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ORDER AS PROCESS: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN THE WORKS OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE

BY

RAY WILTON

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The undersigned certify that they have read a Master's thesis entitled: ..."Order as Process: Narrative Structure in the ...Works of Michael Ondaatje."

submitted by .....Ray WILTON.....

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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The Thesis Examining Committee certifies that the thesis (and the oral examination, if required) is:

Approved ☑ Not Approved ☐

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Order as Process:
Narrative Structure
in the works of
Michael Ondaatje

by
Ray Wilton

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of

Master of Arts

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Chapter One

Introduction

In his four longer narrative works Michael Ondaatje employs a subversive strategy that compels his reader into questioning historical 'realist' assumptions: those traditional distinctions between reality and art, fact and fiction. As he lures his reader into expectations of chronology and narrative closure, he exposes those expectations as simply convention, calling the narrative process itself and the role of the author and reader in that process into question. He thus attacks the very conventions upon which narration depends and thereby exposes a paradox at the heart of civilization.

Paradox is at the centre of Ondaatje's poetic vision; it finds expression in his unique imagery, and is structurally embedded in his narratives, creating that pervasive sense of vitality, flux and uncertainty we get in The Man with Seven Toes, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Coming Through Slaughter and Running in the Family.[1] It provides the potentially ideal ground for the central concern in his work, namely the human need for coherence and order in a changing world. His characters exist in a continual process of giving form to the chaos of their experience, striving for coherence and meaning. Their

striving reveals the paradox, in themselves and in their need for order. Meanwhile, Ondaatje draws the reader into participating in that revelation and, finally, into relinquishing the illusion of order as stasis, and accepting order as process.[2]

Critical attention has focussed perhaps more on Ondaatje's use of imagery than on any other aspect of his work, exposing there many of the paradoxical effects I am suggesting. Critics draw attention to his repeated use of a number of images, images which surprisingly seem to change in their significance from one context to the next. As J. M. Kertzer in his article on Billy the Kid points out, images "take on symbolic significance, yet as symbols, they immediately become ambivalent. Sometimes they serve life; sometimes they serve death; eventually they serve both."[3] He finds in the text "a paradox of life and death" as the "imagery shifts and fuses."[4] Sam Solecki, also speaking of Billy the Kid, finds that within the phrase "His legend a jungle sleep" (BK, p. 97), "Ondaatje has managed to summarize within a single sensuous complex the unresolved tensions and ambiguities of the book."[5] Then, in an article on The Man with Seven Toes, Solecki says:

> It is almost as if Ondaatje is playing with the reader, undercutting his conventional notions about structure and symbolism. Most readers, for example, assume that an image, repeated often enough in a variety of contexts, will, at some

> point, shift in function and meaning from being simply an image and assume the status of a symbol. This is precisely the kind of expectation Ondaatje creates only in order to deny.[6]

The reader discovers in Ondaatje's work a movement towards the fulfillment of our conventional notions of the operations of image and symbol that is never actually realized. As we are being lured toward conventionality we are made aware of the inadequacy of any purely conventional approach. There seems to be no single apprehension of Ondaatje's imagistic structure that can account for all its manifestations.

Kertzer and Solecki suggest that by undermining the conventions of imagery and symbolism, Ondaatje frustrates the reader's need for order. The search for convention is a search for static order, and by frustrating this impulse Ondaatje forces the reader, not only into new ways of perceiving, but into the awareness that any 'conventional' or 'clear' form must necessarily "eliminate much." Thus we are forced simultaneously and continuously to reconfront the chaos of our experience and to reconstruct new forms. We are faced with a collage of images and perceptions that will not succumb to any still form, but rather compel us into a continuous process of forming.

A poem in Rat Jelly deals directly with Ondaatje's poetics. It expresses both his desire to recreate 'reality' and his awareness of the limitations of the lyric

in that regard. The poem is "`The gate in his head'":

> My mind is pouring chaos
> in nets onto the page.
> A blind lover, don't know
> what I love till I write it out.
>
> And then from Gibson's your letter
> with a blurred photograph of a gull.
> Caught vision. The stunning white bird
> an unclear stir.
>
> 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.[7]

Sam Solecki interprets the lines as meaning that

> the poem must deal with motion, flux and formlessness within the confines of poetic form. Ondaatje's poem achieves this by hinting at forms -- the page, the photograph -- and then subtly, through oxymoron, syntax, and an inter-weaving of sounds -- n's and r's -- recreating the reality, the image of the bird.[8]

And Stephen Scobie sees the paradox,

> [t]he resulting image is simultaneously a fixed moment abstracted from time, and a moment which implies and contains the continued "moving to the clear." It is a clear, unmoving image of a blurred movement towards clarity.[9]

The consensus seems to be that Ondaatje is concerned not with static being, but with becoming, or process, in poetic form. Given Ondaatje's apparent concern with the limitations of the lyric form, it is perhaps inevitable

that he turns to narrative, the medium of temporality, to find a structure that is "fully expressive of his vision."[10] It follows that fully experiencing the intricacies and implications of Ondaatje's poetic vision necessitates an analysis of the narrative structures in his texts.

In analyzing narrative technique we approach the texts with the aim of discovering those qualities and characteristics that make interpretation possible. Jonathan Culler argues for such an approach:

> Above all, the need for a poetics [is clear], for if the meaning of works lies in the successive effects of their elements on readers, then one needs a powerful theory that will account for these effects by analyzing the norms, conventions and mental operations on which they depend.[11]

The theory employed in this discussion will be primarily that of the narrative theorist, Gerard Genette, with some reference to the work of Seymour Chatman. Their hypothetical structures, developed out of the conventions of narrative, will act as a kind of grid through which we can perceive and analyze Ondaatje's work. This method will disclose an underlying fluid structure which, through the manipulation of narrative conventions, compels the reader into actively participating in an ambiguous and paradoxical reality.

Narrative analysts' now familiar distinction between 'story' and 'discourse' constitutes the basis for the

ensuing discussion. Chatman defines the terms in the following manner:

> ...each narrative has two parts: a story, the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse, that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*.[12]

As readers, tradition leads us to assume the events of a story have a particular chronological structure consistent with our conventional notions of cause and effect. In reading a text we, consciously or otherwise, attempt to extricate this story from the discourse. In The Man with Seven Toes, the story is what we postulate 'actually' happened to Mrs. Frazer in the Australian Outback; *any* description of those events, including either hers or Ondaatje's, constitutes discourse. The degree to which the discourse adheres to the story provides the source of the majority of narrative effects.

A third crucial element in the narrative process is the act of narration itself.[13] A communal process, requiring the participation of both sender and receiver, it relies upon convention for its inception and continuance. In conventional narrative forms the act of narration can largely be ignored, and is, but in Ondaatje's work an awareness of the narrative act is inevitable and essential

to our understanding of the texts. By repeatedly risking the continuance of the narrative process through undermining convention, he foregrounds the narrative act, and the roles of both the author and reader in that act.

The relations between these three concepts -- 'story,' 'discourse' and 'narrative act' -- form the basis for a terminological framework useful in narrative analysis. Gerard Genette perceives relations between them as falling under three general headings: "tense," "mood" and "voice."[14] "Tense" refers to temporal relations, "mood" to matters of distance or the degree to which the story is given directly, and "voice" refers to the narrative stance, the position of the narrator relative to the story. These terms are in no sense rigorously precise and a more clear grasp of their somewhat indefinite parameters will come with their specific application, but for now a brief overview of them will suffice.

As a result of the conventions derived from our shared experience of the world and other texts, we abstract from the discourse a story with its own time scheme in terms of the "order," "frequency" and "duration" of events. An analysis of narrative "tense" requires relating the time scheme of the events in story to their occurrence in discourse. Do the events occur in the same order, the same number of times and for the same length of time in both

discourse and story? If not, why not? For instance, the order of events comprising Buddy Bolden's story in Coming Through Slaughter at some point in the text become apparent, and we can compare that order in story to the very different order of their occurrence in Ondaatje's discourse. This simple exercise discloses the highly discontinuous style of narrating in the first half of the text, especially when compared to the second half. Furthermore, we discover a number of stories being developed intermittently in the first half, and shifting to become one story in the second.

Articulating the relative frequency of events requires more terms. An event which occurs once in the discourse can refer to an event which occurred numerous times in the story. Genette calls this narrative device "iteration".[15] Events which occur an equal number of times in the story and discourse he terms "singulative."[16] Finally, a single event in the story that occurs a number of times in the discourse he designates as "repeating."[17] The categories of frequency -- iterative, singulative and repeating -- are not mutually exclusive, and a number of variations between them are possible as their application in the study of Ondaatje will show. For instance, the scenes between Angie D. and Billy in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid are strictly speaking singulative, yet their similarities in

wording and tone (eg. "[t]ilts back to fall" (BK, p. 16), "turns toppling slow back to the pillow" (BK, p. 21) and "leans back waving feet at me" (BK, p. 25)) suggests the possibility of viewing them as either iterative or repeating. This ambiguity suggests the way in which Billy, the narrator, views separate events, namely by abstracting their similarities and trying to ignore the changes, creating a cyclic or repetitious view of temporality.

Determining relative duration, or narrative speed, proves to be a more complex matter. As Genette says, the only temporality in discourse is what it borrows from the act of reading, the time it takes to read a sentence or paragraph.[16] In determining story time we approximate how much time would be required for an event to occur in the empirical world, and relate this to an approximation of how much time is required to read of the event in discourse. Genette proposes four hypothetical degrees of relationship between discourse time and story time: the "descriptive pause" signifies a block of discourse which does not indicate any temporal progress in the story; at the other end of the scale is the "ellipsis," wherein temporal progress in the story occurs with very little or no discourse; in between there is the "dramatic scene," wherein discourse time approximates story time, and "summary," wherein the time it takes to read of an event in

discourse is notably less than the time required for the event to occur in story. Thus a scale classifying the variations in narrative speed looks like this:

Descriptive pause	--	DT=n, ST=0
Dramatic scene	--	DT = ST
Summary	--	DT < ST
Ellipsis	--	DT=0, ST=n^{19}

Generally, conventional narrative follows a pattern of a succession of dramatic scenes connected by passages of summary. Ondaatje, however, fully exploits the possibilities of narrative speed. Ellipsis more frequently occur between dramatic scenes than do summaries in his work, and some narrators like Billy the Kid frequently try to stop story time and perceive events spatially, in the form of descriptive pause, as we shall find in our discussion of the barn scene in that text (BK, p. 17). However, Ondaatje does not stop there, but encourages his reader to see the analogy between space/time in story and space/time in discourse. That is, he encourages his reader to see events occurring in story as movement across space, similar to the reader's movement across discourse. The best example of this occurs at the beginning of Coming Through Slaughter, where our movement across Buddy Bolden's geography, New Orleans, in the story, parallels our movement across the lines on the page, the discourse (CTS, p. 8). The effect is to emphasize the temporality involved

in the act of reading, the traversing of the text, and through paralleling it with time in the story, lending to the narrative a sense of real time, thus confusing the conventional distinction between fiction and reality. This confusion opens the way for Ondaatje to identify himself with his character, Buddy Bolden.

The second of Genette's general terms to classify relations between story, discourse and narrative act, is "mood," which concerns the level of mediation or selection implied in the 'discourse,' the degree to which the information is given directly. Genette draws upon the relative terms "diegetic" and "mimetic" to distinguish narratives that are highly summarized (diegetic) from those which give the impression of presenting events without mediation or selection of detail (mimetic). (Of course, mimesis actually only refers to a minimum degree of diegesis, as the pure unadulterated representation of external events in language is impossible[20]). Genette notes that the degree to which the story is given directly is inversely proportional to the narrator's presence in the narrative.[21] We determine the "perspective" of the narrator through a set of terms related to point-of-view.

Apart from the familiar distinctions between first and third person narratives, Genette distinguishes different types of "focalization." The term "non-focalized," which I take

to identify something similar to the more familiar term 'omniscient narration,' indicates a narrative in which the narrator knows more than his characters, in which his perspective is essentially unlimited. An "externally focalized" narrative is one in which the narrator knows less than his characters, where he has no direct access to the characters' inner lives, including their thoughts, feelings and motivations. Finally, a narrative in which the narrator's knowledge is equal to the characters', in which point-of-view is strictly limited to that of one or more characters, is termed "internal focalization".** In Ondaatje's work, as usual, pure examples of the conventions of narrative mood are rare, which contributes to the effect of disorientation the reader often experiences. An obvious example of the kind of mixing of focalizations found in his work occurs in the often cited passage in Billy the Kid where Billy views the moments before his death from the roof of the building he is actually inside of (BK, p. 46). Here Ondaatje without warning slides the internally focalized narrative over to an externally focalized perception, suggesting Billy's desire to escape from the limitations of internal focalization in order to articulate more objectively and accurately, which is a characteristic of Billy's that becomes increasingly familiar in our reading of the text.

Narrative "voice" comprises the last and most subtle classification of the relations between story, discourse and narrative act. I admit here to some distortion of Genette's terms in this classification, which results partially from a difficulty with his distinctions and partially from a desire to simplify the terms and make them more serviceable in a discussion of Ondaatje's work. Genette offers four terms for referring to the relationship between the "narrative instance," or the time at which the act of narration occurs, and the time of occurrence of the event narrated, or story. These are: subsequent narration -- referring to the conventional or classical past tense narrative in which the narrative instance is subsequent to the whole story; prior narration -- which predicts future events, thus locating the narrative instance prior to the story; simultaneous narration -- which is simply present tense narration in which the narrative instance and the narrative event are simultaneous; interpolated narration -- in which the narrative instance varies throughout the narrative.[22] The latter instance presents the most difficulty and Ondaatje utilizes it most, thereby foregrounding the narrative instance in the narrative and rendering it indefinite at the same time. Thus in the passage in Coming Through Slaughter where Buddy Bolden first assumes the position of narrator, "[b]lack then, Webb,

there was the world of Joseph's shaving parlor (CTS, p. 47), the narrative instance is rendered ambiguous. The passage begins with the past tense, subsequent narration, and soon moves into the present tense, or simultaneous narration. The change in narrative instance renders the narrator's closing statement, "my slavery *here*," ambiguous. We wonder where?

Narrative "voice" also concerns narrative levels, or the embedding of narratives within narratives, here termed "intradiegetic" and "extradiegetic".[24] The diegetic universe, the world created in a narrative, whether intra or extra, has both temporal and spatial parameters. Thus a narrator can speak about himself or another in a time and/or place from which he is absent, locating the narrative instance in the extradiegetic, or he can speak from within the time and place narrated, locating the narrative instance in the intradiegetic. In the scene in Coming through Slaughter where Bolden and Tom Pickett fight (CTS, p. 70-75), the fight scene constitutes the intradiegetic or embedded narrative. However, the context of the narration of that scene is Webb's meeting with Pickett in the room full of flies, making what we call the extradiegetic. Further, if the narrator speaks about himself his narration is "homodiegetic" and if he speaks about another character it is "heterodiegetic." Thus we

can distinguish four possible narrative stances:

> extradiegetic/heterodiegetic -- the traditional stance in which the narrator tells someone else's story from which he is absent.
>
> extradiegetic/homodiegetic -- narrator tells his own story from outside the diegetic universe.
>
> intradiegetic/heterodiegetic -- narrator tells someone else's story from within the diegetic universe.
>
> intradiegetic/homodiegetic -- narrator tells his own story from within the diegetic universe.[25]

These delineations of narrative stance, though sometimes awkward, prove particularly useful in the analysis of the complex narrative structure in Coming Through Slaughter.

We have now the basics of a theory or grid through which we can analyze narrative structure in Ondaatje's work. As to the perhaps objectionable proliferation of terminology, I adopt Gerard Genette's reasoning:

> The "grid" which is so disparaged is not an instrument of incarceration, of bringing to heel, or of pruning that in fact castrates: it is a procedure of discovery, a way of describing.[26]

In the analysis of Ondaatje's narratives we discover he exploits and undermines narrative convention as it is outlined in Genette's terminological framework. He thus draws attention to the narrative process itself, and compels us as readers to self-consciously participate with the characters and author in the process of ordering an ambiguous and paradoxical experience.

Chapter Two

The Man with Seven Toes

The Man with Seven Toes constitutes Michael Ondaatje's first major narrative. Like "Peter," an earlier experiment in the possibilities of narrative, it is a series of short, imagistic lyrics that tend to stand as well on their own as they do together. In fact, the design of the book, with its broad pages, visually emphasizes the independence of the poems. The poems themselves tend to contain short flashes of imagery or meaning, resembling photographs or paintings hung in a series. Nevertheless, any inclination to read the poems as separate and independent is balanced by our awareness of a subtle continuity running through the text.

In an interview, Ondaatje describes the kind of structure he was attempting in The Man with Seven Toes:

> I guess the book was influenced in a lot of ways, though not in theme, by Phyllis Webb's Naked Poems,[1] somewhere she talks about a narrative form as a kind of necklace in which each bead-poem while being related to others in the string was nevertheless self sufficient, independent, lyrical.[2]

We might suspect that the "beads" and the "string," rather than working together in any cohesive way, would each serve to undermine the other's tendencies. Perceiving the text as a collection of independent lyrics would require our

suppressing those effects which suggest continuity. On the other hand, perceiving the lyrics as forming together a cohesive whole requires overcoming the tendency of the lyrics to fragment into complete, independent units. Reading the text becomes a process of discovering, or perhaps imposing, order in a collection of lyrics that while subtly encouraging a cohesive interpretation, resist and constantly threaten to break apart again. This conflict, or ambiguity (essentially one of genre), built into the structure of The Man with Seven Toes, contributes to the overall sense of flux or uncertainty that we get in the text.

Sam Solecki, in his discussion on form in The Man with Seven Toes, addresses the difficulty of perceiving the text as a cohesive whole.[3] He explores the form of the text primarily with an eye to imagery and texture, finding that "echoes and parallels" in phrases and images "create a common ground or structure --even the possibility of an unsuspected metaphysical order -- underlying the separate lyrics." However, he notes that although as we read we discover through a kind of "montage" effect an order, it is ambiguous and "avoids becoming a constricting grid."[4] He finds that the structure built around imagery and metaphor pulls the reader towards a static spatial apprehension of the reality depicted, but one with unresolvable ambiguities, one that fragments when we examine the text as

a whole and discover the contradictions. The resulting discomfort for the reader roughly parallels that of the heroine, the anonymous woman, in the poems:

> In The Man with Seven Toes... it is the form as well as the content that pushes the reader into the unfamiliar ground of the work to the point that his reading of the sections of the text becomes roughly analogous to what is happening in the story... [and] demands the reader's active participation as an interpreter of a reality that is often not only ambiguous but even chaotic.[5]

However, while Solecki astutely cites ambiguities and discontinuities in the text, and also the tendency of the work to draw the reader into coming to terms with these difficulties, he says little or nothing of what the "reader's active participation" contributes to the narrative. How is our awareness of our participation significant? Perhaps answering this question requires our becoming more sensitive to what Solecki calls "the tenuous narrative line."

Roland Barthes puts forth a theory on the general operations of narrative which aptly applies to Ondaatje's work. He says that narrative is the working out of a "logic" that is "exposed, risked and satisfied." This working out is "a process of becoming."[6] Such a process strikes me as not too dissimilar from Ondaatje's "moving to the clear,"[7] the difference being that Barthes is referring to narrative as a recreation of the process, while Ondaatje

is referring to the lyric as "exposing" the logic and freezing it in mid-process. In both cases, the end of the process, whether it be a logic "satisfied" or the achievement of intellectual clarity, implies a static apprehension of the content, or cohesion. In The Man with Seven Toes the individual lyrics *imply* "a process of becoming" while the continuity developed through narrative convention *enacts* the process. Enacting a process in itself implies temporality, and in Seven Toes that enactment provides the continuity which "strings" the "bead-poems" together. Solecki, it seems to me, ignores the temporal aspect of narrative, which is intrinsic not only to the "story," but to the narrative act as well. This omission precludes the possibility of discovering order to be, at least partially, a temporal phenomenon, which I take to be central to Ondaatje's poetic vision.

Solecki finds in the opening lyrics of the narrative "no temporal, spatial or syntactical continuity." Of the first lyric he says, "The character and the scene are isolated in space -- 'desert and pale scrub' -- and time."[8] Yet the content to some extent suggests an adherence to narrative convention:

> the train hummed like a low bird
> over the rails, through
> desert and pale scrub,
> air spun in the carriages.

She moved to the doorless steps
where wind could beat her knees.
When they stopped for water she got off
sat by the rails on the wrist thick stones.

The train shuddered, then wheeled away from her.
She was too tired even to call.
Though come back, she murmured to herself.
(ST, p. 9)

At the risk of stating the obvious, each time "she" is mentioned in the above poem, we assume it is the same person, and each action has a causal link with the other actions: she is on a train and when it stops she gets off, then is left behind. Through convention Ondaatje leads us to believe in the consistency of the existents (characters, items of setting), in this case "she" in "desert and pale scrub," through a series of events.

The principles of connection and coherence assumed in the first poem at the level of 'naturalized convention,' that is convention so familiar it is no longer consciously noted, continue in the next poem. It is not too much to assume that the same person from the opening lyric falls asleep, and then awakes: "She woke and there was a dog / sitting on her shoulder"(ST, p. 10). Regardless of the narrator's process of selecting details, there is here in the first two poems sufficient cause for the assumption of "story." Granted, much is left out of the discourse, but in the rebuilding of a continuity in the story from a fragmented discourse, the reader actively participates in a

narrative process. However, in making assumptions based on naturalized convention we, as readers, participate at an almost subconscious level.

Ondaatje jolts us into awareness of our participation when in the fourth poem he undermines narrative convention by changing the identity of the narrator without warning or seeming acknowledgement: " [the natives] laughed, / then threw / the red dress back at *me*."(ST, p. 12, my italics) This shift throws into doubt our previous assumptions of consistency. We are forced to re-evalute and in the process discern the shift may actually occur between the second poem ("she woke and there was a dog...") and third poem ("entered the clearing and they turned..."), where the identity of the missing pronoun before the verb "entered," which narrative convention might have previously led us to assume to be "she," becomes doubtful. Thus the shift in point-of-view, clearly indicated by the use of the pronoun "me" in the fourth poem, throws into doubt our subconscious assumptions maintained throughout the first three poems, and leads us into an awareness of those assumptions and the narrative process instigated by them. Clearly, undermining narrative convention simultaneously risks and foregrounds the narrative process.

However, more than an obvious shift in pronouns marks the transition occurring in the opening four poems. A

shift from "external" to "internal focalization" also occurs. The first and second poems, where the train leaves the woman and she later follows the dog, could easily be rewritten in the first person without significantly changing the sense. The difference between the narrative in the first two poems and that which follows is the increasing emphasis on the women's response to her situation. In the second poem Ondaatje provides no indication of how the woman thinks or feels about her situation, he simply states that situation:

> She woke and there was a dog
> sitting on her shoulder
> doing nothing, not even looking at her
> but out over the land.
>
> She lurched and it sauntered
> feet away and licked its penis
> as if some red flower in the desert.
> She looked away but everything around her was empty.
>
> Sat for an hour.
> Then the dog moved and she followed,
> flies prancing at her head.
>
> (ST, p. 10)

Ondaatje as narrator situates the woman in proximity to the dog and in relation to the desert while a specified "hour" passes. By thus locating her in space and time he provides us as readers with a point of reference in the story. Furthermore, the narrator is essentially transparent, emphasizing the story and not his discourse. The language

is more metonymic than metaphoric; the only live metaphor is introduced with the explanatory "as if," suggesting the narrator's not wishing to confuse the story's events with his depiction of them. Thus we gain a clear view of the heroine's actions and her location, the story's existents and events, as well as our relation to them, without noticeable intervention from the narrator.

However, in the third poem the language becomes much more terse and metaphorical, while also providing less indication of the woman's location spatially and temporally:

> entered the clearing and they turned
> faces scarred with decoration
> feathers, bones, paint from clay
> pasted, skewered to their skin.
> Fanatically thin,
> black ropes of muscle. (ST, p. 11)

The effect is a shift from an emphasis on story to an emphasis on discourse, a shift from emphasis on what is seen to how it is seen, from external to internal focalization, which results in the increased prominence of the narrator. The discourse in fact obscures the story and thereby, as readers, our point of reference. Thus, coinciding with the change in narrator, a shift that undermines the narrative process, is the growing prominence of the narrator. As we become aware of the narrative process and our role in it, we also become aware of the

narrator, and through the clouding of our view of the story as well as our point of reference, participate in her disorientation.

Our participation occurs at the level of narrative act, in the act of reading. The shift away from an emphasis on story induces us to seek from the increasingly discontinuous discourse the continuance of a coherent story line. This participation in the process of ordering, paralleling the woman's situation of being lost, is a temporal activity. Thus time in the narrative act parallels time in the story. However, as our location both temporally and spatially in the story grows more indefinite, we gain a sense of moving in time and being lost in time simultaneously; events occur with seeming randomness, without the order of time. In the next series of poems the coherent story line we saw in the earlier poems fades to the point where no temporal connection exists:

> not lithe, they move
> like sticklebacks,
> you hear toes
> crack with weight,
> elbows sharp as beaks
> grey pads of knees. (ST, p. 13)

We have here a description of an ongoing situation, given in the present tense. The use of the present tense, or in

Genette's terms "simultaneous" narration, locates the narrative instance within the scope of the events narrated, but as the events are ongoing the narrative instance remains indeterminate. Thus, although time passes, we as readers participating in the search for coherent order based on the story line, are effectively losing that sense of order.

The next two poems, following after this loss of the order of time, are likewise without temporal location. The first poem describes the rape of the woman and the second a ritualistic dance. In them, the foregrounding of the narrative process, instigated by the undermining of convention, intensifies, while the increased undermining of convention through increased discontinuity, threatens that narrative process. A tension builds as the discontinuity in discourse threatens to destroy the continuity between the poems, the continuity derived from our awareness of a story line. The weakening of the continuity between the poems emphasizes the structural ambiguity built into the text, the conflict between the "beads" and the "string." The sequence of poems thus threatens to fragment into individual, complete units, while we, as readers, strive to hold them together by providing some kind of order. As the order offered by a continuity in story line fails, and as the emphasis increasingly tips over onto the side of

discourse, an alternative spatial order derived from imagery and metaphor seems to offer itself. The tension between conflicting perceptions builds to the point of explosion, which occurs in the release of the discourse from the story line, the relinquishing of a temporal reference in story, to enable a spatial articulation in discourse:

> goats black goats, balls bushed in the centre
> cocks rising like birds flying to you reeling on you
> and smiles smiles as they ruffle you open
> spill you down, jump and spill over you
> white leaping like fountains in your hair
> your head and mouth till it dries
> and tightens your face like a scar
> Then up to cook a fox or whatever, or goats
> goats eating goats heaving the bodies
> open like purple cunts under ribs, then tear
> like to you a knife down their pit, a hand in the warm
> the hot boiling belly and rip
> open and blood spraying out like dynamite
> caught in the children's mouths on the ground
> laughing collecting it in their hands
> or off to a pan, holding blood like gold
> and the men rip flesh tearing, the muscles
> nerves green and red still jumping
> stringing them out, like you
>
> (ST, p. 16)

The shift to spatial articulation is made possible by a complex change in narrative voice. The woman, the narrator, separates herself from her environment, begins to perceive herself as a distinct entity articulating her experience. We see this in her repeated reference to herself as "you." Thus we have an apparent shift from an intradiegetic narration to an extradiegetic narration, in

that the woman disassociates her self from the diegetic universe of the story. She, in fact, makes a conscious separation of her discourse from story, as the repeated introduction of metaphor with "like" indicates, showing her awareness of the distinction between reality and her depiction of it, and her need to distance herself from her story and rewrite it in a way that allows her some immunity from it. But also we have a shift from subsequent narration to simultaneous narration, in that the use of the present tense indicates that the narrative instance is simultaneous with the events. The coinciding of a separation of narrator and character -- a separation of discourse and story -- with a shift to simultaneous narration, tips the emphasis over onto the side of discourse to the point that the story almost becomes incidental.[39] Thus we see her disregard for the facts of the story: "[t]hen up to cook a fox or whatever, or goats...". She manipulates the story to fit the pattern of discourse, attempting to give the temporal chaos of her experience in story a spatial order in discourse.

The woman relates two events spatially in discourse, a rape followed by a ritualistic sacrifice, which significantly show similarities to the previous two poems. These two events, however, unlike the earlier two, connect with one another through a proliferation of echoes in

metaphor, imagery and phrasing, as well as through their proximity spatially on the page. Nevertheless, the temporality implied in story as well as the temporality of the narrative act, which Ondaatje has made us aware of, conflicts with the attempted spatial, metaphoric apprehension of events. The woman cannot deny the temporality in her environment, for it will not succumb to static spatial interpretation, and therefore the process is unending, as the absence of a period at the end of the passage suggests. The explosion in violence and exuberance in the passage derives from the frantic and futile attempt to spatially nail down a sequence of events. She attempts to articulate a position for herself in a chaotic reality, a position relative to her environment, but a static ordered position which is impossible to achieve.

Her attempt almost succeeds. Through metaphor and a distancing of herself from her story the woman as narrator develops a conceptual framework in which to articulate the violence and chaos of her experience. That articulation to some extent gives her control over the violence, the story, and she achieves a sense of order that, although uncertain and ambiguous, provides a tentative point of reference:

> and put their heads in
> and catch quick quick come on
> COME ON! the heart still beating
> shocked into death, and catch the heart still running

> in their hard quiet lips and eat it alive
> alive still in their mouths throats still beating Bang
> still! BANG in their stomachs (ST, p. 16)

The word "still" is rendered ambiguous in all its occurrences in this context, through having both temporal and spatial connotations, meaning both 'continuing' and 'not moving.' Mrs. Frazer thus expresses through the image of eating the heart alive a need to capture movement, and thereby expresses a reality in a constant state of flux that will not completely succumb to that need. She achieves a point of reference in the 'here and now' that transgresses traditional boundaries between fact and fiction, creating a shifting conceptual structure without absolutes:

> at night the wind
> shakes in your head
> picks sweat off your body
>
> yards away, they
> buck out the night
>
> The sky raw and wounded (ST, p. 17)

She percieves herself in the second person reference to her experience, she perceives "they" at some distance away from herself "at night," and then there is the sky "raw and wounded," a projection of her own pained but accepting response to her environment. The important point however is that she has tentatively located herself in that chaotic environment.

As we, as readers, participate in the woman's dislocation in the earlier poems, we also now participate in her sense of relocation in the here and now. The combination of the loss of a point of reference in the story line with the shift to a simultaneous narration of a particular sequence of events evokes the sense of being in the here and now, a position relative to our location in the traversing of the foregrounded discourse. The here and now is articulated by relating temporal events spatially, through metaphor and imagery, while still acknowledging the temporal aspect of that relating. Ordering becomes a temporal movement through space; time orders space and space orders time. As the discourse breaks away from the story line, the connection between where we are now and where the narrative began, beside the tracks after the train left, gives way. At the same time, the sense of certainty that such a connection offers is lost. Thus, instead of relating where we are now in the narrative act to our position in the story, we are compelled into the inverse position of relating that story to our position in the narrative act. This means we must relate the story to the temporal movement of the narrative act, an ontological position without foundation, which renders the conventions of story uncertain. Ondaatje thus compels us to accept a fluctuating and uncertain reality, in which coherence

exists as a movement within a vaguely articulated and shifting web suspended in chaos.

As we readers escape from our conventional notions of narrative and achieve the sense of location in the present, the woman escapes from the natives. With the help of a convict, someone escaping from civilization, she finds her way back to civilization. Meanwhile, a vague sense of the story line returns to the narrative: events occur from lyric to lyric which, although surprising, are temporally and spatially located. Mrs. Frazer and the convict spend days and nights in a journey across streams, through swamp and trees, until they finally move into the plain and along a river.

Although the return of the story line suggests a return to convention, that convention continues to be undermined by changes in the identity of the narrator:

> he had tattoos on his left hand
> a snake with five heads
> the jaws waiting
> his fingernails chipped tongues;
> crossing a stream
> he steadied her elbow
> and she tensed body
> like a tourniquet to him. (ST, p. 21)

Ondaatje apparently narrates here, but unlike his narrative at the beginning of the text, now there is a different focalization. As narrator he is more prominent, registering through metaphor and imagery his reaction to

the story, emphasizing the discourse but not losing sight of the story. In fact, this kind of focalization -- in Genette's terms internal focalization -- remains constant throughout the remainder of the text, regardless of who narrates. Thus, there occurs no change in focalization in the next poem, although we find there is a change in the narrator:

> in grey swamp
> warm as blood, thick
> with moving. Flesh
> round our thighs like bangles.
> Teeth so sharp, it was later
> he found he'd lost toes,
> the stumps sheer
> as from ideal knives. (ST, p. 22)

It would seem the fluctuations in the identity of the narrator enact a melding of points of view, where different points of view maintain the same focalization. Thus, the movement towards conventionality in the tense relations between story and discourse coincides with a movement towards a constant vision of reality. The effect is a sense of moving toward coherence or intellectual clarity.

Yet in spite of this emergent sense of clarity we are still aware of the shifts in point of view, and of subtle shifts in narrative instance, as the above poem shows. The absence of not only the subject at the beginning of the poem, but the verb as well, renders the narrative instance

indefinite. If such an ellipsis suggests anything, it is that of immediacy, a sense of present tense or simultaneous narration. Yet in the third sentence of the poem the narrative instance turns out to be an imperfect form of subsequent narration: "...it was later / he found he'd lost toes... ." In other words we have a form of interpolated narration. A clear instance of this occurs in another poem:

> lost my knife. Threw the thing at a dog
> and it ran away, the blade in its head.
> Sometimes I don't believe what's going on.
> (ST P. 27)

The narrator clearly narrates the event subsequent to its occurrence, but when is not clear. The concluding comment suggests the narrative instance exists within the journey back to civilization, rather than outside that journey, thus rendering the narrative instance, like the narrator in this passage, indefinite.

If we pause now to summarize the narrative patterns developing throughout the text we detect a merging and dilation occurring in the latter half. The text begins with a transparent narrator offering a clear view of story, then shifts to a more prominent narrator who obscures the story and thus moves the emphasis onto discourse. After the apocalyptic rape and sacrifice, the text gives us a narrator who changes back and forth between the woman and

Ondaatje, while the story becomes more prominent without submerging our awareness of discourse. The narrators in a sense become indistinguishable, meld into one, while the story and discourse achieve a kind of balance in which neither is more emphasized. Coinciding with these patterns is the initial and clear subsequent narrative instance, which shifts to the simultaneous narrative instance in the rape scene, followed by an interpolated narrative instance. Meanwhile, in the process of reading the text, we detect the conventions of narrative in the beginning and develop from them a story line which grows so obscure we have to relinquish it. We develop a conception of the here and now, and then move with the woman through her experiences on her return to civilization. The overriding effect of these converging patterns is a sense of a loss of certainty, the growing insignificance of point of view, and a sense of traversing space, the text, while experiencing more and more directly the woman's experience as our own.

In the process of moving through the text we develop a sense of continuity between the poems that is not based upon a clear story line, but upon a process of discursive ordering both spatially and temporally. We maintain throughout a sense of our participation in the process of ordering, our participation temporally in connecting a collection of disparate verses together. In the latter

portion of the narrative this sense grows increasingly intense as the narrators seem to drop away; better still perhaps, we merge with them, and there is a simultaneous movement towards coherence. The achievement of our goal appears in sight when we arrive back in civilization and at the end of our journey:

> She slept in the heart of the Royal Hotel
> Her burnt arms and thighs
> soaking the cold off the sheets.
> She moved fingers onto the rough skin,
> traced obvious ribs, the running heart,
> sensing herself like a map, then
> lowering her hands into her body.
>
> In the morning she found pieces of a bird
> chopped and scattered by the fan
> blood sprayed onto the mosquito net,
> its body leaving paths on the walls
> like red snails that drifted down in lumps.
> (ST, p. 41)

Sam Solecki notes that here "the narrative closes with the ambiguous and densely allusive poem whose almost every image echoes some image or situation occurring earlier."[16] These echoes give the impression of the imagery taking on a coherent form, or of the narrative's logic "being satisfied," or as Solecki puts it a sense of "some kind of summarizing judgement upon the story." The sense of impending closure, and the reference through "echoes" back to the events of the narrative, give the illusion of arrival at the point of coherence and order in the text. A

static apprehension of the narrative's content seems for the first time within reach as the narrative slows:

> She could imagine the feathers
> while she had slept
> falling around her
> like slow rain. (ST, p. 41)

The slowing, calming effect of this image, however gruesome the bird's death, evokes the sense of arriving, concluding.

The last poem provides the real sense of closure, post-narrative summation, and at the same time causes an awareness of order as illusion. The final stanza in the poem oversimplifies, conventionalizes, as it attempts to capture within metaphor our temporal experience of the narrative:

> Green wild rivers in these people
> running under ice that's calm,
> God bring you all some tender stories
> and keep you from hurt and harm
> (ST, p. 42)

It hardly does the story justice. Rather, it reflects ironically on our need for the illusion of order. While it may be the end of the process of ordering, it eliminates too much to be satisfactory. The sense of cohesion it attempts fails: the narrative remains an ambiguous sequence of disparate fragments, the order of which can only be tentatively grasped in the temporal process of traversing the text.

Through undermining convention Ondaatje forces us into an awareness of our role in the process of ordering the text, in the process of fictionalizing. He forces us to relinquish the certainty of a clear story line or image structure, and accept a shifting, tentative order that derives from the process of ordering in the reading of the text. After the conclusion, the text remains a series of independent lyrics resisting cohesion. The sense of movement towards cohesion in our reading of the text results to a significant degree from our active ordering, from our need for order, as much as it does from any real order built into the text. The sense of order derives from the temporal movement, the act of reading, that finally after the conclusion exists as memory, a kind of dream of order, which evades precise articulation. In fact, the need for precise articulation renders up a cliche ("Green wild rivers..."), which dissolves into meaninglessness, killing the order we have been pursuing. The implicit paradox herein is developed further in Ondaatje's story of that celebrated killer, Billy the Kid.

Chapter Three

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

The first entry in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid exposes us to some of the difficulty this text presents as an interpretable discourse . The narrator, Billy, offers a list of "killed" which, like any list, in its selection of its contents reflects on the one making the list (BK, p. 6). Thus our attention is quickly drawn beyond the list to the speaker, Billy, and what the list reveals about him.

Through the act of listing, Billy seeks to show no emotional or personal involvement with the content of his list, yet that attempt is not easily maintained. The fact that these are the "killed" rather than simply the "dead," for instance, and that there seems to be no distinction between killing birds, animals or men, places a significant emphasis on the action of killing itself, an action that has been repeated twenty times. In fact, we have here the makings of a narrative: twenty actions committed over a period of time. Billy, however, wants to suppress the narrative possibility by speaking in the passive voice, saying "[t]hese are the killed." His intention is to deflate the action, the violence, by making it atemporal.

Meanwhile, we grow increasingly conscious of a tension between the temporality implied in story and the atemporal discourse, a tension which reflects Billy's anxiety. In the list of killed "[b]y them" the form cracks:

> These are the killed.
>
> (By them)-
> Charlie, Tom O'Folliard
> Angela D's split arm,
> and Pat Garrett
> sliced off my head.
> Blood a necklace on me all my life.
> (BK, p. 6)

The story breaks through in the occurrence of the active verb "sliced," and narrative form takes over. Billy's reaction is to remove himself from the scene, maintain a distance that allows him, in the final line, to regain control by masking his anxiety in irony.

Billy strives to suppress the action which will not be suppressed and in the process creates a poem that speaks the energy and violence he wishes to ignore. Or you could say, the suppression of the action becomes a final act, Billy's 21st murder, the killing of the action. Herein lies the paradox that informs the complex bundle that is The Collected Works of Billy the Kid. Yet obviously the book is more than a trick, the expansion of a paradox; it also recreates a myth, a vision of reality, and is a source of multiple interpretations. Clear evidence of this

emerges from a review of some of the critical work that has been done on the text.

Critics generally agree that Billy's need to control creates much of his difficulty. In this regard the importance of photography as a mode of perception in Billy the Kid has received considerable attention. Perry Nodelman points out the many allusions to photography in the text, drawing a parallel between the camera's ablitity to stop motion and Billy's attempts to stop his world with his gun.[1] He sees Billy acting as photographer/gunman in order not to be photographed/shot himself, but finally it is Billy's "vision of life," idealized in the figure of Pat Garrett, that kills him. Thus we see, by implication, the paradox: the need to control backfires on the controller. For Nodelman, however, Billy does not perceive the paradox, but remains unchanged throughout the text, never learning. The development in the text is not in Billy, but in the growing clarity of our image of him, as he discloses involuntarily the error of his ways.[2]

Dennis Cooley carries the photographer analogy further by providing more evidence that Ondaatje intended it as a device for understanding Billy's way of looking at his world.[3] He also argues that Ondaatje juxtaposes Billy's perception to a cinematic perception, in which reality, in its constant process of change, is more justly represented.

"Open, quick, mobile -- that's the kind of post-modern sensibility you bring to life and art."[4] He suggests that Billy is a modern hero in a post-modern world, attempting to produce clean, lifeless artifacts in a vibrant and frequently messy reality.

Both Nodelman and Cooley detect a conflict between an "intransigent" narrator and a "transient" world, a narrator at odds with the reality of his life. For them the reality depicted is Ondaatje's creation in which Billy moves while attempting to maintain control. The suggestion here is that the narrative operates on two levels: at one level Billy selects details and attempts to order them neatly, while on another Ondaatje as author demonstrates, through his presentation of the "collected" works, the knowledge that Billy lacks. They detect in the work the presence of an author who knows more than his character/narrator.

Another approach, taken by Judith Owens, more directly addresses the question of narrative.[5] Like Nodelman and Cooley, she sees Billy as attempting to control his world, but argues that he recognizes finally his powerlessness to do so. She says "[c]learly Billy desires not mere order, but unchanging, eternal order."[6] She finds in his response to his world a contradiction in that Billy attempts both to order time and stop time according "to the demands of the moment." For Billy, time is the problem, and his attempts

to control it, whether by stopping it or ordering it in narrative, inexorably lead to an awareness of his own end. Billy wishes to ignore that awareness, and thus he creates an illusion of himself as able to "rewrite his story in accordance with his desires."[7] Owens argues that the illusion gradually breaks down until Billy realizes his powerlessness, "which frees the narrative line" and brings about the conclusion. Billy's acceptance of his inability to control time permits the passage of time to take over, providing finally a kind of order for Billy, but also, inevitably, his death. For Owens, Billy develops and changes through the narrative, grows from having an exaggerated sense of self importance to accepting his role in the true order of things. Again, we have the implied distinction between author and narrator, only in Owen's view the structure of the text shows a development on the part of the narrator which finally permits his awareness of what the author knew all along.

Nodelman, Cooley and Owens imply some degree of certainty can be drawn from the text. In fact, they demonstrate a need to order not too unlike Billy's. J. M. Kertzer to some extent relates that need on the part of the reader to his understanding of the text, suggesting that with Billy we share in that need, and like Billy never experience its fulfillment.[8] Finally the ambiguous reality

depicted in the text is a result of that need. He finds a balance in the work built out of a central paradox of "death and dying." He observes that all categories and concepts break down; what at first seem to be "strict oppositions" soon "break apart as the imagery shifts and fuses."[9] In this world Billy vainly attempts "self-definition," and his failure permits his character to pass over into legend, where there is no "attempt to sort out the contradictions of his life because [legend] incorporates and is nourished by them." Billy, for Kertzer, is finally human and "representative of man generally." For Kertzer Billy accurately represents the conflict that is his life, developing through his selection of detail "a debate he conducts within his divided self." Meanwhile, throughout, "Michael Ondaatje, as poet, participates in this process."[10]

As readers, our participation in the process is evoked through a structural ambiguity in some ways similar to The Man with Seven Toes. In Billy the Kid the text is again discontinuous, fragmented and generally unconventional. However, Billy the Kid goes further than Seven Toes in its mixing of genres. Within the text we find snatches of narrative prose, poems, poetic meditations, quotations from source material, and photographs, as well as excerpts from an interview and a comic book. In terms of developing the

reader's expectations there is little encouragement in any one direction. Yet, as readers, we do have expectations, but they derive as much from our previous knowledge of the outlaw folk hero, Billy the Kid (and from other texts), as they do from this text. We bring to the text a sketchy awareness of who Billy the Kid was, and seek clarification. Ondaatje nicely suggests he intends to deliver this clarification by inserting the blank frame at the beginning of the text, a snapshot to be developed as we read. However, rather than offering an image, the text evokes through the narrative act a movement, the mind of Billy trying to bring order to his world, which parallels our movement as readers trying to bring order to the text. Inevitably we both fail, but in the process Ondaatje compels us to enter into Billy's game and participate directly in the paradox of his experience. My contention is that Ondaatje and humankind generally share Billy's need for order in a chaotic universe, and it is the exercising of that need which produces the vision of reality enacted in the text. In fact, Ondaatje through manipulation of narrative convention dissolves any boundaries or distinctions between Billy's experience of the world and our own. An analysis of narrative in the text, I believe, bears out this view.

Temporal Isolation

In one narrative segment Billy tells of a week he spent in a barn recovering from a fever (BK, pp. 20-21). The most significant feature on the first page of this narrative segment is the apparent disregard for the temporal relations between the events. Billy begins by carefully articulating the setting, place taking precedence over action. All verbs on the first page except four are in the past tense, and there is a preponderance of the verb 'to be,' as well as other verbs which more accurately depict a state than an action: stayed, held, hung and so on. Further, the action that is mentioned is given no temporal order. Not until the third paragraph, after the setting has been developed, are we told that he "had arrived," the choice of the imperfect tense doing nothing to clarify the temporal ambiguity. It can be assumed that an event or series of events has taken place in a particular order, yet there are almost no clues as to what that order is. All the action and states take place within a week, but we do not know for any of them at what point during the week or how many times or for how long. The week is being perceived more spatially than temporally; the events, separated from any temporal continuity sit in the space of the week like furniture in a room, which Billy arranges to suit his preference. Through this spatial

perception of the week, instigated by a fever, Billy, like a photographer, can arrange the content of the image.

Billy's discourse suppresses any temporal order in the story, yet convention tells us that the week must have a temporal order, and must have a location within the chronology of Billy's life. Even Billy suggests an awareness of that which he omits, through his frequent and unusual references to the periphery of his neatly ordered scene. For instance, he remarks on "the thirty or so grey cans in one corner of the room, their ellipsis, from where I sat, setting up patterns in the dark"(P.17). That he refers to the "ellipsis" of the cans is peculiar; the term generally refers to that which is not articulated, that part of the story that is left out of the discourse. The "setting up" suggests some activity in the "ellipsis" on the periphery, where "patterns" take shape. Also, the only four present active verbs on the first page of the scene all refer to this periphery: the "magnifying" in the room above him, the "setting up" in the corner, the "lighting" from out the window, and the "killing" of plants which "grow at the door."

The first three actions can easily be interpreted as implying the actions of a photographer; thus Billy as photographer adjusts the frame of his image of the week, while attempting to suppress the intervention of reality

from outside that frame. Billy's discourse distorts the reality by omitting the temporal connections between the events and temporally isolating them within the continuity of his life, thus diminishing the possibility of motion or change, just as he is "killing" the plants which "grow at the door."

Through our awareness of convention and through Billy's references to the periphery of his environment we gain a growing sense of the kind of deformity Billy creates on this, the first page, of the barn scene. A degree of tension arises between the implied temporality of the story and Billy's attempt to disregard that temporality in discourse. Thus when Billy feels himself to be secure enough to cope with temporality, as though sensing his footing is secure enough to take another step along the narrative line, he turns his attention to the rats in the next granary, that "ellipsis" or non-articulated area beyond the frame of his carefully constructed image. But the scene explodes chaotically and he frantically tries to maintain order:

> And in the barn next to us there was another granary, separated by just a thick wood door. In it a hundred or so rats, thick rats, eating and eating the foot deep pile of grain abandoned now and fermenting so that at the end of my week, after a heavy rain storm burst the power in those seeds and brought drunkeness into the minds of those rats, they abandoned the sanity of eating the food before them and turned on each other...
> (BK, p. 18)

The sanity of the week is lost, the order Billy imposed on his environment in discourse breaks down as the rats "came through that door" shattering the calm. The controlled sentence structure of the previous page frees; the whole violent episode grows into one long running sentence with a preponderance of active verbs. Also the narrative becomes chronological, is given a beginning, "at the end of my week," and follows through moment by moment until "no other animal of any kind remained in that room." The introduction of drunken rats into Billy's stable environment brings about chaos and a shift in emphasis from discourse to story.

In Genette's terms, Billy takes what would conventionally be a "summary," the events of a week related in one page, and makes it, through perceiving the events of the week on a spatial plane, a "descriptive pause" in the narrative flow. In effect he suspends the narrative. When he allows it to move again, as he begins a "dramatic" presentation "at the end of [his] week," he almost loses control as the story threatens to overwhelm his ability to articulate. This conflict between story and discourse reflects a deeper conflict, and confusion, between diegetic levels.

Descriptive pause necessarily implies a narrative context, yet in this case that context is not easily determined. We are concerned here with matters of

narrative stance and Ondaatje undermines any easy interpretation. We have essentially a narrative embedded within a narrative: Billy narrates an episode in his past, in the intradiegetic mode, from a position in a larger narrative, in the extradiegetic mode. Yet we have no clear temporal context for either the embedded narrative, the week in the barn, nor for the narrative instance. Traditionally, there would be one or the other. Either the act of recollecting would be clearly located within a larger narrative, or the recollection itself would be located within a larger recollection. This temporal isolation at both narrative levels compels us as readers to relinquish, as we did in Seven Toes, any sure temporal terms of reference in the story: in terms of story we can locate exactly neither the intradiegetic nor the extradiegetic levels. Our temporal reference therefore derives from our location in the act of reading, our position in the traversing of the text, our 'here and now.' We are forced to relinquish any ontological foundations a conventional story line might provide and accept a situation relative to Billy's wherein the chaos on the periphery of the here and now constantly threatens our peace of mind. Billy's response to this threat is to isolate, put borders around the 'here and now' and separate it from the continuity of his life. Paradoxically, his

attempt at peace of mind results in the loss of the order and certainty he so desperately wants. All he has is the here and now, his position in the narrative act, which he attempts to clarify by viewing it spatially, making of it a conceptually coherent structure from which he can face the continuity of his life, an ontological foundation to move on from. But because it is a distortion of reality, a suppression of temporality, it explodes when he moves on and actually confronts his reality outside the neatly ordered island.

The way in which Billy's week in the barn, forming the intradiegetic, affects his recollection of that week, the extradiegetic, confuses the conventional boundary between the world *of* which he tells and the world *in* which he tells. This confusion is compounded by the temporal isolation of both the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic. In effect the two narrative levels merge and shape one another to the point that distinguishing between them becomes difficult. The past and present merge in the here and now, isolated from any contextual reference. It is this here and now, a mixture of past and present, that Billy attempts to order, and which explodes when he moves from that illusion of order into the world outside. The disintegration of order occurs at both narrative levels simultaneously.

Billy restores calm in the intradiegetic by killing the rats, the vitality that disrupts his image, and he restores calm in the extradiegetic by separating himself as narrator from himself as character in the intradiegetic:

> Till my hand was black and the gun was hot and no other animal of any kind remained in that room but for *the boy* in the blue shirt sitting there coughing at the dust, rubbing the sweat of *his* upper lip with *his* left forearm.
> (BK, p. 18, my italics)

He shifts here from a homodiegetic/extradiegetic narrative stance to a heterodiegetic/extradiegetic narrative stance. In effect he distances himself from his past, attempts to restore that conventional distinction between past and present. Paradoxically, that distinction asserts the continuity of his life, the very process of change, that he wants to ignore. Through the process of ordering Billy achieves a vision of the world in which certainty is nowhere to be found.

As Billy creates his vision of a changing, shifting world through his need for order, we as readers participate in that creation through our need for order. We experience the merging diegetic levels resulting from the temporal isolation, and thus the sense of indefinite temporal location in the text. The shift at the end of the narrative fragment, to a third person narration, does nothing to resolve this uncertainty. In effect the shift,

more precisely from internal to external focalization, moves Billy as narrator into the role of Ondaatje as narrator/author, eliminating the traditionally assumed boundary between the fictional world of the text and the world in which Ondaatje writes and we read. The boundary between art and reality dissolves as the two worlds merge.

The Illusion of Simplicity

While Billy orders his past to allow himself a sense of order in the present, he also orders the future as an extension of his ordered past. He shows this in his thinking during a ride to the Chisum ranch:

> Forty miles ahead of us, in almost a straight line, is the house. Angela D and I on horses moving towards it, me bringing her there. Even now, this far away, I can imagine them moving among the rooms. It is nine in the morning. They are leaning back in their chairs after their slow late breakfast. (BK, p. 32)

From his position in the desert Billy anticipates his future as a selection of remembered details. The action is slow and predictable and Billy is totally in control. The scene is imagined so there is no threat of outside intervention and Billy allows himself to create as he controls; he allows the immediacy of the present tense as well as a dramatic presentation in terms of narrative speed. The scene and action unfold in neat patterns, as

Billy perceives the ordered past repeating in the future. He then suggests there may be alternative routines:

> On other days they would go their own ways. Chisum would be up earlier than dawn and gone before Sallie even woke and rolled over in bed, her face blind as a bird in the dark.
> (BK, p. 32)

He wants to account for all the possible variations while still retaining control. Thus he shifts to the imperfect tense, and to iterative narration, in order to maintain that control over this little bit of reality he lets in. The imperfect tense gives to a series of events that took place on any number of days a sense of repetition and routine. He then moves into a particular incident, showing Sallie 'what a madman's skin is,' and shifts to the past tense, thus allowing him the distance to control. Then he returns to the imperfect, continues carefully listing and recalling details, wanting a plausible version of the paradise he imagines ahead:

> No I forgot, she had stopped that now. She left the paraffin in the lamps; instead had had John build shutters for every door and window, every hole in the wall. (BK, p. 33)

He is careful to ensure that his view of the future is consistent with the past, thus allowing himself the illusion of creating a realistic version of life. Billy's memory then brings into his dream a painful incident: "Yes

I remember. After burning my legs in the fire and I came to their house..." (BK, p. 33). At first he sees the days as a series of repetitions, with him "witnessing the tides of the sun and moon taking over from each other...," while "Sallie I suppose taking the tent sheet off my legs each morning once the shutters closed" (BK, p. 34). However, Billy's desire for accuracy breaks down the iterative and he almost loses control:

> No. Again. Sallie approaching from the far end of the room like some ghost. I didn't know who it was, a tray of things in her right hand, a lamp in the other carrying them. Me screaming stop stop STOP THERE you're going to fall on me! My picture now sliding so she with her tray and her lamp jerked up to the ceiling and floated down calm again and jerked up to the ceiling and floated down calm again... (BK, p. 34)

The shift in tense, from past to present, or more accurately to a vacillation between past and present tenses, changes the narrative instance from subsequent to simultaneous, creating the effect of the story overtaking the discourse and threatening the careful ordering. The memory becomes too immediate, too real, and as a result the verbs and syntax become erratic. Billy's anticipated paradise almost cracks and as a result threatens his peace of mind in the present. He regains control by returning to the subject, the closing of the shutters, that he was at before the particularly painful recollection: "[i]n the

twenty yard living-dining room I remember the closing of the shutters." He continues from there, still in the present tense, but in control.

As Billy rides to the Chisum's he creates from fragments of memory a story that concludes in paradise, and through imagining his conclusion in this way is able to expel the anxiety in the present:

> ...the brown tanned feet of Sallie Chisum resting on my chest, my hands rubbing them, pushing my hands against them like a carpenter shaving wood to find new clear pulp smelling wood beneath. (BK, p. 35)

As in the barn scene, Billy again creates an environment that he can find peace in: a simple, coherent and ordered one that falls neatly within the bounds of his articulation. But this time it has a temporal order and allows him the illusion of being realistic. That is, until ominously "the parrot begins to talk to itself in the dark, thinking it is night."

The behaviour of the parrot foretells an inversion in Billy's paradise, and the return of his paradoxical experience. In the next scene he remembers being with John Chisum on a particular night, out to see the animals. The house is now light and the desert is dark: "we stepped off the porch, left the last pool of light, down into the dark" (BK, p. 36). As in the barn scene Billy creates an environment in which he feels a sense of control, and then

with new confidence steps further along the narrative line, this time out of the house and into the desert from which he had previously retreated. This time as well, he has the seemingly indestructible security of his created sanctuary behind him, and he moves along the narrative line, even though it is a particular memory, still controlling with ease. However, when he turns back to see the house, he now becomes aware of the shapes moving in the vast ellipsis, "silence" behind him, the desert: "only now we knew they were moving and sensing the air... ." Suddenly, "[t]he night, the dark air, made it all mad." His sanctuary becomes "a house stuffed with yellow wet light where within the frame of a window we saw a woman move carrying fire in a glass funnel and container towards the window, towards the edge of the dark where we stood" (BK, p. 37). An inversion occurs as the familiar becomes the unfamiliar. The house in which Billy found comfort and coherence now becomes strange and threatening.

In a sense Billy's turning back to the house is a turning back in his narrative. In the barn scene he returns to a previous event, remembers it spatially, and reorders it. In his imagined narrative of recovering, with the help of Sallie Chisum, from sunstroke, he recalls the last place he had control, the closing of the shutters, when the narrative threatens to get out of control. He

seeks in turning back an ontological foundation upon which he can move into the future, a rock to stand on, a foothold. This time the event becomes an image "in the frame of a window," a spatially remembered event with nowhere to grow, a concluded narrative in which the ordering is done.

We saw in The Man with Seven Toes how what pretends to be a precise articulation of the temporal order proves to be an illusion, a meaningless cliche, at the end of the narrative. As the process of ordering concludes, the order developed through that process disintegrates, and the text shatters back into the ambiguous lyric fragments of its beginning. Likewise the meaning Billy gave to the events in the Chisum house fades as he perceives them spatially, in the form of a static apprehension. There, on the edge between "seventy miles" of nothing and an image that fades and loses meaning, Billy panics. With no terms of reference his consciousness breaks down and he is only able to communicate that panic:

> bang it went was hot
> under my eye
> was hot small bang did it
> almost a pop
> I didn't hear till I was red
> had a rat fyt in my head
> sad Billy's body glancing out (BK, p. 38)

The movement to imagistic clarity, static apprehension, and

to narrative conclusion arrive finally at the same point: the end of the narrative or story and, as Billy is aware, the end of the narrator. Billy's need for order brings about the end of ordering. Clearly the paradox returns.

The Iterative Cycle

The circling back of the narrative that we have noted at the micro level also occurs within the larger narrative structure in Billy the Kid. In fact, to a considerable extent, this circling back is responsible for the discontinuous form of Billy's narrative. He returns frequently to the same incident to reorder it or to articulate more precisely. In Genette's terms this has to do with "frequency" relations between story and discourse. Ondaatje achieves the sense of circling back through utilizing "repetition" as well as a particular form of what Genette calls the "singulative" mode, where the number of times an incident occurs in discourse roughly corresponds to the number of times it occurs in the story, but where the similarity of the incidents is emphasized so that in the mind of the reader their effect is like that of the iterative mode, or a form of frequency wherein the discourse only relates an event once that in the story occurs a number of times. Genette cites these occurences as instances of the "singulative" being contaminated by the

"iterative," and therefore I will call this mixture of two forms the "singulative/iterative" form. The repeated scenes with Angie D in white rooms are this kind of singulative/iterative form. A closer look at the operations of frequency in Billy's narrative reveals the source of an important narrative effect in the text, namely the cyclic motion in Billy's experience that we have noted already at the micro level.

Before we can examine the frequency relations between story and discourse we must first roughly establish the temporal line as we perceive it in the story. The most pronounced temporal line we can abstract from the text is in the sequence which moves from the killing of Bowdre (BK, p. 22) to the capture of Billy (BK, p. 48), through the ride across the Carrizozo plains (BK, p. 76-78) to the wait for the train (BK p. 79), Billy's sentencing (BK, p. 80), the interview (BK, p. 81-84), the escape (BK, p. 86), the last night at Pete Maxwell's (BK, p. 92-93) and, finally, Billy's death (BK, p. 94-95). We are aware of this order of events through the conventions of chronological order that we bring to the discourse as well as through a knowledge of the story of the historical Billy. It provides for us a point of reference for the story Billy relates in discourse. Attached to this story are a number of subplots and events or scenes such as Garrett's story,

Angie D scenes and the evenings with the Chisums, as well as numerous meditations. The whole creates a vague sort of temporal structure that constitutes for us the story on which Billy bases his discourse.

We begin with Bowdre's death scene, which Billy tells us about twice, this first time being a false start:

> When I caught Charlie Bowdre dying
> tossed three feet by bang bullets giggling
> at me face tossed in a gaggle
> he pissing into his trouser legs in pain
> face changing like fast sunshine o my god
>
> o my god billy I'm pissing watch
> your hands
> while the eyes grew all over his body
> (BK, p. 12)

The story outpaces Billy's discourse and he cannot articulate clearly all the emotional content. He grasps for metaphor, `bang bullets giggling' and `face tossed in a gaggle'; the tense shifts back and forth from past to present in Billy's effort to slow the pace, and he finally hangs all on a final slightly more successful metaphor, "while the eyes grew all over his body." As though he is then able to catch his breath, he withdraws himself from the scene into his more meditative stance and finds a better metaphor that enables him to suppress his anxiety beneath humour:

> Jesus I never knew that did you
> the nerves shot out
> the liver running around there

> like a headless hen jerking
> brown all over the yard
> seen that too at my aunt's
> never eaten hen since then
>
> (BK, p. 22)

He tries the scene again ten pages later, and this time tightly controls the action. He carefully establishes the place and time and with short controlled sentences narrates Charlie's dying:

> January at Tivan Arroyo, called Stinking Springs more often. With me, Charlie, Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh. Snow. Charlie took my hat and went out to get wood and feed the horses. The shot burnt the clothes on his stomach off and lifted him right back in to the room. Snow on Charlie's left boot. He had taken one step out. In one hand had been an axe, in the other a pail. No guns.
>
> (BK, p. 22)

Billy is still uneasy with the incident. He begins from a full stop: the first three sentences depict a setting, like a caption for the event which follows. He then moves slowly through the description of Charlie walking to Garrett and then, at the conclusion of the narrative segment, stops again: "Snow ouside. Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh and me. No windows, the door open so we could see. Four horses outside" (BK, p. 22). He places borders around his narrative, attempting to eliminate anything external, anything temporally before and after, anything in those 'ellipses' on the edge which might jeopardize his control.

Billy returns to the incident where Bowdre dies in order to more effectively capture all the details within the bounds of his articulation. He needs to order the past before he can cope with the present. He does this by circling back, reordering, moving ahead until he is forced to stop, circle back and reinterpret again. In the first instance with Bowdre he captures the scene by aesthetically distancing himself and expressing his anxiety in humour. In the second instance he places borders around the narrative: he moves from descriptive pause into summary, then back to descriptive pause. The two descriptive pauses are very similar in terms of content, with two notable differences: in the second pause Bowdre is absent and Billy can now see outside. In a sense the movement from one pause to the next is a cyclic motion, a perception of different times with similar circumstances, the "singulative/iterative" form. By evoking this sense of analogy between the two pauses Billy expresses change while perceiving everything as remaining to some extent the same. He gains control through a cyclic motion that builds analogies between separate circumstances.

We get a better example of this singulative/iterative form in the Angie D scenes. The first time with Angie, Billy is anxious and hypersensitive:

stomach is a hollow
where the bright bush jumps
this is the first time
bite into her side leave
a string of teeth marks
she hooks in two and covers me
my hand locked
her body nearly breaking off my fingers
pivoting like machines in final speed (BK, p. 16)

His involvement in the scene makes it difficult to control: "covers me / my hand locked," and he senses everything spinning out of control. In the second incident Billy is moving away from involvement but still apprehensive: "I am very still / I take in all the angles of the room" (BK, p. 21). In the third more controlled incident Billy is less involved, more distant and Angie much less domineering:

buy a bottle and she stands
showing me her thighs
look Billy look at this
she folded on the sheet
tapping away at her knees
leans back waving feet at me
catching me like a butterfly
in the shaved legs in her Tucson room
(BK, p. 25)

The threat still exists in "catching," but lacks the anxiety of the previous scenes. She is being tamed. Billy then moves almost totally out of the scene by distancing it in a vaudevillian act that categorizes and classifies Angie (BK, p. 64). The threat of Angie's energy and control over Billy is masked in humour and poor art. Billy gains control over the emotional nature of these incidents by

routinizing them through singulative/iterative form which results in a loss of energy and vitality. The form also develops an analogy between the scenes which he continuously refines, as though developing a central metaphor to explain his life. The development of the analogy entails an aesthetic distancing: Billy gains control by interpreting the present in terms of the past, but as a result he can not fully participate in the present and must look at it from a distance; he must see it as he attempts to see the past -- as spatial and static. Thus in the last scene Angie is asleep and Billy finally has control. However, she is more like a painting and Billy sees her more aesthetically than sexually:

> She is so brown and lovely, the sun rim blending into lighter colours at her neck and wrists. The edge of the pillow in her mouth, her hip a mountain further down the bed. Beautiful ladies in white rooms in the morning. How do I wake her?
> (BK, p. 71)

The cyclic motion evoked through the use of the repetitive and singulative/iterative forms reflects Billy's coming to terms with his experience. He constantly reinterprets the past in terms of the present in the repetitive form, and the present in terms of the past in the singulative/iterative form. Gradually a similarity between all the events grows out of the cyclic motion.

Billy's cyclic enactment of his experience refines his vision of reality through establishing a point of analogy common to all his experience. Yet while he wants that certainty, that central point of analogy, he also wants to maintain the cyclic movement of his consciousness. No wonder we find him fascinated with clocks:

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

Billy's ideal is motion without change.

The Conclusion

After the taming of Angie, the narrative moves toward a sense of precise definition, towards intellectual clarity and the intensity that comes with arriving at the point of discovery. Appropriately this sense is enacted in a series of lyrics (BK, p. 72-75) which slow the story time to almost a stop, while the discourse articulates the moment. The last of these lyrics attempts to freeze the movement of the narrative process, Billy's and the readers ordering, into a static, coherent image:

> I am on the edge of the cold dark
> watching the white landscape in its frame
> a world that is so precise
> every nail and cobweb
> has magnified itself to my prescence
> (BK, p. 74)

Within the form of the lyric poem, Billy expresses the "reality" he has both discovered and created. The lyric compresses the ambiguity of his experience into its form: "...waiting for friends to come / mine or theirs..."; "...I am on the edge of the cold dark... I am on the edge of the sun..."; "...flies in their black path / like inverted stars... ." The result is a sense of shift towards stasis that speaks the paradox resident in the fact that that which it attempts to capture in image exists only as movement, is in fact its own movement towards clarity. Thus, the end of the iterative cycle is the refinement of the central paradox of Billy's experience. That which he strives to know, that which he strives to capture within the bounds of his articulation is his own striving to articulate. The cycle tightens like "pictures of great stars, / drawings which show them straining to the centre..." (BK, p. 41). Billy's lyric expresses his attempt to capture the process of ordering still in process, an attempt to capture himself:

> A boy blocks out the light
> in blue shirt and jeans
> his long hair over his ears
> face young like some pharoah
>
> I am unable to move
> with nothing in my hands (BK, p. 75)

Billy's controlling is done.

Pat Garrett embodies Billy's ideal of motion without

change. Just as Billy attempts to stop the narrative process, the process of ordering, in mid process, so Garrett tries to take Billy alive:

> we moved back and forward, side to side over the county, avoiding people and the law. Lynchers were out now and, bless him, Garrett didn't want that. (BK, p. 76)

The shift to a conventional, chronological narrative form gives the impression of moving towards coherence or conclusion. Garrett and Billy want the order of narrative that comes with conclusion, but they also want to keep the narrative process going. They want to continue the process of ordering and have order at the same time. Inevitably the achieving of order means the end of ordering, the end of the need for order, which in the text is expressed as a kind of apocalyptic orgasm. Billy hallucinates an image of himself as a giant penis, as he is being "overdeveloped to meaninglessness" in the Carrizozo plains, and realizes he has been "fucked" by a belief in the possibility of certainty. Maintaining the edge of clarity, a point at which the movement towards order continues yet at which order is achieved is like maintaining the edge of orgasm:

> Garrett's voice near me on the skin what's wrong billy what's wrong, couldn't see him but I turned to where I knew he was. I yelled so he could hear me through the skin. I've been fucked. I've been fucked I've been fucked by Christ almighty god I've

> been fucked by Christ. And I rolled off the horse's back like a soft shell-less egg wrapped in thin white silk and I splashed onto the dust blind and white but the chain held the legs to my horse and I was dragged picking up dust on my wet skin as I travelled in between his four trotting legs at last thank the fucking christ, in the shade of his stomach. (BK, p. 78)

Narratively speaking, Billy's need for order is satisfied by the achievement of the conventionality of chronological order. The process of ordering ends, and on the periphery of his consciousness nothing happens anymore. In fact, Billy cannot even see the door:

> My last white room, the sun coming through the shutters making the walls whiter. I lie on my left cheek looking to that light. I cannot even see the door or if Emory has stayed behind. (BK, p. 79)

As the narrator Billy disappears, our role as participant in the narrative process fades as the narrative slows and plods, moves without the urge provided by the need for order: a narrative whose logic has been satisfied yet continues. We, as readers, and Billy, have achieved a conventional order within which we have no role, and the narrative focalization shifts from internal to external, as we see in the segment where Billy is sentenced, and in the interview with him in jail. It is a shift towards a highly mimetic presentation, without intervention from the narrator, a direct offering of the 'facts.' As a result the narrative itself disintegrates without the narrator to

continue the process of ordering. The image Billy offers in the jail interview lacks the quality Billy maintained as controller, and without the internal focalization presents our folk hero as enigmatic, strange and not particularly interesting -- an image "overdeveloped to meaninglessness."

A split between the narrator and the narrated, between discourse and story, occurs. We see that what has been captured is the facts without the mental process that gives them meaning, Billy's ordering. Thus Billy, as narrator, escapes the attempt to capture him alive:

> Am the dartboard
> for your midnight blood
> the bone's moment
> of perfect movement
> that waits to be thrown
> magnetic into combat
>
> a pencil
> harnessing my face
> goes stumbling into dots (BK, p. 85)

Billy has been pursuing a mirage, the illusion of certainty, which proves finally to be a distortion of his character. The end of ordering is disorder, "stumbling into dots," the conventional narrative form breaks down and the process of ordering begins again, this time moving rapidly towards conclusion. The split discourse and story move towards convergence, or in other words the narrator Billy moves toward intersecting with his conventionalized

story. Thus we have the shifts in focalization: the internal enactment of Billy's escape (BK, p. 85); the external description of his escape (BK, p. 86; the external description of Garrett's fascination with dead birds (BK, p. 88); and the internal enactment of the intensity Billy experiences just before convergence:

> Sound up. Loud and vibrating in the room. My ears picking up all the burning hum of flies letting go across the room..... (BK, p. 90)

And finally the external description of the moments before the convergence occurs (BK, p. 93-4), and then the convergence itself enacted both from external and internal focalizations. The end of ordering is the end of order:

> oranges reeling across the room AND I KNOW I KNOW
> it is my brain coming out like red grass
> this breaking where red things wade (BK, p. 95)

In the convergence of the narrator and the narrated, or the discourse and the conventionalized chronological story, is the end of the narrative's process of becoming, which is the end of the narrative. What finally explodes the order Billy and ourselves have been after throughout the text is Billy himself; existing as a process, his consciousness as a movement, he himself is the temporality he has tried to control, just as we ourselves in our participation in that movement have attempted to stop that movement, stop our

participation, or satisfy our own need for order. We try to order the process of ordering, but finally the text remains ambiguous, fragmented and discontinuous.

Through the undermining of convention Ondaatje forces us as readers to enter into the process of ordering and experience directly Billy's consciousness as a window without a frame, a here and now in which the past and future enters alive and disruptive, in which there exists no temporal or spatial foundation upon which to build certainties. The world depicted in the text can not be separated or distinguished from Billy's awareness of it, for that awareness or consciousness is all we experience, as it merges with our own. Billy's fault is his need for order, but we and Ondaatje share that need and so experience its paradoxical nature. There remains the process to begin again, like the myth of Billy the Kid, it continues beyond the text and into the future: "...(Even though dead they buried him in leg irons)... His legend a jungle sleep" (BK, p. 97).

Chapter Four

Coming Through Slaughter

In his narratives Michael Ondaatje strikes a balance between convention and innovation which draws the reader into actively participating in the process of ordering the texts. I have argued that this activity, this ordering, plays a crucial role in our understanding of the works. At once encouraging and resisting the activity of ordering, Ondaatje compels us into an awareness of order as process -- the sense of order as a fleeting experience inextricable from the temporality involved in the narrative act. By thus implicating the sense of order with the passage of time, Ondaatje instills order with an illusory, or perhaps even metaphysical, quality. Thus in The Man with Seven Toes a growing sense of order and coherence amongst disparate spatial phenomenon becomes, at the conclusion of the narrative process, evasive, no more perhaps than a dream of order. In The Collected Works of Billy the Kid Billy enacts this process of ordering, and finally eludes any attempt to capture him. Now with Coming Through Slaughter we find the jazz musician Buddy Bolden, an artist in turn-of-the-century New Orleans whose art was never recorded, but remained a remembered "mood of sound" while he moved into silence.

In an interview with Mark Witten, Ondaatje says, "If I could play the piano I wouldn't want to write."[1] He expresses here, amongst other things, an attraction to an activity that has no existence outside of time, that exists as pure event. Music, obviously, is an activity which we cannot stop and look at, at least not without translating it into notes on a page, or into sonographs. On the other hand, the written word exists as primarily a spatial phenomenon and, as such, seems an unlikely substitute for creating music. By relating playing the piano to writing Ondaatje emphasizes one aspect of writing, one point of commonality -- the event, the temporal act of communication as instigated by placing the words on a page. In Coming Through Slaughter the event takes the form of the narrative process, and for Ondaatje constitutes a performance analogous to what playing a cornet in a parade is to the hero of his story, Buddy Bolden. Thus, as an epigraph to the text, Ondaatje offers three sonographs or, like words on a page, visual representations of sounds, suggesting there the relationship between playing music and the act of narration.

The most striking first impression in our reading of the text is the fluctuating relationship between the story and the discourse. The stance of the two prominent narrators, Ondaatje and Buddy Bolden, and their relations

to the stories they narrate varies dramatically from segment to segment throughout the text. We have a number of stories, that is we can extract from the discourse numerous chronological sequences involving existents and events: the stories of Nora, Webb, Bellocq, Tom Pickett, Willy Cornish and Robin and Jaelin Brewitt, not to mention a number of other characters whose stories are less explicit. All these stories enter the main story, that of Bolden's life. In turn, as narrators, Bolden and Ondaatje move in and out of these stories, adopting varying narrative roles and stances. At first it seems that no clear pattern develops, just a constant shift in the relations between story and discourse.

A closer examination of the first narrative fragment, however, reveals a significant process of ordering:

> His geography.
>
> Float by in a car today and see the corner shops. The signs of the owners obliterated by brand names. Tassin's Food Store which he lived opposite for a time surrounded by DRINK COCA COLA IN BOTTLES, BARG'S, or LAURA LEE'S TAVERN, the signs speckled in the sun, TOM MOORE, YELLOWSTONE, JAX, COCA COLA, COCA COLA, primary yellows and reds muted now against the white horizontal sheet wood walls. (CTS, p. 8)

Ondaatje begins his narrative in the world in which he tells, anchoring the narrative temporally and spatially in New Orleans "today." Furthermore, he compels us to

participate in the narrative from the beginning, through the ambiguous omission of the pronouns in the opening sentence before the verbs "[f]loat" and "see." These opening lines set up a clear relationship between the narration of the story and the story itself. The story is the movement through the geography of New Orleans. The temporality implied in this movement roughly parallels the real temporality of the act of reading. Discourse time roughly parallels story time, or in other words, our movement across New Orleans roughly parallels our movement across the text. In Genette's terms this approximation in speed is called "dramatic." It follows that the narrative mood is more mimetic than diegetic (there is a proliferation of detail), and the narrator himself, although present in the diegetic universe, is unobtrusive. Thus, simultaneously, Ondaatje emphasizes the story, the movement through the physical geography, and our relation to it in the act of reading. There is a sense of location or identification between our position in the discourse and our position in the physically verifiable streets. This situation, however, almost immediately changes.

The narrative shifts from an emphasis on geography to an emphasis on history, and from an emphasis on story to an emphasis on discourse. The narrative speed changes too, from the dramatic to the summary. The narrative instance

remains in New Orleans "today," and therefore becomes subsequent:

> Here the famous whore Bricktop Jackson carried a 15 inch knife and her lover John Miller had no left arm and wore a chain with an iron ball on the end to replace it -- killed by Bricktop herself on December 7, 1861, because of his `bestial habits and ferocious manners'. (CTS, p. 8)

The mood of the narrative becomes more diegetic than mimetic as the deliberate selecting of information becomes more apparent. Naturally, the movement towards diegesis alerts us to the more prominent role of the narrator. Thus, simultaneously, we have a shift away from the original story, an increase in narrative speed, and the intrusion of a narrator. The narrator begins to cloud our view of the original story and to pull us rapidly through a summary of historical events that are increasingly remote from our actual location in the story; they are "further away" or "elsewhere" and in the previous century, rather than on Gravier "today." As the clear relationship between story and discourse breaks down our sense of location is increasingly at risk.

While our bodies float along Gravier our minds soar across the city and the century. Our sense of location in the streets of contemporary New Orleans serves as a springboard to a series of anecdotes. However, the movement into historical anecdote is a movement away from

the certainty of "streets," our basis in physically verifiable fact. Without that clear relationship between the story and the narrative instance the reader is forced to accept a different and less tangible sense of location -- one that derives from the relations between the stories:

> By the end of the nineteenth century, 2000 prostitutes were working regularly...
>
> Tom Anderson, 'The King of the District', lived between Rampart and Franklin. Each year he published a Blue Book which listed every whore in New Orleans...
>
> Anderson was the closest thing to a patron that Bolden had... (CTS, p. 9-10)

The connections are made on the level of discourse rather than through the conventions of a story line. And although addresses are offered they mean little without the stories attached to them. It is a movement of mind or idea, like Bolden's "mood of sound" (CTS, p. 95), that connects the stories and thereby the places. The narrator "circles and winds" through the anecdotes, randomly following points of commonality* whether they be history ("History was slow here. It was elsewhere in town...") or money, or prostitution, or characters like Anderson. This movement defines the physical geography, loosely connects the places, while it remains free of any certainty implied by physical geography.

The moving away from a sense of certainty to a less tangible form of order lends a significant impact to the return to that certainty at the conclusion of the first narrative fragment:

> Circle and wind back and forth in your car and at First and Liberty is a corner house with an overhang roof above the wooden pavement, barber stripes on the posts that hold up the overhang. This is N. Joseph's Shaving Parlor, the barber shop where Buddy Bolden worked. (CTS, p. 10)

The original story line, our movement through the streets, and the anecdotes enacted in discourse, connect at a point of commonality, the barber shop. In effect our story connects with Bolden's.

The joining of the story line with the historical fragments through a point of spatial commonality lends a vague sense of location not only in terms of geography, but of time as well. We connect with the past through a spatial point of reference. This point acts as a springboard to another story, in which Bolden steps out active in the present:

> He puts a towel of steam over a face. Leaving holes for the mouth and the nose. Bolden walks off and talks with someone. A minute of hot meditation for the customer. (CTS, p. 11)

The simultaneous, dramatic narration of the tour of New Orleans is carried over into the narration of Bolden's movements in the barber shop. Yet the narrative instance

shifts from contemporary New Orleans to New Orleans at the turn of the century. In effect the narrator moves along the point of commonality between our story and Bolden's story. He moves through a spatial point of commonality to a different temporal location.

We find in a later segment of the text an inverse effect. Webb, Bolden's detective friend, speaks with the fasting Crawley about the "tail of shit" and the last time Crawley saw Bolden (CTS, p. 30). The narrative instance is subsequent. This time a temporal point of commonality connects this fragment and the one which follows: "While Webb is talking to Crawley, this is what Bolden sees" (CTS, p. 31). The narrator follows that temporal point of commonality to a different spatial location in a different story. We move from Webb's story to Bolden's story while the narrative instance slides from subsequent to simultaneous, and from Crawley's place to (we learn later) Robin's place. Furthermore, while all those shifts occur, another occurs in terms of focalization. The Webb story is externally focalized while Bolden's story is internally focalized. While we shift from one story to another through points of commonality, the narrator moves around adopting differing distances and different stances in relation to the stories. The narrator enacts a free movement through a shifting maze of interlocking stories.

As readers, our tour of New Orleans, finding or mapping Bolden's geography, shifts to traversing the text and trying to map some kind of order there.[8] We seek a conventional order in the text, a coherent story line. While the discovery of the shaving parlor and the shift to the story of Bolden in that parlor seems to offer a movement towards coherence (the fragment is at least conventional in its chronology), that situation soon changes as well.

No sooner does Ondaatje establish a coherent story line than he moves away, or through it, without acknowledgement as though he does not even see it. The fragment describing Bolden's movement as he shaves a customer is followed by an iterative ellipsis, a break from the story line to describe Bolden's average day (CTS, p. 12-14), followed by another ellipsis which deals with Bolden's relationship with Nora. We finally return to that story line after Webb's arrival at Bolden's house, and then only to discover Bolden has gone: "Alcohol burning down his throat as she tells him that Buddy went, disappeared, got lost, I don't know Webb but he's gone" (CTS, p. 19). Bolden has disappeared from his own story.

Our need for order is frustrated by Ondaatje's erratic movement as narrator and the sense of a continual movement towards a story line that always leads somewhere

unexpected. However, as we have seen, a disruption of the narrative process actually foregrounds the narrative process. We become increasingly conscious of Ondaatje as narrator and of ourselves as readers in the process of ordering. In the ensuing fragments composing the first section of the text, Ondaatje offers a discontinuous sequence of fragments which connect on the level of discourse in the same way the historical anecdotes did in the first narrative fragment, "[h]is geography"; that is they connect through a "mood of sound," which is the movement of the narrator Ondaatje. Yet as readers we order the anachronies, like the death of Mrs. Bass (CTS, pp. 25-28) or Webb's trips to New Orleans (CTS, pp. 36, 42), or the narrative pauses, like the discussion of the Cricket, the broadsheet publication Bolden edited. We find a number of stories developing: Webb's stories of the time he spent with Bolden and his later trying to find him; Nora's story of her relationship with Bolden; Bolden's story of his disappearance at Shell Beach; as well as our story of seeking coherence as we traverse the text like we traverse the streets of New Orleans.

While we readers put together a story line, Ondaatje disrupts its chronology, as he "circles and winds" through the different stories at their points of commonality. In the process his actions reflect the character of Bolden:

> There was no control except the *mood* of his power... We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot -- see his music was immediately on top of his own life. Echoing. As if, when he was playing he was lost and hunting for the right accidental notes. Listening to him was like talking to Coleman. You were both changing direction with every sentence, sometimes in the middle, using each other as a springboard through the dark. (CTS, p. 37)

Ondaatje enacts in the narrative process Bolden's style of music, which is the process of ordering and avoiding order simultaneously. By disrupting order, tearing apart the plot, he sets the process of ordering in motion, never allowing the achievement of order, the end of the process, but instead uses that movement towards order as a "springboard" to continue the process. Increasingly, however, we become aware of that movement of Ondaatje as narrator, that enactment of Bolden's character, as the point of connection between the stories. Slowly evolving out of the movement is the awareness of what all the stories have in common, Ondaatje's "mood of sound," personified in the character Bolden.

Thus Ondaatje emulates for himself Bolden's predicament, the game of chase between artist and audience, in which the artist effects a movement towards order without himself becoming restricted by that order, remaining free to create new kinds of order. At the beginning of the second section of the text the integration

of the narrator, Ondaatje, and the character, Bolden, becomes literal: "Back then, Webb, there was the world of the Joseph Shaving Parlor" (CTS, p. 47). Bolden relates a story about himself from a diegetic universe from which he is absent, speaks from a different story, which is consistent with the fact that earlier, in the scene with Nora and Webb, we discovered Bolden left his original story line . However, we remain aware through Ondaatje's identification with Bolden that this is also Ondaatje speaking. The integration of narrator and character effects a transgression of the conventional boundary between the world of which one tells and the world in which one tells. Also, while the identification between the narrator, Ondaatje, and the character, Bolden, manifests itself, so does the identification between the reader and the character, Webb. Thus the transgression of the boundary between narrative levels occurs between the world in which Ondaatje speaks to his readers, and the world in which Bolden speaks to Webb. A confusion of narrative levels arises out of what is actually two narratives progresssing simultaneously, reflecting each other, and becoming increasingly indistinguishable: namely Ondaatje's narrative about Bolden and Bolden's narrative about himself.

The paragraphs composing the narrative fragment

connect in a way similar to the narrative fragments of section one, which is similar to the historical anecdotes in the opening fragment of the text. Bolden begins with what qualifies as a descriptive pause in the narrative flow, a description of the barber shop:

> The brown freckles in the old barber-shop mirror. This is what I saw in them. Myself and the room. Nora's plant that came as high as my shoulder. The front of the empty chair, the fake silver roller for the head to rest on. The wallpaper of Louisiana birds behind me. (CTS, p. 47)

He gives us a spatial view of what he remembers seeing in the mirror. The description of the shaving parlor leads to the "clue to good business" which involves Bolden's getting the ice, which leads to cutting hair, which he does the rest of the day, which leads to hair flecks in his nose and clothes. Along with this movement along points of commonality an iterative mode of narration develops:

> Each morning I walked along Gravier to pick up the blocks of [ice] and carried them into the parlor and slid them onto the slope. By 3.45 they had melted and drained through the boards into the waiting pails. At 4.00 I carried these out and threw the filmy water over the few plants to the side of the shop. (CTS, p. 47)

The repetitious or cyclic nature of the actions depicted here continues into the actions described in the next two paragraphs: "Above me revolving slowly is the tin-bladed fan, turning like a giant knife all day above my head" and

"I blow my nose every hour and get the hair-flecks out of it" (CTS, p. 47). In the final paragraph of the narrative fragment there is a shift from the iterative to what may not constitute precisely the singulative but nevertheless gives the impression of moving towards the singulative, and therefore towards story line, a kind of dilation in the cyclic motion. Thus we have a dilating iterative cycle and a winding through points of commonality simultaneously. We sense in the structure of the narrative fragment a tightening around what we have called the "mood of sound," and its being pulled toward conventionality.

Meanwhile, a shift in narrative instance occurs, from subsequent to simultaneous, which places the narrators Bolden and Ondaatje within the diegetic universe of the narrative, within the tightening cycle of repetition, and in the pull to story line. While Ondaatje's identification of himself with Bolden marks the transgression of the boundary between Ondaatje's world and the world of his characters, the shift to simultaneous narration effects another transgression of the extradiegetic into the intradiegetic. We have reached a point of confluence between the various narrative levels, in which the narrators, Bolden and Ondaatje, and the narratees, Webb and the reader, partake of the same diegetic universe.

Thus, while we sense the confluence of narrative

levels, we also sense the dilation towards story line. The image of the "tin-bladed fan, turning like a giant knife all day above my head" or "stories [that] were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air" (CTS, p. 63) come to mind, as does the recurring image of the star:*

> Furious at something he drew his right hand across his body and lashed out. Half way there at full speed he realized it was a window he would be hitting and braked. For a fraction of a second his open palm touched the glass, beginning simultaneously to draw back. The window starred and crumpled slowly two floors down. His hand miraculously uncut. It had acted exactly like a whip violating a target and still free, retreating from the outline of a star. (CTS, p. 16)

This image accurately captures the narrators' performance in the final lines of the description of Bolden's days in the barber shop, as the iterative summary slows toward a singulative dramatic narration and finally stops on the ambiguous "here":

> Dreams of the neck. Gushing onto the floor and my white apron. The men stumbling with no more sight to the door and feeling even through their pain the waves of heat as they go through the door into the real climate of Liberty and First, leaving this ice, wallpaper and sweet smell and gracious conversation, mirrors, *my slavery here*. (CTS, p. 48, my italics)

The narrators, reflecting one another's performance, stop just as they reach the story line and the certainty it offers, shattering it, allowing the process of ordering and the reader's participation to continue. The discourse

moves to a descriptive pause ("So many murders of his own body" (CTS, p. 49)), marking a return to the position prior to the movement towards the point of confluence.

However, Bolden and Ondaatje as narrators, in the "here" rendered ambiguous by the confluence of narrative levels, become slaves to their performance. Frank Lewis sees this potential in Bolden's performance:

> He walks out of the crowd, struggles through onto the street and begins playing, too loud but real and strong you couldn't deny him, and then he went back into the crowd. Then fifteen minutes later, 300 yards down the street, he jumps through the crowd onto the street again, plays, and then goes off. After two or three times we were waiting for him and he came. (CTS, p. 38)

While Bolden and Ondaatje's performance is a movement to the story line and then retreat, that performance itself becomes repetitious, becomes a larger cycle within which they live. Their art reflects their lives as their lives reflect their art. In this way the narrative process enacted in the opening fragment of section two, "[b]lack then, Webb," reflects the process of ordering in the text as a whole, the pull towards chronology, which the narrators both exploit and resist.

Another point needs to be noted. The confluence of narrative levels enacts a confluence of stories as well. Throughout the first section of the book, as we have noted, there are the germs of a number of possible stories:

Webb's trying to find Bolden, Bolden's disappearance in Shell Beach, Bolden's life in Storyville, and our attempt as readers to order the text, to name but a few. Furthermore, as we have already observed, the point of commonality between the stories is Bolden. The confluence of narrative levels, then, is the confluence of stories around a single point, Bolden: "his mind became the street" (CTS, p. 42). Bolden becomes a reflection of all the stories around him, a reflection of the sub-culture of his time and place, in all its variety and vitality. However, he is only able to provide this role because the stories have no particular order amongst themselves, and he, as the point of commonality, remains vital and moving freely. In the barber shop scene ("Back then, Webb..." [CTS, p. 47]) he gives the stories an active simultaneity as he reflects the "mood" they all share, that movement towards story, towards order. The stories continue to grow, remain vital, as long as that which connects them, the point of commonality, remains vital and shifting. This ends when Bolden's movement, and Ondaatje's as narrator, gels into a coherent story line, fixing the relations between the stories, stopping the process of ordering. A balance is achieved. While Bolden becomes a reflection of a sub-culture, that culture becomes a reflection of him: "reputation made the room narrower and narrower, till you

were crawling on your own back, full of your own echoes, till you were drinking in only your own recycled air" (CTS, p. 86).

As the stories come to reflect Bolden, characterized by Ondaatje's "mood of sound," as the stories begin to gel and fit together chronologically around Ondaatje's movement through them, an inversion occurs. While he uses each story as a springboard to another story, increasingly it is Bolden's story that he tells. We reach a point in the text, in the scene in which Bolden fights with Tom Pickett, "one of the great hustlers," when Bolden's story becomes clear, and brings order to all the other stories. Suddenly Bolden's story arises out of the discontinuous discourse as a chronological sequence of events leading to his being found at Shell Beach. More importantly, Bolden finds himself trapped on this story line, as the others' stories are all a part of it; they no longer connect through the "mood of sound" but through the conventions of story. In effect the "mood of sound" takes on the form of conventional narrative and the illusion of order intrinsic to convention, as we discover a path through the shifting maze of interacting stories. The shifting, vibrant culture he knew moves toward static order. Likewise, Ondaatje finds himself, as narrator, in the middle of a story he has to finish.

The fragment in which Bolden and Pickett fight begins with Webb talking to Willy Cornish, which forms the extradiegetic. Webb, who "circles" trying to find Bolden, piecing together the 'facts' to explain his disappearance, is lead by Cornish to Tom Pickett, who tells the story of the fight with Bolden, which forms the intradiegetic. Unlike the previous barber shop scene we have discussed, this one emphasizes the singulative rather than the iterative. This time there is no cyclic dilation towards story line because we are *on* a story line, Webb's story, and the fragment structures itself in accordance with chronology: Webb sees Cornish and then "[a]fter a day" sees Pickett who relates a story that occurred earlier.

The narrative instance, however, is inconsistent with the story's chronology. The passage begins with a simultaneous narrative instance -- the meeting with Cornish is in the present tense -- but shifts to subsequent narration for the meeting with Pickett, creating a sense of the narrator moving ahead of the story, Ondaatje moving ahead of the story, free of the story line. However, as he reaches the point where Pickett tells his own story, a dramatic shift occurs and we gain a sense of his being caught in the story:

> How did it happen?
> The flies moved over the roads on his face.

> Nine o'clock. Storm rain outside. Cricket work finished. Don't want to think. The kid has been around with the bottle and I haven't opened it yet. I watch the wall behind me in the mirror. Alone. Want to think. (CTS, p. 71)

Suddenly a shift to simultaneous narration occurs and Ondaatje once again identifies himself with Bolden. He enters the intradiegetic and thereby locates the narrative instance within Pickett's story, whose narrative instance is within Webb's story. Thus the intradiegetic connects with the extradiegetic at a specific point in the chronology of the extradiegetic. For the first time in the text the narrators, Bolden and Ondaatje, can be located in relation to the conventional order of story; the narrative instance is both spatially and temporally located, in the barber shop.

The exact point of location becomes clear as the scene progresses. The Pickett fight provides a kind of missing link in the chronology of Bolden's story, giving it the conventionality of chronological order, while being at the centre of that chronology. It is the event between Bolden's life with Nora, on stage, and the disintegration of the band which leads to Bolden's departure. The fragmented narrative and all the stories swing into a fixed chronological order, while the narrator finds himself in the middle of that chronology, in the middle of a story. While Bolden narrates from that position (simultaneous

narration), Pickett narrates from a later position, after Bolden has left (subsequent narration): "I started talking about his mood which was so quiet you know so fuckin strange for him and he still wouldn't say much" (CTS, p. 72). As the story line becomes clear the others move ahead of Bolden down "the path" he broke.

Bolden's attack on Pickett expresses his reaction to the trap he finds himself in. The source of his music, the interaction of the stories suddenly becomes a reflection of his own story -- the pieces fall into place and that constant change he saw before disappears. His attack on Pickett then is actually an attack upon himself. As he attacks the conventionality he sees in the others stories he attacks his own story, the tracks of his "mood of sound".

In Coming Through Slaughter, which Ondaatje calls "a very private book... almost like a parable of the 20th-century artist," we have an enactment of the points I have been attempting to develop throughout this thesis. By undermining convention -- the discontinuous form, the unacknowledged ellipsis, the interpolated narrative stance -- Ondaatje compels the reader into active participation in the process of ordering, a process that is characteristic of not only art, but life as well, consciousness. The trick for the artist who wants to reflect not order, but the process of ordering in which we all participate, is to

stay ahead of that process; he must stay sufficiently free of convention to avoid becoming locked into some identity or image that fails to justly represent him, that will not let him grow, and that slides into cliche. Meanwhile the process of ordering he instigates in the reader constantly threatens; we adjust our conventional notions to accomodate his innovations, forming new kinds of order in which to explain him. Thus, in the Pickett fight scene, the order of the text, the story, grows toward convention, the coherence Ondaatje has given it through the process of ordering, the act of narration. It threatens to become order, and make him as narrator someone he doesn't wish to be:

> When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razorblade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be. (CTS, p. 133)

This is the same as Bolden's attack on Pickett, a representative of the culture Bolden reflects, which now reflects him.

Bolden's disappearance is an attempt to escape from an environment in which he could no longer create. As the stories gel and become his story, the only direction left to him is to finish his story, or to leap from it into another story. His time with Robin is that other story, but once the temporal connection is made in the Pickett

fight, that other story, like all the stories, becomes part of his story. When Webb arrives at the Brewitt's Bolden discovers himself once again on the story line he has to follow: "He came and placed my past and future on the table like a road" (CTS, p. 89).

After Webb finds Bolden the narrative becomes chronological, as Bolden and Ondaatje, as narrators, think "along a stone path" (CTS, p. 102). The narrative instance consistently follows the story line, but remains detached from it, as the discourse moves to reflections on the past: "Our friendship had nothing accidental did it..." (CTS, p. 89), "When you're tired, the body thick, you smell sulphur. Bellocq did that..." (CTS, p. 91). Mostly they ignore the present, their location on the story line, and attempt to articulate what they were doing, what they were seeing in the relationships between stories: "I really wanted to talk about my friends" (CTS, p. 99). Ondaatje and Bolden now, after the fact, try to articulate the movement along points of commonality that they had in their art. They try to articulate what that movement was, what they lost, so they might get it back again. But what they get is "this awful and stupid clarity," rather than the articulation of the *movement* towards clarity, or order.

As Bolden returns to Storyville his contact with the story increases, the story becomes increasingly emphasized

in discourse: in his walks to Nora's house, with the kids, while looking for Pickett, along the waterfront. There is again a sense of convergence between story and discourse that culminates in the parade. Again, with the convergence comes the sense of movement towards coherence, but instead Bolden and Ondaatje deliver finally incoherence:

> ...so deep blooming it up god I can't choke it the music still pouring in a roughness I've never hit, watch it listen it listen it, can't see I CAN'T SEE. Air floating through the blood to the girl red hitting the blind spot I can feel the others turning, the silence of the crowd, can't see (CTS, p. 131)

The coherence, the conceptual structure and grammar breaks apart as the discourse runs away from the conventions of story, away from the social world, beyond articulation, as the absence of the concluding period suggests. For Bolden the only escape from becoming a convention himself, and from the grueling "20th century game of fame," is destroying the conventions upon which sanity and order depend. As he moves into silence he takes with him the "mood of sound." Bolden's story never concludes, never achieves the order that would capture and kill his music. Perhaps he keeps on playing, without the basis in convention that we need in order to hear his music.

Ondaatje, however, is not quite prepared to follow Bolden (even if he could), is not quite prepared to abandon

convention, the process of ordering, but neither can he conclude it, achieve order and certainty. Narrative continuity disintegrates after the parade scene and the process of ordering continues. In the remainder of the text Ondaatje makes successive attempts to stop, end the act of narration, none of which is completely satisfactory, at least in the sense that none can offer the summation of Bolden's story that we expect of traditional conclusions. The rest of Bolden's life is "a desert of facts. Cut them open and spread them out like garbage" (CTS, p. 134). Like Seven Toes and Billy the Kid, once the process of ordering stops, the text, Bolden's story, disintegrates into disparate fragments. Bolden thinks: "Laughing in my room. As you try to explain me I will spit you, yellow, out my mouth" (CTS, p. 140).

The end comes arbitrarily, deliberately, through the decision to simply stop, the process of ordering still not complete. The game of chase continues:

> I sit with this room. With the grey walls that darken into corner. And one window with teeth in it. Sit so still you can hear your hair rustle in your shirt. Look away from the window when clouds and other things go by. Thirty-one years old. There are no prizes. (CTS, p. 156)

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In an article on Running in the Family Linda Hutcheon writes:

> Michael Ondaatje has been described as a writer who is fascinated with borders, including those between literature and reality... Running in the Family is, perhaps, the culmination of Ondaatje's challenges to boundaries, at least thus far: its fragmented collection of memories, research, poems, and photographs works to reconstruct a more immediate and personal history -- the writer's own. But to write of anyone's history is to order, to give form to disparate facts; in short, to fictionalize. Ondaatje's self-consciousness about this process is part of the very subject of this postmodernist work.[1]

I have argued that this process of fictionalizing, or ordering, is a part of the subject of all his narratives, and that Ondaatje demonstrates throughout them his self-consciousness as a narrator. Further, I have pointed out many instances of his transgression of traditional boundaries: between art and reality, fiction and history, the intradiegetic and extradiegetic, the heterodiegetic and the homodiegetic. These transgressions serve to foreground the narrative process, and not only question the legitimacy of our traditionally dualistic view of that process, but the legitimacy of language as a medium of experience. When Ondaatje says "I wanted to touch them into words" (RF, p. 22), meaning his ancestors, is he like Northrop Frye

postulating a distinct literary universe?[33] That in itself suggests dualism and thus seems contrary to his poetic vision. Yet, we are always aware, like Ondaatje, that writing is above all about words. Genette suggests this:

> no narrative can "show" or "imitate" the story it tells. All it can do is tell it in a manner which is detailed, precise, "alive," and in that way give more or less the *illusion of mimesis* -- which is only narrative mimesis, for this single and sufficient reason: that narration, oral or written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitating. ...the truth is that mimesis in words can only be a mimesis of words.[34]

When Ondaatje transgresses the boundary between the world in which one tells and the world of which one tells, we say he transgresses the traditional conceptual boundary between art and reality. Yet the transgression occurs in language, a "trick" that may or may not have anything to do with 'reality.' Finally Ondaatje writes about the experience of telling -- its possibilities and its limitations.

The limitations of telling are suggested throughout his work: in his reference to "the perfect white between the words"[35] or the "mystic privacy one can be so proud of [which] has no alphabet of noise or meaning to the people outside" (CTS, p. 64). Solecki comments on such references:

> confrontation with a reality which at first seemed resistant to the "nets" of verbal representation has not silenced the poet; rather

> it has provoked him into an even more ambitious poetry... . [T]entative metaphoric gestures...are all that can be expected of poetry in such a situation.[5]

And Ondaatje says: "Watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble casually on perception, the shape of an unknown thing" (RF, p. 190). Through his use of ambiguity and the transgression of conventional borders Ondaatje loosens the rigidity of the conceptual structure of language so that while not precisely articulating "an unknown thing" he nevertheless "gestures" toward something beyond the words, moves toward precise articulation without actually arriving at it. So of Running in the Family Ondaatje writes "the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues" (RF, p. 201). The heart of the matter remains untouched, intangible.

Hutcheon points out examples of the text's omission of significant points in the story:

> the section labelled "April 11, 1932" begins with "I remember the wedding..." [of Ondaatje's parents]. But the reader's expectations are immediately disappointed, since the wedding remains a textual gap, never to be described. The subsequent section, entitled "Honeymoon," again leads the reader to expect an account at least of what followed the couple's wedding, but once again, we get only a lacuna. What we are offered instead is a listing of things going on at the time, in Ceylon and elsewhere.[6]

Ondaatje frequently leaves out of the discourse what Chatman calls the "nodes" of the story,7 those crucial elements which determine the narrative structure, and provides instead a context for the "nodes," thus leaving the structure flexible and inconclusive, a form more implied than actually drawn. And at another point in the text he tells us "Truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships.

swirling social tides" (RF, p. 53-4). We are left in the end with fragments which draw attention to the ellipses between them, encouraging the process of filling those unfathomable ellipses, in the process of creating structure and order:

> we will trade anecdotes and faint memories, trying to swell them with the order of dates and asides, interlocking them all as if assembling the hull of a ship. No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgements thrown in. In this way history is organized.
> (RF, p. 26)

The "hull of the ship" never reaches completion, and the organization of history never concludes, as Hutcheon observes: "History, like narrative, becomes, therefore, a process, not a product."[8]

Of the four narratives discussed in this thesis, Running constitutes Ondaatje's most blatantly self-

conscious and personal work. Yet in the other texts, through transgressing boundaries, he breaks down the distinctions between author and narrator, between author and character, between the heterodiegetic and the homodiegetic. He shares with all his characters a need for self-definition but with all of them accepts the impossibility of fulfilling that need. In an interview with Sam Solecki the question of the relationship between story and narrator in Running comes up:

> Solecki: Granted that [Running in the Family is] ultimately the story of Doris and Mervyn Ondaatje, you still keep a very low profile.
>
> Ondaatje: To tell the truth it would have been the easiest thing in the world to pour everything into Running. And I did but not in too obvious a way. It was a book about other people, another age. But I think the emotional side of the narrator is clear, and it's essential to recognize it.[9]

I would say that through foregrounding the narrative process the narrator Ondaatje maintains a rather high profile in the text. From Seven Toes to Slaughter Ondaatje hermeneutically develops our awareness of the narrator as orderer, and then in Running that presence is no longer simply inferred but becomes literally manifest: Ondaatje is present as character, narrator and author in the text, providing a context for the fragments of story, a background for the idea of story. We are reminded of his

reference to the background noises in the night:

> Now, and here, Canadian February, I write this in the kitchen and play that section of cassette to hear not just peacocks but all the noises of the night behind them -- inaudible then because they were always there like breath... in that night so modest behind the peacocks they were unfocussed by the brain -- nothing more than darkness, all those sweet younger brothers of the night. (RF, p. 136)

Playing the cassette "to hear not just peacocks but all the noises of the night" provides for him a source of inspiration. The context for the stories and lives depicted in the text, like the context for the peacocks, spreads into the ellipsis in story, and while not providing structure, provide a feeling or emotion that by its very unstructured nature remains alive. That emotion is in the movement of mind gathering history, telling and retelling, "with enough love"; that by its movement resists precise articulation, becomes a "gesture." And one way that movement of mind in the process of ordering avoids articulation is in the shifting narrative instance: in the above quotation it is "Canadian February," at other times it is Ceylon. The story of Ondaatje gathering history, although having a beginning and an ending -- in Canada at a friend's house and on the last morning in Ceylon -- has no fixed structure of language or convention, but remains a movement through "scattered acts and memories."

In the end Ondaatje's work, it seems to me, is about the process of ordering involved in telling; a fascination with what words capture and what they do not:

> We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot -- see his music was immediately on top of his own life. Echoing.
>
> (CTS, p. 37)

NOTES

Chapter One

[1]Michael Ondaatje, The Man With Seven Toes (Toronto, Ontario: The Coach House Press, 1969). The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (Toronto, Ontario: Anansi, 1970). Coming Through Slaughter (Toronto, Ontario: Anansi, 1976). Running in the Family (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, 1982). These four books constitute the primary sources for this thesis and will hereafter be cited within the text using the following abbreviations:

ST -- The Man With Seven Toes
BK -- The Collected Works of Billy the Kid
CTS -- Coming Through Slaughter
RF -- Running in the Family

[2]Unless otherwise stated, I use the term order in the conventional sense throughout this thesis. That is, order as static order. This use of the term proves advantageous in articulating the reader expectations Ondaatje exploits. Order as process comes later.

[3]J. M. Kertzer, "On Death and Dying: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*," English Studies in Canada, 1 (Spring 1975), 87.

[4]Kertzer, 89.

[5]Sam Solecki, "Nets and Chaos: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje," Studies in Canadian Literature, 2, No. 2 (Winter 1977), 42. Rpt. in Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), p. 101.

[6]Sam Solecki, "Point Blank: Narrative in Michael Ondaatje's *The Man With Seven Toes*," Canadian Poetry, No. 6 (Spring-Summer 1980), 17. Rpt. in Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), p. 139.

[7]Michael Ondaatje, Rat Jelly (Toronto, Ontario: The Coach House Press, 1973), p. 62.

[8]Solecki, "Nets and Chaos," 45.

[9]Stephen Scobie, "His Legend a Jungle Sleep: Michael Ondaatje and Henri Rousseau," Canadian Literature, No. 76 (Spring 1978), 17.

[10]Solecki, "Point Blank," 14.

[11]Jonathan Culler, The Pursuit of Signs (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 11.

[12]Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 19.

[13]Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 26.

[14]Genette, pp. 30-31.

[15]Genette, p. 116.

[16]Genette, p. 115.

[17]Genette, p. 115-116.

[18]Genette, p. 34.

[19]Genette, p. 95.

[20]Genette, p. 164.

[21]Genette, p. 166.

[22]Genette, p. 189-190.

[23]Genette, p. 217.

[24]Genette, p. 228.

[25]Genette, p. 248.

[26]Genette, p. 265.

Chapter Two

[1]Phyllis Webb, Naked Poems (Vancouver: Periwinkle Press, 1965).

[2]Sam Solecki, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje," Rune, No. 2 (Spring 1975), 51. Rpt. in Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), p. 24.

[3]Sam Solecki, "Point Blank: Narrative in Michael Ondaatje's *The Man With Seven Toes*," Canadian Poetry, No. 6 (Spring-Summer 1980), 14-20. Rpt. in Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp. 135-149.

[4]Solecki, 16-17.

[5]Solecki, 15.

[6]Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," trans. Stephen Heath, A Barthes Reader, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 294-295.

[7]See Chapter One, pp. 6-7.

[8]Solecki, 18.

[9]Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 219. Genette points out that simultaneous narration produces an unstable situation wherein the emphasis can tip either way, to story or to the telling. The direction is defined by context.

[10]Solecki, 21.

Chapter Three

[1]Perry Nodelman, "The Collected Photographs of Billy the Kid," Canadian Forum, No. 87 (Winter 1980), 68-79.

[2]Nodelman, 76.

[3]Dennis Cooley, "I am here on the edge: Modern Hero / Postmodern Poetics in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*," Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp. 211-239.

[4]Cooley, p. 233.

[5]Judith Owens, "I Send You a Picture: Ondaatje's Portrait of Billy the Kid," Studies in Canadian Literature, 8, No. 1 (1983), 117-139.

[6]Owens, 120.

[7]Owens, 137.

[8]J. M. Kertzer, "On Death and Dying: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*," English Studies in Canada, 1 (Spring 1975), 86-96.

[9]Kertzer, 89.

[10]Kertzer, 96.

Chapter Four

[1]Mark Witten, "Billy, Buddy and Michael," Books in Canada (June-July 1977), 10.

[2]Constance Rooke, "Dog in a Grey Room: Happy Ending of *Coming Through Slaughter*," Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp. 268-292. Rooke seems to explore something similar to these points of commonality in her discussion of relationships between characters. Also see, Anne Wilson, "*Coming Through Slaughter*: Storyville Twice Told," Descant, 42, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Fall 1983), 103. "Bolden and Bellocq shared a knowledge that antithetic elements balance at a common point."

[3]Smaro Kamboureli, "The Poetics of Geography in Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*," Descant 42, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Fall 1983), 112-125. This is a very interesting article on the spatial/location aspects of Ondaatje's novel.

[4]For important discussions on Ondaatje's imagery and Bolden's art see, Stephen Scobie, "*Coming Through Slaughter*: Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webbs," Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 12 (1978), 6-21, and Sam Solecki, "Making and Destroying: Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and Extremist Art," Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 12 (Fall 1978), 24-46. Rpt. Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp. 246-267.

Chapter Five

[1]Linda Hutcheon, "*Running in the Family*: The Postmodernist Challenge," Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), p. 301.

[2]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 18.

[3]Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 164.

[4]Michael Ondaatje, "White Dwarfs," Rat Jelly (Toronto, Ontario: The Coach House Press, 1973), p. 70.

[5]Sam Solecki, "Nets and Chaos: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje," Studies in Canadian Literature, 2, No. 2 (Winter 1977), p. 48. Rpt. Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), pp. 108-9.

[6]Hutcheon, p. 305.

[7]Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 53.

[8]Hutcheon, p. 306.

[9]Sam Solecki, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje (1985)," Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, Quebec: Vehicule Press, 1985), p. 331-2.

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