

“STORIES TO FINISH”:
THE COLLECTED WORKS OF
BILLY THE KID

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Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is a montage of techniques designed to catch and to record the process of recollection. Through a variety of voices in poetry and prose, the book assembles a series of perspectives on the life of Billy the Kid and explores the poet's craft that shaped them. Machines — guns, camera, and pencil — are shown to fragment and isolate single impressions out of the movement of life. This disintegration of living things is also seen in metaphors drawn from the still photo and the motion picture, conceived of as a series of stills infinitely arrangeable. Fixing, one metaphor from photography, runs throughout the book in the recurrences of madness and of hypnosis, a term defined once as “animal magnetism” and used in the text to explore the mentalities of killers: Billy, Garrett, and Livingstone. In this way, the transformation of nature to machine is linked through metaphor to the theme of madness. The collection counterpoints this insane fixity with movement, as the rhythms of the poetry and the composition of its pages flash forward and back in patterns of impression. Single scenes are recomposed and reset in different narrative contexts, their modulations defined by rhythms, imagery, and the structure of scenes on the page. Through this montage of effects, the poet focusses with increasing intensity on the operations of perception and memory.

I. Still Life and Moving Picture

The title page of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is framed with a thick black line, and every picture in the text is so blocked. From the first page of text, an empty frame, to the last, Ondaatje's framed and reduced photo of a child within a larger frame, hard black lines delineate the shape of the poems. Photography, the arresting of motion, determines the technique of the poems and illuminates their themes. This metaphor of the camera, with its shutter cutting off the source of light and life, everywhere informs the text. Caught life is also memory, and Billy's imagination restructures the past in frames of light and shadow, so that, for example, in his recollections of a scene on the Chisum verandah, Billy catches visual impressions and connects them with photography: “John's rocker is going slow but his

checkered shirt leaves just a red arc daze like some blurred picture. I remember, 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."¹ Before Billy begins his narration, Ondaatje opens the collection by quoting the Western photographer L. A. Huffman on the competition between the human hand and the machine it operates: "*I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked . . .*" (p. [5]). What eludes the camera is life moving too fast to be caught; Billy, waiting, standing, is recorded on film.

Not only the still subject of a photograph, Billy is also the recorder of visual impressions: "I am very still / I take in all the angles of a room" (p. 20). His perception is visual; a room is a picture; a day, a series of frames:

And I sat there for three days not moving an inch, like some dead tree witnessing the tides or the sun and the moon taking over from each other as the house in front of me changed colour — the night, the early morning yellow, the gradual move to dark blue at 11 o'clock, the new white 4 o'clock sun let in, later the gradual growing dark again.

.....
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, leaving fewer arcs of sun each time digging into the floor. Sallie starting from one end and disappearing down to the far end leaving black behind her as she walked to the remaining light, making it all a cold darkness. Then in other rooms not seen by me. (p. 34)

In many scenes, Billy waits in a dark room and looks out to a white landscape defined by the frames of windows and doors. Space throughout the sequence of prose and poetry is bordered by box frames: porch rails, windows, walls, barbed wire fences, and coffins. "When I had arrived I opened two windows and a door and the sun poured blocks and angles in, lighting up the floor's skin of feather and old grain" (p. 17). The shape of the text on the page is also blocked in by deep white space, just as Billy's visual memory is defined by "white walls neon on the eye" and the spill of light across a surface (p. 58). In all these scenes, Billy is either in a room crossed by sun arcs or in darkness looking into boxes of light.

Not only are the settings blocked in by black and white, but Billy's black clothing and awareness of the light falling on his waiting eye expand the visual metaphor. Thus he presents himself as a camera, recording the track of a fly across a white surface in a deliberate reversal of a white star's imprint against the night sky:

Waiting
nothing breaks my vision
but flies in their black path
like inverted stars. (p. 74)

¹Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: Anansi, 1970), p. 68. All subsequent references will be indicated in parentheses in my text.

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid also quotes the language and the visual technique of motion pictures. The movie western, with its cliché of a stagecoach wheel reversing through stroboscopic effect, is suggested by the Huffman passage on the first page of the book: “. . . *spokes well defined—some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main*” (p. [5]). Introducing Pat Garrett, Ondaatje seems to evoke a scene in Chaplin’s film *Monsieur Verdoux*, where, between wives, the killer Verdoux snips at his roses, tenderly lifting a caterpillar out of his way:

You know hunters
are the gentlest
anywhere in the world

they halt caterpillars
from path dangers
lift a drowning moth from a bowl
remarkable in peace

in the same way assassins
come to chaos neutral. (p. 47)

Billy’s camera eye is only one emblem of the mechanization of nature; the machine metaphors expand in descriptions of sex and guns. Billy is “the left-handed gun,” the inheritor of machine specialization whose beautiful white hand, transformed to an instrument used only to fire bullets, hypnotizes Garrett. “I noticed his left hand churning within itself, each finger circling alternately like a train wheel. Curling into balls, pouring like waves across a tablecloth” (p. 43). When Billy and his gang are taken to trial at Messilla in five days’ forced march, the sun becomes a pair of hands, merging with Billy’s: “The hands were cold as porcelain, one was silver old bone stripped oak white eastern cigarette white sky the eye core of sun. Two hands, one dead, one born from me, one like crystal, one like shell of snake found in spring. Burning me like dry ice” (p. 77). This reduction and fragmentation of the body echoes in the stories of Billy’s friends, whose disintegration is charted through narrative sections interwoven with Billy’s own story. Jim Payne’s grandfather tells a story of meeting Frank James of the James Brothers, now working as the doorman of the fresco theatre:

GET YOUR TICKET TORN UP BY FRANK JAMES the poster said,
and people came for that rather than the film. Frank would say,
‘Thanks for coming, go on in’.

Jim’s grandfather asked him if he would like to come over and
have a beer after the film, but Frank James said ‘No, but thank
you’ and tore up the next ticket. He was by then an alcoholic.

(p. 24)

The phrase “would say,” the stilted language, and the mechanical repetition of ticket-taking all point up the reduction of the once notorious outlaw.

Again, half way through the book, Tom O'Folliard's story is told. He has blown off the left side of his face in an accident with his rifle; alone in the desert, as he drinks water it pours out of his ear. "He said he would have cut off his hand with a knife to have something to eat, but he realised he had lost too much blood already" (p. 50). In the opening of the book, Billy introduces this pieced-together man, his breath blowing out his neck and cheek and flapping them like air bladders. Finally Garrett completes the dismantling by shooting off Tom's shoulder before he kills him.

This narrative sequence, beginning with Tom's final disintegration, defines Billy's secret vision; for he sees everything decomposing before his eyes — something he tells no one except in his *Works*. "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" (p. 10). His is a microscopic eye that penetrates below the skin, "magnifying the bones across a room / shifting in a wrist" (p. 39). This capacity for identifying body and machine unites both Billy and Garrett in the sanity of assassins, as Billy explains:

that is why I can watch the stomach of clocks
shift their wheels and pins into each other
and emerge living, for hours. (p. 11)

Recollecting sex with Angela D, Billy articulates the contact of bodies as if they were machines tensely working against each other, her body spitting electricity from the sheets to his arm and pinioning his hands:

she hooks in two and covers me
my hand locked
her body nearly breaking off my fingers
pivoting like machines in final speed. (p. 16)

Again, in a later scene, Angela straddles him and hangs her legs tight, "like clothespins," to his shoulders (p. 68). The insistent metaphors of Billy as gun and as train reinforce this mechanization of the sex act.

Complementary to these patterns of the human transformed to machine, specialized and fragmented, is the animation of mechanical objects. In the following passage, for example, Billy records his impressions of a trainyard back East, where metal engines mate and generate new forms:

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. (p. 42)

The language of this passage echoes that of his description of sex with Angela D, quoted above, where his hands were "pivoting like machines in final speed." Like his gun "coiled like a snake" (p. 71), all these machines in Billy's recreated world have sensual quality, their forms as rounded and complete as the stomachs of clocks that "shift their wheels and pins into each other." The contrast between the fragmentation of humans in their rigid patterns of action and the beautiful completeness of the machine is marked in the scene of Billy's death, where a horse's eye globes the visual field like a perfect 180° lens: "all seen sliding round / the screen of a horse's eye" (p. 94). Where most men are erratic and incompetent ("... with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked"), Billy and Garrett impersonate the clear perfection of an intricate mechanism.

II. Fixity and Madness

Machines as the agents of fixation and repetitive action function through an interplay of forces. In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, mechanization is beauty on the edge of madness:

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.

.....

The beautiful machines pivoting on themselves
 sealing and fusing to others
 and men throwing levers like coins at them.
 And there is there the same stress as with stars,
 the one altered move that will make them maniac. (p. 41)

Chewing red dirt marijuana, Billy recalls an image from the past, his consciousness freezing action into mechanism and then reanimating it: "I was thinking of a photograph someone had taken of me, the only one I had then. I was standing on a wall, at my feet there was this bucket and in the bucket was a pump and I was pumping water out over the wall. Only now, with the red dirt, water started dripping out of the photo" (p. 50). Once, for a week alone in a barn, Billy cleared his mind and moved in harmony with the natural environment: "When I walked I avoided the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish" (p. 17). But rats crazed on fermenting grain began to cannibalize each other, and the week's sanity is ended. Billy goes mad at the sight of the rats' abandon and is transformed into an automatic machine firing bullets:

... so that I, sitting on the open window with its thick sill where they couldnt reach me, filled my gun and fired again and again into their slow wheel across the room at each boomm, and reloaded and fired again and again till I went through the whole bag of bullet supplies — the noise breaking out the seal of silence in my ears, the smoke sucked out of the window as it emerged from my fist and the long twenty yard space between me and them empty but for the floating bullet lonely as an emissary across and between the wooden posts that never returned, so the rats continued to wheel and stop in the silences and eat each other, some even the bullet. (p. 18)

Repetitions of phrases and the reverberation of slow and fast rhythms in this passage connect the man with the insane fixity of the rats, both caught up in an ecstasy of destruction. Billy's gun hand wheels with the rats' mindless retracing of their path, while the smoke and the bullet acquire intelligible, human purpose.

Billy can recount scenes of utmost violence in a tone of cool detachment, sharing with Garrett an ability to limit reality to clean configurations: "the ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke" (p. 28). Most of the characters in Billy's stories are frozen in rigid patterns of action, and, like him, they bear a scar or some other deformation that brands them: "Blood a necklace on me all my life" (p. [6]). Again, red dirt, alcohol, fatigue, and extreme pain deaden the conscious minds of these figures, who move through the narrative in straight lines. When Charlie Bowdre is shot in an ambush, he cuts straight as a knife across the snow while his stomach slops down his trousers (p. 22). This fixity of purpose is suggested of Garrett by the term "sane assassin," originally *hashashin*: ritual murderers who used hashish as an intoxicant. Garrett is devoted to the act of killing Billy; he was an "ideal assassin for his mind was warped" (p. 28).

The text explores rigidities of the mind by juxtaposing beautiful exterior control with internal chaos. Billy includes a story that John Chisum had told him about Livingstone, a man who could not be trusted with a gun. Prevented from exploding in violence, Livingstone instead fences in some spaniels and systematically inbreeds them to madness, each succeeding generation more grotesque than the last and living only to fornicate themselves into blind idiocy. When the vet at last finds them, the dogs have eaten everything of Livingstone including his watch: "There were the bones of course, and his left wrist — the hand that held the whip when he was in the pen — was left untouched in the middle of the area" (p. 62). Fixity, precisely located here by the "left wrist," had given Livingstone's life a surface order. Billy relates that Livingstone would go into town without a trace of madness and that "many he had known when younger said how much more stable he had become. . ." (p. 61).

At the outset of his collection, Billy had defined his own madness by delimiting the bounds of conscience:

one must eliminate much
that is one turns when the bullet leaves you
walk off see none of the thrashing

the very eyes welling up like bad drains
believing then the morals of newspapers or gun
where bodies are mindless as paper flowers you dont feed
or give to drink. (p. 11)

At the end of the collection, in the last mad seconds of Billy's account of his own death, he is watching inside and through a window at Maxwell's. Garrett's bullet is a frozen point in his head as Garrett's men dance outside in circles. This exterior view merges with Billy's insides as the pain transforms to sunballs emerging everywhere, like bullets bouncing then juggled in the hand. His conscious mind plays with final metaphors, fixing and unfixing reality until the brain dissolves into chaos:

click click click like Saturday morning pistol cleaning
when the bullets hop across the bed sheet and bounce and click

click and you toss them across the floor like. . . up in the air
and see how many you can catch in one hand the left

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. (p. 95)

Billy's mind turns on itself, and the dominant image is the ball — the scene itself spherical, "sliding round / the screen of a horse's eye," and reflected in the window. As he dies in Maxwell's bedroom, watching inside his head and out, Billy replays the visual impressions of his first morning in bed with Angela D: "on my sheets — oranges / peeled half peeled / bright as hidden coins against the pillow" (p. 21). Now, in these final minutes, Billy's knowledge of the end of knowing is the last expression of his consciousness in the book.

III. Compositions

Billy's collected works swing between fixity and movement. The violence of his life is fixed in history, and his initial statement in the book catalogues reality — first his own victims, then those killed by enemies:

These are the killed.

(By them) —

Charlie, Tom O'Folliard

Angela D's split arm,

and Pat Garrett

sliced off my head.

Blood a necklace on me all my life. (p. [6])

The summary half-lines broken across the page invoke the future, and Garrett is watching and waiting as Billy begins the narrative: "... and he sent me a letter saying move out or I will get you Billy" (p. 7). Against these fixed points of reference, the sequences in poetry and prose are animated in a variety of rhythms:

MMMMMMMM mm thinking
moving across the world on horses
body split at the edge of their necks
neck sweat eating at my jeans
moving across the world on horses. (p. 11)

The rhythm of the two repeated bracketing lines is dactylic, while the two middle lines break the flow in abrupt spondees. The rhythms alternate from that of ambling motion (an echo of any cowboy song — "Tumbling Tumbleweed," say) to the hot bite of horse sweat on the flesh of the thighs. Many poems complete on a page have no terminal punctuation, the narrative or meditative flow unstopped. The movement of the verse in other scenes again juxtaposes movement and fixity, as when Billy's description of a ride across country recalls the language and rhythm of a child's song:

Crossed a crooked river
loving in my head
ambled dry on stubble
shot a crooked bird. (p. 14)

But, as the sequence of poems develops in the book, this too will be stiffened by association with pain — in Sallie Chisum's description, for example, of Garrett: "*Despite his crooked mouth / and crooked smile which / made his whole face seem crooked*" (p. 89). Billy introduces Angela Dickinson first in a music-hall turn, using limerick rhythm — "her teeth leave a sting on your very best thing / and its best when she gets the best money" — and then the dactylic rhythm of "Higglety-Pigglety":

Miss Angela Dickinson
blurred in the dark
her teeth are a tunnel
her eyes need a boat. (p. 64)

This second rhythm later reverberates brokenly in one of Billy's flash-forwards to his death:

Miss Angela D her eyes like a boat
on fire her throat is a kitchen
warm on my face heaving
my head mouth out
she swallows your breath

like warm tar pour
 the man in the bright tin armour star
 blurred in the dark
 saying stop jesusus jesus jesus JESUS. (p. 73)

The gaiety of the earlier dactyls echoes in the first two lines of this passage. Then lines of disjointed syntax and monosyllabic harshness alternate with the dactylic rhythm of the fifth and eighth lines, and the sequence closes with a voice that might be either Billy's or Angela's: "JESUS." The whole passage traces the merging of Billy's life with his death, as Angela's fire and blackness blend into the bright star of Garrett, waiting in the dark to kill him.

This linking of life and death through the language and rhythms of the poetry informs the whole structure of the book: an interweaving of scenes from Billy's life with flash-forwards to his loss of consciousness as Garrett's bullet kills him. Each of the episodes he recalls is acutely realized: "but from here I can imagine a dialogue of noise — the scraping cup, the tilting chair, the cough, the suction as an arm lifts off a table breaking the lock that was formed by air and the wet of the surface" (p. 32). Through these passages Billy explores the difficulty of catching reality out of the fragments of memory and incomplete perception. Two half-blind owls are first seen as one, as Billy recalls that all he could see were its eyes "at least 8" apart" (p. 37). He remembers the look of the light at each hour of the day at the Chisums' house and continually corrects his account, disciplining his memory to precision: "Yes. In long white dresses in the dark house, the large bones somehow taking on the quietness of the house. Yes I remember" (p. 33). Like the owls at the Chisum ranch in their cages, Billy is in darkness, perceived and perceiving fitfully and then dissolving again.

Following a long prose passage describing the Chisum ranch is the first account of Billy's death:

(To come) to where eyes will
 move in head like a rat
 mad since locked in a biscuit tin all day
 stampeding mad as a mad rats legs
 bang it went was hot
 under my eye

 sad billys out
 floating barracuda in the brain. (p. 38)

This poem leads to Billy's revelation of his vision of reality as a mechanism below the surface skin, something he can penetrate in the way that he can foresee the shattering of his skull. In this and in each succeeding replay of Billy's death, the limits of perception are tightly correlated with the poet's act of recording his works. For example, Ondaatje writes of the difficulty of clearing his mind of the details of Billy's rotting corpse, while his dreams are contorted in violence:

Getting more difficult
things all over crawling
in the way
gotta think through
the wave of ants on him

.....
ribs blossoming out like springs
the meat from his eyes

Last night was dreamed into a bartender
with an axe I drove into glasses of gin lifted to be tasted. (p. 40)

This set of three poems — “sad billys out,” his eye “magnifying the bones across a room,” and Ondaatje’s experience of writing — runs in a sequence on separate pages and is completed by a fourth, which recapitulates Billy’s awareness of the stress of stars and machines straining at each other. A second long prose passage then terminates the group with the introduction of “Mistuh Patrick Garrett,” who is destined to assassinate Billy. When Billy describes his experience in writing his *Works*, his imagery merges with that of Ondaatje (quoted above):

and my fingers touch
this soft blue paper notebook
control a pencil that shifts up and sideways
mapping my thinking going its own way
like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood.

.....
hands that need the rub of metal
those senses that
that want to crash things with an axe. (p. 72)

Again, this poem is part of a sequence on Billy’s death, and is completed with Billy alone in the dark waiting for Garrett: “I am unable to move / with nothing in my hands” (p. 75). All the machine metaphors for Billy’s hands suggest the tense beauty of devices precision geared to movement and subject to error, “the one altered move that will make them maniac” (p. 41). This account of fracture and imprecision reverberates in a poem that may be read as Billy’s address to his poet, or to one who will compose a night-piece in capturing him in language:

Am the dartboard
for your midnight blood
the bones’ moment
of perfect movement
that waits to be thrown
magnetic into combat

a pencil
harnessing my face
goes stumbling into dots. (p. 85)

In the final facing pages of the text, Ondaatje describes the salvaging of Billy's corpse, reworking Billy's initial description of his death and picking up the rhythm and the barracuda image of the earlier poem:

Poor young William's dead
with blood planets in his head
with a fish stare, with a giggle
like he said. (p. 104)

Throughout these sequences of parallels, there have been two complementary patterns. Billy's narratives of his death are an accumulation of detail, word upon word, view upon view. The process of Ondaatje's writing the *Works* is a reduction, as the telling ends.

What the photograph does is to freeze motion, catching it and isolating it from a sequence of movements. So the poetry in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* manipulates a scene, plays it back, and reshapes it in new patterns:

His stomach was warm
remembered this when I put my hand into
a pot of lukewarm tea to wash it out
dragging out the stomach to get the bullet
he wanted to see when taking tea
with Sallie Chisum in Paris Texas

With Sallie Chisum in Paris Texas
he wanted to see when taking tea
dragging out the stomach to get the bullet
a pot of luke warm tea to wash it out
remembered this when I put my hand into
his stomach was warm. (p. 27)

This recomposing of a scene works on three scales in the book. In the example cited above, Billy replays a single stanza in reverse order. Again, Pat Garrett is described in a prose passage that is bracketed by the word *assassin* (pp. 28-29). In both the single, mirrored stanza and the Garrett passage, Ondaatje uses the page and facing page as his formal unit, the frame for his scene. Ranging wider than these single scenes replayed in a single visual space, the book also reworks sequences of action, setting them up in different contexts. The death of Charlie Bowdre is played three times. First, quickly, Billy records the moment when Charlie's body was blown back into the room:

face changing like fast sunshine o my god
o my god billy I'm pissing watch
your hands
while the eyes grew all over his body. (p. 12)

In the second account, Charlie's death is expanded and shaped deliberately on the page — the exposition of time, character, and winter season all introduced before the shot lifts Charlie back, one foot white with snow, into the room. Billy then analyzes with precision Charlie's rigid walk straight to Garrett, and by the end of the scene Charlie is eliminated from the visual field:

January at Tivan Arroyo, called Stinking Springs more often.
With me, Charlie, Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh. Snow. Charlie
took my hat and went out to get wood and feed the horses. The
shot burnt the clothes on his stomach off and lifted him right
back into the room. Snow on Charlie's left boot.

.....
Snow outside. Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh and me. No windows,
the door open so we could see. Four horses outside. (p. 22)

Third is the following sequel, picking up exactly where the story had been left and carrying it forward:

Snow outside. Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh and me. No windows,
the door open so we could see. Four horses outside. Garrett
aimed and shot to sever the horse reigns. He did that for 3 of
them so they got away and 3 of us couldnt escape. He tried for
5 minutes to get the reigns on the last horse but kept missing.
So he shot the horse. We came out. No guns. (p. 48)

The largest scale on which Ondaatje manipulates time and replays a scene is the series of passages flashing forwards to Billy's wait for Garrett in Maxwell's room and to Billy's death there. The techniques interconnecting the sequence are varied; the first death scene is connected with the last, for example, by the image of the barracuda in Billy's head. The following scene from the sequence has a circular completeness on the page, as Billy records and revises what he might have seen from a new camera angle:

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.

Again.

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

Garrett takes off his hat and leaves it outside the door. The others laugh. Garrett smiles, pokes his gun towards the door. The others melt and surround.

All this I would have seen if I was on the roof looking. (p. 46)

The composition of this scene is reworked once more in the final minutes of the book, beginning with Billy's meditative "MMMmmmmmm" and blocking in the action in a frame:

MMMmmmmmm. In the final minutes. It is Texas midnight. A large large square, well and buckets centre. The houses and sheds in rows making up the square. The long narrow porch running all around. Up to the well rides Pat Garrett and deputies Poe and Mackinnon. Scuffling slow, smoking as they dismount gentle and leave the horses and walk to the large hut which is Maxwell's room. They pass the dog. (p. 92)

An image, a rhythm, a single object in the visual field can provide an immediate point of reference to tie the sequence together; and the progressive expansion of structural units gives the pattern coherence and strength. Billy provides his reader with a model for this composition of the plot of the book in folds of language, rhythms, visual detail, and narrative sequence:

. . . Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in.

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

The plot of the poem is that whip in slow motion, action transmitted in waves through the length of the text, with the ridges concentrating in the last death scene, where Billy's works and the process of their collecting end. At the end, the poet has assimilated his subject within himself and focusses, like Billy, on the look of light falling in the room where he completes his work.

IV. Collecting

The concept of collecting underlies *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and a series of parallels amplifies its significance. The overlapping of imagery from Billy's memory to Ondaatje's commentary on the process of

writing is one aspect of collecting already discussed in this study. Another is that of structure as collection: the gathering of stories, perspectives on Billy and the juxtaposing of gradually accumulating details about Billy's death with the poet's meditations on memory and perception. A third is the interrelation of the killers, the photographers, and the poet who catches life and fixes it on the page from a multiplicity of perspectives. The killer Billy the Kid is a photographer, like Huffman fascinated by the look of motion frozen into form, as in his examination of Angela D's split arm: "Look at it, I'm looking into your arm / nothing confused in there look how clear Yes Billy, clear" (p. 66). He presents himself and his memory of scenes in the frames of windows and doors, watching the play of light on a moving object. He is like Garrett, as both record the same scene at the Chisum ranch like technicians watching each other. Each is obsessed with the other. Billy writes about Garrett: "He became frightened of flowers because they grew so slowly that he couldnt tell what they planned to do. His mind learned to be superior because of the excessive mistakes of those around him. Flowers watched him" (p. 28). Garrett writes about Billy: "You could never tell how he meant a phrase, whether he was serious or joking. From his eyes you could tell nothing at all" (p. 43). Garrett is also a collector of dead birds, which he would have sent to him frozen in boxes so that he could remove the bodies himself and stuff their feathered shells into life-like attitudes. Michael Ondaatje, composer and collector of these left-handed poems, assembles the collectors and, like Billy, is both part of the process and outside it observing himself.

From the first empty frame, with Huffman's "*I send you a picture of Billy,*" to the last page of text, Billy is not caught in a single image, but in a configuration. The book's business is to collect a picture of Billy and a record of the dialect and content of his works, and the poetry communicates this process through the poet's experience of Billy's character and exploration of himself. The Huffman comment on the first page is a directive to the reader: ". . . *please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open.*" The book is a series of lenses, all wide open to admit a multiplicity of impressions. The boxes and frames that fix dead Billy, like the photograph taken of him with life escaping out of focus, catch only distorted fragments, for the picture is not complete in a single frame. Ondaatje imagines the pieces of Billy remaining in the coffin seventy years later: "Perhaps Garrett's bullet no longer in thick wet flesh would roll in the skull like a marble. From the head there'd be a trail of vertebrae like a row of pearl buttons off a rich coat down to the pelvis. . . . His legend a jungle sleep" (p. 97).

In this book which explores the process of recording both history and legend, many stories are told by and about every character. Segments of the collective account are quoted from the record of Billy's contemporaries, and they are amplified and illuminated by the poet's creation of a chorus of voices whose authenticity is compelling. The thick prose of *The Five Cent Wide Awake Library* gives a final perspective, and ends Billy's legend in a romantic blur:

The man called Billy the Kid is not impressed by the magnificent richness of his surroundings. The golden cutlery means nothing . . . The priceless china and crystal matter not, and the food cooked by a French chef? — PFAAGGH! Thinks: "I'd sooner be in Mama Rosa's kitchen eatin' tortillas an' chile with Rosita battin' them dark eyes at me!" (p. 100)

Ondaatje writes that this comic-book legend is "real" and encloses it in fat black lines on the page, adding one more angle of vision on his subject. Again, the poet records Deputy Poe's reconstruction of his conversation with Pat Garrett just after Garrett had blown someone's head off in Maxwell's bedroom: "*'I'm sure it was the Kid,' responded Garrett, 'for I knew his voice and could not have been mistaken'*" (p. 103). In the richness of Ondaatje's vision, no single picture of Billy would be enough. Billy's photograph, which is promised, captioned, described, and accommodated in the spacing of the pages, is never in fact printed; on the last page instead is a large empty frame containing a smaller framed shot of a child — presumably the poet, but perhaps the poet's child — in chaps, hat, and cowboy vest, grinning with guns held at waist height.

Montreal, P.Q.