

COVERING ONE'S TRACKS

Desert Roads from Memory to Fable

AL MASSI, Michael Ondaatje's *English Patient*, travels through the North African Sahara as an explorer with a passion for the desert and its inhabitants.¹ When he speaks of the desert – on his deathbed, his body burned, his memories and Hanna's ministrations keeping him alive – he is an exalted lover, a man who has discovered his Eldorado, and has lost it to war and politics. He dwells on a Bedouin's face, relishes the names of winds and watches a boy dancing next to a bonfire:

Here in the desert, which had been an old sea where nothing was strapped down or permanent, everything drifted – like the shift of linen across the boy as if he were embracing or freeing himself from an ocean of his own blue afterbirth. A boy arousing himself, his genitals against the colour of fire.²

He can tell a tribesman from another by the taste of saliva on the date the men chew and pass around. Al Massi is searching for the lost oasis of *Zarzura*, but it is sensual experience, rather than science or vain-glory, that drives his quest – and it is sensual experience more than anything that drives Ondaatje's writing. When the Second World War breaks out and choices can no longer be postponed, it comes as no surprise that the explorer opts for "a richness of lovers and tribes" rather than maps and armies.³

Motab'l Hazzal, the old man in Abdel Rahman Munif's epic novel *Cities of Salt*, loses his desert oasis, *Wadi'l Ouyoun* – The Valley of Springs – to American oil companies.⁴ But, unlike Al Massi's Sahara, Motab's Wadi is his birthplace and the only corner of earth he has ever known and loved. The Wadi survives on passing caravans, extending Arab generosity in times of plenty and fighting rival tribes

over water in times of dearth. The young often migrate because the "people of Wadi'l Ouyoun are like its water: when they exceed a certain limit they must flood over and flow away . . ." ⁵ One day, three European-looking foreigners appear, escorted by two Arab men. They are searching for something the Wadi's inhabitants could not make out. It isn't long before the Emir's soldiers evict Motab's folks from the Wadi to clear the way for monstrous oil-extraction machinery. On the same day, Motab mysteriously disappears, last seen riding his camel eastward. Wadi'l Ouyoun, a lost Eden rather than an Eldorado, later acquires a mythical quality in the eyes of the exiled community. So does Motab himself, his hoped-for return a focus of the community's aspirations. Memory replaces the desert as

man's desired curse and his dangerous game. Just as it allows him to travel towards freedom, it becomes his prison. And, in this permanent journey, he reconstitutes the world, his desires and illusions.⁶

Al Massi and Motab are very different characters but both become heroes by rejecting and circumventing loss. Both men, in other words, are resisting history because it has no respect for the sanctity of the desert. While Al Massi swims against the tide of war, loses the fight, and reconstructs his fabulous desert on his deathbed, Motab vanishes at the moment of the Wadi's final disappearance and hence does not experience the loss.

Loss, memory and migration meet again in Eva Sallis' novel *Hiam* whose protagonist is an Arab migrant driving through the Australian desert.⁷ Hiam, an educated Jordanian woman married to a Palestinian man, drives her husband's taxi out of Adelaide,

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northward, following a family trauma. Her daughter Zena and her husband Masoud, both lost to her in different ways, hover in the back of her mind. Masoud, who must work as a taxi driver even though he has qualified as an engineer, is gradually overwhelmed by the indignities and disappointments of migration. To make matters worse, Zena's estrangement from her family grows, as she rejects her parents' restrictions on cross-ethnic dating and pre-marital sex and eventually breaks free of them.

Eva Sallis spins an unusual tale out of such conventional fictional material as the affinity between natural and psychic landscapes, a Father-Mother-Daughter web of relationships and the modern migration experience.

Both the past and the future unravel in Hiam's mind as she penetrates deeper into the outback. The desert, in Hiam's case, is a background to her torment, rather than the object of her bereavement or the focus of her passions. A harsh physical landscape, it is far from neutral, mirroring, amplifying and distorting her predicament. If, in the case of Al Massi and Motab's folks, the past invades the present and memory is allowed to reconstitute the world, Hiam's desert is the landscape which makes such a fusion untenable. It is, in other words, the scene of her catharsis.

In his analysis of the dubious motivations of Gutzon Borglum, sculptor of the four presidential heads on Mount Rushmore in South Dakota and anti-Semitic member of the Ku Klux Klan, the British-American historian Simon Schama says in his book *Landscape and Memory*, voicing the thoughts of the mountain-master: "To make over a mountain into the form of a human head is, perhaps, the ultimate colonization of nature by culture, the alteration of landscape to mandscape".⁸ The Desert – that great omission in Schama's book – resists perhaps more tenaciously mental and physical colonization by humans. Where mountains are unruly heights waiting to be scaled, trimmed and given semantic shape, deserts offer their harsh monotony and dry emptiness as a challenge. They resist the shaping power of human imagery because they fail to inspire it, as Hiam was to discover:

The stilted ideas trotted by like low trees and stunted bushes, and the road accommodated them. She felt mentally dry and rusty. Hiam with the University Education was strangely inadequate out in the red, while the road's readiness to be anything from her lover to the unravelling skein of human

psyche was disturbing. The road was obliging every time and she left the game in disgust.⁹

In crossing the Australian desert, Hiam was not only trying to come to terms with a life crisis, performing a "purgatory of repetition" in the aftermath of the breakdown of her family.¹⁰ She was, as Eva Sallis pointed out in an interview, "colonizing" a foreign place, her new country, and dealing in her own way, with that foreignness.

Borglum's enterprise and Hiam's journey are two contrasting ways of mentally appropriating a landscape. While the first is a particular incarnation of the state of mind of the conquering settler, the second pertains to the alienated migrant. Clearly, the right-wing sculptor goes about his business in a more physical and pompous manner than Hiam. He must make the landscape in his own image (or his tribe's) in order to be at home in it. His obsessions are crude in their graphic possessiveness of nature, compared to Hiam's private and gradual integration of her new country into her consciousness. But both Hiam and Borglum must start by projecting themselves onto the landscape, in order to contain its unfamiliarity. In Borglum's case, this is done almost literally: "So tireless was Borglum's self-promotion that it is not too much to suggest that, somewhere in his mind, there was always meant to be a fifth head up there on the mountain."¹¹

For Hiam however, it is a dynamic interplay between memory and landscape that drives the quiet conquest: the less she hides in her memory, the more she is able to be in the landscape, and eventually be at home in it. Memory, to Hiam, is a mixed blessing, a refuge and a prison. Despite the profound sense of loss that blights her household – Jordan left behind, Palestine never seen, Australia never understood, Masoud's career never realized – she has a capacity for happiness that is most in evidence in the way she nurtures old memories, at once vehicles of loss and remedies for the pain of separation: "She awoke in the tent in the morning light. A memory rose unexpectedly and she clutched at it, rolling it over, savouring it."¹²

While her flight to the desert is rendered in the past tense, her flashbacks are narrated in the present. This reversal of the temporality of the novel creates a powerful intimacy between Hiam and the reader. As she travels inland, the demarcation between reality and memory gradually becomes blurred in her mind. Her engagement with, and disengagement

from, the landscape become more painful and abrupt, with heat waves and small towns and kangaroo carcasses punctuating the road. Stories – hallucinatory visions, dreams and fairy tales – begin to dominate her imagination and ours. This, I thought, was where the novel's strength lies, in Sallis' ability to enact and balance against each other those three elements of Hiam's experience: her emotional turmoil and its history, her interaction with the Australian landscape, and, finally, her eventual redemption, the outcome of a therapeutic fusion of reality and memory into something resembling fable.

HIAM BELONGS TO an Arab minority in Australia which, although subjected to harsh judgments by the dominating Anglo-Celtic culture, lacks the representational and political means of challenging the prevailing views. In *Hiam*, there is no debate between the different ethnic communities, only blind prejudice and mutual contempt. Significantly, Hiam's powerlessness as a migrant is most acutely felt when quizzed by Australians about her presumed powerlessness as a Muslim woman:

The first time someone asked her what it was like growing up as a woman she was so confused that she stared, her mind sidling away rapidly like a crab on the seafloor . . . She had not realized how strange Australians would be and how powerful their view of her would be. She had stopped speaking to people but earlier she had occasionally tried. She senses now that unless she says what they already think, their pity grows the more she speaks. She finds the words dead on her lips and the sound of things precious to her becoming weak and piping as she looks into eyes that think they know something else about her. She and her friends know one thing clearly: being Muslim is not highly thought of and Australia itself is.

"It must be wonderful for you to live in Australia!"¹³

Apart from the obvious irony, the celebratory blindness of the last sentence is cruel: it sounds like a complete closure, a final word killing off the possibility of real communication. Sallis captures here two crucial moments of migration, two sobering discoveries migrants make, which are constitutive of their experiences. There is, on the one hand, the importance of the views of the dominating culture in the migrant's self-identity, giving rise to an encumbering self-con-

sciousness – words dying on one's lips. There is also the impossibility, or so it seems, of changing these views, even when they are as demeaning and naive as the ones that Hiam encounters – the blindness of "eyes that think they know something else about her". And if it is impossible to counter prejudice, it is not only because prejudice is deeply entrenched and faithfully perpetuated by the mainstream media. More important perhaps is the fact that the objects of prejudice – Muslim men and women, middle-aged Russian migrants, Vietnamese teenagers and so on – remain marginal in the dominating culture. They do not get the attention that might have led to scrutiny and change, even if prejudice and hostility is, as one might expect, high on the migrant's agenda. The intensity of prejudice, in other words, reflects the degree of presence of the ethnic community in the mainstream culture. That is why encounters such as the one Hiam makes with Australians are so fraught with politics, even when they are perceived by both parties as the most private of conversations.

A review of *Hiam* in the *Bulletin*, sent to me by Sallis' publisher, turned out to be a curious extension into real life of the misunderstanding depicted in the above scene. The review talks about a "close-knit Muslim community" and says:

Australians, from the perspective of the female members of the clan, are not much better than prostitutes . . . After discovering that Australians have little regard for her religion and culture, Hiam has retreated into herself and abandoned the effort to make friends . . . keenly aware of any slight to her husband's honour, Hiam is powerless to prevent the many humiliations and disappointments he is forced to endure.¹⁴

Throughout this short article, there is an unmistakable sense in which the reviewer herself has little regard for Hiam's religion and culture. While there is nothing wrong with this per se, almost a third of the account is about the Muslim community's racist views of Australians. No question at all of Hiam's strength, of Australian prejudice, of the dilemmas of the migration experience, of Masoud's work problems as opposed to his preoccupation with his 'honour'. We're back into firm normative territory here, where the characters of the novel are torn out of their context and conveyed to us with the same old keywords: Islam, honour, powerlessness of women and so on. Hiam's problem, we gather from the article, is

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that she is an educated Muslim woman without the strength of character to challenge her community's prejudice against Australians, or to break free from patriarchy. Only an acrobatic reversal of the story based on a highly selective reading could have come up with this interpretation.

Such a reading is hopefully exceptional. But although reading is a creative act and every reading is a re-writing of the work, I could not help wondering, after reading the *Bulletin* review, whether fiction changes readers or readers change fiction, and under what conditions the former is more likely than the latter.

In fact, Islam, as a religious language and a spiritual system of beliefs, is an intrinsic part of what holds the character of Hiam together. Hiam's spiritual rebirth is sealed with an encounter, in dream, with the Prophet Mohammad. Sallis' usage of Koranic verse is refreshingly unconventional; it goes a long way in conveying the way Hiam views herself and the world.

The novel reminded me of the extent to which Koranic expressions in English, such as *Allahu Akbar* (God is Greater) and *In the Name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful*, have become contaminated by the media's portrayal of them as vehicles of fanaticism and hate. These expressions have an utterly apolitical life of their own in Arabic, since they are used in daily communication by millions of Muslims. But mainstream Western media, which measures the world on a scale set between *boring* and *great story*, remains blind to anything but the most violent late twentieth-century manifestations of Islam.

Ironically, Islamic revivalism, with its insistence on the inseparability of State and Church, is an unwitting accomplice of this reductionism. Militant Islam not only leads to more religion in politics, but also to more politics in spirituality. The religious ritual becomes an act of rebellion against secular tyrants, a symbol of cultural allegiance, a yearning for a mythical past, or a protest against Western hegemony, and so on and so forth. This has overshadowed the vast spiritual space in the lives of Muslims that has no conscious political dimension; a space, both social and private, occupied by rituals, everyday expressions, linguistic and social conventions, and communal beliefs, which add up to a dynamic spiritual and cultural identity.

The realm of the everyday is far more relevant to the lives of Muslims than political activism or political violence, save perhaps in societies in a state of

war or civil war. As Eva Sallis reminds us, such a realm is best explored by fiction which, though it can be deeply political, is certainly able to map out other dimensions of people's lives. Cultures, although delimited by language, beliefs and rituals, are never as final or pre-determined as stereotype and prejudice would have us believe. Good fiction depicts them more accurately: they are as open to possibilities as the individuals that live within them.

HIAM'S REDEMPTIVE QUEST, like the reminiscence of Michael Ondaatje's *Al Massi* on his deathbed and the disappearance of Abdel Rahman Munif's *Motab'l Hazzal*, is a cultural as well as psychological journey. The harshness of the desert becomes a sanctuary, a safe haven against the tyranny of culture and history and all external forces beyond the individual's control. And it is of course an illusory – or, at best, a temporary – haven, since these forces will triumph in the end, as *Al Massi* and *Motab* have discovered and as Hiam understood when she finally emerged from the desert, scarred and transformed. But this victory is never complete because humans conjure countless ways of circumventing culture and history – and the collective imagination they give rise to. Individual imagination survives and, by the same token, reshapes and enriches the forces it has resisted so fiercely. Therein, perhaps, lies the paradox of all three of the above characters. After all, *Al Massi* represents a long tradition of European desert lovers who would probably not have existed without the European expansionism which they often loathed. The figure of *Motab'l Hazzal* strongly hints at the present-day alienation of the Hijazi Arabs and their self-perceived loss of affinity with the land. Likewise, *Hiam* is, among other things, a new facet in a quintessentially Australian mosaic: a tense encounter between a hostile landscape and a foreign sensibility.

ENDNOTES

1. Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, London, Picador, 1993.
2. Ondaatje, p. 22.
3. That is why the reversal of Anthony Minghella's screen adaptation of the book is extraordinary: a powerful anti-war novel has turned into a largely conventional war movie. The character Madox who, in the novel, kills himself in his local church to protest against war mongering by the priest, takes his own life on screen because he believed his friend to be a Nazi spy. The Sikh Kip, who burst with anger at the news of Hiroshima in the novel, celebrates the end of the war in