TWO AUTHORS IN SEARCH OF A CHARACTER

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IT WAS SURELY COINCIDENCE ENOUGH that two of Canada's finest young poets should both, in one year, produce books on the notably non-Canadian legend of Billy the Kid, without the further coincidence that both should win Governor-General's Awards. Of course, bp Nichol's award was for four books, of which *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* is the shortest, and perhaps the slightest; this point has had to be made in response to the controversy over giving such an award to "fifteen paragraphs of bad pornography". If Nichol's book is "bad pornography", that is only because it is good art; and although it is, at least superficially, a very much slighter book than Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, it is not wholly absurd to examine them in the same light. The reasons why these authors should choose this subject — rather than some roughly equivalent Canadian figure, such as Louis Riel, or even Paul Rose — are to a great degree personal. It is quite possible that bp wrote his book just for fun, because Michael was writing his. More relevantly, Ondaatje's book is a natural outgrowth from his love of Hollywood (and Italian) Westerns: among his favourite films are Sergio Leone's mythic *Once Upon a Time in the West*, and Arthur Penn's contribution to the legend of Billy the Kid, *The Left Handed Gun*. (Ondaatje's book is subtitled "Left Handed Poems".) But in addition to these personal reasons, the figure of Billy the Kid is particularly relevant to certain central concerns in the work of these poets, and, especially in Ondaatje's case, their treatment of him becomes a major contribution to the development of their work. The purpose of this article, then, is to examine the two books and their widely different approaches to the legend of Billy the Kid, and to see how these approaches illuminate the characteristic concerns and obsessions of the two poets.

It should perhaps be stressed at the outset that this kind of approach is in a way a distortion of Nichol's book. *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* is primarily a joke, a clever and light-hearted skit, as opposed to the intense seriousness of Ondaatje's approach. Nichol's jokes are, however, on potentially serious subjects. To work out all the thematic implications which his fifteen paragraphs barely suggest may seem like building mountains out of molehills; and, though I believe the foundations are there for such an enterprise, the elaboration should not obscure the fact that the most characteristic virtues of Nichol's book are its wit, its economy, and its refusal to take itself too seriously.

Nichol's title stands in a long tradition of books claiming to tell the "truth" about Billy: *The True Life of Billy the Kid*, by Don Jenardo (1881); *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid*, by Pat Garrett (ghost-written by Ash Upson) (1882); *Billy the Kid, the True Story of a Western 'Bad Man'*, by Emerson Hough (1901); *The Saga of Billy the Kid*, by Walter Noble Burns (1926); *The Real Billy the Kid*, by Miguel Otero (1936); *The Authentic Death of Hendry Jones*, by Charles Neider (1956); *The True Story of Billy the Kid*, by William Lee Hamlin (1959); etc. The point about all these "true" and "authentic" biographies is that very few of them are. The historical facts about Billy have been buried under a vast accretion of legend.

The legend itself has changed and developed over the years. For the first twenty years or so after Billy's death, writers strove to outdo each other in creating ever more extravagant pictures of his villainy; he became a devil incarnate, a paragon of evil. Then, about the beginning of this century, the trend reversed; Billy became sentimentalised into a poor, misunderstood kid, excuses and justifications were found for his killings, he was transformed into a folk-hero of the Robin Hood variety. In 1930, the first of Hollywood's film versions of Billy the Kid starred the former All-American football star, Johnny Mack Brown; thirty years later, Penn's film starred Paul Newman.

The major work in this posthumous "rehabilitation" of Billy's reputation is Walter Noble Burns' *The Saga of Billy the Kid*, which Ondaatje acknowledges as his major source. Burns' book is of highly questionable historical accuracy, and is filled with writing in the style of the following:

> Fate set a stage. Out of nowhere into the drama stepped this unknown boy. Opposite him played Death. It was a drama of Death and the Boy. Death dogged his trail relentlessly. It was for ever clutching at him with skeleton hands. It lay in ambush for him. It edged him to the gallows' stairs. By bullets, conflagration,

> stratagems, every lethal trick, it sought to compass his destruction. But the boy was not to be trapped. He escaped by apparent miracles; he was saved as if by necromancy. He laughed at Death. Death was a joke. He waved Death a jaunty good-bye and was off to new adventures. But again the inexorable circle closed. New life seemed sweet. It beckoned to love and happiness. A golden vista opened before him. He set his foot upon the sunlit road. Perhaps for a moment the boy dreamed this drama was destined to a happy ending. But no. Fate prompted from the wings. The moment of climax was at hand. The boy had had his hour. It was Death's turn. And so the curtain.

Although Ondaatje's literary abilities are far above Burns's, several of the legendary accretions which Burns perpetuated show up again in Ondaatje's book. For instance, Ondaatje follows Burns in setting the shooting of Tom O'Folliard by Pat Garrett on Christmas night. This was one of many emotional touches added by Burns to reflect against Garrett's character (for, as Billy changed from villain to hero, Garrett necessarily swung in the opposite direction) and to develop the theme of Billy's betrayal. In actual fact, the shooting took place on December 18th. Further, Ondaatje's account of Azariah F. Wild's participation in this event is pure invention; both Burns and Garret himself mention Wild only once in passing, and not in connection with this incident.

This kind of consideration is important, of course, only to the very limited extent to which Ondaatje's book is concerned with giving an accurate historical view of the Kid. Clearly, this is not his intention, though some passages (such as the death of Charlie Bowdre) do appear to be quite accurate, and the general tone of many of the descriptions, the wealth of detail and the intensity of the images' realization, must appear very convincing to the unwary reader. Like many writers, Ondaatje alters the facts of Billy's death (as, hilariously, does Nichol); one of the standard tricks of writers sentimentalising Billy was to pretend that someone else (in one version, his own father!) had been shot by mistake and that Billy, complete with Mexican sweetheart, rode off into the sunset. Penn's film has Billy committing virtual suicide by pretending to go for his gun when he is in fact unarmed; after Garrett's shot Billy staggers forward holding out his empty hand to the killer.

But Ondaatje's and Nichol's alterations and manipulations of historical fact are not due, as is the case with many previous writers of "true" and "authentic" histories, to ignorance or to the desire to "justify" Billy; rather, they fit in with the most recent developments of the legend of Billy the Kid, which move away from the simple pendulum of what Kent Ladd Steckmesser calls "The Satanic Billy" and "The Saintly Billy" towards much more complex uses of the total

idea of Billy the Kid, fact and fiction, as a mythological character. This examination of the mythology of Billy the Kid is apparent in such works as Samuel R. Delany's splendid SF novel *The Einstein Intersection*, in which he appears as "Bonny William" or "Kid Death", and Michael McClure's play *The Beard*, in which, somewhere in eternity, he conducts a brilliant, repetitive, and obscene dialogue with Jean Harlow.

This, incidentally, may be one reason why both Ondaatje and Nichol treated a "non-Canadian" subject: few Canadian outlaw-heroes have been as widely and as thoroughly mythologised as Billy the Kid, though the process is perhaps taking place with Riel. Anyway, "non-Canadian" is a red herring: mythology may be national in origin, but the significance of a figure as completely metamorphosed as Billy the Kid is totally international.

To return, then, to Nichol's title: "this" he assures us "is the true eventual story of billy the kid." The first page of Nichol's book is a demonstration of the absolute relativity of any definition of "truth" in a case like this.

> It is not the story as he told it for he did not tell it to me. he told it to others who wrote it down, but not correctly. there is no true eventual story but this one. had he told it to me i would have written a different one. i could not write the true one had he told it to me.

Compare this with Pat Garrett's "Authentic Life" which opens with the claim that "I have listened, at camp-fires, on the trail, on the prairies and at many different plazas, to his disconnected relations of events of his early and more recent life." Garrett continues to list a number of people who knew Billy and whom he has personally interviewed or written to; he can therefore "safely guarantee that the reader will find in my little book a true and concise relation of the principal interesting events therein, without exaggeration or excusation." The whole is intended "to correct the thousand false statements which have appeared in the public newspapers and in yellow-covered, cheap novels." Burns at one point disingenuously admits:

> The foregoing tales may be regarded, as you please, as the apocryphal cantos of the saga of Billy the Kid. They are not thoroughly authenticated, though possibly they are, in the main, true. Most of them are perhaps too ugly to have been inventions. If you are skeptical, your doubt may be tempered by the fact that they have at least always gone with the legend and have such authority as long-established currency may confer.

Nichol's paragraph may be read as a commentary on these and all similar claims. The "true" and "eventual" story cannot be told by any eye-witness; the more "reliable" their claims are, the less they are to be trusted. If Billy himself had told the story to Nichol, "i would have written a different one." The paragraph is a dismissal of any possibility of objective truth in reporting; it insists that any observer changes what he sees as soon as he attempts to express it. Language does not report reality: it creates reality. From this, two conclusions might emerge: first, that even if Billy himself were to tell his own story, he could not tell it truly; and second, that the only "true" story is the one which rejects any attempt at historicity and aims instead at the "truth" of a work of art; "eventually all other stories will appear untrue beside this one." Of course there is a tongue-in-cheek element here: Nichol is fully enjoying his outrageous claim that his fifteen paragraph joke is going to replace all other versions of the story, including, presumably, that being written by his friend Michael Ondaatje. But beneath the joke is the deadly seriousness of the artist who can dismiss everything outside his own creation, claiming it alone as an absolute. And these views of language and art are surely at the very centre of Nichol's aesthetic, his proclamation of "the language revolution". What matters, then, is not so much the factual record — how many men Billy actually killed or in what year he was actually born — as the legendary image that he lived 21 years and killed 21 men. (For what it's worth, it appears more probable that he lived about 24 and killed about 7.) The "eventual" story of Billy the Kid is beyond history.

The "historical" view is even more explicitly rejected in Nichol's second Chapter. The first paragraph reads:

> history says that billy the kid was a coward. the true eventual story is that billy the kid is dead or he'd probably shoot history in the balls. history always stands back calling people cowards or failures.

It should be remembered that the mythical image of Billy as outlaw-hero is a Romantic idea, as the figure of the Outsider is, from Goethe's Werner on, the central Romantic image; and that Nichol himself (as Ondaatje acknowledged in a recent interview) is a Romantic. This condemnation of history — as an impersonal process which coldly "stands back" from its subjects and thus judges rather than sympathises — is also a Romantic view. History may even be seen as the "official" view of an Establishment which has to reject all rebels and outlaws as "cowards or failures". It is only at a safe distance in time that a figure like Louis Riel can be "officially" viewed as a hero. The task of the rebel, then,

is not to stand back, but to get in there and "shoot history in the balls." But Nichol's Billy, being dead, can't do this. In fact, as becomes clearer, Nichol's Billy is the ultimate loser.

WHAT, THEN, IS BEYOND HISTORY? It is legend, or myth. This is the level at which Ondaatje's book operates, but not Nichol's: and this is one of the fundamental differences between them. For Nichol, legend is as much a liar as history:

> legend says that billy the kid was a hero who liked to screw. the true eventual story is that were billy the kid alive he'd probably take legend out for a drink, match off in the bathroom, then blow him full of holes. legend always has a bigger dick than history and history has a bigger dick than billy had.

This view sees legend as more potent (literally as well as metaphorically) than history, but equally dangerous. And the danger lies precisely in its power, its stability, its vividness, its energy — all the qualities, in fact, of Ondaatje's book. But Nichol's Billy is at the bottom of the power structure, he always has the shortest dick. His status is that of the ulimate loser, and he is always ephemeral:

> rumour has it that billy the kid never died. rumour is billy the kid. he never gets anywhere, being too short-lived.

This underlies the difference in length between the two books. It is not simply that Nichol's is a small joke tossed off in fifteen paragraphs: the shortness, the casualness of the book are intrinsic to its view of Billy. The difference between Ondaatje's 100 pages and Nichol's 5 is the difference between legend and rumour. Ondaatje's book *fixes* a certain view of the Kid into an intense, fully realized image; but for Nichol, the "eventual" truth is beyond even this, and his image of Billy is insubstantial, flickering, changing, dying. Ondaatje creates a myth; Nichol tells a joke.

Ondaatje's mythmaking is a careful process, built up by various means, and he indicates in several ways the degree to which he is presenting a legendary or poetic image of the Kid. There is, for instance, the concern with photographs. The book opens with an account of photography at the time of Billy's life, indicating the difficulty (which is also Ondaatje's) of taking a sharp image of a moving object. Huffman, the photographer, claims to have succeeded: "spokes well defined — some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main." In the same

way, Ondaatje has fixed an image of Nichol's evanescent rumour. The very fine cover, by Roger Silvester, uses an image by the early experimental photographer Muybridge, who made studies of the motions of people and animals through multiple exposures: again, there are possible analogies to Ondaatje's methods. But what the photograph shows is not always accurate: Paulita Maxwell claims that a photograph of Billy doesn't do him justice — surely an ironic phrase. Indeed, it was the reversed image of one famous photograph of Billy which led to the mistaken idea that he was left-handed. All contemporary authorities, including Garrett, remember Billy as right-handed; but his left-handedness fits in better with the legendary image of the outsider. Burns mentions Billy's being left-handed, but doesn't make anything of it; Ondaatje gives to Garrett a brilliantly sinister account of watching Billy subconsciously doing finger-exercises with his left hand. As already remarked, Ondaatje's subtitle, "Left Handed Poems" derives from Penn's film *The Left Handed Gun.*

The film image is a further way in which Ondaatje transforms the historical Billy into a legendary image. The sub-title casts the image of Penn's film across the whole book, and also recalls Penn's later masterpiece, *Bonnie and Clyde*, in which the outlaw figures are subjected to a mythologising process within the film itself. (As when, on their first meeting, Clyde asks Bonnie, "Are you a movie star?") Penn also is fascinated by photography: in both *The Left Handed Gun* and *Bonnie and Clyde* important scenes are devoted to the outlaws getting their pictures taken, and the image recurs in all Penn's films. Ondaatje uses comedy in much the same way as Penn: grotesque images of violence become almost simultaneously comic and horrible. Compare the poem about Gregory's death and the chicken with the scene in *The Left Handed Gun* where Billy's shotgun blast lifts Ollinger right out of his boots and leaves them standing, empty, on the street; a little girl starts laughing at the empty boots, until her mother's horrified slap stops her. In these scenes the humour works to intensify the image of violence; Ondaatje even succeeds in introducing a note of humour at the absolute climax of his story, as Garret is about to shoot Billy. A similar combination of violence and humour may be found in other of Ondaatje's favourite films, such as the Italian Westerns of Sergio Leone, or John Boorman's *Point Blank. Point Blank* also uses a fragmented time-scheme, with the same repeated, slow-motion, dreamlike exposures of violence as in Ondaatje's book. Further, *Point Blank*'s female lead is Angie Dickinson, and who should appear as Billy's sweetheart but "Miss Angela Dickinson of Tucson" — a name entirely of Ondaatje's own invention, not present in Burns nor in any "authentic" biography? The historical

reality of the Old West and its Hollywood myth representation meet each other in the brief story Ondaatje inserts of Frank James tearing tickets at a Los Angeles movie theatre. Finally, closely akin to the movie image is the comic-book legend which forms Billy's apotheosis. (Ondaatje's own film on bp Nichol, *Sons of Captain Poetry*, celebrates Nichol's fascination with old comics.) This is the final transformation of Billy in pop culture into the upright clean-living hero, as in a delightfully absurd film, which I saw several years ago and which Ondaatje told me he had also seen, *Billy the Kid vs. Dracula*.

But although Ondaatje's image of Billy the Kid may be influenced by the images of comic-books and the movies, these references are merely the context in which Ondaatje sets his own central image of Billy: and, as with Nichol, it is the book's title which points to the nature of that image.

Immediately after the quotation from Huffman, Ondaatje gives a list of "the killed". To Billy he ascribes 20 victims (curiously, for the usual legendary number is 21), most of whom, including the "blacksmith when I was twelve, with a knife", are totally unsubstantiated historically. Then he gives Garrett's victims, ending

> . . . and Pat Garret
> sliced off my head.
> Blood a necklace on me all my life.

The strange, violent beauty of the image, together with the use of the first person, point towards the concept behind the title *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Ondaatje's legendary context for Billy is poetry; the transformation will be carried out mainly through the poetic image; the book will present Billy himself as an artist. Of course, "works" is ambiguous: it can also refer to Billy's actions, the killings. But Ondaatje is clearly working within the Romantic tradition of the artist as outsider, just as Samuel R. Delany in his novels is obsessed with the identity of the artist and the outlaw. Nichol's Billy "was not fast with words so he became fast with a gun", but for Ondaatje Billy's status as outlaw is intimately connected with the nature of his perception. He is placed outside society not only by what he does, but by the very way in which he sees the world:

> The others, I know, did not see the wounds appearing in the sky, in the air. Sometimes a normal forehead in front of me leaked brain gasses. Once a nose clogged right before me, a lock of skin formed over the nostrils, and the shocked face had to start breathing through the mouth, but then the mustache bound itself in the lower teeth and he began to gasp loud the hah! hah! going strong

> — churned onto the floor, collapsed out, seeming in the end to be breathing out of his eye — tiny needle jets of air reaching into the throat. I told no one. If Angela D. had been with me then, not even her; not Sallie, John, Charlie, or Pat. In the end the only thing that never changed, never became deformed, were animals.

Of course, Billy's poetic personality is not entirely distinct from Michael Ondaatje's. The concern with animals — apparent throughout the book — is familiar to any reader of Ondaatje's poetry. What results from the title "*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje" is in fact a composite figure: Billy the Kid, outlaw as artist, and Michael Ondaatje, artist as outlaw, meeting in one persona, which is part history, part legend, part aesthetic image, part creator of images. It is in terms of this complex persona that the book approaches its material.

That material may be seen as a narrative with two main strands: the conflict between Billy and Pat Garrett, culminating in the manhunt and the deaths of Tom O'Folliard, Charlie Bowdre, and Billy himself; and the opposite of conflict, the scenes of peace and companionship, centring on Miss Angela D. and the Chisum ranch. Underlying these two narrative strands is the central theme of violence, as it erupts in both outlaw and artist.

BUT FULLY AS IMPORTANT as what *is* in the book is what is missed out. Ondaatje has exercised great selectivity in his presentation of Billy, and what he deliberately omits or suppresses from his sources is of great interest. One thing that should be noted about the narrative structure outlined above is that it ignores, almost completely, what is for all the biographers, however "true" or "authentic", the most important event of Billy's life: the Lincoln County War. (Burns devotes over half of his book to it.) Ondaatje's one reference to it is in connection with the question of motivation:

> A motive? some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence. Was there a source for all this? yup —

There follows Burns' account of Tunstall's murder, which he says Billy witnessed "from a distant hillside" having luckily been off "hunting wild turkeys." (In fact, it appears more probable that Billy was with Tunstall, and ran away.) Most apologists for Billy make this the central point of their exposition: Billy's career begins as an understandable search for vengeance on the murderers of his

idealistic and honest friend. "Others fought for hire," Burns claims; "Billy the Kid's inspiration was the loyalty of friendship." (Again, in fact it is certain that Tunstall was neither idealistic nor honest, and highly doubtful that he was especially friendly with Billy.) But the casual tone of Ondaatje's "yup" suggests that he does not take this idea too seriously, and there is no further mention of this stage of Billy's career. It is possible that this passage is introduced only to make fun of simplistic psychological "explanations" of the sources of Billy's violence. Ondaatje has more serious things to say on that subject.

Similarly, Nichol introduces an "explanation" of Billy's violence as a joke, but a joke with more serious implications. The central conceit of Nichol's book is the reversal of "Kid" to "Dick". Indeed, reversal of the normal image is Nichol's central tactic. So Nichol presents the extended joke that all Billy's activities were due to his having a small penis. At one level, this is a light-hearted version of the too easily oversimplified theory that guns are used as compensation by males with fears of sexual inadequacy. Nichol recognizes that this can be used too simplistically, and also makes fun of psychological determinist attitudes by revealing that "the sherrif had a short dick too, which was why he was sherrif & not out robbing banks. these things affect people differently." But behind these jokes is a serious awareness, present also in Ondaatje's book, of the tremendous force of the connection between violence and sexuality, and the centrality of these two aspects in contemporary American life. Make love not war — if you can. And it is surely no accident that Nichol twice points out that Billy's short dick is "short for richard." Richard, that is, as in Nixon. The Lincoln County War has been represented as a clash between the "good guys", Tunstall and McSween, idealistic supporters of the small farmers, and the "bad guys", the oppressive monopoly of Murphy, Dolan, and Riley; in fact, it appears to have been a fairly cynical gang war for economic control of the territory, in which neither side shows to advantage. Most of the victims in the "war" were shot in the back or from ambush. Parallels to the VietNam war may be drawn at each reader's personal political discretion; but it does seem clear that Nichol is fully conscious of political applications, in his use of "richard", and again, later, in his cynical comment on one of Nixon's favourite slogans:

> billy ran around shooting his mouth off, & the dicks off everybody else, & the sherrif stood on the sidelines cheering. this is how law & order came to the old west.

Nichol's jokes on Billy's motivation also touch lightly on a subject which is absolutely central to his own poetry: the power of language, the almost magical efficacy of words.

> could they have called him instead billy the man or bloody bonney? would he have bothered having a faster gun? who can tell.

Again, the joke can be taken absolutely seriously. Names make you what you are; you become what you are called. The historical Billy went through several changes of name. He started life as William H. Bonney; when his father died, his mother reverted to her maiden name and he became Henry McCarty; she remarried, he became Henry Antrim; when he first began to run foul of the law he acquired the name The Kid; by his own choice he reverted to William H. Bonney; but to history and legend he is only Billy the Kid. The naming is all-important: it fixes the image, it creates the personality. In Nichol's study of Billy's motivation, that noncommittal "who can tell" is the most loaded phrase of all.

Having rejected any "historical" explanation in terms of the Lincoln County War, and omitting also such legendary accretions as Billy's youthful murder of a loafer who had insulted his mother, Ondaatje presents Billy's violence in terms of the poetic image of energy: the energy necessary to both outlaw and artist. The central text for this is the poem on page 41:

> I have seen pictures of great stars,
> drawings which show them straining to the centre
> that would explode their white
> if temperature and the speed they moved at
> shifted one degree.
>
> Or in the East have seen
> the dark grey yards where trains are fitted
> and the clean speed of machines
> that make machines, their
> red golden pouring which when cooled
> mists out to rust or grey.
>
> The beautiful machines pivoting on themselves
> sealing and fusing to others
> and men throwing levers like coins at them.
> And there is the same stress as with stars,
> the one altered move that will make them maniac.

Energy tightly controlled by form is one definition of a work of art; and in art the "one altered move" will result in the dissipation of energy, a bad poem. Or, when the energy of the work of art is directly expressive of violence, and when it is transmitted in a context where such artistic controls as irony are severely compromised, then the "one altered move" can be physically destructive beyond the aesthetic bounds, as in the case of the murder by the Hell's Angels during the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont. Ondaatje's book depicts the shattering of the precarious control over the energy of Billy's violence, and the violence he evokes in those around him; the events then drive inexorably towards his death. There is a close relationship here to the previously mentioned two strands of narrative: the scenes of control are (mainly, but not exclusively) associated with the Chisums and Angela D.; the "one altered move" is (mainly, but not exclusively) Pat Garrett. And, despite Billy's statement that "the only thing that never changed, never became deformed, were animals", both the harmony and the maniac destruction are most clearly seen in the animal references.

The first of Ondaatje's images of harmony, of what might be called the "pastoral interludes" in the book, comes in the description of Billy's weeklong stay in a deserted barn. Here, attracted by "the colour and the light", he stays to get rid of a fever. "It became a calm week" in which Billy and the animals are able to live together in harmony.

> There were animals who did not move out and accepted me as a larger breed. I ate the old grain with them, drank from a constant puddle about twenty yards away, ate his disease and kept it in him. When I walked I avoided the cobwebs squat the best way when shitting, used leaves for wiping, never ate flesh or touched another animal's flesh, never entered his boundary. We were all aware and allowed each other. 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.

But if this image of harmony is presented in terms of animals, it is also in terms of animals that the "one altered move" breaks in and destroys this scene: rats eat grain fermented by rain and become maniac, killing a chipmunk, eating each other, until Billy, with "the noise breaking out the seal of silence in my ears", exhausts his bullet supply in shooting them. At the end "no other animal of any kind remained in that room", except the human with his gun. This brief scene is a paradigm for what is to come later, at the Chisum ranch.

If a writer's intentions can be most clearly seen in the places where he most drastically alters his source material, then Ondaatje's metamorphosis of the Chisums must be the very centre of his work. The impression that Ondaatje's book gives is that the Chisum ranch is a fairly small place, out in the desert miles from anywhere, inhabited only by Sallie and John, who is seen as a gentle, peace-loving man with little interest or influence in the world beyond his ranch. In fact, John Chisum was one of the largest and most influential landowners and cattlemen in the territory; and Burns describes the ranch thus:

> Chisum abandoned Bosque Grande as his headquarters in 1873, and moving down the Pecos forty miles, established South Spring Ranch, which remained his home to the end of his life. Where the South Spring River gushes from the earth in a never-failing giant spring of crystal water, he built a home fit for a cattle-king and made it one of the show places of the Southwest. Cottonwood trees brought from Las Vegas by mule pack-train he planted about his dwelling and in two winding rows that formed a noble avenue a quarter of a mile long leading from road to residence. He sowed eight hundred acres to alfalfa. He brought fruit trees from Arkansas and set out a vast acreage in orchards of apple, pear, peach, and plum. He imported roses from Texas to make a hedge about the house, and scarlet tanagers and bob-white quail from Tennessee — birds unknown to New Mexico — and set them at liberty in the oasis of beauty he had created.
>
> Here, with royal hand, Chisum dispensed frontier hospitality. His great, rambling, one-story adobe house, with verandas at front and rear, stood on the highway between Texas and New Mexico, and the stranger was as free as the invited guest to bed and board for as long as he wanted to stay, and no money or questions asked. Every day at breakfast, dinner, and supper, the table in the dining hall was set for twenty-six guests, twelve on each side and one at each end, and hardly a meal was served in ten years at which every chair was not occupied.

Ondaatje has not merely "edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked the originals"; he has made a complete, vivid, and detailed creation in absolute opposition to his original.

Ondaatje's suppression of the Lincoln County War also involves his omitting the facts that Chisum was the chief (though silent) force behind the Tunstall-McSween faction, and that after the war there was considerable conflict between Chisum and Billy, who claimed that Chisum owed him money for his part in the fighting. Burns quotes Sallie Chisum as attempting to discount this conflict, but there are persistent stories of Billy rustling Chisum's cattle, and, in some

more imaginative versions, killing Chisum's cowboys. In a letter to Governor Lew Wallace, December 12th, 1880, Billy blamed accusations against him on "the impression put out by Chisum and his tools". Steckmesser speculates that Joe Grant, one of Billy's victims, "may well have been hired by Chisum or another cattleman to remove the troublesome Kid". Even Burns, who downplays the whole conflict, admits that Chisum was responsible, along with other local cattle barons, for hiring Pat Garrett to get rid of Billy, and that their motives for this were primarily commercial. All this is totally changed or omitted in Ondaatje's version. It may also be noted that Garrett's own account never mentions his meeting Billy at the Chisum ranch, either for the first or any other time. (Garrett is, of course, understandably reticent about his early friendship with Billy.)

The image presented in Ondaatje's book is, then, largely his own invention; and the pains he has taken to alter his source material indicate the importance he attaches to it. The Chisum ranch is the "still centre" of Billy's world. It is a place of peace, of affection, of comradeship. None of the apologists for Billy as a poor misunderstood child driven against his will to violence have ever provided him with such a beautiful and fully realized context for his "true nature": but Ondaatje succeeds in doing this without in the least sentimentalising Billy.

The first presentation occurs in Billy's mind as he and Angela D. ride towards the house "Forty miles ahead of us". As they approach Billy remembers in a wealth of loving details the small, everyday details of the life of John and Sallie Chisum: the remains of breakfast, their wordless "dialogue of noise", the shutters which made the house "silent and dark blue with sunless quiet", and Sallie herself, in her bare feet,

> like a ghost across the room moving in white dresses, her hair knotted as always at the neck and continuing down until it splayed and withered like eternal smoke half way between the shoulder blades and the base of cobble spine.
> Yes. In white long dresses in the dark house, the large bones somehow taking on the quietness of the house. Yes I remember.

These ethereal images of peace and beauty are reinforced by the solid human friendship, the recollections of long evenings on the porch when "we have talked slowly through nights expecting the long silences and we have taken our time thinking the replies." Even throwing up after a long night's drinking becomes a kind of act of community; and it is significant that Garrett is specifically excluded from it, just as he falls asleep during the conversation on the porch.

Again, this is a detail specifically altered from Burns' book, where Sallie Chisum describes Garrett as often being "the life of the company that used to sit on the porch of an evening."

Angela D. fits into this world: Billy brings her to it. (Garrett arrives on his own, by accident, and is "deaf" when he arrives.) The most graphic of the sexual scenes between Billy and Angela D. takes place at the Chisum ranch, and Billy wakes there to the vision of "Beautiful ladies in white rooms in the morning".

But, as in the Pastoral tradition, *et in Arcadia ego*, elements of disruption are present even in this perfectly achieved harmony, balance, control of energy. Indeed, the indications of the "one altered move" are introduced, typically, at the very centre of the harmony, Sallie Chisum's love of animals. The first description of the Chisum ranch ends with an account of Sallie's strange collection of pet animals: "the tame, the half born, the wild, the wounded." John Chisum takes Billy out to the cages in darkness: "You could peer into a cage and see nothing till a rattle of claws hit the grid an inch from your face and their churning feathers seemed to hiss." There is the bizarre image of the one-eyed owls, the intense realization of the animals' presence and awareness, which "continued like that all night while we slept." Despite the love which Sallie obviously bears for these animals, the atmosphere of the scene is sinister, filled with impending violence. Billy feels himself to be standing on "the edge of the dark" and concludes "The night, the dark air, made it all mad." The madness and violence break out immediately in a poem in which mad rats fight in Billy's head, horses foam white with madness, and a deadly barracuda floats in his brain.

Another extended episode at the Chisum ranch is John's horrifying story of the man who systematically breeds a group of dogs into madness until they turn on him and rip him to pieces. The story is shatteringly out of place in the calm and beautiful atmosphere of the ranch; Sallie comments, to her dog, "Aint that a nasty story Henry, aint it? Aint it nasty." Henry, like Ondaatje's own dog, is a bassett; Henry is also what the H. stands for in William H. Bonney.

Garrett's presence at the Chisums' is another signal of disruption, and it is Garrett who narrates the story of Billy killing Sallie's snake-bitten cat. The imagery is closely tied together: it is this event which, according to Garrett, terrifies Angela D.; the account of Angela's shot arm immediately precedes the narrative of the night of slow talking and drinking from which Garrett is so pointedly excluded; and the beauty of the morning after is brought to an end when Billy sees that "On the nail above the bed the black holster and gun is

coiled like a snake." Another careful juxtaposition is that between Billy's shooting the cat and the first flashforward to the final shooting; and this flashforward begins:

> Down the street was a dog. Some mut spaniel, black and white. One dog, Garrett and two friends, stud looking, came down the street to the house, to me.

As a final touch to this continual association of animals and violence, Ondaatje tells us, right at the end of the book, just before the climactic description of Billy's death, that Garrett also liked animals: but not live ones, like Sallie Chisum. Pat Garrett stuffed dead birds.

BUT GARRETT is an essential part of Billy's legend. Many reasons can be given for the longevity of that legend — Billy's youth; the attractiveness, admitted even by his enemies, of his personality; the possibility of seeing him as fighting on the "right" side of the Lincoln County War; the fact that most of his victims in one sense or another deserved what they got; the exotic Mexican background — but one of the strongest motifs is that of Betrayal. Kent Ladd Steckmesser says of this point:

> The theme of "betrayal" has been carefully pointed up by Bonney's biographers and has gripped the folk imagination. Time and again we are told that the Kid would have settled down and become a law-abiding citizen if only the man hunters had given him half a chance. But Governor Wallace "double-crossed" the Kid by reneging on a promise of an amnesty. Garrett was a Judas who tracked down his friend for a few silver dollars. The story unfolds like a classical Greek drama, with the tragic hero moving inexorably toward death by treachery.

Just as Robin Hood had his Sheriff of Nottingham and Jesse James had Robert Ford, Billy the Kid had Pat Garrett. As has already been remarked, their fates are linked in legend as in life. So long as Billy was regarded as an extravagantly evil villain, Garrett was a hero, saviour of law and order, etc.; but as the view of Billy changes, Garrett becomes the betrayer, the manhunter, the assassin. (In 1908, Garrett was himself assassinated, in circumstances which have never been fully explained.) This is, essentially, the approach which Ondaatje takes; but Nichol, characteristically, takes the whole idea and stands it on its head.

Nichol's version of Pat Garrett is "the sherrif" (sic), and

> the true eventual story is billy & the sherrif were friends. if they had been more aware they would have been lovers. they were not more aware.

Nichol's sherrif does not betray Billy: Billy is betrayed by history, by legend, by god, and ultimately by himself, but not by the sherrif. Indeed, the sherrif occupies in Nichol's book much the place that Angela D. occupies in Ondaatje's. Nichol takes the idea of the symbiosis which binds together hero and villain, hunter and hunted, assassin and victim, and turns it into an identity of interests directed against the outside world. The sherrif shares Billy's predicament, but, as already noted, "these things affect people differently." The sherrif simply "stood on the sidelines cheering." This can of course be read as a cynical comment on the collusion between lawmen and criminals; but it seems more important as Nichol's only expression of community, of a harmonious relationship between two people. The two outsiders, losers of society, join together; their friendship is beautiful, the fact that they "were not more aware" is tragic, the farewell they take of each other is touching in its simplicity. Again, Nichol's surface tone is one of light-hearted joking, but the words he puts down can be taken perfectly seriously. And the sherrif does not destroy Billy: Billy in the end destroys himself, as his own violence catches up with him in a furiously self-destructive joke:

> the true eventual story is that billy the kid shot it out with himself. there was no-one faster. he snuck up on himself & shot himself from behind the grocery store.

Nichol's Billy is in fact a much more violent character than Ondaatje's: but he is not betrayed. Whatever God, history, or legend say, rumour and the sherrif remain true to him. They deny the impositions of history and legend, presenting instead, clearly and strongly, a reversed image. The subtitle "Left Handed Poems" could well be applied more accurately to Nichol's book than to Ondaatje's. In the reversed photo image, William H. Bonney becomes The Left Handed Gun; and Pat Garrett, strangely but not without beauty, becomes a sherrif not quite aware enough to be a lover.

Ondaatje's view of Garrett is more conventional; and here it should be noted that Ondaatje's highly selective presentation of Billy's history involves a very strong bias against Garrett. As already noted, Ondaatje omits any account of Billy's early activities, such as his murders in the Lincoln County War, and presents him mainly in two contexts: the peace and beauty of the Chisum ranch, and the final chase and manhunt. In other words, Billy is seen almost entirely as victim. There are three extended accounts of killings in the book — those of Tom O'Folliard, Charlie Bowdre, and Billy himself — and in every case the killer is Garrett. We never get any similar account of a killing by Billy. Even in

the strange and bizarre account of the killing of Gregory (whoever he is supposed to be) Ondaatje is careful to have Billy say that:

> I'd shot him well and careful
> made it explode under his heart
> so it wouldn't last long

In other words, Billy is a humane murderer; the gruesome images which follow can be blamed on the chicken, not Billy. There is a detailed narrative of the chase and of the tortures Billy suffers in captivity, but only the sketchiest idea is given of Billy's escape from jail, and his murder of Bell and Ollinger. Ondaatje concentrates instead on the depiction of Ollinger as a sadistic villain: a device, largely invented by Burns, which has no historical basis whatever. In short, Ondaatje stacks his deck. If the reader reacts in horror or disgust from the violence in the book, he is reacting mainly *against* Garrett. Although Ondaatje's Billy is far from a blameless character, there is a definite implication that the violence exists around him rather than in him; Nichol's farcical conclusion gives a far greater sense of a character destroyed from within by his own violence. The interconnectedness of Garrett and Billy works inexorably: if Nichol makes Garrett a friend, then the violence has to shift back to Billy, while the more Ondaatje presents Pat Garrett as the assassin, the man-hunter, the more he whitewashes his Billy.

Garrett is presented as "that rare thing — a sane assassin". Ondaatje's account of his early life gives a plausible background of psychological motivation for Garrett's suppression of emotion; but it stresses that even before Juanita's death Garrett was capable of efforts of will such as his learning French and learning to drink. Garrett "comes to chaos neutral": but his neutrality cuts him off from any contact with humanity, so that his violence becomes cold and inhuman. Twice we have the picture of his victims (Tom O'Folliard and Charlie Bowdre) staggering towards him in death; in each case he stands unmoved, waiting for them to die. Even his reaction to Billy's death is reported in a totally unemotional manner. Garrett, more than any other single factor in the book, *is* that "one altered move" that makes everything around him "maniac." The word itself is echoed in the description of Billy's arm breaking through the window after the shooting:

> Guitterrez goes to hold the arm but it is manic, breaks her second finger. His veins that controlled triggers — now tearing all they touch.

Nichol's Billy destroys himself; but Ondaatje's is destroyed by something outside

himself, something that itself remains calm and indestructible: and therefore, all the more terrifying. Garrett's character thus presents an interesting paradox: he is himself an embodiment of order, control; yet in contact with Billy he becomes the "altered move" which produces chaos.

Or is it chaos? It is violence, certainly, and death; but there is a kind of direction to it. Within the terms of the legend, it is an inexorable progress, and what it ends in is not Billy's death but Billy's apotheosis into legend: the creation, that is, of an aesthetic image. If Billy is one image of the artist, then surely Pat Garrett, even if his material is dead bodies, like his birds, is another? *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is, after all, a tightly controlled book: Ondaatje is a careful artist, and the images of violence are never allowed to get out of hand in the book. The book is not chaos, the book is not manic. It is an attempt to comprehend the legend of Billy the Kid, to see him as one of the exemplary figures of modern consciousness, outlaw as artist, artist as outlaw. He is involved with violence, but the violence results from the conflict between himself and his society, it is a product of his symbiotic relationship with Pat Garrett. Ondaatje's final image of Billy sees him waking up after a bad night: the smell of smoke, the stain of violence, is still with him — but only in his shirt, which can be changed. We turn the page and find a photograph of a small boy smiling in a cowboy outfit: Billy's costume of violence turned into an image, a toy. That small boy is Michael Ondaatje, poet.

Ondaatje's Billy does not have the substantiality of history; his history is changed and fashioned into something else: legend, the aesthetic image in all its depth and detail, its vividness and force. Nichol's Billy is, in its way, a much more radical image of the outsider's consciousness, for it rejects any notion of substance whatever. His Billy is rumour, and essentially short-lived, like the smoke which Ondaatje's Billy sees on his ceiling, ready to blow away whenever a window is opened. His energy dissipates itself, sneaks up behind and shoots itself. Yet Nichol's is also a carefully crafted and constructed book. The surface seems superficial and whimsical, yet the words will aways yield a serious meaning if you give them a chance. Perhaps rumour is that way too. The truth lies only in what the words can say, and what they say is never fixed. It is a process, an event, a becoming; the truth is always eventual.

Such as, for example, the "truth" that on July 14th, 1881, in Pete Maxwell's dark bedroom, Pat Garrett shot Billy the Kid just above the heart, and the next day, "neatly and properly dressed" (according to Garrett), he was buried in the military cemetery at Old Fort Sumner, in the state of New Mexico.