

tive recounts Garrett's relentless pursuit of his retreating quarry, Billy's temporary retreat to the Chisum ranch, his arrest, ride to trial and escape from prison, and the final fateful encounter between lawman and outlaw at Pete Maxwell's ranch in Texas.

To recapitulate the poem's narrative in these bald terms, however, conveys little of the strangeness and visionary power of its rewriting of Billy's history and legend. The volume is entitled the 'collected works', not the 'life' or 'history' of Billy the Kid, and it is clear from its opening pages that Ondaatje's recasting of Billy's story makes little concession to the linear form of historiographical narrative. Instead, Ondaatje's playful rewriting of the struggle between Billy and Pat Garrett reverses the assumed relation between cause and effect, collocates inconsistent and occasionally contradictory evidence, interpolates into the poem apocryphal testimony and 'impossible' points of view, refuses to respect the distinction between 'historical' and 'non-historical' modes of representation, and repeatedly collapses the distance between narrator and the subject of narration. Dead before the narrative even begins, Billy is resurrected by the reader through the act of recomposing the textual traces of him that American history has bequeathed us; meanwhile Ondaatje's ludic superimposition of myth and fantasy upon historical memory underlines our collective responsibility for the present uses to which Billy's image is put. One consequence of the poem's self-conscious fascination with the way memory becomes 'history' and history blurs into myth is to open up the phrase 'collected works' to a multiplicity of possible readings: it comes simultaneously to represent Billy's legacy of murder, the poems that constitute Ondaatje's entire sequence, and the continually renewed labour of interpretation by which each succeeding generation brings a new image of Billy into focus.

Recalling the burst of publicity that attended the poem's publication, Ann Mandel notes the profound, and profoundly volatile, impression made upon its readership by a work that was 'praised by critics and readers and roundly condemned – to [Ondaatje's] delight – by federal MPs for dealing with an *American* hero and outlaw'.² This initial ambivalence soon

3 The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

I knew both men well and, in my opinion, Garrett was just as cold and hard a character as the Kid. The great difference between them was that Garrett had the law on his side and the Kid was outside the law. (Paulita Maxwell)¹

The publication of Ondaatje's long poem *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* marked a decisive moment in his writing career. The volume received the Governor General's Award in 1970, bringing Ondaatje's name to a wealth of new readers and establishing him as one of the rising stars of the new generation of Canadian writers who would come to prominence in the ensuing decade. Freely mixing the sketchily known historical facts of Billy the Kid's life and crimes with an imaginative reconstruction of his biography and legend, the poem focuses upon Billy's final outlaw year on the New Mexico frontier and his doomed attempt to evade capture by Sheriff Pat Garrett, his onetime companion and ultimate nemesis. Moving from the concentrated lyric focus of Ondaatje's early poems to an 'open form' created from a collage of textual fragments, *Billy the Kid* combines a range of different registers – 'biographical' writing, oral anecdote, historical romance and singular moments of intense lyrical reflection – in a sometimes bewildering flicker of perspectives. Simultaneously inhabiting Billy's consciousness while maintaining an impersonal and omniscient 'historical' point of view, the poem isolates key moments in the story of Billy's downfall. Beginning with Garrett's systematic destruction of Billy's dwindling band of outlaws, Ondaatje's decentred and synoptic narra-

dissipated to the point where, a mere twenty years later, *Billy the Kid* had become one of the most interpreted texts in recent Canadian Literature.³ One reason for the poem's striking popularity, Douglas Barbour suggests, is that its polyvalent register and decentred form leave it unusually open to reader responses and therefore vulnerable to being pressed into 'a particular critic's ideological needs'.⁴ Another reason is that the story already appears deeply familiar to us, recycled as it has been down the years in films, novels, biographies, ballads, 'yellow' journalism and television serials. We think we *know* the story before we *read* the story; such unconscious acceptance of the narrative's basic outline enables Ondaatje to play with our generic expectations, leading us in turn to rethink the established relation between law and disorder in the Old West and question our understanding of what we understand an historical event to be. A key component of Ondaatje's revisionist strategy is to emphasise the historically contingent and conditioned character of all our historical knowledge by constructing Billy's story from the same elements of 'prose, prose poem, dime novels, newspaper accounts and interviews' that have always been used to fix his image in the popular imagination.⁵ Such exploitation of our prior imaginative investment in Billy's historical drama is made even easier by the fact that his history has undergone mythic revision almost from the moment of his death.⁶

Ondaatje's flamboyantly intertextual version of Billy's legend plays upon our assumed familiarity with the story – a familiarity compounded only three years after the poem's appearance by the release of Sam Peckinpah's movie *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Although Ondaatje reworks a variety of narrative sources, two intertexts achieve particular prominence. Throughout the poem Ondaatje draws heavily upon Walter Noble Burns's early bestselling historical account of Billy's life. Burns's book, itself a curious amalgam of history, myth-making and oral anecdote, came to exert a considerable influence upon *Billy the Kid*, and Ondaatje's complex rewriting of Burns's narrative is crucial to the poem's development. As we might expect, the genre of Western movies also had a substantial impact upon the text. In

the years when Ondaatje was growing up, films like Ray Taylor's *The Son of Billy the Kid* (1949) and Kurt Neumann's *The Kid from Texas* (1950) popularised and reconfigured key elements of Billy's legend; a more direct influence upon Ondaatje's imagination, given the poem's subtitle 'Left Handed Poems', may well have been Arthur Penn's *The Left Handed Gun* (1958), a cinematic version of Gore Vidal's teleplay *The Death of Billy the Kid* (1955). Discussing his admiration for Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Ondaatje acknowledged the hold Western films had upon him during his early years: 'Luckily I saw the film after I had finished *Billy the Kid* because here was an Italian film-maker making this Western, in many ways the best Western, where with *Billy the Kid* I was trying to make the film I couldn't afford to shoot, in the form of a book. All those B movies in which strange things that didn't happen but could and should have happened I explored in that book'.⁷

The acute textual self-consciousness of *Billy the Kid* has done much to establish Ondaatje's reputation as a 'postmodern' writer. Certainly Ondaatje's poem has much in common with that vibrant strand of postmodern writing Linda Hutcheon has termed 'historiographic metafiction'. Hutcheon demarcates by this term those radically self-questioning 'historical' texts, such as the novels of Salman Rushdie, E. L. Doctorow and Umberto Eco, which challenge the impersonal and potentially homogenising perspective of traditional historiography by asserting instead the plurality, provisionality and historically constituted character of historical points-of-view.⁸ Historiographical metafiction, she argues, are works that are 'intensely self-reflective but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge'. Typically these fictions 'problematize' the very nature of historical knowledge by demonstrating that we can have no access to the historical 'real' beyond its textualised remains; they do this by highlighting the inevitable inscription of subjective and ideological points-of-view within the medium of historical narrative.

The similarities between the concerns of historiographical metafiction and the style and form of *Billy the Kid* are striking.

Thus the radical transitivity of Ondaatje's poetics presents a poem groping continually towards an understanding of its historical subject while reproducing, in the elliptical relation between its constituent elements, the hermeneutic problems implicit in every historical judgement. The contingency of historical knowledge is further underscored by Ondaatje's decision to recreate the life of a figure as over-determined as Billy the Kid: a figure who is simultaneously historical and mythic, provincial and international, subaltern and authoritarian, the ceaselessly reconstituted object of a myriad discursive practices. Our problems in understanding Billy's character and motivations, the poem suggests, are partly empirical problems concerning the lack of reliable and incontrovertible historical evidence – a fact Ondaatje emphasises by taking Burns's popular history as his primary source-text – and partly the inevitable consequence of the mediation of the past by multiple layers of historical narrative. *Billy the Kid* explores these questions by recasting the relationship between historicity and history in terms of a distinction between *events*, which Hutcheon reminds us have no intrinsic meaning in themselves, and *facts*, which constitute the explanatory ground of a potentially universal history:

Historiographic metafiction, like both historical fiction and narrative history, cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the status of their 'facts' and of the nature of their evidence, their documents. And obviously, the related issue is that of how these documentary sources are deployed: can they be objectively, neutrally related? Or does interpretation inevitably enter with narrativization? ... Historiographic metafiction suggests a distinction between 'events' and 'facts' that is one shared by many historians. Events, as I have been suggesting, are configured into facts by being related to 'conceptual matrices within which they have to be imbedded if they are to count as facts' ... Facts are not given but are constructed by the kinds of questions we ask of events.⁹

The formidable artfulness of *Billy the Kid* is to acknowledge that events, to become facts, must be embedded within the

conceptual matrix of a narrative history. One problem, of course, with acknowledging the *constructedness* of historical facts is the responsibility one bears to the layers of historical experience from which these facts have been constructed. Rather than explain away the risk of historiographical metafiction's relation to the events and durations beyond narration, Ondaatje's work embraces the problem of the *singular*: those forces that trouble the accepted generalities and narrative consistency of historical discourse. We might refer to this 'problem' as the problem of the *event*, an occurrence 'in' time that calls for a refigured understanding of the very sequence of time or narration. Ondaatje's poetry reflects upon what is lost in the movements of assimilation that constitute collective historical memories, and does this by seeking to establish a point of indiscernibility between the event and a mode of historiography that effaces the specificity of the event in the act of representing it. This subaltern gesture manifests itself in a poetic syntax that explodes linearity into multiple points of perception, which disperses causality into a temporal rhythm with neither beginning nor end, which dissolves the impersonal voice of history into the discordant registers of the subjects for which it claims to speak, which makes no evaluative distinction between wholly incommensurable modes of historical inscription, and obsessively foregrounds the partiality and interestedness of certain historicising judgements. Poetry imagined in these terms, we might say, is not just a way of interpreting or explaining historical experience; it rips a hole in representation by breaking experience down into the singular processes from which it is composed in order to explore the way events become facts and a self comes to conceive of its world.

Yet for all the formal and thematic similarities between *Billy the Kid* and the genre of 'historiographic metafiction', Ondaatje's stubborn emphasis upon the *singularity* of perception also suggests ways in which his work resists the paradigm of an avowedly 'postmodern' poetics. For at work in Hutcheon's idea of the metafiction is an ethics of recuperation: the entire question of apprehending the lost or occluded subject of historical discourse is, for her, always already constituted as a problem

of *historical* representation. In these terms, the factors that produce and reconfigure our historical sense – the multiplication of analytical contexts, the imposition of hegemonic narratives or the marginalisation of subaltern voices – are always already historical in their essence. Whilst acknowledging the historically conditioned character of historical knowledge, *Billy the Kid* also asks: what are we to make of the singularity of experience before it is assimilated into a 'subjective' or 'historical' framework? How, indeed, do we open up a world of sense to ourselves and others before we take our place within the historical horizon of discourse? By neglecting these questions and rushing intemperately to a 'postmodern' reading of the poem, we risk effacing its most enigmatic and troubling feature: the sheer *unreadability* of the figure of Billy himself.

The tension the poem creates between a metafictional history and the singularity of the event is evident from its opening pages. The entire question of the construction of the past by the historical context of its reception is typographically focused upon the opening page by Ondaatje's reproduction of an empty photographic frame. The interplay between the frame's black borders and the dazzling whiteness of a space still awaiting its defining image lays stress upon the role representations play in shaping our perception of historical truth. The empty frame is both a provocation and a challenge: make what you will, it invites us, of the fragments that will follow, but accept your responsibility for the version of the past that your interpretation yields. One hundred pages later the poem will conclude by reasserting the abrupt challenge of this empty frame, albeit with one small but highly significant difference: in the bottom right-hand corner of the frame Ondaatje has inserted a tiny photograph of himself as a child dressed in cowboy garb. Playful though this insertion is, it is also a form of confession: Ondaatje will, after all, establish his poetic reputation by inhabiting the voice and persona of Billy the Kid. Beneath the empty frame on the poem's opening page is a terse accompanying note:

I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter
as quick as it can be worked – Pyro and soda developer. I

am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire – bits of snow in the air – spokes well defined – some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main – men walking are no trick – I will send you proofs sometime. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle without ground glass or tripod – please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion. (BTK, 5)

This brief passage provokes more questions than it answers. How, exactly, is this empty frame a 'picture of Billy' and who is the subject of the explanatory text? Recourse to Ondaatje's acknowledgements reveals the note to have been written by 'the great Western photographer L. A. Huffman', a celebrated exponent of frontier photography during Billy's own lifetime. But by detaching Huffman's note from its immediate context and suppressing the identity of its recipient, Ondaatje suspends the text indefinitely between an immediate and a general relevance. It is impossible, from this perspective, to be certain whether the 'I' denoted by the passage is Huffman, Ondaatje or even the impersonal voice of history itself, while the unspecified use of the second-person plural propels these lines beyond their immediate addressee and out towards the historical community of readers. The uncertain relationship established here between text and context is further underscored by the enigmatic phrase 'daily experiments', which extends almost imperceptibly beyond the immediate subject of Huffman's photographs to encompass both Ondaatje's lyrics and our own attempt to make sense of these scattered words and images. Our only path back to the frontier terrain of the nineteenth century, this interplay of frame and commentary implies, lies through this shadowy 'blur' of representations.

These problems of narrative context and address are compounded when we turn the page to read the first poem in the sequence:

These are the killed.

(By me) –

Morton, Baker, early friends of mine.

Joe Bernstein, 3 Indians.

A blacksmith when I was twelve, with a knife.

5 Indians in self-defence (behind a very safe rock).

One man who bit me during a robbery.

Brady, Hindman, Beckwith, Joe Clark,

Deputy Jim Carley, Deputy Sheriff J. W. Bell.

And Bob Ollinger. A rabid cat

birds during practice,

These are the killed.

(By them) –

Charlie, Tom O'Folliard

Angela D's split arm,

and Pat Garrett

sliced off my head.

Blood a necklace on me all my life. (BTK, 6)

Briefly sketching the primary details of Billy the Kid's criminal biography, this lyric introduces us to the curiously hybrid voice of Billy himself. Certainly the emphasis here upon crime outweighs the attention given to biography; with its blunt, affectless air, the poem has the spirit of a police confession. Legal responsibility for the dead is scrupulously adjudicated, while moral responsibility for their deaths is left wholly unexamined, as if somehow beyond the comprehension of the memorialising consciousness. But as the poem steadily accumulates its burden of detail, a nagging doubt makes itself felt concerning the entire question of 'voice' until we are led to the overwhelming question: who is actually speaking these words? The imbrication of the first-person pronoun ('These are the killed. / (By me)') with a list containing many of Billy's actual historical victims suggests these lines represent the authentic speech of Billy the Kid; yet Billy will himself be included within the list of the killed ('and Pat Garrett / sliced off my head'), making it impossible for him to be the sole narrator of this account. Instead, the voice of an exterior and impersonal 'history' speaks *through* Billy at this point; here we receive the first intimation that singular and plural points-of-view are to be seamlessly interwoven throughout the

poem. The poetic 'I' that designates Billy's historical identity, we might say, is always also the 'we' of a collective historical judgement that recomposes Billy's identity from the scant textual traces he left behind. Ondaatje's Billy the Kid is, in this sense, alive and dead, singular and plural, speaker and spoken, visible symbol of the American frontier and metaphorically suggestive of the residue of contemporary sensibility within every act of historical evaluation.

The poem's continual oscillation between first- and third-person perspectives becomes the subject of one of its most important early fragments:

Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in.

Two years ago Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south.

Our horses stepped from country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of tree green. The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge of action rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat. That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning. (BTK, 20)

Here the reader's broader problems of attribution and context are concentrated within a passage that counsels us, ironically enough, upon the ways in which to read Billy's story. Its first sentence, apparently spoken by Billy, bespeaks his determination to preserve the integrity of his biography from the interference of external forces, although it is not immediately clear whether the phrase 'through their eyes' refers to Garrett and his cohorts or the ranks of commentators who span the hundred years from Billy's time to Ondaatje's own. The two subsequent sentences, however, narrow the distance between Billy and Ondaatje to a point of imperceptibility; while both restate Billy's desire for control of his own narrative, the lexical play between 'begin' and 'be in' betrays the presence of the poetic intelligence that devised

the 'maze' of these 'collected works'. The remainder of the fragment plays off Billy's concern to find a 'way in' or productive point of departure for the story of his own life against Ondaatje's ironic awareness that any 'beginning' will inevitably return us to the labyrinth of existing historical accounts of the outlaw's life and times. There is, these sentences imply, no interpretative position exterior to these narratives: they have already flattened Billy's image upon the plane of 'frontier history', draining it in the process of substantial 'depth' and leaving it devoid of any 'significant accuracy' to his own lived experience. That Billy's quest for a new beginning is destined to be outflanked by Ondaatje's poetic irony is already apparent to us: the entire sequence begins, after all, by reinscribing the force of the narrative frames that produce and mediate Billy's historical image. Billy's story will, in this sense, always be a story 'through their eyes'; this dissident fragment, which articulates momentarily 'Billy's' resistance to such discursive enclosure, is merely one further confirmation of his unavoidable defeat.

Billy's nervousness about the selective rewriting of his own biography would be compounded, rather than allayed, by the 'maze' of Ondaatje's poetics. Ondaatje initially discovered a 'key' to 'dig out' the buried details of Billy the Kid's life in Walter Noble Burns's biography *Billy the Kid*. However, this summary acknowledgement of Ondaatje's literary indebtedness provides few clues to the extent of his radical rewriting of his source material, which fundamentally reshapes the historical context within which the climatic events of Billy's life unfold. The impression that Ondaatje maintained only the slenderest interest in historical verisimilitude is reinforced by his selection of Burns's book as his narrative template; conceived for an audience brought up on the mythical 'Outlaw West' of dime novels, Burns's biography cheerfully transforms narrative history into the stuff of popular historical drama. The vignette in which Burns describes Billy's escape from Lincoln Gaol gives a flavour of the whole:

The Kid gathered up his bridle reins, gripped the pommel, and swung into the saddle. Burdened with his two six-

shooters, rifle and cartridge belts, he was immediately kicked off. He struck the ground on his hands and knees, still holding the bridle. He leaped to his feet; for a moment he stood there in the middle of the sun-drenched road, legs braced, rifle cocked and ready for instant use, a tense, thrilling figure of a fighting man at bay. The watchers on the porch made no move, but on their minds this quick picture of Billy the Kid remained indelibly engraved for all their lives.¹⁰

Although cleaving to Burns's account for a number of its key narrative details, Ondaatje's version substantially revises the historical context that informs the earlier work. Perhaps Ondaatje's most important revision lies in his suppression of significant reference to the Lincoln County War. This brutal local conflict, in which, as Billy points out in his apocryphal jailhouse interview near the end of the poem, 'EVERYBODY' was shooting at everyone else, forms one of the main narrative strands of Burns's biography; but the only allusions Ondaatje includes to these events are a few stray hints unlikely to be recognised by a reader unfamiliar with the local history of the New Mexico frontier (*BTK*, 82). The deletion of this episode has a crucial bearing upon the story: by excising this history from his poetic narrative Ondaatje is able to relegate to the background numerous examples of Billy's own murderous exploits. Besides dispensing with the determining context of the Lincoln County War, Ondaatje also diminishes the force of one of Burns's central historical themes: the escalating struggle in 1880s New Mexico between the expansionary economic force of large landed interests and the essentially nomadic and lawless existence of social outsiders like Billy the Kid and his band of followers. Both the landowners' realisation that Billy's erratic activities now posed a significant threat to their economic and social authority and their decision to hire Pat Garrett to hunt him down constitute, for Burns, defining moments in Billy's story; the fight to the death between Billy and Garrett becomes for him emblematic of the climactic struggle between the 'Old' and the 'New' West during which the nature of frontier law and society underwent

a rapid and irreversible transformation. Despite permitting himself a cursory glance towards 'cattle politicians like Chisum', Ondaatje almost completely effaces from his poem the decisive role of the new mercantile forces represented by these expansionist landowners (BTK, 7). His indifference to the social and economic factors behind Garrett's remorseless pursuit of Billy may be gauged by an aside made halfway through the sequence. In response to the question whether there might have been 'A motive, some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence' comes the laconic reply 'yup' followed by a slab of Burns's narrative recounting the murder of the outlaw Tunstall (BTK, 54).

The killing of Tunstall was a brutal, but hardly untypical, incident within the increasingly ferocious clan warfare between the Murphy and McSween factions for control of Lincoln County. Burns locates this event near the beginning of his narrative to suggest that Billy's subsequent actions may be cast in the benevolent light of a revenge motive: 'With the murder of the Englishman, the Kid threw himself into the feud to avenge his friend's death'.¹¹ Where Burns's account of Tunstall's murder has an exclusively exculpatory function, Ondaatje's decision simply to quote Burns's narrative in the absence of an explanatory context that might illuminate its significance effectively pushes the poem further away from comprehension, rendering the violence it relates both atavistic and inexplicable. This assault on historical context is compounded by a number of poems, like the early description of Boot Hill, in which arbitrary violence is presented almost as the metaphysical condition of frontier culture. Viewed in the context of the three hundred violent deaths recorded in Boot Hill cemetery, Billy's orgy of killing becomes part of the texture of common experience rather than a constant threat to social order in New Mexico.

Not content with reinventing key aspects of Billy the Kid's story, Ondaatje's selective reworking of Burns's partial and exculpatory narrative also crucially redefines the role of Pat Garrett. The redefinition of Garrett's image is partly the consequence of Ondaatje's blithe disregard of the preceding years of Billy's outlaw career; by choosing to begin his poem in *media res*

and devoting the main burden of his narrative to Billy's doomed and desperate flight from his pursuers, Ondaatje inevitably casts Billy in a sympathetic light. From the moment that the poem begins, Garrett is portrayed as an assassin, an opportunist and a turncoat; Billy, by contrast, is presented in the romantic light of a man already marked by death. Three of the most graphic acts of violence in the entire poem – the killings of Tom O'Folliard, Charlie Bowdre and Billy himself – are performed by Garrett; Billy, meanwhile, stands curiously apart from the general mayhem, simultaneously fascinated and appalled by the damage that men do ('Jesus I never knew that did you / the nerves shot out / the liver running around there / like a headless hen jerking / brown all over the yard / seen that too at my aunt's / never eaten hen since then' (BTK, 12)).

Ondaatje's skewed vision of Billy as a commentator upon, rather than a proponent of, violence has inevitable implications for our judgement of each of the principals. By representing Billy throughout the poem as a hunted man, Ondaatje, Steven Scobie argues, significantly 'stacks the deck' in the gunslinger's favour; if the reader recoils in shock from the poem's scenes of graphic violence, she is 'reacting mainly *against* Garrett'.¹² The intermittent identification of the poem's perspective with Billy's point-of-view enables him to justify and excuse the violence employed in his execution of his rivals and present himself as a man fundamentally unlike his cold-hearted antagonist (BTK, 15).

Ondaatje's strategic revision of the biography of Billy the Kid, then, establishes his poem as both a critique and an example of the historical constitution of cultural memory. But the recognition of Ondaatje's historical self-consciousness cannot account for the full aesthetic force of *Billy the Kid* because the poem repeatedly retreats from the historical horizon of experience to meditate upon the phenomenological plane of life and consciousness. The persistent tension at the core of *Billy the Kid* between phenomenological and historical levels of experience offers a clue to the profound originality of Ondaatje's version of the story: where the struggle between Billy and Garrett has historically

been represented as a conflict between the forces of law and social disorder. Ondaatje's poem also portrays it as a struggle between two styles of being and two modes of perception. This emphasis upon the phenomenology of perception leads Ondaatje to couple his representation of character with an examination of the way subjects come to conceive of their worlds. The literary exploration of consciousness, sensation and intuition provides the ground for many of Ondaatje's most striking poetic effects; it is also the aspect of the poem that most stubbornly frustrates our conventional habits of reading.

It is immediately clear from the poem's first pages that to speak of different interpretations of the 'character' of Billy the Kid is already to impose a particular style of thought upon a text that persistently questions how we come to conceive of life in terms of characters, interests and ideologies. The difficulty we often feel in understanding the various images of Billy that the poem circulates arises because Ondaatje frequently presents a micropolitical, rather than 'historical' or 'ideological', vision of the outlaw's life and times.¹³ Instead of portraying Billy as a particular type of personality who represents a particular set of beliefs and values, Ondaatje focuses upon the way Billy's subjectivity is composed from a series of investments, desires and affects. This poetic vision of Billy the Kid embodies what Deleuze and Guattari have called a 'molecular' perception of life; a vision, that is, that remains resolutely at the level of singularities and pre-personal attachments before they are organised and extended into collective or 'molar' formations such as law, ideology, history and subjectivity. To begin from the perspective of molecular experience is to think of life in terms of the singular and partial investments from which individual ways of being are composed. Certainly conceiving of Ondaatje's poem in this way helps to illuminate otherwise impenetrable aspects of Billy's world, which, created as it is from a network of partial and incomplete memories, unfocused perceptions and seemingly random affections, is apt to appear simply chaotic and inexplicable when discussed in conventional terms.

The importance of reading Billy's image in molecular rather

than molar terms is underscored in a number of early scenes. It is glimpsed first in the curious lyric that relates the death of Charlie Bowdre, one of Billy's outlaw companions ('When I caught Charlie Bowdre dying ... while the eyes grew all over his body' (BTK, 12)).

The inadequacy of conventional notions of 'subject' and 'character' to the style of life Billy embodies is immediately apparent in this lyric. In the poem's first explicit act of violence, a man is ripped apart before Billy's eyes; but what is striking about his response is the absence of shock or emotional empathy with the victim. His response, such as it is, is unsympathetic in the fullest sense because sympathy involves an imaginative relation to another quality or condition of being. But Billy is unable to maintain the distinction between subject and object or self and world upon which such sympathy depends; instead he projects himself *into* the bodies and objects he perceives all around him. At no point in this scene can Billy be said to occupy a position 'outside' the event of Bowdre's killing, from which he might supply an emotional or moral context for the action he witnesses; his perspective is, in fact, already immanent to the event itself, an 'eye' that grows all over Bowdre's body and becomes inseparable from the man that is dying. Ondaatje's syntax and diction underline the affective, rather than emotional or moral, quality of Billy's reaction by preserving the shock of this murderous experience before it can be ordered into sense: the shuttling passage between the phrases 'giggling / at me' and 'face tossed in a gaggle' deletes the temporal delay between event and consequence within which empathy might be engendered, capturing instead the raw force of the shooting in a blank instant of perception.

Some sense of Billy's attentiveness to the singularity and intensity of affects rather than the broader system of social values and judgements that they come to constitute is required to illuminate passages of writing that otherwise appear almost wholly unfocused. One such passage is the description of Billy's earlier behaviour at Bowdre's place (BTK, 39). The unsettling aspect of the style of the sequence at this point is once more its dissolution

of subjectivity into singular, partial and affective experience. This mode of dissolution is reflected in the gradual disintegration of poetic syntax, which collapses from the grammatical propriety of 'she is boiling us black coffee' to the aphasic conjunction 'and with a bit the edge of my eye'. The point of this syntactical disarray is to express an impersonal flow of desire and affect that moves across and between bodies before it is recomposed into fixed images of subjectivity and sexuality. What appears in the second stanza is the obliteration of relations between discrete subjectivities and the reassertion of the singular and affective force of life. Billy does not feel people close to him ('Strange that how I feel people / not close to me') because proximity is still a mode of *relation* between individuated and autonomous bodies. His perception of this scene remains instead at the molecular level: the singularities of texture ('as if their dress were against my shoulder'), smell ('the strange smell of their breath / moving against my face') and light ('or my eyes / magnifying the bones across a room / shifting in a wrist'). This rupture with the logic of representation and the return to a deterritorialised flow of desire and affect becomes unavoidable for Billy whenever he passes from the codified spaces of frontier culture to the empty and unwritten Western landscape ('To be near flowers in the rain ... nothing thick sugar death' (BTK, 55)).

This short lyric begins in a mood almost of bucolic reverie ('To be near flowers in the rain'), but quickly charts the same movement from relation and contemplation to an immersion in singularities and intensities. The passage from representation to singularity occurs once more at an affective level: the 'smell of things dying flamboyant' casts us adrift in the stream of pre-personal singularities before they are subsumed into the symbolic order of concepts, identities and values. By gradually opening these words up to the intensities they conceal, Ondaatje pushes language beyond representation towards its extremities or limits. Lyric rhetoric is brought here to the pitch of an asignifying intensity by several stylistic features: the recoil from narrative sense into the internal discordance of consonant and vowel ('All that pollen stink buds / bloated split'), the calculated

indistinction between adjective and noun ('bursting the white drop of spend') and the multiplication of these figures beyond the local demands of reference ('pollen stink buds / bloated split / leaves'). Through the affective intensity of this language, Ondaatje describes how Billy becomes a part of what he perceives; what we experience by the poem's climax is the disintegration of subjectivity into the singularities that compose it, culminating in a symbolic death of the self ('can hardly breathe nothing / nothing thick sugar death') and a transformed relation between human and inhuman life.

The remarkable feature of Ondaatje's molecular style is that it no longer conceives of the subject as the ground or truth of experience, but rather as a form through which life *passes*. Ondaatje develops this molecular conception of the self through Billy's relationship with animal and inhuman life. This relationship is first explored in an extended prose section recounting Billy's week-long retreat to a barn in order to burn out a fever. Completely isolated from the human world and surrounded only by birds and animals ('I saw no human and heard no human voice'), Billy undergoes a strange metamorphosis that leads by stages to the attenuation of self-consciousness ('I began to block my mind of all thought') and the reconstitution of life as a flow of inhuman affects:

For that week then I made a bed of the table there and lay out my fever, whatever it was. I began to block my mind of all thought ... The fly who sat on my arm, after his inquiry, just went away, ate his disease and kept it in him. When I walked I avoided the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish. The flies caught in those acrobat nets were the only murder I saw. (BTK, 17)

This putative metamorphosis ends, on one level, in fear and trembling. Poised for a terrifying moment at the very limit of the human world, Billy resists the dissolution of his identity by recoiling violently from animal life and massacring a horde of rats. But the impression that an internal division has already been made in his persona becomes clear in the passage's haunting final sentence where Billy, looking back upon the

epiphany visited upon him, can no longer recognise his former self ('the boy') as the subject of his own narration: 'Till my hand was black and the gun was hot and no other animal of any kind remained in that room but for the boy in the blue short sitting there coughing at the dust, rubbing the sweat of his upper lip with his left forearm' (BTK, 18).

The full implications of this scene are not lived out for another twenty pages. There the change that has been wrought in Billy's nature is explored in a frenzied lyric that details the deconstitution of a recognisably human personality:

(To come) to where eyes will
move in head like a rat
mad since locked in a biscuit tin all day
stampeding mad as a mad rats legs
bang it went was hot
under my eye
was hot small bank did it
almost a pop
I didnt hear till I was red
had a rat fyt in my head
sad billys body glancing out
body going as sweating white horses go
reeling off me wet
scuffing down my arms
wet horse white
screaming wet sweat round the house
sad billys out
floating barracuda in the brain. (BTK, 38)

Whatever we make of writing like this, little is to be gained by interpreting it as the expression of a form of subjectivity that has effectively been evacuated from the poem or as a metaphor for a crisis of historical modes of knowledge. A potentially more profitable, although initially hazardous, approach is to read Billy's metamorphosis as an example of that experience of intensity Deleuze and Guattari have described as a 'becoming-animal': a line of flight from the autonomous and located human body towards a wholly new and inhuman style of perception.¹⁴ Conceived in these terms, Billy combines here his own mode of

becoming with that of animal life ('had a rat fyt in my head') and transforms himself in the act of perceiving the difference between the two.

The poem's breathless, fractured syntax and its stuttering opening parenthesis mime this movement towards a futural becoming. In the first half of the lyric, Ondaatje charts the passage beyond subject and object distinctions towards a third position that surpasses them by incorporating them both within itself ('had a rat fyt in my head / sad billy's body glancing out'). In perceiving the furious and unthinking energy of rat life, Billy suddenly experiences a becoming-rat; in so doing, he momentarily becomes one with the differential force through which all life emerges.¹⁵ Because Billy may no longer be imagined simply as 'human', Ondaatje once again deterritorialises poetic language, opening his medium up to the flow of intensities that precede and exceed its structures. This phase of deterritorialisation is disclosed in the poem's fluid transposition of pronouns, its revision from a world of sense into the thick materiality of assonance, alliteration and internal rhyme ('wet horse white / screaming wet sweat round the house'), the forcible tearing-away of one state of being towards a new point of vision ('(To come)'), and the apprehension of a metamorphosis so profound and unstable it can only be evoked by a random scattering of nouns ('was hot small bang did it / almost a pop'). By wrenching Billy's point-of-view from its anthropocentric perspective, Ondaatje recasts it upon the plane of inhuman and impersonal perceptions: in the midst of this poetic sequence Billy is variously hunter and hunted, man, rat and horse. To think the becoming of life from a position beyond the ground of the human subject is an ambitious undertaking that requires a revolution in the logic of sense; at points in this process Billy's image becomes almost literally unreadable as he is delivered over into the pure flow of singularities. Whatever implications this style of writing might hold for Ondaatje's potential readership – and it is noticeable that most commentators have chosen to focus their readings of the poem in other directions – these lyrics represent the culmination of his attempt to present a molecular view of life as an inhuman

world of difference and becoming. Nowhere else, not even in *Coming Through Slaughter*, would he go as far again in this direction, although the conflict between molecular and molar life would remain a persistent theme of his work. Certainly these lyrics are not utopian in their emphases: Billy rebels furiously against the transformation visited upon him and tries to reassert his autonomous sense of self by imposing his will violently upon others.

The conflict between molecular and molar life in *Billy the Kid* is also represented at a thematic level by the struggle between Billy and Pat Garrett.¹⁶ As well as a battle of roles and personalities, this struggle also involves a conflict of ideas about life: where Billy expresses a commitment to molecular experience, Garrett stands for the imaginative transcendence of corporeal life and the molar structures of law and social order. Garrett's character is introduced in two long passages that establish his conformity to an idealised self-image:

Pat Garrett, ideal assassin. Public figure, the mind of a doctor, his hands hairy, scarred, burned by rope, on his wrist there was a purple stain there all his life. Ideal assassin for his mind was unwarped ... (BTK, 28)

Garrett is an 'ideal assassin', the sardonic narrative voice implies, because he can turn killing into a pure idea: his mind is 'unwarped', precisely because his gaze never deflects itself from the social forces that legitimate public acts of violence. His remorseless subordination of private feeling to public action makes a social virtue out of the most pathological behaviour: the behaviour of the 'genial' man who had 'the ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke'. In one of the pivotal scenes describing the emergence of Garrett's 'ideal' public self, he wakes up in a hotel room and sets himself the task of breaking down his body's dependence upon instinct and reflex. Steadily drinking himself into a stupor for two years, Garrett transforms his body into a machine whose response he can programme and predict. His obsessive need to transcend molecular modes of becoming is tellingly illuminated halfway through his ordeal when he begins to evince a strange terror of

flowers. Garrett is terrified by natural organisms because they simply are what they do; they make no distinction between the primal force of life and its idea or representation:

He would wake up in the mornings, his sheets soaked in urine 40% alcohol. He became frightened of flowers because they grew so slowly that he couldn't tell what they planned to do. His mind learned to be superior because of the excessive mistakes of those around him. Flowers watched him. (BTK, 28)

After two years, Garrett is able finally to subordinate his volatile nature to an abstract idea of law. Unlike Billy, whose life is increasingly suffused with a chaotic and inhuman vitality, Garrett comes to embody the social function he represents. However, the suspicion that the poem's anonymous and impersonal narrative voice maintains a certain ironic distance from Garrett's supreme act of self-constitution is wittily suggested at the conclusion of this process ('He had come to Sumner then, mind full of French he never used, everything equipped to be that rare thing – a sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane') where the manic repetition of the phrase denoting the lawman's heroic façade ('sane assassin') leads it to blur imperceptibly into its opposite ('insane assassin'), thereby exposing the violent origins of Garrett's absolute vision of justice (BTK, 29).

The crucial difference between Billy's and Garrett's perceptions of the world is rendered vividly in a key early lyric ('MMMMMMMM mm thinking / moving across the world on horses ... / that is why I can watch the stomach of clocks / shift their wheels and pins into each other / and emerge living, for hours (BTK, 11)). Much of Billy's personality is captured in the curious opening line, which enforces a momentary disjunction between a pre-personal mode of bodily plenitude ('mmm') and the mental representations ('thinking') that we use to organise these singular flows. The impression that the poem is narrated primarily from Billy's point-of-view is bolstered by its repeated use of verb-phrases and participles: Billy, after all, is always in transit, continually being changed by the landscape that he

changes; and it is Billy who decomposes forms and functions into their vital 'living' forces. However, Ondaatje's elliptical syntax and his unsettling of pronominal reference challenge the assumption that the poem is wholly focalised by Billy's consciousness; the poem resembles a field of force within which competing expressions of human responsiveness share a common space. Only when the poem's angle of vision is widened beyond Billy's immediate point-of-view does its rhetorical structure become clear. As the break between the first and second lines implies, the crucial dichotomy in the poem is between 'thinking' (a facility usually associated with Garrett) and 'moving' (a principle attuned to the erratic and unstable figure of Billy). These opening lines momentarily superimpose the image of each protagonist upon his rival; both men, like their horses, have their bodies 'split at the edge of their necks'. This insistent doubling of perspective reaches its apotheosis in the poem's middle section: both outlaw and lawman are prepared to 'eliminate much' in order to secure their reputations in the world of men, while the more general observation that 'one must eliminate much / that is one turns when the bullet leaves you / walk off see none of the thrashing' anticipates the later image of Garrett who '[h]ad the ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke' (BTK, 28). These lines also possess a stark premonitory quality: here Billy imaginatively projects himself into Garrett's consciousness and confronts for the first time the retributive force that will kill him. This act of projection is suggested by the poem's sudden shift into the conditional mode: if Billy, like Garrett, possessed the blithe moral certainty of a 'newsman's brain', he would be able to discern a transparent design at the heart of human 'morals' and reconcile his fundamental beliefs with the imperatives of the social machine. Only someone who perceives no connection between the mind that judges and the body that suffers could believe so absolutely in the 'morals of newspaper or gun' and perceive no ethical distinction between the two.

The complex interdependence between outlaw and lawman is a recurring theme of the poem. Perpetually enslaved to his

own chaotic drives, Billy is driven, like Garrett, to make his own vision the standard by which the world is judged (BTK, 74). Implicit in this stance is a longing for an obliteration of personality ('I am here on the edge of sun / that would ignite me'). Billy both desires and fears a return to inhuman and pre-reflective life and this ambivalence becomes more pronounced as the poem progresses. At points Billy wants to become 'pure verb', in Seamus Heaney's exacting phrase: a pure principle of movement and perception irresistibly attuned to a world of becoming and change.¹⁷ Yet in other places Billy harbours a dreadful fear of change ('My eyes are burning from the pain of change'): his violence seems motivated by a terror of losing control over his image and identity (BTK, 68). Poignantly aware that his subjectivity is continually upon the brink of dissolution, Billy finds himself immersed within and terrified by a world of changing appearances that reflects back to him the image of his own mortality.

Some of the most remarkable poems in the sequence register the diffuse play of feeling characteristic of those moments when Billy perceives his world dissolving into flows of affect and desire ('The acute nerves spark / on the periphery of our bodies ... / The mind's invisible blackout the intricate never / The body's waiting rut' (BTK, 72)). Fascinated and appalled by the intuition of a mode of feeling that propels him towards the 'periphery' of his own body, Billy strives to arrest the dispersal of the self by becoming the director of his own biography: the creative 'eye' that confers shape and coherence upon the scattered details of his own experience. His vision attempts to become the define perspective of the poem: 'I am very still / I take in all the angles of the room' (BTK, 21). Gazing at the reclining body of Angela D, Billy's point of view begins to mimic the abrupt and inhuman movement of the cinematic camera (BTK, 16).

The threat posed to Billy's fragile self-image by flows of affect that push him to the periphery of his own body is intensified by his perception of sexual difference. Because sexual passion involves the coupling and merging of bodies, it places Billy's already perilous sense of self under sustained pressure.

This pressure leads by degrees to the emergence of sexual fear, which is expressed in his images of the alluring, but implicitly deadly, force of femininity. The images dominate Billy's two memories of lovemaking with Angela D ('Tilts back to fall / black hair swivelling off her ... / later my hands cracked in love juice / fingers paralysed by it arthritic / these beautiful fingers I couldn't move / faster than a crippled witch now' (BTK, 16)).

Far from confirming Billy's sense of virile masculinity, his encounter with Angela D brings his self-image to a point of crisis. The perceived castrating power of female subjectivity dominates this scene: Angela D's gaunt body spits 'electric' off the sheets onto his arm; the 'bright bush' of her sex jumps startlingly into the centre of his field of vision; while the ecstatic force of her body almost breaks off his fingers. The symbolic significance of this last detail is heavily underscored: his hands 'cracked in love juice', the 'beautiful fingers' that express Billy's expansive outlaw nature become 'paralysed' and useless. Momentarily deprived of a relation to the source of his vitality, Billy's image is insistently feminised: 'I couldn't move / faster than a crippled witch now'. This unexpected reversal of roles and identities reaches its apotheosis in the moment when Angela D 'hooks in two' and 'covers' him. Here lovemaking and gunslinging become inextricably entwined: but Billy is unmanned, his hand 'locked', his prone and helpless profile an eerie premonition of the figure Garrett will gun down in the climatic episode at Maxwell's ranch.

Billy finds sanctuary from his turbulent relationship with Angela D at the Chisum Ranch. The ranch represents an idyllic space in Billy's imagination: it is the still centre of his turning world, an environment in which he may briefly escape Garrett's remorseless pursuit and the 'flashy hawk' of the noontime sun that threatens to burn him back to bare and elemental nature (BTK, 26). The allure of the Chisum Ranch for Billy is indistinguishable from the ministering maternal figure of Sallie Chisum; Sallie shelters him from the inhuman ferocity of the western sun by leading him into cool enclosed spaces where he might regain his strength and hold his demons at bay. Ondaatje's prose

description of these scenes reflects the restorative calm of Sallie's presence; its rangy, unemphatic style is a world away from the delirious frenzy of the poem's early lyrics:

She would get up and after a breakfast that she would eat wandering around the house slowly, she would begin the work ... She left the paraffin in the lamps; instead had had John build shutters for every door and window, every hole in the wall. So that at eleven in the morning all she did was close and lock them all until the house was silent and dark blue with sunless quiet. (BTK, 33)

But Billy will be spared neither Garrett's relentless attentions nor the sun's despoliation. The two forces come together in the surreal passage recounting Garrett's transportation of Billy and the remains of his outlaw band across New Mexico towards the nearest legal authority. Strapped and handcuffed to his horse, Billy is exposed to the midday sun; now the dissolution of his personality into the inhuman flux of life is finally visited upon him:

The brain juice began to swell up. You could see the bones and grey now. The sun sat back and watched while the juice evaporated. By now the bone was dull white, all dry ... lobules gyres notches arcs tracts fissures roots' white insulation of dead seven years cells clinging things rubbing them off on the tracts of spine down the cool precise fingers went into the cistern of bladder down the last hundred miles in a jerk breaking through my sacs of sperm got my cock in the cool fingers pulled it back up and carried it pulling pulling flabby as smoke up the path his arm had rested in and widened. (BTK, 76-7)

In contrast with the way in which Billy's life will subsequently be reconstructed from its scant empirical details into a full-blown Western mythos, he is gradually stripped of his subjectivity and returned to pure elemental being. Billy's delirious account of his sunstroke represents the experience as a bizarre solar sexual assault during which his body is invaded, broken apart and reduced to a series of singular flows. His ordeal recalls what Deleuze and Guattari call a becoming-molecular:

Billy's image is deconstituted into a pure flow of intensities and libidinal energies.¹⁸ What we see in this symbolically suggestive scene is a vision of life as what one part of Billy would like it to be: a life of deterritorialised desire and proliferating connections between intensities. By the conclusion of this passage Billy has metamorphosed beyond the human to become a continuum of pure sensation: 'I was drowned, locked inside my skin sensitive as an hour old animal, could feel everything, I could hear everything on my skin, as I sat, like a great opaque ostrich egg on the barebacked horse' (BTK, 77).

Billy's ecstatic decomposition in the sun's glare can be read as a symbolic death of the self; his vision of life as pure intensity brings the image of the 'human' to a point of absolute crisis. Certainly Billy's poetic image now becomes even more unstable; from this point he will be pushed to the margins of the poem as events speed towards the climactic shoot-out. One reason why Billy's experience on the plains is curiously *beyond* interpretation is that Ondaatje's writing progressively breaks down the distinction between signifier and signified or event and meaning. What makes this passage difficult to read is that Ondaatje no longer conceives of language as if it expresses the point-of-view of a particular subject or consciousness; instead his writing retreats from the logic of representation to immerse itself in the flow of singularities and affect from which all conceptual distinctions emerge. To 'interpret' this section is to try to make sense of Billy's perception of the western landscape when the text's real interest is in the multiplicity of flows from which perception is organised. Hence Ondaatje's prose-poetry gestures simultaneously to the birth and the limit of subjectivity and sense, as Billy is released into the proliferation of intensities from which these ideas come into being.

Ondaatje's reference beyond representation to the forces that compose it also inflects the poem's critique of historiography. One of the primary functions of historiography is to establish points of connection between different modes of historical emergence by organising them according to the logic of particular conceptual formations. *Billy the Kid*, on the other

hand, continually dissolves historiography into the various styles of perception that constitute it in the first place. The pages immediately before and after the scene of Billy's death present a shifting mosaic of textual sources, all of which have contributed to the meaning of Billy's history as it has accrued during the intervening years, none of which has the authority to bring a definitive image of the outlaw into focus. This ironic, and occasionally parodic, collection of 'historical' documents incorporates several different styles of historical inscription. It includes Billy's apocryphal jailhouse interview with the *Texas Star* which, in its playful allusion to the contemporary filmmaker 'Mr Cassavetes', emphasises once more the ongoing cinematic rewriting of American frontier history; Sallie Chisum's generous, albeit unfocused, anecdotal recollections of her former friend; and a fantasy romance entitled 'Billy the Kid and The Princess' that transforms Billy into the dashing gentleman hero of sentimental fiction ('Once more Chivoto, you have saved my life, this time from that cougar. You have won my love!' (BTK, 102)). Ondaatje comically illustrates the ceaseless reconstruction of Billy's historical image in the ballad that brings his story to a tentative conclusion. With its stuttering rhythm and bathetic rhyme pattern, this song represents a first faltering attempt to reconstitute the outlaw as an historical object; such reinvention, as the ponderous pairing of 'Texas Star' and 'camera' attests, is already ineluctably marked by the commercial forces soon to remake Billy's identity in the popular imagination:

I got the bullets, cleaned him up
sold them to the Texas Star
They weighted them, put them in a pile
took pictures with a camera.

One of the principal ironies generated by Ondaatje's emphasis upon the cinematic and historiographical reconstruction of Billy's image is that Billy's final moments are marked by his despairing attempt to become once more the director of his own life story. His extended death scene even borrows from the format of a movie script: 'Sound up' (BTK, 90). Yet

as if in anticipation of the historical fate that will befall him, Bully is pushed throughout this sequence to the margins of his own narrative. Now it is Garrett who occupies the centre of the stage ('NOW dead centre in the square is Garrett with Poe'), while Billy is relegated to a shadowy background presence (BTK, 94). The establishing shot depicting Pete Maxwell's Ranch is accompanied by a voiceover inflected by the tone of one of Billy's early lyrics ('Mmmm'); but the need for Billy to project himself into Garrett's consciousness is long past: the lawman is about to bring the curtain down on Billy's entire existence (BTK, 92). Crucially, Billy's murder is presented as an existential limit and a symbolic metamorphosis. Made 'manic' by Garrett's intervention, Billy breaks through the frame of the window, symbolically shattering the mode of mimesis that underpins historiographical narrative. At this point Billy becomes precisely what can no longer be represented within the historical horizon of Ondaatje's poem:

NOW dead centre in the square is Garrett with Poe – hands in back pockets – argues, nodding his head and then ALL TURNING as the naked arm, the arm from the body, breaks through the window. The window – what remains between the splits – reflecting all the moving too.

Guitierrez goes to hold the arm but it is manic, breaks her second finger. His veins that controlled triggers – now tearing all they touch. (BTK, 94)

Billy's image disintegrates, in his final moments, into the intensities that compose it. What we see through Billy's eyes is a vision of pure singularity as the room dissolves into the heat and light of 'thousands / of perfect sun balls' and perception splinters into waves of colour and affect:

Garrett's voice going Billy Billy
and the other two dancing circles
saying we got him we got him the little shrunk bugger

...
it is my brain coming out like red grass
this breaking where red things wade (BTK, 95)

Even as the poem narrates the 'breaking' of Billy's image it slips away from its historical moment to assume the vantage point of Ondaatje's own time. What would we find, Ondaatje ponders, if we exhumed Billy's leavings and exposed them to our contemporary gaze: buck teeth, Garrett's solitary bullet, a pair of handcuffs 'holding ridiculously the fine ankles bones' (BTK, 97)? All that remains of Billy the Kid is a scattering of historical traces bereft of a narrative that might establish their value and significance. Yet if the abrupt juxtaposition of historical epochs serves to underline the radical incommensurability of different forms of historical consciousness, the sequence also identifies an implicit connection between past and present in the mode of perception common to outlaw and poet. The superimposition of Ondaatje's image onto Billy's own recurs at several points in the sequence; one of its most suggestive instances appears when a figure we assume to be Billy reflects upon a landscape of 'slow moving animals' and the 'acute nerves' that stretch between different kinds of life ('The street of the slow moving animals / while the sun drops in perfect verticals / no wider than boots ... / mapping my thinking going its own way / like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood' (BTK, 72)).

The figure of the outlaw alone 'with the range for everything' is displaced almost imperceptibly into the image of the writer tracing a pencil across a 'soft blue paper notebook' (BTK, 72). This conflation of images is repeated in the passage that concludes the poem where an ambiguous reference to 'smoke' – is this cigarette or gunsmoke? – elides the two figures once again:

It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. The morning sun has concentrated all the cigarette smoke so no one can see it hanging in pillars or sliding along the roof like amoeba. In the bathroom, I wash the loose nicotine out of my mouth. I smell the smoke still in my shirt. (BTK, 105)

The insistent rhyming of Ondaatje and Billy the Kid expresses, at one level, the writer's wry insight into the status of all our historical knowledge: the meaning of an historical event

arrives from the future and the contexts in which it is read and interpreted. The connection between the two figures is further reinforced by the implicit punning correspondence between 'corpse' and 'corpus' that underlies the sequence. Although some commentators have taken Ondaatje's coupling of poet and outlaw as evidence of his desire to establish a romantic portrait of the artist as a social outsider, his real interest in Billy the Kid lay in the evocation of a molecular vision unconstrained by social norms or a moral image of life. In his recreation of outlaw consciousness, Ondaatje developed for the first time a singular conception of the aesthetic as a force with the potential to free us from the habitual in order that we might rethink the genesis of the real. This singular idea of the aesthetic, and the conflict it charts between molecular life and molar authority, was to become the central motif of his first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*.

Coming Through Slaughter

Although it has yet to attract the degree of critical attention paid to Ondaatje's most recent work, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), Ondaatje's first novel, marks a key stage in his literary development. Drawing once more upon the conflict between molecular and molar life explored in *Billy the Kid*, and anticipating the imaginative recreation of civic cultural history in *In the Skin of a Lion*, *Coming Through Slaughter* represents Ondaatje's most far-reaching examination of both the claims and the limits of art and the relationship between art and life. Nowhere else in Ondaatje's oeuvre is the power of art imaginatively to transcend historical consciousness depicted with more force or originality; and nowhere else does this power lead to greater pain or despair. Whether Ondaatje identifies with or disavows Buddy Bolden's 'extremist art' will be a matter for each reader to judge: the continuous verb form of the novel's title suspends the experience it describes perilously between redemption and catastrophe.¹ While not universally shared by other critics, my own view that *Coming Through Slaughter* bids an agonised farewell to the emancipatory promise of a purely singular vision has in one sense the weight of history on its side: the shift of interest in Ondaatje's subsequent fiction from the nature of molecular perception towards the (re)construction of public history underscores this shift in perspective. According to this itinerary the novel represents the bridge between two distinct literary modes: the transition from one to the other became crucial to the type of artist Ondaatje wanted himself to

Blues 24.

- 25 Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002) 111.
- 26 Solecki, 'Point Blank Narrative in the man with seven toes' 145.
- 27 Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje* 35.

Chapter 3

- 1 Walter Noble Burns, *Billy the Kid* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1926) 178.
- 2 Ann Mandel, 'Michael Ondaatje', *Canadian Writers Since 1960: Second Series* ed. W. H. New (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1987) 276.
- 3 Douglas Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje* (New York: Twayne, 1993) 36.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 5 Barbara Godard, 'Stretching the Story: The Canadian Story Cycle', *Open Letter*, 7th series, no. 6 (Fall 1989) 37.
- 6 Stephen Scobie has noted the different ways in which Billy the Kid has been represented from early tales of villainy to his reincarnation as a 'folk hero of the Robin Hood variety'. Stephen Scobie, 'Two Authors in Search of a Character: bpNicol and Michael Ondaatje', *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje* ed. Sam Solecki (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1985) 186.
- 7 Sam Solecki, 'Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1984)', *Spider Blues* 20.
- 8 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1992) 116. I take the distinction between historicity and history from Jacques Derrida. Historicity is the process or proliferation of events which history writes into the form of a meaningful linear narrative. See Derrida's *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* trans. John P. Leavy Jr (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 122-3.
- 10 Burns, *Billy the Kid* 227.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 12 Steven Scobie, 'Two Authors in Search of a Character', *Spider Blues* 203.

- 13 I draw the term 'micropolitical' from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Micropolitical forces are those forces that compose characters and persons; they name the singular images, investments and desires from which general identities such as 'man' are extrapolated.
- 14 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 238.
- 15 Billy's metamorphosis in this passage chimes with the strange process of 'becoming-rat' Deleuze and Guattari detect at work in Daniel Mann's 1972 film *Willard*: 'It is all there: there is a becoming-animal not content to proceed by resemblance and for which resemblance, on the contrary, would represent an obstacle or stoppage: the proliferation of rats, the pack, brings a becoming-molecular that undermines the great molar powers of family, career and conjugality . . . there is a circulation of impersonal affects, an alternate current that disrupts signifying projects as well as subjective feelings and constitutes a nonhuman sexuality; and there is an irresistible deterritorialisation that forestalls attempts at professional, conjugal or Oedipal reterritorialisation', Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 233.
- 16 Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between molecular and molar life is different from the liberal humanist conception of a private individual who then enters into a public and political sphere. The 'private', they argue, is already a political space that is formed when molar representations of 'man' (as rational, competitive, acquisitive, violent and dominant life) are used to code and organise feelings, affects and perceptions that are not yet coded into regular and stable images.
- 17 Seamus Heaney, 'Oysters', *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) 146.
- 18 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 37.