

**Negotiating Rubble: Ruins, Architecture and Affect in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient***

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to offer a new reading of Michael Ondaatje's Booker-winning novel *The English Patient* (1992). It begins by describing Ondaatje's interest in architecture as well as the link between literature and the built form. This article subsequently explains and elaborates on the theoretical concept of ruins and shows how Ondaatje's novel needs to be read in terms of the materiality of ruination that remains a pervasive presence in this text. While the earlier approaches looked at Ondaatje's narrative primarily from a postcolonial perspective or through the lens of historiographic metafiction, this paper makes a non-essentialist critique of the novel primarily from the viewpoint of architecture, ruination, and affect. Using Juhani Pallasmaa's views on the phenomenology of architecture and, especially, the sensuous and affective quality of architecture, this paper will investigate how space and materiality influence the human sensorium in Ondaatje's novel. Considering Jacques Derrida's notion of "hauntology" and Tim Edensor's thesis on the spectrality of industrial ruins, an attempt is then made to explore how the disordered spaces of ruination question standard, conventional ways of remembering in urban spaces. The discussion finally highlights how the sensual memories evoked by Ondaatje's haunted space of ruins contest ordered forms of social remembering, ones which are usually represented by heritage and commemorative places like museums and memorials.

**Keywords:** *Ruins; Architecture; Affect; Michael Ondaatje.*

**Introduction**

Michael Ondaatje's masterly narratives frequently engage with the theme of architecture. References to buildings and their materiality fill the pages of his novels and sometimes, his poems too. In his very short poem "The First Rule of Sinhalese Architecture," Ondaatje cautions the reader never to construct "three doors/in a straight line" (1-2) because if one does so, a devil might "rush/through them/deep into your house," (3-5) where house, as Ondaatje suggests, corresponds to "life" (6). This correlation itself indicates how important architecture is to human life: it is the built edifice that harbours and sustains life to its fullest and, hence, the need to secure its protection. Needless to say, life and literature are also inalienably linked: literature represents life just as life becomes part of literature, each caught in a seamless continuity. There also appears to be a strong connection between literature and architecture in Ondaatje's meticulously woven corpus. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari observed this correspondence between literature and the built form when they wrote that "the literary or musical work has an architecture" which, like a built edifice, "holds heterogeneities together without their ceasing to be heterogeneous" (329). Hence, literature is conceived as a container or receptacle that is filled with diverse, heterogeneous elements while keeping its homogeneity intact. This is especially true of Ondaatje's 1992 novel *The English Patient* where the textual space is replete with allusions to multiple "heterogeneities" (Deleuze and Guattari 329). Ondaatje's works take into account the link between these structurally analogous components (poetics and the built edifice) in their understanding of human existence, but it is also a relation (more specifically, between the language of poetics and architecture) that betrays its attunement to human emotion. Following the eminent theorist Yi-Fu Tuan, one may argue that the architectural environment of a building is endowed with the ability to broaden human consciousness as much as language, which is one of the most fundamental skills of every human being (107). Hence, issues related to architecture, space, language, and poetics are revealed to be

inalienable, thereby building a complex web that defines and refines human consciousness and sensibility.

### **Understanding Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient***

It is important to note that Ondaatje's Booker-winning novel, among other things, exhibits vast spaces of ruination. The novel is set in the war-torn, derelict landscape of Italy, her geography utterly shaped by the destruction and dissipation of World War II. The first chapter begins in the bombed and depleted Villa of San Girolamo, which visibly bears traces of the devastating war. Chapter II of the novel itself is entitled "In Near Ruins," which undoubtedly reverberates one of the novel's central preoccupations. This is important because the opening of the novel with an image of debris sets the scene for later images of ruination to follow which, in fact, remain deeply entrenched in the text. The reader is told that the villa has certain rooms that "could not be entered because of rubble. One bomb crater allowed moon and rain into the library downstairs - where there was in one corner a permanently soaked armchair" (Ondaatje 8). It is hardly surprising that a novel that begins with ruination should end with similar implications: Ondaatje's text concludes with the Indian sapper Kip learning about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States of America, one of the most devastating events in human history, one which reduced human bodies and vast, expansive topographies to countless piles of debris.

The Villa of San Girolamo is undoubtedly one of the most important spatial locations of Ondaatje's text. The villa, which was once a military hospital for the Allied Forces, has been stripped of its previous status and identity, now inhabiting four characters from four different backgrounds: the Hungarian count Lazlo de Almasy (once a desert explorer as well as the novel's eponymous patient assumed by Hana to be "English"); Hana, a Canadian Army nurse taking shelter in the villa; Kip, an Indian sapper; and David Caravaggio, an Italian-Canadian thief. The villa has a

unique location and as Marijke Denger suggests, “although the villa has been assigned to the margins of organized human coexistence, those who retreat to its environment are not necessarily barred from investing in their surroundings in a potentially productive way” (36). In the villa, only the shattered and the littered remain, thus making debris one of the principal concerns of the narrative, defining its very texture and quality. The villa’s location and its connection to its inhabitants are, no doubt, supremely important in understanding how space and the materiality of ruination affect the human sensorium in Ondaatje's text. It is precisely so because both Hana and the patient (the two most important figures of the novel) share many affinities. Significantly enough, these are two bodies in ruins which corroborate the villa's ruined state and affect each other's functions. Denger has brilliantly observed:

In San Girolamo, Hana not only takes on the responsibility of nursing a dying man. She is also incited by the villa's ruined topography to take up certain responsibilities concerning her spatial surroundings. Both the patient and their mutual environment then come to perform certain functions for Hana. (41)

Another significant example of a body in ruin would be Katherine’s decaying body lying in the Cave of Swimmers. Although Almasry undertakes a three-day long trek to British-controlled El Taj to seek help to rescue the dying Katherine, he is detained as a secret agent because of his exotic name. He is even further delayed for a host of other reasons too long to include here. In fact, during this long detour, Katherine has already died in the enveloping darkness of the cave; her body, once in a state of gradual decay and ruination, has now completely turned into debris.

It is noticeable that the Villa of San Girolamo presents the reader with a space and materiality that can allow a meeting or encounter between internal and external spaces to take place so much so that the garden outside the dwelling can invade the interior seamlessly and vice versa:

Now, the villa's interior spills out into its surroundings: "There 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" (EP 43). One consequence of the villa's permeability is that it is no longer divided into distinguishable sub-spaces with individual, predetermined functions. For Hana, this means that there are no restrictions to the purposes to which her surroundings may be put. (Denger 41)

This possibility seems perfectly aligned with French urban thinker Henri Lefevre's contention about space. Lefevre suggested that it is the complex, and often conflicting interactions between internal and external spaces that characterize the whole of human history, and the history of space and life (176). Thus, architecture, a means to containing and nurturing life, can also invite forces of the outside in, that is to say, the closure separating the inside from the outside can only be an abstraction, not a solid, concrete demarcation (176).

It must be stated here that the focus of this paper is exclusively on Ondaatje's use of ruination and affect in *The English Patient*. It is significant in this regard to look at the novel's title which, metaphorically speaking, immediately conjures up a body in ruins (as suggested previously), something that brilliantly tallies with the representation of a house or a nation in a state of decay and dissipation, as it is evident in Ondaatje's text. It is hardly easy to separate buildings and bodies. In some cases, as Victor Buchli argues, built forms exceed the materiality of bodies in terms of animacy, and can contain "ancestral substances and presences" that preexist as well as outlive human lives and bodies (157). Buchli notes how, as a result of the September 11 attacks by Al-Qaeda, the victims' bodies have been utterly and unidentifiably mingled with the remaining parts of the built edifice, leaving the post-9/11 setting an increasingly complex, puzzling, and unnavigable landscape (157).

Ondaatje's placing of four characters in the derelict and war-torn landscape of Italy in this light is indeed apt while the villa's bombed and ruined architectural construction could be viewed to imply the total inseparability of bodies and buildings. Following Gell and Buchli's line of argument, it could be established that the characters inhabiting the Villa of San Girolamo are almost absorbed in and subsumed under the influence of the villa who, like Gell's Māori figures in the meeting house, are mere "furnishings," mobile appurtenances of the villa's structure. In Ondaatje's novel, they indeed have become part and parcel of the villa's habitation and surroundings. As Ladislaus de Almasy dies in the Villa of San Girolamo, his lifeless and decayed material body not only becomes part of the villa's ruined environment but also of life in an extended and collective form. It is important to note that architecture and the built edifice construct one's being in the world. As Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa astutely observed, architecture aims to mobilize and deploy rhetorical devices that constitute one's lived experience and embodiment (71). Ruination, on the contrary, demonstrates utter destruction and dereliction, depriving the built form of its integrity, something that American architect Frank Lloyd Wright considered the most significant element of modern architecture (72). In this sense, the stable materiality of architecture and the built edifice can be mere wishful thinking.

While speaking of the body and its relation to history and space in *The English Patient*, Christopher McVey has observed that Michael Ondaatje's novel deploys images of corporeality, monstrosity, and destruction (both in terms of materiality and metaphoricity) to indicate a restless, tensional and ambiguous relationship between the space of the sovereign self and wider communities of belonging while implying that subjectivity in the text remains largely entangled at the intersection of these two different, conflictual spatialities. As McVey seems to suggest, dreams of a total and independent subject are completely de-totalized and thrown into relief by Ondaatje's utilization of the deracialized, mongrel body which acts as a provisional, interstitial and constantly shifting space between two unstable

spatial markers (141). This hybrid body that is simultaneously somewhere and nowhere is, no doubt, ridden with ambivalence and ambiguity. It occupies a liminal space between two materialities which are often in disagreement with one another. Interestingly enough, the spatial location of the villa can also be said to be endowed with liminal attributes. As “it is at once profoundly shaped by its previous involvement in and defined by its current removal from social structure, Villa San Girolamo can be said to display liminal attributes” (Denger 36).

Throughout human history, spaces of ruination have had a certain glamour and beauty in popular imagination. They are sometimes particularly appealing for their affective, sensual/sensorial details and conditions as they instantly evoke a sense of desolate beauty, but also, importantly, the grandeur of the past (Macaulay 255). In Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, it is the context that provides the reader with an understanding of how important ruins are in this text. The setting of the novel in a war-devastated Italian villa at the height of the Italian Campaign during the Second World War is quite clear enough. Here, it can be argued that the use of ruins in this novel is not only to show the large-scale devastation of World War II but to embody and generate an affective response that is somewhat aligned with Macaulay’s conceptualization of ruins. Italy itself is a city with remarkable antecedents in history, famous for such historical sites as Venice and Milan. Thus, it is not hard to believe that Ondaatje’s intention to use a Tuscan villa as the setting of his novel is to foreground Macaulay’s idea of “dead cities” which “stir us with their desolate beauty” (255). The sense of affect or sensual/sensorial data can also be registered by certain formal properties of the text in discussion. One may argue that ruination in Ondaatje’s novel operates not only in a geographical or physical way (at the level of content) but also in a metaphorical or figurative fashion (at the level of form). Roland Barthes has argued in his discussion on Marquis de Sade that “the pleasure of reading [...] proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions)” (6). It will be intriguing to view one of Ondaatje’s passages in the novel to illustrate Barthes’s idea at work.

Ondaatje writes: “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 sense of tapestry” (7). These gaps and fissures certainly imply a sense of violence, an effect of some destruction even in the textual space, but at the same time, can generate the pleasure of reading, an affect that is resultant of this archi-textual destruction.

This article would like to discuss the notion of “affect” a little later and show how ruins and affect are closely linked together. For the time being, it is important to focus on the idea of ruination at a slightly greater depth. As Jonathan Hill aptly notes, materials of temporary endurance and intricacies of ecology and acoustics hardly remain intact during the long process of decay and dissolution. As a result, the forms that are most substantial in quality may offer a somewhat fragmented, distorted, and unrealistic portrait of the original architectural environment (194). Hill thus challenges the essentialist notion of decay as ruins as he proposes a more inclusive and refined understanding of it: ruination, to say the least, is not an effect, but rather a process, a seamless continuity (194). In this sense, the Villa of San Girolamo can be argued to be in a state of ruination even before it is occupied by either of the novel’s protagonists, namely, Hana, the patient (Count Ladislaus de Almasy), Kip, and David Caravaggio, or the process of decay may have started even before World War II erupted. It is to be remembered in this context that Almasy’s burnt body is no less than a bombed and depleted landscape, just as Hana’s broken and bleeding body is in ruins, intricately entwined with the war-devastated geography of Italy. The decay and degeneration of the built form are also caused by various natural phenomena, as the building in discussion is provisional, contingent, and circumstance-dependent. A building, as Hill argues, transforms into a ruin in due course:

A building is in a constant state of transformation.... Harsh weather and atmospheric pollutants undermine components; plants, insects,



animals, and birds enlarge fissures and cracks; building materials react to each other; and people adjust, abandon, or destroy whole structures. (194)

Here, it may be advanced that this is what Ondaatje precisely aims at in his novel *The English Patient*. It is a truism to say that throughout the novel the ruined and depleted villa's presence is all-pervasive. Instead of depicting any material practice of maintenance and repair, Ondaatje prefers to leave the villa and other sites of excess and debris in an unchanged, unrepaired state. It is also significant to note that the novel was published in 1992, and written probably in the late 1980s, a decade symptomatic of the upsurge of neoliberal capitalism. Although practices of maintenance and repair can stall the process of gradual decay, an acceptance of partial ruination can interrogate the norm of consumption in capitalist societies (194). Thus, using the unrefined and undefined material space of ruins can be seen as an attempt on Ondaatje's part to challenge the norms and values of consumerism.

However, it is to be noted that the notion of waste can both strengthen and threaten the foundations of capitalism. As material culture expert Tim Edensor explains, it is indeed paramount to properly dispose of the produced waste (whether at an individual or institutional level) in order to meaningfully respond to a fast-paced, capitalist epoch that is in favour of exerting more rigorous control over spaces (“Waste” 315). The proper and timely deposition of waste can secure an ordered sense of social life. On the other hand, waste matter, if it is not properly deposited or disposed of, can pose a threat to all forms of heritage, commodified spaces as well as practices of maintenance and repair. Most often, these sites of excess are not easy to cleanse or expunge as they are particularly replete with unbounded litter and remnants, profuse in matter and meaning (“Ghosts” 829). Edensor observes that such sites, when haunted by disruptive ghosts, “seethe with memories” and “haunt the visitor with vague intimations of the past, refusing fixity” (829). It may be worthwhile to remember in this regard French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s

contention about his project on hauntology. To explain his concept, Derrida gives the example of William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, which employs Derrida's concept as it shows "the expected return of the dead King" (10). The spirit of Hamlet's late father, symptomatic of the death or end of history, comes by being revenant (coming back) as the play figures both "a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again" (10). The past can indeed haunt or affect the present in numerous ways. Even though the unrecognizably burnt patient Almasy can somehow suggest the disappearance of the traces of history, it must be noted that this elision can also entail the coming of a ghostly spectre, a past that no longer exists except in spectrality. Even though Hana modifies and appropriates her surroundings just as she likes, it does not, in fact, bring about a complete transformation in the villa's architectural set-up. Although she makes a vegetable patch in the courtyard of the ruined villa in order to trade vegetables with other food items from the town, it does not take away the fact that this built edifice was once a war hospital, the traces of which are still visible (Hana is a nurse looking after the English patient).

Sometimes ghosts and spectres are so pervasive and influential that they easily become part of one's day-to-day life. As far as Sadeq Rahimi's anthropological perspective is concerned, one's everyday, mundane life consists in living and working with spectres, ghosts, and apparitions just as unmistakably as spending time and cooperating with friends and colleagues. Whether it is a Balinese driver showing respect to spirits or a Javanese friend trying to appease the troublesome apparition responsible for keeping him awake, ghostly spectres are found to be everywhere in human society (7). Here, it must be pointed out that the concept of the ghost can function at both literal and metaphorical levels. As the English patient lies in his bed in the desolate, decrepit villa, tightly holding Herodotus's *Histories*, it is this intertext that allows the reader to catch a glimpse of his pre-crash life as a cartographer and desert explorer, as a secret lover of Katherine

Clifton, finally leading to her and her husband Geoffrey's death. Almasy can do nothing but mumble and reminisce about the past the traces of which, most importantly, the ghostly spectre of Katherine, still loom at large in the villa's surroundings, either in the process of Almasy's faint recollection, Hana's intermittent readings from *Histories*, or through her presence itself just as the patient activates and opens a window into Hana's past whence the phantasma of her father comes back, again and again. The past haunts the present in multiple ways in the built environment of San Girolamo and especially, the presence of the library in the villa's material condition can be viewed as an important instrument in this case. As Denger points out:

In the library, selected episodes from the past are made tangible by German mines as well as numerous copies of canonical works of literature. The library not only allows for an intermingling of very different moments of the past in the present. Considering that it has been "sealed for safety" (EP 11), it is also a space in which the past endures to such an extent as to potentially impact dramatically on the future of anyone foolhardy enough to enter it. Manifesting the impossibility of neatly separating past events and their consequences from those of the present and the future, the library inserts an anachronous understanding of time into the heart of San Girolamo's architectural set-up. (45)

The past is hauntological but is also affective. Affect here can be said to mean either a sudden change or transformation due to the collision of two bodies or "the transitional product of an encounter, specific in its ethical and lived dimensions, and yet it is also as indefinite as the experience of a sunset, transformation, or ghost" (Colman 11-13). In fact, affect is not just produced by the collision of two bodies. There are a number of other factors which play a crucial role in generating affects: geography, memory, ecology, meteorology, culture, etc. The fact that an affect is as

indefinite as a ghost may also indicate its grounding in spectrality. Hence, haunting must be affective, and the functioning of memory and hauntology must be very closely connected. However, there appears a notable departure between the two. As Gaston R. Gordillo has suggested, a haunting is to be distinguished from memory, as it is not analogous to linguistically articulated narratives. Rather, it amounts to an affect generated by a non-presence which deploys a somewhat non-discursive, hard-to-articulate, and yet positive force on the body, thus transforming this absence into a material presence (31). Gordillo reframes ruination as "rubble" which, no doubt, broadens the creative possibilities of spaces of debris. He intends to show how the space of rubble affects material bodies and, more importantly, how the same object can bring into play a certain pressure on people with different class as well as cultural milieu (5). In addition, he wishes to outline the affective dimensions of matter and space through rubble's very negativity and the ruptures it foregrounds (6). Gordillo points out that whereas the notion of "ruin" clearly evokes a sense of disconnection, disembodiment, and rupture, it suggests, at the same time, a unified object that is considered somewhat fetishistic as far as elite sensibilities are concerned. In his analysis, this popular elitist conception of ruination lies heavily predicated on a sense of utter disregard for heaps of rubble, generally designated as "ruins" by the heritage industry (6). Hence, if the notion of ruins is an elite construction, the idea of rubble can be said to constitute a possibility that significantly interrogates the elitism surrounding piles of debris. "Rubble," as Gordillo states, emerges thus both as a concept of philosophical and political significance as it thoroughly deglamorizes ruins by revealing the gradual sedimentation and destruction of its material condition (10). It is important to note that Ondaatje, in his text, not only gives examples of ruins in the general sense (as an elite construct) but also of rubble (a framework that questions this sense of elitism).

It must be mentioned here that even though the ruin is a somewhat unified object, this paper will be using the word "ruins" or "ruination" throughout the rest of

the essay for the sake of convenience. There is indeed no denying that the tension between commodified metropolitan spaces and sites of excess and debris is an important concept in the theoretical literature on “ruins”. The ordered and heritage spaces of the city can be found as similar to Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "Apollonian," one which sharply contrasts with the "Dionysian" side of existence (vast spaces of ruination, a disordered sense of social remembering). One should not fail to notice Lefevre's insightful observations on these two sides of existence which, as already noted, conflict with and complement each other. As Lefevre argues: "If the living organism indeed captures, expends, and wastes a surplus of energy, it must do so by the laws of the universe" (178). However, the importance of the Dionysian challenging the totality of Apollonian, monitored, regulated domains is perhaps demonstrated nowhere better than in the work of British cultural geographer Tim Edensor. Edensor, in his thesis on industrial ruination, writes that the modern city is never able to assume a Apollonian, regulated domain of existence as it is continuously visited by the neglected and the repressed, most conspicuously in sites and spaces of marginality because these are sites where ghostly memories and hauntings cannot be completely expunged. ("Ghosts" 833).

In Edensor's study, these peripheral sites are the spaces that play a crucial role in evoking ghostly memories that can challenge preferred versions of history. As opposed to heritage and commemorative spaces like museums and memorials which often serve to reinforce an ordered sense of social remembering, the spaces between two or more buildings, the cluttered, unfurnished backsides of urban spaces, culverts, alleys, and service areas (833), often work to interrogate and disrupt this order and harmony. It is important to note that the villa in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is situated at the margins of human existence, a space that is, in Edensor's logic, would be continually haunted by disruptive ghostly spectres and involuntary memories, thereby refusing totalization and commodification. Ondaatje's refusal to glorify heritage spaces is also apparent in the total absence of museums and memorials in the

novel, spaces which are usually tasked with preserving and commodifying materialities through practices of maintenance and repair, something that promotes an ordered social remembering in the Western metropolis.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has mainly tried to point out the interconnected nature between ruins, architecture, and affect in Michael Ondaatje's 1992 text. As already noted, Ondaatje's Booker-winning novel boasts of ruined landscapes and sites of debris which serve multiple functions in the context of the novel. First, these spaces of excess, ruination, and waste serve to interrogate the commodified and sanctified spaces of the heritage industry, practices of maintenance and repair, the upsurge of a consumerist, capitalist democracy, and an ordered sense of social remembering. Second, the sites of debris in the novel generate a sense of affect and haunting, both of which are heavily invested in the project of resisting fixity and totalization in urban spaces which in turn link this objective with the one mentioned above. Third, ruins in Ondaatje's text reveal architecture in a vulnerable, decayed, and decaying state by destroying its most valued component: integrity, thereby turning the material stability of architecture into wishful thinking. Fourth, ruination can occur in a building even before it is occupied or completely abandoned as it is conditioned by meteorological, ecological, and many other cultural factors. Fifth, bodies and buildings are inseparable from each other so much so that built edifices can serve not simply as anthropomorphic representations but as extensions of body or life collectively. Last but not least, this article responds to the complex interactions between literature, architecture, memory, hauntology, capitalism, waste matter, and affect in the rich, intricate tapestry of Ondaatje's puzzling yet interesting novel. The originality and wider implication of the analysis can be found in its repeated stress on the condition of materiality (an important concept in contemporary cultural criticism), as well as in stimulating further discussions about Ondaatje's multi-layered prose and his overriding interest in architecture. Further studies in this area may take into

consideration a geocritical reading of Ondaatje's novel, underscoring the complex dynamics and interdependence of space and place and the perspective of disability studies in approaching a more nuanced and refined understanding of the characters (Almasy, Hana, and Caravaggio) in the novel.

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