Approaching "That Perfect Edge": Kinetic Techniques in the Poetry and Fiction of Michael Ondaatje

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Why do I love most
among my heroes those
who sail to that perfect edge
where there is no social fuel.
—Ondaatje, "White Dwarfs"

"I was brought up on movies and song,"[1] Michael Ondaatje has said, and since the publication in 1967 of his first book of poetry, *The Dainty Monsters*, he has suggested his dissatisfaction with written language as opposed to music and film.[2] In 1970, while he was making his first film, *The Sons of Captain Poetry*, a study of fellow-poet b.p. nichol, he became interested in "the possibilities of concrete poetry" and of film; as he told Sam Solecki:

> . . . I'd just finished the actual writing of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and there was a real sense of words meaning nothing to me anymore, and I was going around interpreting things into words. If I saw a tree I just found myself saying tree: translating everything into words or metaphors. It was a very dangerous thing for me mentally and I didn't want to carry on in that way. I just felt I had to go into another field, something totally visual. The film was quite a help cos it freed me from going around and doing this kind of thing.[3]

That his film-making was effective as a kind of exorcism will be apparent to readers of Ondaatje's more recent work. In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and even more in *Rat Jelly*

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[1] *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* (Toronto: McClelland, 1979) 40. All further references to this work will appear in parenthesis in the text abbreviated as *TTK*.

[2] For his helpful comments and suggestions I am indebted to Professor Leslie Monkman of Queen's University.

[3] "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1975)," *Spider Blues*, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal: Véhicule, 1985) 14.

(poems to 1973), he shows a growing interest in kinetic literary techniques—techniques which can re-infuse words with immediate, public meaning, thereby transfiguring them from words to Word. But it was not until 1975 with his first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, that Ondaatje found the subject and structure that allowed him to integrate the dynamic artforms in which he was interested, and so resolve some of the problems seen and self-consciously discussed in his earlier work.

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> *". . . with Billy the Kid I was trying to make the film I couldn't afford to shoot."*
>
> —Ondaatje, "An Interview"

For most artists both the struggle and the fulfillment of creative work consist in the transfiguration of matter and thought into art. As Joyce put it, the sluggish matter of earth must somehow be transformed within the "virgin womb of the imagination." The flesh, to corrupt the phrase slightly, must be made word. For writers, this transfiguration has always been especially difficult to effect. Words, after all, are symbols divorced in a very direct way from the sources of their meaning and power. While music has an undeniable emotive force, and painting a potency contingent on mimetic qualities or the tangible interplay of visual rhythms and tones, words seem somehow distant and vague, mute, flat, comparatively colourless. And while the dramatic arts, including dance, appeal to both the aural and visual faculties and have, besides, an emphatic, public immediacy because they are performed in the flesh, words speak softly, sometimes inaudibly, and are notoriously bad dancers.

Although these ideas are not new—T.S. Eliot, for example, refers to them in his *Four Quartets*—they have become the particular preoccupation of colonial and post-colonial poets. J.E. Chamberlin characterizes these men and women as "writing out of situations that define essentially colonial predicaments, where language or audience or the identity and role of the poet are indeterminate."[4] He considers Michael Ondaatje an example of such a poet, and his misgivings about language, poetry, and the accessibility of poetry as symptomatic of this indeterminacy. Sam Solecki has said that Ondaatje shows "concern for the possibility that poetry might not be able to do justice to the existential complexity of reality because of the inevitable tendency of the

[4] Chamberlin, "Let There Be Commerce Between Us: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje," Solecki 41.

mind to see pattern and clarity [and to try to transfix it with words] where life offers only flux and ambiguity"[5] (my interpolation). Elsewhere, referring specifically to Ondaatje's love of the beautiful alphabet of the Tamils, Solecki contends that this love "remind[s] us of the book Ondaatje *cannot* write, in which the writing would be as concrete as 'clothes hung out to dry on a line' and as evanescent as 'musical notation.'"[6]

Another, and older, colonial poet, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, has argued that the challenge for poets in his continent is to infuse colonial languages with the power and emotive immediacy of African music, song, and dance. Explaining that "only through rhythm can the flesh be made Word,"[7] he stresses that poetry must be informed with musical and rhythmic elements if it is to have any transformative effect—that it must consist in the *Logos* rather than the *Ratio* and excite the passions rather than merely whispering to the intellect. But surely the challenge Senghor describes is not peculiar to Africa. The challenge facing Michael Ondaatje includes the fusion (and infusion) of words, not only with musical elements, but also with dramatic and cinematic elements.

Ondaatje claims he did not begin to write seriously until the age of twenty. He was inspired, he explains, by Arthur Motyer, a teacher at Bishop's University who read passages aloud with such theatrical enthusiasm that "the poem became an acted thing, a passionate thing."[8] For the first time, perhaps, Ondaatje saw that words could communicate with the same kind of power he had grown up seeing in "movies and song" (*TTK* 40); if used with intelligence and passion, they could involve and unite an audience instead of remaining private and personal.

And yet his early poems, though well-crafted, lacked the colour, motion, and palpability of the kinetic, public arts he admired. They were artefacts, brief, concise, self-enclosed. They were, as Sam Solecki has said, full of "tricks" borrowed from Yeats—[9] an artist who, not incidentally, had a great interest in the poem as artefact, but who, later in life, became interested in the passion and enduring value of seemingly ephemeral arts like

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[5] "Nets and Chaos: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje," Solecki 94.

[6] "Michael Ondaatje: A Paper Promiscuous and Out of Forme with Several Inlargements and Untutored Narrative," Solecki 338. The quotations are from Gabriel Garcia Marquez *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: Harper, 1970) 189.

[7] Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore, eds., *Modern Poetry from Africa* (London: Penguin, 1963) 8.

[8] "An Interview," Solecki 22.

[9] "Michael Ondaatje," Solecki 342.

dance. Yet, even in the early *The Dainty Monsters*, Ondaatje showed a self-referential awareness of his own tendencies. For example, in "Dragon"—an apparently conventional eighteen-line lyric—the speaker of the poem and his friends finally "surround. . ." a dragon, who, on one level, will inevitably be seen as representative of the intuitive, the subconscious. And for the act of surrounding we can read "enclose." Thus the mythical, primitive dragon, snared bathetically in the commonplace badminton net, represents the collective unconscious, or Auden's "Primary Imagination," trapped in a closed poem which is, in fact, written in a flat, if evocative, vernacular (*TTK* 4).

The net seen here, and later the web, come to be important symbols in Ondaatje's work. In "'The gate in his head,'" a poem from his second collection, *Rat Jelly*, Ondaatje admits that his poetic tendency has been to pour "chaos/ in nets onto the page" (*TTK* 64) —that is, to capture and contain the flux of reality in an enclosed poetic structure. And in "White Dwarfs," the final poem in the same collection, he admits that words are for him a kind of safety net and that he is afraid of "falling without words/ over and over of/ mouthing the silence" (*TTK* 68).

"'The gate is in his head'" is a poem central to *Rat Jelly* and, incidentally, to my argument. It serves as a kind of manifesto; it is a clear assertion about what poetry should be and how it can fly by the nets of language. Essentially, the poem celebrates fellow-poet Victor Coleman's ability to use words without denying or vitiating the kinetic elements of reality. Coleman's style is represented in the poem by a picture he sends to Ondaatje, "a blurred photograph of a gull./ Caught vision. The stunning white bird/ an unclear stir" (*TTK* 64). Dennis Cooley argues that this photograph and the literature that it represents involve art seen "in the blurred glimpse, the artist scanning the shifting world for flashes of beauty, traces of life, surrendering to 'the immaculate moment [that] is now.'"[10] Life is caught here, but temporarily; it is not trapped or frozen. Instead, a balance is achieved, a reconciliation of the artist's rendering of the moment and its actual movement in space and time. Thus the balanced rendering suggests continued motion as a closed artefact never could: "And that is all this writing should be then./ The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment/ so they are shapeless, awkward/ moving to the clear" (*TTK* 64). One important thing about the poem is that it indicates the kinetic potential of the two most static artforms: photography and literature. Thus it prefigures

[10] "'I Am Here on the Edge': Modern Hero/Postmodern Poetics in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*," Solecki 234.

Ondaatje's later efforts to realize the latent power of words through what I call his various *kinetic techniques.*

II

In his early work, then, Ondaatje was obsessed with trapping and ordering the flux of phenomenal existence in well-crafted, closed artefacts. In this regard, his early interest in Rousseau, and what I see as a final repudiation of that painter's technique, are illuminating. In his early poem "Henri Rousseau and Friends," Ondaatje celebrates the painter's ability to contain a flux that "with this order/ reposes" (*TTK* 10). Here "order" and the tranquility of "repose" seem positive—and this positive tone is reinforced later in the poem when we read: "Among the exactness,/the symmetrical petals,/ the efficiently flying angels,/ there is complete liberation" (*TTK* 10). In these lines Ondaatje seems to celebrate the power of a well-wrought artefact to "liberate" phenomena, at least in part, from the flux of temporal existence. There is an echo here of the admiration of the young Breavman (read: Cohen) for Rousseau in *The Favourite Game.* For that young poet—on whom Ondaatje has written a monograph[11] and to whom he is clearly indebted—loved "the pictures of Henri Rousseau, the way he stops time."[12]

But in "Burning Hills," possibly the most important poem in *Rat Jelly*, Ondaatje tacitly indicates that his view of Rousseau has changed. When the speaker (read: Ondaatje—the poem is overtly autobiographical) arrives at his small closed cabin to write, he brings with him a postcard of Rousseau's "The Dream." And immediately that work is characterized in seemingly incongruous and sinister ways: it is seen as "a test pattern by the window/ through which he saw growing scenery," and it is depicted beside "a map of the city in 1900" (*TTK* 58). Perhaps the most unsettling image here is of the window, static and symmetrical within its frame, through which the speaker sees but is separated from the dynamic "growing" world outside. And, of course, the cabin itself can be seen as a kind of frame, as a closed poem so to speak, protecting the poet in a sinister way from the vital "burning hills" around him. By the end of the poem, the dangers of works of art that attempt to freeze time are clear; insects, which Ondaatje describes elsewhere as "true," as truths that, in their secret motion, happen "All night" (*TTK* 73), are seen dying. They have been killed by the Shell Vapona Strip,

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[11] Michael Ondaatje, *Leonard Cohen* (Toronto: McClelland, 1970).

[12] Leonard Cohen, *The Favourite Game* (Toronto: NCL, 1970) 58; cited by Stephen Scobie, "His Legend a Jungle Sleep: Michael Ondaatje and Henri Rousseau," Solecki 51.

which looks like a long sheet of paper, a page on which the poet might frame his next poem, his next victim. The insects, then, are in a sense dropped in amber, preserved in an artefact—which, of course, turns out to be the poem Ondaatje writes: "Burning Hills." At the end of the poem, Ondaatje reiterates his fear of the deficiencies and limitations of language, for he admits that, through revision, he will be able to remove only "the lies that are obvious" (*TTK* 60).

In "The Vault" Ondaatje subtly yet finally rejects Rousseau's aesthetic approach. At first, the poem seems to be a song of praise: Rousseau is nominated as a candidate for godhood. But the title of the poem—which is decidedly funereal—and the conclusion, where a woman trapped in the work "looks to the left/ for that is the direction we leave in/ when we fall from her room of flowers" (*TTK* 67), accentuates the funereal mood. The lines cited above suggest a mourning party leaving a garlanded room, having paid their last respects to the departed, whom God has taken. God, then, becomes an omnipotent yet jealous artist who destroys life by freezing it. Implicit thematically is a comparison of freezing and actual rigor mortis; the comparison recalls Margaret Avison's description of the sonnet that "moves/ toward final stiffness."[13]

The poem "Spider Blues" from *Rat Jelly* most explicitly draws together the images so far discussed and most clearly depicts the poet as a kind of murderer. Yet the poem is not relentlessly negative; Ondaatje portrays the poet as a spider and refers to his (potential) ability to make the flesh Word: "I admire the spider, his control classic,/ his eight legs finicky,/ making lines out of the juice of his abdomen./ A kind of writer I suppose" (*TTK* 62). Furthermore, this spider is able to evoke effectively the emotions more easily aroused by kinetic artforms, for he has learned to use "his ending/ to swivel to new regions/ where the raw of feelings exist" (*TTK* 62). These lines are explicitly self-reflexive; Ondaatje is suggesting that the spider (poet) uses his ending (the conclusion of the poem) to "swivel to new regions/ where the raw of feelings exist" (to imply or elicit a mysterious intuition by resisting closure). And yet the spider/poet is still preoccupied with the forging of an artefact, for "in his loathing/ [he] crucifies his victims in his spit/ making them the art he cannot be" (*TTK* 63). Again, then, living things are trapped in "webs" or nets of words, and, as it were, dropped in amber. As the poem ends, the woman in Rousseau's painting/vault becomes

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[13] Avison, "Butterfly Bones; or Sonnet Against Sonnets," *Poetry of Mid-Century 1940/1960*, ed. Milton Wilson (Toronto: McClelland, 1964) 93.

the speaker's wife[14] who is carried off into air and artifice by "black architects" (*TTK* 63). Finally she is "locked in their *dream* their theme" (italics mine: consider the title of Rousseau's painting).

I

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid was composed at roughly the same time as these poems and exhibits many of the same thematic preoccupations. Linda Hutcheon has characterized the work's primary thematic opposition as one of "free motion and life versus fixed stillness and death."[15] Again, writing figures as a slightly sinister occupation; Billy's obsession with constant motion can be read as a subconscious defiance of the stillness of impending death, which, on a metafictional level, is suggested by the stasis of words on paper that constitute the text.[16] By trying to capture Billy in words, the writer is, in a sense, engraving his epitaph.

Billy represents an important stage in the development of Ondaatje's kinetic techniques; Ondaatje creates him to represent that part of himself that questions stasis, that both requires and fears it, so Billy can be seen as both representing Ondaatje and embodying his artistic dilemma. But because of Ondaatje's omniscience and his attempt to fix Billy in words, he can also be seen as representing that part of the author's psyche that would transcend stasis, the framing of words, and the final framing of the coffin. Much of the book's tension arises out of this conflict, this self-referential dialectic. In the book, the fictional embodiment—or deputy—of Ondaatje's urge to frame is, of course, Pat Garrett, who hunts for Billy just as Web[17] in *Coming Through Slaughter* will hunt for Buddy Bolden. Clearly Billy is Buddy's precursor, just as the inchoate kinetic techniques seen in the former book anticipate the more sophisticated technical integration of the latter.

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[14] The two poems are contiguous, and Ondaatje has made it clear that he arranges his poems carefully.

[15] "'Snow Storm of Paper': The Act of Reading in Self-Reflexive Canadian Verse," *Dalhousie Review* 59 (1979): 116-17.

[16] Hutcheon 116.

[17] Web's name is invented for thematically obvious reasons. But the historical name Garrett—suggesting, of course, a small room inhabited by a solitary romantic poet—is a lucky accident of which Ondaatje takes full advantage.

II

> *". . . that is why music was important . . . as a kind of adrenalin."*
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> —Ondaatje, An Interview

Like W.B. Yeats—a poet by whom he has been considerably influenced—Michael Ondaatje has become increasingly interested in the vitality and aesthetic supremacy of the flesh, and the necessarily ephemeral artforms that it embodies. Perhaps because poetry was far more widely read and appreciated at the turn of the century, Yeats did not become deeply interested in these ideas until, as an older man, he began to feel that he had squandered his youth and vitality on the passive contemplation of form and spirit. Thus he began to praise the physical urgency and pathological vitality of lovers and dancers, of "poetry in motion." For Ondaatje, however, misgivings about the emotive and communicative efficacy of language were present to some extent from the beginning—and this presence is understandable given the colonial predicament discussed earlier and the relative unpopularity of poetry today.

On a fundamental level, Ondaatje's poetry has always exhibited a concern with the physical. Leslie Mundwiler asserts that the death of Billy the Kid

> is only one of the most impressive examples of the reference of the poetry to the body, something which is a mark of Ondaatje's best writing from his first book. The precision of such writing not only directs us toward the poem but also toward the experience of our own bodies, which, given the instrumentality of our world, is almost irrelevant except when we are ill or taking exercise but which, in this case, *becomes the bridge to the root imaginative experience required by the poetry* (italics mine).[18]

In other words, Ondaatje attempts, by evoking the physical in an intensely visceral way, to appeal to a collective physical-instinctual complex rather than to the isolated intellect. He tries to evoke through palpable, muscular imagery and description the kind of "root imaginative experience" that L.S. Senghor considers music and rhythm peculiarly suited to convey. If successful he will bring the readers close to "that perfect edge" (*TTK*

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[18] *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984) 100.

68), that blank margin where lovers and artists make the flesh Word for all of us.[19]

In Ondaatje's poetry, we see a steady movement away from the exclusively intellectual and toward the physical. The somewhat dry, conventional competence of *The Dainty Monsters* stands in sharp contrast to the dramatic dispraise of closure and the poetic credo seen in *Rat Jelly*. And among the poems of *Pig Glass* (1973-78) are pieces like "Late Movies with Skyler," which suggest the ability of the kinetic artforms, film and music, to create temporarily a "perfect world" where "film is replayed to sounds/ of an intricate blues guitar" (*TTK* 97), and "Sweet Like a Crow," which repudiates an epigraph claiming that the Ceylonese are congenitally unmusical. Ondaatje belies this claim by fusing emphatically musical rhythms with the rhythms of flesh and the vitality of the marketplace:

> [Your voice sounds like]
> a dolphin reciting epic poetry to a sleepy audience,
> the sound of a fan when someone throws brinjals at it,
> like pineapples being sliced in the Pettah market
> like betel juice hitting a butterfly in mid-air
> like a whole village running naked onto the street.
> (*TTK* 94)

In Ondaatje's latest collection of poetry, *Secular Love* (1984), this kinetic exuberance is both the final element and, implicitly at least, the chief affirmation of the book: six of the last seven poems deal explicitly with music, dance, and the rhythms of the flesh. There is "Bessie Smith at Roy Thompson Hall" which depicts an artist who, through death, has already transcended—in a sense passing "that perfect edge"—and who now has "wings" and who can slip the "nets" that to varying degrees restrict the creative expression of all artists, not only writers. At the climax of her posthumous recital, Smith "died again,"[20] an action we will see paralleled in *Coming Through Slaughter* and which suggests a complete transfiguration, the flesh vanished and only the Word left behind. In another poem, "The Concessions," we hear a four-piece band and watch a frenzied dance reminiscent of Pieter Breughel the Younger's "Kermess" or "Peasant Dance," a carnivalesque celebration involving the total breakdown of order (Ondaatje may also have in

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[19] Although there is "no social fuel" at "that perfect edge" (*TTK* 68), I would argue that there is communal energy, for beyond the edge lies what Jung called the Collective Unconscious. The energy source that Bolden finally locates and by which he is destroyed is part of a communal principle. I think by "social fuel" Ondaatje means a conventional social framework.

[20] *Secular Love* (Toronto: Coach House, 1984) 109. In further references this text will be abbreviated *SL*.

mind William Carlos Williams' poem "Kermess"). Ondaatje's final repudiation of traditional forms is stated vicariously by a "man from Lobo" who shouts *"Fuck the Renaissance/ —just get me a beer" (SL* 114). In "Red Accordian—an immigrant song," the image of the dancer recurs. At the climax of the poem, the language seems to be aspiring, rhythmically at least, to the condition of music:

> And the others dance.
> Embracing or flinging
> themselves away from each other.
> They bow and look up
> to full moon and white cold sky
> and they *move*, even in this stilled painting.
> They talk a white breath at each other.
> Some appear more than once
> with different partners.
> We are immune to wind.
> Our boots pound down the frozen earth
> our children leap from and into our arms.
> All of us poised and inspired by music
> friendship self-made heat and the knowledge
> each has chosen to come here driven for hours
> over iced highways, to be here bouncing and leaping
>
> to a reel that carried itself generations ago
> north of the border . . . . (*SL* 118)

Note at the end of the poem the use of the word "generations"; here Ondaatje refers to a specific dance (the Virginia Reel) that has been imported over time and space to Canada, but he also suggests The Dance, the idea of a dance, a vital human principle in some way immutable and present in all places and generations.

Another poem in the final pages of *Secular Love*, "In a Yellow Room," is an evocation of the jazz musician Fats Waller who "was always moving" and "saw the heartland where the music could disappear . . . a rewinding, a backward movement of the formation of the world" (*SL* 120). Here the "backward movement" suggests the power of kinetic art to return us to that primitive, instinctual, intuitive state of mind where the Word and world are one. "Birch Bark" is another evocation of this positive reversion; here friends experience a deep sympathy through music as they break into a song without "needing all the words" (*SL* 124). In "Proust in the Waters," on the other hand, the speaker asserts "We love things which disappear/ and are found/ creatures who plummet" (*SL* 122). Again, there is a sense

of vital elements of the natural world immersing themselves in the depths of the unconscious and dredging up truths—finding the lost Word. "We love" such things, we are told, much as Ondaatje has told us earlier that he "love[s]" those heroes who "sail to that perfect edge" (*TTK* 68).

V

there are those burned out stars
who implode into silence
after parading in the sky
after such choreography what would they wish to speak of anyway
—Ondaatje, "White Dwarfs"

"I want to show you something. . . . Put your hand through this window."
—Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*

Coming Through Slaughter represents Ondaatje's most serious effort to make poetry more public and immediate by integrating language with the kinetic elements of film, music, certain types of photography, the dance, and rhythms of the flesh. Different characters embody various artforms in the novel. For example, the wildlife painter John James Audubon is referred to twice in the course of the work. On the first occasion, his drawings are pulled from a suitcase—an obvious symbol of enclosure—by Bolden's mother-in-law, who represents enclosure of another kind.[21] Because the drawings are also "copies," and because they have been enclosed in a suitcase, it is emphasized that Audubon's subjects are seen by the viewer at several removes—much as words if not reinfused with some kind of vitality exist in a vacuum several times removed from the phenomenal source of their power.

Strikingly realistic, Audubon's drawings perfectly exemplify the urge to capture and freeze life in a static artefact. They constitute a visual correlative of the sonnet. And if Bolden represents the part of Ondaatje that longs to "dive" beyond "that perfect edge" (see *CTS* 69: Bolden and Robin dive into a pool like "loons"), then Audubon represents the young Ondaatje, preoccupied with fastened artefacts. That the urge to enclose space and freeze time is antagonistic to the (figurative) act of diving is clear, but when Mrs. Bass shows Bolden a drawing of "the Purple Gallinule which seemed to lean over the water, its

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[21] *Coming Through Slaughter* (Toronto: Anansi, 1976) 25. All further references to this text will be abbreviated *CTS*.

eyes closed, with thoughts of self-destruction" (*CTS* 25), it is apparent also that this freezing functions as a kind of safety net, preventing what Ondaatje has called elsewhere "our suicide into nature" (*TTK* 54). That this suicide is of ambivalent value, that it is both alluring and terrifying, creative and destructive, is one of the main themes of *Coming Through Slaughter.*

Audubon appears again in the anticlimactic closing section of the book. Here he is shown at work, waiting "for birds to fly onto and bend the branch right in front of his eyes" (*CTS* 155). Implicitly the birds that land beside him are loons, every one of them, frozen on the canvas before they can dive.

Buddy Bolden's contemporary double is the photographer Bellocq. Associated primarily with the "narrow focus of the eye" (the self, the I), as opposed to Buddy, who is associated with the perfect chaos of white (the collective),[22] he represents that part of Ondaatje that feels most limited and frustrated by the deficiencies of language. Again, Ondaatje parallels the act of *capturing* in words. This comparison is effective in both *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, where the photographs featured are of necessity black and white, somewhat like the print on the page. But Bellocq is not like the early Ondaatje as embodied in *Coming Through Slaughter* by Audubon. Clearly he is a photographer like Victor Coleman in "'The gate in his head,'" for "what you see in [Bellocq's] pictures is [the] mind jumping" (*CTS* 54). Nevertheless Bellocq is dissatisfied with his own work. He seems to sense that his photographs fail in some fundamental way, that despite their merits they are too static, too lifeless, for he slashes them with a knife as if "wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the bodies" (*CTS* 55). This bizarre act of violence is Bellocq's response to Bolden's repeated exhortation, "Put your hand through this window" (*CTS* 91). Realizing that even the best of his work has frozen time and somehow diminished the physical, Bellocq uses physical violence both to exorcise his own dissatisfaction and to imbue his portraits with a kind of retroactive kinesis. But the effort fails. Bellocq, like Dawe in Robert Kroetch's *Badlands* and the scholar in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, has been left physically ineffectual, a hunchback, by the history he has incidentally traced and nurtured in the dark enclosure of his room. Unable to make the flesh Word through his art, to put his hand through the window (read: frame) and so to pass "that perfect edge," Bellocq decides to kill himself. In his 20 X 20 darkroom, he frames himself with a "balcony"

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[22] Constance Rooke, "Dog in a Grey Room: The Happy Ending of *Coming Through Slaughter*, Solecki 278.

of chairs (a margin first, but also suggesting his desire for a public, for people watching from the balcony) and so burns himself and his darkroom, crashing finally through the flames and cinders where there had been a wall and deadening certainty. At the end of the scene, "he is covered, surrounded by whiteness, it looks as if a cloud had stuffed itself into the room" (*CTS* 67).

Buddy Bolden is one of those "heroes" whom Ondaatje loves most: a man who "sails/ to that perfect edge/ where there is no social fuel" (*TTK* 68). He represents that part of Ondaatje (indeed of many artists) which is frustrated by the proximity of a power source both inspiring and potentially destructive. Surely there has never been a serious artist who has not tried in some way to draw more immediately on the sources of inspiration; countless artists have experimented with drugs, others with hypnosis or meditation. Ondaatje has said that the artist has always "to be on the border where that craft meets the accidental and the unconscious, as close as possible to the unconscious."[23] Now certain artforms, especially music and dance, seem effortlessly to evoke reactions that involve both the unconscious and the body (and perhaps the two are inextricable after all). But because the kinetic artforms exist closer to the source of their beauty and power there is, as I have argued, a danger in them. Consider the mysterious and occasionally violent trances caused by ritual chants and dances. As Yeats knew, the energies of artistic creation and the energies of destruction are indivisibly confounded. In a less explicitly aesthetic vein, recall Billy the Kid's fear of action, his sense that it leads to the ecstacy of madness as it does for Buddy Bolden. Dennis Cooley observes that Billy "desperately wants . . . to freeze action in a series of still photographs . . . . In this book, then, photographs do not figure as unmediated access to reality; rather, they serve as tactical interceptions of it."[24] In other words Billy, overwhelmed by continual violent action, "would like to turn life into a series of safe stills."[25] To a certain extent, Buddy Bolden is afraid of the same kinetic ecstasy.

By the time Buddy runs away for a period of two years, he has begun to realize that his fame is, in a sense, freezing him and attenuating his art. Somewhat like his friend Bellocq, he finds himself figuratively in a dark room, a room that grows with his reputation "narrower and narrower, till [he is] crawling on [his]

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[23] "An Interview," Solecki 22.

[24] Cooley, Solecki 217.

[25] Cooley, Solecki 219.

own back, full of [his] own echoes, till [he is] drinking in only [his] own recycled air" (*CTS* 86). Bolden explains that he was an experimenter when he began playing, that he has a fear of certainties, but that his growing reputation made him so vain that he began to play the patterns his public expected, like the formulaic musician John Robichaux whom he has claimed to despise (*CTS* 93). This deterioration of integrity has many obvious literary correlates; every successful writer must struggle against the temptations of fame, which encourage him or her to become sloppy, self-indulgent, repetitive, rhetorical, and insincere, and to adopt a persona in the light of which all future work will be viewed. Ondaatje has said that this distortion is something he fears.[26] And as he must know it is more than artistically straightening; both Dylan Thomas and Ernest Hemingway, for example, were largely destroyed by their own reputations. Any kind of interaction with the public, it seems, is dangerous.

Bolden, however, is finally redeemed by Robin Jaelin. Through the sexual act—which, like artistic ecstasy, involves the transcending of time but not the freezing of it—she "drains" him of his fame, of himself. Eventually he overcomes what he calls "this awful and stupid clarity" (*CTS* 100) and is ready to throw himself back into the chaos, into the carnivalesque parade of the novel's climax: what he always wanted. And, finally, like Robin who represents it, it is "the chaos he embrace[s]" (*CTS* 110).

The parade scene represents a brilliant thematic fusion of the kinetic elements I have mentioned. The parade, of course, is itself dynamic; it comprehends both the dramatic arts and the dance. And naturally it includes music—but a music which is here totally identified with the dance of the woman whom Bolden imagines urging him on. Moreover, the "climax" of the scene is described in terms of sexual climax; life fluids, in this case blood, "comes up flooding past [his] heart in a mad parade . . . coming through [his] teeth, it is into the cornet, god can't stop god can't stop it . . . " (*CTS* 131). Because of this description, the music, drama, and dance are fused with the sexual act and the rhythms of the flesh. The passage also fuses the player with his instrument, for, after Bolden's collapse, Cornish has to take "the metal from the hard kiss of the mouth" (*CTS* 131), and the player with his public, for Bolden experiences an utter "loss of privacy in the playing" and feels as if he is "the dancer till the music is out there" (*CTS* 130). Finally it is as if Bolden discovers a conduit to a vast communal energy source, and his

[26] "An Interview," Solecki 21.

total identification with the other minds, bodies, and imaginations destroys him as surely as a massive electrical shock.

The scene, then, involves a macro- and microcosmic reconciliation of communal body rhythms, including the rhythms of sex and the dance, music, drama, and, implicitly, all the other kinetic arts. And after such choreography, what would any artist "wish to speak of anyway"?

VI

"God this is what I wanted to play for . . . . what I wanted."
—Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*

Before examining the kinetic structural techniques that mirror and reinforce the thematic fusion just discussed, I will briefly address the issue of the novel's conclusion. Constance Rooke argues that it does not represent "the bankruptcy of extremist art,"[27] although both Bolden and Bellocq are destroyed. And surely Bolden's end is somehow different from Bellocq's; Bolden's involves complete transcendence of order and a moment of unified ecstasy. The silence afterwards, as Bert Almon asserts, "may have two sources: pain that leaves the artist mute, or insight that makes expression superfluous."[28] I would argue that both sources are implicit in Bolden's final silence, but that the latter is more important. During the anticlimatic closing pages, Bolden is depicted as living a kind of death-in-life, a protracted silence endured in an empty room. This, I think, is the silence of eternity, the wordless stasis following death. And certainly the climactic parade scene, complete with Bolden's hemorrhage and the implicit sexual climax (which the French call *la petite mort*), suggests a real death. Thus Bolden's burial in the silent room is inevitable after the climactic action of the parade and represents the stasis of the tomb that inescapably follows the action of life. Earlier I argued that Ondaatje considers the creative kinesis of the dynamic arts a defiance of the "final stiffness" of artefact or death; as Linda Hutcheon puts it, motion represents for Ondaatje a denial of "the stasis represented ultimately by death."[29] And inasmuch as stasis *is* ultimately inevitable, creative mutiny is a vital affirmation in the existentialist tradition, in the tradition of the tragic optimist. Bolden's last words—"there are no prizes"—can be read in this

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[27] Solecki 291.

[28] "A Bitter Aspic: A Review of *Rat Jelly*," Solecki 118.

[29] Hutcheon 117.

light. There is after all no one waiting on the other side of the window to reward or decorate us should we break through. But we *have* broken through, in an act of creative rebellion, and it is enough. It has to be; there is nothing else.

That is not to say that Bolden's end is "positive" in any conventional sense. To write or view things from an existentialist perspective is to deny the possibility of naively affirmative conclusions. But surely Bolden's end does not signify, as Solecki contends, any kind of "bankruptcy," for in *Coming Through Slaughter* Ondaatje incorporates a number of the kinetic techniques that will, ideally, inspire creative or imaginative ecstasy. Admittedly, the action is framed in words, which function for Ondaatje and for us as a kind of safety net; but that Ondaatje does not consider "extremist art" worthless is demonstrated by his own efforts to comprehend and utilize the kinetic—to refuse like Bolden the certainty of conventional structures and so to evoke the extremes beyond all margins, if not actually to reach them.

Throughout the novel, there are subtle and more explicit metafictional clues that identify the writer with his main character. And, by thus tacitly associating writing and music, they suggest a thematic and structural cross-generic fusion. The most obvious instances of such an identification includes Ondaatje's assertion that when Bolden went mad at thirty-three, "he was the same age as I am now" (*CTS* 133), and his admission that he, like Bolden, attacked himself with a razor while standing at his mirror (*CTS* 133). Because of this overt correlation, we can draw certain inferences about the mysterious "Coleman" referred to by jazzman Frank Lewis (*CTS* 37). In context, and in light of the metafictional and autobiographical dimensions of the novel, this character can only be Victor Coleman, the poet of Ondaatje's "'The gate in his head.'" That poet taught Ondaatje to value "not clarity but a sense of shift" and awkward things "moving to the clear" (*TTK* 64), while this character who is preumably a jazzman talks the way Bolden plays:

> Listening to [Bolden] was like talking to Coleman. You were both changing direction with every sentence . . . . You were moving so fast it was unimportant to finish and clear everything.
>
> (*CTS* 37)

By conflating a contemporary poet and friend with a fictional musician, Ondaatje is once again identifying himself with the jazzman Bolden, and identifying writing with music. And he is suggesting that Victor Coleman's aesthetic is fundamental to the theme and structure of *Coming Through Slaughter.*

The kinetic structural techniques Ondaatje uses in this novel are cinematic, photographic, and musical. As suggested, this kind of cross-generic fusion is something he has worked toward since his earliest writing; discussing his film, *The Sons of Captain Poetry*, Ondaatje explains that it "is much more rhythmic [than *The Clinton Special*] in terms of a certain kind of beat or rhythm in [nichol's] poetry."[30] He explains also that he knew about the story on which *the man with seven toes*[31] is based through a series of paintings by Stanley Nowlan; that volume, then, can be seen as a poetic elaboration of visual works. That a literary work can incorporate the rhythms and structures of other artforms Ondaatje has often affirmed, telling Sam Solecki in 1975 that "I find the editing of a manuscript to be like the editing of a film, that's when you determine the work's shape, rhythmic structures etc."[32] And that he has experimented in his poetry by shifting between paradigms is confirmed by J.E. Chamberlin, who states:

> A spider . . . is a maker of webs . . . and poets are makers of songs and pictures and stories. But Ondaatje won't let them be, won't let a song sustain its magic of sound—the opening song of "Letters and Other Worlds" shifts into narrative. Nor will he let a picture maintain its precision—"Kim, at half an inch" slips into song. And a story becomes something to be suspicious of, or to disintegrate into picture and song.[33]

Elsewhere, Chamberlin argues that Ondaatje's poetic approach results in a "tonal collage"—and the cross-generic nature of the term is telling. Leslie Mundwiler calls Ondaatje's kinetic techniques "imagistic." In his book, he explains:

> On a technical level, Ondaatje has discovered and developed certain ways of achieving forceful effects through a kind of imagistic writing. That he was not always satisfied with the words on the page to carry through these effects, he has admitted.[34]

And so to reinforce the imagistic strategies which are, as Mundwiler suggests, hobbled, to a certain extent, by the limitations

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30 "An Interview," Solecki 16.

31 (Toronto: Coach House, 1969).

32 "An Interview," Solecki 21.

33 Solecki 39.

34 *Michael Ondaatje* 93.

which are inherent in language, Ondaatje has used in both *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, what R.P. Bilan calls "a cinematic narrative technique" involving abrupt shifts "from one brief scene to the next."[35] In *Coming Through Slaughter* these cinematic "cuts" are usually indicated by an asterisk. A good example of this technique is seen in Ondaatje's cutting from one of Bolden's soliloquies to an interview with one of his friends (*CTS* 75-76)—and here the shift and the nature of the scenes it connects recall the methods of film documentary. There are too many other examples of cinematic cuts to list; perhaps it is enough to say that this "editing" gives the narrative the immediacy of a fast-paced film. The velocity and suspense of the narrative are maintained and ultimately heightened through the omission of the usual connecting passages—passages that writers often feel obliged to include because of the tenuousness of words. The reader, in other words, usually has to be led along well-marked "passages" because the writer cannot suggest a thousand-word transition in a single picture, as a cinematographer can. But Ondaatje has learned, like any good director or poet, the potency of silence and implication.

Similar to the technique just discussed is the use of "fade-outs" after brief but important scenes. These fade-outs are represented, as in the scene where Bolden nearly kills himself by biting at his wrist (*CTS* 79), by the blank space that follows and occupies the balance of the page. The effect of what Solecki in a review has abruptly called "the protracting and pregnant silences of white spaces"[36] is to allow the preceding passage room in which to resonate and expand. The fade-out precludes the kind of closure, or enclosure, which conventional systems of textual organization necessarily impose; the fertile ambiguities and implications of a passage are allowed to reverberate indefinitely in the imagination.

I argued earlier that Ondaatje's interest in kinetic artforms derives partly from his desire to make his art more accessible, more communal. Like Bolden "what he want[s]" is "loss of privacy in the playing" (*CTS* 130). And the technique of fade-out helps him achieve this publicity by implicating the reader, whose imagination is inevitably and immediately engaged by the suggestive white space—a space which suggests the blank silence beyond words and beneath the threshold of the conscious

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[35] "The Poet Novelist," Solecki 293.

[36] "Coming Through: A Review of *Secular Love*," Solecki 131.

mind. The reader, then, is invited to put his or her hand through the window, threshold, "frame," or page.

Many of the structurally discrete paragraphs or passages in the novel resemble the frames of a film. Often three or four of these passages are arranged on the page so that the comparison is inevitable. Besides suggesting and simulating the motion picture, the device serves again to engage the reader's imagination, at least in a metafictional way—for it is the reader who, on "reading" the individual stills, must make the connection between them and unreel them in the imagination so that the "film" moves and coheres as a kinetic narrative.

The description of the contents of several film reels appearing in the novel's closing pages are among the more obvious cinematic techniques seen in the work. But the "credits" and "acknowledgements" appearing on the last two pages, unmistakably arranged like film credits, are equally convincing. Again, these techniques lend the novel some of the immediacy of film or documentary. And in this case they remind the reader that, after Bolden's ecstasy, only a "desert of facts" can be presented—much as a documentary can present only a series of facts after the truth occurs. Several of Ondaatje's kinetic techniques are derived from photography. As already argued, many of the passages resemble prints: black and white prints specifically, with the white-black blur of the typeset section representing the picture and the page's symmetrical white margins representing the frame of the photograph. This tacit identification of literature and photography is made most explicit when Ondaaatje sets up with type and blank space the cover photograph of Bolden's band (*CTS* 66). This simulation is another self-referential reminder of the flat superficiality of words and invites the reader's cooperation so as to invest the photographs/writing with vitality and to link the still shots and make them move.

Another kinetic element of *Coming Through Slaughter* is its use of musical models. The first among them is the use and development of what might be called a musical theme or *leitmotif.* Perhaps the best example of such a theme begins when the line "passing wet chicory that lies in the fields like the sky" appears in a field of white. Here the use of the relatively uncommon dactylic foot and strong assonance (chic*ory*/ f*ie*ld, *lie*/ *like*/ *sky*) suggest the line's musical nature. And this suggestion is later confirmed by the line's use as the lyric to the "Train Song" (*CTS* 85), where it is repeated several times with alterations—as if variations were being played on a theme. But to return to the idea of the line as a kind of *leitmotif*: on each appearance in the

text, it prefigures a love scene between Bolden and Robin, and so might be considered Robin's theme. If this analysis is valid, then the technique also combines operatic and cinematic forms with the more obvious musical one. Later, when Bolden is "lost from Robin," the line is reduced and paraphrased in a kind of coda, a dying cadence with the wet chicory diminished to a damp spot, "alcohol sweat" and "ink spread" on a page: "When I lift my head up the paper will be damp, the ink spread. The lake and sky will be light blue. Not even her cloud" (*CTS* 102). Cut to the next scene.

Along with the "Train Song" mentioned above, there is "Nora's Song" (*CTS* 17), which, like the former and like Ondaatje's photographic techniques, involves the reader in the text, thus making the work public and kinetic in a more immediate way. For on reading the lyric, the reader will probably—on a subconscious level at least—imagine the music that might bring it to life.

The reader is also involved in the climactic parade scene. Here he or she can imagine Bolden's performance, but it is hardly necessary, for the words move in a manner so seemingly chaotic but, in fact, carefully ordered that they palpably evoke the reeling cadences of unrestrained jazz. The whole passage has the feeling of a mad improvisation, a longer and more ecstatic improvisation than the one that anticipated it early in the novel. In that fluent, powerfully rhythmic passage, Bolden

> threw out and held immense notes, could reach a force on the first note that attacked the ear . . . . The way the side of his mouth would drag a net of air in and dress it in notes and make it last and last, yearning to leave it up there in the sky like air transformed into cloud. (*CTS* 14)

For "air transformed" read: made Word.

In the second improvisation, the rhythm is even stronger, more unrelenting; there is less punctuation here and the "music" moves inevitably toward a climax which then diminishes suddenly into complete silence, Bolden's last word not even separated from the white spaces that follow it by so much as a comma (*CTS* 131).

The novel's continuing for page after page after Bolden's apparent finale might be likened to the jazz technique of indefinite improvisation. That technique plays on listener expectations much as Ondaatje's long, anticlimactic conclusion plays on—or with—the conventional expectations of his readers. Again, this

sort of manipulation involves the reader, who will be surprised, perhaps unsettled, but at any rate an active participant. Thus the kinetic relationship of the player/writer to the listener/reader is maintained. In a jazz set, a long solo improvisation will reach a climax then quickly taper off as the audience, some of whom suppose the number to be over, applaud. But as the ovation subsides the band bursts into another variation—often in a different "mode." This kind of performance is suggested by the various narrative passages (some of which are written in different styles or modes) seen after the parade episode; in the closing pages of *Coming Through Slaughter* Ondaatje plays with the ideas of climax and anticlimax both to echo Bolden's style and as a final cross-generic statement against closure.

VII

From the time of his first published work, Michael Ondaatje has shown a concern for both the power and the emotive limitations of words. He has grown increasingly interested both in making his work more public and accessible, and in the dynamic elements of other artforms that make such communalization possible. To some extent, his poetry constitutes a kind of exorcism, an exercise aimed at confirming and refining a unique approach to writing. With *Coming Through Slaughter,* Ondaatje shows that his personal aesthetic is fully matured, for it represents a complicated and successful fusion of kinetic artforms and the physical rhythms on which they depend. Through this integration, Ondaatje has transfigured words into Word and made his writing more tangible, more true, more immediately accessible to his readers.

> *You are the Word which explodes*
> *In showers of light upon the shores of Oblivion.*
> —David Diop, "To a Black Dancer"

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