

ATTUNING STORYTELLING WITH SILENCE: *THE SILENT WOMAN*,
THE ENGLISH PATIENT
AND *IN THE SKIN OF A LION*

A Master's thesis

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines how silent mediums of expression in *The Silent Woman*, *The English Patient* and *In the Skin of Lion* widen the breadth of knowledge accessible to readers through storytelling. This study scrutinizes Michael Ondaatje's and Janet Malcolm's self-conscious employment of silent forms of communication in the production of narrative. The texts rely on silent characters and narrators who use nonverbal means of communication to construct stories and histories within the narrative. Furthermore, the texts self-reflexively comment on how readers comprehend silences of and in the text in order to instruct readers on reception strategies for silent narrative devices. Ondaatje and Malcolm point to fallibilities of verbal language that obscure stories and histories. Silent forms of expression transcend fallibilities of verbal language and narrate stories and histories outside of language, thereby shifting the boundaries of the histories and stories that can be told through writing.

Résumé

Ce mémoire s'intéresse à la manière dont les différents moyens silencieux d'expression utilisés dans *The Silent Woman*, *The English Patient* et *In the Skin of a Lion* élargissent l'étendue des connaissances accessibles aux lecteurs par l'intermédiaire de la narration. Cette étude examine l'emploi volontaire de formes silencieuses de communication dans la production du récit chez Michael Ondaatje et Janet Malcolm. Les textes étudiés reposent sur des personnages et des narrateurs silencieux qui utilisent des moyens de communication non verbaux pour construire des histoires—individuelles comme collectives—au sein du récit. En outre, ces textes autoréférentiels livrent des commentaires sur la manière dont les lecteurs comprennent les silences que contient mais aussi qu'exprime le texte, afin de les instruire des différentes stratégies de réception associées aux techniques narratives du silence. Ondaatje et Malcolm révèlent les lacunes du langage verbal qui obscurcissent les histoires racontées. Les formes silencieuses d'expression dépassent ces mêmes lacunes, inscrivant le récit en dehors du langage et déplaçant ainsi les limites des histoires écrites.

Contents

Introduction 6

I. Janet Malcolm and The English Patient 8

Writing the Self with Silence 17

“To Delete was for her a Kind of Creative Act”: The Place of Silence in Storytelling 27

II. Silence in *In the Skin of a Lion* 38

III. English as Patient 54

Silence as Antidote 73

Speaking Through Silent Mediums of Language 84

Restructuring the English Language through Silence 95

Conclusion 99

Works Cited 101

Introduction

George Steiner asserts that the Western, classical world view structures “reality within the governance of language”: “[w]e take this [verbal] character for granted. It is the root and bark of our experience and we cannot readily transpose our imaginings outside it. We live inside the act of discourse” (30-31). However, structuring one’s conception of the world in linguistic terms misses capturing forms of knowledge, stories and histories communicated outside of language. Steiner cautions that “[w]e should not assume that a verbal matrix is the only one in which the articulations and conduct of the mind are conceivable. There are modes of intellectual and sensuous reality founded not on language, but on other communicative energies...there are actions of the spirit rooted in silence” (30). He marks the seventeenth century as a time when the transformation of mathematics and the natural sciences from “a framework of linguistic description” to those based increasingly on mathematical notation, as a time when “significant areas of truth, reality and action recede from the sphere of verbal statement” (32). Mary Field Belenky et. al similarly affirm that there are forms of valuable knowledge, such as that used in child rearing, which “comes not from words but from action and observation, and much of it has never been translated into words, only actions” (201). However, classical, Western models of storytelling based on verbal communication transmit only histories and knowledge captured within a linguistic view of the world.

My thesis examines forms of storytelling that rely on silent forms of expression in order to broaden the experiences, stories and histories that can be communicated through literature. Patricia Odek asserts that “[c]ultural and sexual biases have led literary critics to attend to more noticeable behaviours, talk, and words, treating silence as background or inaction, and thus the

important position of silence in human communication has been overlooked” (97). My study foregrounds the role of silence in both the production and reception of narrative in order to draw attention to some of these overlooked narratives. This study highlights the role of silence in both the construction and reception of meaning in narrative as M.M. Bakhtin asserts that understanding and response are “dialectically merged and mutually condition one each other; one is impossible without the other” (282).

Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient* and Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman* demonstrate awareness of forms of histories, and knowledge outside of the English language. Moreover, the three texts point out that some elements of the English language actually obscure the telling of stories, histories and knowledge. The three texts portray a search for modes of telling that transcend the failures of the English language. *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient* and *The Silent Woman* present nonverbal means of communication as being able to narrate histories, stories and experiences verbal language fails to capture. The three works advocate the addition of silent forms of communication in writing in order to restore, and reclaim the ability of the English language to narrate diverse and complex experiences such as histories and stories of marginalized groups, as well as war catastrophes. By adding silences into the writing of revisionist histories and narratives, the three texts aim to foster more meaningful, open storytelling methods.

Janet Malcolm and The English Patient

In her discussion of destitute traits of the English language that obscure storytelling, Janet Malcolm draws on many tropes Michael Ondaatje employs in *The English Patient*. Both Ondaatje's novel, *The English Patient*, and Janet Malcolm's meta-autobiography of Sylvia Plath, *The Silent Woman*, use the doctor-patient analogy to diagnose "illnesses" that infect aspects of storytelling like verbal language and reception and then write prescriptions for the "illnesses". The verbal language serving as the "English patient" in both works shares some of the same symptoms of infection: appropriation, deception, and rumour.

However, in some respects, the aspects of storytelling both works place under restoration display contrasting symptoms of the same infection. While both works serve to correct faulty listening and reading strategies, *The English Patient* deals with readers and listeners who are under-attentive. By contrast, *The Silent Woman* seeks to correct overactive readers who fill in too many gaps. In *The Silent Woman*, the obliteration of silences in storytelling leads to overexposure and rumour. While *The English Patient* and its pre-quel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, face the difficulty of gaining exposure for marginalized hi(stories), conversely, in *The Silent Woman*, Plath's life story suffers from overexposure. The remedies put forth by Ondaatje and Malcolm for the "sick" narratives are silent mediums of language, in the form of gaps and lacunae. The inclusion of silences in the language and reception used as part of storytelling restores stories.

Malcolm pathologizes characteristics of the English language leading to the breakdown of storytelling in *The Silent Woman*. The rumours surrounding "the narrative of the faithless, heartless Hughes and his Jezebel" are imagined by Malcolm as a kind of disease that infects even her: "The patient got sicker from the attempted cure. The doctors (who had already quarrelled,

as doctors do in hopeless cases) withdrew in disarray. Deep pathologies of biography and journalism began to fuse, and to engender virulent new viruses of the bacillus of bad faith...I began to feel the early symptoms of infection” (28). The rumours that take over Plath’s life story result from a lack of silence in its storyline. When silent gaps necessary to storytelling are filled and obliterated, rumours appear instead of story

By allowing gaps and lacunae within narrative to speak for themselves and remain a part of narrative, the narrative remains a story, rather than falling into the pitfalls of rumour. In “Walking in the City” Michel De Certeau notes the importance of gaps and lacunae to storytelling as it is these gaps and ellipses within the text that differentiate story from harmful effects of rumour:

The verbal relics of which the story is composed, being tied to lost stories and opaque acts, are juxtaposed in a collage where their relations are not thought, and for this reason they form a symbolic whole. They are articulated by lacunae. Because of the process of dissemination that they open up, stories differ from rumours in that the latter are always injunctions, initiators and results of a levelling of space, creators of common movements that reinforce an order by adding an activity of making people believe things to making people do things. Stories diversify, rumours totalize (107-108).

One of the very first symptoms of illness that Malcolm diagnoses in the narrative of Plath’s and Hughes’s life stories is rumour. Narratives of rumour fill in gaps and silences in Plath’s and Hughes’ lives thus flat-lining the complex dynamic between Plath and Hughes to boil it down to the victim-oppressor relationship. Rosemary Dinnage writes that the “Good Sylvia,” “is the one described by another biographer as “a fragile, lovable creature, in danger of being crushed,” female victim of a cruel male world” (6). David Bromwich asserts that Malcolm “does

not care for the ease with which Plath has been made to appear the victim of men, the victim, above all, of her husband, Ted Hughes” (36). Claire Rothman declares that casting Hughes and Plath into perpetrator-victim positions marks “a mythology in which Plath plays the feminist martyr to Hughes’s faithless scoundrel. Plath’s biographers usually portray her as a victim, a helpless young American stranded in England with dependent offspring and an adulterous spouse” (13).

Such an overly simplified position of victim overlooks the strength of Plath’s speaker, who refuses the victim position, and also overlooks Plath’s responsibility for and agency in events in her life. This locks Plath into a position of helplessness where she is acted upon by Hughes instead of acting for her self. This flat position of helplessness fails to encourage women writers and minorities who struggle to have their distinct points of view heard within a hegemonic Western system in order to diversify it.

Malcolm uses one of the first memoirs written about Plath by A. Alvarez, a friend of Hughes and Plath, to demonstrate how filling in silences spurs on rumour that levels rather than diversifies. Malcolm writes that “[a]lthough Alvarez is extremely discreet and gives no details of Hughes and Plath’s separation—about which, in fact he knew a great deal—it is not hard to read his self-castigation as a veiled accusation against Hughes” (23). Although Alvarez fails to explicitly state his disapproval of Hughes, Hughes “was immediately aware of the destructive power of the piece” and indeed Malcolm claims this piece starts the ordeal against Ted Hughes (23). Although Alvarez holds back his knowledge of Hughes’ and Plath’s affair, theories of reviewers and critics fill in his silences and thereby pick up what Alvarez “left delicately unsaid but hovering in the air” and run it “into the ground” (26).

The collapsing of gaps and silences in the narrative of Plath’s life transform the story into

rumour. While silences, unknowns and gaps in Plath's life story intrigue audiences, they also tempt people to fill them in with words that explain away the silences. It is when the silences and gaps that are integral to storytelling fall away that slander, libel and rumour take their place. Olwyn writes that Mrs. Plath's silence on Sylvia's death provided fodder to spur on the different versions of Sylvia's life story: "It's my belief that if Mrs. Plath had said, when Sylvia died, 'She suffered from mental illness, but was a marvellous person and I loved her' the myth would have never happened...it has never been made clear, for instance, just how very ill Sylvia was with her first breakdown...Then came the glowing memoirs" (qtd. in Malcolm 29). Mrs. Plath's silence on Sylvia's death provides lacunae within her life story that spurs some critics on to create slanderous narratives of her life.

Indeed part of Malcolm's criticism of the biographical genre is that biography often aims to destroy or fill lacunae in a person's life by revealing secrets. On the medium of biography, Malcolm writes: "Biography is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped out in full view of the world" (8-9). Malcolm continues to speak of what she feels is the biographer's crime: "The biographer's business, like the journalist's, is to satisfy the reader's curiosity, not to place limits on it. He is supposed to go out and bring back the goods—the malevolent secrets that have been quietly burning in archives and libraries and in the minds of contemporaries" (10).

Malcolm praises Anne Stevenson's biography, *Bitter Fame*, on the same grounds that others attack it: fissures in its storyline. Stevenson's work is intentionally incomplete in its presentation of Sylvia's life due to her consideration for Plath's living relatives as well as Olwyn's strong editorial presence. Because of Stevenson's inclusion of silences and lacunae in her work, Malcolm notes that *Bitter Fame* was "brutally attacked, and Anne Stevenson herself

was pilloried; the book became known and continues to be known in the Plath world as a “bad” book” (10). In contrast, Malcolm praises Stevenson’s book, calling it “by far the most intelligent and the only aesthetically satisfying of the five biographies of Plath written to date” (10). In its use of silences as part of its narrative, Stevenson’s biography attempts to steer clear of rumours regarding Plath’s life: “*Bitter Fame* appeared, declaring that it would ‘dispel the posthumous miasma of fantasy, rumour, politics, and ghoulish gossip’ that was feeding Plath’s ‘perverse legend’” (24).

Secondly, Malcolm’s defence of Stevenson’s biography rests on the fact that lacunae and gaps woven into the narrative preserve the voices of Plath and Hughes. Whereas some critics and biographers fill out gaps and lacunae with their own theories and voices, thus obscuring the voices of Plath and Hughes, Malcolm argues that Stevenson steers clear of this act of “colonization”. Hughes laments that his and Plath’s life story is often used to “fill out” the theories of biographers and critics. Tim McNamara writes that one view of the Plath-Hughes relationship is that “Hughes has had his past taken away from him by those who wish to use them to fill out their theories...Therefore, people who never knew Plath or Hughes commandeer the facts and possibilities of their lives and use them for their own purposes—an entirely unpleasant experience” (D4).

Malcolm writes that in contrast to these writers, silences in Stevenson’s work capture the voices of Plath-Hughes. Indeed Malcolm asserts that Stevenson has perhaps been overly compliant with the editorial comments of Olwyn and Ted Hughes, and they appropriate her voice: “Anne Stevenson apparently had not subdued the natives but had been captured by them and subjected to God knows what tortures. The book she had finally staggered back to civilization with was repudiated as a worthless native propaganda, rather than the ‘truthful’ and

‘objective’ work it should have been (12). Malcolm uses the imagery of colonization to highlight appropriation as one of the problems with writing a biography that excludes silences: “Relatives are the biographer’s natural enemies; they are like the hostile tribes an explorer encounters and must ruthlessly subdue to claim his territory...If the relatives behave like friendly tribes...he still has to strut about to show that he is the big white man and they are just the naked savages” (10-11).

Malcolm likens acts of appropriation that use Plath’s and Hughes’ life story to “fill out their theories” to stealing. The trope of thievery Malcolm employs in *The Silent Woman* underlines acts of appropriation commentators of the Plath-Hughes affair commit through verbal language. In her critique of the biography genre, Malcolm compares biographers to burglars: “The biographer at work, indeed, is like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewellery and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away” (9). Malcolm continues her portrayal of biographers as burglars with: “As a burglar should not pause to discuss with his accomplice the rights and wrongs of burglary while he is jimmying a lock, so a biographer ought not to introduce doubts about the legitimacy of the biographical enterprise” (9-10). Her use of the burglary trope chastises those who diminish the role of silence in storytelling by filling them with rumours.

Acts of appropriation stealing away silences from Plath’s and Hughes’ life stories take away the character of their names from Plath and Hughes by encapsulating their names with slander, libel and rumour. Hughes writes that the many gaps and silences surrounding Plath’s life incite the destruction of these silences through the creation of rumour and slander: “maybe it is this very bareness of circumstantial detail that has excited the wilder fantasies projected by others in Sylvia Plath’s name” (qtd. in Malcolm 4). Plath’s form as a silent figure, one who is

dead and can no longer speak and answer back verbally creates yet more gaps and lacunae, for slander and libel to take up: “The branch of law that putatively protects our good name against libel and slander withdraws from us indifferently. The dead cannot be libelled or slandered. They are without legal recourse” (8). Plath writes that she wants her name to be made based on her work. While writing the *Ariel* poems Plath declares “I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name” (qtd. in Malcolm 61). Although Plath intends for the creative nature of her poems to be associated with her name, slander, libel and rumours crowding around her name diminish this attribute of her name.

Malcolm’s attempt to “heal” the broken narrative of Plath’s and Hughes’ life stories involves a restoration of both their names. In a symbolic gesture, vandals have removed Hughes’ surname from Sylvia Plath’s tombstone at least three times since her death (Kakutani C.13). Kakutani writes that “it seems odd that Ms. Malcolm doesn’t mention Plath’s defaced headstone in ‘The Silent Woman,’ for this book is her passionate attempt to restore the Hughes name to a position of honour” (C.13). Malcolm partly restores the Hughes name through ethical considerations she raises for Plath’s survivors, her family and friends. The restoration of naming happens also through Malcolm’s attention to silences in the narrative. Many accounts of the Plath-Hughes relationship offer an overly simplified, dualistic conception in which Plath plays the victim to Hughes’ womanizing. Using silences and lacunae in storytelling opens up the narrative to include parts of one’s life that escape words: the indefinable, and uncertain. Rather than rumours that present dualistic accounts of a person’s life, stories and the silence they contain gesture to the mysterious and ambiguous.

Narratives lacking gaps and lacunae can give rise to dualistic accounts that prompt the creation of antagonistic rumours. In addition to imagery of burglary and illness to characterize

maladies of storytelling in both *The English Patient* and *The Silent Woman*, storytellers must tread through explosive ground. In *The English Patient*, the story is set against atrocities and war crimes of World War II, and uncertain perpetrator-victim positions of characters complicate communication. Betrayals and anger create the potential for flare-ups that can stifle productive communication about the issues. In *The Silent Woman*, both the socio-historical background and the personal events of Plath's life make attempts to tell her life story difficult.

Telling Plath's life story against the socio-historical background of women's oppression has proven to be an explosive and difficult task. The critical commentary links Plath's life story with that of the socio-historical and political position of women in the 1950's. Feminist critics such as Kathleen Margaret Lant, Maureen Curley, Laura Johnson Dahlke and Christina Britzolakis look at Plath's work as examining issues integral to the feminist movement. Hughes' affair with another woman, his separation from Plath, her suicide and the strong imagery of male oppression found in poems such as "Daddy" create a number of "minefields" when detailing her life. Bernard Crick indicates that there is not one minefield but several in talking about Plath's life, noting that in order to write *The Silent Woman* Malcolm had to "walk through the myths and minefields (legal, moral, aesthetic and psychological) of the turbulent Plath-Hughes territory" (38). Stepping on one of these minefields would preclude open communication concerning women's issues and Plath's life and writings from taking place as anger, legal troubles and damage to Plath's survivors, her friends and family, could occur.

Secondary criticism surrounding Malcolm's book and the Plath-Hughes affair depicts both through the imagery of explosion. This imagery of explosion emphasizes just how difficult it is to write about the Plath-Hughes affair in words. In a review of *The Silent Woman* Tim McNamara reflects that writing biography is "made especially difficult when one enters into the

minefield of the Plath-Hughes relationship” (D4). Rosemary Dinnage points out that by writing about the Plath-Hughes affair Malcolm becomes “criminal and victim in the moral minefield of journalism” (6). Val Ross identifies the subject of Malcolm’s book as “the moral minefield trod by those who write biographies of Sylvia Plath” (C.18). Retaining silences and gaps in narrative offers storytellers spaces to walk in amongst these many explosive factors: without stepping on and setting off “minefields”.

Demonstrating the precariousness of these many minefields, Anne Chisholm notes that in spite of Malcolm’s careful handling of Plath’s life and relationship with Hughes and only using her life as a secondary topic of her book, even she fails to make it all the way across safely. Malcolm criticizes Hughes for granting permission to Plath’s mother to publish Plath’s *The Journals* in order to receive permission to re-publish *The Bell Jar* so that he could buy a piece of property. Malcolm argues that by allowing the publication of Plath’s *The Journals* Hughes provides fodder for gossip-mongers: “he had evidently exchanged his right to privacy for a piece of real estate. For if he had not published *The Bell Jar* against Mrs. Plath’s wishes she surely would not have felt impelled to publish *Letters Home*, and Hughes, in his turn, might not have felt impelled to administer a corrective to her corrective by publishing *The Journals*” (40-41).

After the publication of *The Silent Woman* Hughes objects to this line of reasoning and in the British edition of her book Malcolm includes a note explaining her error. Thus Chisholm argues that although Malcolm “tries to defuse the bomb by implying that such are the pitfalls of biographical detective work... a bomb it remains” (42). Even in her careful handling of the Plath-Hughes affair and her consciousness of and inclusion of silences, Malcolm shows just how difficult it is to navigate through Plath’s life story. This underlines the necessity of adding in enough space to manoeuvre through it and the issues involved (suicide, women’s oppression in

1950's American society and their continued oppression today, the traumatic events of World War II) in a way that keeps lines of communication open. Furthermore, although adding silence into dialogue can be viewed by Westerners as shying away from discussions of important issues and events, on the contrary, adding silence strengthens discussions. Gemma Corradi Fiumara asserts that "silence can be a fertile way of relating, aimed at the inner integration and deepening of dialogue...the creation of empty space, or distance, within a dialogic interaction might be the only way of letting the deeper meanings and implications of that relationship emerge" (101). In this way, Fiumara envisions silence "not as an interval but a bridge that unites" (101).

Writing the Self with Silence

Malcolm presents silent mediums of language in the form of lacunae and gaps as dynamic counterparts to maladies of storytelling: rumour, appropriation, and explosion. In *The Silent Woman*, Malcolm commends Ted Hughes for maintaining his silence regarding his relationship with Plath. Hughes' book of poems entitled *Birthday Letters* is the only verbal response that can be viewed as commenting on his relationship with Plath. In spite of constant knocks and pleadings on his door to give interviews, and talk about his relationship with Plath, Hughes remains infamously silent: "The warily silent Hughes has protected his secrets better than his sister has: no one can use his words against him" (Malcolm 51). John Burgess writes: "For 35 years they've been awaiting an explanation, sometimes growing angry over the delay. Devotees of the poet Sylvia Plath...have wanted to hear from her husband... But Ted Hughes kept silent. He got on with his life...Along the way he offered hardly a word about his and Plath's failed seven-year marriage" (B1). Jon Saari asserts that "The Hugheses have presented a united front in protecting Ted's privacy; he has remained in the background, and Olwyn has

handled the requests and questions of biographers” (655). David Bromwich notes Malcolm’s praise of Hughes’ silence: “By staying behind the scenes, by not participating in the journalist's game, by his repeated opting out of the longer and uglier game of the biographers, Hughes won Malcolm's admiration” (37).

Hughes’ silence however, has been greatly unpopular with critics who accuse him of censorship. Douglas Barbour points out that while Sylvia Plath is “one of the 20th century’s most mythicized [sic] writers” her estranged husband is “demonized” (F6). Malcolm writes that “One of the unpleasant but necessary conditions imposed on anyone writing about Sylvia Plath is a hardening of the heart against Ted Hughes” (40) and that “the weight of public opinion” has fallen too “squarely on the Plath side and against the Hugheses” (57). While Hughes has carefully guarded his own disclosure of his knowledge of Plath, he has spoken up to defend charges levelled at his silence and against gossip and rumours circulating about himself and Plath: “I know too that the alternative—remaining silent—makes me a projection post for every worst suspicion. That my silence seems to confirm every accusation and fantasy. I preferred it, on the whole, to allowing myself to be dragged out into the bull-ring and teased and pricked and goaded into vomiting up every detail of my life with Sylvia” (qtd. in Malcolm 141).

Malcolm’s defence of Hughes’ silence has attracted its share of disparagement from reviewers and critics. Caryn James criticizes Malcolm’s depiction of Hughes: “It is in the portrait of Ted Hughes that Ms. Malcolm loses control, romanticizing him almost as much as the young, infatuated Sylvia Plath did...Even his letters to other people make Ms. Malcolm react with ‘intense sympathy and affection,’ as if she were in the throes of a schoolgirl crush. Mr. Hughes’ heroic status owes much to the fact that Ms. Malcolm never meets him” (A.1).

Malcolm’s commendation of Hughes’ silence has largely been approached from an

ethical standpoint in the critical commentary. Malcolm's defence of Hughes' privacy has been attributed to her "superior sense of morality". Chisolm sardonically comments that Malcolm "is armed, too, with a remarkable sense of her own moral and intellectual superiority. She tries to conceal this trait by sprinkling slighting references to journalism through her book...but her essential confidence in her own discriminating intelligence and moral judgment shows through" (42). Wendy Kagan chastises Malcolm for preferring "moralizing to analyzing" stating "[m]oralism can function as a rhetorical ruse; it takes verbal cunning to translate one's chosen viewpoint into ethical imperative. But I could only recoil from the neo-Victorianism of Malcolm's tone when she sermonized about the ill effects of gossip and rumour" (95). Kagan continues: "From her moral pedestal, Malcolm regards gossip as a lower form of communication" (95). Bromwich asserts that Malcolm's argument "is braced by a piece of moral one-upmanship that plays with a stacked deck" (72).

Here, rather than considering Malcolm's defence of silence from an ethical standpoint, I will consider it from that of allowing the space for Plath's voice and silences in her work to speak for themselves. That, in and of itself, is a difficult task. In her seminal piece "Laugh of the Medusa" Hélène Cixous asserts the difficulty women writers' voices have being heard among the literary, "political, typically masculine economy...where woman has never *her* turn to speak" (249). Cixous remonstrates that it is difficult for women writers to speak as their discourse lies outside of the "phallogocentric system" (253). Cixous underscores the difficulty of speaking for women by labelling it a "double distress"—one of both speaking and being received: "Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away—that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public" (251).

Secondly, the additional difficulty of speaking for women writers lies in being understood when they do speak: “Even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (251).

Thus Hughes’ silence not only shields his children’s and Plath’s friends’ and family’s lives from the gruelling dissections of gossip-mongers, it also draws attention to and leaves room for Plath’s own voice. Rather than echoing the ventriloquist gestures of those attempting to speak for Plath, Hughes’ silence draws focus back to the voice of Plath found in her writings. Because of the difficulty women writers have in being heard, Hughes’ comments on Plath’s life would only further obscure the voice of Plath found in her writings. Mary Belenky et. al turn to Marguerite Duras’ work to affirm the necessity of leaving enough room within discourse for women writers to speak for themselves:

[m]en move quickly to impose their own conceptual schemes on the experience of women...These schemes do not help women make sense of their experience; they extinguish the experience. Women must find their own words to make meaning of their experiences...Meanwhile, [to quote Duras] ‘men must renounce their rhetorical rattle’” (203).

This chapter on *The Silent Woman* views Hughes’ silence as such a renunciation: a refusal to speak for Plath’s experiences.

The importance of Plath speaking for herself—through words and silences in her writings¹—is a point Cixous underscores throughout her work. In spite of the difficulties she points to, Cixous emphatically insists that women speak for themselves. Her introductory statement, “Woman must write her self (245)” reverberates repetitively throughout her piece: “Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own

¹ More on speaking through silence follows in the next section.

movement” (245); “She must write her self” (250). At points in her text, Cixous splits up the word “herself” into “her self” to underscore the importance of ownership over their own stories and experiences for women writers. I like Cixous’ defamiliarization of “herself,” by adding a space in between “herself” she gives readers reason to pause and reflect over the meaning of the two words so I adopt Cixous’ terminology in my chapter on *The Silent Woman*.

This first chapter of my study shifts critical commentary surrounding *The Silent Woman*, which primarily looks at Malcolm’s advocacy for silence through the lens of ethics, to that of listening to the voices and silences in Plath’s writing. In her book, Malcolm echoes Cixous’ sentiments that it is harder for women writers to speak than for male writers: “Writing is a fraught activity for everyone, of course, male or female, but women writers seem to have to take stronger measures, make more peculiar psychic arrangements, than men do to activate their imaginations. Plath’s own writing life...was, until the final period, a painful struggle, a repeated, bloodying beating of the head against a wall” (84). Thus the importance of silence in *The Silent Woman* rests not only upon an ethical argument, but also upon a feminist one. In filling silences and lacunae in Plath’s life story, speakers and writers not only turn story into rumour, but also attempt to take the crucial act of speaking for her self away from Plath.

Cixous’ statement about the importance of women maintaining control of the narrative of their lives seems particularly applicable to the posthumous flurry of speech regarding Plath’s life: “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure” (250). Indeed the overexposure of the media storm surrounding her life and death confiscates Plath’s body from her and turns her into such an “uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure”.

Therefore Malcolm's critique throughout *The Silent Woman* of the writers, friends, critics and scholars speaking for Sylvia Plath, and constructing differing narratives of her life and death, is a critique of the appropriation such acts commit. Malcolm critiques the countless retellings of Plath's life "told in the five biographies and in innumerable essays and critical studies" (16). In her review of *The Silent Woman*, Laurel Graeber writes "Sylvia Plath was silenced by her own hand when she committed suicide in 1963, but in the years since, many writers have attempted to speak for her" (A.44). The many rumours and lies circulating about Plath have been attempts at speaking for Plath, at appropriating her right to her self. Cixous asserts that "by means of laws, lies, blackmail and marriage, her right to herself" may be "extorted" (258). It is this act of extortion that Malcolm objects to and seeks to correct in her revisionist narrative and thus to reactivate Plath's right to write her self through the voice found in her writings.

In her dramatization of how silences and lacunae in Plath's life story become filled with words of journalists, biographers, memoirists, Malcolm's veneration of silences is an attempt to wrestle Plath's life back into her own control. Indeed Hughes voices this very argument in defence of his silence. Because Hughes's story is tied up with Plath's, Malcolm writes that he too has had "to watch his young self being picked over by biographers, scholars, critics, article writers, newspaper journalists. Strangers who Hughes feels know nothing about his marriage to Plath write about it with proprietary authority. "I hope each of us owns the facts of her or his own life," Hughes wrote in a letter" (8). In this sense, Malcolm's book collapses the male-female binary by presenting Hughes as a feminized "silent woman". This collapse is visible in the subtitle to Malcolm's book: *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes*. By speaking from a place of silence, Hughes turns into a kind of "silent woman" where he "can (not) be heard as the hero-ically feminized, suffering, silent man" (Churchwell 121).

Malcolm's defence of Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* is another instance of how Malcolm comments on the difficulty women writers have in speaking for themselves. Stevenson's biography preserves gaps and silences in the narrative of Plath's life that are necessary for giving credence to Plath's own voice. Additionally these lacunae in Stevenson's work prevent the story she writes from turning into rumour. However Malcolm additionally writes about Anne's struggle to write for her self in her biography of Plath. In this particular depiction of the challenges women writers face, the obstacle to the expression of Anne's voice in that book is another woman, Olwyn Hughes, with whom Anne works closely on the book. Ted's sister Olwyn Hughes was at the time the literary executor of Plath's estate and along with Ted controlled the use of materials from Plath's works. While Anne and Olwyn originally share the same perspective on the Plath-Hughes affair, throughout the course of her work, Anne develops a viewpoint that differs from Olwyn's. Malcolm observes that for the next two years Anne tries "to reclaim it...to be the author of her own book" but is unsuccessful, "she lost control of the text" (78).

Malcolm's use of Anne's struggle to author her own book serves as a meditation on womens' struggle to write their own text. Malcolm reveals that it was "an essay called 'Writing as a Woman,' by Stevenson which appeared in a feminist anthology (*Women Writing and Writing about Women*, 1979)—that brought Anne into the sharpest focus for me, and made me feel I understood something about what had reduced her, a woman of substance and achievement, to the condition of helpless abjection" (81). Malcolm's focus on two women contending for the expression of their points of view in a single book demonstrates the difficulty women face in writing without succumbing to the male-female binary some feminists believe to be partly responsible for the oppression of women.

While Ted Hughes is certainly the most scrutinized about his relations with Plath, Malcolm also praises other members of Plath's life network of family and friends who do not speak about her. Malcolm commends silent men who maintain gaps and lacunae in Plath's life story: "Plath's brother Warren has never spoken to biographers, or written his own memoir; and among Plath's lovers, Richard Sassoon has eluded all the biographers' nets. Such proud silences command our respect" (Showalter 6).

Accordingly, Malcolm's praise of those who knew Plath and respect lacunae and gaps in the narrative that has woven itself around her life are due not to her "superior sense of morality" or because she has found herself in the "throes of a schoolgirl crush" but rather because of her recognition of the importance of Plath speaking for her self. Given Plath's status as an icon of the feminist movement, this is especially important. Malcolm notes that Plath's writing embodies feminist issues: "The awful mixture of self-loathing and loathing and envy that Plath expresses in 'The Wishing Box' is a central concern, perhaps *the* central concern of contemporary feminism" (87). Because of Plath's embodiment of feminist issues and her potential to serve as a symbol of oppression, it becomes even more urgent for her to write her own story.

Indeed Malcolm ties Plath's personal crisis and struggles to that of women and the collective difficulty of speaking in one's own voice instead of yielding to personal and social lies proliferating during the historical milieu of the 1950's. Malcolm argues that rumours and lies attempting to crowd out Plath's attempts at speaking are a feature of the duplicitous nature of the 1950's. Of the 1950's Malcolm writes: "We lied to our parents and we lied to each other and we lied to ourselves, so addicted to deception had we become" (15). Malcolm attributes the root of this deception to

the desperate pretense [sic] that the two World Wars had left the world as unchanged as the Boer War had left it was finally stripped away by the sexual revolution, the women's movement, the civil rights movements, the environmental movement, the Vietnam War protests. Sylvia Plath and Anne Stevenson and I came of age in the period when the need to keep up the pretense [sic] was especially strong: no one was prepared—least of all the shaken returning G.I.'s—to face the post-Hiroshima and post-Auschwitz world (15-16).

In this way, Plath's life, writes Malcolm, "is a signature story of the fearful, double-faced fifties. (16). Malcolm's position reflects the sentiments of Hélène Cixous' statement that "Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history" (252-253).

During this socio-historical time period, verbal language becomes a way of keeping up appearances among the social changes taking place. There was pressure to write both publicly and privately about genteel material and to cover up some of the more difficult, raw facets of life. While these deceitful words obscure painful unspoken realities, silence and gaps in narrative signal what has been left out. The sense of incompleteness of these stories are their strength, as rather than covering up painful issues, they ask readers to think more deeply about what the silences and gaps gesture towards. Malcolm writes of the deceptions of the socio-historical milieu of the fifties: "duplicity was so closely woven into its fabric. We lied to ourselves, addicted to deception had we become. We were an uneasy, shifty-eyed generation. Only a few of us could see how it was with us" (15). Stevenson, a peer of Malcolm's, seconds Malcolm's observation: "Many women who, like myself, were students in America in the 1950s will remember duplicities of this kind. Sylvia's double standard was quite usual, as was the

acceptable face she assumed in letters to her mother. My own letters home of the time were not dissimilar” (15).

These external socio-historical pressures make it even harder for women to write themselves. However Cixous asserts that these deceptions should be uncovered: “We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman” (250). Plath managed to write with her whole self, breaking out of deceptions of the 1950’s: “At the end of her life, Plath looked, with unnerving steadiness, at the Gorgon; her late poems name and invoke the bomb and the death camps. She was able-she had been elected-to confront what most of the rest of us fearfully shrank from” (Malcolm 16).

But if lies characteristic of the historical period in which she lived threatened to smother Plath’s voice while she was alive, lies and rumours circulating about her personal life threaten to write for Plath after her death. James Atlas writes that in death Plath “became a Silent Woman, unable to respond to those who re-interpret her life and blame survivors for her death” (A.5). Kakutani writes that “Mr. Hughes has responded that critics and biographers have wilfully tried to reinvent the image of his wife and their marriage” (C.13). Furthermore, Kakutani points out that “One of the disillusioning truths offered in ‘The Silent Woman’ is that all biographical subjects eventually becomes pieces of property, with writers feuding over the corpus left behind” (C.13). Rebecca Viney argues that posthumously not only Plath’s art but her life too has become a “kind of cultural property” (227). Malcolm [rhetorically] asks, “Who are the biographers, journalists, critics, curiosity-seekers, and libbers swarming around Hughes but stand-ins for the Undead woman herself?” (140). However what these critics miss is that Plath does answer back, not verbally, but with the silence in her work and life.

“To Delete was for her a Kind of Creative Act”: The Place of Silence in Storytelling

Thus far, this first chapter of my study has focused on the detrimental effects of losing silences to stories: the transformation into rumour, appropriation, and attempting to crowd out the voice of Plath in her own narrative. This section reconceptualises the place of silence in storytelling by focusing on its productive, creative capabilities. Ways of speaking and storytelling present conceptions of and transmit knowledge about the world. Studies such as Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* and Belenky et. al’s *Women’s Ways of Knowing* conclude that people experience the world differently based on social factors like gender. Consequently, if people experience the world in different ways, there must also be a variety of ways one can express oneself and tell stories. This chapter aims to open up the traditional model of storytelling by drawing attention to silence as a method of storytelling.

Traditionally, the Western world conceives of the model for telling stories in linguistic terms—as a telling through words. In classical literature, which serves as a foundation for the English canon, silence is conceived of in terms of immobility, passivity, and negation. In her study of silence in classical and archaic periods of literature, with a particular focus on the *Illiad* and the writings of Pindar, Sylvia Montiglio asserts that silence is characterized by both anti-heroism and in opposition to “the voice as a poetic medium” (6).

Furthermore, the model of the poet and hero in classical literature is gendered. Classical literature attributes speech and the glory it is meant to invoke to men, while “both the tragic repertory and the medical corpus ascribe silence as a stubborn and self-destructive behaviour to the feminine world, while men speak even on the threshold of self-inflicted death” (Montiglio 7). Whereas the model of the poet requires speech and song for male heroes to signify their high status, women’s repute “paradoxically rests on silence: it is inversely correlated with the

woman's *kleos*, whether it be around her virtue or her defects" (Montiglio 83). Indeed Montiglio points out that in classical Greece "a last silent gesture is the only acceptable introduction to a woman's suicide in Greek tragedy. These deaths heralded by silence represent the opposite of heroic death with its verbal exuberance" (244-245).

This section seeks to build on Jeanne Kammer's observations in "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry" where she argues that the silence ascribed to women in classical literature need not be divorced from the art of poetry. Actually, Kammer asserts that modern women poets like Marianne Moore, Emily Dickinson and H.D. have developed and write and speak within an aesthetic of silence. Kammer asserts that Dickinson, Moore, and H.D., "three figures who established precedents for women's poetry in this century...developed her [their] poetry as an art of silence where historically it has been an art of speech" (153). Kammer challenges classical ascriptions of positive values to speech and negative ones to silence. Because silence is invested with such negative qualities as oblivion and blame in classical literature foundations of the canon, women writers who write within an aesthetic of silence face a disadvantage. For this reason Kammer argues that values assigned to speech and silence and the models used for poetry need to be re-conceptualized: "The labels assigned to women's poetry by generations of critics have...devalued its effect...the terms and models used to assign value are inappropriate" (153). Kammer's work identifies how voice produces both speech and silence in the aesthetic of poetry she studies (158).

This chapter of my study re-thinks the place of silence in storytelling. Continuing Kammer's important work, my study of Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* reveals the gender bias in the classic oratorical model of storytelling. Building on Kammer's work, rather than investing silence with negative qualities, this study demonstrates the integral role of silence to storytelling.

In Malcolm's tale of the narrative of Sylvia Plath's life, silence moves from background into foreground. Here silence serves as more than just canvas for words. Instead of acting as background for storytelling and conversation, it is an active part of the act of storytelling itself. Whereas silence is often associated with negation (a lack of speech), here silence is shown to tell. Malcolm uses the many memoirs, and tales of Plath's life to demonstrate how silence speaks in storytelling.

Closely related to the disparagement of silence in the classical tradition is the idea that a poet's words propel a hero's deeds into history: "Heroes do not die in silence because they leave behind a resonant glory, warranted by the poet's voice...silence resembles the 'cloud of forgetfulness' that prevents exploits from being brought into the light" (Montiglio 82). A quote from Pindar, which Montiglio includes in her book reads "Every beautiful deed dies if it is passed over in silence" (82). Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* changes this conception of silence. Indeed it is speech that threatens to obscure the memory of Sylvia Plath's life story and silence that tells and preserves it.

Secondary criticism surrounding *The Silent Woman* discusses how proliferate interpretations put forth by "readers" of the narratives of Plath's life story contribute to the media storm surrounding Plath's life and works thus shutting out Plath's voice and silences. For Phoebe Pettingell, for example, biographers become over-active and over-interpretive readers of Plath's life who use the deceased Plath as a kind of ventriloquist doll: "Malcolm shows how the situation is both oppressive and tantalizing for Plath's would-be biographers: Each hopes to be the one to illuminate what actually happened and voice the feelings of the "silent woman" in the casket" (14). Sarah Churchwell argues that "[w]hat Malcolm characterized as Hughes's continuing contest with "Sylvia Plath over the ownership of his life" was, in fact, not a contest

with “Plath” (who, after all, was dead), but with readers’ interpretations of her words (113). Furthermore, Churchwell asserts that Hughes objects to interpretations of his life with Plath as they turn him into “reader, rather than author” of his own life (115). *The Silent Woman* criticizes over-active and over-interpretive readers of Plath’s and Hughes’ lives as their acts of reading move from reception to projection. Projection prevents readers from empathizing with and understanding issues raised by Hughes’ and Plath’s life stories. Belenky et. al. affirm that understanding involves not “invading another mind but of opening up to receive another’s experience into their own minds” (122).

In its criticism of reading strategies, *The Silent Woman* schools its readers on diligent reception by pointing to the dynamic role of silence in narrative. Both *The Silent Woman* and *The English Patient* accord importance to the silent position of readers and listeners. *The Silent Woman* addresses its readers, castigating those who misinterpret gaps and lacunae. Both works craft a model of storytelling wherein they school readers on careful reading and listening strategies. Whereas *The English Patient* portrays a discourse whose listening and thus interpreting and reading capabilities are imperilled due to a lack of alertness, *The Silent Woman* depicts readers and interpreters who are overactive. In spite of readers’ interest they fail to read silences instead misinterpreting them and filling them with words.

Malcolm criticizes both readers and biographers for the disclosure of secrets in biographies. Malcolm holds both readers and biographers responsible since divulging secrets works to satisfy readers’ curiosities about previously undisclosed gaps in the subjects’ life. Malcolm points out that “[t]he reader’s amazing tolerance (which he would extend to no novel written half as badly as most biographies) makes sense only when seen as a kind of collusion

between him and the biographer in an excitingly forbidden undertaking: tiptoeing down the corridor together, to stand in front of the bedroom door and try to peep through the keyhole” (9).

Furthermore, as readers are likened to listeners, Malcolm points out that listeners are endowed with the destructive power to seduce and prompt talkers to reveal more information than talkers intend, thereby drawing out talkers’ secrets, and ridding narratives of their crucial silences. The kind of material over-revealed by talkers serves as fodder for gossip and rumour. Malcolm uses the journalist profession as an example of listeners who prompt their talkers into revealing secrets speakers may not want to publish. Malcolm cautions against the too-quick, filling-in of silences that often takes place in a journalistic exchange: “In most interviews, both subject and interviewer give more than is necessary. They are always being seduced and distracted by the encounter’s outward resemblance to an ordinary friendly meeting...the conversational reflexes whereby questions are obediently answered and silences too quickly filled” (173).

Secondary criticism picks up on this strand of Malcolm’s book, detailing the glimpses that Malcolm grants to readers about the interview process and construction of journalistic narratives. By letting readers in on the journalistic process, Malcolm creates more knowledgeable, careful and diligent readers of her own work, and more cautious interviewees and talkers. Pettingell notes, “Malcolm lets us see how people talk to a reporter, how in seeking to control a story they usually reveal the very information they later regret having mentioned” (14). Sebastian Smee seconds this by saying, “Malcolm’s books have wrestled with the capacity for self-sabotage, or at least, unwitting self-revelation, that inheres in the stories we tell—not only to journalists, but to analysts, to mentors, to courts of law, and even pictorially, via the camera” (29). Showalter asserts that Malcolm writes “of the way most people babble like

narcissistic fools in front of a reporter” (3). Bromwich compares *The Silent Woman* to Henry James’s *Aspern Papers*: “the story of a careful listener who is eventually exposed as a ‘publishing scoundrel’” (36). Bromwich’s statement about the duplicity of a careful listener later revealed as a “publish scoundrel” touches on the double bind Malcolm finds herself in.

In *The Silent Woman* Malcolm reveals that she faces the same pressures and attractions readers and interpreters of Plath’s life do. Her position as a journalist makes the pull towards the production of another narrative of Plath’s life and to divulge rumours and gossip about the Plath-Hughes affair even stronger for Malcolm. Bromwich observes that from Malcolm’s writings, he learns that she is “an attentive listener, the sort who can lead people to blurt out more than they realize. Her published portraits honestly record the signals by which she gets that response...Almost always, the subject talks on. Armed with this skill of tacit coaxing, Malcolm has survived in a bad time for journalism” (34).

Secondary criticism surrounding *The Silent Woman* hashes out Malcolm’s duplicitous position. Showalter argues that while Malcolm “so vehemently condemns the motives of those who rifle the drawers of the dead, Malcolm is herself impelled to do the same, and it is this pull between its overt and covert narratives that makes *The Silent Woman* such a *tour de force*” (3). Furthermore, Showalter notes that Malcolm creates an antithesis between “her business to inquire and expose” and her depiction that “the way of wisdom is reticence...Her wise men never talk, or are imagined as never talking, in a loud voice” (34).

Malcolm acknowledges that the Plath-Hughes affair poses seductive temptations for the creation of rumour, and that she is no exception to this temptation. Throughout *The Silent Woman* Malcolm throws in anecdotes of finding herself in situations that spark a desire similar to those attempting to divulge details about the Plath and Hughes: “Then—joining the crowd of

wretches begging for crumbs from the table—I added, “May I quote it?”” (47). However, by pointing out the difficulty of turning away from such acts, Malcolm deconstructs the power and temptation of rumour, thus providing advice to her readers on how they might do the same.

In addition to readers and listeners, *The Silent Woman* focuses on yet another often silent participant in the shaping of narrative: the editor. Editors are especially important in *The Silent Woman* as they often create lacunae and gaps in stories by deleting. As Kammer notes, editing and deleting are creative, productive acts; and they belong to an aesthetic of silence. Kammer refers to Moore as a “poet of erasures” for whom ““to delete was...a kind of creative act” (154).

Olwyn and Ted Hughes play considerable roles in the different narratives of Plath’s life put forth after her death through their functions as editors. Roles of editors in *The Silent Woman* are so significant that they often challenge writers for rights of authorship. Linda Wagner-Martin, one of Plath’s biographers had to do without quotations from Plath’s works, as permission was dependent on making changes suggested by Olwyn and Ted Hughes. Wagner-Martin thinks agreeing to making subtractions suggested by the Hugheses that “would have meant a deletion of more than 15,000 words...would have changed the point of view of this book appreciably” (25). Anne Stevenson’s incorporation of many editing changes Olwyn asks of her in her biography of Plath contest Stevenson’s authorship of the book. In the foreword to her book, *Bitter Fame*, she calls Olwyn a co-author of the work. Sarah Churchwell criticizes “Hughes’s reordering, editing and control of virtually all of Plath’s published writing [since it] renders questionable any claims that her poetry, journals or letters tell her version of their “story” as she saw it or chose to make it public” (111). In her review of Malcolm’s book, Churchwell also argues that Hughes’ editing of Plath’s journal contests Plath’s authorship: “He subsequently

formulated a series of objections, made many deletions...Someone's judgment is present here, but it is certainly not Sylvia Plath's" (10).

Where Hughes is often criticized for taking too much of Plath's work out of public view and denying access to her works, Malcolm disparages that he sometimes leaves too much in. In Hughes' editing of *Letters Home* "it was felt that he had taken out too much, that there were many ellipses. But in fact *Letters Home* is remarkable not for what it leaves out about Hughes but for what it leaves in" (36-37). Sebastian Smee observes that Malcolm's investigation of the importance of editing to writing is present in a number of her works: "They are close, unforgiving studies of what happens when we shape and edit reality—as we all do, all the time, even just by looking around us...it comes down to how we edit ourselves and each other" (29).

Malcolm closes her book with a meditation on the important role editing plays in writing because it creates silences, spaces, and gaps integral to storytelling. Malcolm's last chapter focuses on her visit to Trevor Thomas' house. Rather than relying on Thomas' words to build the narrative, Malcolm pays more attention to his house. In many ways, Thomas' house figures more prominently in the chapter than Thomas. Thomas is responsible for spreading one of the most damaging rumours in the Plath-Hughes affair. In his memoir he claims Hughes held a "party with bongo drums in Plath's flat on the night of her funeral" (193). Although Hughes successfully challenged the honesty of this claim before the Press Council and the newspaper that ran the story, and the *Independent* subsequently ran a correction and apologized, Malcolm writes that the "harm was done" (28). The rumour cemented belief in Hughes' victimization of Plath for many of its readers.

Malcolm uses Thomas' overcrowded house as an analogy for the hard task of editing for writers and the danger of removing and leaving in the wrong words. Thomas' rumour is

envisioned as a failed attempt at editing. He didn't know when to stop talking and added too much to the narrative: "this task of housecleaning (of narrating) is not merely arduous; it is dangerous. There is the danger of throwing the wrong things out and keeping the wrong things in; there is the danger of throwing too much out" (Malcolm 205). In her likening of the housecleaning of an overcrowded house to the process of writing, editing speaks as much as words written on the page. It is subtracting words and creating silences that Malcolm sees as more challenging than stringing words together:

Each person who sits down to write faces not a blank page but his own vastly overfilled mind. The problem is to clear out most of what is in it, to fill huge plastic bags with the confused jumble of things that have accreted there over the days, months, years of being alive and taking things in through the eyes and ears and heart. The goal is to make a space where a few ideas and images and feelings may be so arranged that a reader will want to linger awhile among them (204-205).

Finally, this section of my study looks at Plath's expression of her self through the silent medium of body language. Cixous affirms that speaking through the body is an important means of expression for women: "women are body" (257). In Cixous' article the body is both the language of women and their grammar (257). Malcolm argues that the silence Plath creates and leaves behind best captures the expression of her self. The most powerful image of Plath in the book is her silent response to her quarrel with Olwyn Hughes. Olwyn's critique of Sylvia's harsh criticism of an acquaintance of Sylvia's is met with a physical expression of Sylvia's anger only:

Sylvia glared accusingly with a half-terrified, half-furious look and drew Ted into the room, having whispered Olwyn's remark to him. Olwyn, losing her temper, asked Sylvia

why she didn't behave more normally, why she was so rude, why she so often showed little consideration for others. To these questions Sylvia made no reply but kept up her unnerving stare. Olwyn, who immediately regretted she'd said a word, remembers thinking, "Why doesn't she say something?"...She was wakened at dawn by the departure of her brother and his family (Stevenson qtd. in Malcolm 48-49).

Malcolm highlights the strength of silence as an expression of Plath's inner turmoil, and the anger that it directs at Olwyn: "Olwyn verbally attacks Plath, but Olwyn's words are only words; it is Plath's (Medusan) speechlessness that is the deadly, punishing weapon" (49). Here words are futile, ineffective and fall by the wayside in comparison to the effective silence Plath uses to communicate her emotions: "Olwyn's recollection of this unpleasant scene and of two similar scenes reads like a single recurrent dream of infantile diminishment. In each, Plath is rendered as a silent, powerful, uncanny antagonist, whose aggression leaves Olwyn stunned and baffled" (51).

In much the same way, Plath's silence continues to speak after her death among all the attempts at speaking for her. The uncanny, female body of Plath put on display as the "ailing or dead figure," subject to the gaze of those wishing to use the story her body contains for their own purposes collapses under the strength of the silent way she answers back. Indeed the gaze theorists and critics place on her body is not uni-directional, for even after her death, Plath looks back.

Plath's unnerving, silent stare carries on as she stares back at those speaking for her, and renders their words vacuous and empty with the strength of her silent stare. The voice and silences of Plath found in her writings answers strongly to those attempting to create the many "false selves" of Plath. As Malcolm reads *Bitter Fame* she concludes that the voice of Plath

found in her writings is indeed so strong that it renders efforts by those writing and speaking for her inept:

At the time I thought that it was Sylvia Plath herself who was mischievously subverting the biographer's project. The many voices in which the dead girl spoke—the voices of the journals, of her letters, of *The Bell Jar*, of the short stories, of the early poems, of the *Ariel* poems—mocked the whole idea of biographical narrative. The more Anne Stevenson fleshed out Plath's biography with quotations from her writings, the thinner, paradoxically, did her own narrative seem (17).

Silence in *In the Skin of a Lion*

In an interview with Catherine Bush, Michael Ondaatje asserts that “reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer” (245). Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* tells previously untold histories of workers such as builders of the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Waterworks Filtration Plant, loggers, dynamiters and tanners. Telling histories of new Canadian workers is an undertaking that challenges Ondaatje to find a suitable means of representation. Language presents a particular difficulty as the workers are largely made up of new Canadians who struggle with language and find it oppressive. Ondaatje thus faces the problem of telling the histories of a community that finds language oppressive, and that can hardly speak English, if at all, and its members are therefore unable to tell or write their own stories in English. The text further problematizes the representation of histories through language by depicting some of the fallible aspects of language.

Furthermore, the text demonstrates the ways that both linguistic and visual means of officially documenting history have failed to capture stories of workers and the underclass. The articles and images Patrick finds at the library documenting the building of the Viaduct fail to provide information and images of people building the bridge: “[t]he articles and illustrations he found in the Riverdale Library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge” (145). The narrator regrets that “there were no photographers like Lewis Hine who in the United States were photographing child labour everywhere,” to photograph experiences of the labourers. However, even Hine’s photos are seen as problematic due to their inaccessibility: “Patrick would never see the great photographs of Hine, as he would never read the letters of Joseph Conrad” (145).

As Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* portrays the failures and difficulties of representing histories of this collective of workers in the early 1900s, by including their stories as part of its

narrative, the text faces the challenge of using appropriate narrative strategies for the representation of this piece of Canadian history. Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* overcomes some of the challenges language presents for telling this part of history by relying on silent, nonverbal means of communication both as theme and rhetorical method. Rather than relying on official information as a way of presenting this story to readers, the story is filtered through Patrick's personal experience of encountering workers' stories, and his elliptical telling of the story to Hana. The text is conscious of its own status as a work of art, and presents readers with both a narrative strategy that is inclusive of these previously untold stories, as well as reading strategies for these partially untold stories. The telling of these stories by both Patrick and Hana (who imaginatively fills in some of the gaps in Patrick's narrative), is closely tied to their ability to both use and witness, listen to and read forms of silent, nonverbal means of communication employed by new Canadians as narrative strategies.

The telling of previously untold stories of new Canadian communities is mediated through Patrick's account of how he meets Clara. Patrick is a fitting focalizer for personal and historical stories of new Canadian communities as he is aware of inadequacies of verbal language through his own struggles with language. Due to these struggles with language he develops an ability to read and use silent means of communication that allows him to understand and relate experiences of new Canadians.

Patrick grows up in an environment with little verbal communication. The person Patrick mainly interacts with during his childhood, his father Hazen Lewis, is a man who hardly speaks. The text informs us that the "only moments his father was verbal was when calling square dances" (19). Besides spending time with his father, Patrick tends to animals and watches insects. While animals and insects provide him with companionship, he is unable to verbally

converse with them. In addition to a lack of spoken language in his hometown environment, Patrick encounters a lack of official, linguistic definition for this environment. He lives in a region unnamed on maps and not knowing the real names of insects, he gives them fictional ones. The other source of human companionship Patrick has in childhood are loggers who come to work in his town, described as a “silent gauntlet” of men (7).

All labourers the text portrays: loggers, dynamiters, as well as those building the Water Filtration Plant and the Bloor Street Viaduct Bridge are characterized by silence. During the building of the tunnel for the waterworks: “no one speaks. Patrick is as silent as the Italians and Greeks towards the bronco foremen” (107). Rowland Harris dreams of the “silence of the men coming out of a hole each within an envelope of steam” (111).

However, while new Canadian labourers in the text can hardly speak English, if at all, and because of their diversity often lack a verbal language, language itself is shown to be fallible. While learning English would allow workers to tell their histories in a language comprehensible to many, the learning of English and telling of experiences by new Canadians in English is portrayed as undesirable in the text. The narrator asserts that the “event that will light the way for immigration in North America is the talking picture,” and then parodies the learning of English by new Canadians through their imitation of phrases in songs, plays and movies. Ondaatje paints a comic portrayal of “growing echoes” that fill the Fox or Parrot Theatres, as a result of Macedonians, Finns and Greeks repeating the phrases of actors during pauses in actors’ speech in order to improve their pronunciation (47). The narrator relays that when Wayne Burnett dropped dead during a performance, money didn’t have to be refunded as “a Sicilian butcher took over, knowing his lines and his blocking meticulously” (47).

As the derivative use of language entails mimicking words and phrases, this poses the risk of also mimicking the thoughts and ideas contained in those phrases. Hutcheon argues that *In the Skin of a Lion* addresses histories missing from official, popular accounts of history, those of working-class new Canadians she terms “the outsiders, the “ex-centrics,” who are made the paradoxical (and very postmodern) centre of the novel” (“Ex-Centric” 133). Consequently, Ondaatje’s representation of the history of “ex-centrics” in a language learned by mimicking phrases in popular, mainstream songs, plays and movies is problematic as rather than providing a medium for “ex-centrics” to give expression of their thoughts, ideas and histories, this risks ventriloquizing those found in mainstream society.

The naming motif in the text, by which I mean the text’s consistent thematic scrutinizing of issues of naming, portrays the potential for the mimicry of thoughts, histories and ideas of mainstream groups by new Canadians mimicking their language. The naming motif depicts both strengths and limitations of language. Alice asserts the power of language in the statement: “you must name the enemy and destroy their power” (124). In a parodic gesture she names herself after a parrot. The imagery of parrots found in her name as well the name of the Parrot Theatre speaks to the imitative quality of language and its potential for reasserting histories and voices of mainstream groups.

Voiced by the ventriloquist, language’s potential to diversify our knowledge of the world is lost. Linda Hutcheon asserts that constructing histories and stories has significant socio-political implications for marginalized groups: “[t]o write either history or historical fiction is equally to raise the question of power and control: it is the story of the victors that usually gets told” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 72). Consequently being able to voice histories and stories is an act that empowers marginalized groups in society. Hutcheon observes that through: “the

power to change how we read history and fiction, to change how we draw the lines we like to draw between the real and the imaginary. The ex-centric, those on the margins of history—be they women, workers, immigrants (or writers?)—have the power to change the perspective of the centre” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 103). Therefore Ondaatje’s depiction of new Canadians’ ventriloquization of mainstream histories and stories reinforces the power of the mainstream while obscuring power those on the margins can gain by constructing their own histories and stories.

In her discussion of Eve’s speech in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* Christine Froula argues that Eve’s powerlessness is evident when she begins to speak in Adam’s words. Mimicking Adam’s speech completes the indoctrination of Eve’s imagination by the patriarchal authority represented by Adam:

she has internalized the voices and values of her mentors: her speech reproduces the words of the “voice” and of Adam and concludes with an assurance that she has indeed been successfully taught to “see” for herself the superiority of Adam’s virtues to her own...In this way she becomes a “Part” not only of Adam but of the cultural economy which inscribes itself in her speech—or, more accurately, which takes over her speech: Eve does not speak patriarchal discourse; it speaks her (Froula 157).

In the same way, the chorus of new Canadians speaking mainstream discourse can signal their powerlessness in mainstream Canadian society.

The imagery of parrots in *In the Skin of a Lion* similarly highlights the risk that speech and language act to mimic mainstream histories rather than construct previously untold histories of marginalized groups. Parrots speak only by reproducing words and ideas spoken by their owners, but are unable to express their own thoughts in human languages. The text however also

points out that this feature of language is not limited to that of mainstream discourse, the “language of politics” of marginalized peoples can similarly become a ventriloquized discourse. While Alice is a spokesperson for the brutalizing conditions workers face at their jobs, it is sometimes hard to tell whether the words and thoughts she expresses are hers, or if she serves as a mouthpiece for the ideas of her dead lover, Cato. The potential for naming to lose its strength and meaning is also seen when the labour agent at the tanning factory gives the workers English names like Charlie Johnson and Nick Parker, which they remember “like a number” (132).

Nicholas is an example of a new Canadian who successfully learns how to speak English by mimicking Fats Waller’s speech. Although readers are told that a “spell of language” brings Nicholas to Canada, paradoxically, his journey is made in “silence,” and while he learns to speak English, he never quite learns how to use language effectively (43). At work, he is reclusive and speaks too little to others, while the first time he saves Alice, he launches into a monologue and speaks too much. Furthermore, his learning of the English language by modeling his speech on Fats Waller’s, is parodied since Waller’s “emphasis on usually unnoticed syllables and the throwaway lines made ...[Nicholas] seem high-strung or dangerously anti-social or too loving” (47). Silent means of communication provide a channel for new Canadians to express themselves through without resorting to the use of a ventriloquized discourse.

In addition to challenges language presents for new Canadians in Patrick’s neighbourhood as well as workers for communication amongst each other as well as with English speakers, fallible aspects of language lead to oppression in *In the Skin of a Lion*. In “Discourse in the Novel” M.M. Bakhtin asserts that socio-ideological class and status markers are evident in language. In *In the Skin of a Lion*, the labourers’ lack of a language and physical manifestations of their work on themselves demarcate them as members of the working class.

However while physical demarcations of the labourers' work are lasting, the text features silent, nonverbal means of communication that transcend linguistic demarcations.

Although a decree forbids holding political meetings in any language other than English, the dumb show held at the waterworks functions as a nonverbal means of communication offering unity and political freedom for labourers. The dumb show is a dramatic convention that completely privileges nonverbal means of communication. Whereas drama usually includes dialogue, dumb shows rely strictly on nonverbal means of communication such as action, shadow and light, to tell their story.

The dumb show is held at the waterworks, thus avoiding the association of silent theatre with the ventriloquism suggested by Ambrose's Parrot Theatre. The dumb show with puppets that Patrick attends can be understood by everyone in the audience, regardless of the native language they speak. The workers Patrick lives amongst in his neighbourhood use the dumb show to dramatize their struggle with language and the ways that language can be a source of oppression in their lives. In the puppet show onstage, a puppet is "brought before the authorities, unable to speak their language" (117). The puppet is assaulted onstage and although unable to speak, uses gestures to plead for help by kneeling and using one hand to bang down on the floor.

Like the dumb show, the theatre motif running throughout *In the Skin of a Lion* highlights how silent forms of expression found in theatre such as costume, body language, tone, lighting, and *mise-en-scene* can dramatize stories and experiences. Many characters in *In the Skin of a Lion* have vocations in theatre: Ambrose Small is a theatre owner, Clara is a radio Actress and Alice is a stage Actress. When Patrick meets Alice he discovers his love of theatre: "he loved technique, to walk backstage and see Ophelia with her mad face half rubbed off" (152). It is also once Patrick meets Clara that his part in the narrative goes beyond observing. After she leaves

him he goes back to watching others until he unites with another actress, Alice. It is when he lives with Alice that he becomes “suddenly aware that he had a role” and becomes directly involved in the story he has so far been watching: conditions labourers endure (126). The last chapter of the book entitled “Maritime Theatre” ends with “Lights, he said,” and can be interpreted as signalling the end of a dramatic performance: when the curtain drops down and the lights go back on. In this interpretation, the book can be viewed as being told in the language of dramatic arts.

Just as actors use body language to express themselves onstage, characters in *In the Skin of a Lion* use body language to communicate. While building the tunnel for the waterworks, Patrick moves into an Eastern part of the city made up of various communities of new Canadians who can't speak English. He lacks a common language to communicate with people in his community. It is during the time Patrick spends living among this community of new Canadians that he realizes how body language is a means of communication that transcends differences in spoken languages among this community.

While learning the Macedonian word for iguana piques the interest of store owners from whom Patrick buys clover and vetch every evening, sharing knowledge of this one word can only take Patrick so far in getting to know his neighbours. Patrick and his neighbours largely rely on body language and gestures to get to know each other. In spite of being unable to speak with them, his neighbours are able to express their care and concern for Patrick through gestures, by shaking his hand, embracing and kissing him, offering him cake and inviting him to lunch: “Patrick, surrounded by friendship, concern, was smiling, feeling the tears on his face” (113). As Patrick walks through his neighbourhood gestures of members of his community acknowledge their familiarity with him: “They knew who he was now. A hat raised off a head in slow motion,

a woman's nod to his left shoulder" (138). Kosta's wife presses "the side of her stomach with both hands sensually to make clear to Patrick that she would be serving liver" (133). As Patrick spends time with Alice and her friends, who slip out of English into Finnish or Macedonian, Alice "knows she can be unconcerned with his lack of language, that he is happy" (133).

The narrator comments that it is while Patrick lives in this neighbourhood without a shared spoken language that: "every true thing he learned about character he learned at this time in his life" (138). Following this sentence the narrator describes Patrick watching silent films in his neighbourhood, realizing that gestures of those around him, as well as laughter, are ways of speaking to each other:

Once, when they were at the Teck Cinema watching a Chaplin film he found himself laughing out loud, joining the others in their laughter. And he caught someone's eye, the body bending forward to look at him, who had the same realization—that this laughter was mutual conversation (138).

While Nicholas is unable to use language effectively, he uses gestures to communicate. The narrator describes North America of 1900s as a place "without language, [where] gestures and work and bloodlines are the only currency" (43). Nicholas describes arriving in Canada without a passport, being unable to speak a word of English, and relying on a gesture to gain entry: "He had ten napoleons, which he showed them to explain he wouldn't be dependent. They let him through. He was in Upper America" (46). Nicholas states that for him, "language is much more difficult than what he does in space" and the only language useful for him while working is calling out numbers (43; 41).

The text contains a choreography motif that further emphasizes how movement of the body along with timing is an important part of the narrative. During Patrick's break-in through

the tunnel to the waterworks, Patrick and Caravaggio communicate solely through gestures and body language: “[n]o words” are necessary as “they have choreographed this carefully” (228-229). The narrator draws attention to the ways that fate and timing act as important parts of the narrative in silent films: “all events governed by fate and timing, not language and argument” (43). *In the Skin of a Lion* similarly employs timing and coincidence as an important part of the narrative. In a feat of timing and fate, Nicholas catches Alice in the air at the exact moment she is swept off the viaduct bridge. After this occurs Alice recreates herself and becomes one of the major characters in the text as well as gives birth to Hana, thereby bringing another major character into the story.

The choreography of connections between characters and events of the story also functions to keep readers alert. In “Missed Connections,” Tom Marshall comments on the slow way that the book reveals some of the interesting links among its characters: “the novel introduces a number of potentially interesting characters but is slow to develop them or trace connections among them...one reads...for a good hundred and more pages before discovering what connects these remarkable people whose lives are much more vivid than most lives” (16). For instance, Patrick only learns the cultural identities of skaters he comes upon as a boy early in the story, near the end of the text when Hana tells him Cato’s father and other members of the Finnish community skated across the river holding up cattails on fire: “Now in his thirties he finally had a name for that group of men he witnesses as a child” (151). There is also a subtle connection behind the modelling of Nicholas’ speech on Fats Waller and Alice’s love of Fats Waller. Similarly, when Patrick takes on the role of a searcher looking for Ambrose Small as well as with Alice’s personal history, readers are placed in roles of searchers who must read the

text carefully in order to pick up some of the subtle clues that tie together characters and events in the story.

In the Skin of a Lion presents readers with strategies for reading the silent forms of language it uses to narrate historical events. The text draws attention to the active role reception plays in the construction of historical events. In this way it highlights the importance of being able to read the silent forms of language used to narrate. The text requires the dynamic participation of readers, in order for the narration of histories of marginalized groups to have an effect on the social-political reality of marginalized groups. Hutcheon classifies *In the Skin of a Lion* as historiographic metafiction and points out “[i]f, as these texts suggest, language in a sense constitutes reality, rather than merely reflecting it, readers become the actual and actualizing links between history and fiction, as well as between the past and the present” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 65). Since readers have the ability to influence the socio-political reality of marginalized groups, the text pushes its readers to actively participate in the act of construction thereby moving the narration and reception of histories into readers’ worlds.

Rather than relying solely on official documents to represent historical events, the text foregrounds the act of an individual’s bearing witness in the creation of collective histories. In this way, the text is conscious of its own limits as a work of art, and provokes readers to think beyond histories in the text to those they may have themselves experienced and witnessed. However, the text’s emphasis on the significance of personal experience and the witnessing of histories also points to the problem of transmitting and memorializing histories and thereby to art’s mutually important role. Furthermore, the text fictively recreates historical events for which no official documentation exists. Consequently, the text’s metafictional format draws attention to the role of art in the creation and reception of histories.

Whereas stories in *In the Skin of a Lion* are partly glimpsed through Patrick's eyes, these experiences are imaginative reconstructions of the events by Ondaatje. The text highlights the important role of fiction in the reclamation of histories. Hana's role in the narrative is further evidence of the importance of fiction and imagination in the re-creation of historical. Patrick's telling of events to Hana only goes so far and is filled with ellipses and gaps. Hana's role as a listener extends to that of a storyteller as she creatively reconstructs some of the stories and events. As Ondaatje explains, "[t]here are scenes that Patrick does not witness, and so it doesn't make sense that he's the narrator. It's just as much Hana imagining certain scenes as it is her being told certain scenes" (Ondaatje Interview with Bush 246). The text itself is full of blank gaps on pages as well as blank pages separating books of the text, and statements that trail off with ellipses, thus urging readers to use their imaginations to piece together, recreate and reflect on sections of the story.

The text self-reflexively draws attention to the importance of reading through the significance it places on witnessing. While Patrick is the protagonist of *In the Skin of a Lion* and one of the storytellers, he spends a lot of time watching and bearing witness to events. The narrator comments that Patrick "has clung like moss to strangers, to the nooks and fissures of their situations. He has always been alien, the third person in the picture...He was a watcher, a corrector" (156-7). Through his ability to watch carefully Patrick is able to learn and collect information. While Patrick's father hardly talks as Patrick is growing up, and at first the narrator states that "Hazen Lewis did not teach his son anything, no legend, no base of theory," Patrick later realizes that he "had learned important things," by watching his father (18-19). By drawing attention to the important role of reading, the text points to readers' own act of witnessing, and

listening to events in the book as well as outside of the book in their daily lives and the vital roles they play as receptive, responsive readers.

Although workers building Toronto's infrastructure are lost in official documents and photographs documenting its history, Patrick's role as witness to their efforts allows him to include their experiences when he tells his own story. From childhood, Patrick is described as watching communities of labourers. As a young boy Patrick witnesses the procession of loggers every morning. When he is older Patrick works among builders of the waterworks as well as dyers at the tanning factory, providing him with access to witness conditions the workers experience. The text enacts a model of attentive reading for the reception of experiences readers witness and for their subsequent inclusion as part of the communal history of Canada.

After Patrick leaves Muskoka, he arrives at an island containing the Garden of the Blind where Elizabeth, a blind woman who cares for the garden, guides Patrick into recognizing plants and flowers by their scents. The Garden of the Blind segment demonstrates how crucial it is to use the right reading strategy to be able to read or witness different experiences. Ondaatje underlines that experiences remain invisible if readers do not employ the appropriate reading strategy. The text invokes the use of all five senses in order to be able to see various occurrences. For instance, in the darkness of the waterworks break-in, Patrick is invisible "except by touch" (228). While the dangerous effects fumes at the tanning factory have on workers escape sight, leaving the men "invisibly with tuberculosis and arthritis and rheumatism," these effects can be gleaned from odour remaining on their skins: "even if they removed all pigment and coarse salt crystal, the men would smell still of the angel they wrestled with in the well, in the pit" (132). In the Garden of the Blind, rather than relying on sight and sound to

witness, Patrick must rely on his sense of smell. His guide tells him that to identify flowers and plants in the garden he must “focus ...[his] nasal powers ... must forget about sounds” (169).

Similarly the text highlights listening to underscore the significance of reception strategies. In Gemma Corradi Fiumara’s *The Other Side of Language*, she points out that among “the widespread meanings of the Greek terms *logos* there do not appear to be recognizable references to the notion and capacity of listening” (1). Fiumara argues that one of the crucial aspects of language, listening, has been lost in the Western tradition. Listening is important, Fiumara asserts, as without attentive listening “an increasingly arrogant *logos*, [is] ready to ignore anything that does not fit in with a logocentric system of knowledge” (6). Bakhtin similarly asserts the dynamic role of listeners in shaping discourse. He writes that while some linguists “take the listener for a person who passively understands but not for one who actively answers and reacts” he believes that “[r]esponsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse” (281).

In the Skin of a Lion emphasizes the importance of responsive, alert, listening. Gordon Gamlin argues that, “Patrick finds in Harris a receptive listener...In the end it becomes apparent that Patrick has sought the confessional more than the destruction of the waterworks. For him, the telling of the tale has inherent healing powers” (70). The ability of Harris to dissuade Patrick from carrying through with his plan to blow up the waterworks by listening to his story shows how listening can change the outcome of a story. Patrick’s telling of the story to Harris is especially important as the latter is in a position of influence. Indeed, Ajay Heble asserts that in *In the Skin of a Lion* readers “become aware of the effacing of histories that fail to come within

the orbit of interests of those who seem to be in positions to influence the production and distribution of knowledge” (240).

In order to reach a wider audience and for the communal histories of labourers to become part of a collective history, *In the Skin of a Lion* mythologizes histories of the labourers. The entire text can be seen as told in the vein of myth as the book’s title as well as the introductory epigraph are taken from the mythical story of the Epic of Gilgamesh. It is Alice, the character most concerned with the plight of labourers, who relays a play where “several actresses shared the role of the heroine” by passing along a large coat attached with animal pelts (157). In this way, “each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story” (157). The passing around of animal skins speaks to the idea that within Patrick’s telling, many characters have the opportunity to wear animal skins and tell their stories as part of Patrick’s story. The imagery of wild animal skins recalls the Epic of Gilgamesh thereby encasing the telling of these stories within myth. The histories of labourers are thus mythologized within the text. Lien Chao, who writes on the construction and reclamation of the overlooked histories of Chinese Canadians and their roles as nation-builders, highlights the dynamic role myth plays in the reception of histories: “to mythologize any historical experience is to legitimize it, and to make it part of the existing cultural reference systems” (3).

The text calls on readers to be aware of using appropriate, attentive reading strategies, as without them, stories will be overlooked and excluded from accounts of Canada’s history. Linda Hutcheon observes that, “history too shares in this silencing of that which does not fit into its customary mapping techniques” (*Other Solitudes* 94). *In the Skin of a Lion* demonstrates how some of the “customary mapping techniques” officially documenting history have failed to

capture histories of new Canadians that rely on silence. The book expands the ways that history can be told and received through silence as forms of expression using the body, theatre, and choreography that do not rely on words are used as narrative strategies and transcend difficulties characterizing the telling and receiving of their histories. Additionally the text draws attention to the importance of silent processes of language: those of listening, witnessing, reading.

English as Patient

Ondaatje follows *In the Skin of a Lion* with its sequel, *The English Patient*. *The English Patient* shares characters with *In the Skin of a Lion*, however, most importantly for my purposes in this study, it continues its investigation of silence in storytelling. *The English Patient* picks up on issues *In the Skin of a Lion* raises such as naming, listening, witnessing, and reading to examine a concern that is not only vital to both texts, but one that challenges how writers represent histories and stories through writing.

In Michael Ondaatje's poem "White Dwarfs" the speaker's greatest horror is seemingly that of falling into silence: "There is my fear / of no words of / falling without words / over and over of / mouthing the silence" (112). In introductory notes to *A Night Without a Staircase*, a collection of Ondaatje's poems housing "White Dwarfs," Richard Duranti affirms that one of the central concerns found in Ondaatje's writing is the ceasing of words: "no imaginative shock seems to Ondaatje more devastating than the fear of no words, projected on a cosmic scale. In all of his work, this threat looms as the worst fate that could befall his characters, who are always in a state of crisis" (6). At first glance, for a writer, losing words seems to be a frightening loss of expression.

Ondaatje's *The English Patient* comes head-to-head with this "fear of no words" as it portrays a crisis of language, where the threat of "no words" becomes a reality. Marlene Goldman confirms that "Ondaatje's narrative maps a wounded geography—the architectural, bodily, and psychic wreckage caused by the war" and that "the narrative structure itself is seemingly marked by the explosive forces of war" (902-903). Goldman's article maps the imagery of ruins, catastrophe, and wounded bodies and corpses in *The English Patient* in order to trace its portrayal of history to Walter Benjamin's conception of non-linear, non-progressive

human history (902). Goldman argues that knowledge gleaned from discourses of art, science, and religion has the ability to avert calamity (902). Here, I will tie images of catastrophe and disaster in the book to its representation of a crisis of language. I argue that history and stories, communicated through the medium of language, are in danger of becoming faulty if the crisis language faces is not remedied.

However, the speaker of “White Dwarfs” discovers that after crossing the threshold of words to silence, the silent choreography of the stars renders speaking undesirable: “there are those burned out stars / who implode into silence / after parading in the sky / after such choreography / what would they wish to speak of anyway” (113). In *The English Patient* it is through the crisis of language, where words disappear or are rendered deceptive, faulty and explosive that characters discover, and the book presents readers with, a mode of communication based on silence instead of words. Here Ondaatje not only confronts the “fear of no words” or of silence but also uses it to his advantage as a writer. The silent modes of expression in *The English Patient*: body language, the visual, ellipses, and blank space serve not to replace words, as words are integral to the art form of writing, but to re-infuse words with silent modes of expression, thus restoring communication. Consequently each word spoken and written in the text is a fusion of words and silence. However, since silence is often overlooked by the Western world, the book draws attention to the crucial role of silence in communicating. *The English Patient* portrays how language falls apart without silence and then shows how, through the addition of silence, it goes through a process of restoration.

My study thus looks at the central imagery of the book as an analogy of the crisis of the English language in its communication of stories, histories and knowledge. Indeed Stephen

Scobie points out that in order to have a better understanding of the book and its narrative techniques it is important to study metaphors in the work. Scobie confirms that

Ondaatje's sensibility as a writer is grounded in poetry, and all his "novels" may be described as poetic novels...Often, then, a critical response to Ondaatje's novels will have to adopt the techniques of talking about poetry as much as, if not more than, the techniques of talking about fiction. An examination of patterns of image, symbol, and metaphor will lead the reader into the book as readily as a more conventional investigation of characterization or plot...it is still an image that engenders and dominates the book" (92).

Bill Fledderus seconds that "image recurrence interests him [Ondaatje] as an organizing structure" (245). In an interview with Beverly Slopen, Ondaatje asserts that a story can be held together by motifs: "In one mural, [Mexican artist Diego] Rivera shows a factory worker holding a wrench in a certain way. Across the room in a linked mural, we see a foreman holding a pencil in a certain way. [Likewise] a story can be knit together by images. This seems to me a less didactic method of building a theme" (49).

Accordingly, critical reception of *The English Patient* has studied imagery and metaphors in the work to garner a deeper understanding of the work and the issues of history, knowledge and storytelling it represents. A number of critics note the influence of visual art in Ondaatje's narrative. Mark Simpson confirms that "[t]raditions of visual art in Italy help frame a narrative that imagines the Second World War likewise framed. Renaissance and baroque art provide a means with which to focus questions involving the invention and regulation of ways of seeing: ideologies of perspective, light and dark, the subject who sees and is seen" (226). Kristina Kyser asserts that *The English Patient* keeps "with the ideal of a story told by a 'cubist or mural voice'"

(894). Robert Fraser imagines the book's narrative as a "puzzle or collage with selected pieces missing" that must be assembled (45). Goldman comments on the significance of art in the book: "the prevalence of episodes that bring art into play with science and religion makes it difficult for readers to treat works of art as beautiful and consoling, but largely irrelevant, cultural commodities. Instead, in the novel, art is endowed with a profound socio-political and religious significance" (906).

A number of critics have studied religious imagery in the book to unlock meaning in its narrative. David Roxborough examines *The English Patient* as an encyclopaedia of Christian images used from the *Bible* and *Paradise Lost* to tap into the power of myth contemporary society has forgotten (236). Similarly, Kyser argues that *The English Patient's* characters "fluctuate between associations with positive and negative biblical figures" in order to undermine "the fundamental dualism on which all biblical narrative rests" (889). Kyser asserts that Buddhist imagery of fire "frames our last glimpse of the English patient and that the vision offered at the end of his life story is a revelation that serves to counter the destructive apocalypse that preceded it and satisfy the need to 'see everything in a different light' (899). Bill Fledderus views Christian imagery in the text as drawn on to further parallels between *The English Patient* and elements of Arthurian romance. In "English as Patient", I view Ondaatje's intertextuality with Arthurian romance, the *Bible* and *Paradise Lost* as signalling his examination of classical, oratorical models of storytelling these canonical works present. *The English Patient* is his response to classical, rhetorical models of storytelling and his attempt to render classical models more inclusive of nonverbal forms of storytelling.

The criticism accords a prominent place to the physical setting, often looked at as merely background for story, of *The English Patient's* narrative. Mark Simpson places the

setting's visual, nonverbal features "at the centre of thematic strains in the novel" (216). For Simpson, "the Villa San Girolamo orients all manner of thematic strains in *The English Patient*. Situating the play of several historical lines, its half-cracked contours protect as they expose genealogical complexity, collision, hybridity marking discoveries and radiations in art, in race, in nation" (217). Simpson quotes from *The English Patient* to observe that Ondaatje's architecture is full of "gaps of plot like sections washed out of a storm, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry washed out by storms" (7). Full of gaps and lacunae, Simpson states: "No wonder so few want to talk about Ondaatje's architecture. At once corrupted and irrealizable [sic] it threatens to collapse, let discussion down" (216). In contrast, here I assert that silences, gaps and lacunae in Ondaatje's narrative are an integral part of the discussion.

My study forges two of the central concerns in Ondaatje's writings: the "fear of no words," or of silence and that of the production of narrative. Indeed this study ties the two together to investigate what happens to storytelling that can no longer rely on the verbal and instead relies on silent mediums of expression. By paying attention to imagery and symbolism in the text I highlight silence as an important narrative technique in *The English Patient*.

As outlined, critics have studied the central metaphors and imagery in order to unlock the code of the book's figurative language. Here, my investigation of metaphors and imagery in the text leads me to assert that the fundamental or anagogic metaphor of the book is that of the doctor-patient analogy. The patient and characters of the book serve as embodiments of ailments of the English language that the text places under analysis, treatment, and recovery. I argue that this imagery serves as an analogy for the crisis of language portrayed in the text. The doctor-patient analogy symbolizes a "sick" language that has lost its ability to communicate effectively. The book places this language under restoration, and manages its recovery by adding silence to

its repertoire. The book therefore highlights silent means of expression as important narrative strategies that revive “sick” words in the text. Accordingly, I will look here at the self-reflexive nature of the book as an investigation of the role of silence in storytelling.

A Wounded Language

The Villa San Girolamo’s status as a makeshift hospital for the patient, the patient’s wounds, and Hana’s relationship as nurse to the patient as the force uniting the characters at the Villa set up *The English Patient* to be what Michael Ondaatje reveals is “a book about very tentative healing among a group of people. I think it is that most of all” (Ondaatje interview with Wachtel 6). Ondaatje highlights the important role of the Villa in healing, referring to it as “an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war...where healing began” (Ondaatje interview with Wachtel 6). The opening of *The English Patient* depicts crossing the threshold from words to silence for characters and readers of the text as Hana crosses the loggia and enters the Villa San Girolamo. Loggia shares the same root as the word *logos* and it is no coincidence that when Hana crosses the loggia at the beginning of *The English Patient* she enters a place that outwardly manifests a retreat from the logocentrism of the English language for Hana, Caravaggio, the patient and Kip. The text thereby teaches readers of the world constructed in *The English Patient* how to read and pay attention to silent forms of storytelling.

The text maps this journey for readers alongside the healing process characters undergo at the Villa to restore their ability to communicate. Most especially, the patient symbolizes readers’ flawed listening and reading strategies and their inability to pay attention to and read silent forms of language. The title of the book, *The English Patient*, serves not to identify the human identity of the patient as marked by an English nationality, since we find out the patient may very well be the Hungarian Count Laszlo de Almásy. However, even the patient’s identity

as Almásy is questionable as his confession that he is Almásy occurs after he has been drugged by Caravaggio. Caravaggio's expertise creating false identities for people during the war through his work as a spy throws the patient's identification of himself as Almásy into further disarray. Here I assert that the patient's identity remains purposely opaque and enigmatic because the English patient is meant to embody ailing traits of the English language. Consequently the patient is not meant to be identified, but rather functions to symbolize language. Thus the real patient that the text places under analysis, diagnosis and recovery is the English language itself.

All four characters' wounds during the war derive from a bruised relationship with verbal language. Rumours, deception, forced confessions and looming threats of explosions characters encounter result in their injuries. These ailments come to signify a crisis of the English language.

Verbal confessions are deceptive, flawed and result in injury in *The English Patient*. For example, while Caravaggio and torturers induce speech that they believe will unravel hidden truths and stories, the forced confessions of the German, Caravaggio, and the patient are unreliable and untrustworthy. A German soldier who turns himself in to the authorities willingly tells them bombs are wired to the electrical system in the city. Unsure if the confession he produces is true, authorities use torture to compel more words from him in order to ascertain the truthfulness of his previous ones. In spite of being "interrogated more than seven times, in differing stages of tact and violence," the words the soldier produces are meaningless: "at the end...the authorities were still uncertain about his confession" (276).

The confession Caravaggio is forced to produce is not only meaningless, but also injures him. The torture session intending to provoke a confession results in Caravaggio's captors

cutting off his thumbs and prompts his retreat from speech. The narrator asserts Caravaggio's difficulty verbalizing after his injury: "Words did not emerge easily from Caravaggio. He would rub his jaw, his face creasing up, the eyes closed, to think in darkness, and only then would he blurt out something, tearing himself away from his own thoughts" (252). The perceived usefulness and importance of information received through speech during the war provokes a number of captors to use violence as a means of extracting classified information from their prisoners. However, even under the threat of violence, talking is no more revealing than silence. Caravaggio is unsure if he was released from his torturers because they were successful in extracting vital information from him, or if, as Hana says, "They stopped torturing you because the Allies were coming. The Germans were getting out of the city, blowing up bridges as they left" (60).

However, Caravaggio is both a victim and perpetrator of destructive speech acts. While Caravaggio is the victim of a forced confession, that is a destructive speech act, he also coerces the patient's speech. Caravaggio induces the patient to produce a narrative that reveals his identity by drugging him with morphine. While Caravaggio regrets that he "lived through a time of war when everything offered up to those around him was a lie" he both creates deception and helps to unmask it. He works as an advisor during the war as he can read through "the camouflage of deceit more naturally than official intelligence" due to his background as a thief (253). At the same time he creates "double bluffs"—fake double agents used as foils for spies. It is unclear which one of these two activities Caravaggio engages in with regards to the patient as the narrator states he "needs to know who this Englishman from the desert is, and reveal him for Hana's sake. Or perhaps invent a skin for him" (117). While Caravaggio and torturers

induce speech that they believe will reveal stories, forced confessions that the German, Caravaggio and the patient produce are instead undependable.

Carrie Dawson notes that the text places importance not on the verbal process of confession but on the silent one of witnessing: “the bedside encounter between Caravaggio and the patient marks a shift from the appeal for confession to the appreciation of testimony” (54). Dawson draws on Shoshana Felman’s and Dori Laub’s work on trauma to underscore the necessary role of the listener to testimony: “[b]earing witness to a trauma is a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears” (Felman and Laub 70). Indeed Dawson asserts that Hana puts hope “not in the plenitude of language, but in the possibility of reckoning and the necessity of witnessing (60).

In the Skin of a Lion and *The English Patient* both urge the careful reading and listening of stories and therefore the significance and importance of witnesses and listeners. In addition to prompting diligent reception *The English Patient* investigates stresses placed upon receivers. The nurses depicted in the book witness bodily injuries resulting from war. These injured bodies in turn wound nurses: “Nurses too became shell-shocked from the dying around them...they began to believe in nothing, trusted nothing” (41). It is however not travesties of war written upon bodies that shock Hana. Rather Hana experiences the tragedy she learns of through language—a letter telling her of her father’s death—as an explosion that shatters her relationship with language: “the way a man dismantling a mine broke the second his geography exploded. The way Hana broke in Santa Chiara Hospital when an official walked down the space between a hundred beds and gave her a letter that told her of the death of her father” (41). The explosion leaves Hana unable to speak of her father’s death, and indeed impedes her ability to speak at all.

Kip withdraws from verbal speech after witnessing the imprisonment of his brother due to his brother's outspokenness against India's participation in World War II. However, although Kip does not speak out against the war and joins the army in a seemingly conciliatory gesture, his silence is a form of protest. In the next section I detail how silence aids Kip in acting out his wishes even though they contradict the external order imposed on him by authorities.

While Hana, Caravaggio and Kip retreat into silence because of their troubled relationship with language, the patient speaks excessively, and deliriously. His "circuitous manner" of speaking shields knowledge of his personal history and involvement in the war (89). The patient's logorrhoia, his excessive and incoherent speech, is the crux of jokes at the military hospital. When Caravaggio questions doctors at the military hospital regarding the patient, they laugh since they can provide him with little information in spite of the patient's incessant talking: "He won't talk? The clutch of doctors laughed. No, he talks, he talks all the time, he just doesn't know who he is" (28). Kip grows weary with the patient's excessive, circuitous manner of speaking, observing: "He had rambled on, driving them mad, traitor or ally, leaving them never quite sure who he was" (96). While this excessive character of the patient's speech underlines the defective nature of his speech, the patient's reception strategies are likewise malfunctioning. The attention the text pays to his flawed reception strategies highlights the importance of the silent process of listening to effective communication.

That *The English Patient* treats reception as an important part of storytelling is noted by critics. In addition to Carrie Dawson, who marks the text's shift in emphasis from confession to testimony, reception figures prominently in a number of critics' work. Glen Lowry writes that "[i]n locating this text firmly within a history and geography of postwar colonialism, Ondaatje draws us into a space of "race" that forces us to deal with a series of difficult questions about the

politics of reading” (217). Lowry refers to Kyo Maclear’s *Beclouded Vision: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness*, to affirm that “one of the effects of the bombings as they have been represented in Japan and abroad has been to draw attention to the need to bear witness” (234). Hillger takes Lowry’s observation one step further when he asserts that through Almásy’s exploration of the desert and his encounter with tribes, “[s]peaking in Michel de Certeau’s terms, he [Ondaatje] is creating “*a text as witness of the other*” (29). Janis Haswell and Elaine Edwards note that characters in *The English Patient* “assume the functions of storyteller and audience” (125). Certainly for Haswell and Edwards, the recipient has an integral role in storytelling as “each character finds him/herself in a different field, because the patient recounts his stories differently, depending upon the specific trigger from his listeners” (125). Furthermore, Haswell and Edwards argue that the narrator of *The English Patient* has attributes of an oral storyteller thus the “[n]arrator needs readers to accomplish his goal as an oral storyteller. Without them as accomplices, his story is a monologue that ends with the telling. Involving readers in the storytelling act is a transformative gesture (60) in the sense that the telling moment is perpetuated within the listener” (141).

The text’s attention to readers and listeners extends beyond the world of the book and involves readers of *The English Patient*. The text places significance on the ability to read, and listen astutely. In *The English Patient* the patient is often a figure for reading. While characters attempt to coax the patient into talking about his identity, instead he often serves as the recipient of their stories. Stephen Scobie asserts that the anonymous identity of the patient turns him into the “perfect blank screen onto which the other characters can project their own devious passions” (96). However, the effectiveness of the patient’s receptivity of their narratives is questionable.

The patient's listening habits are poor, and tricky. Along with speech, reception is a part of the English language the text places under recovery.

The patient's hearing is damaged in the fire that injures his body. Although the narrator tells us "[t]hat summer the English patient wore his hearing aid so he was alive to everything in the house," the patient and characters play with the hearing aid, turning it up and down, so that characters and readers are never quite sure when he can hear or not. While Kip and the patient talk excitedly about their shared knowledge of Allied and enemy weaponry, in the middle of their conversation Kip realizes the patient's hearing aid is off: "*Is your hearing aid on? What? Turn it on –*" (89). While Hana reads to the patient, he "listened intently or not" (7). Characters turn down the patient's hearing aid when they want privacy. For instance, Kip and Hana want to talk to each other without being overheard by the patient so Kip turns the patient's hearing aid down while he is sleeping.

Further questioning the patient's ability to listen to stories of characters is the fuzziness of his state of consciousness due to his reliance on morphine. Additionally, he seems careless about keeping his hearing aid on while characters are speaking to him, and yet he diligently turns it all the way up while sleeping: "the Englishman woke at any sound, the hearing aid turned to full level while he slept" (113). As a result the reception of characters' stories is faulty, further demonstrating difficulties characters have narrating through spoken language in *The English Patient*. Both their abilities to verbally speak of their experiences and the reception of their narration is in peril.

In *The English Patient*, the English patient who becomes representative of the English language, demonstrates more generally the failure of the Western world to hear marginalized histories. Kyser, along with a few other critics, argue that *The English Patient* reveals unofficial,

personal stories and histories. Annick Hillger asserts that by “referring to itself as ‘an apocryphal story’, the text signals that it differs from the texts forming the canon of its literary tradition. Claiming to be ‘apocryphal’ the text even promises to unearth what has been elided by mainstream thought” (24). Vernon Provencal refers to the “Herodotus of *The English Patient*” as reflecting “Ondaatje’s Herodotus, in the sense of symbolizing his own view of history as constituting a complex dialectic constructed of a main narrative concerning nations at war supplemented with the personal histories of marginal figures” (140). For Amy Novak *The English Patient* “confronts the reader not just with the experience of personal trauma, but also with the trauma of European history—with the silenced voices erased from the narrative of the past” (206).

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak highlights poor listening habits that “silence” histories of marginalized groups. She points out that it is not the subaltern’s failure to speak, but the failure of authorities from the West to hear histories spoken in vocabularies outside Western epistemologies of knowledge that prevent marginalized histories from entering mainstream discourse. Spivak argues that attempts by authorities from the Western world to speak for subaltern figures in Western discourses often misinterpret and “silence” the subaltern’s own histories and voice. Accordingly, Spivak highlights the important role of listening and silence, as the task that she sets up for revisionist historians is to listen to and hear the silences of what the subaltern could not say through Western discourses: “The historian who tries to recover the past should sketch the ‘itinerary of the trace’ that the silenced subaltern has left, should mark where the subaltern was effaced, and should delineate the discourses that did the effacing” (Leitch 2196). Spivak asserts that silence has an important role in revising history: “Part of our unlearning project is to articulate our participation in that

formation— by *measuring* silences, if necessary—into the object of investigation” (2204).

Symbolized by the patient, the book places the process of listening as a part of the English language under restoration².

While the text makes the transmission of marginalized histories an important part of its narrative, it troubles their transmission through language. The book points out that naming can be an effective device in reclaiming lost histories. Hana makes sure to remember names of the many soldiers she takes care of who die before she gets to know them. Their names are the only remnants from the fleeting time Hana takes care of them: “Soldiers were coming in with just bits of their bodies, falling in love with me for an hour and then dying. It was important to remember their names” (83).

Kip reconnects with his history at the same time that he reclaims his full name. Kip loses his full name Kirpal Singh among the English soldiers he works with: “In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper, and the officer had exclaimed, “What’s this? Kipper grease?” and laughter surrounded him. He had no idea what a kipper was, but the young Sikh had thereby been translated into a salty English fish. Within a week, his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten” (87). At first Kip accepts his nickname: “he hadn’t minded this...which he preferred to the English habit of calling people by their surname” (87-88). However Kip reconnects with his history at the same time that he reclaims his full name. The atomic bomb’s explosion triggers Kip into reconnecting with his name and past: “In the tent, before the light evaporated, he had brought out the photograph of his family and gazed at it. His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here” (287).

While *The English Patient* demonstrates the power naming can have in the reclamation of stories and in rendering stories specific, the text largely troubles the effectiveness of naming in

² The process of restoration will be detailed in the next section: “Silence as Antidote”.

the telling of stories and histories. The strength of naming seems lost for the patient, representative of the English language. As an explorer, the patient initially relies on names to guide him through the desert, “When I was lost among them, unsure of where I was, all I needed was the name of a small ridge, a local custom, a cell of this historical animal, and the map of the world would slide into place” (19). However, increasingly, the patient expresses the futility of names and a desire to erase names, to unname. Most obviously, he witnesses barriers to understanding and communication names can provoke when his story of Katharine’s injury is unheard because he gives soldiers he comes upon in the desert his name rather than Clifton’s.

Furthermore, *The English Patient* depicts naming as constricting, in that it can signify the possession and ownership that is part of the process of colonization. Travellers in the patient’s group view the desert as a nameless place waiting to be claimed, they “wanted to leave their mark there. Small vanities in this plot of land...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 Baughan outdid him, having a type of sand dune named after him” (139). Rather than being used to tell stories, Western explorers use names to demarcate places in the desert with histories of their conquest. This act obscures the names and histories of desert tribes already in place.

The patient however, views the desert as a place that defies the definitions Westerners use to stake claims on it: “The desert could not be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East” (138-139). The shifting sands of the desert make for an unstable ground upon which to draw borders—linguistic and otherwise. Rather than naming, the patient expresses a desire to unname and erase the

demarcations of ownership: “Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert...I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from” (139). In his guise as the anonymous, nameless, patient, he seems to be one step closer to achieving the feat of erasing borders drawn by names.

Through his crash in the desert Almasi falls into an unnamed world. His previous wish to erase and to unname has seemingly succeeded. Either through choice or memory damage, his own name and history are erased. He remains unknown to the tribe who finds him, and is unable to identify them. At the Villa he holds onto his anonymity for as long as he can. Hana fits into the patient’s post-nominal world as she is initially only referred to by the pronoun “she” until Caravaggio appears.

Caravaggio names Hana and also instigates the naming of the patient as Almasi. Caravaggio’s background as an agent creating duplicitous identities and names as foils for spies during the war further contributes to the attribution of naming to Caravaggio. That the namer in the book is a thief signifies that the act of naming, and of taking possession, can be an act of appropriation. However, designating Caravaggio as the namer in *The English Patient* points also to the constructedness of the identifiers language creates. Caravaggio’s own name recalls the artist Michelangelo Caravaggio further pointing to the artistry and craftsmanship of naming.

While the text draws attention to the fluidity and potential strength of naming, the patient loses this positive aspect of language. Katharine attempts to re-awaken Almasi to the strength of naming. Prior to meeting Katharine, while Almasi relies on nominations he encounters in the desert to provide him with information that places him in the desert, he disdains the part of naming that lays claim to, and is a part of colonization. However even the patient’s strong stance against naming fails to shield him from the seduction of naming and ownership. An advocate of

words, Katharine views the act of naming as powerful and entices Almasy with naming: “Kiss me and call me by my name” (173). Almasy’s attraction and love for Katharine involves retracting his position opposing naming. Together, they name parts of Katharine’s body: “that small indentation we called the Bosphorous” (236). However, continuing its portrayal of the futility of naming, paradoxically perhaps because of the patient’s new fondness for names, he gives his surname as Katharine’s and this prevents soldiers from listening to his story of Katharine’s injury, and helps usher in her death. He thus reverts back to expressing a sense of the futility of names.

Further illustrating the diminished effectiveness of words in *The English Patient*, absent characters in the book are all associated with language. Katharine, Geoffrey Clifton and Madox are all dead characters that the book ties to language. Madox longs to “become as intimate as he could with words” and carefully charts the history of his travels and explorations in reports (243). Madox dies by committing suicide, and the narrator describes his death as a ceasing of words: “A great silence. Desert silence. Planeless silence” (242). Madox, a character who seeks to become as “intimate as possible with words” and to meticulously record the history of his expeditions in words, commits suicide, showing the futility and self-destructiveness of words in the book for writing of histories.

Geoffrey Clifton, characterized as the talker amongst the group of desert explorers, passes away through suicide, and additionally jeopardizes the lives of Katherine and Almasy in the plane crash that kills him. However even preceding the plane crash Clifton orchestrates, he endangers the group of explorers through his deception. His incessant talking masks his personal identity and history as a spy. The patient reveals that Clifton is a spy with British Intelligence sent to watch the groups’ activities in the desert. Clifton’s actions as a spy secretly collecting

information place him, as well as Katharine, and the group he surveys in danger. Thus the text portrays talking as misleading and hazardous.

The English Patient associates Katharine, who passes away due to injuries she sustains from the plane crash Clifton causes, with words. Reflecting the problematic state of language in *The English Patient*, Katharine is an absent central character who is dead, and whose ghost hovers around the Villa's occupants. Words are of central importance to Katharine: "She had always wanted words, she loved them, grew up on them. Words gave her clarity, brought reason, shape" (238). Married to Clifton, another talker in the text, Katharine's relationship with words is a more productive one than Clifton's. While the text ties Clifton's use of words to hazard and deceit, it links Katharine with the creative, profitable use of language. She uncovers fragments from *The Histories* to which Almasy fails to pay attention, and introduces him to a love of poetry.

Katharine's attempt to move away from Clifton and the destructive side of language Clifton represents is facilitated by silence. After their honeymoon, Katharine attempts to gain independence from her relationship with Clifton: "After that month in Cairo she was muted, read constantly, kept more to herself, as if something had occurred or she realized suddenly that wondrous thing about the human being, it can change. She did not have to remain a socialite who had married an adventurer. She was discovering herself" (230). Secondly, Katharine makes a move away from the destructive side of her relationship with words through her affair with Almasy, which seems to be a step towards leaving Clifton. However ultimately she leaves the patient and decides to stay with Clifton. The marriage of Katharine and Clifton couples the creative productive side of language represented by Katharine with its threatening, deceitful side, symbolized by Clifton. Although Katharine attempts to move away from Clifton and thus the

unproductive use of language, Clifton murders Katharine. As a result the destructive side of language is responsible for murdering the potentially creative, productive use of language in the text. Moreover, Katharine dies among the deceptive use of words; the narrator describes the Cave of Swimmers where she passes away, as being located among rumours. The last memory of Katharine's death the patient communicates is: "I carried Katharine Clifton into the desert, where there is the communal book of moonlight. We were among the rumour of wells. In the palace of winds" (261).

It is appropriate that Katharine dies among the imagery of "the rumour of wells," as in addition to associating Katharine with words, the text also links her with water. The narrator describes Katharine as a "woman who misses moisture" and is happiest among the "heavily watered" plum gardens in Groppi Park (153). The association of Katharine with both words and water is fitting as water imagery is prominent in the book and often serves as a figure for language. At the beginning of the text, as the patient listens to Hana read to him, he compares her words to water: "swallowing her words like water" (5). Waters appears as a figure for words during Hana's and Kip's "nights of no talk and nights of talk...during the verbal nights, they travel his country of five rivers" (270-271). Almásy recounts that to speak in the desert, "would be to fling more water into the earth" (231). He calls the words shielding the secret of his affair with Katharine a "well we helped dig together" (239).

Among the arid atmosphere of the desert in which *The English Patient* is set, water appears to be an invaluable resource with healing capabilities. However, even among the arid atmosphere of the desert, the precious resource of water is treacherous. Paradoxically, when the patient falls burning from the sky into the sands of the desert, his biggest fear is drowning: "When I came out of the air and crashed into the desert, into those troughs of yellow, all I kept

thinking was, I must build a raft. ... I must build a raft" (18). During Kip's battle at Sansepolcro "there was only bad water" (70). Constant rain during battles at Sansepolcro washes soldiers' supplies away, as well as soldiers tied to equipment. The troops find comfort in a place commemorating the slaughter of the vicious water beast of Greek mythology, as they sleep by the pulpit where "Hercules slays the Hydra" (70). While water in the desert should be a source of relief, as the patient travels with the tribe who saves him across the desert, he passes wells whose water is cursed and thus can't be trusted (22).

Silence as Antidote

While the text aligns verbal language with deception and threat, and characters in the text wound themselves on its sharp edges, at the Villa silence provides the rest, safety, and antidote to symptoms of the English patient's disease. Whereas the text equates words with deception, injury, danger, and treachery, the silence at the Villa slowly works to remedy characters' wounds. By tying imagery of remedy to silence, the text seeks to bring attention to silence as an important part of communication. After his crash in the desert a man largely identified by silence cares for the patient: "[h]e could sense the one silent man who always remained beside him, the flavour of his breath when he bent down to unwrap him every twenty-four hours at nightfall, to examine his skin in the dark... There was no colour during those nights. No speech or songs" (6). Perhaps because it recalls Patrick's quiet manner, the silence of Caravaggio's walk at the Villa consoles Hana: "There was no clatter of footsteps as he walked towards her, not a sound on the floor, and that surprised her, was somehow familiar and comforting to her, that he could approach this privacy of her and the English patient's without loudness" (30). For Hana to forgo speech, and instead take in the world offers respite: "To rest was to receive all aspects of

the world without judgment...Tenderness towards the unknown and anonymous, which was a tenderness to the self” (49).

After the destructive act of coercion that forced him to speak, the embalming comfort of silence at the military hospital in Rome makes Caravaggio feel safe: “That was how he felt safest. Revealing nothing. Whether they came at him with tenderness or subterfuge or knives. For more than four months he had not said a word...in near ruins when he was brought in” (27). For Caravaggio, after being forced to speak, being able to choose not to speak is both a source of freedom and consolation.

For Kip, silence is a space in-between total dissent and consent to authority of the Western world. Kip finds a space of freedom within the invisibility silence provides. De Certeau asserts that the walker’s illegibility provides freedom from surveillance of the imposed order of the city (“Walking in the City” 92-93). De Certeau points to a number of ways of using imposed structural orders that circumvent the power that these orders attempt to exert over the user. The ability to manoeuvre within established orders is dependent on gaps within its order:

One thus has the very relationship between spatial practices and the constructed order. The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve order...articulated by lacunae. Within the structured space of the text, they thus produce anti-texts, effects of dissimulation and escape, possibilities of moving into other landscapes” (“Walking in the City” 107).

Kip’s brothers’ public battles protesting Asia’s participation in “English wars” cause his imprisonment. Although Kip joins the army in a seemingly conciliatory gesture, he finds a way to operate within the official, external military order that is consistent with his desires through the invisibility gained by being silent: “Quite early on I had discovered the over-looked space

open to those of us with a silent life. I didn't argue with the policeman who said I couldn't cycle over a certain bridge or through a specific gate in the fort – I just stood there, still, until I was invisible, and then I went through" (200). Because Kip's brother is aware of Kip's ability to manoeuvre within the structural order of the militia he doesn't protest Kip's involvement in the war: "He would never go to war against me or what I did. He was confident that I had the trick of survival, of being able to hide in silent places" (201). The patient seconds: "In the desert the tools of survival are underground" (174).

The invisibility silence engenders also shields Caravaggio during the war. Hana describes him as having a "silence of movement" he retains in spite of the way he changes during the war. When he breaks into a hotel room to retrieve a photograph signalling his activities as a spy, he depends on the silence of his movement and the woman who finds him there in order to escape. He is described by the narrator as "Nothing more than a perfume in their midst. Printless foot. Shadowless" (38).

Silence further signals security out on the minefield as Kip takes apart explosives. Kip's job as a bomb dispatcher involves being carefully attuned to sounds of devices as just a tiny click can signal danger, or contain an important hint about its workings. Indeed Scobie argues that Kip's unearthing of mines comes to represent the unearthing of knowledge, history and stories: the book portrays the act of disclosure as one that needs to involve requisite amounts of silence as well as speech.

The English Patient demonstrates that lacunae within the telling of stories are an important part of their narration. The text asserts keeping secrets is a significant part of storytelling. Enacting what it advocates at the level of narrative at the level of the text, the text keeps its own secrets from the reader. While readers are told that Katharine returns from her

honeymoon with Clifton “altered,” and Almasy asks, “What altered her during their postponed honeymoon on the Nile estuary outside Cairo?” the answer is denied to both Almasy and Ondaatje’s readers. As Hana reads Almasy’s scrambled notes in *The Histories*, the name of the secret wind of the desert is withheld from both Hana and readers. Even the basis of Almasy’s and Katharine’s love affair is left hanging in the air; the narrator states: “[h]ow much she is in love with him or he with her we don’t know. Or how much it is a game of secrets” (127). And even Almasy, the great explorer and charter of the desert, is lost to many of the desert’s secrets. In the fortress of El Jof, Almasy and Bermann attempt to extract information from a man who holds knowledge of the desert’s mysteries to no avail, “We talk to him all day, all night, and he gives nothing away. The Senussi creed, their foremost doctrine, is still not to reveal the secrets of the desert to strangers” (140).

It is precisely this type of silence that the book commends, drawing attention to the difficult balance that must be struck between speech and silence, particularly the overlooked merits of silence in storytelling. An excerpt interwoven with Kip’s recounting of his travels as a bomb dispatcher commends the “*Heroic Age of bomb disposal...whose protagonists remained obscure, since their actions were kept from the public for reasons of security*” (184). In this excerpt the celebration of heroism is equated with the quiet celebration of heroic acts.

The book demonstrates the destructive consequences that both speaking and revealing too much can have. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Ondaatje states that while writing *The English Patient* he “began picking up a sense of the layers of history...That sense of history, of building overlaid with building, was central in my mind...it seems to have to do with unearthing, baring history” (454). The book illustrates both the importance of unearthing and uncovering histories, and of defusing potentially explosive conflict situations that could occur as a result of

this uncovering. In this way the book presents readers with a model for communicating histories that includes defusing, keeping silent, and even disappearing and walking away when faced with an exchange that threatens to break communication among its participants down completely.

Listening is an important part of the book's model for the narration of histories. The book distinguishes between failing to listen and overhearing, carefully crafting its model of effectual listening. In the text, characters are re-schooled in their listening and reading strategies. As the text reforms the reading practices of its character, the text's lessons also caution Ondaatje's readers. A form of listening and receiving, reading forms a part of the remedy to Hana's bruised relationship with language. The patient re-teaches Hana how to read in an attempt to heal her impaired speech; when he first meets her: "She would not talk about it. She was distant from everybody. The only way I could get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me" (253). An important part of the patient's reading lessons to Hana is to draw her attention to the importance of silent pauses while reading: "Read him slowly, dear girl, you must read Kipling slowly. Watch carefully where the commas fall so you can discover the natural pauses... Your eye is too quick and North American" (94).

The narrator compares Hana to the student, the "young boy" of Kipling's *Kim* and the patient to the teacher/master during their long nights of listening and reading (111). However, while the patient provides Hana with reading lessons conducive to healing her troubled relationship with language, Hana in turn guides the patient in his listening. Hana's acute abilities as a listener established in *In the Skin of a Lion* allow her to nurse this aspect of the patient's language. During Hana's nights of listening and reading with the patient, the narrator informs us that, "it was Hana who stayed with the old man, who guided him over the mountains to the sacred river" (111).

The text further draws attention to the importance of listening in its portrayal of Katharine's telling of the Gyges and Candaules myth. The story Katharine reads is directed at her husband, Geoffrey Clifton. She interrupts her reading of the story to ensure he is listening: "Are you listening, Geoffrey?" (232). The story demonstrates the significance of listening as it carries a meaning applicable to Clifton's relationship with Katharine. Candaules' insistent praising of his wife to Gyges mirrors Clifton's own bold praising of Katharine to Almasi. Gyges' betrayal and murder of Candaules parallels Katharine's affair with Almasi and Clifton's subsequent death. Katharine's story seems to have been carefully chosen. Had its meaning been understood by Clifton, it could have served as a warning regarding his own marriage with Katharine.

The scenario demonstrates both the grave consequences of not listening carefully enough and also of overhearing a story meant for someone else. While Katharine directs the story at Clifton, and he fails to pick up on its subtle clues, Almasi pays close attention to the story and uses it as an index to his life. He comments that perhaps Katharine's choice is coincidental, "perhaps there was no ulterior in the selection expect for themselves. It was simply a story that jarred her in its familiarity of situation," yet he admits that it was when he was listening to the story that "a path suddenly revealed itself in life" (233).

Katharine's death further depicts the significance and fatal consequences of not being heard. The English soldiers' refusal to believe Almasi's story of Katharine's injury and seclusion because he gives his own surname as Katharine's rather than Clifton's leads to her death. The tragic consequences of not listening to Almasi's story are highlighted during the recounting of Katharine's death by the narrator, Caravaggio and Almasi through their constant references to (not) listening: "English military jeeps surrounded him and took him away, not

listening to his story of the woman injured at Uweinat, just seventy miles away, listening in fact to nothing he said” (250). Caravaggio’s question to Almasy further emphasizes the pivotal role that soldiers’ refusal to hear Almasy’s story plays in Katharine’s death: “No one listened to you?” “No one listened,” the patient replies. As Almasy continues telling the story, he continues to lament, “she was just seventy miles away and they wouldn’t listen” (251).

The story of Katharine’s death demonstrates difficulties listening presents among the betrayals and suspicions of the war. Almasy believes his foreign name placed him under suspicion by the English soldiers: “They hauled me up into the truck again. I was just another possible second-rate spy. Just another international bastard” (251). He thinks that the familiarity, renown and fame of Clifton’s name would cause his story to be better received by soldiers: “the only name I should have yelled, dropped like a calling card into their hands, was Clifton’s” (251).

Among suspicions and betrayals of World War II, characters must learn to disclose and communicate potentially horrifying information with each other. Simpson observes that “Herodotus’ History...offers a stunning range of explosive possibilities” (221). Making disclosing both modern and ancient histories even more fraught with tension and vulnerability is the blurring of lines between victim and perpetrator among characters. Some characters have responsibility for atrocities committed in the war. For example, the patient’s status as traitor and/or ally is never made clear. And even if his identity as Almasy is accepted, as a potential Nazi spy, Almasy’s own status in the war is unstable and precarious. Indeed he holds himself responsible for spreading dangerous knowledge. During his time travelling through the desert as a captive with the Bedouin tribe who saves him, he translates knowledge about guns. Almasy wonders if his charting and collecting of knowledge about the desert for the Western world, as

well as his spreading of knowledge about weaponry, is responsible for turning it into a site of war: “This country—had I charted it and turned it into a place of war?” (260).

Because of his Indian background, Kip’s participation in the war is contentious due to asymmetrical power relations between Western and Eastern parts of the world. Kip’s participation in the narrative has been criticized. Vernon Provencal thinks that, “the very ambivalence of Herodotus in *The English Patient* compels us to engage in a meaningful dialogue with our imperial past—and our postimperial future” (140). Bill Fledderus asserts that, “Kip has bought into English/Western prerogatives and it takes the dropping of the atomic bomb before he truly asks and begins to answer the question. Before the bomb Kip’s complicity with the warring English empire is near total, as evident in his change of name, an Anglicization ...in many respects forced on him by the colonizing power” (248). Simpson writes that “[o]minously enough, he [Kip] embodies by fits and starts what Ondaatje has elsewhere punningly referred to as “TABULA ASIAE”—a scopic production and a scopic effect of persistent imperial blindness” (221). Novak argues that the “narrative economy of the novel replicates the relegation of the colonial world to a silent position. In the exchange of memories that pass amongst these characters, Kip remains primarily apart, a silent witness to the histories of other people” (218).

While I agree with Novak’s conclusion that the narrative replicates “the totalizing gesture of Western history that historically has prevented the speaking of non-Western histories,” the text also accords power and strength to silence, and highlights especially the importance of witnesses, listeners and receivers. The significance that the text accords to the crucial role that Kip plays by witnessing should not be overlooked. And even before the dropping of the bomb seems to prompt Kip to reject Western influences, he is aware of the precariousness of his position and negotiates it within a space of silence.

Keeping characters' uncertain subject positions in mind, their struggle communicating represents difficulties entailed in healing rifts between individuals and marginalized groups in society as well as catastrophes of war. The unearthing of previously unknown histories can give rise to difficult, yet necessary conversations. *The English Patient* portrays some of the complex dynamics and stresses on interpersonal relations that such revelations can rouse, and the hard task of keeping communication open.

As a way of keeping communication open, the text advocates silence as a necessary part of the conversation. Firstly, through its assertion that the silent process of hearing and listening is crucial for productive conversations. Fiumara underscores the importance of listening to dialogue by drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's work, for him, "anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without this kind of open to one another there is no genuine human relationship. Belonging together always means being able to listen to one another" (8). Fiumara points out that excessive speech is numbing for hearers, therefore the abandonment of verbal fillers can mediate more meaningful exchanges (101). Secondly, adding silences into potentially explosive histories gives interlocutors the space needed to hold difficult conversations in an open manner and prevent conflict that threatens to end discussion. Additionally, as I point out in my chapter on *The Silent Woman*, silence can deepen dialogue by acting as a "gap or distance in which germinal meanings can be developed" (Fiumara 101). The text presents silence as a way of facilitating meaningful discussions that occur through the writing and reception of potentially explosive histories.

The text offers Patrick, characterized as the "most un verbal of men" as a model for managing possible conflicts. Patrick, often acting as the third-person listener and observer in *In the Skin of a Lion*, is idealized in *The English Patient* for his ability to still quarrels before they

become unmanageable. Hana remembers Patrick as “having no feudal spirit around him...He was the least furious man she knew, hating argument” (90-91). Patrick’s way of defusing potentially explosive situations and topics is just “walking out of a room if someone spoke badly of Roosevelt or Tim Buck or praised certain Toronto mayors” (91). Dove imagery infuses the description of Patrick’s death, associating Patrick and his silence and method of avoiding conflict with peace. Hana describes Patrick dying in a dovecot, with doves flying over him (296).

Hana also subscribes to the method of leaving, rather than engaging in explosive conversations. Listening to Kip describe contentious relations between England and Eastern parts of the world, she decides to leave the room: “The feuds of the world. The feuds of the world. She walks into the daylight darkness of the Villa” (218). Hana sees Patrick’s skill in being able to defuse explosive situations, echoed in Kip. As Caravaggio, in a “belligerent morphine rush,” tries to goad Kip into an argument, Kip walks over to the window and “leaves” their conversation. Kip works in a bomb unit that subscribes to a line by Lieutenant Blackler that advises silence as a method of defusing, “If you are in a room with a problem don’t talk to it” (199). The bomb unit figures out how to defuse the new explosive device that kills Lord Suffolk by not touching the fuse at all: “In twelve days, working at the Directorate of Scientific Research, they came up with the answer. Ignore the fuze [sic] entirely. Ignore the first principle, which until then was “defuse the bomb” (199).

Of course, Kip knows the importance of treading carefully upon explosive ground through his job as a bomb dispatcher. Kip’s laying bare of mines hidden underground comes to symbolize the uncovering and unearthing of knowledge and history. Mark Simpson notes that “bombs come increasingly to resemble books” in *The English Patient* (224). He further asserts that in *The English Patient* the reader becomes archaeologist, sifting through the intertextual

fragments for history and knowledge. The history and knowledge contained in Herodotus' *Histories*, "offers a stunning range of explosive possibilities" (219).

Like bombs that Kip defuses on the minefield, some personal and historical revelations have the potential to shatter one's ability to relate to and connect with others if they are not handled carefully. However, in spite of Kip's best attempts at stilling explosions underneath the Villa's field, an even bigger explosion takes place. Scobie notes that in spite of characters' attempts to find shelter in a place away from brutalities of war, "the war is not over; and the observant reader will realize that the date of the action is moving inexorably closer to August 1945, to Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (95).

Demonstrating the close interrelation between collective and personal histories in the book, Kip explodes in anger at the same time as the atomic bomb. Furthering the parallel of Kip's explosion to the bomb, is Hana's comparison of Kip's beating heart to a bomb: "She enters his tent and puts an ear to his sleeping chest and listens to his beating heart, the way he will listen to a clock on a mine" (130). When the explosion finally occurs, it shatters communication amongst the Villa's occupants. Kip turns to the patient as a figure representing those responsible for dropping the bombs, and forces him to listen to news of bombings on the radio by pointing a gun at him. The threat of the gun is however counterproductive to inciting the patient's hearing. The explosion, conflict and threat of violence that ensues brings about a total breakdown in communication as the patient takes off his earphones refusing to further listen to news of bombings on the radio, and then removes his hearing aid, saying that he doesn't ever want to listen to anything anymore: "Do it, Kip. I don't want to hear any more" (285).

Furthermore, the verbal explosion shatters the thread of silence keeping occupants together at the Villa. After the explosion, Kip decides to leave the Villa and return to India.

Once Kip leaves, Hana goes outside to collect his knapsack, pack everything inside and “carried the bag through the trees, walked across the loggia and brought it into the house” (291).

Presumably the “it” refers to the knapsack, but at this point in the narrative Hana brings more than just the knapsack back into the Villa, she also brings the *loggia* back into the house as her own spell of silence is broken and she finally writes the letter to Clara detailing Patrick’s death.

Simpson points to the text’s many intertextual references (Herodotus’ *Histories*, Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Arthurian Romances) as constituting “legible space [that] remains resolutely precarious, untrustworthy, explosive and implosive by turns...they signal any number of epistemological crises involving place, space, history, transit, alterity, and its manifold confusions” (221). Secondary criticism of the book points out that the text aims to represent events “in excess of our frames of reference,” (Dawson 56) that it “takes [even] expert readers beyond the limits of their knowledge,” (Lowry 238), and that it seeks to “give meaning to that which escapes our ability to know and comprehend” (Novak 215). The next section details how silent forms of expression are able to represent complex aspects of our lives and history that lie outside of language.

Speaking Through Silent Mediums of Language

Among imagery of illness attached to language in the text, and its countering imagery of healing attached to silence, Ondaatje introduces silence as a crucial narrative strategy. Critical reception of *The English Patient* points out the book’s self-reflexive nature and its foregrounding of questions of narrative and storytelling. Kyser relates *The English Patient*’s prioritizing of storytelling to its predecessor, *In The Skin of a Lion* (893). In both works, through storytelling a “new way of seeing emerges” and it is this “vision that has a great deal to say about the

importance of stories and their tellers, and the ways in which they construct the world around us” (Kyser 894; 899). Kyser underlines the importance of storytelling with a Salman Rushdie quote: “redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it” (899).

In order to undertake the task of representing marginal figures, stories, histories, and knowledge, Ondaatje probes the construction of narrative. Vernon points out that in Ondaatje’s work “‘the textual narrative’ of history is often fictively reconfigured (141). Steven Totosy de Zepetnek asserts that *The English Patient* “succeeds in representing life—underlining its fullness, complicatedness, inexplicability, fragmentation, and subtextual richness, which cannot be represented by either traditional uses or a linear (fictional) narrative of historical ‘facts’” (142). In *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, Linda Hutcheon raises questions of narrative and specifically the analysis of new forms of storytelling and representation as a primary concern in Canadian writing: “there are ways of seeing the world, and of writing in and about it, that may be different from our own ways—whatever they might be—and valuable because of that difference” (5).

In addition to offering characters respite and an antidote to wounds language enacts, *The English Patient* draws attention to silence as an important narrative technique that transcends failures of language. Words are infused with a sense of inadequacy in *The English Patient*, insufficient in detailing important life events of love and death. The patient deems words insufficient in describing his love for Katharine: “The fear of describing her presence as I wrote caused me to burn down all sentiment, all rhetoric of love” (241). Hana is appalled by speeches given over the bodies of dying soldiers: “I could never believe in all those services they gave for their dead. Their vulgar rhetoric. How dare they!” (84). In spite of the breakdown of speech in

the book, the body, nonverbal senses, choreography and blank space transcend destructive aspects of language and allow characters to continue narrating important life events.

Rather than relying on speech, shown to be faulty in the book, characters use the body to communicate. Katharine and Almasi connect upon being able to read subtleties and nuances of each other's body language. While Clifton fails to pay attention to how silence signals Katharine's altered state after their honeymoon, Almasi questions her sudden silence (230). Clifton misses Katharine's and Almasi's frustration due to his laudatory speeches on Katharine's beauty, however they notice their shared reaction: "Clifton celebrated the beauty of her arms, the thin lines of her ankles. He described witnessing her swim... To all that, I didn't say a word. I would look up sometimes as he spoke and catch her glance, witnessing my unspoken exasperation, and then her demure smile" (230). Catching these slight subtleties among each other is much more expressive than Clifton's loaded speeches. As Almasi writes his monograph, *Recentes Explorations dans le Desert Libyque* it is Katharine's body that etches itself onto the page: "I was unable to remove her body from the page" (235).

While Caravaggio knows the trickiness of words as he uses them to create deceitful double agents during the war, he trusts messages communicated outside language. He is caught attempting to steal back film that gives away his identity as a spy, by a woman who unexpectedly comes back to the hotel room where the film is stored. The woman's silence informs him that she will not reveal his presence in the room to her lover. He mimes having his throat cut to her to communicate the danger he is in. He waits to see if she will give him away to her lover but the woman's silence lets him know that she will hide him: "[Caravaggio] hears the silence of the woman—no whisper—hears her thinking...He hears a moan of pleasure now from her towards her lover, and he is aware it is her agreement with him. No words, no hint of irony, just a

contract with him, the morse of understanding, so he knows he can now move safely to the veranda and drop out into the night” (37). The silence in this scene offers him invisibility needed to safely leave the room.

While characters in the Villa live largely without *loggia*, they continue communicating with each other and with others through the use of their bodies. Kip remembers that when Hana comes out onto the minefield to help him diffuse an extremely dangerous bomb, her potentially “last communication had been the finger to her lips” (113). When Caravaggio finds Kip hidden away in a corner of the Villa disarming a bomb, Kip maintains the silence he needs to work in by silently warning Caravaggio that he should leave: “the young soldier, his eyes not leaving his focus, put out his palm and snapped his fingers, halting Caravaggio in his entrance, a warning to leave the room for safety as he unthreaded and cut a fuze [sic] wire he had traced to that corner” (74). Although during his stay in the military hospital Caravaggio shuts himself off from discourse, he continues to communicate using his body by “signals and grimaces, now and then a grin” (27).

Dance and choreography in the book demonstrate how ordering events by the body’s movement serves as a form of communication. The book details antiphonal dance customs Almasy encounters in his travels through the desert demonstrating the ability for dance to be responsive and communicative. The patient even compares the dancing of a boy he encounters to a form of communication, sound itself: “And the pure beauty of an innocent dancing boy, like sound from a boy chorister, which he remembered as the purest of sounds, the clearest river water, the most transparent depth of the sea” (22). The book juxtaposes Madox, one of the absent characters in the book closely affiliated with words, who steers clear of dancing: “he was a man who never entered those Cairo dance halls with me...He moved with a slow gait. I never

saw him dance” with the patient’s fondness for dance (243). Accordingly Almasy claims he “was the man who fell in love while dancing” (242). Almasy’s out-of-control dancing expresses turmoil he feels over Madox’s death as well as in his relationship with Katharine: “Almasy was drunk and his dancing seemed to the others a brutal series of movements. In those days he and she did not seem to be getting on well. He swung her from side to side as if she were some anonymous doll, and smothered with drink his grief at Madox’s leaving” (244). Almasy treasures memories of his nights of dancing: “When I went back into the desert, I took with me the evenings of dancing to the 78 of ‘Souvenirs’ in the bars, the women pacing like greyhounds, leaning against you” (243).

Further emphasizing the importance of timing and movement to storytelling is the choreography metaphor running throughout *The English Patient*. Military strategies employed during the war are referred to as choreography by the narrator: “The Germans in the Italian campaign had choreographed one of the most brilliant and terrible retreats in history” (274). Almasy believes his relationship with Katharine is dictated by the coordination of timing and movement: “In the desert you have time to look everywhere, to theorize on the choreography of all things around you...For him all relationships fell into patterns. You fell into propinquity or distance” (150). Provencal notes that propinquity ties together personal and collective histories: “Propinquity, or coincidental proximity, appears here as an existential principle of historical patterning underlying the ‘choreography of history’. Given its Herodotean context, however, it suggests a deeper, fatal connection between personal histories and the ‘sweep of history,’ ‘all cradled within the text of Herodotus’” (148).

The occupants of the Villa are especially attentive to propinquity as the incorrect coordination of movement can set off bombs hardwired in rooms and floors underneath. Kip is especially adept at reading this choreography: “He found out he had the skill of the three—dimensional gaze, the rogue gaze that could look at an object or page of information and realign it, see all the false descants...Any room was full of such choreography (111). Whereas Simpson argues that Kip embodies “a scopic effect of persistent imperial blindness” the book actually points out that Kip’s vision is better than that of other characters.

Choreography persists in tying together Kip and Hana through an unspoken connection at the end of the book. Kip is unresponsive to many letters Hana writes to him after he leaves. Whereas this can be seen as a rejection of his relationship with Hana, their bond in the Villa is largely held together by silence. The silent act of synchronicity at the end of the book between Hana knocking a glass off a table and Kip catching a piece of silverware falling off an edge holds their bond together in a stronger way than the move to a linguistic connection in the form of letters could have. Madox’s and the patient’s affection for each other also remains unspoken. Among the linguistic traps and failure of words in the book, these unspoken connections are stronger than ones forged by words.

While language is ammunitive for Kip, such that it often renders him an uncomfortable listener, he is comfortable reading signs created by the body. He seeks out voiceless bodies of statues to sleep beside, one of the few objects offering him respite: “The sapper has told her about statues he came across during the fighting, how he had slept beside one who was a grieving angle, half male, half female, that he had found beautiful. He had lain back, looking at the body, and for the first time during the war felt at peace” (90). Falling asleep beside Hana, Kip imagines her body to be a statue: “It was essential to remain still, the way he had relied on

statues during those months when they moved up the coast fighting... He had given his trust only to this race of stones” (103-104). Even though their lack of voice and movement evokes a perfect silence, Kip views the still gesture of statues as expressive, trusting himself to relax “in the midst of this mime of conversation” (280).

This trust in senses as opposed to words is cultivated in Kip’s childhood. The greatest sense of security and love he receives is from his *ayah*. Rather than the ritual of telling bedtime stories to children to help them fall asleep, she lulls Kip to sleep by reassuring him with a physical gesture: “All comfort and peace during childhood, Kip remembered, had come from her, never from the mother he loved or from his brother or father, whom he played with. When he was scared or unable to sleep it was the *ayah* who recognized his lack, who would ease him into sleep with her hand on his small thin back” (226). The one time Kip reciprocates comfort and care to the *ayah* it is through the single, silent gesture of scratching her back: “Only once did he feel he had given her back any comfort...When her mother died he had crept into her room and held her suddenly old body. In silence he lay beside her mourning...his nine-year-old hands on her shoulders, and when she was finally still, just now and then a shudder, he began to scratch her through the sari, then pulled it aside and scratched her skin” (225).

The book presents alternative modes of navigating without using language or words. Because the Villa lacks electricity and candles, its occupants use the body’s touch to navigate through its darkness: “But the corridors and other bed-rooms hung in darkness, as if in a buried city. They became used to walking in darkness, hands out, touching the walls on either side with their fingertips” (220). As a thief who hides and moves in the darkness of rooms, Caravaggio is adept at using his body to feel his way around a room. Kip similarly must use his hands to feel out the weight and pulse of ticking bombs. Kip’s trust in reading physical expressions of mouths

rather than words they speak, juxtaposes speech with the body, to suggest the body is more telling: “When someone speaks he looks at a mouth...Mouths reveal insecurity or smugness or any other point on the spectrum of character. For him they are the most intricate aspect of faces. He’s never sure what an eye reveals. But he can read how mouths darken into callousness, suggest tenderness” (219).

In *The English Patient*, markings on bodies serve as indexes to characters’ histories. The body is used to write history in *The English Patient*. However, the regulation of bodies by Western authorities shows that only certain bodies are deemed admissible into Western structures and those authorities determine the strata of the system they will occupy. Kip details how yellow chalk used to mark bombs also served to demarcate soldiers’ bodies with information serving as the basis for their rejection or placement within the military: “A doctor cleared or rejected our bodies with his instruments...The coded results written onto our skin with yellow chalk...Our weight, age, district, standard of education, dental condition and what unit we were best suited for” (200). The approval of Kip’s body by military authorities determines him to be a fit subject for entrance into the bomb squad, and also grants him a place from which to tell his history in *The English Patient*.

Kip occupies a precarious position where he is subject to Western structures of power, however his entrance into these structures provides visibility to his own history as well as those of his brother. This maintains a tension between Kip’s desire for both visibility and invisibility, as visibility allows sharing his family’s story, while invisibility grants him freedom from the strictures of Western systems. For this reason Kip states that he does not mind the regulation of his body by military authorities. Kip’s public adherence to regulations grants him access to his place in the Western world that provides the possibility of telling his story in a place where it can

be received by Westerners: “I did not feel insulted by this.... It didn’t stop me doing whatever I wished or doing things the way I wanted to” (200). His ability to manoeuvre within silent, invisible places allows him to subvert the order he is working within.

While Almásy condemns commemorating one’s death by imprinting one’s name on a landmark, he celebrates marking one’s body with earth. He believes that imprints of earth and one’s life on the body allow it to become a collective historical artefact, rather than the singular signalling of ownership naming leaves behind. Katharine’s body, awash with markings of the cave where she dies, is held up as a memorial of her death: “When I turned her around, her whole body was covered in bright pigment. Herbs and stones and light and the ash of acacia to make her eternal...Such glory of this country she enters now and becomes part of” (261).

Almásy remarks that he wants his body to be visibly shaped by places and events of his life upon his death: “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” (261). Whereas naming demarcates a place, shaping a body by one’s environment and encounters involves a mutual, fluid relation between the body and its experiences where the body both acts on the environment and is acted upon. During Caravaggio’s silent sojourn at the military hospital, scars on his body speak of his war glory: “There was the cluster of known scars on him...A celebrity, after all, wanting silence. A war hero” (27).

The book draws attention to the role of all senses in the telling of stories, rejecting it as solely a linguistic act. Sight and speech are often taken as dominant senses in storytelling, however the patient’s incapacitated speech and sight cause him to rely on senses of smell and touch in knowing, experiencing and relating the world. While the patient is cared for by the

Bedouin tribe who save him his face is covered so he can not see or talk and thus relies on scent as a guide in understanding the world around him. The senses of smell and touch are presented as having healing capabilities to the patient's "illness". The patient knows the Bedouin man who takes care of him by the smells of ointments he places on his skin: "With the uncorking of each tiny bottle the perfumes fell out. There was an odour of the sea. The smell of rust. Indigo. Ink. River-mud arrow-wood formaldehyde paraffin ether. The tide of airs chaotic. There were screams of camels in the distance as they picked up the scents" (10). This combination of smell and touch, as the man rubs ointments unto the patient's body nurse the patient's fallibilities.

Thus it is not only Hana's superior listening skills that make her a fitting nurse to the patient's injuries, but also her ability to understand scents as a hint of past experiences. Hana's father teaches her how to discern the history of a dog's wanderings through the scent underneath his paws: "She would pretend disgust, but the dog's paw *was* a wonder: the smell of it never suggested dirt. It's a cathedral! Her father had said, so-and-so's garden, that field of grasses, a walk through cyclamen—a concentration of hints of all the paths the animal had taken during the day" (8).

In addition to highlighting nonverbal forms of communication within the text such as the body, senses, and choreography in transmitting stories, history and knowledge, the book employs blank spaces of the text providing information to readers of Ondaatje's text. Important temporal and spatial shifts are indicated by blank spaces in the book. Ondaatje's readers must learn to pay attention to blank spaces on the page in order to orient themselves within its narration. This form of silence on the page, blank space, helps readers map histories. The narration shifts from the patient's travels with the Bedouin among Villages in the desert to Hana in the Villa through a blank patch on the page:

He brings it over to the white translator of guns and passes it into his hands. In the desert you celebrate nothing but water.

She stands over the sink, gripping it, looking at the stucco wall. She has removed all mirrors and stacked them away in an empty room (23).

The narration of night passing into day in the Villa occurs through a patch of blank space on the page:

The man named Caravaggio pushes open all the windows in the room so he can hear the noises of the night...The moon is on him like skin, a sheaf of water...He looks over where they are in Italy.

In the morning by the fountain they talk tentatively (31-32).

Continuing its representation of narration as an act that includes silences, Hana's reading of *The Histories* to the patient is full of gaps as he dozes off: "So the books for the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by

bombing had fallen away from a mural at night” (7). She takes no care to explain or retract missing sections of story: “She was not concerned about the Englishman as far as the gaps in plot were concerned. She gave no summary of the missing chapters. She simply brought out a book and said “page ninety-six” or “page one hundred and eleven.” That was the only locator” (8). The book also uses ellipses that trail off pointing to stories readers are missing out on: “Let me tell you about plums, he says. When I was a boy...” (46).

Restructuring Language in *The English Patient* Through Silence

The book’s imagery of a language falling apart without silence, aims to show that silence is an important part of communicating. The text’s use of silent mediums of expression shows that silence can act as a narrative device. By doing so the text aims to fuse the verbal and nonverbal together in the model of communication it presents. In Julia Kristeva’s conception of the semiotic and the symbolic, the semiotic is made up of pre-verbal communication before it is transformed into the symbolic order of language. The semiotic therefore constantly challenges the symbolic, and holds potential for changing the symbolic order of language. The book employs the semiotic in its narration in order to draw attention to the fluid and changing nature of language. This shows its potential to incorporate silence into acts of storytelling.

The bird motif running throughout the book draws attention to the ways that sounds can communicate meaning in storytelling. Characters in the text are invested with bird-like qualities. Hana thinks of Kip as a hybrid bird: “She sings and hums. She thinks him, in this tent’s darkness, to be half-bird—a quality of feather within him, the cold iron at his wrist” (270). She feeds the English patient as if he was a bird, placing chewed food from her mouth into his: “As the Englishman wakes she bends over his body and places a third of the plum into his mouth. His open mouth holds it, like water, the jaw not moving” (45). The narrator compares

both himself and Hana to birds: “She is a woman I don’t know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life” (301). The Villa itself is described as an “open aviary” therefore transforming all of its occupants into birds (13).

Music in the book is appreciated for sounds it makes rather than for its words.

Caravaggio relates that the meaning of Hana’s singing of *Alonson fon!* in a restaurant on Danforth Avenue came from nonverbal aspects of her singing: “Half the people there didn’t know what the hell you were singing, and maybe you didn’t know what the exact words meant, but you knew what the song was about” (53). Her singing of the Marseillaise changes because of experiences she has during the war: “She was singing it as if it was something scarred, as if one couldn’t ever again bring all the hope of the song together. It has been altered by the five years leading to this night of her twenty-first birthday in the forty-fifth year of the twentieth century” (269). While the song’s words remain the same, the effect and meaning carried in Hana’s voice come from nonverbal intonations of her singing. Both Hana and Kip appreciate music, and are often depicted humming. Caravaggio “grumbles at the sapper’s continuous humming of Western songs he has learned for himself in the last three years of the war...He is always humming or whistling” (73-74).

Kip holds his personal experiences and memories in silence, and the loud booming of music while he works serves to help him forget these experiences: “Later, when there was a whole personal history of events and moments in his mind, he would need something equivalent to white sound to burn or bury everything while he thought of the problems in front of him. The radio or crystal set and its loud band music would come later, a tarpaulin to hold the rain of real life away from him” (194). Yet even music with its emphasis on nonverbal intonations is unable to hold that which is most intimate to Kip. Even the outburst of instrumental music that breaks

the Villa's silence is figured dangerously in the book as Kip rushes into the Villa when he hears Hana playing the piano for fear that it is wired with a bomb.

It is this quality of language—the semiotic with its potential for challenging and changing the symbolic order already stamped out with words—that the patient searches for in the desert, among its rumours, secrets and wells. The lost oasis Almasy searches for in the desert, Zerzura, is described as “The Oasis of Little Birds,” and a city “white as a dove” (136). The bird imagery evoked in the description of the Zerzura oasis points to his search for the semiotic, pre-verbal kinesis as haven. It is in the course of his search for Zerzura that Almasy instead comes upon Clifton and Katharine, both figures associated with the symbolic order of words and speech. Almasy's involvement with Katharine and Clifton—the latter of whom was supposed to aid him in uncovering Zerzura—instead bring him into a closer relationship with words. Clifton—associated with the circuitous, deceptive, and vain use of words not only fails to aid Almasy in his search for Zerzura, but also instigates the sequence of events leading to the patient's incapacitation.

The English Patient however draws attention to silent, pre-verbal processes of language in order to correct its ailments and restructure it. By working silences into the process of telling stories and histories in *The English Patient*, the book fosters a narration that is more inclusive of life experiences and histories the English language obscures. Overlaid with layers of personal histories that intertwine with and help form the collective history of World War II, *The English Patient's* characters and readers face the task of sifting through and piecing together its fragmented historical narratives. Making the task even more difficult for readers is the book's problematization of the oral and written transmission of histories. The book defamiliarizes the process of writing and reading history through verbal language, relying instead on silent

processes of listening, the body, senses, choreography, blank space and ellipses to remedy the marginalization of histories and life experiences falling outside the patient's grasp.

Conclusion

50 years ago George Steiner raises a significant question for the study of literature: “[a]re we passing out of an historical era of verbal primacy, out of the classic period of literate expression—into a phase of decayed language, of ‘post-linguistic’ forms and, perhaps of partial silence?” (13). Steiner asserts that after the seventeenth century language “no longer articulates, or is relevant to, all major modes of action, thought, and sensibility” (24). This “awareness of the gap between the new sense of psychological reality and the old forms of rhetorical and poetic statement” gave rise to a “crisis of poetic means” beginning in the later nineteenth century (Steiner 27). My thesis revisits Steiner’s question through my analysis of the role of silence in the works of Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient* and Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman*. All three works present readers with narratives that suspend the power and effectiveness of verbal language. *The Silent Woman* and *The English Patient* draw on tropes of infection, burglary, and point to rumours, deception, appropriation as factors that incapacitate verbal language in the texts. *In the Skin of a Lion* dramatizes a community of new Canadians without access to English, therefore problematizing the transmission of their histories and experiences verbally.

The texts’ suspension of the effectiveness and strength of verbal language challenges storytellers within the three texts and readers of the text to use and encounter new forms of storytelling based on silent mediums of expression. These three works point out the limits of verbal communication in the transmission of stories, histories and knowledge. However, the texts’ awareness of verbal limits serves as an impetus to devise forms of telling that overcome the challenges rumours, appropriation, deception, pose to communication. The three texts’ signposting of and employment of nonverbal means of communication such as ellipses, blank

space, body language, gaps and listening to narrate push the boundaries of the realities, stories, and histories that can be transmitted through writing.

By presenting readers with silent mediums of expression within a written form, the texts tell their stories within a hybrid, or multi-linguistic format that draws on both verbal and nonverbal means of communication. This merging of nonverbal forms of communication within a written form, has the potential to restructure language in such a way that histories, stories, and realities outside of verbal language are translated into written forms. Steiner points out that “wherever literary structure strives toward new potentialities, wherever the old categories are challenged by genuine compulsion, the writer will reach out to one of the other principal grammars of human perception—art, music, or more recently, mathematics” (87). Steiner states that “[w]hen picture and word and come together they re-group each other in a dynamic suggestion of new meanings and new relations” (86). This thesis affirms that similarly, the merging of word and silence, forms of nonverbal mediums of expression like body language, gaps, and lacunae, ellipses, restructure and open language to the possibilities of what can be represented through writing.

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