Ill at Ease in Our Translated World: Ecocriticism, Language, and the Natural Environment in the Fiction of Michael Ondaatje, Amitav Ghosh, David Malouf and Wilma Stockenström

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Abstract

This thesis explores the thematic desire to establish an ecological human bond with nature in four contemporary novels: *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, *An Imaginary Life* by David Malouf, and *The Expedition to The Baobab Tree* by Wilma Stockenström. These authors share a concern with the influence that language has on human perception, and one of the most significant ways they attempt to connect with the natural world is through somehow escaping, or transcending, what they perceive to be the divisive tendencies of language. They all suggest that human perception is not steered entirely by a disembodied mind, which constructs reality through linguistic and cultural lenses, but is equally influenced by physical circumstances and embodied experiences. They explore the potential of corporeal reciprocity and empathy as that which enables understanding across cultural barriers, and a sense of ecologically intertwined kinship with nature. They all struggle to reconcile their awareness of the potential danger of relating to nature exclusively through language, with a desire to speak for the natural world in literature. I have examined whether they succeed in doing so, or whether they contradict their thematic suspicion of language with their literary medium.

I have prioritised a close ecocritical reading of the novels and loosely situated the authors' approach to nature and language within the broad theoretical frameworks of radical ecology, structuralism and poststructuralism. I suggest that these novels are best analysed in the context of an ecocritical mediation between poststructuralist conceptions of nature as inaccessible cultural construct, and the naïve conception of unmediated, pre-reflective interaction with the natural world. I draw especially on the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose insistence that perception is always both embodied and culturally mediated truly renders culture and nature irreducible, intertwined categories.

By challenging historical dualisms like mind/body and culture/nature, the selected novels suggest a more fluid and discursive understanding of the perceived conflict between language and nature, whilst problematizing the perception of language as merely a cultural artefact. Moreover, they are examples of the kind of literature that has the potential to positively influence our human conception of nature, and adapt us better to our ecological context on a planet struggling for survival.

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INTRODUCTION

> The ecological crisis may be the result of a recent and collective perceptual disorder in our species, a unique form of myopia which it now forces us to correct. (David Abram "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth")

This thesis explores the thematic desire to create, or re-establish, a human bond with nature in four contemporary novels: *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje (1992), *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh (2004), *An Imaginary Life* by David Malouf (1978), and *The Expedition to The Baobab Tree* by Wilma Stockenström – translated by J. M. Coetzee (1983). These authors share a concern with the influence that language has on human perception, and one of the most significant ways they attempt to connect with the natural world is through somehow escaping, or transcending, what they perceive to be the divisive tendencies of language. The authors analysed here are all clearly cognisant, to some extent, of both environmental theory and the structuralist and poststructuralist theories which claim that the system of language, through which we mediate reality, renders impossible a primal, unreflective experience of the natural world. The perception of language as a constraint against a prelapsarian connection with our natural context is not a new one, but it seems to be becoming a preoccupation, even trademark, of late 20th and early 21st century literature. As Stephens points out:

> The Twentieth century's loss of faith in the capacity of narrative to achieve referentiality has led, in recent years, to the multiplication of texts, and readings of texts, which are self-reflexive or ludically introspective, and so the possibility that a work of fiction might thematize literature itself, or reading, or the use of language, that it might cultivate metafiction or metalanguage, is now a commonplace of criticism. (160)

The selected novels can all be seen to thematise literature, reading and language itself. The novelists all struggle to reconcile their awareness of the potential danger, or inadequacy, of relating to nature through language, with a desire to speak for the natural world in literature.

Traditionally, language, as a human construct, is aligned indelibly with culture and is therefore positioned against nature. As many critics have pointed out, this assumption that nature and culture exist in opposition is age-old and contributes significantly to our abuse of the natural environment. If language is conceived of as a vessel for culture, "a powerful force that shapes people's and society's opinions, attitudes and, ultimately, behaviour" (Schultz

109), it stands to reason that an uneasiness about human civilization, particularly our treatment of the environment, would lead to an interrogation of the role of language. These authors are working against the stunting of minds and imaginations that results from the use of stunted discourse and rhetoric, by writing novels with broadly environmental themes in unconventional, poetic styles that seek to promote awareness of ecological issues, undermine anthropocentrism, and reimagine our human connection with the natural world. Considering this, the most appropriate theoretical framework through which to analyse these texts is ecocriticism.[1]

Ecocriticism is the study of the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). As a hermeneutic tool ecocriticism is premised on an acceptance of Barry Commoner's first law of ecology: "everything is connected to everything else". This implies that language, and literature in particular, cannot be studied as a cultural artefact which "float[s] above the material world in some aesthetic ether" but must be considered as "connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty xix). This is significant to my project because in analysing language as interrelated with nature, as opposed to being in clear opposition to all things natural, some ecocritics help to undermine the culture versus nature paradigm which has proved so harmful, at the same time as acknowledging just how destructive our anthropocentric, humanistic language can be. Ecocriticism has developed in association with modern environmental consciousness and the first explicitly ecological literary criticism can be traced back to the 1980s (Bate 72). Cheryll Glotfelty, a pioneer in the field, is convinced that the current environmental crisis ought to be analysed as "a by-product of culture" (xxi). In accordance with this, much of the criticism centres on an evaluation of the relative ecological responsibility, or lack thereof, of certain works of literature and the impact this may have on human consciousness. In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty says that one of the central questions ecocritics must ask is: "in what ways and to what extent is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary

[1] Due to the preoccupation of these novelists with language and colonialism this thesis could readily have adopted a postcolonial theoretical foundation. I feel, however, that this angle has been more extensively explored by others and that my especial concern with the natural world merits an ecocritical analysis. There is often clear overlap between these areas of research and although certain points in this thesis can be considered appropriate to postcolonial criticism, I have pursued this line of research only insofar as it complements the ecocritical themes and concerns I am investigating. Postcolonial explorations of language and natural environment have been written by Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths, as well as Anthony Vital. See bibliography.

literature[?]" (xix). This thesis partly attempts to answer that question with regard to the four examined novels.

It is necessary at this point to establish an understanding of the key terms, 'nature, 'ecology' and 'environmentalism' which inform my critique. The word "nature" is one of the most complex in the English language. Its usage and associations have changed throughout its history and charting its various connotations gives insight into our historical perceptions of the natural world and our relationship with it (Williams 67-68). Essentially, almost all of the dominant beliefs and metaphors underlying our understanding of the term assume that humankind is not included in 'nature' (67). The implications of this belief are obviously significant to our treatment of the natural world. This thesis will not chart in detail the evolution of our perception of nature, but an understanding of the most prominent assumptions humankind has made over the last five centuries concerning our place in our natural environment is necessary to an understanding of how the selected authors are unconventional in their portrayal thereof. Although the following views of nature can be mapped roughly on an historical timeline they are all still prominent to an extent and many have worked congruently. I have also necessarily simplified these conceptions to enable this summary, and it is important that it is understood that although the traditional associations charted below can be seen as the dominant, mainstream conceptions of nature in Western culture, there have always been contrary interpretations and deviant philosophies. Moreover, while it is useful to understand how the concept of 'nature' has evolved in the human imagination, in this thesis I tend to use the word in its common form – that is, in partial contradiction to my project of challenging anthropocentric dualism, I still sometimes use the word 'nature' to designate that which is not human or of human making. This tension between conventional usage and a desire to re-appropriate, or defy the traditional connotations of a word, in a way goes to the heart of the selected novels' unease over the chasm between word and world.

In medieval times nature was most commonly personified as a goddess, a divine mother figure which usurped the pagan perception of diverse and variable nature spirits at roughly the same time as the Christian idea of a monotheistic God gained ascendance: increasingly nature was seen as the personified minister or deputy of a benevolent God (Williams 69). In many ways this idea is still with us today: we frequently understand nature as a maternal force, associate it closely with knowledge of God, and personify it; perhaps most notably, we

assume nature is a singular force. As Williams complains, we remain scientifically determined to define the singular, essential characteristic or law of the vast and complex system of nature: it must be either "a ruthless competitive struggle" or "a system of ultimate mutual advantage", but cannot be both (70). In the 19th century the perception of nature was altered drastically by the influence of evolutionary theories and the Industrial Revolution. Nature remained something singular but the machine replaced the goddess as the dominant metaphor (73). Evolutionary Theory had a complicated effect on human perception of our relationship with the earth: on the one hand some were forced to acknowledge that humans were merely part of a vast system of "selective breeding"; on the other hand, nature became more than ever mechanistic and therefore open to human manipulation, control and improvement (74). It is perhaps ironic that the idea of evolution largely estranged humankind further from nature: most people still assume that they are separate from and superior to their natural context today, and almost all natural science is based on the premise that we can intervene in and control ecosystems (75). More than evolution, however, this idea was cemented by the Industrial Revolution: nature was viewed as another machine which could therefore be manipulated for best human advantage and "progress" (Harré et al 94). Writing about the values most prominent during and after the Industrial Revolution (most of which are still with us today), Benjamin Schmidt identifies the core of these ideas as follows:

a) It's us *against* the environment.
b) It's us *against* other people.
c) It's the individual (or the individual company, or the individual nation) that matters.
d) We *can* have unilateral control over the environment and must strive for that control.
e) We live within an infinitely expanding 'frontier'.
f) Economic determinism is common sense.
g) Technology will do it for us. (368)

An extreme view of nature as something external was realised in its alignment with all that was pure, innocent, and external to human influence (Williams 77). This Romantic conception of nature as peaceful refuge, retreat and solace for corrupted man was a reaction to the perceived threat of industrialisation and capitalism: the escape to country houses, wilderness areas and even the suburbs was symptomatic (78). This portrayal of nature was positive in the sense that it celebrated the natural as something to be sought after and valued, but in many ways this newfound appreciation merely catalysed further commodification of

nature. Ironically, the landscaper and the industrialist worked together to render nature into a consumable form for humanity, and more than ever it became something external and useful; whether it was to be protected or destroyed it was certainly to be controlled (78). To a large extent, we continue to conceive of nature as being in opposition, and essentially inferior to, culture. As Robert Harrison points out, all Western Civilization was originally established in opposition to the forests it cleared to create its settlements (ix). We have never quite overcome the sense of separation, or the sense of precarious triumph, that this original opposition enabled. Essentially, we have reduced nature to a set of objects, or resources, a passive and malleable realm available for remaking and 'improvement' (Plumwood *Environmental Culture* 6).

Currently, we cling to many of these associations, and are arguably more vehemently anthropocentric than ever; environmentalism has become a fashionable preoccupation, and people are becoming far more aware of environmental issues in the face of impending crisis. Environmentalism has been defined by Monika Langer thus: "a popular term for an inherently very diverse and fluid series of socio-political movements characterised by their concern for the 'environment' and their willingness to take measures to address 'environmental problems'" (103). A distinction must be made between reformist environmentalism and radical environmentalism. The former does not challenge anthropocentrism but seeks to conserve the natural environment mainly for the sake of humankind (Langer 103). I will be utilising radical environmentalism (often also called radical ecology) in this thesis, which challenges and seeks to undermine anthropocentrism and sees nature as having intrinsic value far beyond its usefulness to humans (103). An anthropocentric culture is, broadly speaking, any which considers humankind innately superior to nature and other animals, and prioritises human aims and prerogatives above any other considerations. It is the cultural enshrinement of "a view of the human as outside of and apart from a plastic, passive and 'dead' nature which is conceived in mechanical terms as completely lacking in qualities such as mind and agency that are seen as exclusive to the human" (Plumwood *Environmental Culture* 107). Radical environmentalism understands our current ecological crisis as primarily a crisis of consciousness – the result of a pervasively anthropocentric conception of reality, or of intraspecies oppressions like patriarchy and class hierarchy. Val Plumwood, one of the most famous contemporary philosophers writing on this subject, describes the crisis as

> the fruit of a human and reason-centred culture that is at least a couple of millennia old, whose contrived blindness to ecological relationships is the fundamental condition underlying our destructive and insensitive technology and behaviour. To counter these factors, we need a deep and comprehensive restructuring of culture that rethinks and reworks human locations and relations to nature all the way down. (*Environmental Culture* 8)

It is clear from this sort of description how ecocriticism and radical environmentalism can be considered complementary. I will make reference to three forms of radical environmentalism in this thesis: deep ecology, ecofeminism and social ecology.

Before discussing these different schools of radical environmentalism it is important to distinguish between the science of ecology, and what has come to be loosely termed an ecological outlook or worldview, as propounded by these movements. As a science, ecology was established in 1866 when the German Ernst Haeckel coined the term (Keller & Golley 7). It is derived from the Greek and can be translated as "the scientific study of the earthly dwelling place" – an appropriately broad name for a very extensive science (9). Ecology "endeavours to discover pattern and process in natural networks" (17), and emphasises the study of organisms within their natural environments or ecosystems. However, the basic tenets of the science have been appropriated and applied to so many eco-movements and theories that the term's common usage reflects little of its scientific origin and has become "vaguely synonymous with 'environmentalism'" (3). Indeed, the two terms are often used interchangeably, as we have seen. As Keller and Golley point out, "Having an ecological outlook does not mandate embracing the lessons of scientific ecology; nor do scientific ecologists necessarily have 'ecological worldviews'" (3). An ecological worldview is one which emphasises human symbiosis with nature and involvement in complex ecosystems. Those with such an outlook are often in opposition to the scientists practicing ecology, who have traditionally perpetuated the perception of nature as a machine (17). The only concrete common foundation between the contemporary ecological movements and the science is that they both study the human connection with nature (4). The radical environmentalism of movements like deep ecology, ecofeminism and social ecology has been influenced by the literary tradition of Romantic ecology, which includes writers like William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, amongst many others, who have protested against a utilitarian, anthropocentric conception of nature as machine and resource (4-5). As the term 'radical' suggests, these movements target the core values of society, rather than advocating human-oriented conservation environmentalism.

Deep ecology traces its roots back to what some critics call the Ecological Revolution of the 1960's and aims to "bring about a major paradigm shift – a shift in perception, values, and lifestyles – as a basis for redirecting the ecologically destructive path of modern industrial growth societies" (Sessions viiii). The movement is characterised by an interrogation of anthropocentrism. It is based on a conviction of profound connection with nature, and seeks to emphasise the human species as interconnected with a natural world far larger and more important than any single species, stressing that all life has innate value. The term 'deep ecology' was coined by the philosopher Arne Naess, often considered the 'father' of the movement, who uses it to differentiate his beliefs from 'shallow' survival environmentalism and emphasise the fact that deep ecology is "the ecology movement which questions deeper" (Naess 76). In addition to nature writers and philosophers, like Henry David Thoreau and Aldous Huxley, deep ecology has traditionally drawn inspiration from the spiritual lifestyles of "primal peoples", and 'ecocentric' religions like Zen Buddhism, Animism and Taoism (Sessions viiii). As the name suggests, it also aligns itself with popular scientific ecologists like Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson (viiii). As these varied influences attest, deep ecology bases itself in ethics, intuition and empathy, as well as science and logic, and is conceptualised by many as having a religious or spiritual component. Because it challenges the anthropocentric worldview, and advocates equal rights for all living things, deep ecology has been accused at times of misanthropy, but, as Gary Snyder points out, insisting that "the natural world has value in its own right, that the health of natural systems should be our first concern" best serves the interests of humans, as we are reliant for survival and quality of life on these systems (48). According to deep ecology thinkers, if the individual is in touch with nature their intuitive conviction of interconnection with all life forms should ensure that destruction of nature is conceived of as destruction of self (Curran 112).

Ecofeminism is the marriage of feminism and radical environmentalism and targets the oppressions of patriarchal society as the root cause of the environmental crisis. As Greta Gaard describes it: "ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (1). As this definition suggests, ecofeminism has come to challenge all forms of intraspecies oppression, over and above just the patriarchal discrimination against women. Ecofeminism rose to prominence in the 1980s, and, like deep ecology, the movement is based on a conviction of the basic

interconnectedness of all life and a resultant interrogation of normative societal values. However, unlike deep ecology's targeting of anthropocentrism, ecofeminist thinkers place the blame on androcentric culture, suggesting that women (and certain other groups) "have been associated with nature, and each denigrated with reference to the other" (Garrard 24). Exposing and combatting the oppositional dualisms of mainstream Western culture is the central task of the movement:

> Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind. (Gaard 5)

Ecofeminism has been controversial in its tendency to place the blame for environmental degradation on men and male-dominated culture, and has sometimes been accused of dangerously essentialising the sexes and practicing a kind of inverted sexism. Although she admits that both sexes are capable of conceptions of the self as interconnected with nature, and that perception of the self may be taught rather than innate, Gaard does assert that the concept of self as interconnected with nature is characteristic of women and certain minority groups, whereas the concept of self as separate, independent and atomistic is typically male (1-2). For ecofeminist thinkers this disconnected sense of self is the basis of patriarchal society and the root cause of the environmental crisis (2). As Giorel Curran explains, ecofeminism is best divided into two categories to allow for the substantially different approaches of its two central discourses (116). Cultural ecofeminism celebrates the innate connection of women with nature and seeks to make this connection the basis of a new approach to nature characterised by the caring, nurturing, emotional capacities they consider characteristically female (116). This approach is based strongly in female reproductive powers and fertility and is often associated with goddess worship (116). Social ecofeminist thinkers, on the other hand, reject this approach as being apolitical and inaccurately essentialising of the sexes – they attempt to avoid "biological and cultural reductionism" and attack all forms of oppression as the manifestation of political, economic and historical constructions of dualism (117).

Social ecology became a force in the 1970s and is strongly associated with the work of anarchist philosopher Murray Bookchin. The term has come to define a radical environmentalist school of thinking which argues that "violence against the natural world has

its origins in human social and economic institutions based on oppressive systems of hierarchy and elitism" (Clark 89). Economic class is central to their critique, and although the movement has different branches – eco-socialism, eco-marxism, social ecology – all object primarily to the evils perpetuated by capitalist, industrial society and advocate the fair distribution of natural resources, wealth and living standards (Curran 120). Social ecology supporters tend to remain humanist in their stance, and reject the biocentric ethics of deep ecologists and many ecofeminists – they do not generally see nature as having innate value but rather insist that natural resources (and environmental risk factors like pollution and waste) are justly distributed and managed (120-122). They believe that respect for nature and responsible treatment thereof "can flow from humanity's realization that it is in their interests to protect it" (124-125). Although it is worth noting that some do combat anthropocentrism as well as promote social justice, and that communism and socialism are not necessarily seen as a guarantee of ecological harmony and are often also critiqued (123). Communalism is often promoted as a solution to class hierarchy and Bookchin actually advocates the application of ecological principles, like participation and differentiation, in human communities (158).

These three radical environmentalist movements are all complex schools of thought which incorporate a variety of different thinkers. There have been conflicts within each movement, and often substantial conflict between them. However, whether the root problem is seen as anthropocentrism, androcentrism or class hierarchy, they do share common concerns and can co-operate with and complement each other. Sessions makes a good argument for the fact that the prioritising of intraspecies oppressions and inequalities, like patriarchy and class hierarchy, can be subsumed by the theoretical framework of deep ecologists combatting anthropocentrism (266-267). I am inclined to agree. However, this thesis is not overly concerned with the merits of the various movements and I mention them only to contextualise the ecological themes and apparent positions of the authors analysed. What is important is that all three movements challenge the traditional cultural assumptions of Western society, and demand a reimagining of the human/nature dichotomy.

The relevance of this to ecocritical analysis is clear, as ecocriticism also demands that we look for ways to reimagine the human relationship with the natural world in order to assuage the 'crisis of consciousness' which allows us to conceive of ourselves as separate from, and capable of dominating, an inferior realm of nature. To develop an environmentally

responsible culture we must systematically interrogate and counter the culture/nature dualism which divides mind from body, reason from emotion (Plumwood *Environmental Culture* 4). As Plumwood says, "Once nature is reconceived as capable of agency and intentionality, and human identity is reconceived in less polarised and disembodied ways, the great gulf which Cartesian thought established between the conscious, mindful human sphere and the mindless, clockwork natural one disappears" (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 5). As these four authors seem to have realised, though, our cultural mindsets are deeply imbedded in the languages we speak, which makes it very difficult to alter our conception of nature, and our place within it, without finding some way to either alter or sidestep the linguistic constructions which enforce anthropocentrism. Christopher Manes describes the problem thus:

> our particular idiom, a pastiche of medieval hermeneutics and Renaissance humanism, with its faith in reason, intellect and progress, has created an immense realm of silences, a world of 'not saids' called nature, obscured in global claims of eternal truths about human difference, rationality, and transcendence. If the domination of nature with all its social anxieties rests upon this void, then we must contemplate not only learning a new ethics, but a new language free from the directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentred, postmodern, post-humanist perspective. In short, we require the language of ecological humility… (17).

Speaking particularly about the environmental crisis ecolinguist Matthias Jung notes how "social and ecological awarenesses are formed together through public discourse, in which language is not an external and arbitrary means for the transmission of language independent thoughts, but has a strong effect on what is thought and what is transmitted" (271). Since the early 20th century this kind of thinking has been common in academic circles, particularly in Philosophy, Anthropology, and Linguistics. Theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure have famously argued that language constitutes reality rather than reflecting or revealing it. This theory, a foundational tenet of structuralism and poststructuralism, is commonly known as "the linguistic turn". Despite reaching its peak influence academically in the middle of the last century, the consequences of the linguistic turn's divorce of language from the material world is only recently beginning to reveal itself in literature as a real thematic angst about the impossibility of truthfully relating to each other and to nature. As all four of the authors analysed here seem to be aware of structuralist/poststructuralist theory to some extent, it is necessary to outline the basics. It is worth pointing out, however, that the mistrust of language as an adequate means to understanding and experiencing life is not a uniquely

Western one, and can be traced much further back than modern philosophy. For instance, the Buddhists have believed for centuries that language imposes a restriction on human experience, making it "an integral part of the snares that entrap us and perpetuate our suffering" (Kissack et al 137). They believe that the "nature of language is inherently divisive, for its very existence depends upon an intricate set of contrasts that distinguish terms and concepts from one another" (137). This divisive tendency manifests in our perception of the world, making humankind prone to seeing the world as fragmented and oppositional.

The central thrust of structuralism is that "When man perceives the world, he perceives without knowing it the superimposed shape of his own mind, and entities can only be meaningful (or 'true') in so far as they find a place within that shape" (Hawkes 3). Structuralists see humans as creators of reality and study the processes by which we do this. Through myth, culture and social institutions a human community constitutes its perception of reality and, in so doing, its own identity (4). If one accepts the basic premise of structuralism – that human perception contains an innate cultural bias which significantly affects what we perceive – then one must accept that an objective interpretation of reality or of the material world is impossible (6). Structuralists therefore see the world as made up of relationships (construction/perception, viewer/viewed) rather than of independently real, or natural objects (7). The world as a human construct has "a potent agency for continuous structuring: its customs and rites act as a forceful brainwashing mechanism whereby human beings are habituated to and made to acquiesce in a man-made world which they nevertheless perceive as artless and 'natural'" (4). In many ways language can be considered the most basic human structure. Ferdinand de Saussure revolutionized linguistic theory by demonstrating that the connection between language and the world is arbitrary rather than referential. Saussure explained the linguistic sign as composed of "the union of meanings and sound-images", of signifier and signified, a "psychological" linking based on a learned association which has no real connection to the "referent", to the actual physical entity (961). The referent is always therefore absent from language, making signification eternally incomplete because objective reality is reduced to the conceptual once it is expressed in words – the specificity of the real cannot be captured in the linguistic system. Saussure explains the meaning-making process of language as a "sort of contract signed by members of a community", a social contract derived by communal agreement, rather than by any

inherent referential value in words themselves (961). As Edward Sapir, another founding structuralist linguist, puts it:

> The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached… We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (qtd in Hawkes 18-19)

Poststructuralism, a field of criticism defined by its critique of structuralism, takes the structuralist delineation of language as a system a step further.[2] Jacques Derrida, for instance, accepts and builds on much of Saussure's theory about the arbitrary, limited nature of language as a system, citing the "indefiniteness of reference" as characteristic of linguistic representation (*Of Grammatology* 49). Derrida departs from structuralism, however, because he feels that Saussure, while acknowledging the limitations of the language system to an extent, still seeks a "point of presence", a point at which language as a system signifies internally, when although sign and world may be divorced, signifier and signified (sound-image and concept) are still meaningfully linked (*Writing and Difference* 279). Derrida asserts that there is only ultimately absence at the heart of signification because language cannot be fixed in meaning; 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" (*Writing and Difference* 280). Saussure emphasises that individual words are cemented in meaning by their context, but Derrida insists that it is impossible to cement meaning in language because each word can only be defined to the extent that it is distinguished from all other words. To Derrida, the linguistic sign is defined always and only by that to which it is not referring, making signification a kind of endless process of oppositional elimination. The concept – or signified – to which the sound-image – or signifier – refers, is never stable or certain because meaning is continually deferred. Derrida called this process of continual deferring of meaning "différance", alluding to the fact that the signifier gains meaning only through establishing its

[2] At times it is difficult to delineate exactly where structuralism ends and poststructuralism begins. This is evident in the varying categorisation of certain theorists, like Jacques Lacan, who are sometimes labelled as one and sometimes the other. There is therefore some fluidity in my use of the two terms. Moreover, structuralism and poststructuralism are substantial fields of theory and my investigation here merely skims the surface of the theories relevant to my novelists apparent preoccupation with language as a system which divides humankind from the natural world. The only theorists I draw on in any detail are Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan.

difference from other signifiers, thereby perpetually *deferring* actual signification. So, not only is the sign divorced from the real world referent but the signifier is only tenuously connected to the signified by a process of "différance", defined only by what it does not signify, by all the signifiers which are absent (*Of Grammatology* 70-71). There are many interpretations of Derrida's complex linguistic theories but, taken at their most severe, the upshot is the belief that meaning, or the illusion of meaning, is the result not only of social contract but of an unstable textual effect, and that there can be no access to any extra-textual, primal reality because "there is nothing outside of the text" (158). To the poststructuralist mind there is no aspect of experience which is unaffected by the system of language and the process of signification. Humankind cannot access the real through language.

These theories have been widely accepted academically but have made little impact on the practical, everyday usage of language. The basic implications for this thesis are that words are not neutral but heavily loaded with the value-systems and history of the linguistic communities in which they are used, and that different languages will therefore lead to different world-views and perceptions of reality. Humans mediate their experience of the world through language thus unconsciously accepting the values and cultural constructs of the communities within which they live. Language constructs reality according to the structures of meaning and association through which it (unstably) signifies. Another possible implication is that there can be no universal human understanding, a position which undermines, obviously, ideas of human unity, similarity and sympathy. It also means that our culture-laden languages may be maintaining, or even enforcing, a world-view which is detrimental to our survival. This is certainly the case if one accepts that our conviction in our superiority to nature, and ability to control it, is a main cause of our current environmental crisis. As George Steiner points out, a civilization can all too easily become "imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches, or matches only at certain ritual, arbitrary points, the changing landscape of fact" (21). In this way "grammar and vocabulary become a barrier to real feeling" (Steiner 21). It is against this linguistic barrier that these four novels strain. I will analyse how they attempt to access an experiential ethics based on corporeality, and a "language of ecological humility" (Manes 17) to enable a connection with the natural world.

Paul Shepard blames certain poststructuralist theorists for creating the illusion that because we mediate experience through language the material world – being linguistically inaccessible – ceases to exist (qtd in Scigaj 333). The trap of the poststructuralist position is

that “the words for things are more real than the things they stand for” and “nothing can be traced further than the semiotic in which everything is trapped” (333). The theories can therefore be seen to devalue our direct sensory experience of the world and further distance us from nature. As David Abram puts it:

> Our civilized distrust of the senses and of the body engenders a metaphysical detachment from the sensible world… A renewed attentiveness to bodily experience, however, enables us to recognize and affirm our inevitable involvement in that which we observe, our corporeal immersion in the depths of a breathing Body much larger than our own. (85)

My authors, all clearly conscious of the potential distancing capabilities of language, seek to re-inject sensory, corporeal experience into literature to encourage a less culturally burdened engagement with nature. It stands to reason that if our current environmental crisis is the result of the human valuation of the mental, logical and non-corporeal soul as that which makes us superior to, and innately different from, other life forms, then to combat this delusion we must seek to emphasise the value of physicality, and through it a sense of kinship and connection with nature. Moreover, if we are concerned about the impossibility of relating to people with different languages, cultures and world-views then it makes sense to seek a basic human commonality based on shared corporeality. From this perspective it is interesting to investigate phenomenology (and the emerging field of eco-phenomenology) as its emphasis on “reconnecting us with our most basic and primordial experiences of the natural world” (Brown & Toadvine xx) aptly describes the seemingly paradoxical attempt of the selected novelists to challenge the primacy of language and connect corporeally with nature.

In their introduction to *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, Brown and Toadvine explain that phenomenology is useful in developing new, more ecologically valid and responsible perspectives because it “suggests alternatives to many of the ingrained tendencies that limit our inherited perspectives: our myopic obsession with objectivity, our anthropocentric conceptions of value, and other legacies of Cartesian dualism” (xii). Brown defines phenomenology as “a philosophical method [which] begins with a respect for experience and ultimately grounds all meaning in experience” as opposed to “simply taking for granted higher-level, culturally sedimented idealizations and abstractions that often pass for ahistorical metaphysical discoveries” (5). Phenomenology, as a philosophical stance, directs us towards “the most original, most primal, and least theoretically structured

awareness of the world", and can therefore be said to advocate an experiential recognition of connectedness with the natural world (Marietta 122). Phenomenologists insist that there is meaning to be found in the material world independent of our imposed human structuring through language and culture (122). Our sense of individual identity and separation from one another and from the world is the result not of some primal experience of individuality but rather occurs in the intellectual, linguistic, categorising analysis which follows our embodied experience (122-123). Phenomenologists do not by and large deny the role of language in human perception and some insist, like the poststructuralists, that our mediation of reality through language cannot be escaped. For instance, Zimmerman compares Heidegger's interpretation of language's role to Derrida's and finds them compatible (77). However, phenomenology is premised on the understanding that our embodied experience of the material world is in itself valuable, and as a philosophical stance it is useful to environmental movements because it stresses our connection with the natural, physical world in a manner which is frequently highly compatible with ecological theory.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche, commonly accepted as an early phenomenologist as well as an existentialist, seeks to radically undermine the hierarchical dualisms – like culture/nature and mind/body – which form the bedrock of Western civilization. Monika Langer concludes that Nietzsche's emphasis on corporeality and meaningful engagement with the natural world, as well as his insistence on the soul or mind as an extension of the body rather than a superior and separate entity, makes his the kind of phenomenology which can be very productively applied to combatting the environmental crisis (108-109). As opposed to living by the established "truths" of the church (just one example of conventional Western thought that Nietzsche rails against) Zarathustra suggests: "Listen rather, my brothers, to the voice of the healthy body: that is a more honest and purer voice. More honestly and purely speaks the healthy body… and it speaks of the meaning of the earth" (Nietzsche 145). Zarathustra preaches that truth is something individual and experiential, not universal and logical (307), and furthermore suggests that such truth as there is in life is best sought through physical experience: "There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom" (146-147). As Langer demonstrates, Nietzsche makes his point partly through the character of Zarathustra who is an inversion of the typical Western philosopher. Zarathustra is "emphatically corporeal, subjective, emotional, concretely situated, and passionately involved in the world", whereas the traditional philosopher is "a disembodied, detached, dispassionately objective, and unsituated mind – a mouthpiece for pure Reason and absolute

Truth" (108). Nietzschean phenomenology is complex and not without its flaws, but it is this kind of challenging of institutional wisdom and cultural convention, insistence on the value of corporeal experience, and awareness of the earth, which is theoretically comparable to the efforts of the authors studied here.

The phenomenologist most relevant to this thesis is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on whose interpretation of the phenomenological project I will be concentrating almost exclusively. Merleau-Ponty defines phenomenology as "a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status" (*Phenomenology of Perception* viii). Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which is popular with eco-phenomenologists, dictates that it is through a recognition and experience of shared embodiment with the material world that humankind can overcome the distinctions between human/animal, human/nature and culture/nature (Langer 115). His phenomenology is primarily a philosophy of embodiment, "a philosophy *of* the body… that is not only about the body, but that springs from the body as an emblem of an opening that exceeds us" (Morris 119). The body is an opening, that is, into a primordial, pre-reflective experience of the natural world. Although the individual's subjective construction of reality cannot be denied there is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a realm of bodily experience which precedes and exceeds our subjectivity – an impersonal generality to all human experience which links us through corporeal similarity (Weiss 133). In Merleau-Ponty's words:

> At the very moment when I live in the world, when I am given over to my plans, my occupations, my friends, my memories, I can close my eyes, lie down, listen to the blood pulsating in my ears, lose myself in some pleasure or pain, and shut myself up in this anonymous existence which subtends my personal one. (*Phenomenology of Perception* 164)

Merleau-Ponty by no means denies that we, as humans, project our cultural identities, memories and expectations onto the natural world, but he insists that nature itself, the phenomenological world, also exerts a force on our cognitive lives. We are entangled in nature, part of the same 'flesh' of the physical world, and are involved in a process of reciprocity between self and world. He advocates "intercorporeity", the basic connection and kinship shared by all physical matter, insisting that "the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh" (*The Visible and the Invisible* 137). Our human

coextension with “the flesh of the world” is the bedrock upon which all experience is built and although this pre-reflective experience of the world cannot be completely accessed or divided from our conscious perception, it informs and nourishes our subjective and personal experience.

For Merleau-Ponty culture and nature are intertwined and inseparable in human experience: “Everything is both manufactured and natural in man, as it were, in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behaviour which does not owe something to purely biological being – and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 189). This break-down of culture/nature dualism is part of what Merleau-Ponty calls the “ambiguity” of human experience. The intertwining of nature and culture in human behaviour, as well as the combination of the subjective and the ‘general’, make human experience ambiguous in that the body, the root of all perception, is simultaneously a natural object open to pre-reflective, pre-linguistic experience, and the subject of the individual consciousness (Weiss 134). In positioning his philosophy of perception thus, Merleau-Ponty is challenging both empiricist and intellectualist accounts. Empiricists treat the body as merely a mechanism, or unit of mechanisms, which provides a conduit for sensory perception; intellectualists see perception as mental and treat “the perceiving subject as only accidentally or contingently embodied, with all the organizing and schematizing work of perceptual experience taking place within the confines of the consciousness” (Cerbone 128). For Merleau-Ponty, to be embodied is to perceive; consciousness and embodiment are interconnected, overlapping, and irreducible.

The empiricist belief in mind/body dualism is related to the Cartesian mindset: the Enlightenment glorification of the human as a rational subject whose mind is distinct from, and superior to, their body and the physical world. This anthropocentric mode of perception, a substantial contributor to the human estrangement from our wider ecological context, has dominated human culture since the Renaissance. Harry Adams describes the Cartesian perceptual ideal as one in which “disembodied minds or transcendental egos are invoked – whereby… minds and egos struggle through… bodies, emotions, obscure circumstances and personal backgrounds, to try to express themselves in semantically pure or intellectually aseptic ways” (152). Cartesian dualism “detaches the subject from the world that it experiences, juxtaposes it with the world as a distinct region of being, and grants it a priority over the world” (Toadvine 22-23). Phenomenology reverses this priority by emphasising that

bodies are not mere vessels for minds but "actively evoke, interpret and transform meaning" (Adams 153). Merleau-Ponty insists that the subject is inseparable from the body and the world (*Phenomenology of Perception* 408). Vitally, this dissolution of culture/nature duality extends to language, which, for Merleau-Ponty, is inescapably grounded "in the deep world of immediate perception, in the visible, tangible, audible world that envelops us, and of which we are a part" (Abram 95).

In his article "Revelling in the Referential Flux", Leonard Scigaj, drawing on the theories of Merleau-Ponty, suggests that what we need is a balanced understanding of both the fact that language is a political, cultural construction which deeply affects our understanding of the world and our interpretation of our experiences, and also an acceptance of the fact that there is a material reality beyond our linguistic and cultural constructions which simultaneously exists independent of our perception, and influences it. David Abram uses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to emphasise that language is the result of embodied perception as well as a vessel for cultural and social mores. Similarly, although they do not draw on Merleau-Ponty, critics like Donna Haraway and Christa Grewe-Volpp propose a mediating position in ecocriticism between the poststructuralist insistence on nature as text and inescapably a human construction, and those who insist on the natural world as an accessible material reality, a prediscursive universe. The latter have an aversion to theory and regret that structuralism and poststructuralism negate sensory and embodied experience and access to the natural world, instead positing an endless self-reflexive, linguistic process of construction which constitutes human reality and which it is impossible to transcend (Grewe-Volpp 73). These critics want to access the trees and rocks and rivers that lie beyond the "wilderness of signs" (Parini qtd in Grewe-Volpp 73), the real world which is older by far than our constructed human reality. Grewe-Volpp goes on to say that the implications of seeing the world exclusively as human construction are dangerous because "if no extradiscursive realities are accepted, no 'natural' bodies, no instincts, then only cultural processes have meaning, while nature as the Other, silent and static, needs no further exploration" (74). It can seem naïve, however, to dismiss these important theories, and it cannot be denied that 'nature' is, in crucial ways, a social and historical construction.

A mediating position is therefore necessary to acknowledge both that we linguistically construct reality and 'nature' and that there exists beyond our construction a real universe

with real power and agency and that we participate in this physical-material world as embodied subjects (Grewe-Volpp 74). As Haraway puts it, humankind needs to acknowledge that nature may be seen as a construction, but is nevertheless one which is constructed by many non-human actors as well as humans – it is a "co-construction", "a kind of relationship, an achievement among many actors" (66). As Kate Soper has pointed out, this kind of dual acknowledgement of nature and culture is necessary to overcome the possible naivety or sentimentality of an approach which ignores the complex interaction of the two, and one which, by insisting on the study of discourse and semiotics exclusively, seems dangerously to deny the reality of ecological laws beyond human perception, thereby further alienating us from the physical-material world (qtd in Grewe-Volpp 74). We cannot overlook the political and social implications of our constructions of reality or we risk viewing nature and culture as totally separate entities rather than as inter-related. In other words, nature and culture cannot be clearly defined or separated because they are interactive and inter-dependent (76). A middle-ground between poststructuralist views, and a naïve belief in nature as a totally accessible material reality, would therefore be ideal. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology provides just such a mediating position, as it accepts the constructed nature of perception but simultaneously insists on the influence of the pre-reflective, objective world on human consciousness. As mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty considers culture and nature inseparable in their co-constitution of human consciousness.

By agreeing that nature is inescapably (although not exclusively) cultural in its construction, we also embrace the potential of cultural artefacts, like novels, to address our current environmental issues and through doing so construct the concept of nature more positively. As Mayer says, if we accept a concept of culture as "concretized and mediated in texts" (112) then "to call the environmental crisis a cultural crisis is to claim that the culturally most formative texts… have conceptualised nature, culture and the human in an environmentally detrimental way" (113). It stands to reason, therefore, that many ecocritics are calling for the creation of "new myths" which give adequate expression to nature as both cultural construction and autonomous, active entity (Grewe-Volpp 75). Novelists are arguably ideally equipped to remythologise nature in the cultural imagination.

Jennifer Flynn, drawing on Martha Nussbaum's work, discusses the fact that fiction, due to its literary form, can express moral concerns and content in a way that conventional academic

prose cannot. As she puts it, "form (literary or philosophical) is, at least in some sense, *part* of content" (emphasis in original 317-318). Using the formal, theoretical style associated with academic work in itself makes a statement about what faculties of the reader it is necessary to engage – it is a style which values intellect, logic (318). A work of fiction, on the other hand, can, with the right style, emphasise an ethics of empathy and emotional engagement. Similarly, Plumwood calls for an interrogation of the kinds of scientific and philosophical vocabularies which devalue and decentre nature with an intellectual, reductionist, impersonal stance (*Environmental Culture* 175). She suggests, like Flynn, that more narrative and communicative approaches will be helpful: "we must re-admit [to environmental discourse] the rich intentionality we attribute to the natural world in ordinary, unself-conscious and un-'rationalised' speech contexts" (175). She further suggests that we all "rejoin the poets in hearing the voices of the pines playing with those of the wind" (177). It is possible that "certain truths about human life can *only* be properly stated by the sort of writing characteristic of the 'narrative artist'" (Flynn 318). If "form influences *how* we think" then certain kinds of fiction have the potential to demand an imaginative and emotional engagement from the reader (Flynn 324). I will therefore be attempting to unpack the implications of the styles in which these novels are written and the extent to which their form complements, contradicts, or otherwise influences their ecological themes.

All the authors examined here attempt to engage with the natural world through an emphasis on sensory perception, corporeality, and a self-conscious examination of the various limitations of language. The irony, of course, is that they do all this in language, in literature. Their critique of the limitations or dangers of language can therefore become paradoxical and contradictory. Form can contradict 'message'. There are arguably ways around this paradox, however, and the success with which these novelists negotiate this dilemma is one of the central issues I explore in the coming chapters. Is it possible to represent nature in a non-anthropocentric, ecologically responsible way in literature? Can we self-consciously manipulate language to thematise its own shortcomings? Is there such a thing as a language of ecological humility? Although she is very much aware of the paradox inherent in attempting to represent the external, non-human world through what she sees as exclusively human means, Grewe-Volpp does think it possible to portray nature in an ecologically responsible way in literature (78). Such a portrayal of nature would need, through emphasising embodiment and the agency of nature, to show that the world is not "just a

system of signs, but also a prelinguistic, prelogical, active entity which forms the basis of and acts upon the signs" (78). To do this nature must be portrayed as not just a backdrop or setting but as a protagonist capable of influence and articulation (78).

I have analysed a novel per chapter, and have chosen not to address them chronologically as per date of publication, rather concentrating on a development of themes and style as relevant to the basic structure of ideas in the thesis. For each novel I endeavour to give an ecocritical critique – an analysis of the novel's relevance ecologically, its links, if any, to the above-mentioned forms of radical environmentalism, and its basic portrayal of nature and the human subject within their natural environment. Having established the degree to which the text can be said to remythologise or reimagine nature as a construct, I turn to an examination of the authors' use of corporeality, and emphasis on the sensory and experiential in the novel, and try to unpack how this broadly phenomenological thrust complements the ecological themes. Finally, I investigate the four novelists' engagement with language, and literature, and the role they play in either connecting or disconnecting humankind from the natural world. Having explored the texts for their internal logic of theme and plot, I then turn to style and attempt to discover whether the author can be accused of a contradiction between form and subject matter; whether, to be precise, their thematic attempt to expose the limitations of language is ironically belied by their use thereof to make their point.

CHAPTER ONE

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

> if [the writer] be deserving and fortunate, one may perchance attain to such clearness of sincerity that at last the presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world. (Joseph Conrad "Preface" to *The Nigger of The "Narcissus"*)

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* begins with a woman in an overgrown garden, watching the wind in the cypresses, intensely aware of "the first drops of rain on her bare arms" (3). The novel evinces an urge to reclaim a human bond with nature that has been surprisingly neglected by critics. The community of the Villa San Girolamo can be seen as a small-scale ecological utopia, or ecotopia, based on an ethics of mutual embodiment and an almost prelapsarian intimacy with the natural world. This intensely sensual novel begs for the reclamation of human 'naturalness', our basic corporeality, and persistently conflates landscape with the human body. Intertwined in this yearning for a reconnection with nature is Ondaatje's self-conscious exploration of the power of language and the negative use of words as tools of ownership and the construction of otherness. Against the colonial tropes of mapping, classifying and linguistic possession, Ondaatje offers an ethics of corporeal empathy: respect for all human beings on the basis of shared physicality and sentience, which is capable of combating, to some extent, the divisive tendency of language. This chapter opens with an ecocritical evaluation of the novel, including an analysis of the Villa San Girolamo as an ecotopia of sorts. I then explore Ondaatje's use of, and preoccupation with, language and unpack how this mistrust of words contributes to the ecological dimension of the novel. Finally, I investigate whether the novel constitutes a paradox in the sense that there seems to be a clash between the literary medium and a thematic mistrust of language.

A number of critics have noted, some with disdain for what they consider a cliché, that 'civilization' and the desert are contrasted in *The English Patient*: society is condemned for its noisiness, violence and temporariness in comparison to the primordial calm and mystery of the desert (Hawkins 143; 148). The comparison is most striking with the desert but does

extend beyond it. For instance, during the chaos and horror of the war Hana feels that the seasons are comforting because they seem "archaic" and reliable, unaffected by the human trauma (Ondaatje 53). Although it can be read as a symbol for nature in the more general sense, the desert is also imbued with its traditional associations of liminality, freedom and transgressive potential. It is a place of ill-defined, shifting boundaries, as yet unconquered by humankind, where unconventional and transgressive relationships can thrive (Emery 211). The oasis society of multi-national explorers which develops there foreshadows the community of the Villa San Girolamo: in both, groups attempt to transcend nation and race through commonality (Shin 220). The desert is a sacred place to the protagonist, Almásy, and there are frequent religious overtones to his descriptions thereof: it is the only place he has ever been able to believe in God for everywhere else he finds only "trade and power, money and war" (Ondaatje 265). There is a sense of trespass and violation when the war extends into this sublime landscape, sadness that a "vast and silent pocket of the earth" should be corrupted by battle (143). And it is not only the desert that is damaged by the war: the novel frequently describes natural landscapes destroyed by human violence: outside the villa there is "an ancient meadow scarred… by phosphorus bombs and explosions" (12); the green fields of Somerset, which Madox loves, are turned into a noisy aerodrome (256); Italy is full of "shrapnel-torn cypresses, whose middle branches have been shelled away" (290). The novel clearly condemns this destruction and is perhaps at its most overtly environmental when Almásy notes that nobody in a war can possibly be on the side of nature, nobody can be the ally of landscape (20).

The contrasting of unspoilt wilderness with corrupt society is indeed something of a cliché in literature, although perhaps for good reason. *The English Patient* is a novel which grapples with the intersection of nature and culture, as well as our cultural representation of nature, which is partly why it begs for an ecocritical reading. Many critics misunderstand or oversimplify Ondaatje's message with regard to this juxtaposition and his self-conscious use of certain infamous colonial tropes with reference to nature. Sadashige and Novak, for example, both complain that Almásy's approach to the desert is typically imperialist (Sadashige 242), geared towards conquest and informed by the conviction that "the non-western world is empty and unexplored" (Novak 218). It is true that Almásy, as an explorer and map-maker, is far more implicated in the colonial project than he acknowledges, and is in some ways hypocritical. It is also true that the explorers' presence in the desert is described in the warlike terms traditionally associated with colonialism: the "shades of yellowness" are

"invaded" by their presence (Ondaatje 154) and "raped" by the armies they lead there (273). However, the tone of these descriptions is unmistakably condemnatory and regretful: Almásy seems aware of his usage, and the metaphors of war and violence are consciously chosen. He laments that the humans in the desert damage it "with no sense of what it [is]" and treat it "as if it were just sand" (273). Moreover, he is at pains to acknowledge the pre-colonial history of the landscape:

> The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever. (150-151)

He speaks with reverence of the desert tribes and the ancient endeavours of humankind in the landscape. He knows that the desert had been "given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed" (148); that he walks in a landscape "civilised for centuries" before his existence (149). Ondaatje draws attention to the disastrous colonial habit of viewing nature as enemy and force to be pillaged and subdued but he certainly does not perpetuate it. It is clear, also, that human armies are puny in comparison to the forces of the desert. Their wars against nature are pathetically futile, as evidenced by Herodotus's account of the various armies that waged war against desert winds and were buried or vanquished (19). This inevitable defeat makes a mockery of the tropes of conquest and war with regard to the desert by exposing the arrogance of such metaphors.

The other common metaphor Ondaatje utilises and subverts is the feminisation of nature – directly related, of course, to the colonial desire to possess, subdue and "rape" the environment. As Bolland points out, the equation of sexual and territorial possession by colonists "shows the need to appropriate the body and sexual procreation in a linear narrative that confers ownership on dominant class, race and gender, much as names on maps confer exclusive ownership of land" (41). The conflation of landscape with the "feminine and sexually unconstrained" fuelled the imperial need to control and conquer it (Hawkins 142). The desert is described in maternal terms at times in the novel: the Cave of Swimmers can be read as a "uterine space" (Shin 221); Almásy shelters "within the larger womb of the canyon" (Ondaatje 21). More importantly, however, the desert landscape is throughout associated with female lovers, Katherine in particular. The oases and landmarks in the desert are traditionally named after women, as Almásy explains, "in the desert the most loved waters,

like a lover's name, are carried blue in your hands, enter your throat" (150). He "insists on naming and describing Katherine in terms of the desert" and describes the desert in terms of her (Emery 210). As he writes about the landscape he obsesses about her "white plain of stomach" and finds himself "unable to remove her body from the page" (Ondaatje 250). He "translate[s] her… into [his] text of the desert" (250). This kind of conflation potentially has very negative connotations, particularly from an ecofeminist viewpoint, but Ondaatje uses the feminisation of nature in two vital ways: to demonstrate Almásy's ethical hypocrisy about ownership, and to illustrate human connectedness with nature.

Almásy insists that the desert he loves "cannot be claimed or owned" (Ondaatje 148). He does not want to possess the shifting landscape in which "nothing [is] strapped down or permanent" (24). In fact, he emphasizes that he hates "ownership" above all else (162). This attack on the concept of ownership and human entitlement is ecologically valuable but it also serves to expose a certain hypocrisy in Almásy as he is violently possessive of the lover he conflates with the desert. He is disdainful of those who try to own landscape but desperately desires to own Katherine (Emery 212). As he makes love to her he thinks "This is my shoulder… not her husband's, this is my shoulder" (Ondaatje 166). Their relationship is violent: she hits him many times, stabs him with a fork, breaks a plate over his head (163); he persistently imagines their relationship in warlike terms, feeling that "she [is] with him or against him" (183). He cannot allow her the same freedom and independence that he allows his beloved desert and must learn that they really are similar, and that he cannot own either. By the end of the novel, the dying Almásy has realised that humans are akin to nature: "seas move away, why not lovers?" (253). He understands, it seems, that the desert and Katherine nourished him in similar ways: she sustained him through intimacy, her body essential to his survival just as, in the desert, "he plucked a thread from the horde of nights and put it into his mouth like food" (261). He finds his humanity through love and nature. He remembers these two things as his only sanity: "two lovers and desert – starlight or moonlight, I don't remember. Everywhere else out there was a war" (186). Vitally, when Katherine dies in the Cave of Swimmers she becomes part of the landscape he believes to be eternal and unconquerable (Emery 212). He paints her body with the colours of the desert cave – ochre, blue, red and saffron – to make her "immune to the human", part of the land he loves (Ondaatje 264). When he finds her dead three years later "her whole body [is] covered in bright pigment. Herbs and stones and light and the ash of acacia… make her eternal" (277).

As he flies away from the cave with her body he cannot distinguish between her bones and the branches he used as splints: “the woman [is] translated into leaves and twigs” (187).

This vision of a human body intertwined with the natural world, to the point where one is indistinguishable from the other, recalls Merleau-Ponty’s question, “Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 138). It is a reminder that in death humans become part of the landscape, part of the ecosystem, the perceived barriers between human flesh and the flesh of the world break down. Why in life do we see these barriers as so concrete when their permeability becomes so obvious in death? In life Almásy imagines Katherine’s body as akin to the desert he loves – he frequently makes comparison between the two – and in death she begins to physically dissolve into the landscape, making obvious the corporeal kinship between body and world which he had perceived and described lovingly before her death. As Marietta says, phenomenology can go a long way to illustrating ecological connections because it enforces the fact that nature “is not something that begins where our skins end” (124). This is a fact Ondaatje makes abundantly clear in this novel, in defiance of the traditional anthropocentric perception of humankind as separate from and superior to the natural world.

It is not only Katherine who is described as being immersed in nature. Landscapes and human bodies converge frequently in *The English Patient.* The portrayal of characters as essentially one with nature, and the often latent spirituality in the novel’s approach to the earth as sacred, aligns it with the deep ecology movement to some extent. As stated in the introduction deep ecology is a form of radical environmentalism which insists on the inherent value of nature and seeks to overthrow anthropocentrism. Deep ecology thinkers stress the organic connectedness of all life forms and claim for humanity an innate spiritual connection with nature (Garrard 22). In the desert Almásy learns to “raise his arms and drag strength into his body from the universe” (9), one of many expressions which aligns perfectly with the philosophy of deep ecologists. In the novel, corporeality and sexuality are emphasised in their ‘naturalness’, the human defined as being part of nature instead of by nation, race, language or sex. Humans are as much part of nature as trees, dunes and rivers (Sadashige 251). Just as branches are described as arms and dunes as a woman’s curves, people are described with nature imagery: bodies have hollows and “cliffs of skin” (Ondaatje 4); a boy dancing is “a line of brown lightning… the clearest of river water” (24); a muddy riverbank has the same texture as a woman’s skin (74); Almásy is an old fir tree, sick and noble on the

edge of a cliff (231), his burnt body "an ebony pool" (50). The river motif is one of the most common: Caravaggio's eyes are "clear as any river, unimpeachable as a landscape" (41); Kip is a "dark brown river" in which Hana loves to be "submerged" (132); Almásy "dives" into Katherine's body (251); people are "plunged into and swum up as if rivers" (277). The water metaphor tends to symbolise a surrendering of subjectivity, openness to empathy and immersion in landscape or another individual. Barriers are therefore broken down not only between humans and nature but also between interacting human bodies.

In an extended description of taking refuge and finding peace in corporeality and nature, Hana says to Kip:

> We have this villa this grass, we should have lain down together, you in my arms, before we died. I wanted to touch that bone at your neck, collarbone, it's like a small hard wing under your skin. I wanted to place my fingers against it. I've always liked flesh the colour of rivers and rocks or like the brown eye of a Susan, do you know what that flower is? ... I want to sleep under this tree, put my eye against your collarbone I just want to close my eyes without thinking of others, want to find the crook of a tree and climb into it and sleep. (109-110)

Hana, more than any of the other characters, persistently seeks healing and peace in the intimacy of human bodies and nature. At times she imagines Kip as an extension of the Indian landscape that is his home; he is "another constellation" whose hair is made up of "wheat and ribbons" with the scent and power of "a thousand equators against his pillow" (230). By portraying characters as part of landscape, and interacting with it, as opposed to dominating it or merely using it as a background upon which to stage human drama, Ondaatje is undermining the anthropocentric world-view which so dominates our attitude towards nature. This is opposed to what Manes laments is normal for twentieth century portrayals of the natural world, wherein nature is imagined as little more than "a hazy backdrop against which the rational human subject struts upon the epistemological stage" (16).

Ronald Hepburn has written about the sharp decline in an aesthetic concern with nature in human culture: he argues that since the Romantic period's view of nature as "educator" and spiritual conduit, the natural world seems to have taken a back seat in literature and other art forms (44). This is problematic not only because it is a symptom of more general disregard for nature but because "when a set of human experiences is ignored in…theory… they tend to be rendered less readily available as experiences: if we cannot find sensible sounding

language in which to describe them… the experiences are felt, in an embarrassed way, as off-the-map; and since off-the-map, seldom visited" (Hepburn 45). I will explore the link between language and perception at a later stage but Hepburn makes a vital point about the influence art can have on our attitude towards nature. By portraying his characters as so thoroughly akin to their natural surroundings, and emphasising the pleasure and wisdom to be found in a sensory interaction with nature, Ondaatje is promoting a phenomenological engagement with the natural environment which, in its instinctive physicality, somewhat defies intellectual or academic theory. Eco-phenomenologists hope to encourage "the rediscovery of a natural world that is inherently and primordially meaningful and worthy of respect" (Brown & Toadvine xx), and that is precisely what Ondaatje achieves with his portrayal of human subjects interacting meaningfully with landscapes which are themselves described in terms of power and agency, rather than as mere backdrops.

The English Patient rewards an ecocritical reading in a number of ways. Apart from frequently allowing nature to intrude on human affairs, and blurring the distinction between human bodies and landscape, the novel grapples with some of the most common and most ecologically dangerous metaphors we use in description of nature. It tackles humankind's destructively anthropocentric world-view by portraying humanity as not only connected with, but occasionally indistinguishable from, landscape. Although possibly unconsciously, the novel draws on both deep ecology and eco-phenomenology by representing an intimate experience of the natural world as valuable and enriching on a number of levels, particularly as a healing force. The chapters on the community of the Villa San Girolamo further illustrate many of these ecologically valuable themes. In fact, the villa provides a sanctuary wherein nature and humanity can grow back together, heal together. It is an Eden of sorts, albeit a fragile and temporary one.

The group who congregate in the ruined villa are all deeply scarred by their experiences during the war. Hana's job as a nurse has traumatised her and there is a sense in the novel that she is rediscovering the beauty and comfort of the human body. She is infinitely tender with Almásy's burnt flesh, and by nursing him she feels a connection with her father who died during the war from burns (Ondaatje 3). Healing is imagined in terms of physical contact more vitally than with conventional medicine. When sleeping with Kip, Hana makes the connection between physical love and healing obvious: she offers him "her tongue instead of a swab, her tooth instead of a needle, her mouth instead of a mask" (132). There is a

desperate urge amongst those in the villa to return to physical innocence and sensuality (though their relationship is intensely physical Hana and Kip never have sex) and this desire is associated strongly with a return to nature. In one of many scenes in which the corporeal is celebrated at the same time as a sensory closeness to the environment, Hana sits in the stone fountain alternately sniffing and touching the stone and her own body as she waits for a flood of water. She is entranced by her skin, loving "the familiarity of it. One's own taste and flavour." Analogously, she feels safe in the cool "cradle of stone" (96). Kip, similarly, is described as "unconsciously in love with his body, with his physicalness" (79). The intimacy between Kip and Hana is powerfully contrasted with the relationship between Almásy and Katherine and seems almost prelapsarian in its frequently silent, innocent physicality and acceptance of otherness. Shin writes that their relationship "imagines… utopian possibilities" and indeed, although it is brief, their union is clearly central to Ondaatje's ethical message (Shin 224).

In fact, it is fair to claim that the villa community is meant to be a kind of small ecotopia. Utopia is a genre of fiction dedicated to the imagining of an ideal society; ecotopia is a subgenre which seeks to create in literature an ecologically ideal society (Kumar 20-25). The term "ecotopia" was coined by Ernest Callenbach in the eponymous novel, which imagines an ecologically sustainable society. While I do not think *The English Patient* could be categorised in either genre, I do find reflections of the tradition in the portrayal of the villa community and I believe that Ondaatje wants the novel to inspire a more ecocentric basis for society. Ondaatje described his novel thus in an interview: "It is a book about very tentative healing among a group of people… [the villa] was an Eden, an escape" (Wachtel qtd in Bolland 30). This utopia, or Eden, begs for connectedness with nature and equality amongst people, an almost pastoral vision in keeping with classical utopias in literature (Kumar 199). The ethical community of the villa is premised on the lack of will to own, dominate and define, an acceptance and affection based on mutual embodiment which encompasses but also extends beyond the young lovers. There is no stain of ownership or the desire to conquer in Hana and Kip's romance: "he never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him" (Ondaatje 135). Caravaggio loves the adult Hana, a stranger to him, more than he loved the little girl she once was; he is not daunted by his lack of knowledge of or influence over her; he can "love [her] more deeply because she [is] made up of nothing he ha[s] provided" (235). His love for her is strikingly selfless and unpossessive.

Just as they seek one another out for the pure pleasure of intimacy these characters all actively pursue closeness to nature with no motivation except the peace and refuge it offers them. Hana spends much of her time in the overgrown garden – in itself an interesting blurring of cultivation and wilderness – and likes to sleep in the rooms which do not have walls so that she can be part of "the drifting landscape of stars, moving clouds" (15). Caravaggio sleeps outdoors sometimes but even lying inside the ruined villa "the moon is on him like skin, a sheaf of water" (33). Kip camps in the garden, only using the tent if it rains, and forages for his food (77). More than dialogue or plot the pages of the novel dedicated to the villa community are intricate descriptions of physicality and nature: the expressions, mannerisms and sensory perceptions of the characters; close attention to weather, light, sound, the texture of the plants, the earth, the smell of rain and so forth. In a memorable section the unexplained, ritualistic passing on of a ladybird is described: Kip finds it in the garden and carries it on his nail to Hana who takes it carefully inside on her wrist and places it on the burnt skin of Almásy, its red vitality against his "volcanic flesh"; not a word is spoken by any of them and no insight is offered into the act (219). A stray mongrel joins their group and lives with them, the close companion of Caravaggio; Hana sniffs the dog's paws, as her father taught her, and finds there a "cathedral" of scents, the best "bouquet" of smells in the world (8). They live mostly off the vegetables that Hana plants and what Kip and Caravaggio forage, becoming very self-contained and isolated from the outside world. Caravaggio notes that whereas during the war none of them could escape being implicated in lies and deception, in the villa "they [can] imitate nothing but what they [are]" (124). In escaping the conventions and restrictions of society they all seem to become more capable of respecting one another and coexisting in harmony with the natural world.

It is apt that the group in the villa are described, during a thunderstorm, as being lit up momentarily by lightning and "flung ironically against th[e] war" (Ondaatje 296). There can be little doubt that they are intended to contrast ironically with the destruction, violence and will to possess which characterises the world at war throughout the novel. The villa itself can be read as a metaphor for European civilization in decay. It is very important in the ecocritical sense that the villa, as the setting for this rather utopian vision, is being slowly overcome by the surrounding natural landscape. It is being transformed, in fact, into "a veritable garden of Eden" (Shin 222). The crumbling old building, once a barracks for soldiers and then a war hospital, becomes more and more part of the landscape and it is possible to read the reclamation of the building by nature as a healing of the damaged

civilization and the deeply scarred human beings that live there. This is in keeping with the portrayal of nature as a healing and educating force in the novel. Bomb craters allow "the moon and rain into the library", birds roost indoors and the plant life intrudes (Ondaatje 8). Almasy's room, with its painted walls, is just "another garden" (3), and Hana treats the wild gardens "like further rooms" (45). There is "little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth" (45). It is implied that nature and human society must heal together, grow back together, for there to be hope in the future.

Ondaatje is not suggesting, however, that this kind of idyllic retreat from human society is truly possible. The period spent in the villa is, ironically, enabled by the war and is a result of its horrors and strange freedoms. Their sojourn in the ecotopia is brief and their community is violently ruptured by Kip's fury at the dropping of the atomic bombs which leads him to realign himself with his own race and nation (301-302). The central relationships in the novel attempt to transcend societal convention and the constructions of race and nation: Kip and Hana's relationship is interracial, Katherine and Almásy's is adulterous, both are transnational (Sadashige 245). Of course, during a period of war these oppositional group identities become both more important and more dangerous. They impose destructively upon the intimacies which develop between characters: Kip retreats back into nation and race under the effects of trauma and severs all bonds with the close community of the villa; only in death can Katherine and Almásy overcome "the boulder they had placed between themselves for some social law neither had believed in" (Ondaatje 183); Almásy is convinced that Madox kills himself "because of nations", because he cannot bear the war (257); Katherine dies partly because Almásy is a foreigner and therefore suspected of being a spy (267).

In fact, a central theme of the novel is the conflict between the public and the personal. Ondaatje unambiguously favours the private over the public and demonstrates frequently the horrors that result when individual desires and freedoms are subsumed by national or racial duties and the bonds of convention. The group in the villa transgresses public demands: Hana defies the army's orders by living in the villa and nursing her patient; Almásy is transgressive in his love affair and his wartime betrayals; Caravaggio, a thief, eventually decides that Almásy's personal reasons for becoming a spy far outweigh his betrayal of the Allies, despite his previous vendetta against such traitors; Kip defies his family's wishes by

joining the army and deciding to fight for the English. Almásy's writings about love centre on its anti-social power: "the heart is an organ of fire" which allows the world to be "smashed, revealed in new light" (104); he desires to "burn down all social rules" with desire (165). He has no respect for the structures of society, the rules, laws and conventions and believes instead in the power of love, passion and nature. It is fitting that it is a group of nomads, "for whom the concept of nation is meaningless", that save Almásy's life and offer brief sanctuary and healing from the war (Bolland 29), and even more fitting that this description can apply to the individuals who share the villa with him as well as the desert tribes who rescue him from the burning plane. Near the end of the novel, in response to the atomic bombs, Hana writes in a letter to Clara: "From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public" (Ondaatje 311). Indeed, the dropping of the bombs brings the issue to a climax in a way, as it is in reaction to the bombing that Kip leaves the villa and the ecotopia is ruptured.

A number of critics have misinterpreted the significance of Kip's realignment with "the brown races of the world" (304) in that they tend to assume that the author supports his sudden affiliation to race and nation. This reading is in conflict with all the central themes of the novel. In his rage and sadness over the bombings Kip turns against his friends in the villa, wrongly blaming them for the actions of the Allies: the unfairness of his accusation is made very clear by the fact that Hana and Caravaggio are Canadian, themselves a colonised people, and the "English Patient", Almásy – whom he nearly shoots – is Hungarian and a traitor to the Allied cause. By falling back on sweeping racial and national identities Kip merely perpetuates the cycle of damage and pain he bemoans: he values the public over the private. While Ondaatje certainly takes this opportunity to utterly condemn the bombings he does not support Kip's reaction. This is further backed up by the significance of the earlier conversation about the painting, *David with the Head of Goliath,* by the artist Caravaggio: in the painting, as Almásy points out, both David and the severed head of Goliath are self-portraits, David is the artist as a young man, and the slain giant has the face of the artist as an old man. When he says that "Kip is [his] David" (123), Almásy somewhat predicts Kip's accusation of him; he also makes it clear that the judgement is tragically misguided in that it is youth judging age without recognising its own mortality and flawed humanity, without recognising itself. In an attempt to defy the patronising expectations of colonialism Kip becomes exactly what his family and nation decree he ought to be: he moves from one

oppositional group identity to another and fails to challenge the valuation of public expectation over individual freedom.

Ondaatje's answer to the horrors wrought by such societal constructs and oppositional group identities is a rediscovery of corporeal ethics and a reconnection with the earth. The very concept of the self as a separate and autonomous entity, in the Cartesian sense, must be broken down for humanity to re-embrace nature and one another. It may seem ironic that a novel can propound both individual freedom and yet romanticise the desire to dissolve subjectivity, to celebrate the anonymity of physicality, to meld with landscape or loved companions. Yet it must be understood that this desire to be coextensive with others and nature is itself in defiance of societal convention – it is the ultimate transgression of anthropocentric social expectations, and the war-time emphasis placed on national and cultural identity and allegiance. Almásy claims that in the desert he came to hate nations, that the desert "taught" him that people are "deformed by nation-states" (147). The group of explorers, ethical forerunners of the villa community, realise their insignificance in the vast landscape but also realise their connectedness with it: "all of us… wished to remove the clothing of our countries… We disappeared into landscape" (148). They abandon the superficial cultural constructions of identity in favour of community born of shared interest and love for the desert.

There are moments of unabashed celebration of physicality in the novel: the individuals in the villa "come into triumphant possession of themselves" in simple games (Bolland 37), like Hana's hopscotch, the night spent dancing, and the acrobatic game of hide and seek shared by the young lovers. The natural joy in embodiment is tempered, however, by the above-mentioned desire to dissolve subjectivity and become part of beloved landscapes and companions. Almost all the central characters experience a desperate urge to dissolve their corporeal boundaries, abandon their subjectivity, and become one with nature and with other people (Shin 221). The emphasis on the unashamed exchange of fluids in the novel is indicative of this desire for connections with others as well as being a celebration of human 'naturalness' in defiance of convention and taboo: the patient is given the gift of a young boy's semen in the desert (Ondaatje 24); he is sustained by dates chewed for him by others and he gratefully consumes their saliva along with the food (6); he and Katherine unabashedly taste each other's sexual fluids, tears, sweat and blood (185). Equally, the body becomes a site of resistance in the novel: in contrast to the physical suffering caused by war

(Caravaggio's mutilated hands, Almásy's burnt flesh, and Madox's suicide) the characters seem determined not only to celebrate their physicality and sexuality but also to mark each other with passion (Bolland 38-39). Almásy and Katherine, in particular, claim each other's bodies with "a list of wounds" (Ondaatje 163). As Almásy comes to realize, humankind are marked not only by people but by nature, are deeply connected with nature and one another, and do themselves and the earth a terrible disservice when they assume control of nature and fellow humanity, when they label, classify and claim ownership:

> We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography – to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. (277)

The English Patient illustrates both the destructiveness on nature of the human will to conquer, dominate and possess, and the human potential for an ethical engagement with the earth through an understanding of phenomenological connectedness. It is a celebration of human physicality and sensuality and of the joy to be found in community and commune with the natural world. Although he valorises the private and the personal, the villa ecotopia proves that there is nothing misanthropic about the novel: Ondaatje's attempt to imagine a world in which humans can exist in communal harmony is based firmly in an ethics of corporeal empathy and physical affinity with the earth. He condemns the cultural construction of difference and the human will to power, both of which are seen to tragically disrupt the relationships in the novel and result in the divorce from and destruction of nature as well as people. Into this fray, however, the theme of language is constantly introduced in a very complex manner. On the one hand: a profound mistrust of naming and labelling is manifested in accordance with the desire to dissolve categories of difference and abolish destructive forms of ownership; language is side-stepped in an attempt to access experience and nature corporeally; and the sublime and illegible is celebrated. On the other hand: literature is celebrated for its encouragement of empathy; art is that which renders humanity eternal and has potential to bring humanity closer to nature; and, of course, it is in words that Ondaatje communicates his themes of corporeality and human connection with nature.

In many ways *The English Patient* is a novel about names and naming. The title is itself misleading, a misnomer in fact, as the patient is not English. Katherine dies partly because Almásy, in his possessiveness of her, will not give the soldiers her real name but insists she is his wife (Ondaatje 266). This is significant not just because it is the tragedy which fully exposes the folly of Almásy's sense of ownership of his lover, but because it demonstrates just how important the name itself is to him, as a symbol of her belonging to another. Vitally, Clifton's name would have resulted in immediate aid. It is not surprising, then, that Almásy is content to allow his own name and identity to be mistaken after his burning: apart from the fact that his true name would lead to his arrest as a war criminal, he has come to dislike names and labels.

Perhaps the most important name in the novel, however, is Kirpal Singh. Kirpal is given the nickname "Kip" by fellow soldiers who are mocking and patronising him – though he fails to realise this and happily adopts the shortening as a sign of affection – at this moment "the young sikh… [is]… translated into a salty English fish" (93-94). His name is domesticated and trivialised and in the process his identity is *translated*: he becomes more English, and abandons his proud Indian name. Only at the end of the novel, in his anger and grief over the bombings, does he reclaim his name at the same time, aptly, as he strips off his insignia and deserts the English army: "His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here" (305). It is because he can label Almásy as English that he feels suddenly capable of killing his friend. Of course, by labelling the patient, he labels himself: the power relations of colonialism are enforced by such classifications, so that by insisting on his "Asian" identity he not only reinforces his position of dependency but is also guilty of positioning all the "brown races" of the world and all the "white nations" in a deadlock of racial opposition (304). The reader knows that the patient is not English, "our non-conceptual knowledge of Almásy foregrounds the referential inadequacy of the word 'English', the infinite and therefore ironic distance between the sign and that to which it purports to refer" (Marais 109). Kip is being acted upon by language – he is a victim of the "essencing", divisive tendency of the symbolic realm (109).

Kip's assimilation into English culture, symbolised by his renaming, runs parallel to the colonial need to domesticate and control foreign landscapes through exploration, mapping and labelling. There is ample evidence of this tendency in *The English Patient*. The first thing Geoffrey Clifton – the embodiment of civilised, upper-class England – does, when he

steps off his plane in the desert, is christen the place he has landed, with no knowledge of whether the camp has a name already: "I name this site the Bir Messaha Country Club" (151). Almásy describes himself as a man governed by words, a man obsessed, as an explorer, with "rumours and legends. Charted things. Shards written down." (245). The link between cartography and language is made very clear: both are a means of mapping and categorising, they work hand in hand. Naming (or renaming) places is to claim ownership. For colonists "language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established" (Ashcroft et al 7). Essentially, colonisation can be seen as an act of translation: renaming and remapping a landscape and categorising and redefining local traditions is an act of domestication and familiarisation; a new language brings with it new value-judgements and associations. Almásy is atypical in his distaste for the naming which usually accompanies exploration and cartography:

> *Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf.* I didn't want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert.
> Still, some wanted their mark there. On that dry watercourse, 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. But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. (Ondaatje 148)

Exploration was not an innocent pastime by any means. Almásy's motives appear to be 'pure' in the sense that he admires and respects the landscapes he explores but, as Joseph Conrad complained some decades earlier, the majority of explorers were "self-serving empire builders" who plundered the environment they charted (White 101).

Language and colonialism were connected well beyond the efforts of cartographers to render the unknown familiar and tame. Kip recounts how Indian recruits to the British army were physically labelled with yellow chalk on their skin to state their health, profession, suggested rank and the like (Ondaatje 212-213). Bodies were mapped just as landscapes were. Ondaatje makes this connection clear by frequently using cartographical metaphors when describing bodies. As Marais puts it, the colonial racialization of the human body reduced the colonised body to "a sign in a discursive system" (94), something which could be charted, categorised and controlled. Violence is enabled by this act of labelling: "through its

inscription of difference, language, the bearer of discourse and ideology, denies the specificity and therefore commonality of the other person's body" (Marais 97). Derrida sees naming of all kinds as a form of violence which consists in inscribing difference, "in classifying" and thereby claiming knowledge and control of the other (*Of Grammatology* 112). The English language was itself a tool of conquest as it was sought after by those colonised subjects who desired to emulate those in power, generally the local elite, so that the language of the colonisers became a symbol of status and education (Ashcroft et al 4). It is telling that Kip practises his English pronunciation and is self-conscious about getting it correct (Ondaatje 199). Colonial administrators likewise "discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education" (Viswanathan qtd in Ashcroft et al 3). Kip is undoubtedly correct to cite books, histories and printing presses as the tools of colonial power (Ondaatje 301).

While colonialism makes use of language to categorise and dominate, the rhetoric and propaganda of World War Two similarly breeds mistrust of language amongst the central characters of the novel. Caravaggio's job requires the invention of fictional spies and double agents to mislead the enemy, elaborate fictions which purposefully cloud the distinction between language and reality (Bolland 35). Caravaggio lives under circumstances in which "everything offered up to those around him [is] a lie" (Ondaatje 124), until he reaches the villa where all the characters shed their war-time disguises and lies, "shedding skins" until only their true selves remain (124). It is not surprising, considering his past, that Caravaggio is suspicious of language, as he says himself: "Talkers seduce, words direct us into corners" (128). Hana also has only disgust for propaganda and those that spread it. Having worked with wounded and dying soldiers throughout the war, she condemns the myths of glory and patriotism that accompany the war effort:

> Every damn general should have had my job. Every damn general. It should have been a prerequisite for any river crossing… I could never believe in all those services they gave for the dead. Their vulgar rhetoric. How dare they! How dare they talk like that about a human being dying. (89)

Madox shoots himself mid-jingoistic sermon in church, the implication being that he cannot live with such violent rhetoric. It is an act of protest made more appropriate by the fact that he uses his "desert revolver", the gun from the place where Almásy claims they learned to hate nations (255).

The wartime context and anti-colonial sentiment add greatly to the theme of suspicion of language in the novel. There is, moreover, an awareness of how words influence perception which can be read as a creative expression of Ferdinand de Saussure's theories about language. Saussure argues that words, far from being neutral, are heavily loaded with the value-systems and cultural beliefs of the linguistic community in which they are used. Meaning is therefore derived through social contract (Saussure 961). One of the implications of this theory is that different languages, or different cultural milieus, will lead to different perceptions of reality and, arguably, endanger the possibility of true understanding between people of different countries and languages. The community of the Villa – hailing from Canada, India and Hungary – conquer this problem, seemingly unconsciously, by developing corporeal means of communication as outlined above. They relate to one another through the universal experience of physical pleasure, pain, fear of death and sensory perception. It is significant that these sorts of intensely physical experiences are often difficult to express in language. They are the basis of the 'anonymous' bedrock of human experience which Merleau-Ponty believes connects us through physical generality.

Words, invested as they are with cultural associations, also significantly influence how human beings relate to landscape. As the natural world is named and mapped, landscape is inscribed with history and association. It is perfectly apt that Almásy remembers his childhood home of cultivated gardens as "a fully named world", familiar and culturally predictable (Ondaatje 22); whereas, the desert he explores is, as Katherine puts it, "a half-invented world" which shrugs off the names it is given and cannot be fully known (160). Whereas Katherine delights in words for the way they order reality, Almásy recognises the influence they have on perception with mistrust: "She had always wanted words, she loved them, grew up on them. Words gave her clarity, brought reason, shape. Whereas I thought words bent emotions like sticks in water" (253). Of course, Almásy himself is deeply imbedded within the traditional discourses and verbal associations of the desert landscape he so loves. Ondaatje uses the desert's traditional cultural associations to provide the ideal setting for Almásy's spiritual awakening.

Almásy's perception of the desert is by no means an original one. The desert has been commonly associated with the sublime, with theological wisdom, with silence. Through Almásy, Ondaatje is tapping into a long-established tradition of desert writing (Jasper 157).

Apart from being a fitting landscape to challenge and remould a person, the desert is the ideal natural setting with which to expose the inadequacy of language. It is a land of shifting sand, mirage and changeability: the desert exposes the futility and arrogance of attempting to name and define. As Almásy points out, the desert has erased the "hundred shifting names" it has been given over the centuries, it has erased the history of the peoples who have traversed and inhabited it (Ondaatje 148). The landscape, furthermore, is the centre of Almásy's apparent transformation from colonial explorer to a man yearning to dissolve his subjectivity and be marked by nature and love. In a manner, his quest is to become like his beloved desert in that the landscape represents all that cannot be named and owned. He desires to move beyond the imposed boundaries of nation and culture and "erase [his] name", as the desert has taught him (148). It is ironic that it is Almásy, a cartographer, who cherishes the desert for its resistance to being ordered by human consciousness and language. Instead of leaving his mark on the desert it is he who is marked by nature: Almásy becomes the English Patient, a figure of alterity, an enigma with no name, "a man with no face" (50). Vitally, Ondaatje seems to suggest that Almásy learns to slip the bonds of not only nation and social convention but language itself:

> It was as if he had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller… The place they had come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry. (261-262)

By slipping between "land and chart" Almásy can surely be understood, insofar as it is possible, to be transcending the constructed human interpretation of landscape and experiencing nature as it really is without anthropocentric bias (261). He achieves "pur[ity]" of observation: in this liminal desert space, "unconscious" of the human perceptual baggage that comes with culture and language, the group in the desert can "be their best selves" (262). The desert cleanses Almásy of his violent will to possess his lover, and teaches him that nation and family name can be limiting forces which create conflict where none should exist.

Simpson has noted that the overgrown Villa san Girolamo, like the desert, is characterised by tropes of illegibility, that both landscapes defy human order and create a sublime atmosphere (qtd in Bolland 47). To an extent this is true but the preoccupation with books and reading in the villa community also provides ample example of the positive influence literature can have on human behaviour. Although Ondaatje is at pains to draw attention to the potential

destructiveness of language, his portrayal thereof is anything but purely negative. In her pain Hana is partly reliant on the books in the villa and reads voraciously: her reading constitutes "half her world" (Ondaatje 7). Her literary experiences affirm the theme of empathy and, ironically, even that of corporeal empathy. The descriptions of Hana reading could be seen as lessons from Ondaatje in how novels should be read. Firstly, reading is not simply a cerebral experience but a physical one: Hana's corporeal response to books is emphasised when she spends minutes concentrating on the texture of a novel's pages and delights in "brush[ing] her hand over its skin" (7). More important, however, is the literature's encouragement of surrendering subjectivity and experiencing empathy. Ondaatje is suggesting a more hopeful relationship between people, and between people and nature, through an ethics of corporeal empathy based on an understanding of ecological humility and shared embodiment, and the literature read in the villa is a catalyst for this empathetic growth. Hana feels that she is entering new worlds when she reads and she empathises deeply with the characters she encounters:

> She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others… her body full of sentences and moments, as if awakening from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams. (Ondaatje 13)

The word "immersed" suggests a continuation of the water metaphor repeatedly used to convey a sharing of subjectivity and corporeal empathy between people in the novel (she later describes herself as "submerged" in Almásy's handwriting (104)). It is also important that her reaction to leaving the story is described in physical terms of heaviness and awakening from sleep as this demonstrates the extent of her involvement in the novel and also ties in to the theme of embodiment as a basis for ethical progress. Her experience of identifying with the lives of others affects her physically. In a continuation of Hana's insistence that literature transports her into other worlds we see her describing a pile of already read novels as "landscapes [she and Almásy] have already walked through" (99). She feels that she travels physically "with" characters like Kipling's Kim, surrendering to an extent her own subjectivity (99).

Mike Marais states that Hana and Caravaggio can be seen as the ideal 'readers' in the novel. Hana is idealised because she reads corporeally, allowing the stories to physically affect her and seemingly disrupting the symbolic power of language by escaping her "linguistically inscribed position" in favour of a corporeal and singular experience of physical empathy

(110). Caravaggio, on the other hand, is portrayed as the 'reader' of Almásy's story as it is he who tries to piece together his narrative and make sense of his wartime history – at one stage the patient asks Caravaggio if he is "just a book" to him (Ondaatje 269). Caravaggio, who was tortured during the war, has a clear agenda in interrogating the patient; he is determined to discover if he is indeed Almásy, the Nazi collaborator partly responsible for his maiming. He is therefore predisposed to despise the patient. However, as he listens to the story of the burnt body he comes to relate to Almásy in a corporeal, empathetic manner which gradually undermines his preconceptions and his own symbolic opposition to the patient as a wartime traitor (Marais 108). As Marais puts it:

> In addressing Caravaggio as a body, Almásy's narrative has asserted the primacy of its teller's body rather than what that body signifies within a cultural matrix… [Caravaggio's] actions are now inspired by his sense of Almásy's singularity rather than by language's essencing. (108)

This escape of the divisive realm of wartime discourse is once again a triumph of the personal over the public and of an ethics of corporeal empathy over the potentially distancing effect of language. It enables Caravaggio to defend Almásy – his assumed enemy – from Kip's attack, and to state near the end of the novel that "It no longer matters which side [the patient] was on during the war" (Ondaatje 267). The ideal reader of the novel must, like Hana and Caravaggio, be capable of responding viscerally and corporeally to the text.

Reading as thematic in *The English Patient* is extensively enriched by intertextuality. Ondaatje's allusions to other works not only complement his themes but offer a clue to his apparent ambivalence on the language issue. The novel evinces unmistakable mistrust in labels, in oppositional rhetoric, in narrow discourse and authoritative versions of history: in addition to promoting an ethics of corporeal empathy which sidesteps language, it encourages a dialogue between written works which allows for a challenging of narrow discourse. For example, *The English Patient* clearly positions itself in opposition to the colonial discourse of *Kim*: Hana actually writes Kip's associations of the guns and cannons in the Lahore museum into the copy of Kipling's novel, which has a different version of their history (Ondaatje 125). Herodotus's *Histories* is a very appropriate book for Almásy to cherish, not just because of its desert passages, but because it is a famously dubious historical record which draws on oral accounts and local stories, thus defying an authoritative version of events (Bolland 50). Herodotus also "provides a perspective on the transience of empire and of national and cultural identities" (50), which is why Almásy can claim that the explorers

"knew power and great finance were temporary things" because they all slept with Herodotus (Ondaatje 151). Almásy loves Herodotus's penchant for seeking out "the supplementary to the main argument" (126). However, as evidenced by the voracious reading of fiction amongst the villa community, the novel form is portrayed as ideal in that it makes few promises about truth or fact, ideally ensuring that its "readers [are] never fully in balance" because fiction includes "hesitation or chaos" (99). And, of course, fiction encourages imaginative sympathy more readily than impersonal historical accounts. Intertextuality in *The English Patient* is a substantial topic but for the purposes of this thesis suffice it to say that Ondaatje makes it clear that literature can have great capacity to encourage good, thereby undermining any assertion that he thinks language is inherently a negative force. Rather, he condemns propaganda, and encourages a questioning and interrogation of certain traditional discourses.

This is why Almásy can point out that labels cannot form the measure of character, and that words often mean nothing, in the same paragraph that he celebrates the words which have governed his life as an explorer and a man (Ondaatje 245). It seems that language is something to be questioned, mistrusted and interrogated but, at the same time, is an indelible part of being human and has equal potential for good. When Katherine lashes out at Almásy for being "inhuman" it is because of his hatred "of being owned, of being named" (253). She is a character who delights in words and stories. It is Katherine's voice reciting poetry that Almásy claims to first fall in love with (153); later he adds that he fell in love "with the help of an anecdote", the story of Candaules and Gyges that Katherine tells in the desert (249). He admires as well that she grows after her marriage through enthusiastic reading, a "self-education" which Almásy finds "wondrous" (244). Despite his hatred of labels, Almásy actually loves language: as the English Patient in the villa he experiences Hana's reading to him as a source of almost physical nourishment: "swallowing her words like water" (5). Madox, the man who kills himself listening to a sermon glorifying war, is someone who lived his life enthralled by the written word, a man Almásy describes as forever writing or reading (258). Hana, who rages against propaganda, is similarly sustained by reading.

More importantly, it is through art that humankind seeks immortality and comes to terms with death: Hana finally deals with her father's death by describing it in a letter to Clara, enshrining the moment in writing, sharing her memories of him (311); when Almásy makes Katherine "eternal" by painting her with the colours of the desert he knows that "a colourful

fluid, a song, a rock drawing" can have incredible power (264). In his symbolic burial of Katherine, celebrating her oneness with the earth, Almásy's actions are both ecologically and culturally profound because she is commemorated as being part of the earth as well as in words and in art. In Ondaatje's work ecological humility and language are not necessarily oppositional forces, although he is at pains to point out how destructive words can be on our perception of, and treatment of, nature and one another. Similarly, although an ethics of corporeal empathy is encouraged and celebrated as a means to better relations between humankind, and humans and the natural world, it is portrayed as something which should complement and improve linguistic communication rather than replace language altogether. Hana and Kip are somewhat adept at communicating as embodied beings but they still delight in talking, their physical and verbal communication complement each other to the extent that they become almost indistinguishable: "In the tent there have been nights of no talk and nights full of talk… The intimacy of her body or the body of her language in his ear…" (287). Ondaatje, by reinserting the body into the text – by frequently describing physical sensations and insisting on corporeal responses – attempts to "lesson the limiting influence of language on [the reader's] capacity to sympathize" (Marais 95). But he does not advocate an abandonment of language. Culture and nature are intertwined – their traditional binary opposition is undermined.

Of course, Ondaatje, as a novelist, can hardly be accused of arguing against language as a form of communication without seeming hypocritical. Although *The English Patient* emphasises the frequent failures of language, and the dangers inherent in believing we can linguistically order the world, this message is communicated very effectively in language. I have shown above that his thematic mistrust of language is conditional and subtle and does not deny its potential use for good or its capacity for beauty. As befits an author dealing with such themes there are a number of ways that Ondaatje's own style of writing defies traditional associations, harmful rhetoric and authoritative claims to truth. The novel is written in highly figurative language – Ondaatje admits that a lot of his best poetry went into its construction (Bolland 62). What is most pertinent to this discussion is the originality of Ondaatje's style because, as Bolland points out, the "unexpectedness" of the imagery works to "force the reader to visualise the scene with attentiveness and precision" instead of falling back on preconceived or familiar impressions (62 - 63). This sort of freshness of description and use of figurative language and elaborate poetic description serves to emphasise the artificiality and constructed nature of the novel form: Ondaatje is not attempting to "give

direct access to reality" through language (63). Moreover, by frequently switching focalising perspective he emphasises the multi-faceted and subjective nature of experience and undermines the presumption that an authoritative version of history can exist (63-64). As a result of the clear biases and confusion displayed by his characters the brief sections which are written in a traditionally historical, authoritative, third-person mode stand out stiffly in opposition to the rest of the novel due to their claims to truth, fact and chronology (65). For instance, the factual history of bomb disposal units in England is far less revealing than Kip's account of his experiences in said units (Ondaatje 194-195).

Ondaatje also frequently draws attention to word use in the novel. As Caravaggio stands naked in the process of burgling the manor house he muses on the word "thinking", proposing to himself that it should be "thinkering", because the extra syllable suggests the act of "collecting a thought" (39). Caravaggio concludes that "words are tricky things", but what the episode really reveals is that words are arbitrary, disconnected from reality (39), as the structuralists insist. In another instance Almásy dissects the word "Libya":

> *The deserts of Libya*. Remove politics, and it is the loveliest phrase I know. *Libya*. A sexual, drawn-out word, a coaxed well. The *b* and the *y*. Madox said it was one of the few words in which you heard the tongue turn a corner. (emphasis in original 273)

The condition that political associations be removed from the word for it to be fully appreciated is very telling. Ondaatje seems to be attempting to coax his readers into a depoliticised, fresh interpretation of words, a realisation of language's possible shortcomings as a form of communication, and an understanding of ecological humility and corporeal empathy which can supplement our flawed linguistic system.

In addition to the stylistic defiance of conventionality, and the thematic questioning of the signifying power of words, Ondaatje could be said to gesture frequently towards the inexpressible, the unsayable, the sublime, in this novel. Almásy's story is ultimately about loss, and the telling of it is an act of "inconsolable mourning", an attempt to conjure, through narrative and memory, that which is absent (Marais 107). Through the frequent allusion to physical sensations – desire, pain, death – which are difficult to express linguistically, and through the ultimate failure of narrative to console the patient, the novel "ceaselessly points to a failure of denotation" (107). "The language of the tale ultimately speaks not of that which it seeks to present but of its inability to do so", and this emphasis on the unspeakable

and inexpressible "gives the story its ability to affect the reader corporeally" (107). This applies not only to traumatic events like Caravaggio's torture and Almásy's loss, but also to the treatment of the natural environment in the novel which frequently gestures towards the sublime, as described above. We experience the sublime "whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding… words fail and points of comparison disappear" (Shaw 2). The sublime is a complex term with an extensive literary history but can be loosely understood as that which makes the individual lose control of their constructed reality, the moments when perception exceeds language. It is important, however, that although most conceptions of the sublime define it as an experience which transcends and defies linguistic expression, many inspired by the Romantic tradition insist that poetry can express the sublime, or at least gesture towards it (and that some poetry can itself be conceived of as sublime) due to its defiance of convention and engagement of the imaginative and empathetic capacities of the reader. The poetic, unexpected nature of Ondaatje's prose may be said to gesture towards that which is conventionally unsayable or inexpressible.

As Thomas Weiskel says, "The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human – God or the gods, the daemon or Nature – is matter for great disagreement" (qtd in Bloom 1). In this novel Ondaatje's characters' seem to be confronted often with experiences that transcend or challenge their world views and linguistic capacities – it is at such moments that they resort to embodied communication – and what seems to lie beyond the narrow conception of the human self in this novel is the conviction of belonging to a vast symbiotic system of nature which envelops and supports them. Almásy's experience of the desert is described in terms associated with the sublime. Although he rails against the disrespect of soldiers in the desert who destroy the landscape "with no sense of what it [is]" (Ondaatje 273), he cannot himself express what the desert "is". It is a place which affects him profoundly with its potential to heal and educate, but the overriding impression is one of inexpressible awe for a force which renders him insignificant and speechless, but at the same time incorporates him, appeals to his spirit. And it is not just the natural landscape of the desert that inspires such awe, and that has the potential to expand and challenge the human mind. In the descriptions of landscape, of intense physical experience, of pain and trauma and love "we shall have encountered in the text the trace of that which exceeds language, of what remains after signification has occurred" (Marais 108).

To conclude, Almásy has ample reason, good and bad, to caution: “Words… They have a power” (249). Upon examination there is no paradox in Ondaatje’s treatment of language. *The English Patient* is thematically concerned with the destructive potential of language, particularly colonial discourse, wartime propaganda and rhetoric, and the limiting and divisive tendencies of national, ancestral or racial labels and categorisations. This warning is tempered, however, by an awareness of the potential beauty of language and its capacity to encourage empathy and understanding. The novel itself is an example of the positive usage of language and can certainly be said to reward an ecocritical reading in the sense that the literary interrogation of language, and encouragement of ecological humility through derision of anthropocentric bias, is valuable. The villa ecotopia combines corporeal empathy, an affinity with nature, and a love of literature and words, to create an ethical community which suggests a growing back together of nature and culture to produce healing. Moreover, the novel, through both form and theme, gestures towards that which exceeds language, that which exceeds our human ability to categorise and explicate, and in so doing encourages a sense of respect and awe for phenomenological human experience and the natural environment.

CHAPTER TWO:
Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

> The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world. (Glen Love "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism")

All ecocriticism "shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty xix). The second novel this thesis will investigate, *The Hungry Tide*, is nothing if not a narrative exploration of the various intersections of culture and nature. Set in the unique ecosystem of the Sundarbans, Christopher Rollason describes the novel as:

> [an] exploration of the vast field of human communication, testing both its possibilities and its limits as the characters seek to cross multiple barriers – the barriers of language, religion and social class, those between human beings and nature, between traditional and cosmopolitan India, between urban and rural, between India and the wider world. (2)

The joint consideration of the limitations of language as a means of communication, and of human interaction with nature, make Amitav Ghosh's novel an ideal example of a contemporary author grappling with literature's potential to address ecological issues. Rollason also demonstrates that this novel, like *The English Patient*, evinces a desire for "less polarised and more dialogic frames of being" (9). In addition, the two novels have an exploration of corporeal empathy and physical reciprocity in common. However, although they share many basic themes, Ghosh's ecological agenda is far more overt and forceful.

It is clear that Ghosh is well versed in current ecological theory and his alignment of ecological responsibility with social justice is the result of a thorough exploration of the livelihood-versus-ecology debate. In many ways the novel can be read as a fictional thought-experiment delving into the intricacies of these issues. Ghosh explores the intersection of ecological and social issues through various personalities, including American environmentalist Piya, social activist Nilima, Marxist intellectual Nirmal, local fisherman Fokir, and cosmopolitan businessman Kanai, as well as documenting the collective plight of the struggling local inhabitants of the tide country (Kaur 132). Through these varying personalities Ghosh explores humankind's place in nature and the means by which we understand and interact with our natural environment and with one another. This chapter will

begin with an examination of the novel's treatment of nature and its ecological dimension, followed by an exploration of Ghosh's use of utopias/ecotopias. Finally, it will analyse the ecocritical significance of the translation and communication theme, questioning whether Ghosh manages to render compatible his medium and his ecological perspective.

The Hungry Tide offers a complex approach to the natural world informed by a number of different tropes and traditions which I will briefly evaluate. The hostility of the natural environment of the Sundarbans towards humankind is emphasised, as is a sublime mixture of terror and beauty reminiscent of the Romantics. The different perspectives and experiences of the focalising characters allow for multiple representations of the Sundarbans environment, ranging from the pastoral to the violent. The landscape's danger for humanity is stressed frequently: "At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence… of its determination to destroy or expel them" (Ghosh 8). The mangroves and the waterways are equally frightening: the dense foliage tough and impenetrable and the air fetid (7-8); the water silted, making any sense of direction when submerged impossible, and full of vicious and unpredictable currents (54). The storms and cyclones are terrifying: a primal natural violence, as inevitable as it is unpredictable, which reminds the human inhabitants of the tide country of their basic insignificance. Humanity's hold on this landscape is precarious to say the least. For instance, the island of Lusibari, at high tide, is described as "a flimsy saucer that could tip over at any moment and go circling down into the depths" (37). Life is lived at the sufferance of the *bãdh*, or embankment, protecting the island from the tides (59). Notably, however, the descriptions of danger, hostility and instability are invariably paired with descriptions of beauty. Nirmal expresses this sublime awe through Rilke: "*beauty is nothing/ but the start of terror we can hardly bear,/ and we adore it because of the serene scorn/ it could kill us with*" (68-69). The novel's portrayal of the terrifying power of nature and the ultimate fragility of the human state should serve to encourage ecological humility and respect for nature. There is a sense that the natural environment will ultimately prevail against the paltry attempts of humankind to tame and harness it. As Nirmal says, "the waters must prevail, later if not sooner" against the fragile defences humanity has built (206).

The power, adaptability and endurance of the natural environment in the novel has been most capably explored by Rajender Kaur, who has written an impressive article on Ghosh's treatment of the natural world titled "'Home Is Where the Orcaella Are': Toward a New Paradigm of Transcultural Ecocritical Engagement in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*". In

this article Kaur concentrates on Ghosh's view of nature as "ever changing and mutable" (137). Ghosh persistently emphasises both the timelessness and endless adaptability of the tide country. As Kaur puts it, the choice of the Sundarbans setting is vital because it demonstrates both the "trans-historical vistas of 'deep time' and the mutability of nature" in that some of the islands have lasted millennia while others appear and disappear on a daily basis (Kaur 127). The novel says of the vast archipelago of islands that form the tide country:

> some are immense and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago… the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable… There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily (6-7).

Human history is quickly expunged in this landscape: "the speciality of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonise land; they erase time" (Ghosh 50). The tide country defies the human urge to dominate or control nature. Ghosh invokes the "deep time of geology" as a useful way to provide perspective: by "foregrounding the unimaginably vast vistas of the earth's history, both in terms of time and space, 'deep time' provides a salutary distancing perspective on contemporary political conflicts and hostilities" (Kaur 126). In other words, it serves to encourage humility by emphasising how short-lived and transient the human experience is. Ghosh is well aware of the aptness of his setting to his themes, as made apparent in an interview in which he affirmed the significance of the transgressive, liminal nature of the landscape, ever unstable and transforming, yet enduring (Ferdous & Rutsch 49). As with Ondaatje's use of the desert in *The English Patient*, the tide country setting is appropriate to a novel concerned with the negotiating of various boundaries and barriers. The landscape embodies one of Nirmal's favourite quotations from Rainer Maria Rilke: "*Life is lived in transformation*" (Ghosh 225).

The persistent theme of human transience and instability within a dangerous natural environment includes the proximity of predatory animals in the landscape. Kaur feels that animals such as the tiger can be seen as forces of nature warring with humanity: the tiger attacking the village is the "Blakean archetype of an awesome natural force that is amoral", and its war with the enraged villagers is a fight for basic survival which goes "beyond socialized spaces to hint at the elemental" (136). However, although there can be no doubt of

the occasional hostility of the natural world towards humankind, Ghosh's approach to nature, and animals, is far more subtle than a simple enforcement of human humility and awe. It would be detrimental to the ecological tenor of the novel if nature and humanity were arrayed in permanent violent opposition. It is through animals, primarily, that Ghosh is able to demonstrate the basic interconnectedness of all living creatures. The fear and struggle for survival embodied by the tigers, crocodiles, sharks and snakes in the Sundarbans is therefore tempered by examples of symbiosis and kinship between humankind and other animals. Piya speaks of her experience of dolphins and men fishing together in the Irrawaddy River as a "remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals" (Ghosh 169). Fokir has likewise learnt that following the Orcaella will likely lead him to good fishing sites (307). During the climactic cyclone, when Piya and Fokir are resting in the tree in the eye of the storm, they feel a kinship with the exhausted birds that rest with them, and even with the tiger they see who gazes at them briefly – they are all experiencing the battle for survival against the elements together (389). They share in both the bounty and dangers of the natural environment, which nourishes and supports life as well as threatening and sometimes destroying it. In their thatched huts the tide country people live in very close proximity to a mass of other animals. The young Kanai lies in bed listening to the battle for survival going on in his roof at night, divided from him only by netting (89). This is one of many examples of humans living with a strong awareness of their humble place within a vast system of interconnected living things.

Rollason feels that Ghosh encourages a cooperative ecological relationship between humans and other animals by subverting the basic themes of Melville's *Moby Dick* through Piya's relationship with the dolphins. Ahab's will to power and domination over nature is rewritten more hopefully in Piya's desire to preserve and understand the natural world - her willingness to die for her dolphins of course contrasts strongly with his vengeful quest to kill the great whale. As Rollason puts it,

> It is as if Ghosh were reversing Melville by seeking in his text the essence of a non-confrontational, cooperative relationship between humanity and nature… Ghosh is edging his readership away from Melville's heroic-confrontational mode, centred on the nineteenth-century Western notion of the mastery of nature, towards a different kind of human insertion into the natural world. (Rollason 8)

This is based on a somewhat simplistic reading of Melville, but Rollason makes a useful point about the novel's encouragement of recognition of human participation in natural

ecosystems, as opposed to an anthropocentric arrogance and will to dominate. Much of this theme is explored through Piya's growth as a character and her gradual realisation that she is part of the natural systems she studies, rather than merely an observer of them. Crabs are the "sanitation department" of the mangroves – the keystone species of the entire ecosystem – and by reflecting on the indispensability of these small, apparently dull creatures, Piya makes an interesting observation about the human propensity to imagine oneself separate from the environment:

> She had thought of these concepts – keystone species, biomass – as ideas that applied to things other than herself. To nature, in short – for who was it who had said that the definition of 'nature' was that it included everything not formed by human intention? (Ghosh 142)

She gradually sees that the crabs are highly significant to her life, that perhaps, as the zodiac would have her believe, the humble crab rules her destiny (142). The crabs, in a fundamental way, ensure her survival by maintaining the mangroves ecosystem.

On a less positive note, however, the novel also presents a motif of human estrangement from our natural context. Animals are also instrumental in demonstrating this theme. The novel suggests that the other animals no longer understand humans, that they can sense that we have set ourselves outside of, and in opposition to, nature. Again, the words of Rilke are introduced by Nirmal: animals "*already know by instinct/ we're not comfortably at home/ in our translated world"* (206). The implication is that humans are condemned to destroy their own natural environment, and themselves in the process, due to their failure to understand and appreciate their interconnection with, and dependency on, their ecosystems. This vital theme will be explored further when the question of language is discussed but it is important to mention at this juncture as it contributes to the novel's depiction of environmental degradation through human irresponsibility and greed.

Ghosh says that the environmental decline in the Sundarbans in his lifetime has been very obvious and very shocking (Ferdous & Rutsch 51). Birdlife, fish and crabs, and certain trees and plants have become extremely rare and their absence is clearly felt. The loss of marine mammal populations is part of this "catastrophe" (51). He feels there is "incredible urgency" to these ecological issues and this comes out very clearly in the novel, contributing significantly to its ecological tone (51). There are myriad examples in the text of serious environmental degradation: the once great Matla River, that Kanai remembers from boyhood

as a vast waterway, is small and sluggish (Ghosh 24); according to Nilima, the fish will be all but gone in 15 years due to irresponsible netting, enabled and protected by corrupt politicians (134); Piya notes that the marine mammal population is in serious decline due to "drastic change in the habitat" and its "dramatic deterioration" (266). The Indian authorities, particularly the corrupt Forestry Department, are seriously implicated in these environmental issues – in fact, they are thoroughly vilified. One obvious, and symbolic, example is the dolphin calf Piya regards as a sign of hope for the endangered Orcaella population being killed by a speeding official motorboat (346). Nirmal, watching his beloved landscape, is in no doubt that it is in terrible decline:

> *Age teaches you to recognize the signs of death… Now it was as if I could see those signs everywhere, not just in myself, but in this place that I had lived in for almost thirty years. The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea.* (215).

All of these observations of, and approaches to, the natural world are vital to the ecological outlook of *The Hungry Tide*. The hostility and violence of the landscape encourages awe, respect and humility but, to avoid a confrontational model in which humankind must war with nature as an enemy, this theme is tempered not only by the characters' love and appreciation of nature but also by their growing recognition of ecological interconnectedness and inter-reliance. Furthermore, the mutability and endurance of nature is stressed to emphasise the ephemerality of humankind and to suggest that nature will outlast and ultimately triumph over puny humanity should they persist in warring with it. The documentation of this highly unique environment's rapid decline, due to human irresponsibility, has obvious relevance to the ecological theme and can be interpreted as something of a call to arms – Ghosh is determined that his fiction should have a practical impact on his audience and the world. However, what is perhaps most important to the plot of the novel, and Ghosh's implied ideology, is his linking of environmental decline with social injustice and inequality. Much like the garden growing into the decaying villa in *The English Patient,* the struggling human populations and the natural environment of the Sundarbans must heal together and grow together for there to be hope for the future.

Social ecology is a form of radical environmentalism which claims that environmental crisis is the result of the systems of domination and exploitation of humans by other humans

(Garrard 28). Social ecologists therefore seek to combine political engagement with environmental reform (28). They emphasise that the environmental struggle must be undertaken by all classes of people and that the environmental burdens of society must be shared equally: "for eco-socialists it is only through a creative synthesis with the experiences of the working-class peoples – both nationally and internationally – that the environmental movement can shake off its reputation as a limited middle-class phenomenon" (Curran 124). There is certainly an aspect of this ideology in Ghosh's ecological appeal in the novel. Although it is the most abidingly anthropocentric of the radical environmental movements, social ecology still views the environmental crisis as a crisis of meaning, of consciousness, and therefore believes it "can be managed, solved, or perhaps overcome by new myths or improvements in thinking that would reconceptualise the boundaries, as well as the content, of our understanding of humanity and nature" (Brown 5). It is clear, then, why ecological issues should be so deeply involved with issues of language – as I shall explore later in this chapter. Ghosh himself laments the unfortunate opposition of rich-world environmentalism and the livelihood of poor communities. Speaking of how fresh water wells were dug for tigers in the Sundarbans while families went thirsty he says: "We can't elude the issue. If you care for the environment, does that mean you don't care about the plight of human beings?" (Ferdous & Rutsch 51). Ghosh points out that, despite the rich world's propensity to blame environmental decline on population growth amongst the poor, the "tribal people" in the Sundarbans – who lost their right to use the land for grazing, farming and collecting firewood in 1860 – are not the group responsible for the terrible denudation of the area. It is the commercial timber merchants protected by the Forest Department that wreak environmental havoc (51-52). It is no surprise, he feels, that a person in the tide country said to him, "Oh, for you, we are just pet food, aren't we?", considering that the authorities continue to protect the tigers when up to 500 people a year are killed by them (52).

Ghosh is clearly well-versed in the current environmental issues in India and the novel is "self-consciously suffused with ecological terms that complement the over-determined debate over 'development' in the postcolonial Indian context" (Kaur 125). Ghosh wrote a journalistic piece, "The Town by the Sea", that addresses the calamity of the tsunami in the area in the context of the blind and exploitative environmental policies of the state, so he is aware of these issues (125). In this context, Ghosh is obviously in wholehearted support of Piya's approach at the end of the novel which evinces "an enlightened environmentalism"

sensitive to the interests of the locals and respectful of their environmental knowledge (Kaur 128). As she says:

> And for myself, I don't want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it. If I was to take on a project here, I'd want it to be under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust, so the local fishermen would be involved. And the Trust would benefit too. (Ghosh 397)

Two episodes which expose the social injustice of the environmental policy in the Sundarbans are the tiger-burning and the siege of Morichjhãpi. The tiger attack incident forces Piya to interrogate her valuation of the tiger's right to survive and kill above the villagers' right to defend themselves (Ghosh 294). Although the killing of the animal is shocking and sad it is an undeniable injustice that for defending themselves against the animal, which has killed two people and various precious livestock, the villagers will suffer arrest, beatings and fines from the Forest Guards (297). Kusum's words about the siege of Morichjhãpi are similarly heartbreaking: when the police yell that the refugees are "*worth less than dirt or dust*", and must vacate the island for the sake of the animals that the rest of the world has paid to protect, she wonders, "*Who are these people… who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names?*" (261-262).

Central to Ghosh's alignment of social and ecological justice is a philosophy of balance and syncretism. The novel strives to encourage more tolerant, dialogic frames of being, thus overcoming the injustices resultant of national, religious and class conflict as well as the perceived conflict between humankind and nature. In this Ghosh shares certain motifs with Ondaatje who likewise rails against harmful labels and oppositional group identities, trying to encourage a more generous and all-encompassing view of humankind based on shared embodiment and a shared experience of the natural world. While Ondaatje does this in *The English Patient* largely through documenting the horrors of war and exploring corporeal empathy, Ghosh has chosen a setting – the tide country – which is historically the meeting place of several cultures, religions, castes and nationalities, and in this suitably mutable and fluid landscape attempts to sow the seeds of a cooperative ecotopian vision. *The Hungry Tide* offers multiple visions which could be called utopian. These visions have all either failed already or are undermined by circumstances – not least of all the tide country landscape itself which, although it provides a sort of model for fluidity and adaptability, also resists the

creation of any stable community. An analysis of the various projects and communities which could be considered utopian, or ecotopian, in the novel make Ghosh's philosophy of balance between social and ecological justice clearer.

Sir Daniel Hamilton's utopian vision, dating back to the early 1900s, is inspiring but has failed. Hamilton's utopia is based on the premise that "labour conquers everything" (Ghosh 49). He attempts to build a community in which all are equalised by outlawing caste, attempting to erase "petty little divisions and differences", and ensuring that all are prepared to live and work together (51). He buys land in the Sundarbans from the dreaded Forestry Department and sets about populating it, inviting people from all walks of life to "build a new society, a new kind of country… [where] people wouldn't exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land" (52). Unfortunately, although the community Nirmal and Nilima move into at Lusibari, decades later, is relatively blind to caste, it is also desperately poor. "Hunger and catastrophe [are] a way of life" and the authorities are so corrupt and so vicious that the place is compared to a penal colony (79-80). Hamilton's dream does, however, inspire both of them and in their separate ways they pursue utopian visions of their own. Nilima's Badabon Trust, despite the revolutionary Nirmal's disparagement of its emphasis on social service, is by far the most practically successful attempt at creating a socially just society that the novel documents, but the Trust's willingness to compromise and work within existing structures of power prevent it from being truly utopian in the radical sense of the term. Nirmal, on the other hand, never quite manages to apply his utopian ideals to reality.

Rajender Kaur feels that Nirmal is the character who most exemplifies the sort of "inclusive visionary ecological perspective that is aligned with social justice" that could most accurately found an ecotopia (134). He bases this claim on Nirmal's Marxist intellectual stance in combination with his ecological belief that "everything which existed was inter-connected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature" (Ghosh 282-283). It is true that Nirmal has great potential from an ideological point of view but he fails to really integrate his feelings about ecological connectedness with his utopian vision, which is heavily tied up with the refugees' project on Morichjhãpi. His enthusiasm for their cause is never infiltrated by the concern for the environment which he articulates at other times. He sees no innate value in nature – he even imagines that if the tide country were submerged it would be a relief for humanity because the landscape had been one beset by tragedy for them

(Ghosh 216). His determined humanism is characteristic of the social ecology movement but, in my opinion, prevents his vision from being truly ecotopian. Therefore, while he certainly dreams of equality and social justice, his vision is utopian rather than ecotopian. He is essentially ready to sacrifice the local ecosystem if it is for the betterment of the locals, which would in the long term prove unsustainable.

The refugees who settle on Morichjhãpi, with whom Nirmal throws in his lot, are originally from the tide country and settle on the island illegally after a mass exodus on foot from the inland camps the government relegated them to. This pilgrimage back to the Sundarbans is important both in that it is a moral stand for equality and justice, and in that it evinces a desperate love of the land, but it is hard to say whether this yearning for the land of origin would have translated into an ecologically responsible society. At any rate, although their organisation, industry and emphasis on equality is admirable, they are brutally routed by the authorities, putting an end to their vision for a new and more hopeful society. Nirmal had believed that Morichjhãpi could be an example to the wider world of "a safe haven, a place of true freedom for the country's most oppressed" (191). It is important that this dream is based on the efforts of the poor themselves, rather than a wealthy benefactor like Hamilton, but unfortunately without the necessary political clout the refugees stand no chance of creating their utopia in the midst of Forestry land.

The most hopeful ecotopic vision in the novel is in fact a religious one. As a foundational myth the Bon Bibi saga has real potential as the basis for an ecotopia, geared as it is towards a culture of syncretism and balance. The rituals in honour of Bon Bibi, as witnessed by Piya and Nirmal, point to "a transcultural fusion of elements from both Hinduism and Islam, at the opposite pole from the Hindu-Muslim confrontations that have too often disfigured the post-Raj subcontinent" (Rollason 7). The tolerance implied by this syncretism is very hopeful. As Nirmal writes:

> *the tide country's faith is something like one of its great mahonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a round-about people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and between faiths and religions.*
> (Ghosh 247)

The cultural syncretism of the tide country people can be interpreted as a reflection of the ecological syncretism of their landscape (Kaur 134). Moreover, the legend of Bon Bibi encourages both social justice and ecological responsibility. The tale of Bon Bibi encourages

balance and harmony between humanity and nature based on humility, lack of greed, and respect for the wilderness. In the tale, Bon Bibi gives half the tide country to Dokkhin Rai to remain wild and hostile to humanity, and protects the other half as land open to human settlement: "Thus order was brought to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance" (Ghosh 103). In the legend, Dhona upsets this balance by being greedy and incurs the wrath of Bon Bibi by attempting to sacrifice an innocent boy to the forces of evil, in exchange for wealth from the forest: "Thus did Bon Bibi show the world the law of the forest, which was that the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous were rewarded" (105).

The Hungry Tide itself seems to suggest that it is relating the story of how a new project for transcultural ecological and social engagement came into being. At the end of the novel there is the hope that Piya and Nilima, working together with the local community and, presumably, Kanai, will embark on a hopeful collaboration which will enable both ecological preservation and increased social justice in the region. The project Piya proposes in the final scene encompasses the ecotopian hopes propounded by the novel. When she says that "home is where the Orcaella are" (Ghosh 400) she is declaring a new paradigm for ecological and social engagement which supplants her national and cultural loyalties and previous narrow-minded environmentalism (Kaur 127-128). Throughout the novel, her commitment to marine mammals gradually extends to include a commitment to the human population of the tide country. She comes to see the Orcaella "not in isolation as a particular marine sub-species to be saved at any cost but as a vital part of the larger ecosphere of the Sundarbans where the impoverished indigenous human community live equally threatened lives" (Kaur 128).

It is notable that Ghosh draws two of his central characters – Piya and Kanai – from the middle-class, educated group who will form his readership, and then places them in an unfamiliar and hostile environment which forces not only ecological humility but also empathy with the Sundarbans' poor, rural population (Tomsky 53-54). By focalising through these two essentially urban, highly educated and affluent outsiders, and documenting their growing commitment to the ecological and social improvement of the tide country, "the novel moves us beyond narrow nationalistic, ethnic, and racial binaries to embrace an ecological perspective that is compelled by the understanding that we live, not in many, but in one world" (Kaur 127). In so doing Ghosh outlines the possibility of a kind of global ecotopia in the sense that he urges "a new kind of transcultural engagement that bridges the local and

global, past and present, the scientific and mythic, and that transcends the caste, class, and religious divides that have hitherto hampered visions of global solidarity" (135). Like the Bon Bibi myth this transcultural paradigm is based on syncretism and tolerance: the hope that humankind can conquer their tendency to think oppositionally in terms of race, culture, religion and class and can embrace the shared goal of establishing a socially just and ecologically responsible world.

The hope for a transcultural ecotopian engagement in the Sundarbans is premised, however, on communication across cultural and class barriers, which is one of the reasons that communication and translation are vital themes in *The Hungry Tide*. In this regard language is scrutinised, as are other means of communication including more corporeal and intuitive varieties. Moreover, as briefly mentioned above, the relationship between language and nature is critically explored, particularly the suggestion that language not only potentially divides people of different linguistic groups and cultures but also divorces us from our natural context. This examination of the ways in which nature and language – nature and culture – intersect, makes the novel ideally suited to an ecocritical reading.

There is a great deal of translation taking place in the novel itself: "an imputed transcultural shift is… written into the very fabric of Ghosh's text" because we are made aware, by the numerous Bengali words left untranslated, that we are reading an Indian novel written in English, and because Kanai is constantly translating Nirmal's notebook into English (Rollason 2). Nirmal himself is working with a translation of the Austrian poet Rilke's work. Beyond this, Kanai's career as translator/interpreter is obviously vital to the theme of communication in a multilingual yet interrelated world (2). Ghosh explores both the potential, and the limitations, of human communication and translation in the novel. Vitally, the communication theme extends to the frequent description of characters attempting to 'read' nature. Ryan argues that "to posit the land as a text is to claim its readability, and thence to arrogate power over it" (126). However, Ghosh subverts this tradition by introducing a motif of illegibility to the novel; his characters attempt to 'read' nature but find that they are unequal to the task. These descriptions only serve to emphasise nature's basic inscrutability for humanity which is vital to the theme of humankind struggling to survive in a "translated world" which they can no longer understand. That is to say, they live in a world which they have, through language, misinterpreted to the extent that they can no longer understand where they belong in it, or how to meaningfully interact with their natural

landscapes. Moreover, they live in a world which contains forces they cannot grasp in language, sublime elements which challenge their human expression.

Nirmal compares landscape to literature when he observes that people interpret both according to their subjectivity and socialisation:

> *it occurred to me that in a way a landscape too is not unlike a book… People open the book according to their taste and training, their memories and desires: for a geologist the compilation opens at one page, for a boatman at another, and still another for a ship's pilot, a painter and so on.* (Ghosh 224)

This suggests that, because all humans interpret their natural context differently, according to personal and cultural agendas, we are somehow incapable of seeing nature as it really is, or of conceiving of ourselves as part of it. There are multiple examples in the novel of characters trying to 'read' nature, trying to probe reality and connect somehow with the phenomenological world. Kanai describes Piya watching the water like "a textual scholar poring over a yet-undeciphered manuscript: it was as though she were puzzling over a codex that had been authored by the earth itself" (Ghosh 269). Piya herself describes trying to read the water like a text: "it was as if a hand, hidden in the water's depths, were writing a message to her in the cursive script of ripples, eddies and turbulence" (352), but she cannot make out its message. This is relevant to plot in that the "message" in the water and her surroundings at this point is a warning – she fails to correctly interpret the signs in the landscape which tell the other animals, like the dolphins, that a massive storm is approaching. Thus her failure to instinctively relate to her natural surroundings leads to tragedy.

Discussing the translation theme in *The Hungry Tide* Rollason writes:

> in the complex and multiple social universe bequeathed by colonialism and traversed by globalisation, even so basic a phenomenon as human communication has, more often than not, to be handled at one remove, indirectly, through a process of mediation that may also prove a distortion. (4).

Indeed, there is an awareness throughout the novel that translating or interpreting across language barriers is anything but a neutral process. Vitally, Ghosh extends this problem of communicating in a multilingual world to include the fact that through mediating all our experiences, our very consciousness, through language, humankind may have a distorted experience of nature. Our world is "translated" and we may therefore have distorted our

perception of it. Through these concerns, the novel grapples with structural and poststructural theorists, like Saussure, who popularly claim that language mediates experience and constitutes reality, as opposed to reflecting or representing it (957). As multiple ethnolinguists and cultural anthropologists have pointed out, the manner in which we speak and the foundational myths with which we seek to understand the world, "have a profound influence on all of our activities" (Chawla 116). Ghosh is intensely aware of this. For example, Nirmal knows that the myth of the Goddess Ganga's taming by Lord Shiva leads to a culture-specific view of the river: "To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way" (Ghosh 6). Similarly, Kanai is aware that the legend of Bon Bibi is more than just a story for Fokir, and many like him: it is in fact "the story that gave this land [the tide country] its life", the story by which they interpret the landscape they live in (354).

In the novel words are repeatedly exposed as unreliable, misleading and generally unequal to the task of mirroring reality. It is very important that Kanai, who begins the novel arrogantly certain of his enviable knowledge of the universe, due to the six languages in which he is fluent, comes to realise that he knows very little of himself or the world (Ghosh 353). This epiphany takes place when he abuses Fokir on Garjontola only to be abandoned there by his guide to fend for himself in the mangroves. His realisation is twofold. Firstly, his outburst makes him realise just how enshrined in his consciousness his educated superiority is, that despite his professed knowledge of multiple cultures he is still viewing the world through a system of caste and class distinction (Tomsky 61). Secondly, he realises that there are experiences in life which cannot be expressed in language and that he is very poorly equipped even by his six languages to survive in nature, in a world devoid of culture and language. Vitally, when he is confronted by the tiger his mind "[has] emptied itself of language" and he is swamped in his fear by a "flood of pure sensation" (Ghosh 329). He is never able to describe his experience on the island. This is only one of many examples of characters in the novel finding that, as Nilima puts it, reality runs afoul of their vocabularies (81). Moyna insists that Kanai cannot understand her love for Fokir, no matter how many languages he speaks, because it cannot be expressed in words (Ghosh 156). Later she tells him that words are merely superficial and cannot touch on the real mysteries of life: '"Words are just air, Kanai-babu… When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard"' (258). Piya, musing on the manner in which dolphins communicate, is envious of their three-dimensional sharing of the world. She contrasts their technique, in which "simply to exist [is] to communicate" (159), with the

inadequate human language, a "bag of tricks that fool[s] you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being" (159).

The novel also demonstrates that language is anything but neutral. For Piya, as a child, the Bengali language was "an angry flood trying to break down her door"; her parents fighting a stream of words threatening to "drown" her (93). Bengali therefore becomes for her a language of almost elemental unhappiness (94). She dreams of words devoid of connotation and emotion, words "with the heft of stainless steel, sounds that had been boiled clean, like a surgeon's instruments, tools with nothing attached except meanings that could be looked up in a dictionary – empty of pain and memory and inwardness" (94). Of course, such a language cannot exist: our interpretation of the world through language is suffused by our subjectivity. This is probably why Piya so enjoys abandoning language altogether with Fokir as she attempts to plumb the depths of nature's mysteries. Kanai, as an interpreter, is well aware that a new language means a new world-view and that people of different cultures and linguistic groups therefore perceive reality and their surroundings differently. Tellingly, he remembers learning new languages as a student as a process of learning how "other realities were conjugated" (269). All the angst surrounding the possibility that language is inadequate to the task of connecting people across cultural and class lines, and the fear that humankind has been divided from nature by language, is encapsulated in the poignant cry of the refugees: "*Who are we? We are the dispossessed!*" (Ghosh 254). Nirmal is struck by the feeling that this hopeless cry applies not only to the refugees but to all of "*bewildered humanity*", the species that is divided amongst itself and, more frighteningly, has forgotten its place in the grand ecological scheme and therefore stands alone and dispossessed of the earth (254).

Ghosh has explained in an interview that his novel aims to explore the "cultural gap[s]" in communication, which is why he made his two central characters incapable of speaking to each other (Ferdous & Rutsch 48). This comment implies that Piya and Fokir's relationship is meant to explore the alternatives to language as a means of communication – the possibilities for bridging the "gaps" in understanding resultant of the cultural saturation of any linguistic code. They have fundamentally different cultures and world-views, therefore they must find common ground in order to understand each other. The common ground they find is based in physicality and a shared sensory experience of the natural world unmediated by language. Tomsky writes that Ghosh is unafraid in the novel to appeal to emotion and physicality – things often dismissed as somehow "primitive" – and that by doing so he

demands “a rethinking of modernist and rationalist forms and an attempt to move towards new forms of power and knowledge” (59). If, as discussed above, Ghosh is positioning himself as a kind of radical ecologist, then this sort of “rethinking” is necessary. In this sense Piya and Fokir’s relationship and, through it, the exploration of alternative means of communication and interaction across cultural lines, is important to both the hope of establishing a multicultural ecotopian vision and the thematic critique of the value of language.

Piya’s conviction that she and Fokir can understand each other despite their lack of a language with which to communicate is based on a belief in basic human commonality which Rollason describes as either “enticingly utopian or dangerously naïve” (3). It is not dissimilar to the ethics of corporeal empathy practised by the community in the villa in *The English Patient* in that it is a hopeful philosophy which encourages empathy and is seen to enable an instinctual connection with nature. The difference, however, lies in the fact that the villa community has a common language to use when necessary and uses it frequently, whereas Piya and Fokir have no common language, making their attempt to communicate corporeally more radical.

It is fitting that Piya and Fokir’s first encounter is characterised by extreme physicality – he bodily rescues her from drowning, pins her down and sucks the water and vomit from her throat (Ghosh 56). Danger renders this physicality unashamed and natural. Piya, who is not given to physical displays of affection, quickly finds that on the boat with Fokir and Tutul she touches more readily and more frequently to express support or appreciation – touch is a means of communication which is universal and she finds the physical gestures of father and son very easy to understand and respond to (64). Piya feels that “despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she [is] a person to [Fokir] and not, as it were, a representative of a species, a faceless, tongueless foreigner” (71). The lack of verbal communication forces a concentration on and realisation of basic corporeal commonality which makes Piya feel at ease. The fact that Fokir never goes through any “ritual of naming” with her – as she has come to expect of people speaking a different language – suggests that he is comfortable in this vacuum of verbal communication: he thrives in the silence and physicality (89). This seems compatible with his instinctive understanding of and comfort within his natural environment: Piya believes he can “see right into the river’s heart” (267).

Piya and Fokir's relationship can be usefully unpacked using Derrida's theory of Hospitality. Derrida uses the manner in which a host accommodates a guest as an analogy for the complex manner in which language, and naming in particular, elides alterity and objectifies the Other. As language is inseparable from culture and is the means by which we construct reality, Derrida declares that language is "the home that never leaves us" (*Of Hospitality* 133), as it enables familiarity, and contextual comfort. By naming and locating the Other, the guest or stranger, in our language, we objectify them within our own discursive categories, thereby eliding their alterity. To be truly, unconditionally hospitable (which Derrida believes impossible), the host would need to leave the alterity of the guest unchallenged: true hospitality would "begin with the unquestioning welcome… the effacement of the question *and* the name" (*Of Hospitality* 29). If attempted control and categorisation of the Other begins with naming and linguistic familiarisation, as Derrida claims, then Fokir's complete failure to go through a "ritual of naming" with Piya, or speak to her at all, has ethical implications. It is a gesture of respect in that the guest, Piya, is allowed to retain her alterity, and this goes some way to explaining why she feels so free and comfortable with him – like "a person" instead of "a faceless, tongueless foreigner" who has already been categorized neatly as a vulnerable tourist by the forest guards who exploit her (Ghosh 71). I would not go so far as to say that either Fokir or Piya experience each other as sublime in their alterity, but their mutual failure to attempt linguistic categorisation and possession of each other gestures towards an acceptance and tolerance of otherness which undermines the divisive tendencies of language.

Whilst in the boat the pair do achieve a harmony of thought and occupation which seems hopeful, and it is important that their largely successful corporeal communication goes hand in hand with a feeling of intimacy with nature and comfort within the natural rhythms of the landscape. The climax of their relationship is their life-giving but fatal embrace in the storm, again an experience apt in its intense physicality. The storm gives them what life could not: "it had fused them together and made them one" (390). Fokir dies murmuring the names of his wife and son but Piya feels that she is able to let him know how deeply he is loved without words (393). However, despite the compatibility of their activities, and ability to communicate well intuitively and physically, their lack of a shared language does lead to certain misunderstandings, the most dramatic of which is Piya's disbelief that Fokir would enthusiastically aid in the tiger killing she witnesses. She also makes naïve and romantic assumptions about his life and upbringing, picturing a poor but idyllic childhood in a big

family, which could not be further removed from the truth (Ghosh 158). In doing this, imagining a past for Fokir based on cultural assumptions about a man of his class and profession, Piya is not respecting his alterity – she is absorbing him into her own discursive understanding of the world.

The irreducible "ambiguity" of human existence, for Merleau-Ponty, includes the fact that no true distinction can be made between linguistic and non-linguistic gestures and forms of communication (Weiss 133). The fact of embodiment, of physicality, is ever-influential on human perception and experience, but so is the cultural and subjective. To Merleau-Ponty, "It is no more natural, and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call a table a table" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 189). While there exists between Fokir and Piya an "internal relation" or "reciprocity" based on shared corporeality, this pre-reflective aspect of experience is not fully accessible to them and cannot ever be entirely separated from their personal and cultural perceptual tendencies. They would have to do far more than not talk to rid themselves of all the perceptual baggage associated with language and culture. While their physical interaction is powerful and hopeful and makes a vital point about the potential of corporeal reciprocity, it is also aptly imperfect and incomplete. While Ghosh is clearly demonstrating the value of the more corporeal, universal forms of communication he is as aware of their obvious limitations as he is of the limitations of language itself.

The Hungry Tide explores the limitations of language and the possible dangers of our over-reliance on it, but it would be a mistake to interpret the novel as railing against language as a purely negative force. As with Ondaatje, Ghosh is aware of both the potential and shortcomings of corporeal communication, he is in no doubt as to the value of language not only in communication between people but as a means to connect with nature and to activate for ecological and social justice. Writing fiction is commonly viewed as an exercise in surrendering subjectivity and engaging in imaginative sympathy and this temporary transcendence of the ego is exactly that which, as we have seen, is associated with a more responsible, humble relationship with nature (Jenkins 267). The novel itself is a form of ecological and social activism which has significant value. It is possible that we are meant to assume that the novel is in fact Kanai's retelling of his uncle's notebook and his own experiences. Certainly it emphasises the value of the written word for the preservation of memory and the hope of instituting change. Nirmal makes it clear that his writing of the

notebook, his recording of the plight of the refugees, is an ethical act (Tomsky 58). He says he needs to gain "*some hold upon the memory of the world*" (Ghosh 69), and we know that his story has a profound effect on at least one reader – Kanai. In this sense Ghosh certainly cannot be said to contradict theme with medium: he clearly believes that literature can influence perception and action in a valuable way. Of course, on a more factual, scientific level, it is also true that Piya's recording of the dolphin's unique adaptation to the tide country habitat will have a large impact on the academic field and, as it has already begun to do by the end of the novel, will inspire practical environmental aid in the form of funding.

The novel also emphasises the value of story-telling as a teaching tool and form of communication. Bruce Allen wrote an essay on two other ecologically relevant authors (including Arundhati Roy) and identified a new direction in ecologically driven literature "that is rooted in the traditions of storytelling and that affirms a belief in the spiritual and redemptive power of words" (154). He emphasises that traditional myths and legends can play a vital role in the development of ecological responsibility (154). This is clearly seen in the Bon Bibi myth and in Nirmal's frequent use of stories to demonstrate an ethical lesson or explain the scientific and ecological phenomena he witnesses in the world around him. When he imagines the lesson he will teach the refugee children he decides he will teach them about their surroundings through the joint means of mythology and geology. For Nirmal myths are not dissimilar to geology because both deal with, and attempt to decode, the titanic immensities that form the foundations of the earth – both attempt to explain that which is hidden from humanity, that which is larger than us (Ghosh 180-182). He aims to meaningfully link science and story-telling to educate illiterate children about their natural environment. As mentioned earlier, Brown declares that to reverse the crisis of consciousness causing environmental degradation "new myths" must be ingrained into our imaginations (5). Nirmal's stories aim to serve just this educational function, in line with the radical ecologists' belief in reconceptualising the human relationship with nature. Literature has the potential to be seminal in this process, as I believe this novel demonstrates.

Equally, although *The Hungry Tide* exposes the limitations of translation/interpretation it is significant that when Kanai feels he reaches the limit of his powers as a translator, and tells Piya he cannot render Fokir's telling of the Bon Bibi legend in English, he nonetheless eventually succeeds in providing her with a written translation which proves very valuable to her (Rollason 3). Having read Kanai's letter – his gift – Piya feels deeply in tune with Fokir

and her surroundings; she feels that Kanai's words allow her to understand not just the Bon Bibi myth they render in her tongue but also Fokir and the Tide Country (Ghosh 360). The imperfection of the translation does not matter to her. Similarly, although Kanai is aware of how the act of translation colours perception, he does also recall times in his career as a translator when he encountered the phenomenon of seeing through the eyes of another, "the momentary sensation of being transported out of his body and into another" (327). On Garjontola he is disgusted to see himself through Fokir's eyes:

> the instrument of language had metamorphosed – instead of being a barrier, a curtain that divided, it had become a transparent film, a prism that allowed him to look through another set of eyes, to filter the world through a mind other than his own. (327)

Translation – language itself – can therefore enable empathy and humility. The quotation sums up the novel's approach to language quite concisely: while it certainly can be a "barrier" that divides people from one another, and even from their natural environment, at its best it is a tool with which to see through the eyes of another, the enabler of empathy and transcultural understanding. As explored in *The English Patient* chapter, fiction itself can serve to encourage empathy as it requires imaginative sympathy and demands focalisation through another's subjectivity. Ghosh never really addresses this in the novel but he adopts the technique of frequently switching focalising perspective, relying on the imaginative capability of the reader to identify meaningfully with his characters.

Moreover, Ghosh believes that the shortcomings of language – the very subjectivity thereof – can be used to advantage. He expressed in an interview that the novel contains a form of "deep communication" which is only possible in language (Ferdous & Rutsch 48). The example he uses to explain this "deep communication" is Piya's reaction to the word *gamchha* (checked towel or cloth) which conjures forgotten memories of her father. The word itself is a vessel for all these childhood memories and associations and Ghosh feels that this is invaluable (51). He obviously feels that this sort of word, often laden with personal associations, despite its simple denotative meaning, can enable shared memories and associations which will allow people to understand and identify with one another on a deeper level. It is very interesting then, that although he demonstrates how the cultural saturation of language can divide us from one another and from nature, he also feels that this very subjectivity – the fact that words are laden with personal, political and historical associations – can enable a deeper form of understanding and communication. Although this would

apply, presumably, only to those who have a shared world-view and therefore compatible associations on some personal level. It seems Ghosh is suggesting, therefore, that language has the potential both to divide people and to draw them together. This does not apply, however, to the human relationship with nature – although, as we have seen, the novel itself advocates environmental responsibility, which goes some way to suggesting that language is not an altogether negative force in this regard.

Beyond all these demonstrations of the value of language there is also a sense in the novel of an appreciation for the beauty and power of words. Nirmal loves words. In fact, in a rare demonstration of just how apt a name can be, he uses *badabon* (mangrove) to name Nilima's Trust because he appreciates how the Bengali word combines the Arabic *bada* (desert) with the Sanskrit *bon* (forest): "it is as though the word itself were an island, born of the meeting of two great rivers of language" (81-82). The power of words is demonstrated by the local refusal to utter the word for "tiger" because "to say it is to summon it" (108). The growing necessity of translation/interpretation in a globalised, multilingual world is demonstrated by Kanai's ever-growing language business in the city. Throughout the novel characters communicate meaningfully through the written word: Kanai grows to understand and respect his uncle, Nirmal, by reading his notebook; Piya gains insight into both Fokir and Kanai by reading Kanai's letter and his rendering of the Bon Bibi myth; Nirmal receives much inspiration and comfort from the words of his favourite poet, Rainer Maria Rilke – an example of inter-cultural understanding enabled by translation. By the end of the novel, despite all the exposed limitations and imperfections of language, the reader does find themself "moving tentatively towards an admission of the possibility… of communication across cultural barriers" (Rollason 9). Due to the protagonists' newfound humility and willingness to re-evaluate their belief systems "the Utopian goal of mutual understanding, implicit in the novel's recurrent theme of translation, begins to appear as something actually possible" (10). Moreover, this new hope for communication across national, class and cultural barriers is being utilised to strive towards environmental improvement as well as social justice.

The novel therefore thematises both the limitations and the potential power for good of language. *The Hungry Tide* is written in a simple, sometimes even journalistic style. This kind of realism, Marais argues, can be problematic due to its attempt to "render language transparent" (94). However, the complex treatment of language as a theme makes this

criticism somewhat irrelevant in this case. In fact, although this novel is atypical in this thesis for its relatively plain and unadorned prose, Gurr argues that its form is not only relevant but perfectly suited to its ecological aims. He feels that structure and form are at least as important as theme when attempting to represent ecosystems, and he asserts that Ghosh masterfully structures the novel so that the "fundamental topographical features of [the] ecosystem are structurally replicated in the surface structure of the text" (73-74). He finds it a very effective marriage of form and content that "the entire plot literally grows out of the fundamental characteristics of the landscape" (70). Gurr bases this theory on the fact that the plot, and its structure, seem to arise out of the conflict between land and water: the novel has two sections, "Ebb" and "Flood", and the chapters are characterised by a back-and-forth focalisation between Kanai and Piya (75); Piya is caught between two men, between Kanai – associated with land and urbanity – and Fokir – a fisherman whose element is water (75); in Nirmal's journal, prose and poetry interweave like tides (78); and landscape and language are described as interacting, mutually shaping one another, like the land and water of the tide country (78). Gurr concludes that the novel can itself be described as a "codex authored by the earth itself" (79). Here, then, we have a situation where the natural world has directly influenced the cultural artefact; this is appropriate in a novel in which nature is essentially the main character, a force which dwarfs and dominates the human world.

Ghosh can also be said to have meaningfully subverted the pastoral genre. His use of cosmopolitan, educated outsiders to focalise a story about a rural area is typically pastoral. Love describes the genre thus:

> Literary pastoral traditionally posits a natural world, a green world, to which sophisticated urbanites withdraw in search of the lessons of simplicity which only nature can teach. There, amid sylvan groves and meadows and rural characters – idealized images of country existence – the sophisticates attain a critical vision of the good, simple life, a vision which will presumably sustain them as they return at the end to the great world on the horizon. (231)

The Hungry Tide draws on this pastoral tradition but reimagines it for the issues of our present generation and the environmental crisis. Ghosh subverts our expectations by portraying a highly complex, dangerous and mutable natural world with none of the simplicity and peace associated with the pastoral haven. Moreover, his sophisticated urbanites are poised, by the end of the novel, to make this landscape their home – they are dedicated to giving something back to the community, rather than taking away with them

insights into rural morality and a sense of rejuvenation. Their stay in Arcadia is traumatic and challenging. In a way, this is not dissimilar to Ondaatje's subversion of colonial tropes in *The English Patient*. This kind of reimagining of traditional literary themes is vital to undermining our anthropocentric world-view and overcoming potentially harmful or limiting discourse. Love calls for a redefinition of the pastoral genre, allowing for a more environmentally positive and complex portrayal of nature and humankind within it. I think Ghosh does something very like that with this novel.

To conclude, *The Hungry Tide* rewards an ecocritical reading because it thematises the relationship between humankind and nature with particular emphasis on communication and the role that language, as a cultural artefact, can play in this relationship. Ghosh is fully cognisant of the harm language can cause, and is clearly in favour of humanity exploring corporeal and intuitive means of communication to supplement language and encourage a more universal understanding based on physical commonality. However, there is no paradox between medium and ecological 'message' in this novel. As I have demonstrated, Ghosh has declared in interviews, and makes it clear in the novel, that he believes language – and more pertinently literature – is pivotal to reversing the anthropocentric arrogance which social ecologists view as a central cause of environmental degradation, as well as establishing vital links between human communities. While it is true that language is saturated with cultural values, and has played a large role in establishing the detrimental conceptualisation of nature as the enemy or mere tool of humankind – which has dominated the past few centuries of our history – it is also true that language channelled correctly can help us reconceptualise this relationship in a more hopeful, ecologically responsible manner. Communication across cultural and national lines is necessary to Ghosh's tentative vision of transcultural ecotopia and I have suggested that this novel is a gesture in that direction. Just as Piya "matures from being a blinkered conservation biologist focussed only on studying the Orcaella to a more progressive environmentalist… as she comes to both respect and embrace the locals of the Sundarbans as knowledgeable partners in her ecological agenda" (Kaur 132), literature can help us to see beyond our narrow identification with nation, race and class, and strive towards a transcultural collaboration trying to build a more socially just and ecologically sustainable world.

CHAPTER THREE:

David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*

> The function of poetry… is to nourish the spirit of man by giving him the cosmos to suckle. We have only to lower our standard of dominating nature and to raise our standard of participating in it in order to make the reconciliation take place… Hope therefore lies in a poetry through which the world so invades the spirit of man that he becomes almost speechless, and later reinvents language. (Francis Ponge *The Voice of Things*)

Malouf's novel is best described by Kavanagh as "a fable of return to a state of being in which the divisions and discriminations created by language are replaced by a silence which speaks of unity with the entire fabric of existing things" (150). *An Imaginary Life* evinces a passionate urge to expand consciousness, transcend subjectivity and reconnect humankind with nature. There is a notable ecological emphasis on interconnectivity, respect for all life forms, and the circularity of the life cycle, which together act to counter anthropocentric bias. The respect for and celebration of otherness, and simultaneous desire to dispense with all categories of distinction and division (embedded in language) is thematic. This ties in with the dialogic, tolerant world-views encouraged by both *The English Patient* and *The Hungry Tide*. Malouf's writing, as Nettelbeck puts it, contains "an imperative to reconceive dominant ways of 'knowing'" (104). This desire to re-imagine and reconceive of our approach to the natural world, and one another, aligns the novel thematically with the aforementioned project of radical environmentalists. Moreover, Malouf is obviously intensely conscious of the value of myth and storytelling to this process. This chapter will first chart the ecological elements of the text before analysing Malouf's treatment of language and discussing whether he succumbs to contradiction and paradox in his handling of theme and medium.

The novel has an unmistakably ecological tenor. It thematically undermines anthropocentrism in a number of ways: by blurring the distinction between humans and other animals; by suggesting that human language is only one of many animal languages; by emphasising the shared imaginative capacity of all creatures; and by portraying humankind as being part of the natural world and part of the ecological cycle of life in the most basic biological sense. The novel is focalised and narrated by the poet Ovid who finds himself cast out to the borders of the Roman Empire to a village called Tomis, on the Black Sea, where his exile is from Latin as much as from Rome. At the beginning of the novel Ovid is pitiful

and miserable, incapable of communicating with the villagers who cannot speak his beloved language, culturally alienated and bewildered, and frightened of the barren, seemingly empty landscape. He suspects that the "barbarians" with whom he must live regard his habits as "absurdly out of keeping with the facts of [their] daily existence" (Malouf 17). Ovid grew up on a farm but in his adult life has had little or no dealings with the natural world, animals or the facts of basic survival – by his own admission he was interested as a poet and a citizen of Rome only in that which was ornamental, frivolous, entertaining. He gradually becomes accustomed to his new life, however, and the first manifestations of his awakening to the natural world can be found in his growing alertness and pleasure in landscape, and feelings of kinship with animals. He begins to appreciate long walks, finding that the landscape is "full of tiny animals and insects, all of them worth observing" and feels that he has "stopped finding fault with creation" (Malouf 63-64). This lesson in finding simple pleasure and interest in nature can be seen as the first step Ovid takes in his increasingly profound connection with the natural world, and it is initiated by a growing kinship with animals. Due to the lack of a common language Ovid is "as isolated from the world of men as if [he] belonged to another species" (17). This feeling serves to enable a new sense of kinship and empathy with other species, like the spiders that live in his hut with him. He gradually learns to accept the profuse insect life which infests his new home, and even his clothes and hair, and, increasingly, becomes quite fond of them instead of disgusted (20). He has never had much to do with animals before, not even domesticated ones, but in his exile he begins to find them "oddly companionable" in their shared silence, and wonders if they too have languages with which to communicate amongst themselves (20).

It is also important that the novel contains a motif of hybridity, a frequent blurring of the distinction between humans and other animals, between the 'civilised' and the wild. For instance, Ovid dreams of centaurs, the mythical hybrids between human and horse, a dream which finds cultural expression in the ritual burial of the villagers who are impaled on their horses, leaving behind skeletal 'centaurs' in the burial grounds. In his dream Ovid finds these gigantic creatures terrifying – "not the tamed creatures of… pastoral myths" (Malouf 24) – but through his terror he recognises that there is something god-like in this melding of human and horse. More importantly, he recognises that they too have heartbeats and warm breath, that they share the basic physical attributes of all living creatures (24). This realisation of corporeal commonality makes him less afraid of them and hints at a lost kinship; he feels something in him recognise and respond to them (24). Another important

example of this hybridity is the wolf-child and the werewolf. In the opening pages Ovid tells of myths he heard as a child about a boy raised by wolves and, more supernaturally, about men who become wolves at full moon. The wolf is traditionally a threatening symbol, something wild and dangerous to be feared (Randall 47), but it is also perhaps significant that the myth of the origins of Rome tells the story of brothers raised by a wolf. The young Ovid muses that there must be something "kindly" in the nature of wolves for them to raise human children (Malouf 10), and he feels sad when he sees a decapitated wolf head mounted on a wall. This childhood recollection is significant in that it introduces Ovid's capacity to empathise with animals and recognise the commonalities between species. It further foreshadows his later relationship with the Child whom he suspects has been raised by deer but clearly has some kinship with wolves. The Child's relationship with wolves and other animals – his ability to live amongst them – undermines the validity of the villagers' desperate battle to keep the wolf packs out of their encampment, suggesting that perhaps this rigid division between animal and human is illusory.[3]

Through the Child, Ovid explores what divides humankind from other animals, yet increasingly he finds that there may not be very much that does. The Child straddles the divide between human and animal and the villagers find him threatening to their sense of human identity (Byron 83). It is Ovid's ability to embrace reciprocity with the Child that allows him to learn more about the animal world as he teaches the boy about human culture and language. The Child has not only a kinship with animals but also the ability to imitate them – Ovid believes that his imitation allows him to momentarily become the creatures by imagining himself into their physical forms. He becomes the birds as he makes their sounds:

> 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, so that to my eyes he seems miraculously transformed. (Malouf 90).

The Child learning human language is as much at a loss as Ovid is trying to learn the language of birds. This raises the possibility that, as many linguists have suggested, human language is merely one code of communication amongst many others (Doty et al. 102). It is

[3] Although I touch on the human relationship with animals in this thesis, I do so only insofar as it is a component of the protagonists' developing relationship with nature. Although it is clearly a related topic it is too broad a research area for me to explore here. However, Ralph R. Acampora has written a comprehensive book on interspecies ethics, particularly compatible with this thesis in that he seeks to establish an ethics based in corporeal kinship, and draws on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, amongst others. See bibliography.

significant that although Ovid eventually abandons his attempt to teach the Child human language, he continues to try to learn what the Child teaches him about nature and animals. He tries to imagine himself into the bodies and lives of other creatures: “I close my human mind and try to grow a beak, try to leap out of myself” (Malouf 97). He thinks he is beginning to have some success at it. This is a gesture towards learning to embrace all living things through physical imagination, as the Child does, instead of enforcing difference and division by forcing the boy into human culture and language.

This attempt to imagine oneself into the physical form and being of another creature is also related to Ovid’s frequent philosophising about the power of the imagination, not only in constructing landscape and identity but as a force which at its most powerful allows one to transcend the self, to imagine oneself beyond the limits of individual subjectivity. To Ovid it is this potential which makes us divine, which could one day lead to humans becoming gods and to an ideal god-like world. Early in the novel, Ovid addresses his reader, who he imagines is centuries in the future, as a god: “For that surely is what you must be at your great distance from us – the god who has begun to stir in our depths, to gather his being out of us” (Malouf 18). This imaginative process is what Ovid feels allows him to develop throughout the novel, to reimagine his relationship with human society and the natural world and to expand his formerly frivolous personae: “Our further selves are contained within us, as the leaves and blossoms are in the tree… What a different self has begun to emerge in me!” (64-65). As a poet Ovid is preoccupied with transformation and metamorphosis. He celebrates the conviction that “We are free to transcend ourselves. If we have the imagination for it” (67). Although Ovid seems to see – especially early in the novel – humanity as a peak of this imaginary evolution, it is also a process which imaginatively links all creatures and can therefore be seen as a powerful illustration of interconnectivity. He says, “It is as if each creature had the power to dream itself out of one existence into a new one” (28-29). In fact, he imaginatively links all of nature, dreaming that even the inanimate earth imagines itself into life:

> Having 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 to it. So that the stone sleeping in the sun has once been molten fire and became stone when the fire was able to say, in its liquid form: ‘I would be solid, I would be stone’; and the 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. Our bodies are not final. (29)

This vision of imaginative evolution extending from inanimate earth to potential gods is perhaps somewhat naïve but is compatible with Ovid's later realisation that all living things are part of the earth from whence they came and to which they will return. All things are connected and all life originates in the earth and is ecologically linked. He seems to have some intuitive grasp of evolution, albeit in an unscientific, poetic manner.

An Imaginary Life is concerned with the circle of life both thematically and structurally. The novel charts Ovid's life from childhood to death – largely neglecting the period of his adulthood in Rome, presumably because this period of fame and comfort was in fact a stagnant one in his life. The structure of the novel reinforces this by its circularity. The opening and closing scenes mirror each other and Ovid embraces his childish self as he is dying. His death is an ecstatic and profoundly triumphant rebirth, a re-entering of the earth. When relating a boyhood experience of mourning Ovid describes how, upon his brother's death, he covered himself with soil: "For all our mockery of the earth we have come from, it covers us, we creep back to it, to its thickness on our limbs, its grit in our mouths" (Malouf 88). He is imitating the approaching burial of his brother in a sense, but he also realises that he is instinctively seeking comfort in the earth, seeking solace in the primordial origins of life and thereby linking himself to his brother and all of creation. Later, describing his own approaching death, Ovid says: "I shall settle deep into the earth, deeper than I do in sleep, and will not be lost. We are continuous with earth in all the particles of our physical being, as in our breathing we are continuous with sky. Between our bodies and the world there is unity and commerce" (147). Ovid does not fear death because he has come to an understanding of an ecological immortality. His approaching re-envelopment by nature makes him "immeasurably, unbearably happy" (152). This ecstatic surrendering of subjectivity in death is the culmination of Ovid's gradual expansion of consciousness to include the natural world. In this sense, the novel is deeply phenomenological. Ovid's gradual discovery that his body is continuous with the earth is akin to Merleau-Ponty's insistence that body and earth are ultimately one flesh (*The Visible and the Invisible* 271). Malouf frequently absorbs the

human perspective into a natural scene in his poetry, dissolving subjectivity into a greater interconnected whole.

Once again, Ovid's development in this regard is prompted primarily by his relationship with the Child. The first real inkling we get from him of a desire to dissolve into nature is in reaction to his second sighting of the Child in a clearing in the forest. Ovid hopes that his companions will sit still and quiet so that the wild boy will not fear them: "if we let our spirits out, shaking them loose, and became wood, leaf mould, lichen – he would come to us" (Malouf 59). In a dream soon after he imagines that his companions and he have succeeded in becoming part of the forest, himself transformed into a puddle of water:

> I am a pool of water. I feel myself warm in the sunlight, liquid, filled with the blue of the sky; but I am the merest broken fragment of it, and I feel, softly, the clouds passing through me, their reflections, and once the suddenness of wings… I lie in the dark forest waiting for the moon. And softly, nearby, there are footsteps. A deer. The animal's face leans towards me. I am filled with tenderness for it. Its tongue touches the surface of me, lapping a little. It takes part of me into itself, but I do not feel at all diminished. (61-62)

Although Ovid does feel fear in his dream, scared of losing his spirit, of feeling himself broken, he finds that when the deer drinks the sensation is not unpleasant and he does not find himself diminished. This is a first step towards his mission to expand consciousness by imagining himself into his natural surroundings. He gives of himself willingly to the deer and later in the dream the Child drinks from the pool of water as well, feeding off Ovid's substance (62).

Later in the novel, when the Child has been caught and he and Ovid are developing a relationship, Ovid notices that the Child does not distinguish between self and landscape:

> He 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 – whose existence he can be at home in because they hold, each of them, some particle of his spirit. He has no notion of the otherness of things. (95-96)

Ovid realises that whereas he thinks "It rains", the Child thinks "I am raining" (96). This seemingly radical shift away from individual subjectivity is actually comparable to the way animals treat their territories and therefore not implausible for a feral child. Neil Evernden explains that animals tend to "become" their landscape in that they are territorial and come to

see their territory as part of themselves (97-98). The animal can be seen as bounded by its environment as opposed to bounded more conventionally by its physical form (98). Humans, on the other hand, traditionally doubly alienate themselves from their environments by seeing themselves as not only firmly bounded by their skin during life but also as possessing immortal souls thereby separating them from nature even in death. In the Cartesian vein westerners have generally assumed that the "real" subject is non-physical, separate from the physical world, as a result of which "far from extending our 'self' into the environment… we hoard our ego as tightly as we can" (Evernden 98).

It is exactly this mode of thinking which eco-phenomenology can so ably combat through its insistence on embodied experience and kinship with the physical, natural world. Merleau-Ponty believes that the natural world and the subject are so intertwined that at all times "the world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 407). In the ambiguity of human existence we must accept that we are intertwined with our physical environments, must learn to "situate ourselves in ourselves *and* in the things, in ourselves *and* in the other, at the point where, by a sort of *chiasm*, we become the others and we become world" (emphasis in original *The Visible and the Invisible* 160). At first this mode of being terrifies Ovid, who fears "losing hold of [his] separate and individual soul" (Malouf 96). But he gradually realises that the Child's perspective is more rewarding and natural and he begins to conceive of his exile as being from the physical universe rather than from Rome (98). Finally he desires to embrace this more all-encompassing experience of the world:

> Slowly I begin the final metamorphosis. I must drive out my old self and let the universe in. The creatures will come creeping back… they will settle in us… and after them, the plants… Then we shall begin to take back into ourselves the lakes, the rivers, the oceans of the earth, its plains, its forested crags… The spirit of things will migrate back into us. We shall be whole. (96)

The reader is asked to believe that by the end of his journey Ovid is close to achieving this oneness with the universe. As he is walking through the vast grasslands with the Child Ovid glories in the "open freedom" of his consciousness (141). His spirit "expands to become the whole landscape, as if space itself were its dimensions; filling the whole land from horizon to horizon" (142). This newfound expansiveness culminates, of course, in the ultimate freedom from subjectivity in death.

In this novel the distinction between self and landscape is disrupted and persistently undermined. The ecological significance of such a technique, and theme, is obvious, as it challenges an anthropocentric world-view and encourages a radically different understanding of our place in the world, one in which we are not only connected to but actually coextensive with our natural environments. As mentioned in my introduction, Nietzsche's phenomenological theories seek to undermine hierarchical dualisms and although not without problems his ideas are appropriate to *An Imaginary Life*. Nietzsche states in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that the human separation from nature has rendered us "cripples". His emphasis on corporeality is supplemented by the belief that only through constant transformation, "ongoing becoming", can humankind overcome the dichotomous and false distinctions between life/death, culture/nature and mind/body (Langer 110). This is compatible with Ovid's belief in metamorphosis and the process of development he embarks on in the novel. Moreover, Nietzsche's ideal human being is portrayed as a playful, creative and innocent child who makes no distinction between body and mind and who intermingles freely with nature (111). The Child in this novel can be seen as a creative expression of this phenomenological ideal.

The emphasis on humankind being physically part of a broader phenomenological world, with which we are inextricably interrelated or "continuous", ties in with Ovid's discovery of corporeal modes of communication. Ovid is forced by his exile to find alternate means of communication to language – more universal ones. Doty and Hiltunen claim that Malouf "demonstrates repeatedly that verbal language is only one sign system used by humans" (99). He embraces and explores non-verbal communication including the gestural and sensory (99). In particular, these linguists point out that Malouf seems to be addressing the fact that language cannot replace the sensory perception/communication which we develop first and which allows us to interact with our surroundings in a way language cannot supplant (100). When Ovid first arrives in Tomis he feels that he has to "communicate like a child with grunts and signs" (Malouf 17). He complains about needing to discover the world anew, like a child does, through his senses, because his language is of no use to him in translating the alien landscape or the people and their customs, let alone in communicating with them (22). He gradually comes to see that this sensory, physical exploration of the world is invaluable as it reconnects him with the natural world and with his childish self. Ovid discovers that to an extent he can understand and communicate with the villagers despite a lack of common language. He feels he can understand the "tunes" of the alien language – he can identify the

emotions informing the unknown words, understanding when they are angry or tender (21). Ovid recognises this particularly when listening to Ryzak tell his grandson stories at night: at these times he feels that the stories are somehow familiar to him because he understands the music of the language, the gestures his friend makes, and the different voices Ryzak uses (39). In a similar recognition of basic human commonality Ovid finds great release when performing the ritual in the burial grounds: even though he does not know its formal significance he can intuitively grasp its relevance and experience its value. The inarticulate yell he gives in imitation of the other riders makes him feel "freed of something" (45). Although he is not part of their culture or belief system, he takes comfort in the fact that his yell, his breath, "still moves out from [his] body into the world", making him feel connected to his surroundings and the other men (45). It recalls for him a Roman ritual he performed as a child out in the fields which filled him with joy and exhilaration, reconnecting him to his land and the plants and animals around him, making him feel "gathered into the web of things" (88).

After he has learnt Getic and no longer has to rely on gestural and sensory communication with the villagers, Ovid is confronted by the greater challenge of communicating with the unsocialised Child. It is vital that the Child and Ovid are forced into physical recognition of one another, and corporeal communication, as this establishes a feeling of commonality and reciprocity (Byron 83). Their relationship is based on this physical reciprocity: it is the Child's gestural, sensory communication in teaching Ovid about nature that Ovid learns to value above the verbal language he tries to teach the boy. He learns to communicate with, understand, and empathise with the Child on a far more profound level than language has ever previously allowed him to connect with others. For Ovid, "Silence is not a negative experience... It is, in fact, the key to his true self… silence has a more significant transformative effect on him than anything else in the novel" (Doty & Hiltunen 100-101). Silence is not a passive but a very active state for Ovid, one which allows corporeal and sensory awareness and communication. Although desperate at first to teach the Child to speak, he comes to feel that "true communion is to be found only in the inner speech, in 'silence', a state which is free from the structures of human language. Verbal language, he feels, is dangerous in that it prevents a deeper kind of knowing and understanding" (101). This realisation ties in with Derrida's theory of Hospitality. Through language Ovid can only marginalise and objectify the Child, but in abandoning language he learns to respect the Child's alterity, his different approach to life and the world. Derrida says that "absolute,

hyperbolical, unconditional hospitality" is only possible through "suspending language" (*Of Hospitality* 135). This is exactly what Ovid eventually needs to do to accommodate and appreciate the Child. Ultimately, he comes to see sensory, corporeal communication as a higher form of interaction than verbal communication. In reality, poststructuralists and phenomenologists would agree that this complete abandonment of language is impossible but this is exactly what the fictional Ovid seems to achieve.

It is important at this point to unpack Ovid's journey or evolution regarding language. He undergoes a clear progression from worship of his native tongue, Latin, to an understanding and appreciation of the language of Tomis – Getic – and then beyond verbal language, seeking an intuitive, sensory form of communication. In the beginning Ovid feels that the inhabitants of Tomis are not "fully human" because they are not "Romans under the law" (Malouf 20). To his mind their tongue is ugly and "barbarous" whereas Latin, of course, is a "perfect" language (21). As Ovid begins to grasp the new language and its accompanying world-view, however, he begins to believe that whereas Latin is a language "designed to express difference", Getic "presents… the raw life and unity of things" (65). It is a language which comes closer to expressing "the first principle of creation" (65). What Ovid means by this is that Getic brings him closer to nature, and allows him to express this new feeling of kinship and coextension, presumably because its attendant culture is more ecologically-oriented than that of the Romans. Of course, as identity and world-view are inextricably linked with language, it is apt that Ovid should undergo a transformation of character in the process of adopting a new language and its attendant culture (Attar 68). But Ovid travels not merely from one language and cultural mores to another – a significant transition in itself – but to a state of being "beyond language and homeland" (Attar 56).

In seemingly moving beyond structures of difference like language and culture, Ovid embraces a more fluid, tolerant and ecologically hopeful mode of existence. When he meets the Child, Ovid has his first taste of a silent, intuitive communication; he finds this primordial contact alluring, later abandoning language almost completely in pursuit of it. It is a "true language" which he once knew as a child and has forgotten and which, if rediscovered, will "reveal the secrets of the universe" (Malouf 97-98). This "speech in silence" (97) allows a new sensory appreciation of nature and a physical identification with other people which he has long forgotten and which enables a bridging of the perceived divides between human

beings of different cultures and between humankind and nature. It is "a language whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation" (98). In Kavanagh's words:

> What the boy introduces Ovid to is another 'language', another order of consciousness, deeper than human speech. It has a primacy and a presence which integrates rather than distinguishes, and which does not exclude other orders of being… The Child's language contains the actuality towards which human existence yearns, from which it is separated by words… the Child's self is coextensive with the world, while [Ovid] is excluded, entrapped within himself by the grammar of human speech. (150)

While at first Ovid is determined to socialise the Child and teach him language (notably he wants to teach him Getic, not Latin, by this stage) he gradually comes to doubt the value of this lesson in being human. Ovid eventually realises that the boy is a superior being in his inarticulate, harmonious coextension with the universe, a state of being which human language would threaten. By the end he is simply grateful that he has not succeeded in socialising the Child, that he "survived his season among men" (148).

The ideal, seemingly prelapsarian, 'language' that Ovid and the Child share is similar to the gestures towards corporeal, intuitive communication made in both *The Hungry Tide* and *The English Patient*, but with none of these two novels' admission of its limitations. It is a mode of communication so perfect that it supplants completely the need for verbal language. Ovid finally grasps this form of silent communion with his companion once they cross the frozen river on their final journey. He feels that the Child is moving him "deeper into the earth… further from speech even, into the sighing grasslands that are silence" (145). To use Christian terminology, it is almost as though he is following the Child back into Eden, into a perfect and uncomplicated communion with nature. In the grasslands they conduct "a kind of conversation that needs no tongue, a perfect interchange of perceptions, moods, questions, answers, that is as simple as the weather… thoughts melt out of one mind into the another, cloud and shadow, with none of the structures of formal speech" (145). Ovid, however, being a socialised man, presumably never completely stops thinking in language and we have his "letter", the impossible written record of these events, as proof. He can only be truly freed from language, can only truly become coextensive with landscape, in death. The novel must end at the ecstatic moment of his death because only then does he finally abandon subjectivity and language. His final words, "I am there" (152) are apt because he "transports his consciousness (in its final moment) from the 'here' of self to the 'there' of the other" (Randall 46).

It seems likely that *An Imaginary Life* is informed by some knowledge of the basic tenets of structuralism and experimentation with its implications. This is evident in the fact that it is language which divides Ovid from the natural world and that his abandonment of his culture and former world-view is synonymous with his abandonment of first Latin and then all verbal language. As Stephens says, "Behind [Ovid's] description of Latin as 'a language of distinctions' lies the structuralist view that language only exists and communicates by that very power to define and divide, to make discriminations" (161). There is ample evidence in the novel of Ovid's awareness that we construct our world, our landscapes, with language, accessing reality through the prism of culture, history and world-view as imbedded in language. He is aware, for instance, that he projects his emotions and expectations onto the Tomis landscape, which is made clear by his statement, after describing the scenery, that he is "describing a state of mind, no place" (Malouf 16). He is also aware that the Tomis landscape is somewhat inaccessible to Latin: it is "a vast page whose tongue [he is] unable to interpret" (17). The social and material world of Tomis is structured, constituted even, by a language he does not comprehend. He is therefore confronted with the task of "learning an appropriate language of place" (Randall 46). When he succeeds in learning Getic he experiences the landscape differently, feels that he can access nature: he feels himself "loosen and flow again, reflecting the world" (Malouf 65).

Ovid is in exile, physically and linguistically, so for him the landscape is doubly inaccessible and until he learns Getic he sees it as a barren place, unsuitable for human life:

> How can I give you any notion – you who know only landscapes that have been shaped for centuries to the idea we all carry in our souls of that ideal scene against which our lives should be played out – of what earth was in its original bleakness… (28)

The inhabitants of Tomis, on the other hand, have a whole culture and belief system crafted to suit their natural surroundings. When Ovid starts understanding Getic he finds that the thing that gives him the most insight into the way the people of Tomis relate to nature are the stories told by Ryzak to his grandson. He feels that the stories come straight "out of the nightmare landscape of this place… They fill the world" (58). He thinks that the "Bare, cruel, terrible, comic" myths Ryzak tells fit well with the spirit of the place and help to translate the landscape into human understanding (58). In a way this suggests that language is linked to, or influenced by, landscape rather than totally arbitrary and divorced from reality

as structuralist theory would have us believe. On the other hand, it seems likely that Malouf is emphasising that our relationship with place is culturally and linguistically constituted, that without a cultural context Ovid is incapable of identifying with his natural surroundings. Moreover, Ovid later abandons language completely as he finds that Getic, while less limiting than Latin, is still obstructive to his project of accessing reality and becoming one with the natural world. Therefore, although a language which for centuries has sought to 'translate' the reality of the Tomis landscape brings Ovid nearer to an authentic understanding and appreciation of place, to truly become coextensive with the natural world he must abandon language altogether.

Ovid's frustration with the unnameable world of his exile is demonstrated by his irritation over the seeds which he cannot identify. As a Roman poet he knows the Latin names of seeds but not what they look like; to use structuralist terms, he finds that he cannot link signifier and signified (Malouf 21). Later, one of the woman teaches him the Getic name for a seed but, not being able to link the name with any recollection of the seed's Latin name or its use he is still helpless to identify it: he "cannot translate it back into [his] own experience" (22). He is reliant on language to the extent that seeing and tasting the seed allows him no understanding of it because he understands the natural world through words, not sensory experience. Although he used the Latin words for seeds in his poetry, his work was "a mere play of signifiers" because they were not linked to reality (Stephens 162). Many critics have also analysed the poppy scene, which Malouf himself has cited as an important one (Neilson 47). Here Ovid discovers a single scarlet poppy on a walk and becomes overjoyed at the beauty and familiarity of it, overwhelmed by his ability to name it and know it (Malouf 31-32). He tells the flower it has "recovered the earth for [him]" (32). By this he means that it has reconnected his mind with the world as he can identify it, and also that it inspires him to imagine other blooms, to remember that he need only imagine (and name) the world to mould reality:

> Suddenly my head is full of flowers of all kinds. They sprout out of the earth in deep fields and roll away in my skull. I have only to name the flowers… and they burst into bud, they click open, they spread their fragrance in my mind, opening out of the secret syllables as I place them like seeds upon my tongue and give them breath. I shall make whole gardens like this. (32)

The passage is actually very complex as it seems to both allude to structuralist theory – words making the world – and seems to be a testament to the power of language and the imagination to bridge the gap between consciousness and reality. Neilson describes the episode as Ovid's celebration of language's ability to connect humankind to the world (47). He uses the episode to demonstrate that Ovid is constituting reality through language, conjuring the spring through memories of the names for flowers in a very structuralist manner (47). The poppy, certainly, is full for him of associations with home, with childhood, with a nameable, knowable world, which is why it has such an effect on him. Grogan, on the other hand, says that the poppy episode "suggests the possible merging of the material world and the sign systems that describe it, but only in moments of engaged and imaginative attention" (6). This reading implies that Ovid really does temporarily succeed in using language to engage meaningfully with nature. Reading the section in isolation this seems accurate, and it is certainly complementary to Ovid's philosophy about the imagination allowing transcendence, and a few other sections in the novel which assert the power of the literary creative act. However, the fact that Ovid later seems to succeed in bypassing language completely and as a result in accessing the material world far more directly, and with more ecological significance, either negates the significance of this early scene in the novel, or constitutes a thematic contradiction. I would argue that the celebration of words and the poet's power to constitute the world through imagination, which is celebrated in the poppy scene, is merely a step in Ovid's transformation and should not be read as a vital epiphany. Ovid's later convictions suggest that this euphoric, structuralist, approach to reality is less valuable than an ecological sense of oneness with the earth.

Malouf himself has said that the novel arose out of an interest in "the exile of a poet beyond the boundaries of language… the problem of a man for whom language is supremely important being deprived of it and having to begin to experience things all over again… through a new language" (Neilson 49). It is interesting that Malouf describes Ovid's situation thus, because some critics – including Neilson – seem to be preoccupied with Ovid's transition from Latin to Getic to the exclusion of his more profound step beyond the realms of verbal language. The poppy scene, after all, is very near the beginning of the novel and takes place at a time when Ovid's 'progress' is only beginning. It seems more appropriate therefore to assume that the Ovid at the end of the novel would repudiate his former reliance on language to experience and create landscape. Whether or not language can, in moments of imaginative transcendence, link humanity meaningfully with reality, it is

undeniable that language is depicted on the whole as a flawed system which dictates and therefore limits the human experience of the world. At some point in the novel Ovid becomes aware that all language limits his experience of the world, particularly the natural world:

> To replace this flawed system, Ovid postulates his universal language which speaks even as it doesn't speak and communicates things directly – that is, it transfers objects, events, perceptions, straight into the mind unmediated by language and so uncorrupted by relatives and the signifier/signified gap… Because it will exist without having been patterned into the multiplicity of differentiating signifiers it can be asserted that it is 'a language whose every syllable is a gesture of reconciliation'. (Stephens 161)

It is also possible that *An Imaginary Life* has a theoretical commitment to Jacques Lacan – generally considered an influential poststructuralist – and what he identified as the pre-symbolic or Imaginary mode of existence (Randall 52). It is possible that the title alludes to this theory. Certainly, a lot of the imagery is usefully unpacked with reference to Lacan's work on identity formation. Lacan theorised that there are three orders of human existence and development: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The Imaginary phase is a period when the human ego is developed during early childhood – also called the "mirror-stage" – when a concept of self first begins to arise as the infant begins to identify with others, particularly the mother, and recognise its own reflection. The ego will from this point onwards seek to see itself reflected in others and the world. It is "the order of mirror-images, identifications and reciprocities… the dimension of experience in which the individual seeks not simply to placate the Other but to dissolve his otherness by becoming his counterpart" (Bowie 92). Vital to the novel is the fact that this phase is pre-verbal. The Symbolic phase is an initiation into the realm of human social organisation including law, rules and language and is governed by the hierarchical authority of state and family. Once entered into the Symbolic stage of life a person will never fully reclaim the Imaginary. Lacan's Imaginary order has a negative connotation in his psychoanalysis because it involves a wilful attempt to find "sameness, resemblance and self-replication" and thereby to prevent further natural development of the identity (Bowie 92). The Symbolic, on the other hand, is generally portrayed in a more positive light – which is compatible with poststructuralist theory in general. Malouf, on the other hand, is inverting this valuation, privileging the Imaginary over the Symbolic. In *An Imaginary Life* Ovid seems to be struggling to reclaim his capacity for

imaginative sympathy and the assimilation of otherness, and he does so primarily by abandoning the Symbolic constrictions of language.

Ovid undergoes a gradual process of the confrontation and assimilation of otherness, first by assimilating a new culture and world-view and developing a friendship with Ryzak, then by establishing a reciprocal relationship with the unsocialised Child and with his help developing an empathy and feeling of unity with animals and nature. Ovid's death is the ultimate collapse between self and alterity and he embraces it wholeheartedly (Randall 54). His dreams of wolves and centaurs are also very telling. In the centaur dream Ovid uses mirror imagery: as he reaches out to touch a centaur he feels that he is experiencing "a reflection rising to the surface of a mirror" (Malouf 24). Mirror imagery is a strong link to the theories of Lacan – seeing oneself reflected in another is a process of imaginative engagement central to the Imaginary phase (Randall 53). Malouf uses mirror imagery also when describing the development of the Child in captivity. At first the boy is almost comatose, or expresses his fear and misery by whimpering like an animal. Ovid is terrified he is dying and wishes he would do something human, like smile or cry, but the Child strikes him only in his animal characteristics (Malouf 73-73). Gradually, however, the Child seems to make contact with something, "his mind has been engaged, and has started to move out into the room… Some process of reaching up out of himself has begun of its own accord." (79). He begins to touch Ovid's body for the first time with curiosity, seeming to start recognising himself in the old man's body, and Ovid wonders "Is it, for him, like touching his reflection in a glass?" (79). This accords with Lacan's description of the infant undergoing "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image", when he first encounters his own image in a reflection (Lacan 1286). The Child is developing "some notion of his own being" in a manner strongly reminiscent of Lacan's Imaginary phase (Malouf 79). It later becomes clear that the Child is capable of identifying with his surroundings and other beings to the extent that he has not yet developed an individual ego, and Ovid is glad that he has not corrupted this ability by continuing to try and socialise him. The Child's uttering of his first word, as his fever breaks, has generally been seen by critics as proof of his initiation into the social realm but I am sure it is best read as a final expulsion of the Symbolic phase, of language and all the limitations it will impose on his imaginative capacity. In the novel "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" (Randall 1). Malouf includes nature prominently in this

exercise in assimilation of otherness and it is this which makes the novel so ecological in tone. As Randall puts it, "The achievement of Ovid's imaginary history is in its strong affirmation of the redemptive effects of creative engagement with manifestations of alterity" (58).

However, despite the ecological value of the novel and its promotion of reconciling difference, assimilating otherness and realising a transcendent connection with nature, *An Imaginary Life* is not without problematic aspects. Not least of these is Malouf's play with traditional oppositions. Malouf has commented on his use of oppositions such as culture/nature and language/reality as being central to his themes (Neilson 45). Stephens believes that Ovid "in the course of the novel, reconstructs his life by rethinking the oppositions" (165). This has some truth but the use of such traditional oppositions can be problematic if they are not questioned or disrupted and I think that Ovid merely moves from favouring one opposite to the other without actually challenging the existence of such a binary. He moves from being the metropolitan poet, valuing culture and language, to an intuitive natural being exploring the value of nature and reality beyond the divisive anthropocentric bias of humankind. Many ecocritics emphasise, quite rightly, the damage such oppositions have done to our conception of nature and our interaction with it. In examining this potentially harmful treatment it is worth pointing out that Ovid's experience is an impossible one: "Although it seems to do so, the recuperative vision of Malouf's characters can never transcend the politics of culture and history, just as the body's retrieval of a seemingly natural state can never be socially or sexually uninformed" (Nettelbeck 111). Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, considers nature and culture to be indistinct, acknowledging the influence of both on human experience, but denying the possibility of transcending either one or the other. Referring back to the use of binary oppositions, Nettelbeck points out that "that ideal dimension beyond space, time and language is also culturally regulated, inscribed as it is by what it refuses" (111). It is possible that Malouf is aware of this. Neilson claims that Ovid breaks the opposition between culture and nature through language, that he bridges the gap imaginatively in much the same way that he dissolves the self/other binary through imaginative sympathy (52). This is a viable reading of the first half of the novel but Ovid's faith in language to bridge the gap between humanity and reality is supplanted by his discovery of a universal "language" which seems to utterly dismiss culture in favour of ecstatic connection with nature. The fact therefore remains that for Ovid accessing nature ultimately requires the rejection of culture and language, which reinforces the traditional

Western belief that culture and nature are opposing forces. *An Imaginary Life* would arguably be a more ecologically valuable text if its embrace of ecological unity with nature was not premised on a dismissal of all things cultural, because the understanding of culture and nature as mutually exclusive is potentially very harmful.

Equally problematic is the apparent contradiction between medium and 'message' in this novel. Malouf's treatment of language as a barrier to a transcendent experience of the natural world comes across as paradoxical in a *novel* which clearly aims to glorify an ecological connection. Within the novel, Ovid's faith in imagination (strongly linked to language in episodes like the poppy scene) to bridge the gap between humankind and nature is contradicted by his later complete abandonment of language in order to dissolve into earth: "The larger paradox of the novel is that language is both something which restricts and narrows human perceptions and apprehensions of the world, and a key concept used to embody the change which the narrator perceives taking place within himself" (Stephens 162). Malouf himself "is using a discursive form, language, to describe significant non-discursive moments… he captures in language the symbolic power of silence, gesture, and sensory experience for his characters" (Doty & Hiltunen 100). Thematically, "The centrality in the Western tradition of differentiation and separation, which have defined human speech, existence and consciousness, is here being challenged" (Kavanagh 151), but it is being done in the very medium Ovid ultimately repudiates. Perhaps the paradox is best reconciled by distinguishing between the collective and the individual. As Randall says, there is a misanthropic element to Malouf's writing, a mistrust of the conventional collective (58). Individuals must imagine themselves beyond the narrow and harmful constrictions of the collective, must transcend their own Symbolic brainwashing. The fact that Malouf can express this idea in language suggests that it is not merely harmful and can be an aid in this project of transcendence. There are hints both within the text and stylistically that undermine Ovid's final, rather extreme, repudiation of culture and language.

As we have seen, there are moments early in the novel when Ovid celebrates words and links them powerfully to the imagination, most notably the poppy scene in which he momentarily connects with nature through the creative act of naming and imagining flowers. When learning to make fishing nets he draws an analogy with weaving words in poetry and expresses a delight in finding patterns and links in life which could be read as ecological in tone:

> What is beautiful is the way one thing is fitted perfectly to another, and our ingenuity is also beautiful in finding the necessary correspondence between things. It is a kind of poetry, all this business with nets and hooks. (64)

This passage implies that the human consciousness is at its best capable of discovering and celebrating the interconnections in life and nature and that one of the ways it does so is through creativity and language. It further seems to gesture towards the idea that through imaginative engagement the poet is capable of finding words which truly do connect with reality, which somewhat overcome the arbitrary nature of language and allow a deeper understanding of the patterns of the natural world. Despite Ovid's eventual desire to abandon, or at least transcend language completely, he never ceases to express a vocational faith in the power of poetry and its importance. In his last days Ovid preaches that life is about pushing beyond the boundaries of subjectivity, the importance of exploring the unknown:

> Always pushing out… beyond what I know cannot be the limits – what else should a man's life be?... What else should our lives be but a continual series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become. (Malouf 135)

Vitally, Ovid associates this exploration with poetry. He believes that he has been prepared for his final physical journey into the unknown by a lifetime of seeking transformation in words. He is a man "whose whole life has been just such a daily exercise of adventuring, even in the stillness of his own garden" (136).

Interestingly, Malouf himself suggests that he has faith in the creative act overcoming the limitations associated with language:

> the word and the naming and the object are in some deep sense, for [writers], absolutely one; that the gap between those things, which was opened up much later, is one that we need to heal. Writing, it seems to me, is one of those ways in which the healing takes place. When we read, or when we write, the word and the object are absolutely one, as if there never was any question of mind and object being separate, of word and object being separate… I have always tried to render that sense of immediate being in perception. Not just through the writing itself, but through the experiences of characters in my books. (qtd in Kavanagh 154)

While he emphasises this in interviews, it does not come across strongly in this particular novel. The few scenes in which Ovid advocates this view are far outweighed by his growth

beyond language. It could be argued that the continued narration of Ovid, long after he has ceased to speak, demonstrates that he still thinks in language and, more importantly, is able to articulate his profound physical experiences in language. Overall, however, Ovid's story does not suggest that language is a means of connecting humankind with the natural world. Rather, Ovid advocates an abandonment of language on the structuralist basis that it is, in all its forms, limited and divisive, and a hindrance to a profound connection with other humans and with landscape. On the other hand, although *An Imaginary Life* seems thematically to dismiss language, it is true that stylistically Malouf can be seen to strive towards "that sense of immediate being in perception" (Malouf qtd in Kavanagh 154).

A number of critics have noted that Malouf's style of writing is unusual and an important accompaniment to his central themes. Neilson says that the "poetic, evocative style" makes "little concession to realist conventions of character and drama" (39). And Kavanagh observes that "the peculiarly open language of poetry" is necessary to express certain vital ideas in *An Imaginary Life* (152). Malouf himself has spoken in interviews of how he goes about writing novels in the same manner that he does poetry, relying on images, metaphors and associations rather than plot (Indyk 48). And indeed, the novel reads like an extended poem. This is important in a novel which thematises the divisive tendencies of language because poetry breaks with some of the conventions of the system, arguably escaping, to an extent, the associative weight of the social contract which gives language meaning, and thereby allowing the author to creatively surprise readers so that they see things in a different light. As Kavanagh says, poetry is powerful because at its best it balances on "the razor's edge between what is expressible and what is inexpressible" (161). This is in line with Malouf's attempt to thematise the sublime – that which goes beyond our conventional human understanding of the world. The sublime, in the Romantic conception, refers not only to an experience of awe and transcendence but is also associated with a certain style of writing: sublime writing expresses in style "a form of excess, a surpassing of limits. The limits it surpasses may be those of rational expectation, of reasonable argument, of logic itself" (Price 40). Moreover, a sublime writing style is often associated with a melding of external scene and the mind or soul of the perceiver – a kind of extreme, transcendent pathetic fallacy or "ambiguity of internal and external" (44) which, as discussed above, is a technique Malouf uses frequently in this novel.

Malouf's writing style is therefore very compatible with his thematic challenging of limits and convention. He seems to be suggesting, by writing a poetic, unconventional novel about the abandonment of language, that the chasm between humankind and the phenomenological world can still be bridged by creatively engaged, sensually rich writing. As Randall demonstrates, Malouf's writing is full of variations of the verb-phrases "out into" or "up out of" which stylistically express the novel's thematic preoccupation with the desire to expand or transcend the limits of subjectivity (44). The frequently expressed desire to venture out, "this traversing of conventionally presumes 'limits' emerges at last as the key to an understanding of the meaning and purpose of a human life" (Randall 45), and it manifests in Malouf's style as well as his content. His associations and metaphors are effective exactly because they are not "dependent upon social convention" (Indyk 53). Of course, without pandering to some degree to societal convention one would be incapable of communicating meaning, but it is true that because Malouf's descriptions are often unfamiliar or unusual they seem more profound. Tomis is portrayed as something of a blank landscape by Ovid and even the most mundane objects seen against this backdrop, all so alien to the foreign poet, are seen anew. There is a kind of romancing of the ordinary which allows simple things like fishing nets to be seen in a new poetic light. What is more, Malouf's is a poetry which constantly stresses physicality and sensory perception, gesturing towards experiences which may be difficult to express in language but which can be accessed by imaginative sympathy. His work emphasises "the transformative potential of an embodied interaction with the environment and… the poetic possibilities of a language that describes this" (Grogan 7).

Malouf has said that reading and writing require a "physical act of approaching words and touching a world" (Ramsey-Kurtz 116). This sentiment ties in with Ondaatje's portrayal of reading as a corporeal experience which encourages ethical engagement through empathy. It is clear in other works of Malouf's that he believes writing/reading is an ethical act which can enable transformation or even transcendence of the self. Grogan writes about how Malouf aims to galvanise his readers into "an imaginative engagement that expands the limits of the socialised self" (17); she uses the short story "Mrs Porter and the Rock" to demonstrate this very effectively. In *An Imaginary Life* Malouf describes Ovid's experiences as an explorer of the natural world in such a way that he stresses embodiment and sensory engagement, encouraging – hopefully – a corporeal empathetic engagement from his readers. In Grogan's words, Malouf "works towards climactic moments lyrically enacting an ecological phenomenology" reminiscent of Meleau-Ponty (1). Merleau-Ponty insists that language itself

is always the product of embodied perception as well as an expression of cultural values. As Abram puts it, "the fluid creativity we commonly associate with the human intellect is an elaboration or recapitulation of a deep creativity already underway at the most immediate level of bodily perception" (84). Fiction like Malouf's, which stresses embodiment and a sensory experience of the world, which strains against the limits of convention, seems to flow directly from this level of "deep creativity". As discussed in the previous chapters, one of the most valuable offerings of fiction to the ecological movement is a re-imagining or re-mythologizing of the human relationship with nature. Given that the environmental crisis is most significantly a crisis of consciousness, it is vital to use language imaginatively to address the harmful cultural assumptions conventionally imbedded therein. Malouf is, I think, fully cognisant of this need. He has spoken of how novels have a "mythologizing" function (Neilson 40). *An Imaginary Life* demands a rethinking of how we relate to the natural world and draws attention to the potentially harmful consequences of mediating all our experiences through language. It also seems to strive for a style of expression which exceeds these limitations, suggesting a language of embodiment which draws on physical experience and imagination as much as it does on cultural and literary conventions.

While *The English Patient* and *The Hungry Tide* offer corporeal communication and empathy as a hopeful addition to verbal communication, this novel takes a step further by ultimately glorifying the pre-lingual, silence and sensory communication to the exclusion of language, which is seen to corrupt the ideal state of humankind as coextensive with the natural world. Despite the fact that Malouf also at times celebrates the potential of language and the imagination to connect humankind with nature, there is undeniable contradiction in his simultaneous attempt to point out the flaws of language to the point of apparently advocating its abandonment, and laud it as a means to an imaginative engagement with the universe. However, this novel, at base, can still be accurately described as "a symbolic fable about the human potential for transformation of the self and the 'other' by means of language and imagination" (Neilson 43). The paradox between medium and 'message' is, I think, unresolved in *An Imaginary Life,* but this does not detract from its status as an ecologically hopeful exploration of human interaction with nature. Perhaps the paradox is necessary to fully engage the reader with the issue of language constituting reality, and the implications of this for our interaction with nature.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*

> With our twentieth-century selves we have forgotten the importance of being truly and openly primitive. We have forgotten the art of our legitimate beginnings. We no longer know how to close the gap between the far past and the immediate present in ourselves. We need primitive nature, the First Man in ourselves, it seems, as the lungs need air and the body food and water… (Laurens van der Post *The Lost World of the Kalahari*)

The Expedition to the Baobab Tree is a novel, like the others examined in this thesis, which evinces a strong back-to-nature urge and consciously examines the human relationship with the natural world, as well as the shortcomings of language – particularly the discourses enabling slavery, patriarchy and environmental estrangement. The novel can be seen as ecofeminist in its outlook and is staunchly anti-anthropocentric. Once again we see the inversion of the explorer's quest myth: rather than conquering landscape the protagonist instead finds herself dissolving into coextension with nature and an appreciation of ecological interconnectedness. Moreover, the novel is written in a very interesting, poetic style which defies convention and suggests new possibilities for ecologically engaged literature. I am analysing the novel in the English translation written by J. M. Coetzee, rather than in the original Afrikaans. Although I realise that the work will have been unavoidably altered in translation, for convenience's sake I reference Stockenström herself rather than her translator.

Although the unnamed slave woman who focalises and narrates the novel never gives place names or a period for her experiences, one can deduce that *The Expedition to The Baobab Tree* is set in the late fifteenth century, in East Africa. The protagonist is probably captured by slavers in the mountains of Burundi and taken to a city on the Mozambican coast where she experiences an Afro-Arab culture which conducts extensive sea-trade with the East (Zeiss 72). In a circuitous, non-linear narrative – which occasionally seems self-indulgently opaque – the slave woman describes her three masters and the experiences she has with them in the coastal city. She then sets off on an expedition with her fourth and final master into the interior in search of a new trade route. Their quest is for a wealthy city which they increasingly imagine in a utopian light; what Zeiss calls a longing for "a prelapsarian dimension of being", a recurrent trope in quest narratives (62). After a number of

misadventures the woman finds herself alone in the African wilderness and seeks shelter in a baobab tree. After barely surviving for a time alone, she is mistaken for some kind of tree deity by the San, or "little people", who thereafter bring her offerings of food and clothes which make her life comfortable. Although she is grateful to them she is also upset by their refusal to interact with her because she is desperately lonely. She feels acutely the "insult of not being allowed to be human" (Stockenström 101), and begins to desire death despite her newfound appreciation of nature and identification with her natural surroundings. After witnessing a terrible massacre between the San and an unknown group she commits suicide by drinking poison left for her by the survivors. In death she seeks release from the constraints of the human condition and finally finds freedom in darkness, silence and integration with nature.

In this unusual bildungsroman the protagonist's progress centres around the baobab tree, as the title suggests. It is from the tree, and actually to the tree, that she narrates, and it is at this final destination that she learns the folly of her anthropocentric world-view and begins to appreciate and identify deeply with her natural landscape. Zeiss feels that the baobab is aligned with the concept of the perfect city in quest narratives, as it is associated with a return to a prelapsarian, almost primordial world (75). This is supported by the slave woman's struggle, eventually abandoned, to keep measuring time. By the end she has admitted the meaninglessness of the human construct of linear time and seemingly transcended the concept, embracing circularity and natural rhythms. It is significant that she finds rest in a natural paradise as opposed to an urban one, but it must be said that her life at the baobab, although it has edenic potential, is not a perfect existence. There is no doubt, however, that the baobab is portrayed as a return to origins and nature for the slave woman, and that she seems fated to end up living inside it: "not only can a hollow baobab be used for human habitation, but its rain-storing and fruit-bearing propensities, in the context of the narrative, project it as the elemental destiny of the 'water-spirit' that has characterised the protagonist" (Zeiss 75). The slave woman comes to identify with the tree to the point that she conceives of herself as part of it. She knows she is dependent on it and exists in it and with it. She describes being "swallowed" into it as though they are becoming physically coextensive (Stockenström 17). Indeed, in keeping with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the human body being physically entwined with the flesh of the world, she comes to know the inside of the baobab as though it is her own body, rather than just a home or dwelling: "I know the inside of my tree as a blind man knows his home, I know its flat surfaces and grooves and swellings

and edges, its smell, its darknesses, its great crack of light as I never knew the huts and rooms where I was ordered to sleep" (13). She frequently mentions with gratitude all that it means to her:

> confidant, home, fort, water source, medicine chest, honey holder, my refuge, my last resort… my midpoint, guardian of my passionate outbursts, leafless coagulated obesity winter and summer life-giving rocking cupola of leaves and flowers and sour seeds… You protect me. I revere you. That is to say, the field-mouse and I inhabit you, but only I revere you, I think, only I. (30)

Her approach to the baobab is only part of a greater change, an increased awareness of human insignificance, natural interconnectedness, and grateful humility, which makes the novel strongly anti-anthropocentric, or biocentric as the deep ecologists would say. The basic insignificance of humankind in the natural scheme of things is emphasised often in the novel. Although while in the coastal city the protagonist is largely unaware of nature, as soon as she leaves she starts sensing how inconsequential she is. When travelling through the wilderness with the caravan she reflects on how "insignificant" the "little line of human beings" is amongst the vast grasslands, how "wholly inconspicuous" they are amongst the other animals (82). Once living in the baobab the occasional evidence she finds of one-time human settlement, like beads and pot shards, make her certain that she is walking over the graveyards of human civilisations. She thinks it is sad that whole communities can disappear almost without a trace, can be swallowed up into landscape (16). In the same vein she imagines that although whole tribes of people – like her own when she was a child – are caught or killed by slavers in the forests, the natural ecosystem is barely influenced by this human drama: "It was a vain scream of fear. It was a small commotion in a wide forest. It drew no more attention than the noise of a troop of apes. After the interruption the birds went on twittering" (40). The tragedy of the slaughter of the San near the end of her story provides a feast for many animals – it is nothing more than a lucky source of nourishment (107). However, perhaps the most significant inversion of the human/nature hierarchy in the novel is her last master, the Stranger's, death in the jaws of a crocodile.

> Come to his end in the belly of a reptile. There are times when I really can't help laughing at it. It is after all a particularly laughable death. One is so used to regarding other inhabitants of the earth as food, to accepting them, as it were, as self-evident sources of food, and to putting whatever is edible in service of one's digestion, to raising the ingestion of food to an art by adding condiments and tastefully serving up dishes that go together, to

> making a huge fuss of a meal and to developing customs around it that ossify into rituals, to making a whole rigmarole of the utterly natural bodily function of eating – one is so used to it that it seems terribly funny when other-consuming man is himself eaten. The untouchably mighty, revealed to be nothing but food… (63)

The protagonist comes to know that she is not only no more important than any other creature, but also that she is a "novice" at survival in a world from which she has been estranged by her upbringing and culture; she is an "unequipped stupid civilized creature" who cannot find food despite wandering about in "paradisal luxuriance" (37). She is only one of many animals trying to survive in the landscape:

> Found: all kinds of veld foods; and found too that I was plucking, digging, picking them up in competition with animals, that trees did not bud and blossom and bear fruit for me to still my hunger, that tubers and roots did not swell underground for me, that not to please me did the greenheart tree drip its nectar, and not to refresh me did the flat-crown stand at strategic points in the middle of a patch of shade, and not to give me pleasure did the flecked orchids display themselves, not for me did the violet tree put up tents of scent in early summer. (11)

She realises that she is dependent on her natural surroundings in the most basic way, and becomes intensely appreciative for all she receives and aware that she is part of a vast, interconnected system. She is therefore able to give thanks in a deeply ecological way, acknowledging the chain of connections which enable her survival: "I thank the honey-bee. I thank the tree that houses him. I thank the earth that gives the tree its footing… I thank the rain that descends to the very roots of the tree so that it can drink water and grow leaves and flowers" (Stockenström 96). She is aware that she is dependent on nature, part of it rather than superior to the natural realm. In fact, she recognises her human conditioning and comes to mock what remains of her arrogance: "Reborn every time from the belly of a baobab, I stand full of myself. The sun defines my shadow. The wind clothes me. I point to the air and say: air make me live" (14). Part of this process involves her growing understanding that she is not the only species which has agency, intentionality, essence and life force. In fact, she seems to be returning to a more animistic form of spirituality, as practiced by her ancestors. When she is pinned in a terrible storm by a tree while a slave in the city she feels in retrospect that it must have been because she did not then believe that the tree had a spirit and therefore did not respect it or acknowledge it as a fellow living thing. She is trapped because she "had always resolutely ignored it and never tried to seek the favour of its spirit, because [she] ignore[s] all spirits save that which lives in [her]" (26). She knows this is

contrary to the beliefs of her people, who tell her that she must "Placate the spirit of the earth… of the air… of the tree" so that they will note her gesture and watch over her (26-27). She begins to acknowledge essence and spirit in everything, in a manner compatible with certain kinds of deep ecology. She sings a ritual song of thanks when she collects her daily water (10-11). She nourishes and celebrates the water-spirit which she has imagined from childhood lives within her. She listens to the wind and the running water and asks them to share their wisdom with her (72).

The term Animism was first popularised in the nineteenth century by Edward Tyler and is the belief that all living entities have souls. Tyler used the term negatively when referring to "primitive" cultures who believed in spirits, and in many ways this association of primitivism is still with us today. However, in certain ecological and literary circles the term has since expanded and been reimagined in a more positive light as a doctrine celebrating plurality, multiplicity and a connection between all living things (Knechtel 260). For animistic cultures animals, plants and even entities like stones and rivers are "inspirited", perceived as articulate and capable of communicating with humans. Languages other than the human – the language of wind, birds, wolves – are acknowledged (Manes 15). This has massive implications for the treatment and understanding of nature. As Plumwood points out, one of the things we need to combat in dominant culture is the automatic mainstream denigration of any anthropomorphic or animist approaches to the natural world; that which attributes nature with agency, mind, or the ability to communicate is wrongly seen as sentimental and primitive. The "enforcement of impoverishing, passifying and deadening vocabularies for what is to be reduced and ruthlessly consumed" have allowed us to become estranged from the natural world and capable of destroying it apparently without ethical qualms (Plumwood *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 56). Hans Peter Duerr has said "people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them" (qtd in Manes 16). Manes responds that "Regrettably, our culture has gone a long way to demonstrate that the converse of this statement is also true" (16). In literate societies nature is generally silent – "the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" (Manes 15). Manes urges humankind to "reanimate nature" by giving it a voice and agency. Stockenström does just this by portraying her protagonist gradually discovering the agency and 'voice' of the natural forces that surround her.

Animals play a central role in the protagonist's awakening to agency in nature. When she is stranded alone in the African wilderness the slave woman admits she is completely ignorant of the natural realm and animals: "no one grows up as ignorant as a slave girl, and even I, the shining exception, seem to be stupid when it comes to wild animals and their habits, with my knowledge restricted to items of information about the ivory trade" (Stockenström 9). She quickly has to learn, however, and finds that she acts instinctively much like the other animals do, making paths to the water and foraging for food (8). She comes to respect the animals she shares her surroundings with. She learns how to live in harmony with the elephants who share her water hole: "Now I live in friendship with the herd whose ford and bathing place I accidentally trespassed on. Friendship a condescending misnomer, however. I live. They live. Thus." (9). This is an important passage because it demonstrates not only a newfound humility but also an unwillingness to anthropomorphise to an extent that the animals lose their power, agency and wildness; they are not her friends, but creatures she lives in a respectful harmony with.

She is deeply unsettled by the baboons whom she fears but, interestingly, it is mainly because she finds them disconcertingly human:

> He is too much like me. I fear my recognisable self in his ugly face. I am reminded of my inferior position here, my lesser knowledge. I feel taunted by the mirroring of my moods and desires in his monstrousness, and feel ridicule of my refinement, a demonstration that it is superfluous, in his vulgar hands-and-knees caricature. I despise him, his strength, his cunning, his self-evident mastery of this world. (11)

She is jealous of the baboons and their superiority and similarity offend her. Not only are they very much like humans – demonstrating that humankind are just another ape – they are, in this context, superior to her. She recognises emotion and intention in many different animals, saying of a ground hornbill, sneaking into her baobab for food, that she can "clearly recognize the calculating look in his light-blue eyes, coquettishly veiled by stiff eyelashes" (95). She also frequently compares humans to animals. In a passage which seems to make reference (impossibly) to evolution, she compares the travellers, adventuring with no clear idea of why they do so, to "Invertebrates about to change homes… Shellfish sliding over the sand. A colony of sea-anemones slithering over dry rocks on their single feet. Fish walking on their fins. Wobbling salt-scaled coelacanths" (60). This comparison makes it clear that humans are merely another animal obeying age-old instincts which they attempt to glorify with philosophising and commercial endeavour.

Vitally, in the novel, the domestication, ownership and abuse of animals is conflated in some ways with the wrongs of slavery. This is apt considering that slavery was enabled by dehumanisation, a discourse of inferiority which reduced slaves to animal status. The little serval cat owned by the household of the third master is admired by the slave woman because of his continued defiant independence in captivity. Despite being a 'pet' he claims self-sufficiency and she therefore likes to think that they have much in common (32). On the same day that she is bought for a pittance by her second master, a far more expensive cockerel is purchased by him. In the squalor of this cruel man's home she notes that she and the cock – and all the other animals in the compound – are equally owned and captive:

> You and we, cock, cock, your crowing and shitting and our chatting and our excretions and secretions, our babies, our ornaments… and the house and the warehouse full of baskets of spices and the rats there, all his. The cooking equipment, the eating utensils, our lice, the cockroaches, the ants in the cracks of the walls and the earth around the house, all his. My labour his. My sleep his. My coming and going. My sweat. My hair. (44)

The household animals, like the household slaves, have been reduced to mere possessions. The slave square is similarly associated with the slaughterhouse nearby. The horror of the slaving is not dissimilar to the blood, fear and pain of the slaughter yard where she imagines the surrounding palm trees trying to avert their gaze (49). Both places are an embarrassment to nature. Perhaps the most powerful comparison between slavery and animal cruelty is the passage when the protagonist goes to greet the new slaves caught in the interior and brought to the square in chains. This pitiful episode is juxtaposed with the fate of a hammerhead shark which has washed up on the beach and is being teased and abused in his dying moments by a group of boys (34-36). The slave woman recognises the same fear in the dying shark as she has lived with as a slave, and describes him as being "like a baby laid on its stomach, curling its spine as it tries to curl upright" (36). After her unsuccessful attempt to communicate some kind of comfort to the broken and terrified slaves she goes to the beach and, sobbing, buries the carcass of the shark (36). There is a clear linking of the lack of societal empathy which enables both slavery and the complete indifference to the dying pain of the animal.

It is important to realise that mistreatment of the environment has involved the congruent mistreatment of those human beings associated with the natural world. As Plumwood says:

> The category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature. Thus racism, colonialism and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial and ethnic difference as closer to the animal and the body construed as a sphere of inferiority, as a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture…To be defined as 'nature' in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the 'environment' or invisible background conditions against which the 'foreground' achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place. It is to be defined as… a resource empty of its own purposes or meanings and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect. (4)

In this novel, the ecological theme of combatting anthropocentrism is complemented by a feminist undermining of androcentrism (the assumed superiority of the male over the female). *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* can therefore be said to have an ecofeminist component. As mentioned in my introduction, ecofeminism is a branch of radical ecology which asserts that "woman have been associated with nature, and each denigrated with reference to the other" (Garrard 24). Some ecofeminists argue that man "has conceived nature as a wife or subordinate other encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master [the male] has split off and constructed as beneath him" (Plumwood *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 3). Certain varieties of ecofeminism, sometimes labelled cultural ecofeminism, have developed a bad reputation due to the movement's retaliation against patriarchy and anthropocentrism by merely reversing traditional valuations and thereby celebrating the natural, feminine, physical, emotional and instinctual as superior to culture, masculinity, logic and intellect (Garrard 24). However, many critics have overcome this kind of superficiality and made meaningful contributions to ecocriticism, feminism and the environmental movement under the guise of ecofeminism. Val Plumwood, for instance, as demonstrated above, has extended ecofeminism to address multiple inequalities, including colonialism and racism as well as sexism, by undermining and questioning the essentialist dualisms which enable such exploitation, and the misuse of the natural environment.

Feminists have frequently used slavery as an analogy for the position of women in society, implying that women are both mentally and physically enslaved by patriarchal culture. In *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* slavery and patriarchy are critiqued simultaneously in that the protagonist experiences the double oppression of being a slave and being a woman. The protagonist draws immense comfort from her fellow slave women during her time in the city.

The women draw together into a strong community to combat the horrors of hard labour, sexual abuse and unwanted child-bearing. When she is enslaved as a child the slave women at her first home all become mothers to her, teach her, and comfort her through her first pregnancy (Stockenström 15). Due to their mutual mistreatment and status as commodities they are "all one woman, interchangeable, exchangeable", and they therefore identify strongly with one another and share all they have (24). The text can be seen as ecofeminist because it attacks both anthropocentrism and androcentrism by portraying a patriarchal society which horribly misuses natural resources and animals, just as it does slaves, and female slaves in particular. The novel depicts a woman living peacefully and with genuine appreciation in nature and communing meaningfully with the natural world, whereas the patriarchal culture from which she escapes is characterised by competitive commerce and the shrewd trade and exploitation of commodities like ivory. The text is also written in what can be considered an ecofeminist style. I will discuss the writing style in detail at a later stage but it is important in this context that the novel defies chronology or a linear approach – which is associated with dominant culture and patriarchy – in favour of a poetic, circular narrative. This creative act is mirrored by the huts in the villages that the travellers encounter, which have been built by women and differ noticeably from the dwellings they are accustomed to: "No right-angles here but soft curves connecting with the earth's curves. Thus women build" (68).

Angelo Fick points out that women writers must mediate experience through their bodies, that they must keep physicality in their language, if they are to overcome the barriers imposed on them by patriarchal society (Fick 49). He believes that Stockenström is doing so in this novel. There is indeed an emphasis on corporeality in the text, which echoes the other novels examined in this thesis in its insistence on a basic empathy and reciprocity based on shared physicality which goes beyond the divisive tendencies of language. It is manifested mainly in a celebration of the female body, and a linking of the power of the body with the larger physical realm of nature. The protagonist's belief that she is a kind of water spirit celebrates an ecological connection with nature: "I who come from the heart of the country bear the murmur of waters subliminally with me, a water-knowledge preserved in my tears and saliva, in the blood of my veins, in all the juices of my body" (Stockenström 20). She is of nature and has some of the life-giving and nourishing power of nature. When being raped by her second master she comforts herself with a defiant belief in her natural, elemental power:

> I did not surrender. I let it happen. I could wait. I listened to the beat of the waves far behind his groaning, and it lulled me. I was of water. I was a flowing into all kinds of forms. I could preserve his seed and bring it to fruition from the sap of my body. I could kneel in waves of contractions with my face near to the earth to which water is married, and push the fruit out of myself and give my dripping breasts to one suckling child after another. (24)

This kind of writing celebrates both the strength of women and the power of nature. Based on this kind of conflation of the feminine with the natural, a case could be made to accuse Stockenström of the brand of cultural ecofeminism which dangerously essentialises the sexes. However, I would suggest that she is saved from the trap of perpetuating the stereotype of women being aligned with nature and physicality, while men are cultural and intellectual, because the San she portrays living in such evident ecological harmony are mainly male. More importantly, for much of her life the protagonist is clearly complicit in the cultural assumptions which characterise her society, demonstrating that women are also capable of atomistic conceptions of self, and indifference to nature. However, there are moments even at the height of the slave woman's pride in her master's culture, when a connection with nature is a comfort to her. Her longing for children and grandchildren, for "continuation" (55), is eased by the moments in her third master's home when she can watch the sunset and feel herself united with the natural world, which seems to provide her with an understanding of a sort of ecological immortality: "I would stand caught in perfect balance in the interlight. In inescapable transitoriness I could have dissolved like a phantom into the swift black. I was marked out in peacefulness, and whole" (58). By imagining dissolving into her surroundings she becomes peaceful and whole.

We also see examples of corporeal commonality and empathy overcoming the master/slave dialectic. The basic fact of mortality and the suffering of imminent death make the third master willing to show weakness and be nursed by the protagonist. She in turn describes the multiplicity of the relationship she shares with this man: "In my perfect arms he died, supported between my perfect thighs, leaning against my perfect breasts, he and I, father, mother, child, owner, valued art object and servant, lovers" (53). Not only is death an equalizer in this scene, the position in which she holds her master mimics a birth, reminding the reader of the natural cycle of life. The protagonist also describes herself as lying curled up in the belly of the baobab, as though it is a womb (93): it nourishes her and in it she allows herself to die, an event she imagines as a kind of rebirth due to her newfound faith in ecological connectivity. This blurring of the life/death dualism is a characteristic of the

novel. Tolerance and comfort is derived from the fact that all humans experience birth and death, and that all live with the spectre of mortality and physical pleasure and pain. Although the slave women are never allowed to keep their babies beyond infancy they do derive pleasure and comfort from the physical act of mothering; they often do not distinguish between children – knowing they will soon lose them – but celebrate the feeling of the "warm little body in [their] arms, a dribbling little mouth searching for the nipple…" (39). In a world comparatively devoid of ethics, and an existence which promises abuse and dehumanisation, the slaves take comfort from their shared physicality. It is significant that when the slave woman imagines the ideal city, the utopia they have been seeking in the wilderness, she imagines a place where she will be complete and understand without words the feelings and thoughts of those around her, in an instinctive, corporeal communion: "We do not have to talk to each other, we understand each other naturally… I am of a self-sufficient crystallinity, transmuted into pure bliss. I am one whole, and divided too and present in everything everywhere" (101). This sounds like not only a transcendence of language in favour of the kind of perfect communication described in *An Imaginary Life*, but also, once again, an ecological understanding of connectedness with all things.

An emphasis on corporeality and the basic 'naturalness' of human processes is just one way in which the novel undermines destructive discourses and exposes the shortcomings and divisive tendencies of language. Slavery requires a racial or cultural discourse of inferiority and dehumanisation to be instituted and accepted, and one of the central ways that Stockenström addresses language as a potential problem is by exposing the manner in which this discourse insidiously infects society, including the slaves themselves, who internalise a belief in their inferiority and seek to mimic the master class. Domination through language is vital to colonialism, as I have discussed in previous chapters. It is telling that a punishment for slaves caught discussing their masters is the cutting out of the tongue (Stockenström 23). The protagonist has clearly internalised some of the racist rhetoric she has heard. At her lowest point, when she has had her first child wrested from her and is being resold at the slave market, she warns that she has become all the things they say slaves are, listing scorned cultural practices and various manifestations of the 'uncivilized' and degraded African:

> Come and kindle your ill in me. I am evil and dangerous. I am dried-out ape dugs and fresh slippery ox eye and peeled-off human skin and the venom of the deadly sea-slug with the sucker mouth. I am hatred and

> hatred's mask. I am deformed. There is a snake in my blood. I drink my own blood. (43)

Later on, living in the home of her third master – whom she tellingly calls her benefactor – the opulence in which she lives and the obvious favouritism he shows her make her ambivalent about her position as a slave and apparently quite grateful to be one, for it ensures that her life is "easy" and "indolent" (22). "It was the privilege of a slave girl", she says, "to have everything given to her. The roof over my head. The cloth around my body. The food – in my case plenty of it. How happy I was" (13). This, in turn, is a frightening acceptance of her position which becomes a desire to imitate and participate in the power of the master class. She later discovers, to her horror, that her benefactor made all his money out of slavery, making her somewhat complicit in the system due to her pride in the wealth, her enjoyment of it, and her affection for her master (51).

She also becomes complicit through conformity with the opinions and manners of her master's social circle. As Fick points out, she learns to imitate the discourses of those in power, "parroting the praxes (practices) of the master narrative to which she is subject" (46). She says of her new life as a privileged slave that it was "as if [she] were learning again to talk" (Stockenström 28), which, of course, she is. She is learning a new language of manipulation, seduction and superficiality which she has never known before. She is taught to confer with the friends of her benefactor, to charm and impress them: "I learned to converse quite differently, with a metallic tone of irony at the tail end of a remark. I learned to make my voice dove-sweet when the conversation became pointed…" (28). She remembers hearing derogatory remarks about women in dinner-time conversation and joining in so as to belong, something which, in retrospect, she abhors:

> I remembered the poets' sarcastic remarks about women in general, but at the time I had not taken them to heart: to tell the truth, I joined in the so-called sophisticated disparagement, and this kind of superficial display of lust did not strike me as vile and immediately to be condemned. Vain. Vainly and frivolously I participated. (Stockenström 52)

Similarly, once she has been elevated to the level of favourite and is superior to the other slaves she begins to disparage their slovenliness, laziness and insubordination, just as though she is herself a slave owner. When she learns her new language, and assumes the position of relative power this mastery of discourse allows her, she immediately becomes estranged from the slaves who were once her community and begins to gossip about them and tease them

with her benefactor (29). In retrospect, she can remember how much her "new way of talking", "precious manners", and "affectations" confined her and made her awkward and uncomfortable the moment she left the house and had to confer with normal people and other slaves (48-49). By the time they set off on the expedition she is utterly divorced from the other slaves, who carry her, and she tells the Stranger that they are like "zombies" who behave "inhumanly" (71).

All the while, however, she does show some signs of unhappiness and resistance to her enslavement. She keeps her "oyster-shell of will" (23-24) and this continued sense of defiance, independence and agency is aligned strongly with nature. As described above, she explains her resilience in terms of her affinity with water, and the strength of her body. She also seems to experience an urge to hide in or rediscover nature, and her natural state within it, to combat the materialism and superficial coquetry which characterises her life. As she explains, even at her most happy and self-satisfied she experiences depression and panic in her benefactor's house: "I sat, tiny as a beetle, and whined… I wished that I had a snout with which to burrow into the earth and disappear, or into the bark of a tree where I could lurk inconspicuously" (30). She also continues, on a basic level, to empathise with the fate of her fellow slaves even though she estranges herself from them by feeling and acting superior. This is proven by the incident when she feels obliged to go and see the newly arrived slaves whom she finds shackled, exhausted and downtrodden in the square. Although she maintains her poise she feels deeply for them and tries her best to comfort them even though they cannot understand her language and show no interest in her presence. Her words demonstrate a struggle to express herself in the language of her masters – or in language at all – and betray a failure of words to signify:

> The untouched girls, my little sisters. The young eunuchs no longer men, no longer human beings, the survivors of a raid deep into the interior, my own people halfpeople may not be people, the compelled, the pitifully strong healthy products. (34)

As Fick says, by describing the slaves as "people halfpeople may not be people" she is "creating the ambivalence that questions the very suitability of the language of her masters (and by extension, also herself) to convey her experiences" (47). She realises that to the slaves she is babbling incomprehensibly but she continues to mutter to them anyway in a kind of defiance (Fick 47).

There are a number of incidences in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* when the slave woman expresses frustration with language and seeks to amend or transcend it. When she curses the Stranger for his curiosity and human arrogance, for his desire to explain the world, she could be cursing all humankind: "oh the talk, the talk, the omniscience, the all-investigating consciousness that could explain nothing… Oh the powerlessness of reasonableness!" (17-18 Stockenström). In this passage it is clear that the human ability to justify and explain ourselves in language is part of our problem, is part of the reason why we can maintain our arrogance and separation from nature and other animals. She also becomes aware that language is only useful in a limited, and uniquely human, social realm. When she reflects on her ignorance as a young girl, her lack of ability to name the things happening to her or around her, she concludes that she is no better off now that she knows the names because although she is free from enslavement, she has nobody to speak to. Words are not in themselves meaningful, they are part of a social contract. Out in the wilderness her words are "nothing but rattles" (100). In escaping language as a social code, albeit inadvertently, she has also escaped the codes of patriarchy, enslavement and anthropocentrism which infect her masters' language. When exploring the wilderness with the other travellers she first becomes aware of the inadequacy of language to express her feelings and experiences, and when she is finally alone at the baobab she becomes preoccupied with a need to find a suitable language to fit her rapidly changing world-view.

Upon discovering a koppie whereupon there are ruins of a community and paintings in a cave, the slave woman is deeply saddened by the transience of human life and the scornful reaction of the two men who laugh at the art, thinking it juvenile and ugly (87-88). She withdraws to the cliff in her anguish and, feeling that she must expel her sadness and frustration somehow, she begins to talk into the wind:

> I heard myself say something. Not say. Mumble. Stammer. I heard the words fall from my mouth in snatches over the cliff to be swallowed by the windfilled silence, words that spoke of a jackal that would run through the air with a burning tail and set all the air afire. So there sprang a jackal from my mouth. I heard myself prophesy feverishly of languages that yet slept, of strange trees… (88)

Although her mutterings are largely incomprehensible it does seem that she is searching for a new language, one in which she can express the pain she is feeling and describe the pictures she has seen in the cave – pictures which are certainly San rock art and which seem to touch her deeply. She describes her words as "fibrous" (89), an interesting description because it

implies that her language is organic, is perhaps striving for a genuine phenomenological connection. The episode is also vital in that she is abandoning words to the abyss of nature – what she says is snatched away by the wind. She is purging the patriarchal codes that infect her language and spouting an incomprehensible stream of poetic gibberish which seems to be grasping after equality and respect, not only between people, but for nature. She has intuitively grasped how deeply wrong the actions of the men are and is trying to cleanse herself of her complicity in their subjugation of women, slaves, tribal peoples and the natural realm alike. Her desperate need to recreate language can be seen as a reaction to the sublime. She feels her perceptive constructions challenged by that which she cannot express, by that which confounds her ability to express herself in words. She has undergone a gradual process of realization regarding the incompatibility of her taught conceptions of life, nature and herself with her experiences and this episode is a culmination of this process thus far.

Once at the baobab she describes similar urges to yell inarticulately or mutter nonsensically, which could be read as an attempt to remake language to more aptly describe her experiences, as well as resulting of a need to purge herself of the masters' tongue. It certainly also springs, however, from a need to assert her existence and a struggle with the human need to control and dominate her environment, which she has long ago realised she cannot hope to do: "A bloody sound was exposed to the air, with which I tried to subject everything around me. To be able to dominate with one long raw sound" (Stockenström 65). It is important that in doing so she emphasises the naturalness of this urge to make a noise to assert oneself, noting that what she is doing is exactly the same as what the lions and wildebeest and ostriches do to mark their territory (65). As she "unlearns the old ways which do not fit in with those of the baobab… so she unlearns the codes of her masters, which she had internalized, and learns new codes through which to construct her/self" (Fick 51). She seems to think, at times, that she has come up with a language which suits her environment, and with which, in a seemingly prelapsarian sense, she can find the true names for things. This is most likely based in her newfound humility and gratefulness for nature which allows her to address the natural objects and forces around her as fellow agents rather than as objects to be labelled and dominated: "I say the name of the tree aloud, the name of water, of air, fire, wind, earth, moon, sun, and all mean what I call them" (65). She has accepted, however, that reality is separate from language, that the world exists independent of linguistic categorisation: "I say my own name aloud and my own name means nothing. But I still am" (65). Eventually she desires absolute freedom from human subjectivity and language and, like Malouf's Ovid, she

realises she can only achieve this liberation from herself, this dissolution into nature, in death. In her dying moments she gives thanks for the enclosing darkness and silence; she is grateful that she is "no longer able to help [her]self" (111).

Although she becomes mistrustful of language in some ways, the slave woman does wish she could write so that she could carve her story into the baobab tree. This in itself could be seen as an attempt at possession, the human urge to make a mark on the environment. However, she also likes the idea of the tree outgrowing her words, and the writing is portrayed as an act of purging the "ridiculousness" from her human life, a kind of self-mockery:

> If I could write, I would take up a porcupine quill and scratch your enormous belly full from top to bottom. I would clamber up as far as your branches and carve notches in your armpits to make you laugh. Big letters. Small letters. In a script full of lobes and curls, in circumambient lines I write round and round you, for I have much to tell of a trip to a new horizon that became an expedition to a tree… round and round your trunk the poetic history of a crazy eagerness that was finally all we could cling to, stripped of material things and emaciated and tired to death of ourselves… Thus I decorate you line after line with our hallucinations so that you can digest, outgrow, make smooth this ridiculousness, preserve the useless information in your thick skin… (30-31)

The tree will endure far beyond the ephemeral desires and actions of mere human beings, and its stoic age mocks their materialistic preoccupations and their arrogance. This imaginary act of writing is what we are reading – a circular, poetic, mocking record of the life of the protagonist and how she came to live in a tree. Stockenström, via Coetzee, writes in a style strongly associated with ecofeminism. That is to say, she writes in a manner associated with the attempts of female writers to combat the emphasis on logic, linearity and anthropocentrism that they associate with patriarchal society. Irrespective of whether this dangerously essentialises the sexes, it can be argued that the use of circularity, metaphor, poetic technique and orality complement the ecological theme of the novel. This constitutes an attempt to avoid the rhetoric and limiting discourse which the novel thematically undermines – much as we've seen in *An Imaginary Life* and *The English Patient.*

The narration in this novel is "of direct address reminiscent of the oral story-teller" (Zeiss 57). It is "a prose poem in which the story commences at the journey's 'end'" (73). Stockenström told Zeiss in an interview that when writing the novel she was intensely aware of the circularity of the baobab tree itself (76) and this comes across clearly in the style. The novel does seem to begin at the end, when the protagonist is near suicide, and the forays into

memory to tell her story are anything but chronological. Of course, she fights a battle with time at the baobab, trying to control it and organise it into the linear, chronological order that she has learnt it should be – but her memories are beyond her control, recurrent, circular and interwoven (Stockenström 66). As the slave girl says, once she has accepted that chronological time is "rubbish" (10): "Nowadays I laugh ruefully at my spasmodic attempts to… measure what is so ridiculous to measure and record. I attribute it to my education… in which division and counting and classification played such an important role" (92). Time, like language, is a human attempt to impose order on the world, and out in the wilderness she has realised the futility and arrogance of such categorisation. The narrative is in fact characterised by "fluidity of categories" (Zeiss 57). The slave woman comes to exist in a liminal, in-between state "in which the categories of youth, age, light, dark, life, death and resurrection merge and interpenetrate" (57). Binary oppositions like life/death are "synthesised and are revealed as intellectual constructs" (58-59). This dissolution of binary opposition is most obvious in the break-down of the human/nature binary, as the protagonist realises that she is in no way superior to, or set apart from, the natural realm and is simply another animal in an interconnected, ecological world. This realisation of connectedness and inter-dependence in turn leads to dissolution of the life/death binary, to an extent, because it insists on a cycle of interconnected life which defies "death" in its absolute form. As the slave woman says, at the end of her journey (which is also the beginning), she can "perceive that dreaming and waking do not damn each other, but are extensions of each other and flow into each other, enrich each other, supplement each other, make each other bearable" (Stockenström 92). She is clearly also speaking of life and death in this passage, and it is her realisation that they supplement and complete each other, that dying makes living bearable, that allows her to kill herself and so peacefully embrace the darkness and silence of death.

We have all been taught to associate sparse, non-descriptive prose with objectivity and factual 'truth'. The inverse assumption is that a poetic, densely descriptive style of writing is highly individual and subjective – appealing to the imagination, the emotions and the empathetic capacity of the reader, rather than to any logical capacity. As Vice says, "Regardless of the content, there is some intuitive connection between an absence of rhetorical flourish, emotional excess, or ornament, and the kind of vision of the world attained by the impartial point of view" (298). Although I would not venture to claim that a circuitous, ornamental, poetic style of writing is in any way innate to femininity – an assertion which would be usefully belied by the male authors analysed in this thesis – I do

believe that the style of writing in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is well-crafted to complement the themes of multiplicity, corporeality and the dissolution of binary oppositions. The style emphasises subjectivity and the constructed nature of conceptions of 'truth', which is apt in a novel which thematises an attempt at escape from the culturally enforced discourses of anthropocentrism, slavery and sexism.

Stockenström provides a, perhaps less coherent, version of the same basic themes and preoccupations as the other authors examined here. To my mind, the novel does not constitute a paradox between medium and 'message' because it is fairly clear that Stockenström does not have a problem with language itself but rather the discourses of power which are entrenched therein and which enable intolerance, abuse and inequality. As Fick puts it, the slave woman's narrative aims to "resist the subsuming politics of a culture and canon that wish to situate her voice in the margin, and in doing so, merely subsume her individual 'history' and 'text' into the metatext of Western phallocentrism" (45). To this I would add that she is resisting not just phallocentrism but anthropocentrism and colonialism as well, and doing so from a distinctly ecofeminist position. It is a writing-back to the institutions and discourses which enable slavery, sexism and the mistreatment and abuse of nature, and aims to remythologise and reimagine our human connection to the natural world. Language is certainly not maligned utterly: we see the protagonist envision the act of writing as at once a therapeutic process of healing and an act of resistance and self-assertion. At the same time, the discourses and rhetoric of exploitation, and the assumptions of a phallocentric and anthropocentric culture as imbedded in language, are to be exposed, resisted and overthrown. *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is written in such a way that its basic themes of connectedness with nature, the arrogance of anthropocentrism, and the horror of enslavement of any kind, are complemented by a style of writing which defies convention in favour of a corporeally-engaged, ecological and poetic narrative.

CONCLUSION

> [The novel] tells us there are no rules. It hands down no commandments… If religion is an answer, if political ideology is an answer, then literature is an inquiry; great literature, by asking extraordinary questions, opens new doors in our minds. (Salman Rushdie *Imaginary Homelands*)

This thesis has analysed four contemporary authors' attempts to reconnect humanity with the natural world by countenancing the undermining, or supplanting, of language as humankind's primary (or only) means of relating to nature. Through ecocritical analysis I have demonstrated how these novels have attempted to promote a less anthropocentric worldview in a number of ways: by advocating an ethics of corporeal reciprocity which transcends the potentially negative power of language; by depicting humans as part of (rather than superior to) their natural environments, and frequently portraying humanity as being absorbed by landscape until indistinguishable from the non-human world; by depicting various characters' attempts to wrestle with language and its failure to adequately signify their experiences of life in general, and the natural world in particular; and finally by imagining ecological utopias – ecotopias – based on one or more of the above themes and issues. I have also examined whether these novelists manage to reconcile their suspicion of language with their literary medium. I will now conclude by once again situating my analyses within the framework of poststructural theory and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. In so doing I will also gesture towards future avenues of research, before summarizing my findings for each novel, and finally elucidating whether there is ultimately a paradox inherent in tackling these ecological and linguistic issues in literature.

The novels I have selected all emphasise and celebrate an embodied experience and connection with the natural world which challenges the concept of nature as merely a cultural construct, or as utterly inaccessible to humankind – as some poststructuralists suggest. At the same time, although they all thematise the potentially divisive effects of language on our mediation of reality, and interaction with nature, they certainly do not advocate an abandonment of culture or suggest – with the possible exception of *An Imaginary Life* – that a truly pre-reflective interaction with nature is possible. They also do suggest that language, at its best, can enable empathy, and can be a useful creative tool with which to celebrate human kinship with nature. They do so, not least of all, by writing the kinds of novels which should

inspire a re-evaluation of our human perception of nature, our place in the ecological framework, thereby using language to meaningfully and positively affect the reader's perception of what it means to be human in an ecologically inter-related natural world. Although *An Imaginary Life* is possibly the most problematic from an ecocritical perspective – in the sense that it does not sufficiently challenge the opposition of nature and culture – as an imaginative exercise it questions, perhaps the most radically of all the texts, the manner in which humanity has become disconnected from nature and a primal, embodied experience of the world. And as with all the other novels, the medium itself goes some way to balancing the illustration of that which is negative in language. These novels are therefore best analysed in the context of an ecocritical mediation between poststructuralist conceptions of nature as inaccessible cultural construct, and the idea of unmediated, pre-reflective interaction with the natural world. I have argued that the best way to achieve this mediation is by drawing on the theories of Merleau-Ponty.

As discussed in my introduction, most versions of ecocriticism prioritise the break-down of culture/nature dualism and of the attendant conviction of anthropocentric arrogance. As Glotfelty has said, literature must be studied by ecocritics as a cultural artefact which is affected by, and capable of affecting, the natural world. This ecocritical study of the intersections between nature and culture is usefully bolstered by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in which the concept of the "flesh of the world" suggests an irreducible entwinement of culture and nature by positing a world in which "language, the social world… human corporeality and the natural world are… obviously intertwined" (Adams 155). What Merleau-Ponty attempts is "a phenomenology of the perceived world in its entirety, including the social, historical, aesthetic, political and scientific aspects of human experience" (Toadvine 18). He wants to reconcile the natural and the cultural, the objective and subjective dimensions of the perceived world (18). This makes his phenomenology – which can aptly be termed eco-phenomenology – ideal for a mediating position between structuralism/poststructuralism and the kind of naïve approach to environmentalism which assumes the possibility of an uncomplicated, un-culturally mediated interaction with nature. Merleau-Ponty's insistence that "[i]t is impossible to superimpose on man a lower layer of behaviour which one chooses to call 'natural', followed by a manufactured cultural or spiritual world" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 189), and his belief that perception is equally influenced by the physical, natural world and the subjective cultural constructions of

individuals and communities, truly renders culture and nature irreducible, intertwined and fluid categories.

A possible complication of this phenomenological mediating position is the degree to which the appeal to corporeal reciprocity leads the novelists to advocate the attempt to dissolve, transcend and incorporate otherness and alterity. Both the sublime and that which Derrida calls alterity can be understood as symptoms of the limitations of language as a system with which to order and control experience. But if the sublime "refers to the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, to express a thought or sensation is defeated" (Shaw 3) then how can these authors possibly thematise the sublime in literature without denigrating the concept? And by advocating corporeal empathy are they failing to respect the otherness, or alterity of humans, animals and nature itself? A possible criticism of written works trying to access nature and a realm of pre-reflective corporeal affinity with landscape and other creatures is that in so doing they elide otherness and alterity. This can reduce the sublime to something prosaic, thereby robbing it of its ethical potential to disrupt human arrogance, anthropocentrism and linguistic, categorical control.

A version of this argument is most famously made by the poststructuralists themselves, who criticise phenomenologists for advocating a return to a pre-reflective engagement with the world which, if successful, will "eliminate any difference between self and other, since both would share in the one pre-personal transcendental consciousness in its grasp of universal truths" (Toadvine 23). Although poststructuralists like Levinas and Derrida have condemned certain phenomenologists for their lack of provision for alterity, for that which goes beyond human knowledge and understanding, I feel that a phenomenology like Merleau-Ponty's is not incompatible with a concept of the sublime, or with Derrida's conception of the ethical potential of irreducible alterity. A number of Merleau-Ponty scholars have suggested that his theories – particularly in his later works – do not elide alterity as those of some other phenomenologists do (Sanders 147). In fact, Sanders goes so far as to claim that "Phenomenology's chief virtue, according to Merleau-Ponty, lies in its very recognition and refusal to dissolve [the] distinction between self and other" (144). This is because although another individual may be accessible through the anonymity of shared corporeality, they are also, irreducibly, a subject with a history and personality all their own. As Toadvine argues, it is vital that, for Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological reduction can never be complete: it is impossible to completely access a pre-reflective experience of the world, because it is

impossible to completely surrender the personal/subjective aspects of perception (24). In Merleau-Ponty's own words, the "most important lesson that the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (*The Phenomenology of Perception* xiv). This is why phenomenology is an "infinite meditation" (xxi). I think it can therefore be posited that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as a constituent of a mediating ecocritical position, can be said to gesture towards our innate openness to and entwinement with nature while still insisting that due to our inescapably cultural subjectivity that world can remain "resolutely other" in the positive sense that it cannot be reduced to discursive categories of understanding which may prove harmful (Toadvine 29).

Regarding the complex question of whether these authors dangerously elide alterity I would tentatively argue that for the most part they attempt to resolve the potential conflicts arising out of otherness, without seeking to eradicate it. For instance, Fokir and Piya's relationship imagines the possibilities of an almost perfect corporeal understanding and communication, but the assumptions Piya makes about Fokir, and their conflict over certain issues like the tiger killing, demonstrate that their physical reciprocity does not elide their difference as subjective individuals from very different backgrounds. Even in the case of Ovid and the Child – the most radical illustration of an intuitive, embodied communication and mutual understanding analysed in this thesis – the Child retains an aura of mystery and ultimate otherness which Ovid embraces rather than attempts to reduce. The recognition of fundamental physical similarity and reciprocity *allows* for the respect of cultural and individual alterity. This failure to truly elide otherness applies equally to the various characters' relationships to the natural world. Almásy may insist that the armies fighting therein have no understanding of what the desert is, but he never attempts himself to define it.

I must re-emphasise that the sublime is a very complex concept, with myriad different historical interpretations. Alterity can be considered an interpretation, or category, of the sublime but if so it is one of many. As Martin Price points out, at its most popular, in the eighteenth century, the sublime had as many interpretations as there were critics, theorists and poets writing about it: "It could be applied to the natural landscape, to a state of mind, to a literary mode; it could evoke orthodox religious experience or pantheistic rapture, Gothic terror or Doric severity, the grandeur of Michaelangelo's sculpture or the fictitious pleasures of medievalized romance" (31). Vital to my project is Weiskel's insistence that in any conception the sublime can in no sense be considered humanistic – it is that which transcends

human concerns and the anthropocentric world view (qtd in Bloom 1). It is an experience "in which cognitive limits appear to be surpassed": that which is conventionally beyond the realms of human experience is momentarily grasped (Bloom 3). Edmund Burke, amongst the most famous of the theorists of the sublime, feels that literature's ability to express the sublime is reliant not on the description of the object or landscape which inspires the experience but rather on the description of the effect it has on the writer themselves, because "we yield to sympathy what we refuse to description" (qtd in Price 33). In other words, it is the reader's empathetic capacities which enable literature to gesture towards sublime experience. This is in accordance with my findings in this thesis that it is the appeal to the reader's capacity for corporeal empathy which enables the authors' expression of the sublime experience of unity with nature. Nature is a sublime force in these novels in that it forces the human protagonists to re-evaluate their perception of self and their conventional, discursive understanding of the world, by forcing an inexpressible conviction of kinship which defies their anthropocentric world view. David Abram sees experiences of the sublime as firmly rooted in physicality: what he calls "transcendence" is enabled by "the ecstatic nature of the living body", the ability to empathise and react and experience as an embodied being (84). The conviction of ecological coextension and entwinement with nature expressed in novels like *An Imaginary Life* and *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is represented as a profound physical experience which cannot be fully explained or rationalised. It is for this reason that the protagonists struggle so much with language. Perhaps the answer is that literature should gesture towards the ineffable, but some of its power lies in the ultimate failure to express certain things: being unequal to reality, it encourages mystery, respect, and awe, as well as demanding corporeal and imaginative engagement.

These are complex ideas which can be explored further, and I feel that research into the use of the sublime in ecological or biocentric fiction would be a rewarding area of investigation for ecocriticism. The relationship between the poststructuralist conception of alterity, or radical otherness, and the sublime would be a useful corollary of this research, perhaps as a constituent of interrogating the perceived conflict between the academic field of poststructuralism and the radical ecological movements, including eco-phenomenology like Merleau-Ponty's. Sue Ellen Campbell has attempted to reconcile the two worlds of poststructuralism and deep ecology in her academic career. She wants to find a way to be poststructuralist and ecological at the same time and insists that there must be middle ground: "all ideas are historical: surely two such major and contemporary intellectual developments

must be somehow related to each other" (126). She suggests that despite their vast differences, and seeming opposition, there are shared premises between poststructuralist theory and ecological nature writing in the tradition of Thoreau, Muir and Barry Lopez. Both schools of thought are radical in their challenging of traditional authority and cultural values – they share the starting point of a criticism of dominant Western culture (127). They also share techniques for this critique of power, like the challenging and revaluation of traditional hierarchies like male/female, culture/nature, reason/madness, mind/body (127). This exposition of the exploitative, artificial nature of such dualisms is key to both schools of thought (128).

Most importantly, for Campbell, poststructuralist theory and ecology "[b]oth criticize the traditional sense of a separate, independent, authoritative *centre* of value and meaning; both substitute the idea of *networks*" (emphasis in original 131). Poststructuralists question the stable logocentric ideals of linguistics, philosophy, literary criticism and Cartesian dualism by replacing "the traditional humanist notion of a centred self with the idea of an uncentered network" (132). This is not dissimilar in practice to the ecological insistence on interrelated networks and resistance to humanist and Cartesian approaches. For both "[p]erhaps the most important idea that follows from this premise is that human beings are no longer the centre of value or meaning" (133). These are all ideas which we have seen reflected in the novels under study. Admittedly, from this point of departure poststructuralism and radical ecology come to differ considerably, but this common grounding surely provides some hope for a bridging of the perceived academic chasm. Campbell tentatively concludes that poststructuralist theory is correct in asserting that "what we are depends on all kinds of influences outside ourselves, that we are part of vast networks, texts written by larger and stronger forces", but that surely "one of the most important of these forces is the rest of the natural world" (134).

This tentative marriage of ecological networks with the textual networks of poststructuralism is compatible with the mediating position I have suggested in this thesis, drawing on the theories of Merleau-Ponty. As Merleau-Ponty says, "The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which it projects itself" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 430). In simpler terms, the human subject constructs the world and is simultaneously constructed by it. I would like to explore these suggestions further. While

this thesis suggests an ecocritical mediating position with regard to the conflict over the relationship between language and nature, and proves that the examined texts go some way to illustrating such a position, it would be interesting to extend the comparison between poststructuralism and ecology beyond the issue of language.

In addition to this very broad area of potential research, there are three possible avenues of further study which result from my findings thus far. Two of them I have already mentioned as rewarding extensions to the current project: the ecocritical evaluation I have given would be interestingly complemented by a postcolonial reading of the texts; and investigation into human interaction with animals in literature of this sort, as opposed to the broad category of 'nature', would benefit from the application of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. The third potential area for further research is the implications of genre and style to ecological 'message', and more particularly to ecocritical study. I have investigated the relationship between style and theme in these four novels but there is a general argument about the relative merits of realism in ecocritical studies which I have not explored in this thesis. Dana Phillips is critical of ecocriticism's "rehabilitation of mimesis" (8), and asserts that the field in general should be cured of "its fundamentalist fixation on literal representation" (7). He feels that ecocritics are liable to laud literature at its most "pedestrian" by demanding strict realism (8). Accepting the structuralist assertion that the material world is inescapably laden with associative baggage as soon as it is described in language (of any kind) renders realism – the attempt to render words transparent in an accurate portrayal of reality – problematic and somewhat out-dated. I would like to explore where the more poetic, experimental styles of authors like Ondaatje, Malouf and Stockenström fit into the ecocritical fray over the merits of realism. This thesis provides a useful foundation for these investigations.

I have prioritised a close ecocritical reading of the four novels and loosely situated the authors' approach to nature and language within the broad theoretical frameworks of radical environmentalism, and structuralist and poststructuralist theory. The novelists all suggest that human perception is not steered entirely by a disembodied mind, which constructs reality through linguistic and cultural lenses, but is equally influenced by physical circumstances and embodied experiences. They explore the potential of corporeal reciprocity and empathy as that which enables communication and understanding across cultural barriers, and a sense of ecological intertwinement and kinship with nature. The body in these texts is portrayed as the basis for an ethical engagement with one another and with the natural world. As

Merleau-Ponty has said, “my body is not only an object among objects, [but] is that strange object… through which we can consequently ‘be at home in’ the world, ‘understand’ it and find significance in it” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 235). The body is “not merely an inert housing of some Cartesian ego, which receives and transmits meaning. Rather, the body already communicates with a material and meaningful world prior to, and as a condition of, thought and linguistic expression” (Adams 154). This basic, pre-reflective engagement with the world via embodiment should, these authors suggest, provide the basis for a human experience of affinity with nature which will undermine the destructive anthropocentric construction thereof in the Western imagination. With the possible exception of Malouf, all the novelists envision corporeality as a perceptive capacity which should supplement, rather than replace, language. Or rather, an aspect of perception which is ever-present and ought to be emphasised and celebrated in order to combat the equally inescapable influences of cultural bias inherent in language use.

Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* is a novel which thematises the damage done to individual lives by the oppositional discourses and rhetoric of war and colonialism. The community which develops in the villa can be seen as a small-scale ecotopia which imagines a growing together and mutual healing between the scarred natural landscape and the war-torn culture represented by the crumbling old building. The overgrown villa becomes a space of solace for the damaged individuals who make it their home, and who learn to supplement their mistrusted linguistic communication with an experience of corporeal empathy which allows them a physical reciprocity and understanding which transcends their national and cultural allegiances. This is accompanied by a simple appreciation and enjoyment of their natural surroundings and their own physicality. In fact, the novel emphasises human interconnectedness with nature by conflating bodies with landscape. By illustrating the potentially divisive and violent capacities of language, and gesturing towards experiences of that which is sublime – that is, not reducible to the characters’ discursive categories of understanding – Ondaatje suggests that our cognitive and linguistic capacities are unequal to the description of our experiential connection with nature. While language is also celebrated as having the potential to connect people and enable empathy, it must therefore be supplemented by an embodied experience of nature and fellow humanity.

The Hungry Tide, by Amitav Ghosh, is primarily concerned with the collision of nature and culture within the unique ecosystem of the Sundarbans, and attempts to demonstrate the

potential, for both the human population and the environment, of a balanced, syncretic relationship between land, animals and the human population. The novel propounds an ideology of social ecology which attempts to align social justice with environmental conservation. The multinational cast of characters demands communication across cultural, class, and linguistic barriers and the resultant thematising of translation, and the limited capacity of language to enable understanding between people of vastly different cultural backgrounds, is exacerbated by the characters' inability to 'read' and 'translate' the nature they experience into their linguistic understanding of the world. The non-verbal communication between Piya and Fokir, however, demonstrates the potential of an understanding based on corporeal reciprocity, and this hopeful acknowledgement of basic human commonality renders the dream of a multinational ecotopia more realistic.

David Malouf's Ovid, in *An Imaginary Life*, is a character who undergoes a metamorphosis from the urban disciple of Rome and premier Latin poet, to a man determined to embrace coextension with the natural world and willing, to achieve this, to completely abandon language in favour of intuitive, corporeal interaction. His development in this regard is prompted by his growing affinity with nature, animals, and especially a feral child he comes to raise. The Child's apparent embrace of absolute coextension with nature can be seen as the complete realisation of the phenomenological unity of the body and the earth as "the flesh of the world", and is portrayed as being possible only in the absence of language and socialisation. By advocating the complete abandonment of language to fully access nature Malouf opens himself to charges of dangerously essentialising culture and nature as oppositional categories of experience. That said, his novel is a powerful illustration of ecological interconnection and a celebration of humankind's kinship with nature.

In Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, the protagonist gradually finds that her culturally dictated, taught constructions of nature are in conflict with her experiential perception of her place in an interconnected natural world in which she is merely another animal in an intricate ecosystem. She comes to challenge the discourses of anthropocentrism and androcentrism which have mediated her experience as a human being, a slave, and a woman. Her resistance to these limited and destructive discourses, and to the physical abuse and hardship she faces as a slave woman, are based in her conviction of her own physical resilience and natural female power, and in her growing affinity with nature. Once alone in the African veld, living in the baobab, she discovers that the natural world is animated by

agency and intentionality, which she comes to respect, even worship. Her journey culminates in her suicide within the tree that has become a second body to her, and the act is imagined not as a defeat but rather as a peaceful surrender to a comforting coextension with nature.

One of my central aims in this thesis has been to determine whether these four novelists manage to reconcile their ecological themes with their literary medium. I think that while they all demand an interrogation of language – particularly the limiting discourses of anthropocentrism and Cartesian dualism – they also demonstrate the potential of literature to promote an embodied experience of ecological interconnectivity. As outlined above, it is vital to the ecological project that culture and nature are not conceived of as necessarily oppositional realms of experience. By extension, language, and literature, must not be represented as incompatible with a capacity for sensory, embodied engagement with nature. Language may inarguably be a vessel for cultural constructions of reality, but it does not necessarily disallow the expression of ecological themes or deny the existence of an embodied aspect to human perception. As Merleau-Ponty emphasises, human beings can, by recognising their physical intertwining with the world, "serve as muses" and let the world – nature – speak through them (Adams 160). This experience of physical affinity with nature is spoken effectively by these novelists in language. By demanding corporeal responses and sympathies from the reader, by injecting the body into language, these novels allow nature a kind of mouthpiece in literature, allowing it to be a positive, and powerful, force in the environmental crisis.

As these novels testify, poetry and fiction have the capacity to subvert and question mainstream cultural discourse. They portray human subjects whose experiential 'realities', particularly their perception of nature, come into conflict with the 'reality' of their communities and general cultural context. They gradually learn to value their embodied experience of kinship and interconnection with nature and other human beings above the taught oppositional constructions of colonialism, anthropocentrism, androcentrism, nationalism and war. Apart from powerfully thematising this resistance to destructive discourses of hierarchical dualism, the novelists' styles avoid the conceptual, scientific and political frameworks which habitually underpin discussions of environmentalism, and even ecology, instead using highly unconventional, poetic styles which disrupt the normative anthropocentric views enshrined in conventional language. Through this rich, unexpected prose the authors are capable of surprising, even alienating the reader, and demanding an

interrogation of their cultural assumptions by appealing to emotion, imagination and corporeal empathy. As Clark says, language "expresses the overwhelming and often oppressive weight of centuries of anthropocentric modes of thought and perception", however, it "still contains hidden resources and inventive possibilities for those writers and thinkers able to discern and exploit them" (54).

The realisation of literature as a medium capable of 'speaking' for nature, and acknowledging a realm of embodied experience which proceeds cognitive reflection, is premised on the dissolution of our characteristic assumptions about the human subject. If we understand the current environmental crisis as the result of "a cultural 'mind' that cannot adapt itself properly to its material 'body', the embodied and ecological support base it draws on in the long-denied counter-sphere of 'nature'" (Plumwood *Environmental Culture* 15), then it stands to reason that the mind and the body must be reconnected, emphasized in their inter-dependence and mutual power. These novels demonstrate that perhaps, as phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and Nietzsche suggest, mind and body, culture and nature, are not distinct categories but intertwined. This is relevant not only to their thematic concerns but to the question of whether the examined novelists contradict their ecological themes, mistrust of language, and emphasis on embodiment with their linguistic medium. As I have shown, for the most part these authors do not contradict theme with medium, as they generally resist and undermine certain destructive discourses rather than language itself. Even so, the suggestion of such a paradox rests on the perception of literature as an essentially mental, purely cognitive exercise – a product of the mind in creative, reflective isolation. But, as Dvorakova suggests, "the body does not give way to the mind because the mind is not something foreign to the body. It is its tool, in each of its activities" (369). These four authors could not possibly have conceived of and written such novels if they did not have an embodied experience of nature to draw on. Writing is not merely a linguistic exercise, forever trapped in the symbolic mechanisms of language, because, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, perception is always both corporeal and subjective. There is no such thing as a Cartesian – a purely mental – exercise, just as there is no possibility of returning to a pre-reflective primal experience of the world. Mind and body cannot be separated and immense harm has been done by our philosophical attempts, over the centuries, to do so.

Joseph Meeker, one of the pioneers of the ecocritical field, wrote in 1974:

> If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behaviour and the natural environment – to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? (qtd in Love 228)

These questions form the basis of any ecocritical investigation. I have demonstrated that these four novels, by re-introducing corporeality into language, and thematising an embodied ecological experience of nature, are examples of the kind of literature which has the potential to positively influence our human conception of nature, and adapt us better to our ecological context on a planet struggling for survival. If, as I feel these novels demonstrate, "culture is… embedded in nature and… nature is always culturally inscribed", the oppositional, exclusive nature of these 'categories' of experience cannot be justified (Grewe-Volpp 81). The mind can no longer be conceived of as separate from and superior to the body. And literature is always both the product of an embodied, pre-reflective experience of reality, and a cognitive linguistic exercise. Therefore, by establishing a balanced, non-oppositional approach to traditional dualisms like mind/body and culture/nature, these novelists render the question of whether literature can express themes of embodiment null.

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