"I SEND YOU A PICTURE": ONDAATJE'S PORTRAIT OF BILLY THE KID

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I

The reader finds in Ondaatje's Billy a strong desire for order, a rage for order, one might say, if Billy's style and voice were not so deliberately flat in so many places. From his opening words, Billy reveals an inclination to order his world as he neatly lists "the killed" by himself and "by them."[1] The precision and meticulousness of Billy's list stand in contrast to the qualities of those photographs enumerated by Billy's contemporary, L. A. Huffman, on the preceding page: "bits of snow in the air—spokes well defined—some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main" (p. 5). Imprecision marks these "daily experiements" made by Huffman, a quality to be accounted for more by Huffman's interest in motion than by any lack of sophistication in equipment or technique. Not only does he choose moving subjects—"passing horses," "men walking"—but he frequently shoots from "the saddle" when his horse is "in motion." Whereas movement strikes the keynote in Huffman's paragraph, fixity characteristizes Billy's list. And Huffman's "movement," given his paragraph's privileged position at the beginning of the volume and its lively, energetic rhythm, immediately impresses the reader as preferable to Billy's fixity.

Billy's attempt, in his opening "work," to organize his world into a clear-cut pattern fails almost immediately. J. M. Kertzer points out that the initial distinction between friend and foe breaks down in the next poem when Billy reports killing Jim Carlyle "over some mix-up, he being a friend" (p. 7).[2] In fact, in Billy's first entry itself, any distinction between adversaries seems fuzzy, at best, for Billy begins his list of those he has killed by including "Morton, Baker, early friends of mine" (p. 5).

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[1]Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: Anansi, 1970), p. 6. Subsequent references will be indicated by page number immediately following the quotation.

[2]"On Death and Dying: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*," *English Studies in Canada*, 1, No. 1 (Spring 1975), p. 87.

The blurring of the lines between adversaries extends to Ondaatje's presentation of Pat Garrett as well. For, while Billy, on the one side, can kill friends, Garrett, on the other side, can "giggle" at the escapades of the men whom he pursues, imprisons, and kills (p. 28). Moreover, the relationship between Billy and Garrett, with its ambiguously sexual undertones, does not resolve simply into a question of "sheriff versus outlaw."[3] As Kertzer suggests, Ondaatje creates a world in which all categories "break apart as the imagery shifts and fuses."[4]

Despite the apparent impossibility of fixing the world, Billy remains insistent in his urge to order. He sprinkles his account of the killing of Tom O'Folliard, for example, with "thens" and "nows," words which lend the semblance of orderly progression to a narrative. The narrative mode itself presupposes some principle of order moving through time, of course.

Billy's "Boot Hill" poem illustrates particularly well the problematic aspect of his desire for a simple order since the poem points to natural forces which resist any imposition of order. The graveyard's path stubbornly "tangles," mocking the aspirations of a formal and imposing gate designed to maintain order:

> There is an elaborate gate
> but the path keeps to no main route for it tangles
> like branches of a tree among the gravestones.
>
> (p. 9)

The choice of a natural metaphor to image the garveyard's disorder betrays Billy's belief that the natural world is unmanageable and messy, if not chaotic. He quickly counters this natural disorder with another list of the killed:

> 300 of the dead in Boot Hill died violently
> 200 by guns, over 50 by knives
> some were pushed under trains—a popular
> and overlooked form of murder in the west.
> Some from brain haemorrhages resulting from bar fights
> at least 10 killed in barbed wire.
>
> (p.9)

That two of Billy's opening three "works" involve lists tells us something about the strength of his need for order; that both are lists of the dead suggests something about order itself: perhaps only dead

[3]See, for example, p. 53 and p. 73.
[4]"On Death and Dying," p. 89.

things can fit tidily into a list. (And even then the result may be only a semblance of order; Billy's first list, we recall, failed to adequately contain or fix clear distinctions between adversaries.) A curious detail from the prose section preceding the "Boot Hill" poem—a small incident in the list of the events which follow Garrett's killing of O'Folliard—also links death and orderliness. "Mason," Billy reports, "stretched out a blanket *neat* in the corner. Garrett *placed* Tom O'Folliard down, broke open Tom's rifle, took the remaining shells and *placed* them by him" (p. 8: my italics). Again the suggestion is that only lifeless things can be so neatly placed. The association between order and death strengthens when we notice that Boot Hill's image of disorder, "the path [which] keeps to no main route," also invests the graveyard with its only signs of life when it "tangles/like branches of a tree" (p. 9). In Billy's graveyard poem, living and growing become instances of disorderly conduct.

If Billy's first three works demonstrate his compelling urge to order things, events, and people, his fourth work sketches a reason for this obsession with external order: Billy's uneasiness with the radically disordered nature of his inner world. Billy, that is, seeks or imposes order in the external world to compensate for a disintegrating inner world, a state which he projects upon the world around him. Nightmarish visions of a world in deformation constantly plague him. When he looks up, he apprehends a vast metaphysical or divine injury, seeing "wounds appearing in the sky" (p. 10). Unable to place his faith in the heavens, he cannot cling to ideals of normality in the human sphere either, because what appears to be normal may deflate at any moment: "Sometimes," Billy confesses, "a normal forehead in front of me leaked brain gasses" (p. 10). The human organism proves defective, faultily adapted to its world: "Once a nose clogged right before me, a lock of skin formed over the nostrils . . . [he seemed] in the end to be breathing out of his eye—tiny needle jets of air reaching into the throat" (p. 10). So, "In the end," Billy turns to non-human life, seeking relief from his vision of deformation in "the only thing that never changed, never became deformed," in "animals" (p. 10).

Even as Billy is presenting his visions of deformation and disorder, however, his compulsion to order determines the development of the paragraph. His attention moves steadily downward, in orderly fashion, from sky to forehead, nose, mouth, mustache, teeth, to the body on the floor, finally coming to rest below the human level, on animals. At this lowest level, Billy finds, or imagines, that quality which, in a more traditional metaphysical view, would belong to the highest sphere—

immutability. Clearly Billy desires not mere order, but unchanging, eternal order.

The notion of changelessness figures as well in the poem which follows the passage describing Billy's nightmarish perceptions, in a way which links the desire for immutability specifically to Billy's fear of mortality. Once again the disturbing fact of deformity confronts Billy, only this time it is the deformity wrought by his own hand when he shoots a man. Unwilling to consider himself at all responsible for such deformation, Billy advocates the "moral of newspapers or gun/where bodies are mindless" (p. 11). He constructs an argument that, with its "so . . . then . . . that is why" structure, bears at least the appearance of orderly, logical development:

> so if I had a newman's brain I'd say
> well some morals are physical
> must be clear and open
> like diagram of watch or star
> 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 moral of newspapers or gun
> where bodies are mindless as paper flowers you dont feed
> or give to drink
> 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)

But beneath the seeming straightforwardness of Billy's argument lies a confusion of semi-articulated ideas and feelings revolving around a wish to deny the very fact of human mortality. (Thus, once again, we find Billy imposing a superficial order in an attempt to compensate for inward disorder.) Since an awareness of the inexorable, forward movement of time contributes so largely to the knowledge of mortality, Billy tries to deny mortality by qualifying the movement of time, by blocking any sense of the absolute passing of time. Toward this end, he introduces the image of a "diagram of watch" which can successfully "eliminate much." What a diagram eliminates most effectively is movement, here, specifically the movement of time. When, at the end of the poem, Billy refers to his contemplation of an actual, working clock, he still has in mind a timeplace that does not tell the time. The clocks he chooses show only their inner mechanisms, their "stomachs"; they are faceless,

handless, and therefore unable to register the passing of time. Billy can "watch the stomach of clocks" for hours and still "emerge living" because, despite the continual shifting of "wheels and pins," time does not appear to move. More precisely, it seems to circle endlessly round and round rather than move forward.

In an earlier "work" (pp. 7-8), and in "works" to come, we see Billy relying expressly upon narratives, upon an orderly progression through time, in an effort to fix his world. His present attempt to stop the flow of time thus introduces a seeming contradiction or inconsistency in his responses to the world. In fact, though, what strikes us here as merely contradictory really operates in a quietly ironic way throughout the volume and especially in its last quarter. Briefly, if the narrative mode involves orderly movement through time, and if movement through time contributes to the knowledge of mortality, then the narrative mode must ultimately lead to confrontation with mortality. Ironically, then, two of Billy's strongest impulses, his wish to deny the fact of mortality and his urge to order his world, prove finally incompatible. When, toward the end of the volume, Billy wins a chronologically ordered world, he pays with his life. But this is to anticipate my discussion, as well as to imply, perhaps, that Billy himself is aware of the incompatible aspects of his approach to the world. At this early stage in the book, Billy shows no such self-awareness. Nor does he reason out the implications of his reactions to events and people; he simply responds according to the demands of the moment, imposing a narrative structure in one instance, for example, and refusing to acknowledge the passage of time in another instance.

The poem presently under discussion ends with a circling motion, as we have seen a moment of stasis, really, which stands in implicit contrast to the linear, forward movement which Billy emphasizes at the start of the poem when he tells of

> 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)

These lines convey a sense of time entirely different from that suggested by diagrams or stomachs of clocks. Here, at the beginning of the poem, time presses inexorably forward. Indeed, the opening lines amount to a reworking of the conventional metaphor of "consuming time": Billy

feels the sweat "eating at" the jeans of his "split" body. The poem's closing moment of stasis, from which Billy claims to "emerge living," relieves the acute physical discomfort described in the second and third lines, thereby strengthening, by contrast, the suggestion that the opening lines are playing with the idea of "consuming time."

Once the reader sees the image of all-devouring time as even faintly operative in the poem, Billy's comparison of "bodies" to "paper flowers you dont feed" assumes another dimension of meaning. One "feeds" real flowers when one is wholly consumed by time, that is, dead and buried. Billy's preference for paper flowers thus grows out of his wish to deny mortality. Logically, of course, such a notion has little to do with the strict sense of these lines. My point is that the fact of mortality and the consequent fear of consuming time determine much of this poem's imagery and on a level which runs deeper than Billy's express horror of thrashing bodies and eyes that well up like bad drains.

Any attempt to deny the fact of mortality soon proves futile, as of course it must, as we see on the next page with its startingly vivid rendering of Charlie Bowdre's death. Although Billy begins his first of two accounts of the death of Charlie in good narrative fashion with the line "When I caught Charlie Bowdre dying" (p. 12), he cannot fulfill the expectations of the narrative mode. The "when . . . while" structure remains unfinished as Billy trails off into a long silence part way down the page. Overwhelmed by Charlie's dying, Billy can only register a sense of helplessness in the face of something which he clearly feels to lie completely beyond his control: Charlie's eyes, Billy remembers, grew "*all over* his body," and his liver looked, sickeningly, like a headless hen jerking "*all over* the yard" (p. 12: my italics).

"Jesus," Billy exlaims in response to Charlie's ugly death, "I never knew" that that's what happens. The reader might easily pass over Billy's "Jesus" as simply an expletive. However, Billy's use of this word is both infrequent and select enough to warrant our reading it as something more. Billy uses "Jesus" on only three occasions throughout the volume and in each instance he is speaking about a death (p. 12, p. 22, p. 73). Since it becomes associated in this way with his abiding fear of mortality, Billy's expletive perhaps expresses an unconscious hope that there exists a Jesus who offers life after death.

As if to cleanse himself of the messy details of Charlie's dying, Billy turns to the memory of a river-crossing:

> Blurred a waist high river
> foam against the horse
> riding naked clothes and boots
> and pistol in the air.
>
> (p. 14)

The obviously phallic "pistol," an image of general potency intimates that Billy has recovered from the feelings of powerlessness which attended the death of Charlie. Certainly the river memory affords him a measure of composure, as the regularity ot the poem's rhythm indicates. The choppiness of the preceding "Charlie" poem now gives way to a greater evenness. Gone, too, is the quality of unmanageableness which characterizes the scene of Charlie's death, conveyed by such awkwardly run-on lines as : "tossed 3 feet by bang bullets giggling/at me face tossed in a gaggle" (p. 12). The still more regular rhythm of the second stanza of the river poem efficiently organizes Billy's perceptions and feelings into tidy, one-line units:

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

Billy remains in control of himself in this poem, as unaffected now by the shooting of the bird as he was affected by the shooting of Charlie one page earlier. He records the distinction between these two responses imagistically, as the bird's distance from him, when he tells us that he "Held [the bird] in my fingers," and that its eyes seemed to him "small and far" (p. 14). Charlie's more immediate eyes, in contrast, "grew all over his body," and Billy's "hands," pressed against his friend, felt Charlie "pissing into his trouser legs in pain" (p. 12).

Billy distances himself from the painful knowledge of mortality still more effectively in the passage describing the shooting of Gregory. (The absence of Gregory's name from Billy's opening list of those killed by him proves just how effectively.) As Dennis Cooley observes, Billy employs various devices which amount to a "verbal narcotic," aimed at "minimizing his own responsibility and awareness."[5] Foremost among these devices stands the grimly black humour with which Billy recounts the actions of "this chicken" as it

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[5] " 'I am here on the edge': Modern Hero/Post-Modern Poetics in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*" (unpublished), p. 10.

paddles out to [Gregory]
and as he was falling hops on his neck
digs the beak into his throat
straightens legs and heaves
a red and blue vein out.

(p. 15)

Billy finishes his anecdote with a stroke of comic genius which not only renders Gregory's dying moment less than momentous, but which nearly absolves Billy from any blame in the matter of Gregory's death. For when we read that Gregory's "last words" were "get away from me yer stupid chicken," we almost forget that Billy has killed Gregory, that he "shot him well and careful . . . under his heart" (p. 15). Billy thus shrugs off any personal complicity, implying, as Cooley says, that "these things just happened, rather comically, and they don't have much of anything to do with me."[6]

That one can even speak of the "Gregory" passage as an anecdote gauges the extent to which Billy feels himself to be in control of circumstances once again. In the "Charlie" section, we recall, an inability to fulfill the expectations of the narrative mode signals Billy's utter helplessness in the face of his friend's death.No hiatus interrupts the narrative voice this time, however. The lines, "and the chicken walked away/still tugging . . .," promptly follow the phrase, "Meanwhile he fell," to the satisfaction of the demands of the narrative mode.

Control, order, impersonality, distance. Billy manages to achieve these goals—in defiance of the all-too-close messiness of Charlie's death—by the end of the "Gregory" passage, only to be thrust once again into the midst of turmoil when he turns his attention, in the next poem, to his sexual experiences with, presumably, Angie, The poem begins precipitously:

Tilts back to fall
balck hair swivelling off her
shattering the pillow.

(p. 16)

Angie resembles a gigantic uncontrollable machine and clearly Billy perceives her as threatening. The poem's last four lines focus on a Billy who, in the aftermath of the violent love-making, feels maimed:

later my hands cracked in love juice
fingers paralyzed by it arthritic

[6]"Modern Hero/Post-Modern Poetics," p. 10.

these beautiful fingers I couldnt move
faster than a crippled witch now.
(p. 16)

Billy's extreme physical passivity forms a contrast to the violence of Angie's movements, in a way which reverses traditional notions of male and female sexual roles. Billy, we suspect, fears emasculation by Angie, feels that she has usurped his—the male's—role. His use of the word "beautiful," an adjective cutomarily reserved for the woman, to describe not Angela, but his own fingers, suggests as much, as does his likening of himself to a typically female creature, a "witch." That Billy in part images himself as female points to his feeling of helplessness in the face of Angie's onslaught.

One aspect of the poem, perhaps more than any other, exposes Billy's deeply-rooted fear that he does not have control over either Angie, or, more generally, the world he inhabits. This, the first of Billy's "love" lyrics, bears a telling relationship to the tradition of love poetry in which the beloved is identified with the world. Poems in that tradition typically image the beloved as a landscape. True to that form, we find Angie-as-landscape in the middle of Billy's poem. In keeping with his distrust of Angie and of his world, however, the landscape in Billy's version appears as a place of ambush: Angie

leans her whole body out
so breasts are thinner
stomach is a hollow
where the bright bush jumps.
(p. 16)

By this point in the volume, then, a picture emerges of a Billy who feels vulnerable, threatened by death, by the unleashed energy of sexuality, by the disorder of the natural world. Instinctively, he seeks to contain and restrain the forces ranged against him: he compiles lists, he tries to deny the passing of time, he distances himself from the knowledge of mortality. Fearing that there is no god, no divinely ordered universe, yet desperately wanting order in his world, Billy feels compelled to create order where he cannot find it. But it is not until well into the volume that Billy takes advantage of his role as the "author" of these "works" to create a more desirable world for himself, or a more favourable image of himself.

II

Billy's first clear declaration that he intends his "works" to tell his story occurs several pages into the volume. As if he has overheard Paulita Maxwell remark that a certain photograph "makes him rough and uncouth," and does not do him "justice" (p. 19), Billy asserts that he will make his own image: "Not a story about me through their eyes then" (p. 20). The making of his story offers Billy the supreme chance to assume control over his world, to order the world to his liking. And immediately after he determines to take the matter of his story into his own hands, Billy reworks two incidents from earlier in the volume, presenting himself in a new and more favourable light both in relationship to Angie and in response to the killing of Charlie Bowdre.

The second of Billy's poems about Angela (p. 21) focuses on an incident essentially similar to, if not exactly identical with, the encounter described in the first "love" poem (p. 16). Both poems present a bedroom scene, but the circumstantial parallel only underscores certain changes in Billy's position. To begin with, although each poem closes with a physically inert Billy, the second poem makes a virtue of what now appears to be a welf-willed passivity. That is, in contrast to the first lyric's crippling paralysis, which strikes Billy independently of his will, passivity in the later poem becomes a matter of choice: "I am very still," says Billy, "I take in all the angles of the room" (p. 21). "Angles" surely refers not onl to the geometry of the room but also, given Billy's status as an outlaw, to the strategems which others might use to entrap Billy. Thus, stillness becomes the means by which Billy hopes to avoid being ambushed again, as he was in the first love lyric when the "bright bush" jumped (p. 16). Billy, then, at least appears to be in a position of control and dominance.

Billy certainly exercises greater control over Angie in the second of his love lyrics, tempering, for example, the violence of her movements. Angie's great physical strength, which so frightened Billy in the first poem by shattering pillows and nearly breaking his fingers, here remains restricted to one act:

> she walks slow to the window
> lifts the sackcloth
> and jams it horizontal on a nail.
> (p. 21)

Even this one aggressive movement of jamming the sackcloth loses some of its force, preceded as it is by Angie's slow walk and gentle

lifting of the cloth.

Above all, a general lengthening of perspective gives Billy the control over Angie and over his own responses to her which he lacked in the first love poem. That first lyric began, precipitously, with Angie tilting back to fall next to Billy on the bed (p. 16). Billy starts the second poem at an earlier point, initially focusing on Angie at a distance as she "leans against the door" and "looks at the bed" (p. 21). Not until the penultimate stanza does Angie finally fall onto the bed, and even then Billy draws out this movement with the phrase "turns toppling slow" (p. 21). His lengthening of Angie's fall towards him does not betoken a lover's desire to linger over an especially tantalizing or pleasing moment of love-making, however. Rather, it signals a wish to purge the moment of its immediacy, a desire in Billy to distance himself from the event by rendering it impersonal.

One very slight change from the first poem further reveals Billy's distance from Angie. In the first lyric, Billy remembered Angie calling him—familiarly, intimately—"Billy" (p. 16). In the second poem, Angie calls Billy by his surname, "Bonney Bonney" (p. 21). The absence of intimacy in this form of address anticipates the psychological distance from Angie which Billy maintains in the poem's closing lines. Although Angela lies next to him on the bed, (having just "toppled" on the pillows after seductively tracing Billy's bones), Billy's eyes and mind move outward from her and the bed: "I am very still/I take in all the angles of the room" (p. 21).

Despite Billy's re-presentation of this episode, his re-working of events in a way which grants him greater control, a strong sense of his vulnerability emerges nevertheless. For while Angie's movements may no longer seem so violent, Billy still unconsciously perceives her as an overwhelming presence in the room and on the bed, as his choice of verbs indicates. The heavy, ponderous motion with which the sun "hoists itself across the room" becomes associated with Angie to some degree since it is she who lifts the sackcloth to let in the sun. Angie's subsequent act of "crossing the sun" offers an image which, if taken literally just for a moment, lends a cosmic vastness to this woman. Even her action of "sweeping off the peels" strikes us as a large gesture, larger, say, than would be mere "brushing." And Angela's massiveness underlines Billy's diminutiveness. We sense this sharp contrast when Angela "traces the *thin* bones" on her lover(my italics). Perhaps we are even a little afraid that Angela, in "toppling slow back," might crush Billy beneath her. Finally, Billy still seems vulnerable to us because the reversal of

traditional male and female sexual roles effected in the first love poem carries over to this poem. Billy continues to embody a feminine passivity as he "take[s] in" the angles of the room.

Although, as we have just seen, Billy cannot entirely mask his vulnerability, he does appear as a more dominant figure in the second love lyric than in the first. Similarly, the second version of Charlie's death discovers Billy equal to the circumstances, not helplessly overcome by his friend's dying, as he was in the first recounting. As in the second love poem, Billy's bid to characterize himself as calmly in control involves a lengthening of perspective. Whereas the first "Charlie" poem, directed almost accusingly at Charlie for dying, began with the fact of Charlie's death, "When I caught Charlie Bowdre dying" (p. 12), the second version approaches the shooting from a slightly earlier point in the sequence of events, and in an emotionally neutral voice:

> 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.
> (p. 22)

This version grants considerably more dignity to the dying Charlie: here we read that the shot "lifted" Charlie into the room while in the earlier version we read that Charlie was unceremoniously "tossed . . . by bang bullets" (p. 12). But most importantly, the Billy who, in the first version, stood by, helpless, dumbfounded, while the "eyes grew all over [Charlie's] body" (p. 12), now takes prompt and practical action: "Get up Charlie, get up, go and get one . . . I prop him to the door, put his gun in his hand" (p. 22). And he tries to do even more: "Over [Charlie's] shoulder I aimed at Pat, fired, and hit his shoulder braid" (p. 22).

That Billy misses his target tells us, of course, that, far from being calmly in control of himself, he remains as shaken by the shooting of his friend as he appeared to be in the first version. His unadmitted feelings of horror and fear also express themselves in an unwarranted emphasis on "snow," and in a curious obsession with the "straightness" of Charlie's walk towards Garrett. Billy's mind fixes on these two seemingly irrelevant details (especially the latter) with an intensity that belies his posture of emotional neutrality and control.

III

In the passages just discussed, Billy feels compelled to create (how-

ever unsuccessfully) an image of himself as strong and in complete control of circumstances. When he first writes of his visits to the Chisum ranch, however, he experiences no such compulsion. In fact, he surrenders to a sense of himself as weak and vulnerable, identifying implicity with "the tame, the half born, the wild, the wounded" animals who find sanctuary at the ranch (p. 36). Billy surrenders, lets down his guard, precisely because the ranch does seem to offer sanctuary, in that it appears to Billy as a perfectly ordered world. More accurately, Billy remembers or re-creates the ranch as just such a refuge. But just as in his role as the author of these works Billy could not entirely mask his feelings of helplessness in the face of Charlie's death or Angie's powerful presence, neither can he sustain the illusion of the ranch as refuge, as we shall see.

It is Sallie Chisum who introduces us to the ranch, in a reminiscence obviously solicited by some chronicler seeking to romanticize the "old west." "Miss Sallie Chisum," writes this historian, "later Mrs. Roberts, was living in Roswell in 1924, a sweet faced, kindly old lady of a thousand memories of frontier days" (p. 30). Sallie obliges the historian with a memory which is pat and conventional, right down to the little thrill of horror with which she mentions Billy:

> Billy the Kid would come in often
> and sometimes stayed for a week or two.
> I remember how frightened I was the first time he came.
> (p. 30)

Because of Sallie's note of casual insincerity, the depth of Billy's thoughts and feelings about the ranch impresses the reader all the more forcibly. "Forty miles ahead of us," begins Billy, "in almost a straight line, is the house" (p. 32). We might well imagine this to be a voice from the Bible—"forty" is such a biblical number, after all, especially in connection with the kind of desert landscape over which Billy is travelling. At the very least, Billy approaches the ranch with reverence. In contrast to Sallie's memory which, from far away in 1924, generalizes about life at the ranch as an impersonal round of guests and busyness, Billy's memory, "Even now, this far away," furnishes a wealth of particularities:

> It is nine in the morning. They are leaning back
> in their chairs after their slow late Saturday
> breakfast. John with the heels of his brown boots
> on the edge of the table in the space he cleared of

> his plate and cup and cutlery, the cup in his hands in his lap. The table with four plates—two large two small. The remnants of bacon fat and eggs on the larger ones, the black crumbs of toast butter and marmalade (Californian) on the others.
>
> (p. 32)

Billy revels in the sheer predictability of life at the Chisum ranch. It satisfies his longing for order to know that

> Across the table on the other side is Sallie, in probably her long brown and yellow dress . . . By now she would have moved the spare chair so she too could put her feet up, barefoot as always . . . Her right arm would be leaning against the table and now and then she'll scrape the bottom of her cup against the saucer and drink some of the coffee . . . On other days they would go their own ways . . . On weekdays anyway, she'd sit like that on the bed . . .
>
> (pp. 32-33)

Billy painstakingly shields his image of the ranch from disruption, weaving any changes that might have occurred into the fabric of his memory. "No I forgot, she had stopped that now," says Billy in reference to Sallie's former task of emptying the lamps (p. 33). "She left the paraffin in the lamps; instead had had John build shutters . . . all she did was close and lock them," he remembers, insisting again later "Yes . . . Yes I remember" (p. 33).

Sallie Chisum, especially, represents the immutability Billy needs so to badly. He imposes upon her the quality of unchangingness he fails to find elsewhere in the world when he sees her

> 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.
>
> (p. 33)

Sallie's very ghostliness, her incorporeality, renders her immune to the mutability of the flesh and thus to the mortality Billy fears so much.

Temporarily released from the fears of mortality and of disorder which customarily grip it, Billy's imagination finds the time and space to expand. The slow rhythm and the long, leisurely recounting of details reflect such an imaginative expansion. So too does Billy's movement backwards in time from the present occasion to his second and first visits to the ranch. However, it is the nearly mythic quality informing

much of the first "Chisum" section which best expresses this imaginative expansiveness. The following passage, with its description of cosmic forces and its subtle personification of sun and moon, approaches the level of myth; we might even hear a specific allusion to the Christian myth of regeneration in the reference to three days of deathlike stillness:

> 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.
>
> (p. 34)

Two paragraphs later, Sallie strengthens the mythic element by seeming to repeat the movements of sun and moon. Billy witnesses Sallie

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

The sun tracks across the sky in a similar movement, leaving night in its wake as it goes on to light the other side of the world. Sallie then reappears, "vast in the thick blue in her long white dress," like a white moon taking over from the sun at nightfall.

The quiet, reassuringly domestic scene with which the Chisum section opens thus yields to an increasingly mythic atmosphere. And in its turn, myth gives way to mystery. A sense of the fundamental mysteriousness of reality pervades Billy's description of cages of birds

> In those dark cages the birds, there must have been 20 of them, made a steady hum all through the night—a noise you heard only if you were within five yards of them. Walking back to the house it was again sheer silence from where we had come, only now we knew they were moving and sensing the air and our departure. We knew they continued like that all night while we slept.
>
> (p. 37)

Unknown and unknowable, these birds represent an absolute "otherness," hence an absolute mystery. The sense of the inexplicableness of reality continues into the next and last paragraph, only now Billy consciously seeks to articulate this "strange" sense:

> Half way back to the house, the building we moved towards seemed to be stuffed with something yellow and wet. The night, the dark

> air, made it all mad. That fifteen yards away there were bright birds in cages and here John Chisum and me walked, strange bodies.
> (p. 37)

In his struggle to grasp the mystery confronting him, Billy turns finally to a language of pure description, deliberately eschewing the language of definition as he looks with new eyes at

> a house stuffed with yellow wet light where within the frame of a window we say a woman move carrying fire in a glass funnel and container towards the window, towards the edge of the dark where we stood.
> (p. 37)

Sallie's carrying of light towards Billy and the darkness exactly reverses her earlier walk "into the remaining light" which leaves "black" and a "cold darkness" behind her (p. 34). Billy represents that earlier activity of closing the shutters as "the sudden blacking out of clarity" (p. 34). As his uncharacteristic choice of so abstract a word as "clarity" indicates, he is referring to a degree of intelligibility rather than to a quality of light. And Billy, we understand, welcomes that state of darkness—of unintelligibility—because, like much else at the Chisum ranch, it releases him from the painful demands of reality, from having to make sense of the world. Perry Nodelman observes, in reference to another of Billy's works, that Billy likes to block out light because he fears "the world it allows him to see."[7]

The absence of demands in the middle section of the Chisum passage manifests itself particularly in the unobstrusiveness of Sallie's presence. Specifically, Sallie seems sexually undemanding to Billy; she wanders rather plunges (as Angie does) into love-making:

> Her shoes off, so silent, she moves a hand straying over the covers off John's books, till she comes and sits near me and puts her feet up shoeless and I reach to touch them . . . the brown tanned feet of Sallie Chisum resting on my chest, my hands rubbing them . . .
> (p. 35)

It is almost as if Sallie's undemanding presence returns Billy imaginatively to a world before man, a world of emergent, uncomplicated life-forms: touching Sallie's feet, Billy imagines "some semi-shelled animal" (p. 35). At the very least, Sallie returns Billy to a simpler time in man's

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[7]"The Collected Photographs of Billy the Kid," *Canadian Literature*, No. 87 (Winter 1980), p. 73.

history, to a fresher world in which Billy feels "like a carpenter shaving wood to find new clear pulp smelling wood beneath" (p. 35).

In contrast to such a soothingly dim and inchoate world which makes few demands upon Billy's consciousness, the mystery which Billy encounters at the close of the Chisum passage will not permit a lapse into mental indolence. It demands, as we have seen, that Billy adopt a different kind of language. In short, it demands a response. The passage ends with Billy poised, momentarily and, one senses, momentously, on "the edge of dark" as a woman carrying fire moves towards this verge. The moment is one of acute self-consciousness for Billy, a moment in which the unknowableness of everything that is other than oneself forces consciousness to turn in upon itself.

The reader's sense of the precariousness of Billy's positon on "the edge" finds confirmation on the very next page when Billy suddenly prophesies his own violent death: "(To come) to where eyes will/move in head like a rat/mad since locked in a biscuit tin all day" (p. 38). The self-consciousness of the preceding page has forced upon Billy the certain knowledge of his own mortality. Characteristically, Billy images his death as a loss of control:

> sad billys body glancing out
> body going as sweating white horses go
> reeling off me wet
> scuffing down my arms
> wet horse white
> screaming wet sweat round the house.
> (p. 38)

On the formal level, Billy's inability to separate, either imagistically or syntactically, the vision of his death from the description of the rat mirrors the theme of loss of control. Specifically, Billy fears the loss of inner control, of control over his "eyes" which will move wildly, unable to maintain a steady vision of the world.

But, just as earlier in the volume Billy escaped from the painfulness of Charlie's ugly death to the cleansing river, so now he seeks immediate refuge from the knowledge of his own death in the memory of a pleasantly domestic scene "With the Bowdres" (p. 39). He goes on to speak, wistfully almost, of "beautiful machines" which realize his own unfulfilled desires for perfectly and effortlessly controlled energy: "The beautiful machines pivoting on themselves/sealing and fusing to others/and men throwing levers like coins at them" (p. 41). But neither evasion works completely. The Bowdres' kitchen grows suddenly "strange" when Billy feels "people/not close to me/as if their dress were against

my shoulder," or when he finds his "eyes/magnifying the bones across a room/shifting a wrist" (p. 39). The panegyric to "beautiful machines" begins with Billy's fear that the cosmos might explode into chaos:

> 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.
>
> (p. 41)

And this fearful sense of precariousness finally overrides even the "clean speed" and beauty of machines in motion, for "there is there the same stress as with stars,/the one altered move that will make them maniac" (p. 41).

Again and again throughout the next several pages of the volume, Billy encounters an increasingly disturbing world which assaults him with its uncontained, chaotic energies. "Bloated" flowers, "bursting" their "white drop of spend," explode into entropy, anticipating the explosion of "great stars" which Billy feels to be inevitable (p. 55). This white chaos stuffs up Billy's nose so that he "can hardly breathe nothing/nothing thick sugar death" (p. 55). He recalls, for the second time in the volume, his twenty-first birthday, only now, instead of remembering it as a "celebration" (p. 7), he remembers the "angry weather in my head" (p. 58). Most significantly, each of the three passages on the Chisum ranch which punctuate the middle section of the volume centres around an unpleasant incident involving an animal. In the first, Billy must kill a rabid cat (pp. 44-45). In the second, he hears of a race of mad dogs who degenerate into

> heaps of bone and hair and sexual organs and bulging eyes and minds which were chaotic half out of hunger out of liquor out of their minds being pressed out of shape by new freakish bones that grew into their skulls.
>
> (pp. 61-62)

The last Chisum passage brings a "bloody dog" who "methodically begins to eat" Billy's vomit (p. 70). Early in the volume, we remember, Billy sought relief from his troubling vision of the world in animals, in "the only thing that never changed, never became deformed" (p. 10).

That the Chisum ranch should provide the setting in which Billy's trust in animals proves so ill-founded seems especially ironic in light of his presentation of the ranch as a pastoral world. At times, indeed, the

ranch appears Edenic. For instance, the closest Billy comes to a moment of pure happiness is when he wakes at the ranch after a "bad night" into an idyllic world in which "silvery shadows roll across the ceiling" (p. 71). His sense of well-being finds its best expression in his image of Angela as a bountiful landscape:

> Angela D is golden and cool beside . . . her arm out straight over the edge of the bed like a peninsula rich with veins . . . She is so brown and lovely . . . her hip a mountain further down the bed. (p. 71)

We remember Billy's earlier image of Angie as a landscape of ambush, of inhospital "hollows" and lurking "bushes," contours shaped by Billy's deep distrust of the world (p. 16). In the present passage, the "mountain" and especially the "peninsula rich with veins" form a landscape of wealth and untapped abundance to mirror Billy's sense of well-being and his expectations of future happiness. This is as near as Billy approaches to a paradise. It is the nearest, too, that he comes to the innocence, or unself-consciousness, belonging to the state of paradise:

> All the awkwardness of last night with the Chisums gone, like my head is empty, scoured open by acid. My head and body open to every new wind direction, every nerve new move and smell. (p. 71)

As in all paradise stories, however, the moment of happiness and unself-consciousness proves short-lived. Billy looks up, and sees "the black hoster and gun . . . coiled like a snake, glinting also in the early morning white" (p. 71).

IV

The burden of consciousness—specifically, consciousness of mortality—returns on the next page, with what is Billy's most searchingly introspective poem in this point in the volume. The poem works like a pendulum; Billy's mind moves from a belief in the vastness of human potential to a recognition of the ultimate limitedness of human nature. "I am here with the range for everything," proclaims Billy at the start of the last stanza (p. 72). But the spectre of mortality rises, and the limitless "range" dwindles to the "body's waiting rut" (p. 72).

Billy's concluding realization seems all the darker since, earlier in the poem, he achieves, for the first and only time in the volume, his ideal of perfect, effortless control. In contrast to the first stanza, with its horses whose movements are blundering and thwarted, the second

stanza describes how Billy's fingers can

> control a pencil that shifts up and sideways
> mapping my thinking going its own way
> like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood.
> (p. 72)

"Drifting on polished wood." Not even the "beautiful machines" which Billy idolized for "pivoting on themselves/sealing and fusing" (p. 41) can match this dream of easy movement and effortless control of energy.

Billy's choice of the verb "drifting" to image his writing brings to mind his first declaration that he intends his collected works to tell his story. There Billy offers, as a beginning for his story, the image of "drifting" with Charlie Bowdre as they zigzagged across the Canadian border,

> 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.
> (p. 20)

In both instances, the verb connotes a carefreeness of mind and spirit. However, in the first passage, Billy associates such carefreeness both with his movement through his story or "works" and with his passage through the world or external reality. (We can make the former assumption because the "ridge of action rising and falling . . . till it ended" not only refers to the travels of Billy and Charlie but, as well, aptly describes traditional notions of how a story should be organized around a plot whose action rises and falls to an ending.) In the later poem, Billy associates carefreeness exclusively with movement through an inner world, through his story of himself; movement through external reality has become a matter of "blunders" (p. 72). For, by this point in the volume, Billy has learned that he cannot move unimpeded through the external world. Just as the horses in this poem find it difficult to move surefootedly down their street on the "crowded" weekend, so too does Billy find it impossible to move surely and safely across the stage on which his story unfolds. A few pages earlier, for example, Billy complains about "crowdedness' in his world:

> The thing here is to explain the difference of this evening. That in fact the Chisum verandah is crowded. It could of course hold a hundred more, but that John and Sallie and I have been used to other distances . . .
> (p. 67)

Angie and Garret, the two newcomers, make Billy feel hemmed in. Garrett, in particular, represents a serious obstacle to Billy's progress through the world, of course, since it is Garrett who eventually imprisons and later kills Billy. In other words, the unalterable events of history close in on Billy, impeding his movement through external reality. The carefree optimism with which Billy spoke of travelling through the world with Charlie and drifting down to Mexico and "old heat" (p. 20) thus reverberates ironically against the fact that, in his movement through history, Billy ultimately meets with "old heat" in the sense of the "law," as embodied by his old adversary, Garrett.

Billy has known all along, of course, what the final outcome must be. Indeed, at the outset of the volume, he tells us that "Pat Garrett sliced off my head" (p. 6). However, the same poetic license which allows Billy to speak to us from some point beyond his death also permits him both to know from the first what must happen yet still believe that somehow he can rewrite his story in accordance with his desires. Such a belief proves groundless, though. History catches up with Billy, and immediately following the second of his two poems of self-analysis, the strictly narrative line of Billy's story gains ascendance and events press quickly and inexorably forward to Billy's death. But before that happens, Billy reaches a point of self-knowledge in the poem beginning with the line, "This nightmare by this 7 foot high doorway" (pp. 74-75).

As in the first of the self-analytical poems (p. 72), a swing from one extreme pole to another best describes the progress of Billy's introspection. Specifically, Billy moves from a belief in his own cosmic vastness, his own godlike stature and power, to a recognition of his utter impotence. Billy's self-aggrandizement begins quietly part way through the first stanza. "I am on the edge of the cold dark," writes Billy,

> watching the white landscape in its frame
> a world that's so precise
> every nail and cobweb
> has magnified itself to my presence.
> (p. 74)

The imperialness in the word "presence" lends Billy a godlike stature, and that the world magnifies itself not "in" but "to" Billy's presence divines Billy's sense of the world as subservient to his wishes. In the next stanza, a kind of cosmic inversion, which finds "stars" likened to "flies in their black path," contributes to Billy's godlike stature; one must be vast indeed to be able to see stars reduced to the size of flies.

"[N]othing breaks my vision," Billy claims, except these inverted stars. This claim offers a more telling index to Billy's state of mind if we recall that when Billy first prophesied his death, he did so largely in the imagery of broken vision, of eyes moving wildly, uncontrollably (p. 38). Billy's vastness continues into the third stanza, only now Billy adds godlike indifference to his godlike stature:

> If I hold up my finger
> I blot out the horizon
> if I hold up my thumb
> I'd ignore a man who comes
> on a three mile trip to here.
> (p. 74)

Such a purely arbitrary exercise of power rather poignantly reflects Billy's apprehension of his own universe as one completely indifferent to man. Very early in the volume, we remember, Billy perceived a divine injury or death when, looking upwards, he saw "wounds appearing in the sky" (p. 10). At the same time, Billy yearns for there to be a deity in the heavens, as we have seen, for example, in his use of the expletive "Jesus." In the apparent absence of such a being, Billy now sets himself up as a godhead. In so imagining himself, Billy is making one last, supreme effort to assert himself, to place himself in complete control of his circumstances.

Given the excessive degree of this self-aggrandizement, the reader should not feel surprised that Billy proves slow to acknowledge his impotence. Forced to admit that "There is nothing in my hands," Billy qualifies this admission of weakness:

> though every move I would make
> getting up slowly walking
> on the periphery of black
> to where weapons are
> is planned by my eye.
> (p. 75)

Similarly, even when Billy looks at himself as if through another's eyes and plainly sees not a god, but a "boy [who] blocks out the light/in blue shirt and jeans," he still clings to his notions of power and greatness for he adds that he seems "young like some pharoah" (p. 75). The last two lines of the poem, however, undercut all postures of power and greatness: "I am unable to move/with nothing in my hands," confesses Billy, in stark recognition of his ultimate impotence.

Billy's moment of self-knowledge, this recognition of powerlessness, receives immediate and ironic validation on the next page when

the statement "We moved in a batch now" (p. 76) mockingly echoes Billy's confession of being "unable to move." Bound and captured, Billy is moved by Garrett now rather than able to move himself. As if to insist indirectly upon this fact of bondage, the word "moved" occurs four times in the first paragraph of this section. Still more tellingly, Garrett and his prisoners zigzag across the desert, moving "back and forward, side to side over the county" (p. 76). Billy and Charlie, we remember, travelled in a similar style, though in perfect freedom and carefreeness, when they "criss-crossed the Canadian border" (p. 20). The repetition now of the earlier motion underscores the completeness of Billy's loss of freedom.

V

Beginning with the desert ride (p. 76), the narrative line, which has progressed only fitfully to this point in the volume, moves rapidly and fairly straightforwardly to its conclusion in Billy's death (pp. 76-95). Structurally, then, it is Billy's recognition of his powerlessness which frees the narrative line. Moreover, the strictly narrative mode reflects a world which, in one way, conforms to Billy's need for order. For a readily discernible order, specifically, chronological order, governs a substantial number of consecutive passages, and for the first time in the volume. That this group also happens to be the one sustained sequence of passages dealing exclusively with Billy's death—its details and the events immediately preceding it—draws attention once again to the relationship between "order" and "death." The volume's opening works, we recall, established just such a relationship with their neatly compiled lists of the dead. Far more clearly now, this relationship exists at Billy's expense—Billy wins an ordered world, but at the price of his life.

With a still finer irony, Ondaatje grants Billy the god he wanted. The desert ride which begins so inauspiciously with Billy's bondage and powerlessness ends with a moment of ecstasy for Billy. Having travelled hatless for four days, a sun-struck Billy claims that, on the fifth day, the sun "turned into a pair of hands" and "fucked" him (pp. 76-77). It is with jubilation that Billy relates the news to Garrett: "Ive been fucked. Ive been fuckd Ive been fucked by Christ almighty god Ive been good and fucked by Christ" (p. 78). Rhythmically, it is nearly impossible to read these "by Christs" as mere expletives. On one level, Billy believes that "Christ almight god" has "fucked" him. And this accounts for the jubilant—ecstatic—note: to Billy's sun-maddened mind, the experience proves that a god inhabits the heavens after all. Billy thus wins a presiding deity, but at the price of his sanity, of all inner control.

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