

THE COLLECTED PHOTOGRAPHS OF BILLY THE KID

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WHILE THE INCLUSION of photographs in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is an interesting experiment, Ondaatje's choice of specific images is bewildering. The first sentence of the book mentions a picture of Billy, but only a blank square is shown; and the people who do appear in later photographs seem incapable of the violence the book describes. They stare lifelessly into the camera, or turn their backs to it; or they hide their faces in shadows, apparently overwhelmed by the empty landscapes surrounding them.

Nevertheless, photographs play an important part in Ondaatje's conception of the book. The first section is a comment about taking pictures, and knowledgeable readers will recognize the naked man on horseback who appears on the book's cover; the picture is from one of the revolutionary sequences taken by Eadweard Muybridge in the latter years of the last century, in attempting to understand the nature of movement. According to Stephen Scobie, the techniques of photography offer "possible analogies to Ondaatje's methods"¹ of presenting Billy's life.

In fact, by interspersing poems and sections in prose with photographs, Ondaatje implies an equivalence between them; the written sections are like photographs also. Not surprisingly, many of them begin with descriptive phrases like those written in an album: "Christmas at Fort Sumner, 1880," "Blurred," "January at Tivan Arroyo," "Miss Dickinson of Tucson," "With the Bowdres." These phrases often have no grammatical connection with the words following them; they act like titles, or like captions to photographs.

Furthermore, the various sections of *The Collected Works* are not in chronological order. Ondaatje's "photographs" of Billy are a disconnected series of fragmented moments, and the book as a whole resembles an album, organized according to a logic that is not chronological. Ondaatje's obfuscation of temporal development suggests that Billy's behaviour could not be explained accurately by the sequential relationships of causes and effects that fluid narratives necessarily imply. Perhaps he is trying to understand the movement of the whole by breaking it into more readily comprehensible parts.

If he is, then the presence of the Muybridge photograph is important. Muybridge's famous studies of bodies in motion began when he used a battery of

cameras in sequence to photograph a race horse, in order to discover something that human eyes could not see — whether or not a moving horse lifted all four feet off the ground at once. Paradoxically, by stopping motion in photographs the workings of motion could be clearly seen. In *The Collected Works*, Billy's life is understood in the same way.

But photographs like Muybridge's are necessarily incomplete, mere images of movement that do not actually move themselves. The "word pictures" that make up *The Collected Works* are similarly incomplete; the poems and sections in prose are as devoid of emotion as the actual photographs Ondaatje chose to include. The "photographer" keeps his emotional distance from the violent events he is describing, and paradoxically, his dispassionate objectivity is so disproportionate that it amounts to misrepresentation. In fact, it is the unemotional tone of *The Collected Works* that allows Ondaatje to replace the traditional legend of Billy the Kid with his own interpretation of him. The legendary outsider whose exuberance could not be restrained by the petty restrictions of a narrowminded society was at least passionately involved in the act of living; Ondaatje's Billy is as objective about himself as a photographer is about his subjects.

In fact, Billy's photographic objectivity is the key to Ondaatje's interpretation of him. The "collected works" are photographs; if they are the collected works of Billy himself, then Billy himself is the photographer. If that is true, then the unusual structure of the book mirrors its protagonist's vision of himself and the world he lives in; and *The Collected Works* explores that vision.

As I suggested earlier, the structure of *The Collected Works* denies the significance of chronological sequence in the explanation of events. If the "works" are Billy's, then he himself denies the significance of such explanations. In fact, the book as a whole never shows him developing or changing in relation to experience. His character and his attitudes are static, his vision unchanging. For readers of the book, knowledge of Billy grows, as later sections reveal the significance of phrases and ideas present in earlier sections. What follows is an attempt to describe Billy's vision, not as a reader's knowledge of it develops, but as it is finally revealed after all the "works" have been considered, and the connections between them understood. Billy's refusal to consider the influence of events on his behaviour seems to demand such an approach.

BILLY EXPRESSES HIS INTEREST in the way photographs depict the world most openly in his references to an actual picture of himself. The picture fascinates him enough for him to mention it a number of times; but it is not the image of himself that he dwells on. In fact, he is more concerned with what the picture does *not* show. On one occasion, his indulgence in "red dirt" brings the picture to life: "I was pumping water out over the well. Only now,

with the red dirt, water started dripping out of the photo.” And later, he says, “When they took the picture of me there was a white block down the fountain road where somebody had come out of a building and got off the porch onto his horse and ridden away while I was waiting standing still for the acid in the camera to dry firm.” In both instances, Billy is intrigued by the difference between the motionless world of the photograph and the actual movement of the world it was meant to depict.

In fact, it seems to be the camera’s ability to stop things from moving that most fascinates Billy. As the section beginning “his stomach was warm” implies, Billy views things photographically himself to avoid emotional involvement with them. In this poem he remembers putting his hand into a wounded stomach in order to retrieve a bullet, and the last six lines are the first six in reverse order — like a film run backwards. Each line becomes a separable component, like the individual frames of a motion picture. By putting these components into a meaningless relationship with each other, Billy purges their meaning, and gets rid of the pain it causes him. He has stopped time, just as a photographer does when he shoots a picture; perhaps something similar is happening in the disconnected structure of the book as a whole.

In order to take pictures, a photographer needs distance; he must be removed from the scenes he captures. Billy continually expresses an interest in such distance. In one section, for instance, he describes the scene of his death in careful detail, and his description is repeated word-for-word after he says “Again”; apparently he has chosen to re-inspect a photograph of interest to him. Its importance is obvious; Billy could have described the scene so accurately only if he were distant from it: “all this I would have seen if I was on the roof looking.” But in fact, he was not on the roof; as another section reveals, he actually views the scene in “the screen of a horse’s eye.” Instead of taking the picture from a distance Billy is actually *in* it; and his life is taken.

In fact, Billy seems to share the belief of certain primitive tribesmen that having one’s picture taken is a threat to one’s existence. Paulita Maxwell’s comment about Billy’s photograph suggests the nature of the threat: “I never liked the picture. I don’t think it does Billy justice.” Billy seems to agree; the next section begins, “Not a story about me through their eyes then.” Billy’s “collected works,” his own pictures of his life, reveal the falseness of the pictures taken by the eyes of others — pictures like the *Wide Awake Library* version of his life, from which the real Billy has entirely disappeared.

Billy’s refusal to accept other people’s pictures of him goes beyond a concern for his reputation; his tendency to view things photographically himself is also a matter of self-defence. In distancing himself and in taking his own “pictures,” he can protect himself from the attempts of others to capture him.

He seems to use a gun for the same reason. Like photographers, gunfighters

can shoot things successfully only when they are far enough away from them to get them clearly in their sights; and both stop movement. In fact, the similarity between guns and cameras is reinforced by the language of *The Collected Works*, for instance in the opening paragraph when the photographer Huffman says, "I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire." Similarly, Muybridge stopped the movement of the horses he shot, and the photographers who took the actual pictures in the book captured only motionless beings. Through the book, Billy is concerned with the attempts of others to "take" him, to stop his movement. His response is to put himself into Huffman's or Muybridge's position, to distance himself either with his gun or with the camera of his distancing eye, and to stop their movement.

But Billy's concern with photographs transcends his identification with the people who take them; the machines that make photographs are also meaningful to him. In particular, he is most at ease in the dark rooms which let in blocks of light through small openings, rooms that resemble cameras. His "calm week" in a barn is a good example: "it was the colour and light of the place that made me stay there." But ironically, the colour is almost colourless — "a grey with remnants of brown" — in sharp contrast to the bright light outside, which Billy allows to enter the barn in much the same way that light enters a camera: "when I had arrived I opened two windows and a door and the sun poured blocks and angles in."

Similarly, Billy's description of the Chisum ranch contrasts the "sunless quiet" of the dark rooms with the strong light outside: "in the long 20 yard living-dining room I remember the closing of shutters, with each one the sudden blacking out of clarity in a section of the room." Billy seems to be inside a camera again. Later he reverses the image, but maintains the same pattern. Standing outside in "total blackness," he sees "a house stuffed with yellow wet light where within the frame of a window we saw a woman move . . . towards the window, towards the edge of the dark." Sally Chisum has lost her personality; she is just a nameless woman framed like a photograph, and Billy says that "the night, the dark air, made it all mad"; apparently he identifies light with madness.

Billy explains his preference for darkness in a later section that recalls his stay in the barn: "I am on the edge of the cold dark / watching the white landscape in its frame / a world that's so precise / every nail and cobweb / has magnified itself to my presence." Hidden by the dark and able to see the world of light this clearly, Billy feels safe from it. He mentions his ability to "magnify" objects elsewhere, most significantly when he says, "Strange that how I feel people / not close to me / . . . my eyes / magnify the bones across a room / shifting in a wrist." He knows that he can magnify things to clarity only if he keeps his distance from them; he also knows that if he sacrifices his distance and enters the world of light, he will be exposed — like a photograph.

It is for this reason that Billy sees the world of light as “mad”; if he walked through the “frame” of the barn door he would be vulnerable to light: “I am here on the edge of sun / that would ignite me / looking out into pitch white / sky and grass overdeveloped to meaninglessness” — just as Sally is “overdeveloped” into impersonality when she is bathed in light and just as Billy himself is “overdeveloped” when he sees himself in the screen of a horse’s eye, and dies. Symbolically, Billy retracts into a camera in order to avoid being photographed.

But Billy’s fear of being “framed” obviously goes too far. His hatred of exposure destroys his relationship with women in particular; he interprets their movements as attempts to take him. When a woman lifts a curtain Billy imagines himself framed in a photograph: “the bent oblong of sun / hoists itself across the room / framing the bed the white flesh / of my arm.” His response is to try to be a camera: “I am very still / I take in all the angles of the room.” Angela D.’s ability to take him is particularly dangerous. Her eyes are so big they “need a boat” for him to keep afloat in them, and he sees her from a distance as “blurred in the dark,” moving too fast for him to watch her clearly and therefore dangerous to him. But when she actually captures him, he is “blurred in the dark” himself, having totally lost his clarity and shouting “stop.” His fear of being taken causes him to fear the lack of control inherent in his own physical pleasure.

Billy’s imagery continually implies that Angela is trying to capture him — “catching me like a butterfly” in her legs. But his real fear is that his physical contact with her leads to his loss of mental control: “her toes take your ribs / her fingers your mind.” Without control he is exposed to danger, and he presents his dealings with Angela as a vaudeville act: “up with the curtain / down with your pants.” That curtain may be the one raised by a woman in an earlier poem; in any case, Billy is unveiled and made vulnerable to the eyes of his audience, and loses control.

The one woman who does not threaten Billy is Sally Chisum, who always looks to him “like some ghost,” a disembodied figure in white moving quietly through dark rooms. Sally never tries to “take” Billy, and he does not have to take her. She represents his ideal; safe in the darkness and privacy of her house, she can let down her guard.

Billy believes that he cannot afford to make himself so vulnerable. When he immerses Sally in a bathtub, wrapped in a sheet, and tells her that it is like “a mad man’s skin,” he implies his own feelings of constriction, and his desire for freedom from them; his dislike of sexual involvement and his need to distance himself from other people suggest a fear of his own body and the demands it makes of him. In the solitude of dark rooms he can feel disembodied — “like some ghost.” But he is convinced that freedom from the constrictions of the body is impossible. Billy’s worst experience of vulnerability occurs when his skin is removed, in the peculiar fantasy he has as he rides in the desert after being cap-

tured by Garrett: “the sun turned into a pair of hands. . . . it began to unfold my head drawing back each layer of skin and letting it flap over my ears.” The sun’s fingers are like Angela’s; they take Billy’s mind, and the rest of him is turned inside out. Billy’s description of this experience implies a peculiar confusion of sexuality and death, and his association of them with light; all three imply loss of control. “My cock standing out of my head”: he is literally exposed by the sun, the source of light. And as the sun fingers him to orgasm, he loses control and knows what it is like to be “overdeveloped to meaninglessness.” Finally he finds relief “in the shade” of his horse’s stomach.

The shade offers Billy security; “a boy blocks out the light” because he is afraid of it. But what he really fears is the world it allows him to see. That “mad” world lacks the control and the clarity Billy so desires. Unlike a photograph, life keeps moving. If Billy is alone, or with Sally Chisum, he can give himself to the movement and enjoy it — as he does “moving across the world on horses.” But if he is with other people who might move against him, he must be on guard. Finally, Billy is a photographer of life because he fears what he calls at one point “the pain of change.”

CHANGE DISTURBS BILLY because it implies that nothing can be depended on: “in the end the only thing that never changed, never became deformed, were animals.” Billy’s identification of change with deformity is characteristic; for him, no change is ever for the better. He sees Charlie Bowdre dying with his “face changing like fast sunshine,” and purges the pain of the image photographically, saying, “I *caught* Charlie Bowdre dying.” But his dislike of flowers is more disturbing. He seems to admire “paper flowers you don’t feed / or give to drink,” and he speaks of the pollen of real flowers in terms that, once again, confuse sexuality and death. They distress him by bursting the white drop of spend / out into the air at you / the smell of things dying.” This smell suffocates Billy, “stuffing up your nose / and up like wet cotton in the brain.” For him, the “liquor perfume” of flowers is paradoxically “like lilac urine smell.” Even sweet smells disgust him.

In fact, all the smells of living offend Billy, particularly those of other people. He dislikes “the strange smell of their breath / moving across my face,” and as he imagines the scene of his death, he says he wants to kill Garrett because he “can smell him smell that mule sweat / that stink.” And as he feels exposed in the desert after a drunken night at the Chisums’, he imagines that the wind is carrying “the smell off dead animals a hundred miles away and aiming it at me and my body.” For Billy, smells are weapons wielded by the world of change in attempting to involve him in itself.

Billy destroys anything that tries to involve him. He distances himself from other people, and sometimes kills them. He moves away from the exposure of sunlight and into darkness. And he crushes the flowers that get at him. As he does so, "the flower gets small smells sane / deteriorates in a hand." For Billy, death smells good. The only true sanity comes with the elimination of a painfully changing thing that smells disturbingly of life.

But Billy's anguished response to the anarchy of change is most obvious as the isolated darkness of the Chisum ranch is disrupted by an evening of debauchery. Billy must be involved; but because, as he says, he is "used to other distances," his eyes burn from "the pain of change" and he compares the situation to a "blurred picture." Not surprisingly, he is forced to be aware of the offensive odours photographs cannot record, and he speaks with disgust of Angela, "the smell of her sex strong now daubing my chest." The photograph has come to life, and Billy cannot bear it.

In fact, Billy is never allowed to maintain the repose he so desires. It is achieved by elimination; like photographs, it removes the smells and the pain of change. Billy knows that "one must eliminate much" to gain peace, and he tries, not just to eliminate his enemies with a gun, but also to eliminate his awareness of some important facts of life. His crushing of flowers is just one example. He also tries to turn away from the deaths he causes, and "see none of the thrashing"; but again and again he must see "wounds appearing in the sky, in the air," "nerves shot out" and livers "running around," veins pulled out of bodies, and so on. Furthermore, his conviction that animals never become deformed is consistently denied throughout the book; their "deformity" can not be eliminated by Billy's insistence that it does not exist. Animals do some of the ugliest things in the book. They eat vomit, and their smell in death attacks Billy. Dogs are transformed into monsters by the mad breeder Livingstone. Mild-mannered chickens become sinister as they pull veins out of human bodies. Above all, even the animals which share the calm of Billy's barn become deformed.

Ironically, it is their deformity — the fact that he refuses to acknowledge — that disrupts his calm. For that calm is not what Billy claims it is. It depends, not on the clarity provided by distance, but on a curious form of numbness. Removed from a world that might move against him, and believing there is no need to keep his eyes conscious of possible danger, Billy eliminates even his awareness: "I began to block my mind of all thought." He drops his guard, loses his distance, and finds peace as just another animal; he says, "We were all aware and allowed each other," but the awareness is not convincing. Billy achieves the same numb repose here he has in "moving across the world on horses" or in the undemanding company of Sally Chisum.

But that repose is built on a false conception of reality. Billy has eliminated the possibility of the animals changing; the rats that turn on each other in the barn

imply that animals are no more capable of being both aware and allowing each other than human beings are. To be aware is to be aware of change, and some change is painful. Billy's photographic calm explodes into movement, its falseness made obvious. Billy shoots the rats in order to stop their movement and restore his own peace. Paradoxically, he performs violence to prevent violence. If one is to achieve a perfect, unchanging world, one must use one's gun, or one's camera, to "eliminate much."

But the act of destroying the rats does not restore Billy's repose. He is on guard again — no longer an unthinking animal among animals, but "the boy in the blue shirt," who is, ironically, framed by the doorway and forced to look at the changing world outside. If that world moves and he does not, then Billy is not really in a camera; the door that frames him makes him into a photograph — the one unchanging thing in a world of change.

Billy's insistence that the change inherent in living is always painful is clearly unhealthy. If he needs to eliminate the smells of flowers and of other people, and even his own sexuality, in order to achieve repose, he actually aspires to be something less than human. Not surprisingly, his images of perfection are inhuman, and frequently mechanical. His tendency to describe rooms as cameras and himself and other people as photographers is only one manifestation of a general pattern. For him, "the stomach of clocks" that "shift their wheels and pins into each other / and emerge living" is preferable to the nauseatingly "warm" stomach of a human being, and he admires the "dark grey yards where trains are fitted / and the clean speed of machines / that make machines / . . . the beautiful machines pivoting on themselves." He admires them so much that he tries to transform himself into one of them. Garrett's description of Billy doing his finger exercises recalls Billy's description of the train yards, "each finger circling alternately like a train wheel." Billy's left hand is a mechanical extension of the lethal machine it holds, and even his fear of sexual involvement is expressed in terms of his losing control of this machine: "my hand locked / her body nearly breaking off my fingers / pivoting like machines in final speed / later my hands cracked in love juice / fingers paralysed by it arthritic / these beautiful fingers I couldnt move / faster than a crippled witch now."

BUT IT IS NOT SEXUAL INVOLVEMENT that finally destroys Billy. In fact, Ondaatje's presentation of Pat Garrett, Billy's killer, implies that his real enemy is his own mad vision. For Garrett seems to share that vision, and he can take Billy only because he understands him so well.

Garrett finds the movements of Billy's fingers "the most hypnotising beautiful thing I ever saw," and for good reason; Garrett also has turned himself into a

machine. "His mind was unwarped," but only because, like Billy, he refuses to acknowledge the complexities of living. Billy himself admires "morals" that are "clear and open," achieved by eliminating much; similarly, Garrett "decided what was right and forgot all morals." Furthermore, Billy's mechanizing of his hand is paralleled by Garrett's mechanizing of his life, his "schedule to learn how to drink" and his refusal to allow his emotions to gain control over him.

Above all, Garrett shares Billy's dislike of change. If Billy admired paper flowers and killed real ones for smelling of life, Garrett "became frightened of flowers because they grew so slowly that he couldn't tell what they planned to do." They both believe that all movement is potentially dangerous to themselves. Billy admires assassins because they "come to chaos neutral," and for this reason, Billy is as much a "sane assassin" as Garrett is. Ondaatje reveals the deficiency of that cool sanity by repeating the phrase "sane assassin" until it turns in on itself, the "in-" at the end of "assassin" joining onto the front of "sane" and revealing the truth; the real madmen are those who believe that sanity is total control and total lack of emotion.

If the man who kills Billy is a mirror image of him, Billy is actually destroyed by his own vision of life. In fact, understanding how Billy will react, Garrett "does the one thing that will save him." He leaps into Maxwell's bed, and Billy, knowing that there are no other women on the ranch, assumes that Maxwell is sleeping with his own sister. Revolted by this evidence of humanity's subservience to its own anarchic sexuality, Billy is put off guard. His need for control causes him to lose control, and he is killed.

Ondaatje's investigation of Billy answers the question Billy himself raises at one point: was there "a motive? some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence? Was there a source for all this?" Billy's explanation of that motive is the killing of his friend Tunstall. But Ondaatje cleverly shows Billy watching Tunstall's death "from a distant hillside." That is the real "source"; Billy's desire for lack of involvement causes him to lash out, to kill things so that he can preserve his distance from them. At one point, he speaks of "pictures of great stars . . . that would explode their white / if temperature and the speed they moved at / shifted one degree." Billy himself explodes whenever life happens; when he loses control and clarity, when his distance from other people is lessened, or when the movement of another creature does not fit the pattern he has imposed on it.

According to Stephen Scobie, "Billy's poetic personality is not entirely distinct from Michael Ondaatje's."³ As a photographer, Billy's artistry is a matter of stopping change — the dead stillness of the actual photographs in the book mirrors the dead stillness of Billy's own perception of the world; he "fixes" things, either with guns or with the photographic "word pictures" of his collected works. The relation of Billy's methods to the traditional theory that art should be eternal and unchanging is obvious. But Billy's motive for taking his pictures is a disgust

with things that live and move and change; it seems doubtful that Ondaatje's work is engendered by a similarly insane attitude.

In fact, *The Collected Works* may be an exorcism of the poet's admiration for his protagonist. If the child in the cowboy outfit whose photograph appears at the end of the book is Ondaatje himself, then he was in fact once taken in by the usual legends of Billy the Kid and other similar heroes. The portrait of Billy that emerges in *The Collected Works* reveals what is wrong with those legends. The heroic outsider who bravely dismissed the restrictions of society did so only because he was uninvolved and emotionally dead. Understanding this, and, perhaps, realizing its implications in terms of the way legends like Billy's justify the uninvolved and removed violence of "outsiders" in the contemporary world, Ondaatje frees himself from the legend. The poet himself speaks in the last poem, and he is seen washing away the smoke of a bad night, the night in which he finished the book and purged himself of its hero.

But in the process of disengaging himself from one false image of Billy, Ondaatje may have taken on an even larger burden. Billy's activities *are* identified with the methods of photography, and they might be a metaphor for the work of artists. While the "collected works" are like photographs, the phrase is usually reserved for volumes of poetry, and many of the "works" are in fact poems. Scobie may be right. Perhaps all attempts to fix the fluid movement of the world into an artistically satisfying order are murderous; they may emerge from a disdain for life, and engender nothing but motionless misrepresentations. Perhaps the words with which a poet fixes an image of his world are the weapons he wields against the "pain of change," and perhaps the use of such weapons has the same numbing effect on poets as it had on Billy.

Such considerations seem to surface in *The Collected Works* in a poem that might represent the thought of either Billy or Ondaatje. The speaker of this poem is thinking about the act of writing: "my fingers touch / this soft blue paper notebook / control a pencil . . . / mapping my thinking." Apparently pencils are like guns and cameras, tools that allow one to control confusion by "mapping" it. Certainly Billy's concern about a newspaper interviewer's manipulation of his image suggests such a similarity: "a pencil / harnessing my face / goes stumbling into dots." These dots could be either the reporter's shorthand, or the dots that make up a photograph in a newspaper. In any case, the implications of controlling a pencil are the ones hidden in all of Billy's attitudes — he tries to use the orderly patterns of his mind to give form and stability to a painfully unstable world. His writing — and perhaps Ondaatje's also — is equivalent to his photography. Both retreat from reality into "the mind's invisible blackout," the camera that removes itself from the world and stops its movement.

Ondaatje has written elsewhere of similar concerns, particularly in the "White Dwarfs" sequence in *Rat Jelly*. In the first of these poems, he says, "Our minds

shape / and lock the transient,"⁴ thus capturing permanent images of things that are impermanent. But in the next poem, this ability of the mind becomes problematic: "there are ways of going / physically mad, physically / mad when you perfect the mind."⁵ Billy is mad in this way, and so is Garrett; they are both "sane assassins." Perhaps the poet is a sane assassin also.

The achievement of total control is insane because it is an illusion; change does not stop, and as the man writing in the blue notebook in *The Collected Works* realizes, the mind's elimination of it is not real. The pencil is really "going its own way," and similarly, "the acute nerves spark / on the periphery of our bodies / while the block trunk of us / blunders." The physical body still blunders despite attempts to control it. In the same way, the pain of change cannot be stopped, either by photographs or by poems; life blunders on despite all the images that try to fix it.

Significantly, Ondaatje's response to this problem, implied later in the "White Dwarfs" sequence, makes use of yet another image of photography. He speaks of "a blurred photograph of a gull. Caught vision. The stunning white bird / an unclear stir. / And that is all this writing should be then. / The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment / so they are shapeless, awkward / moving to the clear."⁶ Billy's perfectly clear photographs are lifeless; good pictures, and good poems, should be blurred. If they are, the sterility of permanence will not have destroyed the movement of life. In fact, and paradoxically, the "blundering" movement of life is what the poet is trying to capture and make permanent. It is not insignificant that the happiest moment in *The Collected Works*, when Billy takes pleasure in "riding naked" on horseback, is presented in a picture that is unclear — one that Billy calls "blurred." Nor is it insignificant that Billy's enjoyment ends when he looks into the eyes of a bird; that eye stops Billy, just as the eye of Muybridge's camera stopped the movement of the naked man on horseback he photographed. Such still pictures are not satisfactory.

At this point, some history becomes significant. Each one of Muybridge's photographs of a horse was lifeless and unmoving; but as a sequence, these pictures represent an important advance in the development of motion pictures. The sequential viewing of them could appear to duplicate the movement of the horse; they are unmoving photographs that could in fact depict movement. In the same way, Ondaatje's collection of still photographs of Billy the Kid comes together as a sequence to create a moving picture of a convincing human being. In *The Collected Works*, Billy is a "beautiful formed thing caught at the wrong moment" again and again, so that he is always unconsciously revealing the weakness of his own attitudes. His deliberately lifeless photographs of himself contain implications that allow Ondaatje to present a fuller and more believable picture of Billy in the book as a whole, one that moves steadily away from the empty frame that represents Billy's photograph at the beginning of the book and "to the clear."

Obviously, then, Billy's photography is quite different from Ondaatje's. If *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is Ondaatje's attempt to "present Billy himself as an artist,"⁷ it is not for the purpose of defining his own artistry. Billy is being criticized, and Ondaatje is certainly not identifying his protagonist with himself. In fact, by understanding Billy well enough to purge himself of him, Ondaatje has divested himself of a familiar and easy idea about poetry, and forced himself into a much more difficult struggle — to make things live and move in words, rather than simply to capture their image and stop them dead.

NOTES

- ¹ "Two Authors in Search of a Character," *Canadian Literature*, No. 54 (Autumn 1972), 43.
- ² *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: Anansi, 1970).
- ³ Scobie, p. 45.
- ⁴ "We're at the graveyard," *Rat Jelly* (Toronto: Coach House, 1973), p. 51.
- ⁵ "Heron Rex," *Rat Jelly*, p. 53.
- ⁶ "The gate in his head," *Rat Jelly*, p. 62.
- ⁷ Scobie, p. 44.

THE FILLED PEN

P. K. Page

Eager to draw again
 find space in that small room
 for my drawing board and inks
 and the huge revolving world
 the delicate nib releases

I have only to fill my pen
 and the shifting gears begin
 Fly-wheel and cog-wheel start
 their small-toothed interlock

and whatever machinery draws
 is drawing through my fingers
 and the shapes that I have drawn
 gaze up into my eyes
 We stare each other down