

# Reading *The English Patient*: Teaching and Difference

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This paper will highlight post-colonialism and teaching by looking closer at Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*, Foucault's notion of heterotopia, and Carl Schmitt's political theory. This might seem somewhat far-fetched, but perhaps not. Let's start with the kind of questions that could be asked. For example: What is the relation between colonialism and teaching? Between colonialism and knowledge? The word colony, from Latin *colere*, means to till, to cultivate, or inhabit. From the same Indo-European root, *kwel-*, that gives culture. What is the relation between the will to transfer knowledge and pedagogical methodology? What does it mean to determine the desert, to map it, to draw maps of it, and what is the relation of this to learning? Is learning a way to determine knowledge and to draw a map of that knowledge? Is it to assign a history to a certain event and a certain place? Does a teacher have the sovereign power to decide on the exception? What would that imply for the act of learning? Is there a politics of teaching? This last question might seem self-evident. But considering Carl Schmitt's definition of politics it might gain new relevance. Let me begin with this definition also as a means to address the other questions I have posed.

In *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt defines the political in terms of what he calls the friend-enemy distinction. For Schmitt, an enemy is always a public enemy, the enemy is never a personal enemy. Moreover, the friend-enemy distinction cannot be reduced, according to Schmitt, to a question of an economical competitor or a polemical adversary in a scholarly debate. The enemy, in the final analysis, Schmitt says, has to threaten my life and the existence of a "we." The friend-enemy distinction is, in other words, an existential distinction; it has nothing to do with the norms and values of a certain group or society. A society that is not defined by the friend-enemy distinction is not political; that is, without the friend-enemy distinction there would be no difference, everything would be reduced to the same.

Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* circles around the characters at an abandoned villa in Italy at the end of the Second World War. A young nurse stays at the villa to care for a badly burned patient whose identity is unknown, but who is suspected to be a spy by the name Almásy. She

is joined by Caravaggio, an old friend of her father's, and Kip a young Indian Sikh trained as a bomb-defuser in the British army.

Where the friend-enemy distinction is most explicitly articulated in *The English Patient* is when Kip reacts to the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From then on the West is the colonial enemy that threatens the existence of the "we" he belongs to, and this event is what makes it evident to him. Before the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombing Kip could be said to live in an innocently, maybe even naive colonial relationship with Europe, working as a soldier in the British army. In contrast, Almásy, the English patient, views the desert as essentially apolitical. To draw maps of the desert, to determine it, place it, and name it is to politicize it and to make it into a potential theatre of war. Not only his physical ambiguity after being burned, something which together with (perhaps) the trauma of the event itself contributes to his indeterminate identity, but also his values in the stories he tells, reflect the non-political, decolonizing aspect of Almásy as a character, in the novel. But is he really without difference, even if we see him as apolitical? The answer would be no, I suggest, since the English patient (his body, his identity) becomes a site for difference, his very ambiguity counteracting sameness and, instead, disseminating difference. In fact, Caravaggio's obsessive search for the "true" identity of the English patient, his sameness within difference, turns him into an interrogator/analyst/critic trying to determine and secure meaning.

The English patient, I would like to contend, becomes a site comparable to Foucault's notion in "Different Spaces" of what he calls heterotopia. To explain heterotopia Foucault uses the analogy of the mirror. "The mirror," Foucault writes,

is a utopia after all, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up virtually behind the surface; I am over there where I am not, a kind of shadow that gives me my own visibility, that enables me to look at myself there where I am absent—a mirror utopia. But it is also a heterotopia in that the mirror really exists, in that it has a sort of return effect on the place that I occupy. Due to the mirror, I discover myself absent at the place where I am, since I see myself over there. From that gaze which settles on me, as it were, I come back to myself and begin once more to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in the sense that it makes this place I occupy at the moment I look at myself in the glass both utterly real, connected with the entire space surrounding it, and utterly unreal—since, to be perceived, it is obliged to go by way of that virtual point which is over there. (179)

How, then, can the English patient be a mirror? How is he heterotopical? Precisely by the fact that he is analyzed, he is a site of difference where identity is at once absent and the place where identity is constituted. The burnt skin of the English patient (making him into a desert), his reluctance to

speak, his Herodotus (filled with notes and pieces of paper pasted in it full of scribbles), becomes a rewriting of history, a re-flection of an-other history, still indeterminate, or rather a history broken up, fragmented, and de-personalized. This book of history has become a palimpsest, writing upon writing, and goes to question not only History with a capital H, but involves the personal, it personalizes history, makes it more specific, and de-generalizes it. Making a mirror of history, it creates what Foucault calls a “return effect.” As Foucault notes: “Due to the mirror, I discover myself absent at the place where I am, since I see myself over there.” To analyze, then, to interrogate, to interpret is, also, to look oneself in the mirror, it is to face oneself heterotopically; that is, to find oneself absent by seeing oneself in the other, and to find oneself in an-other place.

The English patient in this way becomes the site of the difference of history, he is the reflection of the other, he is history as absence, as difference. He speaks by not speaking of/to/as the subaltern.

But, this does not mean that he stands outside conflict, outside controversy, or outside polemics. That is, he still belongs within Carl Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction. The reason for this is precisely that he exists as the history of absence and difference, as (to take Foucault to the extreme) pure or radical heterotopia. The English patient is the exception, one could perhaps say crisis, where history, politics, the history of politics and the politics of history are decided. The decision takes place in absence, in difference; that is, as soon as there is an exception or crisis there is the friend-enemy distinction—since it, according to Schmitt, is ontologically constituted. (Crisis, from Greek *krinein*, to separate, to judge.) The English patient is the heterotopical site of crisis, where friend and enemy are decided upon.

Now, when we teach we enter, precisely, a heterotopical site of crisis, where friend and enemy are decided upon. But do we know that? Do we know what it means? What happens when I teach Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient*? What type of knowledge is assumed? And how do I handle it? I have come to suspect that I often assume a colonial attitude to teaching and to knowledge. Reflecting on what really happens when I teach and on what kind of attitude I may bring to the teaching situation without being aware of it, I have come to realize that often, but hopefully not always, I assume a position that could be compared to the colonizer-colonized position. There exists what one could perhaps describe as a colonial ideology when it comes to teaching. I am in no way, of course, trying to equal Colonialism with the teaching situation today at Western or Swedish institutions of higher education. But perhaps a similar structure can be discerned? What I am suggesting is that, if we don’t already, we need to examine the structures of our teaching. When teaching literature and especially post-colonial literature the method of teaching should be exposed and made clear. And, as I mentioned, after reflecting on my own teaching I have noticed the presence of a structure similar to the one present in colonial discourse.

To elaborate on this, knowledge and the idea of the teaching of a certain type of knowledge—what is at stake here? Consider Said's statement in the "Introduction" to *Orientalism*: "Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she says or does is Orientalism" (2). And he continues:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on [ . . . ]. But the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient (the East as career) despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a "real" Orient. (2-3, 5)

I will not analyze Said's work in detail here, but I want to focus on what can, from these quotes, be said about a possible Orientalism of teaching and knowledge. No doubt, teaching literature is teaching a certain type of knowledge, which in turn means generating power. There is, in other words, power in teaching, a teacher possesses the power of power, or rather, what generates power; that is, knowledge. If this is the case, should we not, as teachers, critically reflect on what knowledge we teach, how we teach it, and what structures of power it generates? There is a risk, I would argue, that we carry with us to the teaching situation Orientalism, as in Said's words "a style of thought." In consequence, this style of thought becomes our style of teaching. It is a question of a specific type of knowledge, constructed at a specific time, or even different constructions of knowledge, but still within the same style of thought.

To the English patient, the desert is borderless, without maps; it does not distinguish any difference, it is a site of equality, a place where there is sameness. With knowledge, Western knowledge, comes the will to power, the will to determine meaning, to circumscribe, in order to master, and gain control. What if this figure of the desert can be compared with our teaching situation? What if our style of teaching promotes this type of knowledge—even when we have nothing but good intentions? What if unknowingly, we provide learners with a place where this type of knowledge is expected, where learning means to colonize knowledge, to circumscribe it, and determine it, to map it as an untouched desert, according to an ideology reminis-

cent of if not colonialism, then at least of Orientalism? What if there is such an unconscious structure that governs our teaching and also our research?

If there is even a chance that this is the case, should we not start to critically reflect on our position? Yes. This position from which we speak and teach should be questioned, and it should be questioned by us. If what we want is responsible knowledge, we need to strive for what could perhaps be called a democratic epistemology. A democratic epistemology is an epistemology that continually questions itself, putting its own existence in question and to the test, just as democracy is never certain and should never be taken for granted, but should always be critically examined. In this sense, democracy, as Derrida has it, is always to come. We should perhaps view our teaching and our position within higher education in a similar way; that is, knowledge is something always to come, never a determined category. Responsible knowledge is first and foremost a critical questioning of its own limits, responsible teaching is a critical questioning of the teaching position, its use of knowledge and power, and with what means this power and knowledge is used. Teaching becomes the heterotopical site of crisis, where friend and enemy are decided upon; that is, where difference is creative and inventive—just as teaching and learning should be.

But let's come back to *The English Patient*, the novel. What I see in Ondaatje's novel is an ambivalence when it comes to sameness and difference, and how to come to terms with this. On the one hand, the novel seems built or structured around the apolitical, non-confrontational as the ideal—rationalism, power, and the political lead, according to the text, inevitably to violent confrontation and Orientalism. The novel strives toward sameness at the cost of difference, which it exposes as Orientalist and Eurocentric. Equality becomes the abolition of all difference.

On the other hand, the English patient, I would like to argue, represents the uncertainty of ambiguity, of constitutive difference. In him, in his very physicality, his body, as well as his book, the Herodotus, the physicality of the work upsets and problematizes sameness, self-identity, and equality without difference. The English patient as a mirror of the other, as a heterotopical site, functions in the text as a critical counter-force to a postcolonial discourse that reduces what is different, and also difference itself, into an unreflected sameness that only gives rise to a false equality, the chimera and fantasy of equality.

What *The English Patient* perhaps silently and unconsciously gives voice to is the excluded, the wholly other. And this voice is, precisely, I would like to argue, what would be the foundation of a democratic epistemology.

## Works Cited

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