

Sense and Singularity

Reading Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

The publication of Michael Ondaatje's long poem *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in 1970 marked a decisive moment in his writing career. The volume received the Governor General's Award that year, 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. In the remarks that follow I want to broaden the critical discussion about Ondaatje's early poetry by claiming that the novelty and force of *Billy the Kid* inheres in the poet's ability to create a form of *minor* literature through the event of *singularity*. The phrase "minor literature" is being employed here in accordance with the sense given to the term by Deleuze and Guattari for whom it no longer describes the representation of a recognized minority or social fraction, but instead opens a space within representation for a "people to come" (218). In *Billy the Kid*, this modulation to minor literature is achieved through what Deleuze and Guattari call the "stuttering of language."¹ What is remarkable about the poem is the way it both fashions a historical narrative of the last great phase of the American West and produces singular points of intensity or perception that prevent that narrative from achieving structural coherence. In the reading of *Billy the Kid* that I will shortly develop, I will attempt to trace the continuing relation between historical sense and singularity by exploring the way Ondaatje's commitment to singular moments, perceptions, and events simultaneously composes and discomposes the field of historical representations that his poem presents.

Ondaatje's preoccupation with the relationship between historical narrative and singular points of perception informs his idiosyncratic revision of his source materials.² Freely mixing the sketchily known historical facts of Billy the Kid's life and crimes with an imaginative reconstruction of his biography and legend, his 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. Simultaneously inhabiting Billy's consciousness while maintaining throughout 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 narrative 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 from its opening pages on, Ondaatje's recasting of Billy's story makes little concession to the linear form of historiographical narrative. Instead, Ondaatje's playful rewriting of the fateful struggle between Billy and Pat Garrett reverses the assumed relation between cause and effect, collocates inconsistent and occasionally contradictory evidence, interpolates 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.³ 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.⁴

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' early bestselling historical account of Billy's life, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1926). Burns' 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' 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) popularized 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).

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 (116).

The similarities between the concerns of historiographic 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 judgment. The contingency of historical knowledge is further underscored by Ondaatje's decision to recreate the life of a figure as overdetermined as Billy the Kid: a figure who is simultaneously historical and mythic, provincial and international, subaltern and authoritarian, the

ceaselessly reconstituted object of 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 emphasizes by taking Burns' 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.

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. Ondaatje's response to this problem is *not*, like Hutcheon, to insist upon the irreducibly ethical dimension of an avowedly constructed history. Rather than explain away the risk of historiographic metafiction's relation to the events and durations beyond narration, Ondaatje's work instead 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, that is, 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 historicizing judgments. 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.

For all the formal and thematic similarities between *Billy the Kid* and the genre of “historiographic metafiction,” then, 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 marginalization 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” 5).

The brief passage that these words introduce 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 (5)? 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 haunting first poem in the sequence that begins “These are the killed / (By me)—” (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 air 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 memorializing 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 that 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”), rendering 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 judgment 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 in the eyes of his contemporary onlookers of the American frontier and metaphorically suggestive of the residue of contemporary sensibility within every act of historical evaluation.⁵

The poem’s continual oscillation between first and third person perspectives becomes the subject of one of its most important early fragments. In this passage, which begins “Not a story about me through their eyes then,” the broader problems of attribution and context that confront us are concentrated within a passage that counsels us, ironically enough, upon the ways in which to read Billy’s story (20). 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: “Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. / Here then is a maze to begin, be in” (20). While both restate Billy’s desire for control of his own narrative, the lexical play between “begin” and “be in” indicates 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 there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know” (20). 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 mediate and produce 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 Burns’ *The Saga of 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, rewriting which fundamentally reshapes the historical context within which the climactic 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’ book as his narrative template; conceived for an audience brought up on the mythical “Outlaw West” of dime novels, Burns’ biography cheerfully transforms narrative history into the stuff of popular historical drama.

Although cleaving to Burns’ 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’ biography; however, the only allusions Ondaatje includes to these events are a few stray hints unlikely to be recognized by a reader unfamiliar with the local history of the New Mexico frontier. 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’ 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’ realization 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 (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 reason we can give to explain all this violence” comes the laconic reply “yup” followed by a slab of Burns’ narrative recounting the murder of the outlaw Tunstall (54).

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 remains resolutely at the level of singularities and pre-personal attachments before they are organized 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 (“When I caught Charlie Bowdre dying”) that relates the death of one of Billy’s foremost outlaw companions (12). The inadequacy of applying conventional notions of “subject” and “character” to the style of life Billy embodies is immediately apparent from these lines. Here, in the poem’s first explicit act of violence, a man is ripped apart before his eyes; but what is striking about Billy’s 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. However, 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 who 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. Beneath Billy’s pitiless and barely comprehending gaze Bowdre’s body is stripped of any recognizable identity; it simply

dissolves into the repertoire of body parts, reflexes, and gestures from which his image of Bowdre is assembled.

Some sense of Billy's attentiveness to the singularity and intensity of affects rather than the broader system of social values and judgments 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 presented in the uncanny little lyric "With the Bowdres." What is unsettling about this poetic style 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 ("their dress 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") (39). This rupture with the logic of representation and the return to a deterritorialized 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.

This process is explicitly the subject of one of the strangest and most puzzling poems in the entire sequence: "To be near flowers in the rain." Although this short lyric begins in a mood almost of bucolic reverie ("To be near flowers in the rain"), it quickly charts the movement we have already seen 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 a-signifying 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 (55).

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.⁸ 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, beginning “Pat Garrett, ideal assassin,” that establish his conformity to an idealized self-image (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” (23). 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 program 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.

Unlike Billy, whose life is increasingly suffused with a chaotic and inhuman vitality, Garrett comes to embody the social function he represents. The crucial difference between Billy and Garrett’s perception of the world is rendered vividly in a key early lyric which begins with the arresting couplet

“MMMMMMMM mm thinking / moving across the world on horses” (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 organize 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 focalized by Billy’s consciousness; the poem approximates a field of force within which competing expressions of human responsiveness share a common space.⁹ 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 line implies, the crucial dichotomy in the poem is between “thinking” (a facility usually associated with Garrett) and “moving” (a participle 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” (11). This insistent doubling of perspective reaches its apogee 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 off the thrashing” (11) anticipates the later image of Garrett who “[h]ad the ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a drink” (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 (11). 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 (11).

As if in anticipation of the historical fate that will befall him, Billy is gradually pushed to the margins of his own narrative. Increasingly it is Garrett

who occupies the centre of the stage while Billy is relegated to a shadowy background presence. Crucially, Billy's murder at the Maxwell Ranch is presented as an existential limit and a symbolic metamorphosis. Made "manic" by Garrett's climactic intervention, Billy's stricken body breaks through the frame of the window, symbolically shattering the mode of mimesis that underpins historiographical narrative (94). At this point Billy the Kid becomes precisely what can no longer be represented within the historical horizon of Ondaatje's poem. Throughout his death scene we watch as Billy's image disintegrates into the intensities that compose it. What we glimpse 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: "oranges reeling across the room AND I KNOW I KNOW / it is my brain coming out like red grass / this breaking where red things wade" (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 ankle bones" (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 in the lyric of quiet meditative introspection in which 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. Here 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" (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, as 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 (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 a historical event arrives from the future and the contexts in which it is read and reconfigured. The connection between the two figures is further reinforced by the implicit punning correspondence between "corpse" and "corpus" that underlies the sequence. But 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, as I have argued, in the evocation of a molecular vision unconstrained by social norms or a moral image of life. For it was here, in his untimely recreation of outlaw consciousness, that 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.¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 By this term the "stuttering of language" Deleuze evokes what Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco describe as "the becoming minor of language itself" in which a writer "introduces into language a stuttering, which is not simply a stuttering in speech, but a stuttering of the language itself" (xlvi). Or as Deleuze himself puts it later in the same volume: "It is no longer the character who stutters in speech; it is the writer who becomes a *stutterer in language*. He makes the language as such stutter: an affective and intensive language, and no longer an affectation of the one who speaks" (107).
- 2 My review of the various images and stories that compose the main outlines of the legend of Billy the Kid is indebted to Stephen Tatum's comprehensive study.
- 3 In this sense Ondaatje's version of Billy's narrative extends the exquisite ambivalence of bpNichol's "true eventual story" of Billy the Kid in which the adjective "besides" (connoting at once "apart from" and "along with") beautifully suggests the imbrication of truth with falsehood that characterizes every version of Billy's outlaw myth: "this is the true eventual story of the place in which billy died. dead, he let others write his story, the untrue one. this is the true story of billy & the town in which he died & why he was called a kid and why he died. eventually all the other stories will appear true beside this one" (np).
- 4 This process enables us to postulate in turn a particular correspondence between singularity, history, and historical relations. According to Deleuze, the actual world in which we live is the expression of a temporal movement in which a virtual plane of potential takes a determined form. Singular points—such as revolutions, invasions, and assassinations—mark moments in history where certain paths of actualization are taken over others. By composing a poem from singularities Ondaatje shows not only how history might have been *narrated* otherwise but also how certain singular points might have opened different historical trajectories.
- 5 Douglas Barbour captures crucial aspects of the instability of Billy's image throughout the

- poem in his observation that “Billy is a site of continuing flux and a body of sense impressions” (60).
- 6 Any discussion of *Billy the Kid* that discusses the text in terms of a struggle between two styles of being and two modes of perception is inevitably indebted to Dennis Lee’s path-breaking study. Lee’s argument that Ondaatje’s poem “makes most sense as a picture of civilization and instinct at war” is persuasive and his description of the ceaseless antagonism it depicts between what he calls “world” (an ensemble of beings either conscious or manipulated by consciousness) and “earth” (an ensemble of beings powered by un-self-conscious instinct) has informed my reading of the text (27). However, the weakness of Lee’s account, in my view, is its continual reduction of the origins of this antagonism to the “mode of consciousness” of technocratic modernity, a view that fails to acknowledge the way’s Billy’s style of being may be thought of as a becoming-imperceptible: a mode of perception of life that unhouses perception from its human home (43).
 - 7 I draw the term “micropolitical” from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*. 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.
 - 8 Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between molecular and molar life, it should be noted, is different from the liberal humanist conception of a private individual who then enters in to a public and political sphere. The realm of 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 organize feelings, affects, and perceptions that are *not yet* coded into regular and stable images.
 - 9 My reading therefore takes a certain distance from Dennis Lee’s assertion that the poem simply presents Billy’s self-conscious reflection upon “the ideology of self-mechanization.” Lee’s difficulty in maintaining the integrity of Billy’s point-of-view here betrays itself in his acknowledgement that even in his hands this remains a “rather elliptical” passage. It is “elliptical,” in fact, precisely because the lyric’s point-of-view flickers back and forth between the implied perspectives of the poem’s two main protagonists (19).
 - 10 We might expand this conclusion by arguing that Ondaatje’s poem is, in fact, Leibnizian, if we take Deleuze’s reading of Leibniz into account. According to this reading the universe is not given as a whole that expresses one coherent system of relations. Instead each point of view, each perception (each “monad” in Leibniz’s terminology) perceives the whole of the world from its own singular point. In this schema “we” are nothing more than our localized perceptions while the whole is always open by virtue of the divergence of perceptions. A poem or work of literature that strives to write of that whole can only be a *minor* literature: not only can the unity of a *world* never be given; there is no world above and beyond the multiple voices and affections of which we are composed. Deleuze develops these ideas at some length in *The Fold*.

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