the absurdity of his quest. This ironic treatment extends to Voss’s relationship with the land: his egotistical supplementation of the landscape is frequently undercut, suggesting that his attempts to conquer the desert are futile.

which will incorporate the desert into European knowledge systems (*Voss* 91). In doing so, he fails to recognise the specificity of the natural world, and sees it only in relation to his pre-existing knowledge.

Like Voss, the Bonners attempt to re-invent the Australian landscape in their own image. By cultivating a garden of British plants, Bonner intends to tame the Australian bush. Gardens, in the colonial context, signify the settler's attempt to domesticate the foreign land encountered. Jean-Pierre Durix argues that the Bonners' relation to the Australian landscape demonstrates their "desire to become a self-sufficient unit" of British culture (351). The Bonners' perspective does not account for "the presence of social life or [the] physical factors" of Australia (351). Unfortunately for the Bonners, the indigenous plants are not destroyed and excluded by their attempts at landscaping. In the garden, we read, "the science of horticulture had failed to exorcise the spirit of the place" (*Voss* 156). The natural world does not conform to the family's expectations: despite their great effort to re-create an English garden in Australia, the "wands and fronds of native things intruded still, paperbarks and various gums, of mysterious hot scents, and attentive silences" (156). Being the hosts, in Derridean terms, the Bonners fail to welcome the natural world on its own terms. Instead, they render it familiar by cultivating it. However, the indigenous plants and animals can never be completely eliminated, and so continually invade the garden.

Similarly, the indigenous bush and desert will continually exceed the explorers' attempts to name and map them. As Pringle tells Voss, Australia "will prove most hostile to anything in the nature of planned development" (62). He warns the explorer that "deserts prefer to resist history and develop along their own lines" (62). Since history is a discursive system of signifiers, Pringle's comment foreshadows Voss's failure to mediate the desert with this discourse. In his final moments in the Outback, Voss will finally admit that it is impossible to colonise the desert. Prior to his expedition, however, he is blinded by his ambition and responds to Pringle's comment with his own description of the desert as "purely metaphysical" (62). Such an idealistic, Romantic vision reveals his ignorance of the possible failure of his quest. As William Walsh observes, Voss is "not simply the possessor of an idea but possessed by it" (16): the potential conquest of the Australian desert consumes and compels him.

Voss's megalomania urges him into the interior. Although he has no experience of its climate and terrain, he is confident that he can master the desert. Such mastery, he thinks, will prove that he has fulfilled his immense potential. Walsh argues that this movement towards knowledge and possession is "the essence of *Voss*", which represents the "struggle of the will and reality" and "the effort of the will to impose government on both human and non-human reality" (33). By attempting to map the desert, Voss projects his ideas onto the Australian landscape, which he anticipates will be accommodating. The novel, however, undermines Voss's colonial authority via its depiction of his failure to impose his will upon the desert. As Lyn McCredden argues, the text depicts the limits of "self-projection – in thought, action, imagination, writing, and representation" and thus the limits of the "human capacity for self-authorship" (116).

At the end of the novel, Voss learns what Laura Trevelyan, his significant other and narrative counterpart, already knows – knowledge is "never a matter of Geography" (*Voss* 446). Knowledge, she contends, "overflows all maps that exist" (446). The perspectives of characters such as Laura are crucial to the text's critique of the Enlightenment and imperial discourses. According to Giffin, White believed that "inherent and unresolved tensions" existed within the Enlightenment, which were subsequently "inflicted upon the Western imagination" (5). In *Voss*, these tensions become apparent to Voss when the objectives of the Enlightenment no longer seem feasible to him, and he is forced to reassess his conceptions of both the natural world and himself.

The Australian Abyss

While Voss's ambition informs his approach to the Outback, he is also compelled by its seeming alterity. The absence of the desert from the map generates his curiosity, and he consequently feels a compulsion to explore it. Indeed, he is awed by its immensity, even as he arrogantly assumes that he can ultimately control it. Like Voss, many of the other characters in the novel are confronted with the Outback's sublimity, and find themselves at a loss for words. Because of their struggle to express themselves, these characters

repeatedly voice their disdain for language. This section of my chapter will examine the characters' perception of landscape in *Voss* and, by extension, White's concern with the limitations of language.

In admitting that he is "compelled into this country" (20), Voss indicates that the land has affected him. There is a crucial ambivalence here: although he occasionally acknowledges the difficulty of the task before him, and confesses that he finds Australia a "disturbing country" (35), Voss is not yet deterred by the land's sublimity. His journey into the interior is therefore prompted by ambivalent feelings of compulsion and ambition. Because the land poses a threat to his sense of power and autonomy, he feels compelled to inflict his will upon it. Despite this threat, he is not intimidated by the journey, as his conversation with Le Mesurier at the start of the expedition reveals. As they gaze at the ocean, Le Mesurier says he has no "purpose" for following Voss into the desert, but that time may reveal one (33). The narrator, however, disagrees: "It was clear that the vast glass of ocean would not" (33). Le Mesurier searches for "purpose" in a landscape that proffers no meaning. Reflecting on the same scene, Voss comforts himself, believing that if he were not "obsessed", he "would be purposeless in this same sea" (33). Unlike Le Mesurier, he sees the ocean as a mirror that reflects his gaze, and feels confident that he can fulfil the task ahead. Accordingly, he tells Le Mesurier that he has come to Australia with the intention of "cross[ing] the continent from one end to the other" (33). In doing so, he believes he will "know it with [his] heart" (33). By mapping the land, that is, Voss seeks to extend the realm of the known, and thereby eliminate alterity.

Attitudes to the land such as Voss's, which feature "a combination of desire and anxiety", are identified by Richard Kerridge as typical of travellers (167). To quell this anxiety, travellers characteristically exhibit a desire "to see and know, to convert the otherness of the world into the familiar and homely, [. . .] so that there will be nothing menacing lurking in unexplored places, and the world will not terrify" (167). Early in the novel, Laura also expresses an anxiety that is characteristic of the colonial position. She claims that all settlers are "afraid" of Australia, because they "are not yet possessed of understanding" of the country (*Voss* 28). Like Laura, Voss struggles to grasp a place "so foreign and incomprehensible" (29). Fuelled by anxiety, he desires to explore the unfamiliar territory, gain knowledge of it and, consequently, eliminate its alterity.

Kerridge, in theorising the explorer's desire "to see and know", touches on the ocularcentrism informing colonial ideology. Voss exemplifies this ocularcentrism, since he routinely equates seeing an object with knowing it, and, at one point in the novel, is described as staring "imperiously over the heads of men, possessing the whole country with his eyes" (155). Moreover, he falls prey to what Ashcroft describes as "the inevitable sense of detachment from the objects of [his] regard" (*Transformation* 126), a separation which invests him with the illusion that he possesses a measure of control over the objects of perception. Accordingly, he assumes a certain claim to Australia and arrogantly believes that he will know and possess the country by gazing upon it. Laura recognises his presumption in this regard, as emerges when she describes the country as "his by right of vision" (*Voss* 29).

While Voss feels he is "pursued by [the] necessity" of exploring the Australian interior, he cannot explain his motivation for the journey (33). In searching for a means to describe his response to the land, he evinces something akin to the "desire of presence" to which Derrida refers in *Of Grammatology* (163). Before his journey, the Australian interior exists for Voss only as an abyss, an absent origin of all the empty maps and meaningless words he has encountered. The impossibility of accurate representation is, for Derrida, precisely what enables all representation, since the desire of presence is "born from the abyss" (163). With this in mind, it is significant that Voss is "fascinated by the prospect of the journey before [him]" (*Voss* 62), as it will enable him to explore the seemingly unknown. The knowledge that he hopes to achieve will coincide with his mastery of the desert. He will know and possess the desert if he names it. Firmly "locked in language" (274), he is inspired precisely because he cannot articulate what has compelled him. The desert which, to him, appears formless urges him to attempt to know it – to map and name it – and thereby explain it.

Voss's inability to express how he has been affected by the natural world is not unique to him. As I have noted, many of the characters in the novel "repeatedly voice a disgust with or suspicion of the refractory nature of language" (Bliss 12). Harry, for example, is mistrustful of language. Observing the stars, he is reminded that "he had long since chosen to forget" the "official names", which Voss had taught him. For him, the "stars themselves" have become "more personal than their names" (*Voss* 193). Sharing

this sentiment, Palfreyman supposes that to “understand the stars would spoil their appearance” (137). It seems that many of the characters find that language cannot account for the complexity of their experience. Laura, for instance, remarks that she has “long given up trying to express [her]self” (91). This is a feeling that Judd shares. He believes that words are “not the servants of life, but life, rather, [is] the slave of words” (203), the implication being that life is mediated (often uncomfortably) by language. Words appear to undermine the “knowledge with which he was filled, all those raw hunks of life that, for choice, or by force, he had swallowed down” (203). This knowledge, he feels, is “reduced by the great mystery of words” (203). Aware that language cannot be trusted, he is most comfortable in silence. Wandering through the bush, he is “only soothed at last by leaves and silence. Then he [is] glad again. He would have expressed that gladness, but could not, except by letting the smooth leaves lie upon his stubbly face, except by being of the stillness” (203). In his contempt for language, Judd prefers not to attempt to express his ideas in words, and instead experiences the natural world by ‘being of it’. As Ashcroft puts it, his suspicion of language “resolves itself in an intimacy with the particularity of the world” (“Presence of the Sacred” 96–97).

Finally, Le Mesurier, the expedition’s poet, ironically finds language to be so removed from meaning that he often feels as if he is “ploughing through the dark treacle of seductive words and getting nowhere” (*Voss* 34). Much later in the novel, he again reflects on the inadequacy of language:

In the beginning I used to imagine that if I were to succeed in describing with any accuracy some thing, this little cone of light with the blurry edges, for instance, or this common pannikin, then I would be expressing all truth. But I could not. My whole life had been a failure, lived at a most humiliating level, always purposeless, frequently degrading. Until I became aware of my power. The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming. (271)

Although Le Mesurier is unable to describe his experience, he is perpetually inspired to do so. His “perpetual struggle” to represent the unrepresentable can be understood in terms of Derrida’s process of supplementation. Since one can only represent something in

a medium that renders it absent, one's representations are in constant need of supplementation. By its very nature, then, the process of representation is radically incomplete, and therefore ateleological. Unlike Voss, however, Le Mesurier is aware that, despite language's failure to signify adequately, the attempt to represent is valuable in itself. Recognising that he can never succeed in describing it, he accepts that he cannot come to know the desert completely.

“With contented eye”: The Mindscape of Rhine Towers and Jildra

The next two sections of this chapter will analyse the explorers' journey chronologically, focusing on their responses to the land as they encounter it. During the early stages of the journey, Voss describes the landscape as pleasant and accommodating. This is because he sees his environment as a mindscape: that is, as a reflection of his state of mind. To him, Australia is an empty space onto which, in Platz's description, “he projects not only his pre-conceived ideas but also his desires and sentiments” (174).

Initially, the Australian landscape seems to comply with Voss's expectations. For example, he describes the landscape en route to Rhine Towers as “gentle” and “healing”, and looks upon it “with contented eye” (*Voss* 124). It satisfies, and so affirms, him because he understands it in anthropomorphic terms. One should be mindful here of Merleau-Ponty's argument that there is “nothing in the appearance of a landscape, an object or a body whereby it is predestined to look ‘gay’ or ‘sad’, ‘lively, or ‘dreary’, ‘elegant’ or ‘coarse’” (23). Clearly, Voss inscribes the land with his own ideas through language. Rather than observing Rhine Towers, on his arrival he sets about “investing it with those graces which one hopes to find at the heart of every mirage” (*Voss* 126). The narrator recognises this “yearning after Rhine Towers” as indicative of “the fallible man in Voss”, who believes that places “yet unvisited” such as these will offer “final peace, all goodness” (126). Voss is keen, as Judd would say, to make life a slave to his words, which is why it is “its *name*” which “glitter[s] for him”, as he repeats it to himself (126, italics mine). Despite having no experience of the place, he feels that he knows Rhine Towers. When he arrives, the landscape seems to fulfil his expectations – at first.

Looking into the valley, he admires “the sculptural red rocks and tapestries of musical green”, which seem “[e]nnobling and eternal” (197). Since he still views the place on his own terms, he finds that he “can apprehend” Rhine Towers (197).

Jildra appears less picturesque, and the landscape is ominously red upon Voss’s arrival. However, he retains his confidence in the efficacy of the journey, and his conviction that it has a clear destination. The area is described as “reduced to a panful of dust and stinking mud” (175), and yet Voss finds the “simplicity of the clay-coloured landscape [. . .] very moving” (179). Despite the arid nature of the land, including “some dead trees”, his optimism leads him to appreciate what he sees as beautiful, “glowing with flesh of rosy light” (179). In Jildra, he feels “that each visible object has been created for purposes of love, that the stones, even, are smoother for the dust” (179). When humans invest the land with emotions, Merleau-Ponty argues, “it is because we have observed in ourselves the coincidence between these internal perceptions and the external signs associated with them” (24). Voss’s perception of Rhine Towers and Jildra reveals a mindscape rather than a landscape. Despite “all the evidence” of an inhospitable environment and “the horror of [physical] limitations”, as Durix puts it, this character retains his desire to cross the desert (352). His fear of limitations makes his illusion of success necessary, and he “learns to see the elements around him in terms of organisation and unity” (352).

Yet this cultivated sense of unity is soon disturbed. Even in these early stages of the journey, there are moments when the natural world appears sublime to the characters. When “left alone for some little time”, Voss is startled by how ill-at-ease he feels in his environment, which the narrator describes as “devoid of all furniture, even of a throne” (Voss 191). His need to occupy a position of centrality within his environment receives ironic treatment here. Without this centrality, he is overwhelmed by the “distance between aspiration and human nature”, and by “the immensity of his presumption” in this landscape (191). By implication, he acknowledges his human limitations and the fact that they are “most inescapable” (191). For a moment, that is, he doubts his ability to succeed because he is affected by the natural world. The other explorers are similarly affected; even at the beautiful Rhine Towers, they feel a sense of sublime terror and none of them seems able to describe the impression that the place has made on them all. They are

inexplicably unsettled by its grandeur, and experience the “beauty” of Rhine Towers as “tragic” (129). Indeed, Voss is so overwhelmed that he is reminded of his own mortality, as emerges in his sense that he is “drown[ing]” in the “purple stream of evening” (128).

While Rhine Towers and Jildra captivate Voss, these places on the outskirts of the Outback cannot satisfy his ambition because “through this bushland, men had already blazed a way” (124). The existing settlements in the area have rendered the landscape familiar. By contrast, the Australian interior is nameless to him: he cannot yet incorporate it into his existent conceptual framework. This is why, for him, “places unvisited” have “become an obsession, promising final peace, all goodness” (126). To familiarise the desert, he must ‘blaze a way’ through it as those before him have done on the coast. Voss and his party gain a sense of the sheer magnitude of this task when, as they approach the interior beyond Rhine Towers, they again begin to feel intimidated by the natural world:

The country round them reduced more personal hopes and fears until these were of little account. An eternity of days was opening up for the men, who would wake, and scramble up with a kind of sheepish respect for their surroundings. Dew was clogging the landscape. Spiders had sewn the bushes together. And then there were those last, intolerably melancholy stars, that cling to a white sky, and will not be put out except by force. (194)

The explorers are insignificant in their environment. As their “hopes and fears” become irrelevant, they feel other to themselves. Because they can no longer express themselves effectively, words “that did not belong to them – illuminating, true, naked words – had a habit of coming out” (333). Alienated, rather than at home in their environment, the explorers cease to occupy the role of host, and cannot treat the land as a guest. Since they lack the words to express themselves adequately, these “true, naked words” serve as supplements to their speech. Because they are haunted by the alterity of the land, they are forced to express themselves differently, to *see* things differently.

Journey into the Dead Heart

As they cross into the interior, Voss and his party find the environment increasingly inhospitable and lose confidence in their ability to master it. This section of the chapter will examine White's depiction of the desert, and show that it serves as a critique of colonial attempts to control and possess foreign territory. In addition, I will examine the way in which the explorers' experience of the desert affects their perception of themselves as autonomous.

The explorers' difficulty in navigating the interior emerges in descriptions of the terrain as being "highly treacherous" (*Voss* 210). Not even the livestock can withstand its "bare crust", and we read that "several of the sheep determined to lie down upon it and die" (210). Survival seems impossible: the animals search fruitlessly "for any suggestion of leaf, blade of grass, or little pocket of rock from which to suck the dew" (210). The explorers, who feel they have been "riding eternally over the humped and hateful earth" (210), come to an area in which "a brigalow scrub whipped their flesh back to waking", and slashes the "udders of those goats which had kidded" (210–211). This image of lacerated flesh connotes the land's violent influence upon the expedition – they are acted upon by the desert.

Nevertheless, despite the harsh environment, Voss is confident that "this is what [he] expected" (210), and continues to view the land in relation to himself. Such arrogance is characteristic not only of Voss, but also of his expedition, as emerges in their attitude to an episode of heavy rain. Although it has rained "in almost every district", the explorers feel that it is "wettest in that country in which the expedition of Johann Ulrich Voss was forcibly encamped" (331). With characteristic irony, the narrator observes that "men are convinced early in their lives that the excesses of nature are incited for their personal discomfiture" (331). When the rain passes, the explorers' sense of victory is again rendered ironic: they are "flattering themselves, on the strength of their survival, that all the goodness which emanated from the earth was for their especial benefit" (332).

White's depiction of animal behaviour in *Voss* often comments on human action. Since the animals' experience of the world is not mediated by language, they possess an

intimacy with the land that the humans do not. By contrast with the travellers, “it was the mules and few surviving horses that deserved pity, for these were without the benefit of illusion. They endured their fate, the former sullenly, the latter with a tired patience, no longer looking for a vegetation that did not exist” (359). The animals appear to have an immediate knowledge of the natural world that undermines the explorers’ discursive knowledge. Since they do not recognise the animals as subjects, the explorers treat them as they do the natural world, that is, they attempt to objectify and control them. When this control is compromised, Turner, in particular, responds violently. He is disturbed by a small, grey bird who “seemed to cast some doubt” upon the explorers’ confidence (332). Reacting to the bird’s indifference, Turner attempts to assert control by killing it. Absurdly, he hates “the fearless bird” because it “could not conceive that respect was due to men, not even as [he] shot him dead” (332). This violent act connotes his desperate attempt to banish the alterity he encounters in the desert. Even Palfreyman, who tries to defend the bird, realises that, as an ornithologist, he himself has committed violence against birds and “could be responsible for much” that he does not realise (332). In this moment of illumination, he recognises the hubris inherent in the collection and classification of plants and animals, and acknowledges his own role in what he now sees as a violent system. In admitting this, he feels the need to resign his part in the expedition (332). Later, his inability to control and possess the natural world is suggested when a raft collapses and his specimens are washed away, signifying, perhaps, that the natural world is no longer within his control and possession.

The explorers increasingly become aware that they are no longer in control of their journey, and that they have “advanced into chaos” (211). Le Mesurier, who “expect[s] damnation” from what the narrator calls “the uncompromising desert” (360), even equates the desert with hell, and thereby implies that the explorers have no hope of returning home. Platz notes that “increasingly, Voss loses his capacity to superimpose his own structure of awareness upon the landscape” (175). This becomes particularly apparent when he attempts to document his experience of the desert in his journal. Attempting to write, he finds that he is “not, however, at that moment, self-possessed” and so cannot consult “his neat journal and copy down their latest estimated position” (*Voss* 215). Since he is not in possession of himself, and so no longer sees himself as

autonomous, he finds it impossible to comprehend his environment. Ultimately, the natural world appears “infinite” in its effect on the characters, reducing them “to impotence, despair, and madness” (Garebian 558). In the process, Voss is confronted with the illusory nature of his control of the land, and therefore with his own limitations. As Palfreyman says, there “comes a moment when an individual who is too honest to take refuge in the old illusion of self-importance is suspended agonizingly between the flat sky and the flat earth, and prayer is no more than a slight gumminess on the roof of the mouth” (*Voss* 332–333).

The Unstable Self: Subjectivity in *Voss*

From my discussion thus far, it should be clear that Voss’s failure to contain the desert enables it to affect him. He does not transform the desert, it transforms him. Indeed, his perception of himself is transformed. In this section of my chapter, I wish to discuss the nature of this transformation and, in the process, White’s treatment of subjectivity in the novel.

Before he leaves Sydney, Voss views the expedition as a journey of self-discovery. He sees his travels into ‘the dead heart’ of the country as an exploration of the self, during which he hopes to come to full knowledge of both. It follows that Voss essentialises selfhood, and perceives himself as knowable, autonomous and capable of immense power. As I have mentioned above, he considers his journey as a means to discover his inner “genius” (35), and trusts that the desert will reveal to him previously hidden, and potentially valuable, aspects of the self. He admits that the journey will be difficult, but claims that “to make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself” (34), the implication being that a certain amount of damage to the self is necessary for its exploration. Like Boyle, Voss believes that exploring “the depths of one’s own repulsive nature is more than irresistible – it is necessary” (167). As his following words to Le Mesurier indicate, Voss believes that

Every man has a genius, though it is not always discoverable. Least of all when choked by the trivialities of daily existence. But in this disturbing country, [. . .] it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and attempt the infinite. You will be burnt up most likely, you will have the flesh torn from your bones, you will be tortured probably in many horrible and primitive ways, but you will realise that genius of which you will not tell me you are afraid. (35)

Voss thinks that “the potentialities of the self” are “immeasurable” (22), and is willing to let the desert wear him down so that he can emerge all-powerful (35). Laura believes that he is “fascinated with the prospect of desert places” where he will find his own situation “taken for granted, or more than that, exalted” (88). At Jildra, Boyle is similarly aware that Voss’s obsession is “to overcome distance” and “irresistible disaster” (167), and guarantees him that he “will be given every opportunity of indulging [this desire] to the west of [Jildra]” (167–168).

Whilst Voss seeks a challenge in the desert, he does so only because he seeks a worthy opponent that he hopes to ultimately dominate. The task he sets himself is therefore impossible. Although he is compelled by alterity, and willing to let the desert “destroy” him, he also seeks to “attempt the infinite” and realise his potential by subsuming all otherness within himself in order to achieve power (34–35). Yet alterity, by Derrida’s definition, is that which cannot be entirely subsumed or dominated. Since the ‘I’ is always in tension with the other, Voss cannot exist independently. He will always be subjected to, and haunted by, otherness. Ultimately, he will find that he cannot derive pleasure from the sublimity he encounters, as it will always exceed his conceptual grasp.

Although the desert serves as a site of transformation for Voss, it does not do so in the manner he anticipates. When he fails to map it and complete the journey, he loses faith in his ability to be autonomous and omnipotent. As Walsh notes, when Voss “becomes aware of the infinite Australian distance”, he recognises “the immensity of his presumption” in his attempt to dominate the natural world (28). Immersed in the desert, he is made to realise that he must submit “to the will of what is outside himself” and beyond his control (Green 299). He can only endure the desert when “at last he was truly humbled” (*Voss* 389). Aware that the desert has affected him, he “loses many of his

reasons for believing in his self-sufficiency” (Durix 352). It is important to note the irony in the disjuncture between Voss’s understanding of selfhood and the conception of subjectivity that ultimately emerges from the novel. Voss does not transform himself through mapping and naming the desert, and so enlarging the supposedly inherent self. Instead, he changes when he is affected by his encounter with alterity. Ironically, his expedition’s failure leads to a transformation in his perception. The novel demonstrates that Voss’s worldview is dependent on his experience and that a shift in experience can facilitate such a transformation.

Clearly, then, *Voss* shows that the subject is fragmented and insecure: it depicts the physical boundaries between self and world as permeable, and portrays the subject as vulnerable to invasion by the natural world. Furthermore, this novel illustrates that the action of the desert upon the self, if accommodated, results in a fusion of the two. Such a mergence of self with the natural world is usually discernible at those points in the novel when a character “is completely overwhelmed by the raging elements” and “yields to forces of fusion”, as he becomes “one with the wind or lets the sand suck his blood” (Durix 352). One such example is the scene in which Le Mesurier delivers a message to Angus and Turner in a storm:

The wind was filling his mouth and running down through the acceptant funnel of his throat, till he was completely *possessed* by it; his heart was thunder, and the jagged nerves of lightning were radiating from his own body.

But it was not until the farther side of the ridge, going down, and he was singing the storm up out of him, that the rain came, first with a few whips, then with the release of cold, grey light and solid water, and he was immersed in the mystery of it, he was *dissolved*, he was running into crannies, and sucked into the mouths of the earth, and disputed, and distributed, but again and again, for some purpose, was made *one* by the strength of a will not his own. (*Voss* 249, italics mine)

In the storm, Le Mesurier is “possessed” and rendered powerless by the wind and earth. He feels as though he is temporarily an extension of the storm itself as the boundaries between his body and the desert momentarily dissipate. In other words, Le Mesurier no longer occupies the position of an independent subject, but is “dissolved”. Carolyn Bliss

describes White's depiction of "dissolution" as "a process by which the self seems to melt and dissolve", and thereby expand "until its limits approach those of the unifying all" (9). Le Mesurier attains a temporary state of hospitality when he is invaded by the land. Instead of acting, he is acted upon, and so becomes a home for the other.

Through descriptions such as these, in which White foregrounds the constructed nature of the subject/object divide, the reader is made aware "that man is not and never can be self-sufficient" (Brissenden 28–29). Since we access the phenomenal world through language, we come to know it from the cultural perspective that this medium installs. In order to experience a union with the natural world, the self thus needs to abandon its position as a subject in culture. Voss, for instance, needs to abandon his position as a colonial subject informed by Enlightenment ideas. As Durix suggests, White's fiction foregrounds "total passive acceptance and unification through destruction of any form of [cultural] identity" (351). Following the dissolution of identity, the self cannot be viewed as separate from the land. As Ashcroft argues, anonymity "means that one can no longer set the self over against the world: self is *in* the world" ("More Than One Horizon" 131). Similarly, Bliss notes that the paradox in White's novels is one in which "the self must be sought and found only to be relinquished [so] that the individuality so powerfully expressed by his major characters enables them to seek a state of understanding in which selfhood is finally subsumed" (8).

Ironically, then, the elimination of selfhood that brings about a transformation of perception is finally "inseparable from death" in White's fiction (Van Niekerk 133). *Voss* suggests that an elimination of selfhood is only attainable through silence or the absence of language, and therefore a departure from consciousness. Le Mesurier is aware that his death moves him towards this silence. He views his suicide as "his last attempt at poetry" before he is "able to climb out into the immense fields of silence" (*Voss* 381). At the end of his life, Voss too comes to know the land without a map or journal. He finally learns that "the human will cannot so manipulate reality" and he feels ready to abandon it (Walsh 33). Ultimately, he must "learn to accept the limitations of the human body and spirit" (Green 285). When Jackie beheads him, he dies in the desert and "his blood [runs] out upon the dry earth, which [drinks] it up immediately" (*Voss* 394). A permanent fusion with the desert occurs as his body decays and is invaded by the land. Palfreyman's death

also leads to such a merge. Once the party leaves the area in which he is killed, there remains nothing “in the immediate landscape” of the expedition, “except a small cairn of stones that marked [his] grave” (348). The reader understands that this too will disappear, leaving no remaining trace of Palfreyman.

Voss’s transformation of perception, and eventually of the body, is most poignantly illustrated in Le Mesurier’s poem “Conclusion”, which can be interpreted as an allegory of Voss’s journey. Interestingly, the poem seems to express the themes of the novel as a whole. In Section I, the human subject is depicted as all-powerful:

Man is King. They hung a robe on him, of blue sky. [. . .] He rode across his kingdom of dust, which paid homage to him for a season, with jasmine, and lilies, and visions of water. They had painted his mysteries upon the rock, but, afraid of his presence, they had run away. [. . .] He continued to eat distance, and to raise up the sun in the morning, and the moon was his slave by night. Fevers turned him from Man to God. (296)

In Section II, the speaker still recognises himself as the centre around which everything revolves: he describes “looking at the map of [his] hand, on which the rivers rise to the North-east” (296). He sees his heart as “the centre” and believes his “blood will water the earth and make it green” (296). Section III marks a shift in the speaker’s perspective: he ceases to see the natural world as separate from himself and subject to domination and, instead, acknowledges that he does not hold power over it. Now, he takes comfort in his own humility (296). Surrendering himself to the natural world, he describes how “the sun delivered [him]” from his body, “the wind fretted” his “wretched ribs”, and his “skull was split open by the green lightning” (297). The final section of the poem speaks of the ultimate surrender of the “Man”, who has now been humbled and recognises himself as a part of his environment, praying that God will take his spirit “out of this [his] body’s remains”, and “grant that it shall be everywhere, and in the rocks, and in the empty waterholes” (297). In abandoning a subject-centred view of existence, the speaker reassesses his role in the natural world, and surrenders to it. Like the speaker in Le Mesurier’s poem, Voss transforms in the novel. Beginning as a megalomaniac, or “King”, he ends as a scattered body, yielding to the desert. Clearly, Le Mesurier’s poem

foregrounds “the dialectic between *humility and arrogance* revealed in the desert journey” that White explores in *Voss* as a whole (McCredde 118).

“Soothed at last by leaves and silence”: Patrick White’s Literary Language

Thus far, this chapter has focused on the characters’ relationship with the natural world in *Voss*, and has analysed the discursive mediation of their perception. White’s novel foregrounds the inability of European discourses to represent adequately the particularity of the Australian landscape, and therefore repeatedly draws attention to the alterity of this space. What is more, silence is thematised as a positive value, and this, coupled with the novel’s critique of imperial discourse, dramatises the limitations of discursive knowledge. Somewhat ironically, then, White emphasises the limits of language in a novel, and thus in language. However, White’s literary language gestures toward alterity in ways that other discourses do not. In this section of my chapter, I turn my attention to this literary language, considering the irony of White’s preoccupation with silence and the ineffable in a linguistic text, and commenting on his use of literary language as a means to make room for the other.

White draws attention to the unrepresentable in *Voss* by depicting the natural world as silent, as is evident in his portrayal of Bonner’s garden and Judd’s farm. Furthermore, he foregrounds alterity by staging his characters’ inability to gain discursive knowledge of the landscape. For instance, Voss is rendered silent when his words and maps fail to familiarise the Outback. By using silence as a leitmotif and highlighting the limitations of discourse, White gestures beyond the text, toward that which cannot be represented – the other of language. In doing so, his novel gives the reader a “sense of the imponderables, of issues and emotions that are difficult to pin down to the words on the page” (Harries 464). As Durix argues, the “experience described by Patrick White in *Voss* cannot be expressed directly” since it “always falls short of any literal rendering” (345). Significantly, in this regard, White has defended his style by claiming that it is impossible “to be explicit about a grandeur too overwhelming to express” (*Flaws in the Glass* 70), thereby drawing attention to “the paradox of language” with which he

“continually wrestles” (Ashcroft, “Presence of the Sacred” 99). He is aware that, when attempting to describe alterity, “language will only [. . .] contain the moment, robbing it of the inexplicable” (107). Nevertheless, he uses language – as the necessary medium of literature – to call attention to sublimity.

Ironically, then, his literary language has a different effect to that of other discourses: that is, his prose emphasises the limitations of language and thus refutes the assumption that there is a natural relation between sign and referent. Because he foregrounds the ineffable, “at the edges of language” and thus “*intimates the sublime*” (99), he succeeds in imparting a sense of “the unrepresentable” (99), which, for Lyotard, as I have shown, marks an “aesthetic of the sublime” (*The Postmodern Condition* 80).

In acknowledging that which remains unsaid by his novel, and thereby signalling beyond its boundaries, White, paradoxically, makes room for the other in *Voss*. By doing so, he succeeds in “mak[ing] the novel perform new functions” (Harries 466). The following two chapters of my thesis show that both Ondaatje and Malouf participate in precisely such an attempt to accommodate alterity, despite the linguistic medium of their novels.

Conclusion

White’s *Voss* portrays the desert as impenetrable to European cultural inscription. The characters’ attempts to document and map the desert, and ultimately gain exhaustive knowledge of it, fail. Voss’s map is never filled in, and the expedition’s journal and letters are destroyed or lost. The authority of these documents is undermined by White, who portrays knowledge of Australia as unattainable via European language and cartography. His concern with these discourses is shared by Ondaatje and Malouf. In the following chapters, I shall demonstrate that both these authors depict the subject’s inability to gain discursive knowledge of the natural world.

Importantly, Voss’s failure to document the desert engenders a shift in his perception of the land. Along with *The English Patient* and *An Imaginary Life*, *Voss*

indicates that “absoluteness is not in the nature of consciousness itself. The horizon of understanding, like that of perception, is one of possibility and becoming” (Ashcroft, “More Than One Horizon” 133). In the next two chapters, I will argue that the protagonists of *The English Patient* and *An Imaginary Life* experience the self in transformation as a result of its interactions with the natural world. Subjectivity is again revealed as unstable and dynamic, constantly adapting to the physical and social forces to which it is exposed.

Chapter Three

Fire, Sand and the *Fata Morgana*

Rather than forming a background to human action, the desert in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is central to the novel's concerns. Since it foregrounds the role of discourse in the characters' relationship with the natural world, this novel is important to my thesis. In this chapter, I shall focus on Ondaatje's protagonist, Count Ladislaus de Almásy, and his experience of the desert. I will also devote some attention to the inhabitants of the Villa San Girolamo and their relationships with the natural world. Like Almásy, they are frequently confronted with that which they cannot articulate or comprehend. As a result, one of the novel's major concerns is the characters' approach to, and negotiation of, alterity. Derrida's theory of hospitality will prove useful in explaining how the characters in the novel approach the natural world. I shall also examine the manner in which Ondaatje gestures toward alterity. Like White, he thematises the limitations of language and discourse, notwithstanding his linguistic medium. Accordingly, this chapter will comment on Ondaatje's writing style and its effect on the reader.

Although set in World War Two, I read the novel as a postcolonial text since it thematises imperial activity and interrogates Eurocentric concepts such as the nation-state which, along with geography and history, construct and universalise culturally specific notions of place. Focusing on language and cartography in particular, this chapter will examine the novel's treatment of imperial discourses. For instance, Almásy finds that language and cartography are limited in their ability to secure knowledge of the desert. After becoming aware of the power of language, he rejects naming as a method of representation. Recognising this same power in cartography, he sees that maps are inadequate representations of place. Ultimately, he denounces the Western knowledge systems he has inherited, since they do not seem to apply to the Sahara, and later describes having been taught by the desert to see and understand the world differently (*English Patient* 148). Through the insight this character gains, the novel, as Marlene Goldman argues, "invites readers to explore very different approaches to the acquisition

and deployment of knowledge” (907–908). While Goldman contends that knowledge is transmitted through Ondaatje’s combination of discourses in the novel, I propose that the text endorses a silent knowledge of the natural world.

As its title suggests, one of the prominent concerns in *The English Patient* is identity. Like Voss, Almásy experiences a transformation of self in the course of the novel that is catalysed by his voyages in the desert. To begin with, a dramatic shift in his experience causes him to question notions of national identity, geography and history. He recognises that his perception is mediated by these discourses, and embraces the mirage, “the fata morgana”, that the desert offers (*English Patient* 262). Without “the sun compass and the odometer mileage and the book”, he feels free to become “his own invention” (262). Of the three protagonists in the novels under consideration in this thesis, Almásy is the one who is most affected, physically at least, by his experience in the desert. During a flight over the Gifl Kebir Plateau, his plane ignites and, ablaze, he falls into the desert. Burnt beyond recognition, and claiming to have lost most of his memory, he is known only as ‘the English patient’ to his nurse Hana, who cares for him in an abandoned villa in Italy. Whilst he survives the crash, he has, to an extent, suffered a loss of self. This chapter will examine the way in which Almásy’s identity is transformed as a result of his experience in the desert. My argument is that Ondaatje’s novel, through its emphasis on “the fractured or discontinuous quality of human perception”, demonstrates that encounters with alterity spur transformations of self (Cook 109).

Through the Eyes of a Mapmaker

This section of the chapter looks at Almásy’s initial perception of the desert. At first, he approaches the desert as a subject entrenched in European culture. He is a Hungarian working in Britain, who travels to the Sahara as a cartographer, explorer, and member of the RGS. His expedition, which forms part of a colonial project that aims to document supposedly unknown areas in the Libyan Desert, intends to search for the lost oasis of Zerzura. Like Voss, Almásy sets out to map what was considered uncharted territory. He intends to ‘discover’ and name the landscape in order to contribute to the British

documentation of the geography of the area. In part, this chapter will look at how this character's cultural position influences his perception of the landscape, as well as the change in perspective he experiences in the desert.

By documenting certain areas of the Sahara, the RGS expedition intends to identify land previously unobserved by the Western eye. Almásy, in particular, attempts to produce knowledge of the desert using two different approaches. Firstly, he attempts to map the desert. Being a cartographer, he, like Voss, is a skilled author and reader of maps. Indeed, he proudly describes himself as “a man who can recognize an unnamed town by its skeletal shape on a map”, adding that he “knew the maps of the sea floor, maps that depict weaknesses in the shield of the earth, [and even] charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades” (*English Patient* 19). This ability to read maps is a skill that never leaves him, despite his later, unplanned, departure from the expedition. For instance, when he travels with the Bedouin, he acts as a mapmaker for many of the villages they encounter, and usually draws “maps that go beyond their [tribal] boundaries” (23). It is important to note that his ability to map the landscape is premised on his capacity to comprehend the world via discursive structures. Since the map is an instrument through which the landscape is ordered into a familiar and known place, geographical documentation of the desert gives him the illusion that he knows it absolutely. He also attempts to gain knowledge of the desert with language, and describes himself as “a man whose life in many ways, even as an explorer, has been governed by words” (245). Similarly, he acknowledges the influence that language has on his experience when he tells Caravaggio that words “have a power” (234). Before his time in the desert, he is most comfortable in a “fully named world” (22). This is why “his favourite garden in the world” is “the grass garden at Kew” (9). He is comfortable at Kew Botanical Gardens because the landscape is cultivated, documented, and domesticated. Since it is absent from history and geography, Zerzura is unknown to him and functions as the antithesis of landscapes such as Kew. He believes that by charting the desert, he will come to know it through filling in the blank spaces on the map. However, as will be noted later in the chapter, he finds that discursive methods of gaining knowledge are ineffectual in this landscape.

Being a 'man of words' and a mapmaker, Almásy is confident that he can comprehend the desert. He recognises that his view of the world is informed by "rumours and legends. Charted things. Shards written down" (245). In other words, he acknowledges that he interprets the world through writing and cartography. For example, he assumes knowledge of the area in which he lands after his plane crash because he has seen a map of it. When he tells Hana of the Bedouin, he claims that he "knew their place before [he] crashed among them" (19). Maps of the area allow him to find it familiar, and he resorts to them when he loses a sense of place. So, for instance, when lost among the Bedouin, all he needs for "the map of the world" to "slide into place" is "the name of a small ridge" (20). Similarly, he believes he knows the desert even before he visits it, as he knows the history of the area, which Alexander had traversed "in an earlier age" (19). He is confident that these historical and geographical records have provided him with exhaustive knowledge of the place. Accordingly, it is a name, a history and geography, which he and his party seek in the quest for knowledge of Zerzura. They are "mapping the greater part of the Gilf Kebir Plateau", because they hope to find "the lost oasis" mentioned in the stories they had read (144). Together with the RGS, Almásy pronounces Zerzura 'lost', since he has been deprived of any textual knowledge of it. In itself, Zerzura is not lost at all. The oasis may or may not exist, but to describe it as lost implies that it is an object that exists in relation to a subject. In other words, Zerzura is lost only to the RGS, to Almásy, and ultimately to the Western body of knowledge and control. The "[g]eographical and historical absence" of much of the desert, including Zerzura, is "a ghostly presence" (Renger 113), which haunts inquisitive travellers. They fail to locate a referent for the word 'Zerzura', and it consequently becomes an empty sign which compels supplementation. It is precisely because attempts at classifying the desert through other discourses have failed that men have "always been the reciters of poetry in the desert" (*English Patient* 255). Almásy has not yet come to this understanding, though he is inspired by the elusive Zerzura, just as Voss is inspired by the Outback. With maps and written texts, Almásy intends to render Zerzura known and owned.

The Inhospitable Desert

Since he is confident that he knows the landscape “like a sea” within his mind, the desert should not pose a threat to Almásy’s agenda (19). However, like the Outback in *Voss*, the desert in *The English Patient* is portrayed as inhospitable to colonial pursuits. I will now examine the explorers’ experience of the desert and the effect it has on their perception of landscape.

Almásy finds that “in the desert it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation” (20). By “demarcation” he refers to the boundaries that render space known and therefore familiar. The novel thus indicates that boundaries are not inherent to the land but constructed in language. As Ashcroft claims, they are “a method of parcelling up the world” which enables “the ideological control of space” (*Transformation* 146). Nevertheless, Ryan observes that the land is not fully represented by this “textualisation process and [this] makes reading [it] difficult or aberrant” (*Cartographic Eye* 122). Significantly, in this regard, the landscape that Ondaatje’s explorers encounter is inhospitable to discursive methods of documentation. When the expedition is thrown off course, Almásy begins to reconsider the role of words and maps as epistemological tools. In the process, he finds that the desert cannot be represented through European narratives of history and geography. As a result of this transformation in his perception, he abandons his colonial agenda.

Ondaatje’s depiction of the Eastern Sahara is central to his postcolonial concerns. Colonial attempts to map the desert in *The English Patient* are unsuccessful, and Almásy’s expedition, like Voss’s, fails. During their first voyage in Libya, the explorers find themselves lost in a series of sandstorms, including “a storm in the darkness” North of Kufra (*English Patient* 146). Thrown into chaos, the expedition loses most of its stock – the horse vanishes and three of the camels die (146). After having been rendered powerless in the storm, the explorers find that the land they hope to map seems indifferent to their presence. The desert invades them physically and mentally. In one particular incident, they are engulfed in sand as a gale “sweeps the tents from their moorings and [they] roll with them, taking in sand like a sinking boat takes in water,

weighed down, suffocating, till [they are] cut free by a camel driver” (146). For the explorers, the desert becomes “a place not only of shifting spatial distinctions”, but also “a realm of shifting temporal and ontological realities” (Cook 114). They lose their ability to navigate entirely, travelling “through three storms in nine days”, and miss “small desert towns where [they had] expected to locate more supplies” (*English Patient* 146). Since maps mediate their experience, the explorers feel they have lost touch with reality; they cling to the “the clink of the fire-black tea urn and the long spoon and the glass” which, to them, represent their “last link with any other world” (146).

Through his portrayal of his characters’ relationship with the desert, Ondaatje emphasises the limits of language. Words fail the explorers in their encounter with sublimity in the desert. Almásy is astonished by the storms, one of which hits them “out of the clear morning, coming from nowhere” (146). He describes this sandstorm as coming from “nowhere” because he does not expect it; it originates from a place outside his frame of reference. Hassanein Bey, an explorer of the Libyan Desert, whom Almásy quotes at length, also struggles to describe the storm:

It is as though the surface were underlaid with steam-pipes, with thousands of orifices through which tiny jets of steam are puffing out. The sand leaps in little spurts and whirls. Inch by inch the disturbance rises as the wind increases its force. It seems as though the whole surface of the desert were rising in obedience to some upthrusting force beneath. Larger pebbles strike against the shins, the knees, the thighs. The sand-grains climb the body till it strikes the face and goes over the head. The sky is shut out, all but the nearest objects fade from view, the universe is filled. (146)

Bey is able only to describe the desert comparatively, using phrases such as “as though” and “seems” to express his thoughts. Evidently, his words fail to secure knowledge of the desert. As Dennis J. Sumara observes, the sublimity of the desert in *The English Patient*, is “a constant reminder” that one’s encounter with natural world “always exceeds the words used to represent it” (235–236). Sumara goes on to argue that Ondaatje’s desert is a sublime counterpart to the known world and, accordingly, “demands a greater tolerance for difficulty and for the ambiguity of not knowing” (239). To the explorers, the desert

defies absolute definition and, paradoxically, can “be defined only in terms of its indefinability” (Burcar 108). Like Bey, the party discover that words, as is the case with maps, bring no comfort, and after the third night of storms, they “gave up talking” (146). Notably, both White and Ondaatje associate the sublime with silence. In both novels, the explorers’ are left powerless and silent in the desert.

As a liminal space that lies outside the boundaries of cartography, Ondaatje’s desert is “a metaphor for the incompleteness and indeterminacy of geographical and historical mapping” (Renger 113). After his encounter with sublimity, Almásy comes to recognise the destructive nature of discursive boundaries. His failure to map the desert, and to locate Zerzura, causes him to lose faith in the maps he once trusted. He no longer sees words and maps as transparent media, and feels as though “he had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone between land and chart [. . .] between nature and storyteller” (*English Patient* 262). This critique of cartography draws “attention to the materiality and aesthetic quality of maps, [and] denies them transparency as signs that merely reflect a meaning that is intrinsic in the landscape” (Bolland 47). Almásy now recognises that maps fail to describe the desert, which, according to Lilijana Burcar, will always remain an uncharted territory, and which “refuses to be mapped” by colonisers with Western methods (108). Furthermore, the desert “denies the validity of any single pattern of understanding imposed by outside observers”, including “those who create maps of the desert” (108). Nicola Renger sees Ondaatje’s desert as “a place of perpetual flux, which, through its nomadic populations and its vast and changing surface, makes spatial control and colonial appropriation through maps, nearly impossible” (112). Ultimately, Almásy comes to understand that, “in the desert, which had been an old sea where nothing was strapped down or permanent, everything drifted”, and navigation via a map is thus futile (*English Patient* 24).

Since he allows himself to be “taught such things by the desert”, Almásy soon comes to know the land in the way that many of the nomads do and learns to navigate it without a map (*English Patient* 148). En route to find help for Katharine after she is injured in a plane crash, he has “No truck. No plane. No compass. Only moon and his shadow” (264). To navigate, he “found the old stone marker from the past that located the direction of El Taj, north-northwest” and, once he had “memorised the angle of his

shadow [he] started walking” (265). Without the aid of a map or compass, there were “two periods of time when he could not move”: at noon, “when the shadow was under him, and at twilight, between sunset and the appearance of the stars” (265). During these times, if he moved, “he might err as much as ninety degrees off his course” (265). Once he learns that he cannot equate seeing a map with knowing an area, he begins to *re-*discover the desert. And, as he comes to know the land without Western geography or history, it seems a new place to him: he starts to see the landscape differently. Like “the nomads of faith”, he comes to love “the monotone of the desert”, and see its “brightness and faith and colour” (277). He is no longer affected by the otherness of the desert, since he ceases to approach it through Western discourse. Rather, he gains a familiarity with the desert by inhabiting it, and evinces “the mental state of those Englishmen who were happier in the desert than they were in Putney” – a state that Ondaatje considers “very central” to the novel (qtd. in Wachtel para. 31).

In contradiction to colonial discourses of land ownership, Ondaatje depicts a desert that “could not be claimed or owned” through naming, and then compares it to “a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones” (*English Patient* 147). Like the nomads, Almásy comes to understand this – as emerges in his description of the desert as “a world that had been civilised for centuries, had a thousand paths and roads”, despite its absence in European history (149). This ancient civilisation is not immediately recognisable because, unlike the European explorers of the Sahara, the Bedouin do not attempt to mark the desert. Their caravans, the reader is told, leave “nothing behind, not an ember” (148). Along with their methods of navigation, Almásy also recognises the names that the nomads have bestowed on the oases: “*Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf*” (148). He acknowledges that the desert was “given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East” (148). By contrast, the imperial attempts of the explorers are rendered absurd in the novel:

[S]ome wanted their mark there. On that dry water course, on this shingled knoll. Small vanities in this plot of land northwest of the Sudan, south of Cyrenaica. Fenelon-Barnes wanted the fossil trees he discovered to bear his name. He even wanted a tribe to take his name, and spent a year on the negotiations. Then Bauchan outdid him, having a type of sand dune named after him. (148)

Almásy accuses the explorers of having “become vain” with their names, and their “claims to have been the first eyes, the strongest army, the cleverest merchant” (151). Nonetheless, he realises, the map of the Sahara features the names of his fellow explorers rather than those of the nomads (145). He now refuses to continue this practice, saying that he does not wish to place his “name against such beautiful names” as those the nomads have bestowed on the desert (148).

Almásy’s rejection of the map as an epistemological tool serves as a critique of European cartography as a whole. Similarly, his growing disdain for colonial naming, which will be examined more closely in the next section of this chapter, illustrates Ondaatje’s critique of the colonial appropriation of land. European discourses are shown to be inadequate tools for gaining knowledge of the Sahara, since they neither acknowledge the existing, indigenous history of the landscape, nor represent the experience of the explorers in the desert.

Re-visioning the Self: Almásy in Communion with the Desert

Ondaatje’s depiction of landscape in *The English Patient* is integral to his representation of subjectivity. Through his portrayal of the desert’s influence on the individual in *The English Patient*, he draws attention to the unstable relationship between subject and world. In the novel, Annick Hillger notes, it is the “absence of fixed and stable points that renders the desert a space that ultimately defies the notion of both personal and national identity” (140). She later argues that, on the whole, Ondaatje’s writing challenges the idea that the subject is rooted in a fixed point of origin (223). Along with *Voss* and *An Imaginary Life*, *The English Patient* challenges the notion of the rational, autonomous

subject by depicting a transcendence, or forfeiture, of subjectivity as a result of an encounter with alterity.

Ondaatje draws attention to the permeable boundaries between self and world in his portrayal of the explorers' relationship with the desert in *The English Patient*. In much of Ondaatje's fiction, Catherine Bush observes, there is "a point where body and landscape merge" (para. 31). In *The English Patient*, this is evident when the explorers' belief that they exist independently of their environment is challenged by their experiences in the desert. Once the wind and sand start filling their mouths and burying their bodies, it becomes difficult to maintain the boundaries between subject and object. In the storm, they have to "keep moving", they know that if they pause "sand builds up as it would around anything stationary", and "locks" them in (*English Patient* 146). Should this happen, they will be "lost forever" (146). The distinction between self and world begins to collapse, as the explorers are overrun by the desert.

Almásy, like White's Voss, experiences a transformation of self. He is continually affected, and at times invaded, by his environment. And like Le Mesurier, he undergoes moments of mergence with the natural world. For example, after the explorers accidentally find the town of El Taj, they are described as receiving this "new world slowly, as if coming out of a drowning" (147). Almásy feels as if they had "disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand" (148). The "drowning" he describes connotes a fusion with the desert. He leaves the desert in a state of altered consciousness, as if emerging from a dream. Significantly, Almásy compares this synthesis with the desert to a "drowning", because he associates his temporary loss of subject-centred consciousness with the death of the self.

Rather than a subjectivity rooted in, and controlled by, the mind, Ondaatje's "texts present the idea of an *embodied* subjectivity" (Hillger 223). Almásy does not see the desert as an extension of the self – as Voss does – but views the self as an aspect of the natural world. He yearns to replace names and maps with a kind of corporeal cartography, and he wants human beings "to be marked by nature", rather than inscribing it with their names (*English Patient* 277). It is his belief that we die marked by the world, "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” (277).¹

Because of his experiences in the desert, Almásy abandons his identity and does so by rejecting language. He treats the “act of naming” with disdain because it is a “strategy by which nations and families incorporate individuals into structures of language and narratives of identity” (Bolland 41). This transformation in Almásy’s perception reveals that identity is informed and dictated by discursive structures. The desert’s “assault on selfhood or self-sufficiency” leaves him “with a permanent longing for anonymity”, and a compulsion “to dissolve boundaries and distinctions” which manifests itself in his “periodic diatribes against nationhood or ownership” (Cook 114). When Katharine dies because her name is of no significance, he learns that names “have a power” as they are capable of great violence (*English Patient* 234). For that reason, he refuses to be bound to his name, partly because he sees it as a mark of possession. Since it exceeds all names, the desert has taught him that any such possession is arbitrary. Consequently, he feels that names hinder the freedom the desert provides him, and tells Hana that “after ten years in the desert”, it was easy for him “to slip across borders, not belong to anyone, to any nation” (148). Believing that people “are deformed by nation states” (147), which impose the ‘structures of language and narratives of identity’ to which J. Bolland refers, Almásy seeks to “Erase the family name! Erase nations!” (*English Patient* 148). He does not wish to participate in these structures since he feels that, like the names bestowed on the desert, his name is an inadequate means of representation. By rejecting his own name, which he feels no longer bears any relation to him, Almásy questions the notion that words are innocuous communicators of truth. Since his name is not inherent to his self, he is free to “slip into a name as if within a discovered well” (150). This is demonstrated later in the novel when he becomes known as ‘the English patient’ following the destruction of all his distinguishing physical characteristics.

¹ In his analysis of the novel, Rufus Cook notes that identity is “communal and composite, a product of cumulative inscription and sedimentation”, and argues that this notion “informs practically every facet of *The English Patient*, [and] echoes through the experience of all its characters” (120).

After he has lived in the desert, Almásy rejects the identity of a cartographer in a colonial project. The shift in his experience of the desert causes a shift in his perception of it. This is evident when he recounts a story he wrote in his copy of Herodotus' *The Histories*. The story tells of a nation that "was so enraged by [an] evil wind that they declared war on it and marched out in full battle array, only to be rapidly and completely interred" (*English Patient* 19). They became one of the "various armies engulfed in the *simoom* who were never seen again" (19). By referring to this narrative, which foregrounds the absurdity of attempting to dominate the desert, Almásy recognises his lack of control and ownership of the natural world. In forming a new relationship with the desert, he ceases to be an explorer. He has relinquished what Kerridge terms "the traveller's position" (166), in which the traveller maintains a distance from the place she or he temporarily inhabits. To remain in the foreign landscape, according to Kerridge, would be a sign of the traveller's

absorption into the world he is visiting. To put it another way, this would be to allow his travel experience to change him. He would become Object as well as Subject. The membrane of [. . .] identity he must carry unchanged from departure to return [. . .] would be dissolved. His voyage would have so much changed him that he would be unable to return to his old life; it would cease to be a voyage. (166)

This is precisely the effect that Almásy's journey in the desert has on him. The transformation in his perception of the desert leads to a shift in the way he sees himself in relation to his environment. He learns that the self is not static but fluid, and therefore reliant on an unstable environment.

The Abject Patient

In each of the three novels examined in this thesis, the protagonist, in varying degrees, merges with the desert. Voss, Almásy and Ovid all experience an imaginative and physical transformation. However, Almásy differs from Voss and Ovid because he undergoes a radical metamorphosis of the body which, in turn, initiates a transformation

of the mind. When his plane crashes in the desert, he occupies an ambiguous state for a significant part of his journey. His body merges with fire and sand in the beginnings of an eventual union with the natural world. Devoid of much of his memory, he becomes other to himself and the inhabitants of the Villa San Girolamo. This section of the chapter considers how he is transformed by his experience in the desert.

In the crash, Almásy receives wounds that grant him the anonymity he so craved. He forfeits his subject position in his near-fusion with the desert, as he is not in possession or control of his self and therefore can no longer act independently. His injury transforms him into “a figure whose identity is physically erased, made up of composite cultural influences and continually resistant to final definition” (Bolland 37). He is now “a man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire” (*English Patient* 50). Consequently, he finally fulfils his desire to erase his “name and the place [he] had come from” (148). Having been “reduced by fire to one all-encompassing scar” (Scobie para. 21), his body is a sign of nothing recognisable; he is unable to name himself or be identified by others. Given that he functions as the haunting absent other to which Derrida refers in *Of Hospitality* (“Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality” 125), it is appropriate that he is twice referred to as a “ghost” (*English Patient* 47, 30). His body represents “an emptiness which the others try to fill through projections of their own needs” (Bolland 34). One such projection is the name – ‘the English patient’ – that Hana gives him, a misnomer that signifies its infinite distance from an absent, ever-elusive referent.

Due to his accident, Almásy has become neither subject nor object, but abject. In terms of Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, his body manifests “dark revolts of being” in its grotesque state (1). A breach in its limits seems to have been caused by his injuries: his “black body” has “destroyed feet” and he is “burned into the colour of aubergine” in places (*English Patient* 3–4). His body exceeds the familiar, and can be read in Kristeva’s terms as “beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). Significantly, Kristeva points out that it is “not a lack of cleanliness, or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). The abject is that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules”; it is the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Almásy embodies such ambiguity, being both alive and dead, fire, sand and flesh,

English and Hungarian, cartographer and spy. As Renger argues, “Almásy personifies the paradox of being other and Self; in him the binary of either/or is dissolved” (120).

Described in Kristeva’s terms, he breaches the binary opposition “I/Other, Inside/Outside[,] an opposition that is vigorous but pervious, violent but uncertain” (7).

Almásy’s abject state vividly demonstrates that transformation is a painful process in which one undergoes a temporary forfeiture of subjectivity. His recognition of this loss of self is evident in a story that he relays to Hana and Caravaggio. Since he feels other to himself, he often shifts between first and third person when referring to himself, thereby implying that the person he once was has died. Tellingly, in this regard, Caravaggio recognises that “*Death means you are in the third person*” (*English Patient* 263). As he lies “eternally dying” in the Villa San Girolamo, Almásy, in his state of abjection, is close to a union with his environment (121). Notably, it is his crash in the desert that fuses his body with fire and sand, and so initiates the process of his death. Ultimately, he will end as Katharine does, that is, with his body “now an eternal part of the desert’s landscape” (Emery 212).

The Ruined Villa and its Displaced Inhabitants

In light of my analysis of Almásy’s relationship with the desert, I feel it necessary to examine Ondaatje’s depiction of the Villa San Girolamo. The transgression of boundaries between self and world that Ondaatje attributes to Almásy’s relationship with the desert is also manifested in Caravaggio, Kirpal and Hana’s interaction with their environment in the villa. Like Almásy, the inhabitants of the villa are affected by the natural world. Hana, Caravaggio and Kirpal welcome the invasion of the elements and, in receiving the natural world hospitably, are un-homed in a literal and psychological sense. Bolland reads this dissolution of boundaries in the novel as a breaking down of “conventional hierarchies and divisions” (47), as does Andrew Shin, who notes that “the permeability of [the villa’s] boundaries complicates distinctions between private interiors and the exterior world” (222). Because it is in ruins, the villa becomes a space in which new and different relationships between the inhabitants and the enveloping natural world are possible.

Left in ruins by the war, the Villa San Girolamo lies, along with its inhabitants, exposed to the elements. In its ruined state, it is transformed into an unconventional space between inside and outside. As the villa crumbles, the demarcations “between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth” dissolve (*English Patient* 45). The natural world permeates the walls of the house, particularly in the library, where a “bomb crater allow[s] moon and rain” inside (8), and “the rest of the room ha[s] adapted itself to this wound”, causing it to accept “the habits of weather, evening stars, the sound of birds” (12). Even lightning penetrates the library “again and again, falling across the covered piano and carpet” (12). In other parts of the villa, doors open “into landscape” and some rooms have “become an open aviary” (14).

In his assessment of boundaries and their conceptual value in postcolonial studies, Ashcroft considers spaces such as this as “areas of possibility” (*Transformation* 195), since they act as a contact zone (to borrow Pratt’s term). One such space is the ‘veranda’

where inhabitants and strangers may meet with ease. They are the space in which ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ interact, and not only do they reveal the provisionality of such apparently unnegotiable boundaries but they represent that space in which the inner and outer may change and affect one another. Metaphorically speaking, verandas represent that space in which discourse itself is disrupted and the very identities of the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ become negotiable. (Ashcroft, *Transformation* 195)

Drawing on the traditional view of the veranda as “the place where the meeting of strangers” and “the negotiation with outsiders” may be conducted “without the defining restrictions of convention” (195), he theorises it as an edge where transgression and negotiation is possible. In contrast to the inside or outside of a house, “the veranda stands more evocatively for the zonal and interactive possibilities of boundaries” (195). The Villa San Girolamo’s inhabitants engage in exactly such a negotiation with the natural world. Being damaged, the entire villa becomes a veranda of a kind: a site of interaction and hospitality. It possesses what Ashcroft terms a “bi-focal orientation”: the veranda not only faces the house, but also “the ‘vast, unknown areas beyond’ and [has an] ability to maintain the ambivalent link between the ‘house’ and the unknown” or other (“Excess”

42). Being similar to the veranda, in this respect, the villa exceeds physical and discursive boundaries and so eludes any final classification. To some extent, it ceases to be a villa at all, functioning instead as a site of ruin or wreckage.

The destruction of the Villa San Girolamo makes it impossible for the inhabitants to assume the position of host, since there is no absolute distinction between home and horizon. This blurring of borders in the house therefore represents the permeable nature of the boundaries between host and stranger, self and world. Hana, Kirpal and Caravaggio embrace the breach of the villa's periphery, and refuse to live within the boundaries of the house. Accordingly, the natural world is not barred from the house and its accommodating inhabitants. Indeed, they render themselves vulnerable to the elements. For this reason, Sumara describes their welcome of the natural world as a desire "to envelop the other, and to be enveloped" (237).

While these three characters approach the natural world in this manner for individual reasons, they have all survived trauma, which has affected their social behaviour. Hana's disregard for boundaries, evident in her "nomadic" existence in the house, is directly related to her experiences during the war (*English Patient* 14). Like the villa, Hana is damaged. She has lived through trauma, and her behaviour toward the natural world is an indication of her psychological state: she accepts the trauma rather than repressing it, and accordingly embraces the damage to the house rather than attempting to rebuild it. For Hana, "the wild gardens were like further rooms" of the villa (45). Recognising each space in the villa as full of possibility, she seeks alternative ways of being in her environment. She does not attempt to claim or possess any singular space but prefers "to be nomadic in the house with her pallet or hammock", sleeping in different spaces "depending on the temperature or wind or light" (14). Along with Kirpal and Caravaggio, she loves to sleep outdoors, enjoying a sensory experience of the natural world. The reader is told that some nights "she opened doors and slept in rooms that had walls missing. She lay on the pallet on the very edge of the room, facing the drifting landscape of stars, moving clouds, wakened by the growl of thunder and lightning" (14–15).

Caravaggio approaches the landscape in similar ways. He is sensitive to his surroundings, and spends a lot of his time outdoors. In summer, “he finds it difficult to stay indoors at night. Most of the time he is on the roof beside the broken chimney” (36). He

pushes open all the windows in the room so he can hear the noises of the night. He undresses, rubs his palms gently over his neck and for a while lies down on the unmade bed. The noise of the trees, the breaking of moon into silver fish bouncing off the leaves of asters outside. The moon is on him like skin, a sheaf of water. An hour later he is on the roof of the villa. (33)

Hana often finds him “in the garden lying along the stone rim of the fountain looking up at the stars, or she will come across him on a lower terrace” (36).

The character of Kirpal is useful in explaining Ashcroft’s argument that “the body, place, language, the house of being itself are all ‘verandas’” (“Excess” 42). As an Indian sapper working in the British army, Kirpal adopts traits from both cultures, and distinctly lacks a sense of home. Unable to see himself as any particular national subject, he cannot be classified. Occupying the margins, in the contact zone, he is like a veranda. He necessarily compares cultures with one another, and this influences the way he interacts not only with other individuals, but also with the landscape surrounding the villa. Rather than seeing the world as a set of individual objects, he focuses on the interactions between them. Being cognisant of the interconnections between self and other, body and world, he “moves always in relation to things, beside walls, raised terrace hedges. He scans the periphery” (*English Patient* 230). Looking at Hana, “he sees a fragment of her lean cheek in relation to the landscape behind it” and the narrator compares this to the “way he watches the arc of a linnnet in terms of the space it gathers away from the surface of the earth” (230). Like Caravaggio, he regularly “sleeps on the parapet that overlooks the valley, crawling into his tent only if it rains” (77). And like Hana, he is nomadic and assumes a temporary space in the landscape by pitching “a tent in the far reaches of the garden, where Hana thinks lavender was once grown” (76). He recognises the characteristic impermanence of the natural world and “simply acknowledges the

possibility of rain, a certain odour from a shrub” (93). When he first arrives at the villa, the reader is told, “he will not come into the house at all” (76).

Because they do not adopt the position of a rational subject in their interactions with the land, these characters do not objectify it. Ondaatje’s depiction of them draws attention to conventional approaches to landscape and offers an alternate perspective on the relationship between the individual and her environment.

The Trauma of Reading Ondaatje

Ondaatje’s portrayal of the relationship between his characters and their environment, and his suggestion that they have somehow negotiated ways of being that transgress the limits of their cultural discourses, seems to present a paradox: although he foregrounds the limitations of language, he makes use of prose to do so. Like White, he suggests that literature functions differently from other forms of writing, most of which reinforce discursively inscribed relations between subject and world. In his novels, Ondaatje constantly makes room for the other. He does this in various ways, which will be outlined in this section of the chapter.

Firstly, the novel’s focus on the limitations of language and cartography draws attention to that which these discourses do not express. For example, by foregrounding the disjuncture between the sign “the English patient” and its referent, the man who calls himself Almásy, Ondaatje emphasises the remainder that is left unsaid by the sign: the other of language. By doing so, he gestures toward the ineffable beyond discourse, including his own text. As Philip Marchand puts it, Ondaatje writes a form of prose that “appeal[s] to the sublime” (para. 22). In other words, Ondaatje gives the reader a sense of the inexpressible or other, which language fails to express. He thereby highlights the paradox of literature: even though language reduces its objects of representation, literary language is capable of signalling beyond itself toward alterity. *The English Patient* demonstrates that this mode of language makes room for the other. As this chapter has shown, literature is able to undermine discourses that elide otherness.

Secondly, Ondaatje's prose has the "capacity to [. . . evoke] an almost physical response" in the reader (Smythe 2). It is precisely for this reason that Karen E. Smythe, who draws on Longinus's conception of the sublime and emphasises the transporting "effect of elevated language upon an audience", describes Ondaatje as "a 'sublime' writer" (2). Mike Marais, in his article "The Trauma of Reading", also comments on the ability of texts such as *The English Patient* to affect the reader. He argues that literary works are able "to expose the reader to [. . .] otherness" because they "place the reader in a relationship with something that is indefinable and therefore beyond his power to control" (3). In *The English Patient*, specifically, the reader may be exposed to alterity through the characters' encounter with it, because this text attempts to make her "feel the feelings" of these characters, that is, to "embody" them (5). For instance, in reading of Almásy and Hana's encounters with alterity, the reader may also be confronted with this otherness.

By gesturing beyond its own limits, and providing the possibility for the reader to be exposed to otherness, *The English Patient*, like the Villa San Girolamo, becomes a veranda of sorts: that is, a site of hospitality. Like the villa it describes, this novel is fractured to an extent: rather than proceeding chronologically, its narrative consists of a series of disjointed scenes which slowly provide the reader with fragments of Almásy's story. Accordingly, both the novel and the villa act as liminal sites, that is, sites that are open to alterity. In the narrative itself, Ondaatje illustrates the way in which a subject may be confronted with alterity while reading. When Hana reads, for example, she emerges "feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams" (*English Patient* 13). In this passage, Ondaatje aligns the act of reading and dreaming. As I have argued, one forfeits one's subject position in language and culture when dreaming, and therefore one forfeits one's possession of self. In the passage, Ondaatje associates such lack of agency with the act of reading. Like Hana, the reader of *The English Patient* may forfeit her self temporarily while reading the novel through being affected by the otherness to which the novel gestures. If she is attentive and "attentional" in her reading, she "will have been invaded by this novel. In entering it, it will have entered her" (Marais 5). In her reading of

Almásy's desert, for instance, she "will have responded viscerally, which is to say non-conceptually, to this novel" (5). And, like Hana, when she emerges from it, "it will be with her 'body full of sentences and moments'" (5).

Conclusion

Like White, Ondaatje's desert is inhospitable to colonial pursuits. Due to its impermanence and indeterminacy, it exceeds any attempt to document and define it. The RGS explorers fail to find Zerzura and so it remains lost to the Western world. Similarly to *Voss*, then, *The English Patient* challenges the legitimacy of cartography as an epistemological tool. By depicting the limitations of colonial maps and writing, Ondaatje offers a critique of imperial approaches to the natural world. His depiction of the desert ultimately "suggests that the objectivity ascribed by the Western world to cartography and historiography is itself part of the fiction created by these forms of representation" (Renger 111).

Once he rejects naming and nationhood, Almásy also perceives himself differently. As White does in *Voss*, Ondaatje contests the notion that selfhood is inherent in *The English Patient*. After his plane crash in the desert, Almásy undergoes a physical transformation of self that causes him to lose his social identity entirely. Having been permanently altered by his time in the desert, he is unable to retrieve the self that he has lost; he exists as a being that is neither subject nor object, but abject. My argument in this chapter therefore endorses Hillger's contention that Ondaatje's novels characteristically feature "the deconstruction of the Cartesian subject" (146). Ondaatje criticises the idea of the rational subject, and along with it "the concept of individual identity or selfhood", by depicting his characters as being influenced by their environment rather than as self-sufficient entities (Cook 110).

My next chapter, which examines David Malouf's depiction of landscape, language and subjectivity in *An Imaginary Life*, will show that this writer shares many of White and Ondaatje's concerns.

Chapter Four An Imaginary Landscape

Given its focus on landscape and subjectivity, as well as its concern with language and alterity, David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* is highly significant for this study. For Malouf, like White and Ondaatje, a preoccupation with language is fundamental to his depictions of landscape. In addition, Malouf's representations of subjectivity repeatedly foreground the relationship between discourse and perception: the protagonist Ovid's language mediates his view of the natural world. Furthermore, the novel foregrounds his encounter with alterity – another of Malouf's prominent thematic concerns. Alterity decentres Ovid's view of the landscape, forcing him perpetually to perceive it differently and to seek new modes of description.

An Imaginary Life re-imagines the poet Ovid's exile from Rome in the year 8 AD. Relegated to the edge of the empire, he finds himself in Tomis, a village in what is now Romania. Tomis is situated on a steppe that partially surrounds the Black Sea. Its arid landscape is a semi-desert that is radically different to the cultivated garden-city of Rome.¹ In comparison to Rome, it seems lacking and empty to Ovid: his exile to Tomis has left him deserted, and thus his feelings of desolation and abandonment also locate him in a metaphorical desert. Like Voss and Almásy, Ovid is initially confounded by his new environment. Far from home, he feels alienated from the native Getae, whose language he cannot speak, and the landscape. He finds his new setting difficult to describe, since he cannot “translate it back into [his own] experience”, which is informed by the Roman language and culture (*Imaginary Life* 22). His perception of Tomis begins to change, however, when his circumstances change: after years of silence, he learns the Getic language. Following this, he becomes an active participant in the community. At this time, during a ritualistic hunting trip in which he participates, the men in the village capture a feral child, whom Ovid subsequently attempts to domesticate. Devoid of language, the Child relates to the world differently than Ovid and the Getae. The

¹ Although a region which is classified as a steppe, or semi-desert, has twice the precipitation level of a desert, it is still an arid environment. Being situated on the coast, Tomis is not as parched as the semi-desert, yet suffers from the dry “north winds [that] blow in across the rivers, out of the Scythian steppes” (23).

relationship that Ovid forms with the Child, which remains intact until his death, radically impacts his perception. For Ovid, the boy represents a life without language. After his initial attempt to domesticate the Child, he learns to accommodate the natural world as the boy does. Eventually, after the death of the Getic leader, Ovid and the Child are forced to flee Tomis: they cross the river Ister, considered the boundary of the Roman Empire, into the Scythian steppe. Shortly after their crossing, and lost in unmapped territory, Ovid dies in the semi-desert. The narrative chronicles his voyage into the unknown, and increasingly into a life without language, as well as his remarkable ability to adapt and transform in his ever-changing environment. The novel culminates in his death, as his subjectivity dissolves and he merges finally and irrevocably with the natural world.

This chapter seeks to examine Malouf's distinctive representations of landscape, language and subjectivity. In line with my previous discussions of *Voss* and *The English Patient*, I will primarily analyse the protagonist's perception of the natural world. In particular, I will trace the many transformations that Ovid undergoes over the course of the narrative, and provide an analysis of his changing relationship with the natural world. Moreover, I will discuss Malouf's deployment of language: while thematising the limitations of language, his literary writing, like White's and Ondaatje's, attempts to gesture beyond its medium. Accordingly, his literary language appears to open the text to the other of language.

Before considering Ovid's relationship with the natural world, it is important to understand the perspective through which he approaches landscape. In this respect, he differs from Voss and Almásy: while all three experience a shift in their perception, Ovid is the most self-aware. Like Le Mesurier, he is a visionary, often expressing great insight into human experience. Being a poet, rather than a cartographer, he is conscious of the distance between words and the world they seek to represent. The discrepancy between language and its referents, which he observes most intensely in Tomis, prompts him to reassess his view of the natural world and the words he uses to describe it. Unlike *Voss* and *The English Patient*, the novel is a first-person narrative, limiting the reader to Ovid's perspectives, thoughts and feelings. Consequently, the landscape of Tomis seems to transform when Ovid's perceptions change. He, like Voss and Almásy, experiences a

great transformation in his perception – indeed he is the most metamorphic of the three. Moreover, he consciously seeks transformation throughout the novel. As Don Randall maintains, *An Imaginary Life* “undertakes a detailed articulation of individual consciousness, portraying the ‘I’ self-consciously engaged in the process of its becoming” (3). By depicting Ovid’s metamorphosis – both imaginative and physical – Malouf assigns his protagonist the same transformative quality of the historical Ovid’s characters in his *Metamorphoses*. The poems of the ancient Greek poet express what he termed his “purpose”, which is “to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind” (Ovid 31). In the afterword to *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf states his “purpose”: “to make this glib fabulist of ‘the changes’ live out in reality what had been, in his previous existence, merely the occasion for dazzling literary display” (154). Gerard Loughlin focuses on *An Imaginary Life*’s interest in the transformative aspects of the human mind and body, relating them to the historical Ovid’s concerns:

Malouf’s novel is concerned with change, with the metamorphoses that befall all earthlings, and [with] taking Ovid, the great poet of transformations, from Rome to Tomis, from being a cultivated citizen to a wild, wolfish villager, and then onwards again, from a shouting rage to a new kind of humanity, from Tomis to an entirely imaginary land, beyond the Ister [. . . In doing so,] Malouf addresses the fundamental aporia of metamorphosis. Can there be no real change without destruction? Perhaps there is no real change at all, no true becoming, but merely different moments of being, a series of little deaths. (122–123)

Loughlin’s poignant observation on the destructive nature of change is significant. Like the poet Ovid, Malouf knows that metamorphosis is always painful. He describes *Metamorphoses* as “full of strange creatures caught between man and some higher or lower creature, in a moment of *painful* transformation” (*Imaginary Life* 50, italics mine). Ovid himself experiences multiple transformations, of body and mind, which frequently induce his suffering. His transformations of mind are noteworthy; they entail multiple shifts in perception and a changing relationship to language and, subsequently, the natural world.

Ovid's poetic language and his response to alterity are the primary catalysts for the transformations in his perception. In an interview, Malouf stated that *An Imaginary Life* allowed him to explore "language and its power to shape and remake experience" (qtd. in Levasseur and Rabalais 167). Language is able to transform one's perception precisely because it is a medium of communication between self and world. For instance, Ovid considers his position in his environment in light of his awareness that language mediates his reality. However, he begins to learn that his language perpetually falls short in its ability to reflect his experience. Malouf demonstrates that language's reductions generate alterity, which then interrupts language, and consequently challenges the subject's perception of landscape. Ovid's perceptions are "re-made" throughout the novel and, once he attempts to experience the world without language, even grander transformations befall him. The novel, like *Voss* and *The English Patient*, depicts many transformations of self as a result of the protagonist's response to otherness. Randall discusses this phenomenon in detail in his study of Malouf's fiction:

What most distinguishes [Malouf's] work is its strong tendency to find in otherness (or alterity) the stimulus and orientation for a creative unsettling of identity. The other, in Malouf, does not typically enable a consolidation of selfhood, nor does it unproductively impede or confuse identity formation. Encounter with the other provokes creative self-transformation, a self-overcoming, a becoming other than oneself that responds to and moves toward the version of being the other manifests. For Malouf, the project of human life should not be secure self-definition [. . .]; a human life should remain on, or at least repeatedly return to, the path of becoming. Always, we should seek to become other than we have been, other than we are, and the other is the indispensable agent of our changes. (1)

Randall recognises that Malouf challenges the notion of an autonomous subject, emphasising the effect that otherness has on the self. Malouf's novels demonstrate that encounters with otherness are a trigger for the inevitable transformations that all subjects undergo. Ovid, however, is unique in his reaction to otherness. He responds to "the allure of alterity, of difference, and to the personal and social transformations they can inspire" (10). In particular, it is his contact with the natural world that affects his perception of the landscape and of his self.

Although he travels to a foreign landscape, Ovid, unlike Voss and Almásy, is an exile rather than an explorer. Furthermore, he is not a coloniser, since he does not intend to map the landscape as Voss and Almásy do. Banished to Tomis as punishment for his rebellion against the empire, he is forced into a place unknown to him. Ironically, he is nonetheless a subject situated firmly within an imperial culture. Randall articulates the paradox implicit here: Ovid “takes shape as a quite precise figuring of the settler-exile: although he opposes imperial forms of culture while inhabiting the empire’s centre, he experiences himself in exile as a displaced piece of empire” (43–44). His initial attempts to capture the natural world in language, and to cultivate gardens within his new setting of exile, demonstrate this. When he is exiled from Rome, he is also “exiled from language itself” (Malouf, qtd. in Levasseur and Rabalais 167), which, in effect, involves “a loss of [. . .] history and identity” (Attar 68). Unable to apprehend this new place within his Roman knowledge, he is forced to remake “his experience and the foundation of his being” (Malouf, qtd. in Levasseur and Rabalais 167).

Tomis: Ovid’s Imperial Mindscape

Malouf did not intend *An Imaginary Life* to be an explicitly postcolonial novel.² Nonetheless, he emphasises that Ovid’s perception of Tomis is influenced by his position as an imperial subject. Like *Voss* and *The English Patient*, Malouf’s novel explores “the place that is at the edge of the world, not the centre of the world” (Malouf, qtd. in Spinks 8). Situated on the outskirts of the Roman map, Tomis is the “last outpost” of the Empire (*Imaginary Life* 16). Ovid terms all land outside the limits of the map “the unknown” (16); for him it is “beyond the edge of our world” (17). As a “displaced piece of empire”, he perceives the world in relation to Rome (Randall 44). When he first sees Tomis,

² In an interview with Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais, Malouf remarked that *An Imaginary Life* is often “read as a postcolonial text”, though he had not “thought about it that way” when he wrote it (171). Nor is it, he contends, “a disguised argument about Australia” (171). However, *An Imaginary Life*, like many of his novels, is a story of “the *other* place that [Australians are] trying to bring [them]selves home to” (172, italics mine). Malouf argues that this may only be possible by taking the land “inside us” and “inhabiting it imaginatively as well as physically”, which, incidentally, is precisely what Ovid attempts in the later stages of his journey (172).

therefore, he does so as an imperial subject. Since he considers Rome the centre of the world, Tomis is “at the ends of the earth” (*Imaginary Life* 15). Tomis thus becomes a marginal ‘edge’: a space between the known and unknown, in which Ovid must interact with the Getae people and the natural world, though both are other to him. Martin Leer considers the portrayal of edges in Malouf’s work as spaces of instability, “where everything is being rearranged and redefined” (6). Indeed, in many of his poems and novels, Malouf depicts the edge as a place “where revelations and metamorphoses occur” (6). Furthermore, these marginal places are contact zones (Pratt 8), where “subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other” (7). Like the Villa San Girolamo in *The English Patient*, Tomis is a contact zone. Located at the edge of the known world, it becomes a space of possibility, allowing for different relationships between Ovid and the natural world. Once he goes into exile, then, a shift in his experience of the natural world allows for a shift in his perception of landscape. He is faced with “the need to remap the world so that wherever [he] happen[s] to be is the centre” (Malouf, “A Writing Life” 702). However, as Randall notes, Ovid does not simply reject imperial culture, but “reworks and supplements, thus transforming the meaning of the imperial given and creating the possibility of a new and different life for his social world” (43). Such encounters with otherness, including Ovid’s “intensive meditation on questions of difference and alterity”, evince the novel’s “affiliation with postcolonial topics and concerns” (44).

Significantly, Ovid’s meditations on the natural world initiate his consideration of alterity and therefore trigger the transformation of his perception. Some of the most noteworthy of these meditations occur during the first pages of the novel, which detail his initial response to Tomis. After a brief prologue, *An Imaginary Life* begins with his description of the landscape. He finds it indifferent to his attempts to represent it in Latin, and compares it to “a vast page whose tongue [he is] unable to decipher, whose message [he is] unable to interpret” (*Imaginary Life* 17). Because of this crisis of representation, his “days in this place, [his] nights, are terrible beyond description” (17). Given that he cannot speak of the natural world, especially to himself, the novel shows that it is other to him: he cannot comprehend his environment because it is foreign. Tomis, as other, is absent from the realm of his knowledge. However, as Derrida has taught us of the supplement, this absent other is precisely what inspires the subject to speak of it.

Accordingly, Ovid “continually ‘reads’ and interprets an overtly textualised landscape even as it exceeds his conceptualisation” (Grogan 5). Malouf presents a familiar paradox: although Ovid feels he does not have the words to describe his environment, he is nonetheless intent upon doing so. This can be seen when, ironically, moments before he pronounces Tomis indecipherable, he provides a detailed illustration of his perspective:

It is the desolateness of this place that day after day fills my mind with its perspectives. A line of cliffs, oblique against the sky, and the sea leaden beyond. To the west and south, mountains, heaped under cloud. To the north, beyond the marshy river mouth, empty grasslands, rolling level to the pole [. . .]. The river flats, the wormwood scrubs, the grasslands beyond, all lead to a sky that hangs close above us, heavy with snow, or is empty as far as the eye can see or the mind imagine, cloudless, without wings. (*Imaginary Life* 15–16)

Since Ovid cannot render the natural world present in his lexis, he needs to supplement it. In doing so, he supplements “the absent presence” of his knowledge with an utterance (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 154). Ironically, then, “it is the very alterity of the landscape that renders it a resonant space of interpretation and projection” (Grogan 5). In the act of naming it, Ovid has represented the landscape in relation to himself. His diction is important: the landscape “fills [his] mind”, rather than his sight (*Imaginary Life* 15). This is because he is “describing a state of mind, no place” (16). By his own admission, the description represents Ovid’s state of mind, and his supplement depicts a mindscape rather than a landscape.

This mindscape is defined negatively; that is, it is defined in contrast to Rome. With no Latin words for what he sees around him, Ovid finds the landscape lacking by comparison. The grasslands appear empty because he sees in them nothing familiar: in the spring, “there are no orchards to break into bud, no violets, no shade trees to show their pale green fronds, no streams to bubble and braid in the sunlight” (53). Ovid describes Tomis as “centuries from the notion of an orchard or a garden made simply to please” (15): these are his criteria for successful progress in the civilised world. In this hierarchy of progress, he locates Rome at the top, while Tomis falls at the bottom, or rather the “beginning”:

I know how far we [Romans] have come because I have been back to the beginnings. I have seen the unmade earth. It is flat and featureless, swamp in summer, a frozen waste in winter, without a tree or a flower or a made field, and only the wildest seeds growing together in their stunted clumps or blowing about at random on the breeze. It is a place of utter desolation, the beginning. I know it like the inside of my head. You can have no idea how far we have come, [. . . nor] how rudimentary our life is in its beginnings. (30)

Here, Ovid describes Tomis as “unmade” and “without” cultivation in comparison to Rome. Failing to recognise the specificity of the natural world, he sees the land in Roman terms: he perceives Tomis as primitive and devoid of “the order of industry, the terraces, fields, orchards, pastures, the irrigated gardens of the world we are making in our own image” (28). From his perspective, the Roman landscape has “been shaped for centuries to the idea we all carry in our souls of that ideal scene against which our lives should be played” (28). Here, Ovid voices Malouf’s idea that the European landscape has “been shaped entirely to human needs and [. . .] ideals, so it has come to look the perfect background to human drama” (qtd. in Spinks 10). But a place such as Tomis, which has not been adapted to European ideals, does not comfort Ovid. He describes the village as empty and obstinate, “a place of utter desolation” (*Imaginary Life* 30). Since he is “moved by nothing that [he] couldn’t give a name to, believing in nothing that [he] couldn’t see” (40), Ovid is still unable to understand the landscape’s incompatibility with his Roman knowledge. Accordingly, he feels that he is in a desert: a desolate place in which he has been abandoned. This aspect of Tomis is possibly modelled on the Australian landscape, which Malouf describes as an environment that “tends to tell you ‘there is no place for you here’. It’s not hostile exactly, but it is alienating because it’s indifferent” (qtd. in Spinks 10). He sees this ‘indifference’ as a challenge to the notion that human beings are meant “to shape that landscape, [and] that the world has been given us so that we can make something of it” (10). In response to this notion, Malouf depicts Tomis as a setting that is not merely instrumental to human needs, but self-determining and all-encompassing.

It is the seeming alterity of the desolate landscape of Tomis that prompts Ovid’s poetic vision of a different landscape. The mindscape he creates is most evident in the

scene in which he stumbles across a poppy in the cornfields. Reminded of all the colours that were present in his life in Rome, he declares scarlet the first colour he has seen “in months” (*Imaginary Life* 31), and, overjoyed at this familiar sight, he finds certitude in his ability to name (and so comprehend) the flower. Until this moment, “the word, like the color, had escaped [him]” (31). On repeating the word “Scarlet”, he has a sense that “just saying [the word] would keep the windblown flower in sight” (31), since he perceives only that which he is able to name. In an effort to revisit his experience of the Roman spring, he assumes creative control of his environment. He finds that “[m]etaphor is the power of metamorphosis” (Loughlin 128) as he uses poetry to transform his world, imagining that he need only utter the “[m]agic word on the tongue” to cause the flower to “flash again on the eye” (*An Imaginary Life* 31). After seeing the scarlet poppy, “all the other colours [come] flooding back” to his memory, and he therefore supplements the seeming absence of spring (31). Since his experience of the natural world is mediated by language, he recreates this experience through narrative. In his mindscape, he is “making the spring” (31). He remembers the “yellow of the ox-eyed daisy of [the] weedy olive groves, with blue of cornflower, orange of marigold, purple of foxglove” (31). Once again, it is his mind which “is full of flowers of all kinds. They sprout out of the earth in deep fields and roll away in [his] skull” (32). The mindscape he imagines is “a demonstration of how words [. . .] can conjure up ‘reality’” (Neilson 50). In his mindscape, he has only “to name the flowers, without even knowing what they look like, the color, the shape, the number of petals, and they burst into bud” (*Imaginary Life* 32). Like Voss’s perceptions of the Australian landscape at Jildra and Rhine Towers, Ovid invests the landscape of Tomis with qualities that are not inherent in it.

Unlike Voss, however, Ovid is aware that his language affects his relation to the world. He believes that in order to transform ourselves and our worlds, “[w]e have only to find the name and let its illumination fill us” (32). Although he is aware that he invests his environment with meaning, he claims that this is only one instance in the history of landscapes, which have been shaped for centuries by human beings. He sees the world as constituted by “the objects we have made” and “the landscape we have shaped” (28). The “earth as we have made it [through] clearing, grafting, transplanting, carrying seeds from one place to another” has “cornfields a fathom high, stacked in the sunlight, swaying

under the moon; olive groves blowing from green to silver in a breeze, as if some god spoke the word silver, and his breath in passing over the scene transformed it with the turning of the leaves” (30). He sees all landscapes as constructed in this way, and therefore argues that whatever land “you now inhabit” is not “a place given to you by the gods, readymade in all its placid beauty”, but “a created place”; “[i]f the gods are there”, he maintains, it is because we have “dreamed them into the landscape to make it shine” (28). He supposes that the natural world in and of itself has nothing to offer him, and that it can only “shine” once it is named in Latin, and therefore seemingly endowed with significance.

In the early stages of the narrative, then, the environment that Ovid inhabits is his poetic creation: he has constructed his world through language and the construction of mindscapes such as these “provides the novel with its poetry” (Grogan 5). In poetic moments like the episode involving a scarlet poppy, Malouf thematises language, revealing an inherent paradox: although language continually falls short as a means for accurate representation, poetry – poetic prose – engenders new experiential possibilities for Ovid and the reader. Furthermore, Ovid’s poetic prose provides the novel with a metafictional dimension: Malouf uses prose to comment on language as a medium, implying that it can both limit and create the experience of landscape. In what Bridget Grogan terms “performative prose”, Ovid speaks of his own experience of Tomis and thus gives the reader access to an imaginative experience through the act of reading (5). As Grogan observes, Malouf’s characters are “[e]xperiential observers of the world around them, [and] they are analogous with Malouf’s readers”: both are “perceivers of a linguistic landscape flaunting, even flowering, its materiality” (6). Whether this “linguistic” experience of landscape respects that which exceeds it, and that which the inadequate representation reduces, is questionable and will be further interrogated in the rest of this chapter.

Since he describes landscape in his language, Ovid’s relation to the natural world is dependent on words and their connotations. Malouf is aware of the unstable nature of language, which is beyond the control of the poet or writer. He therefore questions “the relationship of language to landscape”, which leads him to consider the extent to which “language [itself] is the poet” (qtd. in Spinks 8). Limited by his lexicon, Ovid can only

perceive the world from within his own discursive context. Since language is constitutive, his words carry with them connotations of value and power that do not account for alterity. In some ways, as it is with Voss, Ovid's distance from the natural world becomes apparent when he uses poetic imagery to describe it. By representing the landscape in language, he reduces the specificity of the natural world by objectifying it. At first, he does not recognise its particularity or acknowledge that it has acted upon him. "I now know how to work the spring" (*Imaginary Life* 32) he says, but does not want the spring to work on him.

An Imaginary Metamorphosis

By imaginatively constructing the landscape as an object, Ovid affirms his position as a subject. He therefore re-imagines his self in the process. Shaping the landscape, Ovid also shapes his self. Because he is aware of this process, he is of the belief that he is able to control it. Randall argues that the "poesis of spring" that Ovid initiates in the poppy scene "necessarily spurs re-creation and [an imaginative] transformation of self – which Ovid at this very point of the narrative first acknowledges as needful" (50). Confident in the power of his imagination, he embarks on a project to remake himself in this new environment. He underestimates, however, the impact of alterity upon his vision of self; his encounter with the sublime will interrupt this self-making project, forcing him to re-evaluate his conceptions of his self and the landscape. This section of my argument will observe his attempts to construct a subjectivity that lies in opposition to a world of objects, and his later realisation that the metamorphosis that he seeks is not possible: he cannot remain a subject and yet transcend his self to become one with the natural world.

Of the three protagonists under study, Ovid is most aware of how his environment influences his identity; he claims that "the landscape we have made reveals to us the creatures we long for and must become" (*Imaginary Life* 30). Leer understands Malouf's works as "all about the 'self' – an entity comprising the subconscious and the conscious, imagination and memory" (3). Crucially, he sees geography, or place, as "one of Malouf's main ways of conceptualizing these various aspects of his self" (3).

Commenting on this process of identification, Amanda Nettelbeck contends that Malouf's characters "inhabit a 'mirror state' where the horizon reflects back the image of their own presence: a presence which is defined against what is hidden, excluded, unspeakable" (114). Implicit in this statement is Nettelbeck's recognition of the land as other to Ovid, since it is defined by its exclusion and absence. It is in opposition to this absence that Voss, Almásy and Ovid attempt to define themselves – by naming their environment. Phillip Neilson agrees, affirming that "the gaze of the perceiving subject upon the objective world can lead to the affirmation of the entity of self" (48). Indeed, Ovid recognises that, when adapting the natural world to human needs, it is also "our self we are making out there, and when the landscape is complete we shall have become the gods who are intended to fill it" (*Imaginary Life* 28).

Ovid, like Voss and Almásy, is in a state of perpetual transformation. Early in the narrative, he believes, as Voss does, that this transformation is within his control. He is certain that, in this imagined and constructed landscape, "the beings we are in the process of becoming will be drawn out of us" (32). This identification allows him the illusion that he is a rational subject who possesses knowledge of himself and his environment. He hopes that he can use his mind to initiate his merging with the natural world, because he believes that "[w]e are free to transcend ourselves. If we have the imagination for it" (67). He wishes to transcend his subjectivity, but attempts to do so whilst still maintaining control of himself and his environment. Like Voss, he believes he can will himself into a state of transformation through his imagination: in his musings on metamorphosis, he uses poetry to re-imagine his world. For instance, he narrates the story of "the stone sleeping in the sun [that] has once been molten fire", which transforms because "the fire was able to say, in its liquid form: 'I would be solid, I would be stone'" (29). He anticipates that he can engender his metamorphosis, as the stone has, since "each creature ha[s] the power to dream itself out of one existence and into a new one" (28–29) and he thinks that all living things are free in this way, "bound not by the laws of our nature but by the ways we can imagine ourselves breaking out of those laws" (67). With this in mind, he imaginatively pursues a metamorphosis of self.

Paradoxically, however, he thinks he must undergo an ultimate abandonment of the self to succeed in this endeavour. In *Voss*, Laura envisions such a transcendence of

self. At Rose Portion's funeral, she imagines that "the material part of [herself] became quite superfluous, while [her] understanding seemed to enter into wind, earth, the ocean beyond" (*Voss* 239). Ovid, however, imagines a grander transformation than Laura's – a transformation of both the mind and body. For him, the possibilities for imaginative transformation are inextricably linked to those for physical metamorphosis. It is our ability to "conceive of the possibility" of metamorphosis, he believes, that is a catalyst for "the spirit [that] works in us to make it actual" (*Imaginary Life* 64). Initiated by the mind, these physical transformations of living things continue over centuries:

[T]he stone dreams now that the veins of ore in its nature might become liquid again and move, but within its shape as stone, so that slowly, through long centuries of aching for such a condition, for softness, for a pulse, it feels one day that the transformation has begun to occur; the veins loosen and flow, the clay relaxes, the stone, through long ages of imagining some further life, discovers eyes, a mouth, legs to leap with, and is toad. And the toad in turn conceives the possibility, now that it can move over the earth, of taking to the air, and slowly, without ever ceasing to be toad, dreams itself aloft on wings. (29)

This story is highly metaphoric, since the stone does not possess the imagination he mentions as necessary for transformation. Arguably, Malouf hints here at the impossibility of Ovid's quest to re-imagine himself as other-than-himself. Moreover, metamorphosis requires a forfeiture of subjectivity, which makes the role of the imagination that Ovid mentions impossible; the subject cannot control its abandonment of self. Nonetheless, he is convinced that "[o]ur bodies are not final", and feels that once we have "*conceived* in our sleep the idea of a further being, our bodies find, slowly, *painfully*, the physical process that will allow them to break their own bonds and leap up into it" (29, italics mine). The pain which accompanies metamorphosis is portrayed as a physical manifestation of change. According to Ovid, transformation occurs "[s]lowly, and with pain, over centuries, [as] we each move an infinitesimal space towards it" (29). This metamorphosis is possible, he thinks, because inside each of us is the potential to transform: "[o]ur further selves are contained within us, as the leaves and blossoms are in the tree" (64). He proclaims this realisation of potential as "the true meaning of transformation", and trusts that, like all creatures, human beings are always in a state of

flux (64). With this in mind, he watches the Child use a pen for the first time, and therefore sees him as one of many children in human history. He feels touched witnessing “the first efforts of the child to push itself upright, to push that one step up that it must have taken our ancestors centuries to imagine and dream and find limbs for” (81).³ In our perpetual transformation, he claims, “[w]e are moving, all of us, in our common humankind, through the forms we love so deeply in one another, to what our hands have already touched in lovemaking and our bodies strain towards in each other’s darkness” (29). Malouf, here, seems to propose that human beings constantly strain toward alterity. This suggests that it is within our nature to reach beyond what we know and understand, toward what is imperceptible and yet commonly felt. Through language and the imagination, Ovid hopes to make actual the metamorphosis for which he is sure we all have the potential.

Although Ovid is aware that, like all living things, he is predisposed to metamorphosis, his belief that he is able to control it is misguided. In this belief, he does not allow for the role that otherness plays in his transformation. The natural world, which is beyond his comprehension and control, greatly affects his transformation of self. Initially, he believes he has the ability to become other to himself through poetic language and the imagination, and hopes that he might offer hospitality to the natural world in this way. According to Derrida, however, hospitality requires an acknowledgment that the other lies outside that which is imaginable and knowable (*Writing and Difference* 103). Becoming other would be the ultimate transformation in Ovid’s eyes, but using the imagination to do so is impossible. The imagination is a property of the thinking subject, who will always reduce the other in language. Ultimately, he seeks the impossible – to go where he cannot, and to become other whilst still retaining his subjectivity. He cannot achieve this, since he still uses words such as *scarlet* to create his imagined world. This ensures his perpetual distance from that which

³ Later in the novel, however, Ovid’s perspective changes: he no longer sees conforming to civilisation as a form of progress or metamorphic evolution. In his later abandonment of language he promotes an alternative metamorphosis wherein he attempts to embrace the alterity of the natural world. Eventually, but not through his own will, he dies in the desert. His journey into the earth contrasts the Child’s attempts to stand upright, and provides a significant symbol of Ovid’s shift in perception.

he imagines, since language necessitates distinction through naming. Because he subscribes to this concept, the landscape cannot enter him as he hopes it will – as he cannot be possessed by it. Although he does not yet know it, the landscape with which Ovid is looking to unite is the imaginary landscape of his mind.

“It is a different world”: Ovid Learns from Others

During Ovid’s attempt at imaginative transcendence, he maintains the illusion of control of himself and his environment. However, he is not fully aware of the extent to which his perception of the landscape is influenced by Latin. Once he learns the Getic language, his description of the landscape alters dramatically. Moreover, his observation of the Child’s relationship with the natural world leads him to reassess his own. Ovid undergoes a significant subjective change in his approach to the landscape due to his interactions with the Getae and the Child. In this section of the chapter, I will discuss the influence of these encounters on Ovid’s perception of the natural world.

Like Almásy, who is “taught [. . .] by the desert” (*English Patient* 148), Ovid begins to experience the world differently when he accepts the land of his exile as his home. This move toward hospitality is marked by, amongst other things, his newfound willingness to learn the vernacular in Tomis. As he does so, he perceives the landscape as vastly different. By depicting this shift in Ovid’s experience of the landscape, Malouf emphasises the way that discourse mediates perception. At first, Ovid feels that he has to “learn everything all over again like a child” (*Imaginary Life* 22), because he now has access to experiences and objects that exist only in the Getic language. For example, he is taught the name of a seed growing in Tomis: *Korschka*. Although he knows “the word for this seed now, and its taste, and its shape and color, [he] cannot translate it back into [his] own experience” (22). Once fluent, he stops translating the world into a Roman context and allows himself to see the world differently “through this other tongue” (65). Consequently, he feels able to decipher his environment, and interprets it as “a different world” to what he had previously known (65). However, this is primarily because the Getic language gives him the means to name the world. He therefore ceases to name the

landscape in Latin, and no longer sees the landscape of Tomis as other. The Getic tongue gives him the opportunity to, once again, eliminate the alterity of the natural world by locating it in language. The landscape becomes known and familiar to him once again.

Accordingly, it seems that Ovid ceases to live in a desert: he no longer feels he is in a barren and abandoned place. Although Tomis still seems primeval – “closer to the first principle of creation, closer to whatever force it is that makes things what they are and changes them into what they would be” (65) – he no longer sees this as an inadequacy. Initially perceived as desolate, the landscape now burgeons with organic life. He describes, for example, the brushwood as “full of tiny animals and insects, all of them worth observing” (63). Even the sea “is full of strange fish, all beautiful in their way, all created perfectly after their own needs, every detail of their anatomy useful, necessary, and for that reason admirable, even when they are the product of terror” (63). This recalls Almásy’s perception of the world, in which “[t]here are always millions of tons of dust in the air, just as there are millions of cubes of air in the earth and more living flesh in the soil (worms, beetles, underground creatures) than there is grazing and existing on it” (*English Patient* 18). Rather than seeing the desert as reflections of themselves, Ovid and Almásy acknowledge it as an ecosystem of diverse organisms that form complex relationships with each other. Ovid no longer yearns for a Roman spring, which is “recognised in blossoms or in new leaves on the trees”, but appreciates the spring in Tomis, including the “little marsh flowers out there, so small [he] can hardly see them” (*Imaginary Life* 64–65). Now that he sees the spring for what it is, he begins to “find [his] eye delighted by the simple forms of [Tomis], the narrower range of colors, the harsh lines of cliff and scrub, the clear, watery light” (65, italics mine). “That is what spring means” to him now (65). Rather than projecting his own visions onto the land, he is affected by it, and strives to open himself to difference rather than seeking the familiar. He attempts to welcome the other, saying he has “stopped finding fault with creation and [. . .] learned to accept it” (63).

Ovid attributes this new vision of the world, and the shift in his attitude to the landscape which accompanies it, to his acquisition of the Getic language, which has inspired this new move toward reconciliation. Since he now understands the Getic speech “almost as well as [his] own”, he finds it “oddly moving”, and observes that it is largely

different from the Roman tongue, “whose endings are designed to express difference, the smallest nuances of thought and feeling” (65). Premised on a sense of wholeness, the Getic language, for him, presents “the raw life and unity of things” (65). Like Almásy, who no longer wishes to name the desert in English, Ovid no longer attempts to possess the landscape by naming it in Latin. However, in light of the linguistic theory outlined in Chapter One, it is clear that his belief that the tongue brings him closer to the landscape is misguided. Although the Getic language gives him a sense of reconciliation with the landscape, *any* language necessitates a distance between the subject and the world.⁴

Once Ovid forms a relationship with the feral child, however, he begins to understand that language distances him from the world. The Child lacks language, and is consequently a site of otherness for him: his “mind cannot contain him” (96). Intrigued by the way in which the Child sees the world, he watches him interact with his environment, and learns that “[a]ll this world is alive” for the boy (93). In the absence of language, he seems less detached from the land, does not require an imaginative leap into metamorphosis, and is perpetually transforming. Possessing an intimacy with the natural world, the Child “can imitate any of the birds or mammals” in the area:

He stands with his feet apart, hands on hips, head held back to the light, and his lips contort, his features strain to become those of the bird he is mimicking, to become beak, crest, wattles, as out of his body he produces the absolute voice of the creature, and surely, in entering into the mysterious life of its language, becomes, for a moment, the creature itself. (90)

Unlike a mimic “copying something that is outside him and revealing the accuracy of his ear or the virtuosity of his speech organs”, he is “being the bird” (92). The Child allows the bird “to speak out of him”, and, according to Ovid, occupies a state of communion with the bird, during which the Child “seems miraculously transformed” (90). Despite Ovid’s recognition of this union, he initially understands the Child’s relation to the world as that of a subject who interprets texts:

⁴ Therefore, although the Getae, like the aborigines in *Voss* and the Bedouin in *The English Patient*, are depicted as possessing an intimacy with the natural world, they are nonetheless subject to a perception of landscape that is mediated by language.

[The landscape] is his sphere of knowledge, a kind of library of forms that he has observed and committed to memory, another language whose hieroglyphs he can interpret and read. It is his consciousness that he leads me through on our walks. It flickers all around us: it is water swamps, grass clumps, logs, branches; it is crowded with a thousand changing forms that shrill and sing and rattle and buzz, and must be, in his mind, like the poems I have long since committed to memory [. . .]. Only for him it is a visible world he can walk through, that has its weathers and its seasons, its cycle of lives. (93)

Ovid thinks the Child has a discursive knowledge of the landscape, which he has memorised as if it were a language. He begins to understand, however, that, because the Child lacks language, he does not see things outside himself as objects. It becomes evident to Ovid that the Child does not “read” the landscape as he once thought and he becomes aware, like Laura and Almásy, that knowledge need not be attained in language. The boy is able momentarily to embody the animals in the brushwood because “[h]e has not yet captured his individual soul out of the universe about him. His self is outside him, its energy distributed among the beasts and birds whose life he shares, among leaves, water, grasses, clouds, thunder” (95–96). Ovid’s metamorphosis seems to form a chiasmic relationship with the Child: whilst Ovid teaches the Child to speak the Getic tongue, he in turn learns that it is possible to relate to the world without language. However, although the Child does not initially *see* any distance between himself and the world, as he “has no notion of the otherness of things”, he is nonetheless human and so necessarily perceives the world via his consciousness – albeit one that is not mediated by language (96). Accordingly, he is only temporarily able to accommodate the plants and animals as extensions of himself. In doing so, he undergoes moments of hospitality in which he feels “at home” because the animals “hold, each of them, some particle of his spirit” (96).

Because of this relationship with the Child, Ovid sees himself differently because he sees the world differently; as in the earlier stages of the novel, he repositions himself in relation to the landscape. Opposed to using the landscape as a mirror for the self, he attempts to let it “reflect” in him. Using the cracking and melting of ice as a metaphor for transformation, he describes feeling himself “loosen and flow again, reflecting the world” (65). Soon, he becomes aware that “a different self begins to emerge” (65). As Randall

observes, Ovid “derive[s] some benefit from the negotiation of difference” in an interaction with otherness (9). Due to this negotiation, he gains a “new clarity and understanding”, a “more integrated vision”, as well as “a new sense of self and the world [he] inhabits” (9). Ovid experiences this shift in perception because he now recognises the landscape as having value in and of itself, rather than as a mere “background to human drama” (Malouf, qtd. in Spinks 10). His identification with the world has changed him: he decides he “shall never go back to Rome”, having realised that “this place is the true destination” he has been seeking (*Imaginary Life* 94). Since he no longer identifies it as home, he finally abandons his imperial Roman perspective, feeling that he “belong[s] to this place now” (95). Although this is as “painful” as any change, he feels that this new life “is [his] true fate” (94). Identifying himself as a part of his environment, he feels that he possesses, and is possessed by, the land; he acts on, and is acted upon by the natural world. He does not yet understand that he feels a sense of belonging in the land because, through the Getic language, he makes of the land a belonging – an object which he possesses. He can only truly belong to the land, Malouf shows us, once he lets go of language and the self entirely.

Ovid attempts to relate to the world in the same way that the Child does, by precipitating himself “into his consciousness of the world”, but soon he becomes aware that this is impossible (96). He seeks to attain a loss of control: to will the loss of will. Once again, he tries to imagine himself in a state of union with the world, which results in an epiphany. He describes trying to “imagine the sky with all the constellations, the Dog, the Bear, the Dragon and so on, as an extension of [himself], as part of [his] further being” and comes to realise, as Palfreyman does in *Voss*, that his knowledge “that the stars have names and a history, prevents [his] being the sky” (*Imaginary Life* 96). This is because naming the stars constitutes them as objects, and therefore separate from the subject. He now understands that language is what separates self and world; he cannot experience the materiality of the stars because he perceives them in relation to their cultural value. As Derrida argues, the speaker or writer uses names and their history “only by letting himself [. . .] be governed by the system” of language (*Of Grammatology* 158). In other words, one must subscribe to the conventions inherent in language when employing it as a tool for communication. Each word is weighted with a history, and to

refer to the stars by name is to invoke these histories and to position oneself *in relation to* the stars, rather than as *part* of them. Ovid now understands that “history enters us”, as Almásy puts it, through language (*English Patient* 19), and that his discursive knowledge of the landscape mediates his perception of it.

Now aware that a mergence with the natural world necessitates an abandonment of language, he attempts to gain knowledge of his environment outside of discourse. Again, he seeks to control that which is uncontrollable. He begins by attempting to think as he imagines the Child does: “*I am raining, I am thundering*” (*Imaginary Life* 96). In doing so, Ovid tries to merge subject and object through language and attain that which is beyond subjectivity. This poetic rebellion against the conventions of language attempts to merge self and other. Unfortunately, however, this amalgamation is ultimately impossible, since language requires a subject and object to operate successfully as a system. Therefore, any attempt to transcend the boundaries between self and other via language will necessarily fail – though, as Ovid demonstrates, the attempt holds value in itself.

Dreaming into the Beyond: Malouf’s Metamorphic Man

Through his interactions with the Child, Ovid learns that a union with the world requires a forfeiture of the self, and he is “struck with panic, as if, in losing hold of [his] separate and individual soul”, he might find himself “lost out there in the multiplicity of things, and never get back” (*Imaginary Life* 96). Despite this, he is now aware that a mergence is not enabled by the imagination alone. Nevertheless, he knows this loss of self is “the way” to respond to the natural world (96). For this reason, he resolves to “begin the final metamorphosis”, in which he “must drive out [his] old self and let the universe in” (96). Indeed, if he hopes to achieve a state of synthesis with the world, he must lose the ‘I’ completely, and permanently. He is closest to this state in his dreams, which frequently feature his fusion with the land. This section of the chapter focuses on Ovid’s experience of the natural world in his dreams, which offer an alternative to the relationship with the landscape that he constructs in his waking life. Since they provide a space for contact with otherness, Ovid’s dreams play a significant role in Malouf’s depiction of landscape.

Like Voss, Ovid first undergoes a communion with the natural world in his dreams. These dreams are distinct from his imagined metamorphoses in waking life, where he maintains the illusion that he can will himself into physical transformation. Dreaming transports him closer to his goal of embracing alterity since it is a state in which the subject is, by definition, decentred. Assuming the position of the subject is impossible in the dream state, as it is marked by an absence of autonomy and rationality. Ovid seems to know this intuitively and repeatedly associates metamorphosis with sleep. He is yet to comprehend, however, that he does so because both sleep and metamorphosis require a loss of agency. When asleep, he says, one is able to conceive “the idea of a further being” (29). This is why he thinks that metamorphosis “begins, at first [. . .] in our dreams” (95). He has recurring dreams of metamorphosis, wherein he merges with the natural world. For example, early in the novel he dreams that he walks on the river Ister and “[is] moonlight” (23). Later, while on a hunting trip with Ryzak, he dreams that the hunters “have all been transformed” and “become part of the woods” (61). They are now “mushrooms” and “stones” (61). In the same dream, he becomes “a pool of water” (61). He feels himself “warm in the sunlight, liquid, filled with the blue of the sky”, but he is “the merest fragment of it”, and he feels, “softly, the clouds passing through [him]” (61). When a deer begins to drink from the pool of water, he is “filled with tenderness for it” as it “takes part of [him] into itself”, but he does not feel “at all diminished” (62). Part of him “enters the deer, which lifts its head slowly, and moves away over the leaves” (62). His loss of autonomy is emphasised in these dreams when he mentions that he feels part of himself “moving away” (62). By transcending the boundaries between self and world, he momentarily merges with the land. Understanding that he can only be a fragment of the world with which he seeks to merge, he expresses some fear at losing the wholeness he feels as a subject. He is “afraid suddenly to be just a pool of rain in the forest”, feeling himself “grow cold and fill with starlight” and considers “what it might be like to freeze”, wondering what would happen to his “spirit” (61–62). Although he recognises that a union with the natural world will entail this loss of spirit or self, he knows it also involves the possibility for what he calls a “further being” to exist through metamorphosis (29). For that reason, he is willing to risk a loss of self in his attempt to become one with the natural world.

Dreams, being the first site of this synthesis for Ovid, function as a state between autonomy and the loss of self. They are a site of hospitality, a mode of contact between the known and the unknown. In his dreams, Ovid first ventures beyond the Ister into unknown land, “out beyond the stubbled fields into the desolate plain beyond, into the grasslands beyond the edge of [his] world” (17). His dreams invade him from an external, other place, and he compares them to winds that “blow in from *out there* bearing the fragrance of islands we have not yet sighted in our waking hours” (135, italics mine). His dreams take him further than the realm of the world he knows. Although he has no experience of the steppe, he feels that the land he is about to enter “is not entirely unfamiliar” because he has dreamed of it for many years (137). The dream state also allows Ovid to encounter the world outside of language. Unable to articulate his thoughts and feelings, he forfeits his agency. This is apparent when, upon waking from his dream in the forest, he recalls crying out in another language (25). In this moment, he feels other to himself, as he has carried some residue of his dream with him into his waking life. This lack of agency allows for a state in which he is more hospitable to that which he cannot comprehend. In becoming a home for the other, he becomes other than himself – a stranger to himself. Dreaming of metamorphosis, he encounters the “*other* being that we have kept out of mind, whose thoughts we have never allowed to come to the tip of our tongue” (95, italics mine). This other communicates with him in silence. When dreaming of the centaurs, for instance, he communicates with them as if he has no language of his own (24). Without words to decipher, he begins “to listen for another meaning” in their presence (24).

Ovid’s dreams demonstrate that hospitality requires a silencing of language. Musing on his dreams in his waking life, he realises the necessity of silence for his metamorphosis: he believes that “the true language” is “that speech in silence” in which he first communicated with the Child, “when [he] was asleep” (97). In an interview, Malouf states that, in silence, there is a moment in which his “characters break through to some kind of understanding” (qtd. in Papastergiadis 91). It is when “nothing is actually being said, or not in words anyway” that “most is happening” in his novels (91). Initially, these epiphanies concerning language and its role in relationships with the other occur in Ovid’s dreams. The silence he encounters in his dreams, together with the insight into

language he gains from the Child, encourages the steps he takes toward hospitality in his waking life.

Silence in the Sublime Desert

One such step is Ovid's crossing of the Ister into the semi-desert, which he sees as a final frontier beyond all that is known and familiar – a space of alterity that he is compelled to explore despite his inability to comprehend it. Another is his adoption of silence which Malouf depicts, paradoxically, as a means of communication between the self and the other. Ovid turns to silence once he journeys into the desert, beyond the known world. In this section of the chapter, I will analyse his approach to the desert and how it is affected by his employment of what Malouf terms “the language of silence that doesn't require words” (qtd. in Papastergiadis 91). It is his abandonment of speech, together with his journey into the steppe, which initiates a further transformation in his perception of the landscape.

By crossing the Ister, Ovid travels into a landscape he describes as “the unknown, the real unknown, compared with which Tomis was but a degenerate outpost of Rome” (*Imaginary Life* 135). Venturing past the edge of the Roman map, he enters a desert of which he has no knowledge. The Ister, like Tomis, functions as an edge, where he comes into contact with the otherness of the steppe. In leaving the known world, he feels he is “following the clear path of [his] fate” (135) and that the Ister “has been there, always, somehow waiting”, even when, in Rome, his “eye noted it on maps” as the “final boundary” of his life, “waiting to be crossed” (136). Seeing this contact with alterity as fundamental to transformation, he understands life as “a continual series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown”, in which human beings are “pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become, except in dreams” (135). Now that he encounters the other place that he has previously known only in sleep, there are “[n]o more dreams” (141). This is because Ovid believes that he and the Child “have passed beyond them into the last reality” of his life (141). The metamorphosis he craves requires limitless hospitality, and to achieve it he must set out

for the unknown without any certain destination. By attempting to be hospitable to the unknown, Ovid begins his final metamorphosis.

Ovid's endeavour to accommodate the desert is further enabled by his departure from speech. He continues his journey in silence rather than resuming his attempts to teach the Child the Getic language. His acceptance of silence as the "true language" is premised, according to Randall on "a suspicion of language's ultimate incapacity, its falling short" of any reference to the physical world (51). Forsaking speech, he begins to gain a different perception of the world. The "sea" of grasslands in the steppe and the sky in its "immensity" overwhelm Ovid, and he recognises his relative insignificance: he is only one minute element of the landscape. In his mind's eye he sees himself and the Child "from a great height, two tiny figures parting the grassland with a shadowy crease as [they] move through it" (*Imaginary Life* 142). Previously, Ovid was distressed by the thought that he may be only a tiny aspect of the world. Now, however, he finds this liberating, and embraces the "unity and commerce" that is "[b]etween our bodies and the world" (147). In his unity, he is "growing bodiless" and "turning into the landscape" (145). He feels himself "sway and ripple" and "expand upwards toward the blue roundness of the sky" (145–146). His subjectivity dissolves as he is "has been swallowed up by the immensity of [the] landscape" (144). In the steppe, silence "reveal[s] the secrets of the universe" to Ovid (97–98). These secrets seem to be part of an ineffable knowledge, which is elided by language. Malouf, like White, proposes that "truth may be the property of silence" (White, *Flaws in the Glass* 42). This truth, according to Ovid, is that all living things are interconnected. Human beings are not self-sufficient but necessarily in "commerce" with the world, "continuous with the earth in all the particles of our physical being, as in our breathing we are continuous with the sky" (*Imaginary Life* 147). It is language that is the maker of "distinctions, every ending defines and divides", whereas silence is a language in which "every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation" (98).

Death in the Steppe: Ovid loses the eye/'I'

Ovid perceives the steppe as a space in which he can abandon the self in surrender to the other. In order to do so, he must cease to view the world in linguistic terms. However a true silencing of language is only possible in death. As long as he is conscious, he will always be a subject who thinks, perceives and accesses the world through language. Furthermore, his linguistic consciousness refutes any true hospitality between self and other. Although his imaginings and dreams allow for a momentary merging with his environment, Ovid is ultimately unable to grant hospitality whilst still conscious of the landscape. As Randall contends, while both “imagination and dream are paths for approach to the other”, they are useful “only for approach”, since the other “is both unignorable and ungraspable” and, ultimately, “the full apprehension of the other eludes both imagination and dreamwork” (54). As White and Ondaatje illustrate, unconditional hospitality requires a silence only possible in death. In order to complete his metamorphosis, Ovid must become other to himself. This section of this chapter analyses his death in the semi-desert.

In the steppe, Ovid is placeless: he occupies a temporary physical and mental position in which he is incapable of being at home, and is neither subject nor object. As Andrew Taylor argues, Ovid, located at this liminal space or edge, inhabits a position which “is not exactly death, because language of a kind is still operating. But neither is it exactly life” (“Body and Landscape” 718). It is, he claims, a “radical challenge to [the] boundary [. . .] between life and death” that cannot be sustained (718). According to Taylor, the end of the novel celebrates

a boundaryless state in which distinction between subject and object, between the I and the not-I, is joyously dissolved. It is not, of course, a condition within which we can permanently live our lives, because our lives, like language itself, depend on such distinctions. It is therefore not fortuitous that it is achieved at the moment of death. It is also not fortuitous that what is achieved and celebrated at such a moment is a union of the human with the nonhuman and, especially, the human body with the natural world. Ovid’s death occurs within a landscape in which the unity of the human and the natural comes, for a moment, shimmering alive. (716)

Only in the moment before his death can Ovid inhabit this state between subject and object. For him, this is the state he “dreamed of so often, back there in Tomis, but could never find in all [his] wanderings in sleep”; it is the place he describes as “the point on the earth’s surface where I disappear” (*Imaginary Life* 150).

To venture beyond the known world, Ovid must traverse the edge of the known self. This process has already begun by the time he reaches the steppe: like Almásy, his name no longer signifies his sense of self, and he feels other to himself, often commenting that he is not recognisable as the Ovid he once knew (31, 55, 94). Death, the final human transformation, requires a permanent loss of self in which, he imagines, “we allow our limbs to burst into a new form, let the crust of our flesh split and the tree break through, or the moth or bird abandon us for air” (136). He is now prepared to admit the final “violence to [his] essential being” that is necessary to allow a hospitable engagement with the natural world, and feels he has “become braver in [his] old age, ready at last for all the changes [he] must undergo” (67,136). Furthermore, he is aware that, like all transformation, this physical change will be painful. When the metamorphosis begins, he imagines that he can “hear [his] own body breaking forth” and “pushing at the thin, transparent envelope that still constrains it, that keeps it from bursting forth into whatever new form it has already conceived itself as being”, which could be “something as different from what we know as the moth is from the chrysalis” (148). He describes becoming other than himself, like the caterpillar becoming a butterfly whose “membrane strains and strains, growing transparent”, until “the creature who is stirring and waking in there” forces itself “towards the breaking point” and finally “flutters free” with its new “folded wings” (147). Beyond the Ister, the final edge he must cross is “the edge of the self” where, as Leer observes, “inside and outside meet” and interpenetrate by “a process of osmosis” (6). Such osmosis is the final, physical metamorphosis, which entails a synthesis with the natural world. As he lies dying, Ovid can “feel [his] individual pores open to the individual grains of the earth, as the interchange begins” (*Imaginary Life* 147).

Importantly, in these last moments of his life, Ovid attains a relationship with the land that is not constituted within the imperial gaze. He no longer perceives the natural world with an imperial eye, but as an interconnected, organic system with which he is

united. Taylor argues that such unity is characteristic of Malouf's novels, in which a "sense of the abolition of boundary and division" often originates in "the dissolution of identity at the moment of death, at the moment of the body's destruction" ("Origin, Identity and the Body" 13). Like Voss, Ovid dies in the wilderness, and will slowly become indistinguishable from the earth. However, Malouf's protagonist approaches death rather differently to White's. At the end of his life, Voss still sees the natural world as separate from himself. He views imminent death as a "supreme emergency" which he will meet with "strength and resignation" (*Voss* 393). Where Voss admits defeat, Ovid seeks it, welcoming a loss of self. Ovid describes his desire to "be open" to all that death holds for him, and is "entirely reconciled to the process" in which he will "settle deep into the earth" (*Imaginary Life* 152,147).

It is important to note, as Randall does, that Malouf depicts death as "clearly beyond language [and] the differential system of shared and conventionalised signs" (51). In this moment, Ovid finally exists in "[f]ull reconciliation, communion, atonement, at-one-ment, with the other" (51). Ultimately, the natural world ceases to be other to him because language no longer distinguishes him as a subject that is separate from the world. As he mentions earlier in the novel, it is language that produces distinctions; it "defines and divides" (*Imaginary Life* 98). In death, the subject is surpassed because it ceases to exist in language. Death marks the end of the 'I', as Ovid loses his position as a subject in language and departs from his self. When he loses consciousness, he ceases to be a subject who is "separate and distinguishable from everything else – [and] dissolves into this unity of the body and the world around it" (Taylor, "Body and Landscape" 715–716). The silence which attends his death allows for the elimination of all physical boundaries between self and world and enables a "communion or full reconciliation" with the natural world that occurs "in an other-than-linguistic place, in a realm of experience beyond the scope of the symbol" (Randall 51).

A Writer's Language

This chapter has emphasised that Ovid's experience of the landscape is mediated by language – in particular, by the imperial discourses he inherited during his time in Rome. However, it is important to note that Malouf uses literature – and thus language – to critique such discourses. While he emphasises that language elides otherness, he paradoxically shows that literature can make room for alterity. Like White and Ondaatje, he demonstrates that literature differs from other forms of writing, which routinely elide otherness. This section of my chapter focuses on the ways in which Malouf draws attention to alterity – by drawing on literature's ability to gesture beyond itself – and discusses the effect that this strategy may have on the reader of the novel.

In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf conveys a sense of the unrepresentable in two ways. Firstly, the reader becomes aware of alterity by reading of Ovid's encounters with it. For instance, when Ovid meets the Child, he is confronted with the boy's otherness. Since his experience is not mediated by words, the Child's interaction with the world suggests to Ovid that which lies beyond language and knowledge. Furthermore, Malouf, in this first-person narrative, limits the reader to Ovid's perspective, and therefore denies her access to the Child's consciousness. Paradoxically, then, Malouf, through his literary, which is to say linguistic, representation of the Child, speaks of that which is outside language and therefore beyond representation. Moreover, in presenting the Child as that which is unrepresentable, he ironically expresses his inability to represent the Child, thereby positioning the reader in relation to what the novel's literary language can intimate but cannot finally signify.

Secondly, by thematising the limits of language in the novel, Malouf constantly draws attention to that which is beyond the text, and so “beyond what the eye can see and the mind imagine” (*Imaginary Life* 18). Ovid's transformation in perception is evidence of this: while he relates to the world in Latin, his experience is always interrupted by the alterity he encounters in Tomis. In foregrounding the instability of Ovid's perception, and attributing this instability to the restrictions of language, Malouf, again paradoxically, emphasises that which language cannot represent. This is especially evident at the end of

the novel, when Malouf writes Ovid's death and, in so doing, gestures beyond language. In the moment before his death, Ovid's language breaks down as he begins to lose his position as a subject in culture. His last words are particularly noteworthy: "It is summer. It is spring. I am immeasurably, unbearably happy. I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six. I am there" (151). In this quotation, the structure of Ovid's sentences erode: the subject 'I' cannot possibly take on the object 'there' in English, since 'I' can only ever be 'here', whereas 'you are' or 'it is' 'there'. These sentences, indicating that Ovid has finally been transported beyond the 'here', show that he has moved beyond the self and therefore beyond the limits and limitations of discourse. Furthermore, they exemplify the way in which Malouf's prose points beyond itself, toward the ineffable – a gesture that is paradoxically and ironically enacted in language.

By imparting to the reader a sense of otherness through his representation of the Child, and thereby foregrounding the inability of language to signify adequately, Malouf demonstrates the manner in which literature may offer a sense of the unrepresentable and thus allow for alterity in ways that other discourses do not. As I have pointed out in the previous chapters of this thesis, discourses such as those used by imperial subjects seek to reduce and objectify alterity. In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf's language alludes to that which exceeds it and hence foregrounds, without presenting, that which imperial discourses elide. Because he deploys literary language, Malouf paradoxically finds "words to articulate" that which "doesn't come mediated through language except through the language that the writer finds for them", thereby drawing attention to the unrepresentable (Malouf, qtd. in Papastergiadis 91). By emphasising that which imperial language discounts, literature is able to subvert such discourses.

In both its language and subject matter, *An Imaginary Life* requires the reader to engage imaginatively with that which appears to exist beyond the reach of the text. The reader, then, could find herself having a sublime encounter while reading – as Hana does in *The English Patient*. Therefore, like *The English Patient*, *An Imaginary Life* acts as a site of hospitality, a liminal space in which the reader may be exposed to alterity. Because of this possibility, Grogan argues that reading Malouf's prose "is itself a confrontation with otherness" (4). Literature, unlike other discourses, offers the reader a sense of the unrepresentable and an opportunity to be affected by alterity.

Conclusion

For Voss, Almásy and Ovid, a transformation of perception begins with one significant interaction with the desert. For Ovid, this occurs during his exile. However, he seems to experience multiple transformations throughout the novel, many of which result from his encounters with the natural world. In these transformations, Ovid's Roman language and knowledge is interrupted by the alterity he encounters in Tomis. This tension between the subject's need to objectify the world, and its inability to do so creates the perpetual "medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other" that Mitchell argues is a function of landscape (5). In other words, Ovid's perception of landscape is always unstable and his language will never provide absolute knowledge of the world. Malouf therefore demonstrates that an allusion to the sublime in literature can be used to undermine imperial epistemologies.

Like *Voss* and *The English Patient*, *An Imaginary Life* challenges the notion of the rational subject by locating the subject in language. Initially, Ovid perceives the world as subject-centred, and so believes his imagination allows him to construct his world. He later learns that he is a subject in transformation and perceives the landscape differently because of his dreams and interactions with alterity. After recognising the possibility of new perspectives, he undergoes a metamorphosis which culminates in a merge with the natural world, attained ultimately only in death, the eternal silence. While Voss views his submission to mortality as a failure, Ovid welcomes death, because he is aware that it is the only way that he can truly merge with the natural world. In death alone he can attain permanent transcendence of the self, and finally become a fragment of the desert where, "in this desolation, no one knows where he lies" (*Imaginary Life* 18).

Conclusion

Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable.
(Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 82).

This thesis has investigated the relationship between the subject and the natural world as it is portrayed in Patrick White's *Voss*, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, and David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*. In particular, it has analysed the authors' portrayal of the tension between the protagonists' cultural perceptions and the deserts they seek to domesticate – a tension which Wylie considers central to the phenomenon of landscape (1). By foregrounding this tension, these authors highlight the instabilities in the protagonists' imperial ways of seeing and knowing.

White, Ondaatje and Malouf depict landscape in a manner that undermines imperial epistemology in two ways. Firstly, the novels show that Western knowledge of the natural world is inadequate: the deserts in the novels under discussion are inhospitable to the protagonists' imperial perceptions and endeavours. Voss, Almásy and Ovid are unable to map and name the natural world: they discover that the desert exceeds their cartography and language and thus fail to classify it in accordance with imperial epistemology.

Secondly, these novels undermine imperial epistemology by critiquing the notion of the rational and autonomous subject that supports it. When the protagonists' discourses fail in these novels, they encounter sublimity and their perception of the landscape transforms. Rather than inscribing the landscape with their own words and maps, they begin to recognise the particularity of the natural world and come to know it without the aid of imperial discourses. These novels reveal, therefore, that much of the instability inherent in the subject's perception of landscape results from the limitations of language and, by extension, the restrictions implicit in discursive epistemology.

Furthermore, after experiencing transformations in perception, the protagonists themselves are transformed. They begin their journeys as “colonial authors” who must “construct the land through language” when documenting it and who thereby “construct

themselves [. . .] as observers of, and participants in, their new world” (Ryan, *Cartographic Eye* 21). Once Voss, Almásy and Ovid find that their maps and words are irrelevant in the desert, they can no longer fulfil the role of the “authoritative and knowledgeable” traveller (21). After their time in the desert, they cease to be travellers and, moreover, their voyages end in death. Rather than invading the land, they are invaded and effaced by it and their subjectivity is finally and irrevocably decentred. Because these novels describe journeys in which the self is eliminated in the natural world, they undermine the notion of the rational subject and ultimately the validity of a subject-centred, imperial worldview.

This thesis has also argued that White, Ondaatje and Malouf, in drawing attention to that which the colonial subject encounters as sublime and other, foreground the limitations of imperial language. In doing so, they attempt, quite paradoxically, to “make visible” that which “can neither be seen nor made visible”, and thus conform to Lyotard’s postmodernist “aesthetic of the sublime” (*The Postmodern Condition* 78, 80). Gesturing to the invisible in this way, I have argued, forms part of a postcolonial strategy of undermining imperial epistemologies. The postcolonialism of these writers thus inheres in their postmodernist refusal of a Kantian aesthetic of the sublime, which re-stabilises the subject by “establish[ing] rational order over dark, immense and threatening experiences” (Wittenberg 231). In the novels under consideration, the sublime is therefore not “a pleasure involved in reasoning contemplation” (Kant, *Critique of Judgment* 158), but an interruption of the protagonists’ pleasure and rational perception. In their deployment of a postmodern aesthetic of the sublime, White, Ondaatje and Malouf emphasise the instabilities inherent in the imperial subject’s perceptions and epistemologies. Moreover, they are, paradoxically, able to impart a sense of “the unrepresentable in presentation” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 81), and so foreground the alterity which they do not represent but which they consistently strive to intimate. By acting as “witnesses to the unrepresentable”, they oppose the totalising drive of hegemonic discourses such as those which aid imperialism (82).

As I have shown, the intimation of sublimity in *Voss*, *The English Patient* and *An Imaginary Life* suggests that the literary use of language bears a paradoxical relation to the ineffable: literary works are able to gesture toward otherness despite their linguistic

medium. In their depiction of landscape specifically, White, Ondaatje and Malouf's deployment of literary language points beyond the text toward that which their novels cannot represent and which, in turn, gives the reader a sense of the otherness of the natural world. I have argued that, unlike discourses such as geography and history, these novels do not reduce or objectify the natural world. Instead, they avoid any final classification and definition of the landscapes they seek to portray. They prove, therefore, that literary texts which self-consciously expose the inadequacy of their representations are able to engage with landscape in ways that other discourses cannot.

While I have claimed that literature does not function in the hegemonic manner of other discourses, I have been unable, due to the limited scope of this study, to elaborate extensively on the ways in which literary language differs from other forms of language, or to provide a detailed analysis of each authors' particular style of writing. I should point out, however, that the poetic style of each author has been repeatedly remarked upon by critics. Harries, for instance, argues that White claims for the novel "territory once the exclusive possession of the poet" (466). Similarly, Grogan observes that Malouf offers his readers "a sense of the poetic possibilities of language" in his works of prose (17). Ondaatje, whose work has been described as "blur[ring] the boundary between prose and poetry" (Jaggi para. 2), suggests that there are aspects of modern poetry that could be explored in prose, including what he describes as "the scope, the simultaneity, [and] the sharpness of language" (qtd. in Bush para. 42). A close reading of Ondaatje's work would reveal the same preoccupation with the poetic aspects of language evident in the prose of White and Malouf. Future research, extending the topic of this thesis, may examine the ways in which the poetic devices that these authors employ invest their prose with an affective, lyrical quality that appeals to the reader's imagination and emotions rather than her sense of logic or rationality, thereby conveying the sense of sublimity irrefutably contributing to the pleasure of reading their fiction.

As I have maintained, in the novels under study, the reader is given a sense of the otherness which lies outside the boundaries of the text. Accordingly, these texts are sites of hospitality in which the reader may be invaded and decentred, and so momentarily cease to be a subject in control of her reading experience. The reader may find that, like the novels' protagonists, she is haunted – and thus changed – as a result of her encounter

with otherness. *Voss*, *The English Patient* and *An Imaginary Life* may transform the reader's perceptions. In the process, the texts suggest that, in our approaches to landscape and to reading, we should show "[t]enderness towards the unknown and anonymous", which is also "tenderness to the self" (*English Patient* 51).

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