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Article abstract

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, as in much of Michael Ondaatje's work, identity loses diachronic stability with each historical, critical, or reminiscently interpretive reading. The fragments which appear without authorial identification remind us that truth is something we have to guess at; in many cases in the volume, the missing identifiers could refer to either Billy the Kid or Pat Garrett. Ondaatje's discontinuous blend of myth, reminiscence, and occasional fact become, for the reader, a tangible demonstration that time, memory, and subjectivity are inescapable culprits in obscuring our view of the past.

Reading Billy: Memory, Time, and Subjectivity in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

KATHLEEN I. BETHELL

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S 1970 volume, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (hereafter abbreviated *CW*) is a rewarding, if not an easy, read. Temporal and narrative uncertainties dominate the seemingly haphazard collection of documentary scraps, poetic fragments, and disconnected memories that comprise the text. The scrapbook-like qualities of *CW* invite its reading as a type of commonplace book; indeed, one might read it as a thematic precursor to those that figure prominently in Ondaatje's later novel, *The English Patient*. Like Almásy's volume of Herodotus, in which clues to a present identity are pasted into a bound volume of the recorded past (96),¹ the juxtaposition of fragments in *CW* also suggests a present moment interleaved with records from a legendary past. Ondaatje repeatedly returns to problems of the intersection of identity and memory with historiography (which for my purposes here includes biography and autobiography); his work consistently questions how one should read or write the remnants of the past.

The fragmentary, randomly gathered textual elements that allow *CW* to be read as a type of commonplace book recur in thematic form in Ondaatje's later prose fictions, most notably *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*. Identity in Ondaatje's work is less a matter of self-fashioned subjectivity than of continuously composed legend constituted by an accretion of external readings that have occurred and continue to occur synchronically, through time. In *CW*, as in much of Ondaatje's work, identity loses diachronic stability with each historical, critical, or reminiscently interpretive reading. Billy the Kid, like the anachronistic skeleton (with a tape recording in its chest cavity in place of the soul stones found in antique human remains) in Ondaatje's most recent novel, *Anil's Ghost*, has a current, reconstructed identity conflated with past possible reconstructions. The temporal blurring in *Anil's Ghost* underscores the inevitability of inventing a narra-

tive when reading even the recent past. In that novel, the epigraphist Palipana's wholly realized narratives of past historic events require his interpretation of possibly invented, ancient interlinear inscriptions. To Palipana, the interlinear texts have to be there, because it makes historical sense. He begins "to see as truth things that could only be guessed at. In no way did this feel to him like forgery or falsification" (83). He sees his interpretations as discovery of hidden truth, "the hidden histories, intentionally lost, that altered the perspective and knowledge of earlier times" (105). Palipana's outlook has its conceptual origins in *CW*, a volume that structurally demonstrates that to write Billy's life (or, by extension, any life) requires that we read the textual remains of that life with more than a little imagination. The fragments without authorial identification in *CW* remind us that truth is something we have to guess at; in many cases in the volume, the missing identifiers could refer to either Billy the Kid or Pat Garrett. What is lost when we guess at the truth and write the fragmentary into a whole narrative?

Hayden White argues that "the opaqueness of the world figured in historical documents is, if anything, increased by the production of historical narratives (89). The world figured in *CW* is indeed opaque, and Ondaatje's metaphor of the maze in *CW* (which I discuss in detail later) clearly shows that the mental production of historical or biographical narrative on the part of the reader-as-historiographer yields a distorted image of the past. To White, "each new historical work only adds to the number of possible texts that have to be interpreted if a full and accurate picture of a given historical milieu is to be faithfully drawn" (89). Ondaatje, on the other hand, uses *CW* and subsequent fictions to emphasize the futility of achieving a faithful rendering of historical persons or events; one might capture the flavour of the milieu, but our knowledge of Billy the Kid (or Almásy's identity, or the cultural history of Palipana's ancient Sri Lanka, or the individual identities of Anil's victims of modern war and the precise circumstances of their deaths) will of necessity remain interpretations, or readings, of what the passage of time has rendered incomplete. White argues that "our problem is to identify the modality of the relationships that bind the discernible elements of the formless totality together in such a way as to make of it a whole of some sort" (96). For Ondaatje, however, historiography cannot bind the past into a whole; there is no single, bounded text to be discovered and clarified by the historiographer. Rather, the historian and historiographer can only read interlinear inscriptions in order to write yet another partial and partially distorted narrative.

CW eloquently demonstrates the problem. Its fragmentary text and lack of identifiable pronouns render subjectivity problematic and openly challenges traditional assumptions about time, memory, and historical reality. Ondaatje's manipulation of time and memory forms an essential but critically neglected part of the structural strategy underpinning the work;² an examination of the ambiguous subjectivity fostered by that temporal strategy opens the text to myriad unexplored narrative possibilities.³ In *CW*'s discontinuous text, time does not function as a universally experienced, unidirectional progress from past through present to future; the random collection of memories recorded in the book lacks temporal or personal markers. Attempts to read the historically "real" Billy the Kid in the uncertainties of the text prove futile. As in his lifetime, the man behind the legend remains elusive. His subjective identity fades as his legend gains solidity with each critical reading of Ondaatje's text.

Reading and rereading Billy is the point of *CW*, whereas finding a single narrative of his life and times is not. As Manina Jones notes, the text itself invites reader participation in the ongoing (re)construction of the textually deconstructed outlaw. Although she suggests that a reader "should perhaps be looking less for keys than key holes, entrance not into a teleological narrative structure that terminates in a single exit, but through and into textual narrative uncertainties" (71-72), many readers nevertheless regard *CW* as a story in puzzle form. Most critics treat the challenge to "find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out" (*CW* 20) as an indication that a diligent reader can find a sure path through Ondaatje's maze of mixed prose and poetic forms and emerge triumphantly with a single, tidy psychological or biographical narrative in hand. Although this method of reading may satisfy, it fails to fully apprehend the unfolding story in which a reader assumes a responsible role in constructing coherence or discovering its lack. Although a few critics, like Jones, have recognized Ondaatje's "maze to begin, to be in" (20) as an invitation to explore multiple interpretive possibilities,⁴ none has yet, to my knowledge, examined the reality-constituting consequences of such an exploration. On the contrary, the diligence most readers bring to finding a coherent Billy the Kid in the imaginative fragments of *CW* attests to a seductive nostalgia for plain, old-fashioned, authorial truth. A desire for narrative truth grounded in a sense of historical reality seems to impel traditionally oriented readers to seek "the key to unlock" a single, meaningful story from Ondaatje's discontinuous text. Desire, however, cannot create certainty and meaning where they simply do not exist. Rather, readers must address the book's textual absences; one must seek in Ondaatje's temporal ambiguities the epistemo-

logical limits of the past and recognize in those limits the fragile web of conjecture that comprises our sense of historical reality.

The temporal and subjective uncertainties of the short poem “His stomach was warm” (27) demonstrate on a small scale much of the structural strategy of the entire *CW*. The ambiguities inherent in the poem’s exotic syntax and absent narrative components reflect the ambiguities of the larger text, which makes this passage particularly useful in discussing the interpretive challenges presented by Ondaatje’s temporal manipulations. In the poem, three scenes are recalled to memory — an afternoon tea with Sally Chisum in “Paris Texas,” someone washing a teapot, and that same someone putting a hand into a wounded man’s stomach in order to retrieve a bullet:

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

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

The first stanza of the poem records the progress of memory as a chain of causality set into motion through physical sensation. The speaker is reminded of the warmth of the wounded man’s stomach when he (or she; the speaker’s identity is unclear) puts his/her hand into a pot of luke-warm tea to wash it out. Not all the links in the causal chain are clearly defined, however; arbitrary line breaks and lack of punctuation leave the reader uncertain about who was “taking tea with Sallie Chisum in Paris Texas.” If it is the speaker (now washing the teapot), we might place the tea party in recent time. However, we cannot temporally locate the occasion of the wounding, identify the wounded person, or even determine who, exactly, “he” is who “wanted to see.” Other questions also arise. Does the present washing of a teapot temporally coincide with or merely recall “taking tea with Sallie”? Was taking tea with Sallie the occasion of the shooting, or for the recollection of the event? The fragmentary nature of the poem is emphasized by the presence of pronouns, but there are no

referents to which they can logically attach. Time is lost in the reversal of the first stanza to form the second. The poem stubbornly resists spatio-temporal location.

Most of the poetic fragments of *CW* are similarly elusive. The absence of editorial mediation by means of punctuation between text and reader blurs the relation of cause to effect; consequently, any causal sequence of events becomes increasingly ambiguous. The reader — like a historian examining fragmentary material that has little or no context — cannot establish the order of (possibly) earlier events with the textual evidence at hand, nor can the identities of the speaker or the wounded party in this poem be established with any certainty. Without the context of the surrounding material (a jumble of similarly decontextualized fragments), the poem becomes a curiosity with no historical value. The only factual moments that emerge from the text of the poem are these: that someone is shot, “he” wants to see the bullet, the speaker of the poem is or was “dragging the stomach out” to retrieve the bullet; later, while washing a teapot that contains lukewarm tea, the speaker remembers that the wounded person’s stomach felt warm to the touch. The presence of leftover, lukewarm tea in the pot suggests interruption, and reflects on all the unfinished business and pervasive textual absences in *CW*.

Absence is palpable in the isolated fact that Sallie Chisum once had tea with an unnamed guest (or guests) on an undisclosed date somewhere in “Paris Texas.” Here, the absence of punctuation between city and state introduces the additional, albeit unlikely, possibility that the events recalled here could have happened anywhere, or even that they might have happened more than once, in two different locations. Absence here gives way to potentially excessive presence. Just as the absent comma in the phrase “Paris Texas” multiplies the spatial opportunities for violence, temporal discontinuities multiply when fragmentary memories of past mayhem rip through present and recollected moments of tranquility. Violence in *CW* resists temporal containment; it erupts everywhere and remains an ever-present interloper in memory and in fact. With each explosive eruption, memory is increasingly fragmented; the text’s ambiguity suggests that the subjective reality represented by ever smaller shards of memory has lost its constitutive connection to a specific individual. Violence in *CW* is pervasive; its presence is fixed to everyone, yet the text’s pronominal absences ensure that memories of it belong to no one.

To further complicate analysis, we might conjecture that the tea with Sallie Chisum took place in late afternoon, because that is the time of day we associate with a nineteenth-century teatime involving guests. We

might pause to wonder at the oddity of the polite, Victorian inflection in the phrase, “while taking tea” in a narrative infused with the chaotic violence associated with the American West. Certainly the juxtaposition of the genteel and the rude both here and in scenes at the Chisum ranch reinforces the impression of cultural time(s) in collision. In short, to assume that “taking tea” fixes the events of this poem in time courts risk. No small part of the danger in making such a temporal assumption lies in the supposition that the poem is, in fact, set in the nineteenth century, and that the voice of the speaker is an authentic, if fictional, nineteenth-century voice. Yet the poem’s present existence as a passage in a twentieth-century experimental text undermines that supposition. No passage in Ondaatje’s text can be trusted as even a fictively historical artifact; the self-reflexive references to the act of writing — in which, for example, “a pencil / harnessing my face / goes stumbling into dots” (85), an author has “gotta think through” physical details (40), and recover from a “bad night” in a smoke-filled room (105) — serve as reminders of Ondaatje’s twentieth-century authorial presence, a postcolonial presence also hinted at in the violently interrupted teatime of the poem.⁵

In the second stanza of the poem, as in the whole book, reality becomes increasingly suspect. The few uninformative facts gleaned from the first stanza are rendered unstable in the mirror of the second, in which the already discontinuous flow of time is completely reversed. The tenuous causal links of the first stanza are clearly broken in the second; yet, the reversal of time effected by the reversal of line order does not yield a corresponding reversal of cause and effect. Indeed, the only reality that can be extracted safely from the disorder of the second stanza is the subjective “fact” that “his stomach was warm.” To further confound understanding, the singsong rhyme of “He wanted to see when taking tea” that introduces a teasing, almost playful, tone into the poem in the first stanza becomes darkly taunting in the second. Its new position immediately prior to images of “dragging out the stomach to get the bullet / a pot of luke warm tea to wash it out” shifts the poem abruptly from the rational (if incomplete) to the hallucinatory — a shift that mimics the frequent shifts into and out of hallucination in so many other passages in the book.

The first stanza of the poem operates much like the long prose passages scattered throughout *CW* in that it suggests the existence of objective, sequential events, even while it falls short of providing contextual detail necessary for historical meaning. The memories contained in the poem have lost all connection to the human being whose experience they reflect, with the result that not only are the narrative and historical records

incomplete, but the identity of the subject/owner of the fragmented memories is incomplete as well. The fragmentary memories of the poem “His stomach was warm” have no identifiable link to past or future; even their connection with a present empirical self, who may or may not be Billy the Kid, has been severed. Our own “memory” of the historical Billy the Kid is comprised, in *CW*, of many such discontinuous fragments — and, just as they do not appear as part of the empirical self of the now-dead outlaw (if they are, in fact, meant to be his memories) — neither can those same fragments reliably inform our image of the person from whom they became detached. In the world of *CW*, then, these memory fragments are what Linda Hutcheon refers to as the “textualized remains” of the past (119). The difficulty in reading *CW* is also what fascinates — it is never entirely clear to whom the “textualized remains” belong, whose subjective reality they might inform.

As the tantalizingly incomplete first stanza of “His stomach was warm” demonstrates the narrative strategy of the prose passages of *CW*, so do the reversed lines of the second stanza mimic the basic structure of the book itself — the necessary elements of sequential story are present, but their presentation in discontinuous, decontextualized fragments strips them of meaning. To extract any narrative sense from this poem, and from the book as a whole, all of the fragments must be examined for clues that might impose some pattern of order on the scattered bits of disorderly evidence. Smaro Kamboureli argues against such imposition of order, claiming that “Ondaatje’s disjointed presentation of action is meant to remain this way. The lack of surface narrative does not necessarily imply that there is a deep structure to be discovered or, worse, invented by the reader” (118). Although Kamboureli’s conclusion is sound, one should not be warned off by her comments. An attempt to impose order on Ondaatje’s disorderly text is a necessary, even inevitable, first step in a reading process that leads not only to the discovery of ultimate narrative absence, but of the reader’s own complicity in constructing the narrative of that absence. Attempts to order events of the text quickly reveal that conjecture and supposition are unavoidable; in the work of creating context, the reader discovers that s/he is complicit in creating, not the true history of a man, but merely another imaginative reality in the ever-expanding myth of Billy the Kid. Kamboureli is right to argue that the disorder is purposeful; all attempts to organize the “textualized remains” into a tidy reading of Billy the Kid manage only to hide him behind new interpretations of the legend. The “key to unlock” the story of *CW* is the recognition that there is no single story to unlock.

Just as imposition of order on the randomly ordered story fragments is of critical concern to a reader acting as historiographer, imposition of order on his chaotically violent world is crucial to the fictional author (or compiler) of the fragmentary *CW*. Although ambiguity clouds certainty in many passages, textual evidence for at least some authorial attribution is not altogether absent. It is reasonably if not absolutely certain that the prevailing voice in the text is that of a fictional Billy the Kid, with other, documentary voices rising in occasional counterpoint (e.g., through the photographs, jailhouse interview, comic book excerpt, and various italicized reminiscences).⁶ *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is less a journal of Billy's musings (as, for example, both Kertzer [93] and Van Wart [9] have described it) than it is a commonplace book, an ownerless scrapbook of Billyiana. Furthermore, although nearly every critic has noted the presence of multiple voices within the text, they generally show remarkable certainty in their assignment of various passages to particular voices — despite the fact that few fragments in *CW* can lay claim to a single authorial voice. The dawn passage concluding the narrative portion of the volume is a case in point:

It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. The morning sun has concentrated all the cigarette smoke so one can see it hanging in pillars or sliding along the roof like amoeba. In the bathroom, I wash the loose nicotine out of my mouth. I smell the smoke still in my shirt. (105)

These lines have been attributed, variously, to Billy (Scobie 204-05), to Ondaatje (Heble 109; Van Wart 24), to Billy and Ondaatje (Kertzer 95, 96; MacLulich 116), and even to photographer L.A. Huffman (Donnell 244). Harrison dodges the problem of direct attribution, but speculates that the “amoeba” of cigarette smoke “represents Billy’s archetypal aliveness” (37). I would add still another attribution — to Pat Garrett. The first two sentences balance neatly with the implied “bad night” of Garrett’s all-night poker vigil in a hotel room at the book’s opening — a vigil-cum-ambush that is interrupted by an anticipated gunfight with Tom O’Folliard, and which continues in company with O’Folliard’s shattered corpse “till six a.m.” (*CW* 7-8). Evidently, the ambiguities of voice in *CW* are not easily resolved. Indeed, the many varied, valid responses to this passage clearly demonstrate that irresolution is the whole point of Ondaatje’s tantalizingly vague text. Images may be concrete, the violence viscerally real (literally so in the case of gut-shot Charlie Bowdre), but the scenes remain deliberately unfixable. Terry Eagleton, writing in

another context, argues that “there is absolutely no need to suppose that works of literature either do or should constitute harmonious wholes, and many suggestive frictions and collisions of meaning must be blandly ‘processed’ by literary criticism to induce them to do so” (70). Friction and collision are essential to Ondaatje’s *CW*; meaning will collide with alternative meanings simply because we cannot catch hold of a single story of the past. In the purposeful incoherence of Ondaatje’s *CW*, a reader cannot accurately ascertain any clear-cut subject-object relationship, or even positively affix events to a particular point along some mental timeline of history.

Despite the multiple perspectives afforded by the subjective and temporal uncertainties of the text, for most readers Billy’s is the prevailing voice, and it prevails in the mythologized realm of the 1880s American West. Billy dominates our reading of the text; Billy is, after all, the reason for our reading *CW* in the first place. Just as Frank James’s celebrity sells movie tickets (24), Billy’s legend evidently still sells books. The legend lives on, and through it, so does Billy the Kid, whose voice prevails in *CW* even beyond his death as it seeks to control its own story, to make it “not . . . about me through their eyes” (20). Billy’s anachronistic roll call of the dead — which includes himself and establishes the book’s anomalous temporality — indicates the importance of getting the details of his own life and death right (6). Billy’s correction of his own reminiscence of Sallie’s routine at the Chisum ranch demonstrates the point: “No I forgot,” he chides himself, “she had stopped that now” (33).

The historiographic implications of such attention to detail are further illustrated in the poem “Down the street was a dog” (46), in which the first stanza is followed by a second that contains only one word: “Again.” The third stanza repeats the first, but with one small editorial revision (the phrase “stud looking” is omitted). The poem closes with the line, “All this I would have seen if I was on the roof looking.” Interpretive possibilities abound. Perhaps the carefully edited description of dog, Garrett, and two unidentified men coming down the street toward a Billy who is, after all, not present on the roof demonstrates the cinematographer’s habit of generating multiple takes of a single scene, as Cooley suggests (225). Alternatively, Scobie sees the scene as entirely imagined, a premonitory “flash forward” of Billy’s impending death (201). Kamboureli’s study of *CW* as Billy’s thanatographic discourse (120–21) implies that it can function as a post-death recollection in the same vein, for example, as the list of the killed (*CW* 6) and Billy’s description of his own moment of death (95). As with the diversely interpreted “bad night” in

the smoke-filled room, this passage — like the entire *CW* — can be read as representing all these things and more. Each reading represents an endless re-visioning of history that yields not truth, but simply a growing accretion of possible scenarios.

Another first-person, post-death reminiscence problematizes interpretation of historical evidence through use of provocatively anachronistic language. A birthday poem begins:

White walls neon on the eye
1880 November 23 my birthday. (58)

The juxtaposition of the glaringly modern word “neon” (which did not come into use until 1898, seventeen years after Billy’s death) with the precise date of Billy’s final birthday in the second line of the poem problematizes subjectivity while directing attention to the book’s temporal irregularities. If we accept the text’s temporally problematic first-person reminiscences as (dead) Billy’s, the anachronism frustrates attempts to create coherence. If we reject an anachronistic Billy as author of the post-death poems, we sacrifice coherence and shift the context and meaning of the entire *CW*. To return to the closing fragment of the text, for example, it does matter who spent the “bad night” in the smoke-filled hotel room (105), because the who of that passage necessarily dictates the when. Whether the speaker is Billy, Huffman, Ondaatje, or even Garrett, the temporal locus of the event is entirely dependent on whose “bad night” is being described. Memory cannot make sense of the past when the narrative voice is uncertain. The clamour of voices rising from the unattributed passages renders subjectivity ambiguous; the anachronistic language merely underscores the irremediable fact of our inability to fix events in linear time. The discontinuous, textualized remains of the past in *CW* are clearly adrift in an atemporal universe.

A predictable, orderly, continuous universe is a key concern of Ondaatje’s authorial Billy. He has “seen pictures of great stars” whose volatility is only barely contained (“one altered move” of temperature or speed might explode them, “make them maniac” [41]). Yet stars, like watches, can be diagrammed (11) and, thereby, tamed by stripping away inessential, chaotic detail. What is left — in the “stomach of clocks” (11), the “clean speed of machines” (41), and, presumably, the elegance of stars reduced to mathematically predictable motion — is a serenely purposeful, perpetual order, a condition that clearly does not prevail in *CW*’s chaotically violent world. Judith Owens observes that “what a diagram eliminates most effectively is movement . . . specifically the movement of

time" (120). Time is the key to order, and Ondaatje's manipulations of time in *CW* indicate how elusive temporal order can be.

In the Chisum house, time itself is not passively measured, but is ordered and regulated. Sallie opens and closes shutters at regular intervals, artificially creating multiple days and nights in place of each natural day (32-35); Owens suggests that Sallie's movement through the house — in which Billy perceives Sallie "leaving black behind her as she walked into the remaining light" (*CW* 34) — mimics the cosmic movements of sun and moon (131). Time slows down in the surreal carnage of the rat-infested barn in which a feverish Billy describes "the long twenty yard space between me and them empty but for the floating bullet lonely as an emissary" (*CW* 18); the bullet that will kill Billy parts his hair "slow," enters his head, going "in slow in slow," and finally exits the skull, "leaving skin in a puff / behind" (73). Time nearly stops altogether in Charlie's long, nightmarish death walk into the arms of a waiting Pat Garrett. All motion but Charlie's ceases; even the gunfire stops while everyone waits and watches a dead man lurch across the arroyo (22). The text's overarching photographic metaphor fragments time, freezing it into slightly blurred images taken "with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked" (5). Kamboureli notes that when Angela D. (as Angel of Death, whose presence heralds Billy's death) jams the sackcloth curtain onto a nail, the "bent oblong of sun" (*CW* 21) shining into the room becomes an "element conflating the physical time of heavenly bodies with the biological time of mortal bodies" (125). The structure of the two poems discussed above, "His stomach was warm" and "Down the street was a dog," suggests time run backward and time as an endlessly repeating, if slightly variable, loop (*CW* 27, 46). Cooley notes that, in the scheme of *CW*, Billy, who is "supremely triumphant on the paradigmatic axis" of Ondaatje's text, is "no match, finally, for Garrett on the syntagmatic axis where time happens" (231).⁷

It is notable, however, that in *CW*, none of these various experiences of time has any effect on the immutable fact of Billy's death. Only one faint path — when Poe tells Garrett "I believe you have killed the wrong man" (103) — suggests that Billy may have survived the fictively historical events of the book. However, in the realm of our own historically distant reading, the fact of Billy's death is undeniable. Whether or not he actually dies in the pages of *CW* becomes irrelevant.⁸ Indeed, just as the randomly ordered, rhetorically mixed fragments that exist within the established framework of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* do not alter the fact of the book's existence, neither do the multiple and diverse human experiences and percep-

tions of time change events that are eternally present in an atemporal literary realm that does not recognize past, present, or future. Ondaatje's fragmented challenge to linear, historical continuity echoes age-old attempts to understand human temporality in what J.T. Fraser calls "a nowless universe," in which "time's directed flow" has no meaning (159). Fragmentary, discontinuous memory exists in *CW* only as textualized traces of past events inscribed and decoded in an ongoing present moment that slips continuously into an empirically irrecoverable past — a past that, nevertheless, refuses to depart the noetic present.

Although temporal speculation may be philosophically bracing, the hallucinatory poem "After shooting Gregory" suggests that events actually experienced as perpetually present are nightmarishly grotesque. The poem's fantastic chicken challenges the speaker's control of his memories. It echoes childhood memories evoked by Charlie Bowdre's spastic liver "like a headless hen jerking / brown all over the yard" (12) as well as the "crooked bird" shot and held in hand (14). Both chicken and hand-held bird are killed but retain post mortem control by continuing to act after death. The first is, quite literally, the proverbial chicken with its head cut off; the second bird "yell[s] out like a trumpet" (14) in what is, perhaps, a poetic nod to the trump of doom. The bizarre chicken of the "Gregory" poem erupts out of nowhere and similarly wrests control of the entire scene from the speaker, who shot Gregory.

Whereas the first hen is a nightmarish memory that prompts the speaker to "never eat . . . hen since then" (12), and the second bird (shot, but yelling) may be part of an actual attempt to gain mastery over memories of the headless hen, the chicken of the "Gregory" poem is out-and-out hallucinatory. It is also frighteningly opportunistic, digging in and tugging out a twelve-yard length of vein from the neck of a dying man even before he falls down. Chicken and dying man are tethered; the bird hangs on "as if it held that body like a kite" (15). Death and the unrelenting bird are inseparable in this moment, and we sense a horror on the part of the speaker (who, for the purpose of this discussion we shall assume to be Billy, although it could as easily be Garrett) who is himself inseparably tethered to hallucinatory memories of people and things that are killed but never seem to finish dying. In Billy's nightmarishly violent world, they are killed, but despite his best "careful" efforts to aim true, "so [the dying] wouldn't last long" (15), his victims refuse to lie down. Their dying moments live on, kite-like, tugging at his memory and imagination just as the chicken tugs the impossibly long vein from Gregory's neck.

A sense of incompleteness is further reinforced by the presentation of

the poem on the page. As with so many of the poems in *CW*, there is no punctuation, no editorial mediation between the reader and the words on the page. The lack of punctuation, overuse of conjunctions (“and,” “when,” “till”), and use of the gerund (“falling,” “tugging”) and simple present (“paddles,” “hops,” “digs,” “straightens,” “heaves”) — all work to create an ongoing, continuous present moment. Where past tense exists (in the first and third stanzas), it functions only as a trigger for the continuous hallucination. Emblematic of the speaker’s dilemma are the dying man’s last words: “get away from me yer stupid chicken” (15). Images of grotesquely persistent and undying birds echo in the one-eyed owls caged at the Chisum ranch, whose sinister presence follows Billy even after he walks out of earshot (36-37). Images of dead and deformed birds that remain stubbornly animate also evoke images of violently killed men, whose final moments remain caught in the perpetual present of recurring memory. Charlie Bowdre’s incremental death scene, for example, haunts the pages of the book in brief, sometimes elegiac, fragments of memory (12, 22, 39, 48, 49, 57, 76, 79). The violent images burned into memory do not fade into a forgotten past; their shattered remains continue vividly to haunt the speaker until his own death — whereupon the recurring hallucination is transferred to the reader, for whom Billy the Kid, now legendary, simply will not die. In the jailhouse interview, Billy is asked, “do you think you will last in people’s memories?” to which Billy prophetically replies, “I’ll be with the world till she dies” (84).

It should not escape anyone’s notice that this analysis of “After shooting Gregory” is yet another tidy reading in a long series of tidy readings that attempt to domesticate Ondaatje’s deliberately disorderly text. Yet there is no compelling reason to assign the poem to Billy; it is no less temporally and subjectively ambiguous than anything else in *CW*. The speaker, for example, could as easily be Pat Garrett as Billy the Kid; the Gregory poem has attributes that pertain to both. The bird imagery, for example, is linked to both men; in addition to his encounter with the caged owls, Billy likens his vomit to “a pack of miniature canaries. A flock. A covey of them” flying up and out of his mouth (70), and Garrett practices avian taxidermy and receives shipments of frozen birds for his collection (88). Most of the bird imagery, however, has no clear identification with either Billy or Garrett — which strongly suggests an intentional ambiguity. Indeed, if one follows the path linking the vein-tugging fowl of the Gregory poem through the yelling trumpet bird (14) back to the “headless hen jerking / brown all over the yard” (12), two interpretive choices present themselves. The first is that employed in the above

analysis of “After shooting Gregory.” That analysis assumes that the speaker of the Gregory poem is Billy, because the links noted above place the passage comparing “the liver running around there” like the “headless hen” in the same scene as Charlie Bowdre’s dying words, “o my god billy I’m pissing watch / your hands” (12). This is not an unreasonable connection; both passages appear on the same page, and the remarks on the bizarrely twitching liver immediately follow the collapse of Bowdre into Billy’s arms. The same analytic path, however, forks on that very same page and opens a second interpretive option. Although the speaker of the first passage can be identified through Charlie’s words as Billy, the speaker of the second passage cannot be so easily identified. Both passages occupy the same page but are separated by a wide expanse of white space, which might well represent the snow-covered expanse that separates Billy’s gang from Garrett’s posse at Tivan Arroyo. If we interpret the white space on the page as a textual representation of the geographic space across which Charlie, nearly dead, walks “in a perfect, incredible straight line” into Garrett’s arms (22), the second passage on that page can be read as conversational commentary by a watchful, waiting Pat Garrett.

Reading Garrett as an alternative speaker of the Gregory poem is further supported by Gregory’s absence from the list of the dead (6) on either side of the hostilities, and by Garrett’s purported “ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke” (28), which accords with the jocular tone of the Gregory poem. Additionally, the grotesque, hallucinatory aspects of the Gregory poem also inform passages that particularly describe either Billy or Garrett. Garrett, for example, is said to be “frightened by flowers because they grew so slowly that he couldnt tell what they planned to do” (28), which links him to menacing images of suffocating flowers (55-56); hallucinatory images also attach to Billy, who sees “wounds appearing in the sky, in the air” and normal foreheads that suddenly “leaked brain gasses” (10). It is ultimately impossible to attribute the Gregory poem to either character with any certainty. The equivocal subjectivity of the Gregory poem renders the historicity of the fictional event problematic. Whether one argues in favor of Billy, Garrett, or anyone else as the subject, an analysis of the textual evidence supporting the attribution reveals little more than conjecture. The reality of this fragment, like so much of *CW*, is constructed entirely by the reader from the unreliable stuff of fragmented, decontextualized memory.

In *CW*, Ondaatje invites us into a labyrinth of multiple temporal possibilities, into the “maze to begin to be in” (20). To accept the invitation is also to read *CW* as a story about reading, and about writing as

we read. We enter the maze in search of a key to unlock the mystery, to dig out the truth about the man behind the legend. We're looking for the beginning, the source — the essence. We read *CW* in the temporal present, yet plunge into the maze “two years ago.” Our starting point is “Charlie Bowdre and I” criss-crossing the Canadian border on horseback from “country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of tree green” (20) — an image that mirrors ourselves, criss-crossing the text, wandering from subjective country to subjective country through different colours of reality, never entirely sure of our spatiotemporal coordinates. Until he is chained securely to a horse (76), we are rarely certain that we even have Billy in our sights.

A captive Billy — whose identity as owner of the passage is secured by “Garrett’s voice near me . . . whats wrong billy whats wrong” (78) — represents a reasonably definite subject whose innermost self we are sure can be discovered if only we probe with sufficient care and diligence. A grisly scene of solar violation in which the sun stands in as metaphor for close-reading trophy hunters — ourselves as reader-historiographers — demonstrates the process. We/the sun become “a pair of hands;” we are gendered and become “he,” and our “thin careful fingers” split the skin of Billy’s head, peel it back (separating the now labial folds of flesh), and penetrate the skull of the man whose inmost self we intimately want to know. The body becomes metaphor for the maze; the maze is already metaphor for our quest for some sure truth, for the “real” Billy the Kid. Through the “long cool hand” of the sun, we vicariously search the maze of Billy’s inner anatomy — “weaving in and out,” “moving uncertainly through wrong fissures ending pausing at cul de sacs . . . retreating . . . then down the proper path . . . through grooves . . . merging paths of medians . . . gyres notches arcs tracts fissures roots” (77). In our urgency at the end, we abandon all pretense of finesse. Our/the sun’s “cool fingers,” hurtle down “the last hundred miles in a jerk” and break through the barrier “sacs of sperm” to seize hold of Billy’s “very best thing” (64) — his cock — and pull it recklessly back “up the path his arm had rested in and widened.” Exercising our male, solar prerogative we violently penetrate and feminize a forcibly restrained Billy, whose own male reproductive organ we force to penetrate his own body (now doubly feminized). Paradoxically, in order to restore his masculinity, Billy must give birth — to himself, to his own “best thing.” We/the “cool hand” of the sun play midwife to his cock, delivering it through the bleeding canal of his throat, and restore it to its exterior, masculine condition (albeit inside out and protruding from Billy’s head). Clearly, this distorted image is not the por-

trait we set out to obtain; we must re-enter the maze, and begin again. Two hands now, “one dead, one born from me,” start the process anew, in gender-reversed language. Where one hand split the skin of Billy’s head and penetrated his skull, two now enclose Billy’s newborn cock (which now penetrates the feminine space between the too-inquisitive hands), split the foreskin, peel it back, and then — let go (77).

We let go. Why? We — solar rapists, reader-historiographers, eternally hopeful pillagers of the past — have hold of Billy the Kid’s “very best thing”; we have in hand the generative, procreative means by which we believe we can (re)create a coherent Billy. But we let it go. Two hands, “one dead, one born from me, one like crystal, one like shell of snake found in spring,” suggest that resurrection/regeneration is possible. But our recreated Billy is deformed and incomplete; in our impatience to get to the centre of the maze, we break through the “sacs of sperm,” metaphorically destroying any real generative potential. We pull him inside out in a hallucinatory inversion that echoes the gut-searching inversion of the mirror poem, “His stomach was warm” (27). His identity, like his shifting gender, remains as elusive as the identities of speaker and gunshot victim in the earlier poem. The inversion fails to reveal the true Billy; we do not find the centre, but merely invert the maze — which we promptly prepare to re-enter (by peeling back the foreskin as we peeled back the skin of Billy’s head). The sudden abandonment of the project — letting go — signals what should be our recognition that the desired centre cannot be found. At each remove, there is less and less “real” Billy to reveal.

Billy’s cries of outrage and frustration at the close of the passage mark him as an individual who no longer belongs to himself: he is ours, we’ve taken possession of his very best thing and made it produce, not the man (it cannot), but a series of flawed, imaginative constructs. With the pulling back of every layer of skin, we reduce the man even as we add layers to the legend. We peel him, turn him inside out, peel him again; in images alternating violent appropriation with enforced passivity, we loot the original for material to construct the legend even before Garrett kills the living man. Garrett’s distant-seeming, lower-case “whats wrong billy whats wrong” indicates that Billy’s subjective reality is fading as we pull him away from his own reality to one of our own construction. The temporally limited outlaw gives birth to an endlessly regenerating legend that sheds the real Billy like an old snakeskin.

In the ongoing present of *CW*, the legend of Billy the Kid gains substance even as the historical man fades, ghostlike, from view. Faced with scrap after scrap of decontextualized fragments of memory, myth,

history, and outright fiction, a reader discovers that s/he can no more impose a rational order on the accumulated “works” than Sallie Chisum can truly control the rising and setting of the sun. Although human imposition of order on the workings of the universe is an overarching concern in the world of Ondaatje’s *Billy the Kid*, such attempts at control are not limited to opening and closing shutters, diagramming stars, or contemplating watches whose shifting gears mark precisely the passage of time. Time in *CW* is very much like “a river you could get lost in” (26). The reader’s experience of time in Ondaatje’s text is that it is as present and elusive as water in a river: you can see the path of movement through it, circle round in it, disturb it, perceive it as random droplets like water splashed from a drinking horse’s face; you can lie down in it until you turn cold. Days unrecorded on calendar or clock are marked only by the cosmic clockwork of a sun that perches on the cusp of night like “a flashy hawk / on the edge of it” only to be supplanted by the “frozen bird’s eye” of the moon (26). Our efforts to find beginning, middle, and end to Billy’s story and fit them within the context of a larger history are as seductively absurd as trying to return the drops of water dribbled from a horse’s face back into their original position within the river’s flow.

Just as L.A. Huffman, the photographer of the book’s opening, can neither stop time nor reproduce with complete fidelity a fleeting moment plucked out of time (the photograph of horses in motion that he describes does, after all, still show “some blur” [5]), neither can the reader-as-historiographer recreate with complete integrity an unblurred history of Billy the Kid. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is exemplary of Ondaatje’s preoccupation with problems of history and historiography. How does one read what time has rendered fragmentary and uncertain? In *CW*, the reader’s impulse is to “bind,” as Hayden White would have it, “the discernible elements of the formless totality” (96), to give the scrapbook or commonplace compilation some kind of plausible, total, narrative. Yet Ondaatje’s text yields only what history might leave us to decipher — random bits of fragmentary material from which we can create at best an abundance of possible narratives, at worst terrible (and sometimes terribly funny) distortions, but never a single, true story. In his later works, particularly *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje himself creates the narratives within narratives, leaving his characters, rather than the reader, to wrestle with problems of historiography and the frustrations inherent in any attempt to clarify and understand the past. Ondaatje’s discontinuous blend of myth,

reminiscence, and occasional fact in *CW* become, for the reader, a tangible demonstration that time, memory, and subjectivity are inescapable culprits in obscuring our view of the past. Time in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and in Ondaatje's subsequent fictions, can be as fluid and variable as a river; its very nature makes speculation and conjecture inseparable from the imaginative reality we like to think of as history.

NOTES

¹ Also in *The English Patient*, Hana similarly creates commonplace books by writing her present thoughts into the volumes in the library at Villa San Girolamo (61), thereby making of each book, and of the library as a whole, the site of discontinuous, randomly recorded memory.

² Most criticism to date discusses the photographic, cinematographic, and historiographic and mythographic elements of the work; however, none fully addresses the multiple subjectivities afforded by the temporal and grammatical peculiarities of the text. For a more extensive discussion of the postmodern, historiographic aspects of *CW*, which I have only touched on in this study, see Jones and Heble. Photographic and/or cinematographic aspects are discussed at length in, for example, Blott and Cooley. For a discussion of the mythopoeic aspects of *CW*, see Clarke.

³ Manina Jones's insightful discussion of *CW* as documentary collage acknowledges the presence of "multiple testimonies" ("Scripting the Docudrama" [79]) in the text (making particular note of Paulita Maxwell's story), and argues that "interdiscursive relationships among stories violate closure by offering alternative narrative lines and alternative perspectives" (80). Jones's primary focus, however, is on *CW*'s documentary "pre-texts" of photographs and quotations, the appropriation of which "intertextually multiplies and scatters single voice" (84). My purpose, on the other hand, is an examination of the fictional whole of *CW* as a scrapbook or commonplace book, and to explore in detail at least some of the multiple and uncertain realities inherent in Ondaatje's subjectively ambiguous text.

⁴ Clarke, for example, places the maze at the "center of myth, where thought is free to wander any twisting path to an unforeseen conclusion" (5).

⁵ Although these passages may represent Ondaatje's voice, Kamboureli's discussion of *CW* as a thanatographic discourse suggests they could just as easily belong to Billy. I would multiply the subjective possibilities and include Pat Garrett.

⁶ See Jones ("Scripting the Docudrama") for a full discussion of Ondaatje's use of documentary intertexts.

⁷ Heble also argues that Ondaatje's texts, including *CW*, reflect "his desire to replace the conventional syntagmatic approach to history with a kind of paradigmatic — potential or absent — level of discourse. By inscribing his texts with potentialities not realized in the historical past, Ondaatje reshapes our experience of history" (101).

⁸ Kamboureli argues that "Billy does not die in the poem [on page 6]. He is already dead when he utters his first monologue" (120).

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