We Are Text:
Reading, Dwelling and Narrative Identity in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and *Divisadero*

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Introduction:

The first two parts of this essay are united by a guiding concern about the nature of dwelling in what might loosely be called the postmodern world. By “dwelling” I mean our mode of being in the world, or the basic structure of our existence. Through an implicit comparison of the characters Hana and Anna in Michael Ondaatje’s novels *The English Patient* and *Divisadero*, I seek to outline and inform what I have come to see as a unique continuity of themes between these two characters and the novels they appear in (ignoring for the purposes of this present essay Hana’s adolescent presence in Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*). Situated at the end of World War Two, *The English Patient* raises questions about the status of human dwelling that signal the dawning of a new age. The central question of part one of this essay, entitled “A Home For Hana?: Reading and the Crisis of Dwelling at the Villa San Girolamo,” is where, in the face of the breakdown of the traditional structures of dwelling, as defined by Robert Harrison, is Hana to find a permanent dwelling place? Implicit in this question is a correlation between modernity and homelessness that is explicitly raised at the end of part one. Following an examination of the role of reading in helping Hana recover from her madness (a.k.a. her crisis of dwelling)—a recovery that might be thought of as a coming to terms with her essential homelessness—I raise the question via Harrison whether “something like the housing of modern homelessness is conceivable?” (Harrison 37). As the status of dwelling and Hana’s search for a “home” are left ambiguous at the end of *The English Patient*, a response to this question initiates a shift in focus to *Divisadero*, where the character and narrator Anna provides the means by which a postmodern response to the crisis of dwelling can be explored.
The second part of this essay, “I Come From Divisadero Street’: Narrative Identity in *Divisadero,*” begins by unpacking a quotation from Nietzsche that the narrator Anna offers as part of an explanation of how she approaches her work as a writer: “‘We have art,’ Nietzsche said, ‘so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth’” (1). To summarize in brief a much larger discussion, in *The Gay Science,* Nietzsche suggests that art plays a pivotal role as a counterbalance to the disorienting truths revealed through modern science, and that art and creativity are needed to provide the illusions of structure, without which human beings cannot flourish and are driven to “nausea and suicide” (*The Gay Science* 107). Nietzsche describes this activity of imposing form on ourselves and the world as “finishing off the poem”—a description that leads to an exploration of the concept of narrative identity as I see it modeled in *Divisadero.* Unlike more traditional conceptions of identity, narrative identity is not a stable, fixed and determinate model, for narratives are open to a multitude of readings and revisions. Anna’s statement, “[h]ow we are almost nothing” (23), recognizes the fragility of identity and the larger text of *Divisadero* suggests that we are always “barely” identifiable with ourselves, and that our basic construction of narrative identities—conceptions of ourselves established and reinforced through various narrative performances—functions both as a witness to the looming threat of destruction and a means of survival.

In part three, “Reading as Incorporation: The Violence of Intertextuality,” I begin by comparing two modes of writing: Anna’s approach to writing the biography of the writer Lucien Segura and the reductive executions of literary criticism that both Anna and Segura identify as distasteful. The second movement in part three is an engagement with Alice Brittan’s essay, “War and The Book,” which sets in opposition two kinds of writers evidenced in *The English Patient:* the diarist—embodied by Almásy and Hana, both of
whom “[record] private experience by hand[writing]” in and over printed texts—and the
cryptographer, who “learns to embed messages of national importance in printed texts”
(Brittan 202). What is crucial to pick up on here is there is no nonviolent position in either
of these sets of oppositions, which are as much about opposing modes of reading as they
are about writing. Divisadero and The English Patient suggest that reading—whether it be
studious, curious, or otherwise escapist in nature—is a vital act of incorporation, a political
act of consumption wherein words become flesh and the stories in books come into
confrontation with the texts of our selves in an explosion of intertextuality.

“‘Read to Me’: A Coda,” the fourth and concluding part of this essay, is an attempt
to bring together the various analyses of reading practices from the first three parts. I begin
by outlining two different ways of thinking about the relationship between speaking and
writing—one which holds speech as anterior and superior to writing, which it sees as a
secondary system of representation, and the other which views speech as being a form of
writing itself operating within the play of difference and deferral that is language as such. I
then suggest that the two novels in question propose a third position that contains elements
of both the previous two. This position is captured in key instances in both The English
Patient and Divisadero of the written word being read out loud in a communal setting. In
view of Lucien and Marie-Neige’s and Hana and the English patient’s practice of reading
out loud to each other, I conclude that it is through the vocalization of the written text that
the structure of narrative identity is performed par-excellence, because for the duration of
such a vocalization I (and the one I am reading to) experience myself as text.
Part I.

A Home for Hana?: Reading and the Crisis of Dwelling at the Villa San Girolamo

The opening chapter of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, entitled “The Villa” (1), establishes a metaphorical relationship between the battered psyche of Hana, the shell-shocked nurse who has remained behind with her English patient, and the embattled Villa San Girolamo. Prior to the war that ravaged the Italian countryside in the early 1940’s, the villa had been a nunnery before becoming “the last stronghold of the German army” (12). As the German forces were pushed into retreat, the Allies had converted the villa into a hospital, but the building, severely damaged by shelling and meticulously mined by the retreating German soldiers, was soon abandoned for “a safer location in the south” (13). With its roof largely destroyed and many of its walls “wound[ed]” or razed by mortar-shells (11), the villa had become unnaturally porous, the distinction between natural and domestic space blurred, the relationship between inside and outside space more complicated, such that rain and lightning poured into rooms, leaves gathered in corners and “doors opened into landscape” (13). With regard to Hana, the narration is explicit about her condition, “She was twenty years old and mad” (13). Overwhelmed by an endless surge of deaths, she had retreated into herself, no longer able to abide by the rules and obligations of society (14), her capacity for participation in social relationships shattered by her inability to structure and communicate her experience of loss (84-85).

It is within this framework of a connection between Hana’s shell-shocked psyche and the bombed-out villa that the first chapter of Ondaatje’s novel presents a succinct, four
line scene that creates an image that this essay suggests is emblematic of one of the novel’s most intriguing explorations, namely, the relationship between reading and dwelling:

The staircase had lost its lower steps during the fire that was set before the soldiers left. She had gone into the library, removed twenty books and nailed them to the floor and then onto each other, in this way rebuilding the two lowest steps. (13)

While the use of books in the above passage is certainly unusual, if not somewhat irreverent, interpreted within the metaphorical framework established above, Hana’s use of books in rebuilding the villa—in making it more habitable—suggests to the reader that books are to play a pivotal role in helping Hana recover her sanity. For now, it suffices to point out that scenes related to Hana’s reading occur on nine of the twenty pages of the first chapter—most of the other pages dealing with the Englishman’s experiences with the Bedouin who rescued him in the desert. The nature of Hana’s reading practices and relationship with books will be examined in more detail later. First, the essential features of Hana’s dwelling and human dwelling in general need to be defined.

In “What is a House?” (37), the third chapter of The Dominion of the Dead, Robert Harrison delves into the relationship between dwellings, dwellers and reading. Beginning with the “anthropological fact” that “human beings housed their dead before they housed themselves” (38), Harrison defines a house as a space that mediates “the closure of the tomb and the openness of nature” (39):

Thanks to its windows, yet thanks also to its enclosure, a house differentiates the inside from the outside space in such a way that, in and through such differentiation, it creates a relation between interior and exterior whose dynamic field of interpenetration the dwellers inhabit. (39)
What Harrison is suggesting here is that the human mode of being in the world is enabled by the successful mediation of our essential human interiority and the exteriority of nature. There is a delicate balance between our inside and outside worlds that our houses help to establish and sustain. One can see, from this perspective, how fitting it is that it is in the chapter “In Near Ruins” that Ondaatje’s narrator remarks, “[t]here seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth. To Hana the wild gardens were like further rooms” (43). This loss of demarcation signals the crisis at the centre of the novel: the crisis of human dwelling.

Before we can establish the central role that books and reading play in housing, that is, providing for and preserving the fragile balance between inside and outside, we must trace, through Harrison, the nature of this essential human interiority and the way it informs the basic structure of both the ancient and the modern house. As already mentioned, the first humans to be housed were the dead. Harrison restates the thesis of Fustel de Coulanges, suggesting that “the ancient house...had its origins in ancestor worship” (38). Thus, the ancient Greek and Roman house “typically featured an altar on which burned the sacred fire of the so-called lares...[the] ancestral spirits associated with the hearth” (38). Though our modern definition of a house is no longer founded upon the centrality of the ancestral altar as such, Harrison argues that

The “in” that the dead abide in—whether it be in the earth, in our memory...in our words, in our books...in our prayers, in our thoughts—this “in” of the dead’s indwelling defines the human interiority which our houses build walls around and render inhabitable. The domestic interior is thus in some fundamental sense mortuary, inhabited not only by the dead but also
by the unborn in their projective potentiality. It is because we are the 
ligature between the dead and the unborn—and not because we are 
vulnerable to the elements and predators—that we humans require 
housing...A house is a place of insideness in the openness of nature where 
the dead, through the care of the living, perpetuate their afterlives and 
promote the interests of the unborn. (40)

But where, in the absence of the ancestral altar, are human beings to locate this latent 
relationship with the lares that defines their essential interiority? Harrison has already 
imintimated the answer, as has the theme of this essay, namely, in books. For where more 
intensely than in books does modern humanity have access to the historic and imaginative 
worlds of time past? Or to change the perspective, where more powerfully than in books 
do the dead perpetuate their afterlives and extend their voices into the worlds of the living? 
Indeed, Harrison states that “[i]f nothing else, a [modern] house is a place to keep books 
in. Books require storage places because they themselves store time. They are places where 
the past comes to meet us from out of the future, *provided we learn the art of reading*” (43, 
my emphasis). This last phrase regarding the art of reading is the crux of the exploration at 
hand. But we must dwell (in the older sense of *delay*) on the previous points a short time 
longer.

Returning to Hana and the crisis of dwelling at the Villa San Girolamo, further 
insight can now be gleaned into the nature of her crisis. Hana’s crisis can be described in 
terms of her inability to function as the mediating, life-perpetuating ligature between the 
dead and the unborn:

I wanted to go home and there was no one at home. And I was sick of 
Europe...I courted one man and he died and the child died. I mean, the
child didn’t just die, I was the one who destroyed it. After that I stepped so far back no one could get near me. Not with talk of snobs. Not with anyone’s death. (85)

Overwhelmed by the carnival of death swirling around her, Hana kills her unborn child. The unborn child’s death is symbolic of Hana’s inability to imagine a future for herself, after which she “step[s] so far back” into herself that “no one”—not “anyone’s death”—“could get near” her (85). Returning to the passage already quoted above that discusses the loss of demarcation between house and landscape at the villa, just how far inward Hana retreats can now be fully grasped. While Hana’s “furious passion” (43) for gardening appears on the surface to suggest that Hana’s madness is comprised of a radical openness to nature, in fact the passage confirms that Hana has “stepped so far back” (85) into herself that her whole world has been colonized by her inwardness, “[t]o Hana the wild gardens were like further rooms” (43, my emphasis). Likewise, the “bower of limes” likened to “rooms of green light” confirms that at this point for Hana there is no longer any outside space (43, my emphasis).

From the first moment Almásy observed Hana at the “sea hospital” in Tirrenia, he noticed her “separate[ness] from the others” and “knew she was more patient than nurse” (95-96). Late in the novel, Almásy tells Caravaggio, “Hana was greatly distressed when I first met her...The only way I could get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me” (253). Early in the novel the narrator remarks that “[t]his was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became half her world” (7). It appears, as Almásy suggests, that she reads initially at his behest—“[a]t night [the Englishman] is never tired enough to sleep. She reads to him from whatever book she is able to find in the library” (5). However she soon develops a ritual of continuing to read
after the Englishman has fallen asleep, “she would ceremoniously pour herself a small beaker [of wine]...and sip away further into whatever book she was reading” (7). Through the first two chapters Hana is hardly seen without a book, her reading slowly opening up the sealed off contents of her consciousness, causing “a scurry in her mind like a mouse in the ceiling” (7), a phrase that is repeated three times in the first two chapters. The metaphor of the mouse upstairs again draws on the association between Hana and the villa, for the third floor of the villa has been “sealed off” because of excessive damage due to the shelling (13). The second occurrence of the phrase is found on page eight while she is reading to the Englishman and a memory of her father—memories that since his death she has sealed off along with everything else from her past—interrupts her concentration, “[a] scurry in the ceiling like a mouse, and she looked up from the book again” (8). The third occurrence of the phrase again interrupts her reading, only this time her past walks right into the room to confront her, “[s]he sat very still, the book on her lap, as [Caravaggio] came up to her and then crouched beside her like an uncle” (30). Without putting too fine a point on it, there seems to be a way in which Hana’s reading has prepared the way for Caravaggio’s arrival, if only by preparing her for such human contact and holding the loose threads of her being together, the way in which, in the midst of the shock caused by Caravaggio’s sudden appearance, she finds herself “needing...this half-finished book in order to collect herself” (31).

Early in their relationship, before the arrival of Caravaggio and Kip at the villa, the English patient gives Hana a “lesson about reading” (95):

Read him slowly, dear girl, you must read Kipling slowly. Watch carefully where the commas fall so you can discover the natural pauses. He is a writer who used pen and ink. He looked up from the page a lot, I believe, stared
through his window and listened to birds, as most writers who are alone do...Your eye is too quick and North American. Think about the speed of his pen. (94)

According to the English patient, to read well is to read “slowly” and “carefully,” not only observing, but entering into, the rhythm of the written words, allowing for “natural pauses” which allow one time to “[look] up from the page” (94). One sees in this lesson a dual concern for both the time and the place of reading. In regard to place, “look[ing] up from the page” (94) brings the “inside” of the book into relation with its “outside,” and allows the reader to inhabit, as with Harrison’s house-dweller, the book’s “dynamic field of interpenetration” (Harrison 39). Concerning the time of reading, to enter the rhythm of a book’s unfolding and so experience oneself in relation to the temporal is to experience one’s mortality. And this, finally, is what it means to “learn the art of reading” (Harrison 43), that is, to unlock the magical potential of books, wherein the “past comes to meet us from out of the future” (43). It is as part of *The English Patient*'s pervasive web of intertextuality that Kip enters Hana and the English patient’s lives “as if out of this fiction. As if the pages of Kipling had been rubbed in the night like a magic lamp” (94). However, perhaps more important than the narrator’s mystical speculation is the intimation that, as with the entrance of Caravaggio, it was the “long nights of reading and listening” that prepared Hana psychologically for Kip’s arrival (111). Under the English patient’s guidance, reading eased Hana back into the give and take of conversation, prepared her for the entrance of people from both the most intimate recesses of her past and the mysterious realms of the future and for her eventual reentry into the outside world.

Although perhaps Almásy is correct when he tells Caravaggio near the end of the events at the Villa San Girolamo that Hana and Kip “are not mortal yet” (253), the celibate
intimacy that the two young lovers share in Kip’s canvas tent is nevertheless the first fruits of their mortalization:

Where he had learned it or she had who knows, in such youth. Perhaps from Caravaggio, who had spoken to her during those evenings about his age, about the tenderness towards every cell in a lover that comes when you discover your mortality. (225)

In the intimate space of Kip’s tent Hana enters a place that, in contrast to the villa’s broken down structures of dwelling, can begin to house—to receive—her humanity. Within the shelter of the tent she begins to recover an identity and a way of relating to others beyond that of nurse. It is when she “enters through the open flaps, to crawl against his body” that she finds “the arm she wants” (125), making human rather than medical contact with it, “her tongue instead of a swab, her tooth instead of a needle” (125).

However, a tent, as Hana becomes painfully aware, is no permanent dwelling place. The nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which drive Kip out of Hana’s life, mark the beginning of a new dispensation for Hana and a return to an older one for Kip. More exactly, their respective rebirths are signaled most clearly in two simultaneous events—Hana’s writing of the letter to Clara and Kip’s motorcycle accident, the latter of which is strongly suggestive of a baptism, “[t]he sapper’s bare head comes out of the water, and he gasps in all the air above the river” (296). The letter that Hana writes home to Clara is prefigured by the three messages she writes into books earlier in the novel (61,118, 209). The blank pages at the end of the books that Hana has read create a space in which her own narrative can come alive before her. The three notes, which are a combination of personal and contextual commentary, are seemingly addressed to herself and as such are key points in her recovery of a personal identity. Furthermore, this commingling of the
personal voice with the printed word is strikingly similar to and no doubt inspired by the example of the English patient’s commonplace book, which consists of various forms of personal writing and passages of other books pasted in or written directly into “a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus” (16). However, it seems to be suggested by *The English Patient* that the paradigm of Almášy’s commonplace book, with its promiscuous mixing of personal, historical and other supra-personal narratives, has passed. As the narrator points out, “[t]he references in [Almášy’s] book are all pre-war” (96), and Hana, in her letter to Clara, looks into the future and prophetically declares, “[f]rom now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public” (292).

Where then, if the traditional structures of dwelling have broken down and the innocence of Almášy’s intertextuality has been undermined by the violence of nations, will Hana find a dwelling in the postwar world? In her letter Hana tells Clara, “I want to come home. To your small cabin and pink rock in Georgian Bay” (296). Hana, in her longing for a home, is here still holding onto the false hope that she will be able to return to a place of pre-war purity, that Clara will be able to “rescue [her] from this place we all entered, betraying you” (296). However, as Ondaatje’s metafictional interjection at the end of the novel suggests, Hana struggles to find the home she longs for: “And Hana moves possibly in the company that is not her choice. She, at even this age, thirty-four, has not found her own company, the ones she wanted” (301). In his treatise on dwelling already drawn from above, Robert Harrison, in reference to the thinking of Martin Heidegger, suggests a possible correlation between the cultural conditions of modernity and the crisis of modern homelessness (Harrison 37)—an exigency mapped out in this essay through the examination of Hana’s crisis of dwelling. In response to this observation, Harrison asks, “is the correlation itself amenable to domestication? Is something like the housing of modern
homelessness conceivable?” (37). These are questions that both push beyond the
boundaries of *The English Patient* and prepare a starting point for the following
exploration into Ondaatje’s most recent novel, *Divisadero*, to which this essay will now
turn.
Part II.

“I Come From Divisadero Street”: Narrative Identity in *Divisadero*

“We have art,’ Nietzsche said, ‘so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth’” (Divisadero 1). The above quotation from Nietzsche stands sentry over Ondaatje’s most recent novel. It appears at the beginning of the text as an excerpt, borrowed from a passage in the last pages of the novel in which Anna steps back from her biography of the writer Lucien Segura to reflect on her own life story: “‘We have art,’ Nietzsche says, ‘so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth.’ For the raw truth of an episode never ends, just as the terrain of my sister’s life and the story of my time with Coop are endless to me” (267). The self-reflexive context in which the Nietzsche quotation appears is interpreted in this essay as an invitation to use it as a starting point of reflection on the relationship between “art” and “truth” in Anna’s various narrative performances. In addition, Ondaatje’s epigraphical emphasis of Anna’s use of the quotation suggests that it bears significance for the relationship between the reader and the work as a whole. However, I will begin by offering some supplementary insight into what it means, in the context of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, for art to stave off the destructive potential of the truth.

Nietzsche’s “we have art” statement comes from an (originally) unpublished note of 1888 (Ridley 4), and is more familiar to readers of Nietzsche in W. Kaufmann’s translation of 1968, “we possess art lest we perish of the truth” (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 882). Though Nietzsche’s positions on the social function of art were various over the course of his writings, the articulation of 1888 in question here is probably most significantly informed by his ideas on the nature of reality, appearances, truth, suffering and art as presented in his 1882 work, *The Gay Science*, in which the indispensable function of art is
understood to be, “to render life bearable” (Ridley 6). In the 1888 remark and The Gay Science, the “truth” that threatens our destruction is “the truth about the world, as progressively revealed by modern science” (Ridley 5), which, in Human, All Too Human (1878), Nietzsche embraces as the sometimes disconcerting but necessary path to freedom, greatness and the overcoming of human suffering (Ridley 5). In regard to art, Nietzsche’s view in Human, All Too Human, is that, as we come to recognize the liberating potential of modern science, our need for the “palliative fantasies supplied by art” should “wither away” (Ridley 5). It is not until The Gay Science that the “fantasies” supplied by art are seen as playing more than a secondary and obstructive role in Nietzsche’s enlightenment project.

In The Gay Science, Nietzsche still understands modern science as providing the most accurate truths about the world, but begins to see more clearly those truths as revealing a world that is chaotic, arbitrary, and meaningless (Ridley 5). In conjunction with this observation, Nietzsche concedes, as it were, that human beings “cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life—without faith in reason in life” (Nietzsche quoted in Ridley 76), and thus the truths of science threaten to leave some of our essential human needs “unsatisfiable” and, consequently, our lives fundamentally unlivable (Ridley 76). Nietzsche’s solution to this paradox is to advocate art as a means of imposing the appearance of form and order on the world:

Our ultimate gratitude to art. – If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this kind of cult of the untrue, then the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science – the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensations – would be utterly unbearable. Honesty would lead to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps
us to avoid such consequences: art as the good will to appearance. We do
not always keep our eyes from rounding off something and, as it were,
finishing the poem. (Nietzsche, The Gay Science 107)

Nietzsche’s breakthrough in The Gay Science is in reformulating the human compulsion to
artistic creation as “the good will to appearance” (107) rather than merely and always a
form of “bad intellectual conscience” (2). It is now uncompromising intellectual “honesty”
(107) that threatens to drive humankind to “suicide” (107), and art is fashioned as “a
counterforce” (107) to the nihilistic insights of modern science. Furthermore, in The Gay
Science, the goal in Human, All Too Human of bringing about an end to all human
suffering is revised, and Nietzsche no longer sees pain as antithetical to pleasure:

On the aim of science. - What? The aim of science should be to give men
as much pleasure and as little displeasure as possible? But what if pleasure
and displeasure were so tied together that whoever wanted to have as much
as possible of one must also have as much as possible of the other...To this
day you have the choice: either as little displeasure as possible, painlessness
in brief - .... or as much displeasure as possible as the price for the growth
of an abundance of subtle pleasures and joys that have rarely been relished
yet. (Nietzsche, The Gay Science 12)

What Nietzsche is suggesting here is that the truths of modern science, which result in so
much displeasure in humankind as they reveal and undo the falsifications in our
understanding of the world and ourselves, should be embraced “as much...as possible”
(12). He is advocating a balancing act between the opposing forces of science and art, truth
and untruth, which entails “the maximum amount of honesty, of courageousness in the face
of the truth, that is consistent with steering off ‘nausea and suicide’” (Ridley 80). The role
he assigns to art, then, is undeniably “modest” (Ridley 80), but nevertheless undeniable in its importance. It is only as an “aesthetic phenomenon” that “existence is still bearable for us” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 107); and it is in this essential project of aestheticizing existence that something akin to an art of the self begins to emerge from *The Gay Science*. It is in the imperative to make our lives beautiful to ourselves that the importance of an artistic vision, or way of being in the world, comes to the forefront. Nietzsche describes this artistic vision as a

moving away from things until there is a good deal that one no longer sees
and there is much that our eye has to add if we are still to see them at all; or seeing things round a corner and as cut out and framed; or placing them so that they partially conceal each other and grant us only glimpses of architectural perspectives...—all this we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life – first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters. (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 299)

This way of seeing that Nietzsche suggests “we should learn from artists” (299) is characterized above all by a seeing from a distance, where creativity and art are needed in order to give form to existence, an activity described earlier as “finishing the poem” (107). But Nietzsche also implores us to be “wiser” than the artists from whom we learn this artistic gaze, for with them it “comes to an end where art ends and life begins” (299). The essential point is to employ the “subtle power” of this aestheticizing gaze in our “everyday” lives (299).
Turning our attention to Ondaatje’s most recent novel, the significance of the title, “Divisadero,” and just how much of a Nietzschean Anna is, can now be addressed. At its halfway point, Anna gives the novel’s only explanation of its title:

I come from Divisadero Street. Divisadero, from the Spanish word for ‘division,’ the street that at one time was the dividing line between San Francisco and the fields of the Presidio. Or it might derive from the word *divisar*, meaning ‘to gaze at something from a distance.’ (There is a ‘height’ nearby called El Divisadero.) Thus a point from which you can look far into the distance. It is what I do with my work[.] (142-3)

“Divisadero” is both a “dividing line” and “a point from which you can look far into the distance” (142-3). In Anna’s world it is the dividing line between life and art. However, the dividing line does not function for Anna as a border that keeps these two opposing realms from polluting one another, rather it is the ground of her existence (“I come from Divisadero Street”), where art and life commingle and collude. Such that Anna works in the places where “art meets life in secret” (141), and what she always and everywhere works at is “look[ing] into the distance for those I have lost, so that I see them everywhere” (143).

The structure of *Divisadero* exemplifies Nietzsche’s methodology of intellectual honesty balanced with an artistic vision as outlined in *The Gay Science*. In keeping with Nietzsche’s imperative that the truths of the world should be confronted with the “maximum amount of honesty” an individual has the capacity to endure (Ridley 80), the novel begins with Anna’s account of her youth and the episode of traumatic violence that effectively brought it to a close. The narrative voices in *Divisadero* fade in and out of Anna’s first-person voice and a more distant third-person narrative. However, this third-person voice, which first enters the novel on page twenty-one, as the story of Anna’s youth
enters the stage of her intimacy with Coop, belongs almost everywhere to Anna. Anna confesses halfway through the novel, “I learned that sometimes we enter art to hide within it. It is where we can go to save ourselves, where a third-person voice protects us” (142, my emphasis). Having sought the refuge of this third-person voice, Anna describes the chaotic nature of the world that would be revealed to her through the violence that collapsed the illusions of her youth: “How we are almost nothing. We think, in our youth, we are the centre of the universe, but we simply respond, go this way or that by accident, survive or improve by the luck of the draw, with little choice or determination on our part” (23).

Anna’s entire adult life is characterized by an attempt to simultaneously confront and seek refuge from the “raw truth” of her father’s violence (267): “There are times when she needs to hide in a stranger’s landscape, so that she can look back at the tumult of her youth, to the still undiminished violence of her bloodied naked self between her father and Coop, the moment of violence that deformed her” (75). The narratives of Claire and Coop’s imagined adult lives, her time in France with Raphael, and the adventures of Lucien Segura are all, in one way or another, attempts to reframe and glimpse the “raw truth” of her life from a safe distance, to position herself just “round the corner” from that moment (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 299), or placing and recreating the historical characters she writes about so that “they partially conceal each other and grant [her, and us] only glimpses” of the incomprehensibility of existence (299).

It is crucial, in order to comprehend its breakdown, to understand that the story of Coop the gambler and Claire the legal assistant are fictions created and woven together by Anna. Commenting on a line (“care moves in disguise”) from a poem by Henry Vaughan, Anna remarks, “I don’t know if [caring in disguise] is what I am doing, from this distance, imagining the life of my sister, and imagining the future of Coop” (137). While on first
reading Coop and Claire’s adventures appear to offer the reader intriguing glimpses into their lives beyond the events in Petaluma, upon rereading it becomes clearer that these stories soon digress into a retelling of the same story of Anna, Claire, and Coop that opens the novel. (Anna herself reminds us that “[o]nly the rereading counts” [136]). The brutal beating of Coop, which results in there being “nothing older than a few days” in his memory, marks the entrance into Anna’s fiction of the chaos and lack of meaning that stem from the ontological violence which underpins the novel (represented by the violent murder of Coop’s family and the death of Anna’s mother in childbirth). Anna is recast in this narrative as the femme fatale Bridget, who this time around is able to spare Coop from the pain of the beating by injecting him with a drug, “I can give you this, so you will barely feel what they do to you” (132). Although the narrative is sprinkled with this and other wish-fulfillments by Anna (she and Coop are reunited in the aftermath of the beating by a “verbal accident” [152]), it becomes a stage upon which Anna can confront the precariousness of identity, “[w]ith forgetfulness, what remains of the desire that consumed Coop? Where does it go?” (153). Coop’s loss of himself doubles Anna’s loss of him and dramatizes the earlier realization, “[h]ow we are almost nothing” (23), which is repeated here in the account of “[d]esire and obsession so slight. One organ, the hippocampus, closes down, and we are redirected into an emptiness” (153). Anna peers into this emptiness for as long as she can and then plunges into the biography of Lucien Segura. The movement away from Claire and Coop for the remaining third of the novel appears crude and defiant of traditional narrative structures on the surface, but underneath it is in complete continuity with Divisadero’s essential structure, which is the repetition of Anna’s confrontation with the “raw truth” of existence followed and enabled by her retreat into art.
The subject of the story is itself eternal return, or that, as Anna suggests, “[w]e live permanently in the recurrence of our own stories, whatever story we tell” (136).

*Divisadero* suggests that what prevents one from being “redirected into an emptiness” are stories, the stories we tell about ourselves, the identities we construct through narrative. Coop’s loss of memory, which amounts to his inability to situate himself within a diachronic narrative, seriously calls into question materialist substance theories of identity that would identify a person with a particular body through the mediating function of a determinate name (Teichert 177). The absence of narrative is the absence of meaning, and “[s]ubjects recognize themselves in the stories they tell about themselves” (Ricoeur 247). Narrative identity thus prevents the human subject from dissolving into meaninglessness. Within the context of *Divisadero*, narrative is what protects subjects from nothingness—“How we are *almost* nothing” (23 my emphasis)—and that which keeps identity precariously teetering on this “almost” (23), for narrative identity is not a stable, fixed and determinate model of identity. The stories we tell about ourselves can change, and therefore so too can our identities. The unstable nature of narrative identity is perhaps nowhere better evidenced in *Divisadero* than in the instability of names.

*Divisadero* is full of name changes. The one at the centre of the novel is of course Anna’s, which she announces at the very beginning of the novel in the epigraphical pretext, “[f]or I have taken myself away from who I was with them, and what I used to be. When my name was Anna” (1). Although the change itself is mentioned several more times (there is a chapter in the first section with the title “The Person Formerly Known as Anna” [133]), her new name is never mentioned. Anna’s new name is withheld because the project she is engaged in throughout the novel is an attempt to rediscover, or at least revisit, who she was with Claire and Coop. At the time she writes the major narratives of the novel, Anna is at
least thirty-four years old (135), which makes her at least eighteen years removed from
“who [she] was with [Claire and Coop], and what [she] used to be” growing up in California
(the violent episode between herself, her father and Coop taking place when she was
sixteen). However, despite the fact that Anna (one almost has to refer to her as “Anna”) has
“taken [herself] away” from her adolescent self, the last lines of part two, which describe
her sometime during or after her thirty-fourth year, refer to her as “[t]his person who is
barely Anna” (188). This description seems to double the earlier epithet, “[h]ow we are
almost nothing” (23). The point being made is not only that no matter how much distance
in time and space is between her youthful self in California and her adult self in France
there remains a trace of the former in the latter, but also that no matter where or who a
person is in her life, there is a sense that she is always “barely” (188), or loosely identifiable
with herself. Anna is as “barely” herself in her youth as she is all those years later in France.

It is this idea—that we are always almost non-identical to ourselves—that the multiple
instances of misidentification in Divisadero demonstrate so acutely. In one such pivotal
instance early in the novel, Coop, having come across the two girls injured in the horse
barn, kneels down before Anna and says, “Claire, my god Claire” (20), so that in the
confusion Anna thinks, “[t]hen I am not Anna, then that must be Anna over there” (20).
What this instance reveals is the possibility that “I am not myself”—the fragile and
incomplete nature of personal identity. To revisit Nietzsche’s claims in The Gay Science,
this realization is the fruit of an “honesty” that unchecked “would lead to nausea and
suicide” (107), consequences that are to be avoided by embracing “art as the good will to
appearance” (107). Anna and Claire’s response to “the confusion” of their identities in the
horse barn is the need, from then on, “to be [seen as] distinctly Anna and distinctly Claire”
(19). Concomitant to this awakened need for a distinct identity is the awareness of identity
as artistic performance (in terms of Nietzsche’s definition of art as “the good will to appearance”)—or, more directly, as narrative performance, for Nietzsche describes the performance of “art as the good will to appearance” as “finishing off the poem” (107). Likewise, identity in Divisadero is presented as a product of narrative, of the human ability to tell stories about ourselves in the world, to finish off the poem of human being, to re-read and re-write it as often as necessary.

Returning to the issue of the crisis of dwelling characteristic of modernity outlined in the first part of this essay which focused on The English Patient, we are now in a position to address the question posed by Robert Harrison, namely, “[i]s something like the housing of modern homelessness conceivable” (Harrison 37). The answer to this question suggested by the above reading of Divisadero is that the crisis of dwelling that characterizes modernity precipitates and necessitates the inhabitation of “Divisadero Street” (142), that porous border and zone of interpenetration where the hard truths of existence and the narrative constructs of art come together to offer the bare shelter of postmodernity. Divisadero Street is not a place of dwelling, but an existential position somewhere between meaning and nonmeaning, identity and nothingness where narrative functions both as a witness to the looming threat of destruction and a means of survival. For humanity as such, it is a situation not unlike the one Lucien Segura finds himself in on the last page of the novel, where the writer steps into the “oldest of boats” (273), turning his back to the far shore and rowing towards it. As he rows the precariously porous boat, “[w]ater laps up between the boards, and he feels he is riding a floating skeleton” (273). In such a situation, the writer has no assurance that he is staying on course, not even any knowledge of where he is headed. Only one thing is sure: if he is not to sink, the writer must keep rowing, satisfied with a certain level of obscurity.
Part III.

Reading as Incorporation: The Violence of Intertextuality

One of the major challenges facing the literary critic working on *The English Patient* or *Divisadero* is that the characters in these two stories are seemingly always already engaged in literary critical analysis of their own stories. Almásy, for example, in his morphine fueled tete-a-tete with Caravaggio, begins his own analysis of Katharine’s campfire reading of “Candaules and his queen” (232) with the remark, “[t]here are several things one can say. Knowing that eventually I will become her lover, just as Gyges will be the queen’s lover and murderer of Candaules” (233). Almásy here seems almost to speak directly to the reader of the text, as if he is anticipating the speculative interpretations that such a rich moment must inevitably invite. But Almásy does not just acknowledge that several interpretations are possible, rather he seems to make an attempt to get ahead of or even discourage the readers’ critical activities by offering an authoritative interpretation of his own: “This is a story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story of Herodotus” (233). Almásy’s tag-line-like synopsis tells the reader what the story is about, thus making any interpretation that does not meet up with his own definitive reading appear errant. This embedded critical activity is a double edge sword, for as often as it pulls the would-be literary critic in for a closer look it also undermines his secondary critical activity, making it appear a superfluous and violent intrusion of a self-contained intertextual system.

In *Divisadero*, there is a strong distaste for literary criticism associated with Lucien Segura, who on the Bancroft Library tapes admits
“I love the performance of a craft, whether it is modest or mean-spirited, yet I walk away when discussions of it begin—as if one should ask a gravedigger what brand of shovel he uses or whether he prefers to work at noon or in the moonlight” (192).

In addition to this direct comment by Segura, there are two narrative instances involving the French writer in which a disapproval of literary critical activity comes to the forefront. The first is occasioned by the elderly writer’s chance spotting of a peacock, which reminds him of a “poem from his youth about a strange bird from the foothills [that] had been one of his most famous verses, memorized, explicated, exfoliated in schools until there was nothing left but a throat bone and a claw” (171). The critical activity characterized here is described as aggressively reductive, the bird poem being crudely scraped down to a partial skeleton in an attempt to biographize the poem in terms of the poet’s supposed personal experience, as suggested by the narrator’s additional comment: “There had been, in fact, no such rare bird in his youth. None had ever flown across his stepfather’s fields” (171). The second comment on literary criticism associated with Segura is equal to the first in its disparaging and ironic tone:

Essays were being published in cities about his career, his craft, his psychosis, his landscape, the lack of close friends, his secretive and diverse nature, his soul. They reproduced maps of the town of Bagnères-de-Bigorre, and the Fan of Gascony, and Marseillan. Every local cleric, neighbouring butcher, and mailman came out from the quiet corners of Lucien Segura’s world with a story or an insight that would expose his silence. (223)
Once again it is the violent reductions of authorial obsession that are at issue in the above quotation. It is the “his” of “his career...craft...psychosis...landscape” (223), etc., that is the subject of the speculative discourse. It is made clear that the violence of such activity extends beyond the poems and stories: “He saw the disfigured man who was portrayed. He was the nocturnal animal in that night zoo, revealed in the darkness, who growled or bit his fellow creatures and ate his children” (223). The point being made through these two passages that directly comment on the activity of literary critics is that such activity too often seeks out the writer behind the work and reduces the significance of both to whatever connection can be made between the two. At the risk of doing something very similar here, the point is neatly summed up by Ondaatje in the introduction to his literary study of 1970, *Leonard Cohen*, where Ondaatje raises Cohen’s own dissatisfaction with the literary reviews that chose to treat his novel, *The Favourite Game*, as autobiography rather than a work of art, to which opinion Ondaatje sympathetically adds, “Cohen is right of course; nothing is more irritating than to have your work translated by your life” (3). The fact that Ondaatje goes on in the introduction to *Leonard Cohen* to provide his reader, however sheepishly, with the “warm blanket of [Cohen’s] biography” (4) is, coincidentally, quite instructive here. For the two passages quoted above that deal with the critical approaches to Segura’s work are not presented by some impersonal, omniscient narrator but are written by Anna in her role as Segura’s biographer. It is the secondary nature of the ridicule—the literary biographer denouncing literary biography—that is the full source of the ironic tension in the passages portraying the exfoliated, dismembered poem and the disfigured writer.

But what then is the difference, if any, between Anna’s treatment of Lucien Segura and the critical activity she mocks? If there is a difference it is not, I think, to be found in
answering the question of what motivated her to “[travel] to France, to the last house he had lived in, during the final stage of his life” in order to “[piece] together the landscapes he had written about” (144). Anna herself is “uncertain” about what made her “fall upon the life of Lucien Segura and wish to write about him” (143). Rather, it is in her imaginative recreation of Lucien Segura’s story—her attempt to not just tell it how it was but to translate and enter into the “wound” in his voice as if it were her own (143). As has been discussed earlier, what Anna does with her work is to “look into the distance for those [she has] lost, so that [she sees] them everywhere” (143). In writing about Segura she is in effect writing about herself; he is the “substitution” for herself that she “transcribe[s]” in order to explore her past (143). (If all this strikes the reader of this essay as a great formula for fiction, but a rather dubious methodology for a self-proclaimed “archivist” and “historian” [141], let her not forget that this is very similar to Ondaatje’s approach to the telling of his family’s history in Running in the Family). But if it is the imaginative or artistic nature of Anna’s work on Segura that sets it apart from the exfoliating and disfiguring critical activity discussed above, it is not because her transcription/appropriation process is any less violent. Anna herself describes her work as a “plunder[ing of] the past” (141).

In her essay, “War and the Book: The Diarist, the Cryptographer, and The English Patient,” professor Alice Brittan of Dalhousie University asks, “what is the connection between reading and writing in books and the forms of national violence, namely war and colonialism, that obsess The English Patient?” (Brittan 200). It is a question that cuts to the heart of the present exploration of the violence of reading and writing. Brittan seeks to establish that the diarist—embodied in The English Patient by Almásy and Hana, both of whom “[record] private experience by hand[writing]” in and over printed texts—and the cryptographer, who “learns to embed messages of national importance in printed texts[,]”
are “antithetical kinds of writers” (202). Underpinning this suggestion of the antipathy that separates these two modes of writing—one belonging to the machinery of war and the other establishing a resistance to it—is the argument that “the rules of wartime reading and writing turn poems and novels into political and military tools” (206). What is at danger of being suggested by Brittan’s analysis of these two modes of writing—contrary, I believe, to her own best insights—is the belief that somehow it is the politics of war and colonialism that makes reading and writing violent while the nonviolent resistance of the diarist characterizes his resignation from the political battlefield of nations and his peaceful retreat into Marginalia—a private, “erasable” utopia written in the margins of civilization (211).

This belief, which I hope to demonstrate is undermined by both The English Patient and Divisadero, is not Brittan’s as much as it is Almásy’s. Therefore, I turn now to a more specific account of Almásy’s mode of reading and writing.

For Almásy the desert explorer there is a clear separation between the personal and the public spheres of life. The desert, which Almásy sees in the 1930’s as an apolitical utopia, is a geography whose places more appropriately bear “the names of lovers” (140) than names of state authority: “Erase the family name! Erase Nations! I was taught such things by the desert” (139). The anonymous intimacy of a lover’s name symbolizes for Almásy a form of purified “absence” (141) that is characteristic of the desert’s soothing nihilism, “[s]o a man in the desert can slip into [the absence of] a name as if within a discovered well, and in its shadowed coolness be tempted never to leave such containment” (141). In addition, Almásy sees the desert as “a place of faith” where “all of us...wished to remove the clothing of our countries” (139). However, if Almásy’s desert faith is made up (in part) by a belief in the non-political nature of a lover’s name and the desire of all desert initiates to shed their national skins, then he is doubly betrayed by this faith, for as
Caravaggio reveals to him it was Katharine Clifton’s name and the political motives of his desert companions doubling as English spies that turned him into “the enemy” and shattered his utopian vision.

Almásy’s conception of the desert is pertinent to a discussion of his reading/writing practices because his view of books is essentially the same as his purified conception of the dessert. As Brittan points out, Almásy “treats books as though they were immaculate” (206), or beyond suspicion, such that he is caught off guard by Katharine’s reading of the story of Queen Candaules and surprised by the “power” of words (*The English Patient* 233-4). His use of *The Histories* as a commonplace book, filling in the margins and blank pages and covering over the text with handwritten notes, is an attempt to slowly transform the political, printed work of Herodotus into a private manuscript—an attempt to slowly displace the political as such. Thus Almásy glues “brown cigarette papers” over the tales of warring nations in *The Histories*, covering them with details of his love-affair (172).

However, what *The English Patient* ultimately reveals is that a text is not so easily disarmed or depoliticized. Though Brittan is right to suggest that “Hana and Almásy resist war by handwriting” (202), Hana eventually realizes the inefficacy and non-reality of mere resistance and, in a letter to her stepmother Clare, *declares* war by handwriting: “From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public. If we can rationalize this we can rationalize anything” (292). The event Hana suggests is beyond her capacity to rationalize is the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan. However, before I examine how the bombing of Japan contributed to Hana’s declaration of war, I want to explore Kip’s function as sapper as a metaphor for the reading/writing practices of conventional literary criticism, for Kip also comes into confrontation with the reality of his reading/writing practices as a result of the bombing of Japan.
Although the narrator states that Kip doesn’t possess a “faith in books” (111), through his activity as an English-trained sapper, Kip perhaps provides the novel with its strongest image of a literary critic. Prior to the war, Lord Suffolk, Kip’s bomb disposal mentor and instructor in everything English, was a literary critic whose “passion was the study of *Lorna Doone* and how authentic the novel was historically and geographically” (185). Lord Suffolk’s experience as a literary critic seems to have influenced his military pupils, for Kip’s approach to defusing bombs has much in common with traditional literary criticism. Kip’s work is described as “unraveling that knot of wires and fuzes someone has left him like a terrible letter” (76), which suggests that the enemy’s activity of rigging-up mines can be seen as a type of writing, and the job of disarming them as a type of reading. Thus practicing the art of literary criticism as bomb-disposal, Kip searches for clues of the “personality” (99) lurking behind the mine: “People think a bomb is a mechanical object, a mechanical enemy. But you have to consider that somebody made it” (192). In one situation, after successfully disarming a bomb with a new type of fuse, Kip “quickly...[writes] down a few notes and hand[s] the solution for the new bomb to an officer” who makes sure the information is made available to the other bomb-disposal experts (195), an activity that mirrors the practice of literary scholars who publish their solutions to poems and novels so that they may be successfully disarmed in classrooms across the English speaking world.

Kip’s activity as a reader of militarized forms of writing is an example of how in World War Two

[t]he ordinary challenges of reading, of understanding how a poem works or interpreting what a novel means, became the cryptographic challenges of encipherment and decoding that led to the deployment of soldiers, the
bombing of boats, the capture of spies, and the protection or endangerment of citizens. (Brittan 211)

Kip’s story functions as an exemplary critique of the shortcomings of this “ordinary” and rationalistic approach to texts, which reduces the practice of reading to a search for hidden meaning and authorial intention. The illusion of the heroic nature of such reading crumbles for the sapper/literary critic when he is confronted with a bomb too big to be disarmed, “a bomb the size...of a city” that reveals the violence of reading as rationalization (287), of “[c]utting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For this to happen?” (285).

What I have been attempting to outline above are two distinct reading practices that are both revealed to be seriously flawed in the same historical moment. Hana’s practice of handwriting snapshots of her personal story into printed books—a practice modeled after Almásy’s commonplace book—can be seen as an attempt to make a personal claim on the public field of discourse and to tame or domesticate the political realm. Kip’s rationalized reading of enemy weaponry, modeled after the literary criticism practiced by his mentor Lord Suffolk, seeks to neutralize texts by decoding the authorial intention in their design. However, what both of these reading practices exhibit in common is a desire to disarm the violence of texts, and it is in this regard that both practices are fundamentally flawed.

Brittan, in her essay, quotes Jacques Derrida in trying to articulate Hana and Almásy’s desire to “emancipate [print], to let it make its way alone and unarmed” (201). While this quotation, as Brittan suggests, accurately “captures the intention of Hana and Almásy’s desire to transform books with the pencil and the handwritten word” (202), it falls short of articulating the nature of the impasse revealed to Hana and Kip by the bombing of Japan.

Divisadero and The English Patient suggest that reading—whether it be studious, curious, or otherwise escapist in nature—is a vital act of incorporation, a mystical act of
consumption wherein words become flesh and the stories in books come into confrontation with the texts of our selves in an explosion of intertextuality. We have already looked at the concept of narrative identity at play in *Divisadero* and seen how narrative functions to keep the human subject from dissipating into nothingness. In addition, *The English Patient* abounds with examples of textual descriptions of persons and bodies. Hana’s body is “full of sentences and moments” (12), “stories and situations” (36). The English patient refers to himself as a “book” and “something to be read” (253). Passages suggesting the textual origins of the body are also numerous. Kip is described as walking out of “the pages of Kipling” (94); Hana finds her role as the English patient’s nurse echoed in the biblical story of Abishag; Katharine reads her affair with Almásy out of his Herodotus; and as Almásy works in Cairo on his book, *Récentes Explorations dans le Désert Libyque*, he finds himself “unable to remove [Katharine’s] body from the page” (235). The textual nature of bodies and identities means that both are inescapably at play in the word-consuming nature of the reading process.

As Jacques Derrida once stated in an interview, “every act of incorporation is an act of violence, and what is crucial is how to perceive such an act and how to do it well” (qtd. in Kaufman 359). It is the inherent violence of their own attempts at disarming the violence of texts that confronts Kip and Hana at the end of the novel, a confrontation that tears Kip out of Hana’s life and thereby initiates Hana’s declaration of war. What defines the “do[ing] it well” of reading and writing in Ondaatje’s novels is whether the result is creative—in the sense of life-sustaining and productive—as with Anna’s biography of Segura, which opens up and expands the writer’s story, in opposition to the critical discourse that dissects and disfigures his life and work so that all that survives are the bones.
Part IV.

“Read to Me”: A Coda

In the context of a discussion on post-structuralism, Terry Eagleton summarizes two different ways of thinking about the relationship between speaking and writing. The first, which he suggests is consistent with the Western philosophical tradition from Plato to Lévi-Strauss, sees speech as superior to writing. According to this view, which post-structuralist thinkers describe as “phonocentric,” writing is merely a “second-hand mode of communication, a pallid, mechanical transcript” of the “living voice” (Eagleton 113). Where writing is an impersonal, alienated, and materialized mode of communication, speech stands out as a medium in which the speaker’s words, which seem “immediately present to [his] consciousness” (113), are seen to “coincide” with his “being” (113).

Eagleton suggests that behind this phonocentric interpretation is a belief that “man is able spontaneously to create and express his own meanings, to be in full possession of himself, and to dominate language as a transparent medium of his inmost being” (113). As Derrida states, the phonocentric position is already clearly defined in the formulation of Aristotle: “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words” (Of Grammatology 30).

According to the second view, pioneered by Jacques Derrida, speech itself is seen as a form of writing, and “spoken signs, like written ones, work only by a process of difference and division” (Eagleton 113). As a result of this view of language all concepts and ideas are seen as “embroiled in an open-ended play of signification, shot through with the traces and fragments of other ideas” (114). This endless play of signification means that there is no longer any stable ground upon which to build an identity or other constructs of
stabilized meaning. Therefore seeing speech as a type of writing in a Derridean fashion means that not only is the privileged position of speech undermined, but so too the very concept of inner-being or identity.

I begin this concluding section of the present essay by outlining these two views on the relationship between speech and writing—the first which holds speech as anterior and superior to writing and the second which views speech as being a form of writing—because I want to suggest that the two novels in question here propose a third position that contains elements of both the previous two. There is a special significance in these two novels—a type of reverence, one might say—associated with instances of the written word read aloud. It is in the vocalization of the written word that the full power of language is performed. To further explore the significance of this unification of voice and text I turn now to a closer look at some examples from the texts.

In *Divisadero*, the yet adolescent Lucien Segura and the teenage-bride Marie-Neige develop a lasting bond through their shared experiences of reading out loud to one another:

One afternoon when Marie-Neige sat beside him in silence he decided to read the Dumas out loud to her. “On the way to his imprisonment in Buitenhof Prison, our Cornelius heard nothing but the barking of the dog and saw nothing but the face of a young woman....” [She] looked at him with her mouth open. He could not tell whether she believed he was inventing what he spoke or whether she was already hypnotized by the fragment...From then on she wished to share everything he consumed from a book. (200)
The sense of wonder with which Marie-Neige responds to Lucien’s spontaneous act of reading out loud to her is characteristic of the mysterious power associated with such acts in both *Divisadero* and *The English Patient*. There is an inherent intimacy associated in these texts with such shared verbal experiences, which more often than not leave Lucien and Marie-Neige “lying on the slim ribbon of porch...[feeling] at times that they could scarcely breathe” (201). But it is not a reclusive intimacy that closes them off from others; rather it is through reading out loud that the two “entered the great world” (221). In fact, it is this capacity for communal acts of oral reading to socialize the reading subjects that is their most striking feature. There is a structural vulnerability and openness of such a gesture, distinctly evidenced when, one month after Lucien’s disfiguring loss of one of his eyes, the semi-literate Marie-Neige successfully pulls him out of his solitude, despite his resistance, in a spontaneous decision to read to him: “Everything froze within him. He refused to step out to meet her words” (207). Lucien’s initial resistance is demonstrative of his awareness of the strong socializing pull of Marie-Neige’s gesture. Despite his resolution that “tomorrow he would simply not come outside” (207), it is in fact Lucien that initiates the continuation of their communal reading:

He asked her if she would clarify something he had missed, not understood within that first chapter. She looked up. ‘I don’t think I remember, I was too nervous.’ There was a sort of response from him. ‘Shall I go back and read it again?’ ‘No, just go on.’” (208)

Marie-Neige’s nervousness reveals the uncertainty and vulnerability associated with the shared act of reading, while Lucien’s suggestion to move forward despite their unknowing of what had been read the day before reveals that the significance of their activity is independent from the meaning of, or their mastery over, the text.
Likewise, in *The English Patient*, Almásy is able to help coax Hana out of her reclusive state of privation by getting her to read to him: “[Hana] was distant from everybody. The only way I could get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me” (253). Their practice throughout the novel is for Hana to read to him from “whatever book she is able to find in the library downstairs” (5). Like Lucien and Marie-Neige, they do not concern themselves with “gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms” (7). Furthermore, the shared reading is not all for Hana’s sake, as Almásy’s confession to Caravaggio might seem to suggest. From the burned man’s perspective, the candle light illuminates the strange connection between “the page and...the young nurse’s talking face” as he “swallow[s] her words like water” (5), suggesting that the former desert explorer, who can appreciate something of the necessity of water, depends on her reading for his survival. But Hana doesn’t just read to her patient, but is read to by him as well, the significance of which is demonstrated twice in the concluding pages of the novel. As Hana senses Kip’s impending departure, she reaches out to him with words that the “Englishman once read [to her] from a book” (288). Hana and Almásy’s shared reading experiences come to comprise such a pivotal part of her character that they are perhaps the central link between the twenty-one year old Hana of the Villa San Girolamo and the thirty-four year old Hana that the narrator gives a glimpse of at the end of novel: “She still remembers the lines of poems the Englishman read out loud to her” (301).

The shared experiences of reading out loud in *The English Patient* and *Divisadero* can be seen as offering a revision of the relationships between voice and text outlined above. Reading out loud to another is distinguished by a vulnerability caused by an uncertainty regarding the meaning of the text and the boundaries of the idea of text as such that is characteristic of the Derridean view of language. In the act of reading the written
word out loud, it is no longer possible to identify where the text begins or ends or where one might draw the line between the inside and outside of the text. Such reading thus orients the participants toward a radical opening up of the textualized world through the destabilization of meaning and a multiplication of possibilities as the illusions of a fixed reality give way to the fluidity of intertextual play. And yet, the voice maintains a crucial, privileged role in facilitating this process of textualization. It is through the vocalization of the written text that the structure of narrative identity is performed par-excellence because, for the duration of such a vocalization, I am text, and experience my self as such—not as a controlled, mastered expression of text, but a radically vulnerable, speaking subject opened up to intertextual play. In reading out loud from a written text, rather than just speaking, I break the illusion that my voice originates exclusively from “within” my inner being. For the subject being read to, it is to experience the text as active rather than passive, as reaching out to engage rather than merely waiting to be deciphered. It is also to experience an embodied text that makes the act of reading inherently social.

In Divisadero, Anna ambiguously states: “How we are almost nothing” (23). I say “ambiguously” because it is not clear whether the statement is uttered as a lament, or as something more hopeful. But one thing that I think is worth mentioning is that she does not say “I am almost nothing”—she says, “we are” (23). That tiny “we” calls out from the page with a voice of its own, reminding the reader that while embracing the intertextuality of narrative identity means that we must confront the fact that we are less ourselves than we might have previously imagined, it also means that we are more “we” than we have perhaps yet experienced, that as Anna suggests, “[t]here is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross” (16).
Works Cited


