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Subjectivity, Social Relations, History:
Doing Philosophy with Michael Ondaatje

Dianne Varga

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

August 1995

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ABSTRACT

Subjectivity, Social Relations, History:
Doing Philosophy with Michael Ondaatje

Dianne Varga

Although Michael Ondaatje's fictions and historiographic metafiction negotiate a number of philosophical traditions, it is pragmatism which accounts most comprehensively for circumstances in the works and which, when played off against other doctrines, invariably triumphs. Pragmatism has been defined as simply anti-essentialism applied to entities and processes such as truth, knowledge, language, morality, rationality, intellectual inquiry, the human subject, society, and culture. The doctrine sees that rather than any essential nature, it is *only* conversation and deliberation with other inquirers which can constrain descriptions of, or explanations for, these entities and processes.

In the works examined in this study, subjectivity, cultural identity, and social organization are invariably characterized by changeability and vicissitude. Furthermore, whether it is by way of scientific method, story-telling, or political, narcissistic, or artistic pursuits, different narrators and characters seek, or claim to possess or experience, knowledge, truth, omniscience, or an eternal sublime. But the attainment of knowledge is never proved to be other than haphazard, and absolute truth, omniscience, or transcendence is obtained by no one. Ondaatje's characters are finite, without transcendental Kantian ego or Platonic soul--they are utterly without epistemological or metaphysical purchase. Their very selves and their situations, their undertakings and the outcomes of them, are variably marked by opacity, equivocality, instability, contingency, and contestation.

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This is for Heidi Brown

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE:	
<i>The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: The Apprehension of William Bonney</i> . . .	7
CHAPTER TWO:	
<i>Coming Through Slaughter: Over the Top and into the Sublime</i>	31
CHAPTER THREE:	
<i>In the Skin of a Lion: Meandering to Town</i>	60
CHAPTER FOUR:	
<i>The English Patient: The Holy and the Historical</i>	83
CONCLUSION	100
BIBLIOGRAPHY	105

Introduction

In the fictions and 'historiographic metafiction' examined in this study, philosophical deliberation is at times conspicuous, comprising a part of a narrator's or character's discourse. Contrarily and most frequently, propositions are communicated indirectly, through the author's particularizations of subjectivity, cultural identity, or social organization; through the elaboration of hopes, beliefs, or projects specific to an individual or a society; or through the management of the historical referent.

Although Michael Ondaatje's works negotiate a number of philosophical traditions, it is pragmatism which accounts most comprehensively for circumstances in the fictions and which, when played off against other doctrines, invariably triumphs. Pragmatism was postulated in the mid-nineteenth century by Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, colleagues at Harvard. Richard Rorty is one who continues the tradition, and he offers for our consideration three "sloganistic" characterizations of it. The first sees that pragmatism

is simply anti-essentialism applied to notions like 'truth', 'knowledge', 'language', 'morality', and similar objects of philosophical theorizing. Let me illustrate this by James's definition of 'the true' as 'what is good in the way of belief'. This has struck his critics as not to the point, as unphilosophical, as like the suggestion that the essence of aspirin is that it is good for headaches. James's point, however, was that there *is* nothing deeper to be said: truth is not the sort of thing which *has* an essence. Those who want truth to have an essence want knowledge, or rationality, or inquiry, or the relation between thought and its object, to have an essence. Further, they want to be able to use their knowledge of such essences to criticize views they take to be false, and to point the direction of progress toward the discovery of more truths. There are no essences anywhere in the area. There is no wholesale, epistemological way to direct, or criticize, or underwrite, the course of inquiry. (1982: 162)

To Rorty's list of "objects" that are without essence can be added the

human subject Ever since Hegel, he says, philosophers of a historicist persuasion "have denied that there is such a thing as 'human nature' or the 'deepest level of the self' ... [Rather, they] insist that socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down--that there is nothing 'beneath' socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human" (1989: xiii).¹

Rorty remarks that when the French Revolution showed that "the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight," the idea that truth "was made rather than found" began to take hold of the imagination of Europe (1989: 3). He would deem society--just as anthropologist James Clifford would deem culture--to be yet another "object" which, like truth, is without any eternal, absolute nature. Clifford suggests that we conceive of cultural identity as an "ongoing process," a historically unfinished invention, rather than in terms of an "essence or a source," the "unified self" or a continuous tradition (4-9) "[O]ur glory," Rorty says, "is in our participation in fallible and transitory human projects"--projects like scientific and moral inquiry, and, we might understand, the fashioning of our selves, societies, and cultures--"not in our obedience to permanent nonhuman constraints" (166).

In his second characterization of pragmatism, Rorty elaborates, by playing off doctrine against doctrine, notions of truth and morality, and ways in which inquiry might proceed:

¹ We will come to see that unlike certain historicist thinkers, Rorty draws distinctions between the public and the private. Understanding that "socialization, and thus historical circumstance," cannot be evaded, he thinks that one nevertheless might take advantage of processes through which a limited private self-creation can be effected

there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any methodological difference between morality and science. Even nonpragmatists think Plato was wrong to think of moral philosophy as discovering the essence of goodness, and Mill and Kant wrong in trying to reduce moral choice to rule. For the pragmatists, the pattern of all inquiry--scientific as well as moral--is deliberation concerning the relative attractions of various concrete alternatives. The idea that in science or philosophy we can substitute 'method' for deliberation between alternative results of speculation is just wishful thinking. It is like the idea that the morally wise man resolves his dilemmas by consulting his memory of the Idea of the Good, or by looking up the relevant article of the moral law. It is the myth that rationality consists in being constrained by rule. According to this Platonic myth, the life of reason is not the life of Socratic conversation but an illuminated state of consciousness in which one never needs to ask if one has exhausted the possible descriptions of, or explanations for, the situation. One simply arrives at true beliefs by obeying mechanical procedures. Traditional, Platonic, epistemologically-centred philosophy is the search for such procedures. It is the search for a way in which one can avoid the need for conversation and deliberation and simply tick off the way things are. [The urge common to nineteenth-century idealists and contemporary scientific realists, to Russell and to Husserl, to the entire Western philosophical tradition, is] to escape the vocabulary and practices of one's own time and find something ahistorical and necessary to cling to. [The pragmatist asks] us to abandon that tradition. (1982 163-65)

Rorty offers, in his third characterization, details of the constraints on, and potential payoff of, the pragmatist's mode of inquiry. And he answers the question of what, in lieu of some ahistorical and necessary truth, we may hope to cling to:

[pragmatism] is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones--no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers. The only sense in which we are constrained to truth is that, as Peirce suggested, we can make no sense of the notion that the view which can survive all objections might be false. But objections--conversational constraints--cannot be anticipated. There is no method for knowing *when* one has reached the truth, or when one is closer to it than before. If we give up [the Platonic hope that we might pass beyond hypotheses, and the Cartesian hope that we might discover the indubitable, and the post-Kantian hope that we might find the a priori structure of any possible inquiry, or language, or form of social life], we shall lose what Nietzsche called 'metaphysical comfort', but we may gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community--our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage--is heightened when we see this community as *ours* rather than *nature's*, *shaped* rather than *found*, one among many which men have made. In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right. (165-66)

The first chapter of this thesis, "*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: The Apprehension of William Bonney*," examines various modes and outcomes of inquiry, and differing conceptions of morality and expressions of moral conduct. But for the most part the chapter takes stock of the human subject as a product of both socialization and self-construction. Given that the site of the action is the American Wild West, one would expect social interactions to be marked by tremendous violence. However, one might not anticipate Billy's strategic reorganization of his self to result in ontological circumstances qualitatively similar to the social hell.

Like the first chapter, the second--"*Coming Through Slaughter: Over the Top and into the Sublime*"--considers approaches to, and results of, inquiry and self-construction. Moreover, this second chapter examines the possibilities and limitations of reason, knowledge, and moral regulation. In addition, Ondaatje's treatment of the historical referent (both Billy Bonney and Buddy Bolden were historical figures) is explained according to Linda Hutcheon's account of historiographic metafiction. Finally, critical outrage over the historiographic approach, and the critics' counter-project, are analyzed.

Chapter three, "*In the Skin of a Lion: Meandering to Town*," considers notions of truth, and issues of historiographic and narrative authority. Subjective and socio-economic organization is also discussed, as are different political ideologies and their philosophical freight. However, the chapter focuses mainly on the quandary of much-needed socio-political redress and on the ethical implications of the direct political action decided upon by Alice Gull and Patrick

Lewis. Their conduct has been understood by some critics to spring from moral responsibility, whereas others condemn the "revolutionary" action as counterfeit, infantile, and debased.

The fourth chapter, "*The English Patient: The Holy and the Historical*," discusses the ambiguities of subjective, cultural, and national identities. It also examines private reality as a positive alternative to the repudiated socio-political one. To that end, both the humanistic model of ideal human association--society--and the imperialistic fantasy of the same--the family--are compared to the relations forged by the villa residents. In addition, the chapter considers notions of truth, reason, knowledge, and morality, and contextualizes them according to their advocates: the priests, kings, queens, and presidents who merely pretend to civilisation and humanistic wisdom; and the cultivated lovers of learning and knowledge who dwell at the Villa San Girolamo.

Whether owing to an interest in sources and influences, authorial intention, or hermeneutics, the reader may wish to know that to my knowledge there exists no evidence that Ondaatje has encountered the writings of Richard Rorty or any of the other theorists whose work I will discuss in relation to Ondaatje's own. In an interview with Sam Solecki in 1975, Ondaatje stated that although he was interested in psychology, his interest was not "formal"--he avoided reading books on psychology, as well as on philosophy and politics. In a later interview with Solecki (1984), he added that he paid no formal attention to contemporary critical theory. However, in that same interview he allowed that his exposure to both

critical and political theory has been informal--"I rely mostly on rumours of [such theorists] ...I'm sure I'm influenced by them all in some way. Pollination of the age"--as well as formal: he has indeed read Barthes' work and certain political theses. Whether Ondaatje has formally or informally encountered the work of, for instance, philosophers Richard Rorty and Alisdair MacIntyre, anthropologist James Clifford, or psychiatrist Peter Barham remains, in my view, a question unanswered.

I *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: The Apprehension of William Bonney*

Critic Lorraine York notes that the photographic image routinely draws theorists of both literature and the visual arts into philosophical discussion of issues such as knowledge, perception, and objectivity. Regarding *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, she suggests that Michael Ondaatje employs photography as a metaphor for the reader's "choice of perspective." "[O]ur vision of Billy shifts, new highlights are visible according to our position as a viewer--standing either alongside Sallie Chisum or Sherriff [sic] Garrett" (104). The characters perceive and achieve their various "versions" of Billy which the reader then negotiates.

Be that as it may, the sheriff would argue the merits of the camera to be otherwise. Intending to report to the reader the results of his close observation of the relations between Billy and Angela, it is not a "version" of their reality, but a *definitive* explanation of "some things," that he promises (44). Billy believes that Garrett, in possession of the "mind of a doctor," is able to know with utter certainty those around him--"what motivated their laughter and anger, what they liked to think about, how he had to act for them to like him" (28). Such grandiose psychiatric ambitions are Garrett's very own; moreover, they, like his orientation, are of a piece with "scientific method." By assuming a putatively objective, observational stance in order to see fact and experience as they *truly* are, he operates according to certain assumptions of the Cartesian epistemological tradition.¹

Scrutinizing Billy's ridiculous body positions and the shift of Angela's

¹ Barham, pp. 57, 67. Elaboration of this tradition will follow

thighs, Garrett draws no conclusions, however, and next scans "to see how they understood each other" (43, 44). Reporting Billy's shooting of a snake-bitten, pain-wracked cat, and Angie's facial expression of terror, Garrett confidently concludes his inquiry. But neither Angie's expression nor the relations between her and Billy have been definitively--or even partially or provisionally--explained. Garrett's earlier, more modest statement points up the difference between Billy's belief of the sheriff's all-knowingness and his real capabilities: "You could never tell how [Billy] meant a phrase, whether he was serious or joking. From his eyes you could tell nothing at all" (43).

Assuming that Garrett is not simply incompetent, his failure to achieve knowledge through scientific method might stand for the inadequacy of the method itself. The narrative which accompanies the space unoccupied by L.A. Huffman's promised photograph of Billy suggests just such a snag. The scientific language and procedures employed by the photographer--"*daily experiments...proofs....specimens*" (5)--describe but do not produce evidence of results. By considering the theories of mind and knowledge which lead to the establishment of scientific method, and how the theories relate to Enlightenment conceptions of subjectivity, we might speculate further on Garrett's difficulty in apprehending Billy *and* on the importance of Huffman's missing photograph. We might do so via photographic theory.

York notes the common assumption that a photograph is mirror-like, an accurate reflection of reality, a transparent "window on the world" (9, 12)--an assumption held since the advent of photography and still held today, despite the

attack made upon it by any number of theorists, including Umberto Eco: "We know that the image which takes shape on celluloid is analogous to the retinal image [that replicates object reality] but *not* to that which we perceive." ² What Eco argues, says York, is that meaning is not found but made, by an individual or by her or his culture. And what Eco argues against, wittingly or not, is Descartes's conception of the mind--a conception in many ways similar to the nineteenth-century conception of the photograph.

To Decartes, "mind" is an inner space or entity, mirror-like in its function of reflecting object reality (Nature). The Inner Eye, a non-human entity harbored within the mind, inspects the "representations" contained therein--representations modeled, accurately or inaccurately, on retinal images--in the hope of finding some mark which will testify to their fidelity.³

Decartes later came to distinguish between certain mental "events" and certain mind "substances " Bodily and perceptual sensations (the potentially confused representations of the mind) were associated with mind-as-consciousness, whereas concepts (mathematical truths, moral rules, the idea of God, and so on) were associated with mind-as-reason The task of the scientist was then threefold: to distinguish between the two parts of his mind, to filter his thoughts to eliminate "subjective," "non-cognitive," "confused" elements; and to subject concepts to a process of analysis The goal of such analysis was to get beyond propositions and rational argument to causes and fact, to "unconfused knowledge," to "clear and distinct perception." From

² Quoted in York, p. 10; my emphasis

³ Rorty (1979), pp 45, 68

Descartes and his successors we have inherited the notion of scientific method as "pure observation" in the quest for "an absolute conception of reality."⁴

Both Huffman's camera and Descartes's mirror-like mind are able to reflect reality and produce representations of it. Like Descartes, the photographer admits that representations are not always accurate: the spokes of a wheel are "well defined," but there is "some blur" on the rim (5). According to scientific method, if clear and distinct perception--causes or fact--is to be achieved, it is "mind-as-reason," not the camera-like mind, that must be engaged. In his quest to define Billy, Huffman has made such an engagement. He has analysed the interplay of the motion of horses and the speed of shutters, the size of lens openings and the action of developers. But he has failed to subject an idea of *Billy*--any idea whatsoever--to methodic analysis. His failure to achieve a technical definition of him surely stands for his failure to search for a cognitive definition of him--the causes or facts of his reality.

The relation between Descartes's theory of the mind and contemporary conceptions of subjectivity is described by Peter Barham:

Doctrines about the source of knowledge as residing in the individual...were developed and pursued in close connection with doctrines about the origin and nature of the individual himself. If the origin of knowledge is to be accounted for solely on the basis of individual experience, then it must also be possible to account for the individual himself without reference to social causality. Thus from the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we have inherited a conception of the individual as *given* in his most essential aspects, a picture of the encapsulated, self-possessed and self-centred individual comprising a distinct and separate reality from what is called 'society', and also a conception of society as made up of citizens who are 'independent centres of consciousness' (57)

Unlike Huffman, Garrett undertakes to explain the meaning of Angela and

⁴ Rorty (1979), pp 50-54, 58, 159, and Barham, pp 57, 58

Billy. Moreover, it is not essential human nature but the social tissue of the two that he thinks he will define. However, rather than engaging, like Huffman, in a process of reasoning, it is as though Garrett engages the camera-like mind, producing, in effect, the photograph which Huffman sought. He believes that the flat image *itself* speaks its meaning. But meaning inheres in no photograph; meaning is a thing made not found. Further, Garrett thinks the photo speaks the obvious--something essential, something given--about the killing of a cat, a look of terror, and, ultimately, a social relationship. But the truth of the photo is missing--just as Huffman's photograph is missing.

From Billy's eyes, Garrett said, you could tell nothing at all. From the eyes you *can* tell nothing at all. Barham explains the fallacy of the observational stance--the stance of "pure observation" and objectivity. Neither the scientist nor his own vantage point, he says, "can be isolated from the historical texture in which they subsist." Objectivity is beyond the reach of both "Dr Social Scientist" and "Mr Ordinary Agent" for the reason that *no one* can succeed in extricating his or her self from social processes and influences (67). Huffman, making no acknowledgement of social interaction, might be emblematic of the self-detached Cartesian scientist. But Garrett's involvement with his subject proves the fallacy of pure observation: he feels "incredible admiration" for Billy (45). Yet Garrett merely *supposes* that his *facial expression* records this feeling. His report, rather than the inquiry itself, is marked by cool self-detachment.

It has been widely argued that in the effort to anaesthetize himself to life, Garrett has, just like Billy, transformed himself to an emotionless machine,⁵ in

effect eradicating his very self. Moreover, Billy accuses Garrett of being such an automaton--one who is able to kill someone, "walk back and finish a joke" (28). In keeping, Garrett does casually return to a poker game after killing Tom O'Folliard. But before picking up the cards he ritualistically lays bullets beside the body of his one-time friend, and he cares enough to bury him in the morning (8). After shooting Charlie Bowdre, he leaves himself open to flying bullets, allowing the dying man--another one-time friend--to reach him and drop into his arms (22). Theories of emotion-free mechanicalism overlook the fact that Garrett *cares about* the people he kills. What sheds light upon the fact that he does indeed kill them is his discrimination between the "moral" and the "right" (28); between yesterday's friend and today's payola. Made sheriff by the New Mexican "cattle politicians," he collects "a lot" of money (83) for ridding the state of rustlers. It's the right thing to do: the thieves are "bad for progress" (7).

Just as particulars of the socio-political environment explain--at least to some extent--the reshuffling of Garrett's moral self and relations, they will help to explain certain alterations of Billy's self and worldly affairs. Our consideration of Billy might begin with the narrative that follows Paulita Maxwell's discussion of *another* missing photograph of him.

In defense against both the work of the photographer and Paulita's analysis of it, Billy declares: "Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out" (20). Billy is evidently aware that although "they"--the photographer and Paulita--are story-tellers like

⁵ Cf. Nodelman, MacLulich, Blott, Cooley

himself, *their* stories, realized "through their eyes," are realized through the observational stance.⁶ Contrary to them, Billy's stance in the quest for "it" is that of the self-conscious, implicated story-teller. The "it" that he searches for is, we will see, both the story itself and the truth that it will tell--an apparently precious and inherent truth.

The "beginning" which Billy offers--an "image" of himself that leaves uncontested Paulita's beliefs about his character and is admittedly without anything "of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth"--is, it turns out, simply "there for a beginning." For the moment, the nuggets of truth about him remain interred. Moreover, Billy's especially subtle cognition--he somehow knows that Garrett never swears when alone and that, although Garrett never told anyone about it, he once taught himself French (28)--likewise fails him. Absolute apprehension, for Billy and for the reader, is at the very least deferred, just like the "beginning" that will actually lead towards the middle.

Absolute apprehension might be endlessly deferred, however, in view of Karl Popper's advice on such a quest. We should, he thinks, "give up the idea of ultimate sources of knowledge, and admit that all knowledge is human; that it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams, and our hopes; that all we can do is to grope for truth even though it is beyond our reach."⁷ We might also give up on beginnings, middles, or *any* sort of narrative absolutes when we consider the troublesome fact that Billy records his own death not just in terms of present

⁶ In the case of the social sciences, Barham makes no distinction between scientific method and story-telling. notions of story-telling "serve to identify crucial features of what social scientists do" (59)

⁷ Quoted in Barham, p 58

action--how does he get it down on paper when his brain is breaking where red things wade? (95)--but in terms of past event--from what spatio-temporal location does he write that Pat Garrett sliced off his head? (6)⁸ Looking at certain theories of subjectivity will let us speculate on the matters of Billy's *wished-for* omniscience and immortality.

C Fred Alford accounts for regressive and progressive aspects of that which is often held to be essentially a pathological personality disorder: narcissism. Understanding both aspects of narcissism to be an expression of human "longing for perfection, wholeness, and control over self and world" (3), he charts the singular development of narcissistic desire.

Alford says that most theorists believe that all infants experience a primal state of blissful wholeness: a state that is thought to have occurred in the womb, the fetus "coincident with eternity"; or between infant and mother, self and object fused in an "oceanic" feeling of the unbounded; or between infant and world--"*his* world, which for him is *the* world" (55, 56). The harmony, however it is theorized, is invariably disrupted: the infant recognizes that the mother is a whole, integrated object outside of his self, beyond his omnipotent control; or the parents respond inappropriately to the infant's need for recognition of his nascent self (32, 45). The infant's sense of omnipotence and self-sufficiency is thereby challenged, and he experiences a humiliating sense of powerlessness: the "narcissistic wound" (56). What will eventually compensate to some degree for this injury is a sense

⁸ The meaning of things changes, says Ondaatje, "depending on whether line B referred to line A or to line C" (*Manna* 21). The positioning of Garrett on Billy's list of the killers and the killed is exemplary of such ambiguity.

of "object mastery": the ability to control one's self by bringing the interaction of instinct and narcissism under the reign of the ego and superego, and the ability to control one's environment--through meaningful labor, for instance (57-58). The desire to restore narcissistic bliss and hence the perfection of the self remains--forever, it is said--and has the "potential to push men and women forward or to entice them down a backward path" (188)

We might now speculate that Billy's wish for omniscience and eternity is an expression of the narcissistic desire for control, perfection, and wholeness. Whether his "path" is progressive or regressive *can* be determined, but not through an analysis of what might be the values of his mature "ego ideal"--his standard of perfection. Theories of narcissism do not distinguish good from bad values, good from bad quests (Alford 199). Rather, a progressive path can be identified by the *style* of mastery. Grandiosity--the self's need to be sublime, magnificent, and recognized as such--must be tempered, integrated realistically with one's skills and talents and with one's opportunities (46). Further, the limits of mastery--the boundaries between reach and grasp, desire and fulfillment, one person and another, perfection and human finitude, knowledge and ignorance--must be recognized and respected (195). In view of such criteria, Billy's path is surely one of regression. It is the *degree* of regression that now concerns us. Because narcissistic disorders amount to nothing less than "disturbances at the very core of what it means to be an individual person, separated from others, yet bound to them in relationships" (43), an exploration of Billy's subject-object relations will allow us to determine that degree. Billy writes two poems that well

describe his relations:

To be near flowers in the rain
all that pollen stink buds
bloated split
leaves their juices
bursting the white drop of spend
out into the air at you
the smell of things dying flamboyant
smell stuffing up your nose
and up like wet cotton in the brain
can hardly breathe nothing
nothing like thick sugar death (55)

In Mexico the flowers
like brain the blood drained out
packed with all the liquor perfume
sweat like lilac urine smell
getting to me from across a room

if you cut the stalk
your face near it
you feel the puff of air escape
the flower gets small smells sane
deteriorates in a hand (56)

The alarming descriptions of the relation between Billy and object reality, suggestive of an ultimate and shared nonbeingness, support neither Perry Nodelman's and others' arguments that Billy is, for whatever reason, "emotionally dead," nor Stephen Scobie's, that the meaning of the poems is obvious to the careful reader.⁹ Ignoring for the moment matters of sexuality and intelligibility, a reader might interpret the poems to at least involve Billy's expression of pleasure with *and* anxiety over the flowers that exude the "sugar death" that penetrates his body to his very brain, overtaking his respiration. The Mexican flowers--like Billy, respiratory creatures, stuffed with perfume, and insane--are cut down by him in what might be an act of defense, expiring to the "smell" of sanity. That William Bonney is insane--psychotic, according to theories of narcissism or schizophrenia--will become clear.

Normal object relations can be summarily described as the distinction one makes between "that which is me" (the internal reality of the subject) and "that which is not me" (the external reality of other and of the material world). The distinction carries the subject's recognition of both the separateness of the

⁹ Scobie addresses Nodelman in his "Postscript" to "Two Authors "

self from object reality and her or his unity with that reality--the embedding of the self in community and history.¹⁰ It is, says Joel Kovel, a configuration which constitutes "personhood" (335).

But the psychotic experiences "dedifferentiation," an inner-outer confusion of the boundaries of self and not-self.¹¹ Parts of the self are deployed as objects and parts of objects are taken into the self.¹² Such fragmentation is an expression of a violent hatred of both internal and external reality. The subject ejects on to the outside world elements of the "bad" self which she or he refuses to contain, and she or he refuses "the terms of participation that the human world ineluctably seems to offer."¹³

The ejection and admission of parts of self and not-self are, in Billy's poems, articulated in the language of sexuality. Object reality ejaculates the sugar death that penetrates Billy's brain; Billy ejects human physical processes and insanity on to the object. We might reason that by interacting with the brain-threatening flowers, Billy refuses--at least temporarily--to participate with a greater external threat: the Wild West community of murderers. We might reason that he ejects on to the Mexican flowers the badness of his insanity and of his own capacity to murder.

The rupture experienced by the schizophrenic from the self is best

¹⁰ Barham, discussing D W Winnicott's theories of object-relations and separation-individuation, pp. 92-96

¹¹ Burnham, p 200

¹² Kovel, p 336

¹³ Barham, discussing Melanie Klein's theory of projective identification, p 153 Kovel notes that the schizophrenic's fragmentation of other does not preclude the possibility of a paradoxical *caring* for other: schizophrenics "care impossibly, in a way that utterly negates the independent existence of the other, some part of whom has been absorbed into the reconstructed self, and the rest jettisoned or destroyed, as need be" (341)

explained in the terms of action and reaction and not causality. It is a "strategy," a "defensive organization in repudiation of environmental impingement,"¹⁴ which results in the "annihilation" of both subject and object. While genetic, biochemical, or cognitive aspects may be drawn into the process, schizophrenia is ultimately an ontological condition, a collapsed and reconstructed self without a "locus of subjectivity"--and it is "hell."¹⁵

The schizophrenic's restructuring of reality replaces, says Donald Burnham, "an intolerable version of reality by a more tolerable one" (206). So much said, then, for the version of reality that "hell" replaces. Our questions now concern "versions." How can we explain, in terms other than psychological, Billy's accounts of experience? Are they defensible by virtue of epistemic privilege? That is, are his accounts valid, whether or not we agree with them, because *he* knows himself and his world best? Richard Rorty suggests that no account of self or world carries such an advantage. None of us have privileged access to our inner world or to the external (1982: 202).

Rorty believes that the accounts made by individuals carry a *moral* privilege, however. We are morally bound to listen to all accounts--those produced by the "moronic psychopath" and those produced, presumably, by

¹⁴ Barham, p 55, quoting Oliver Sacks, p 78, D.W Winnicott, p 152

¹⁵ Kovel, pp 335-338, 344 In reply to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (*Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*), who see transcendental possibilities in the very extremity of the schizophrenic's alienation, Kovel explains that by "denying the terror of [the schizophrenic] annihilation [it is assumed there exists] a kind of continuity between schizophrenia and normal experience." But, says Kovel, "the critical negativity within being--that capacity to refuse the given world while remaining one's self--is demolished [by the schizophrenic] and transposed to the zone of nonbeing." He or she thereby loses "the capacity of transforming material reality (including collective human reality) and with it, the only real possibility for emancipation" (343-344).

Rorty himself--simply because all speakers are human beings. Such civility is not a method for determining good explanations from bad but "a way of decreasing our chances of acting badly" (1982: 202) Are there good explanations and bad? One is either a relativist, or one, like Rorty, is not. He believes that no one but the most naïve or cooperative holds the view that any account or belief is just as good as any other (1982: 166). How, then, might we justify or evaluate beliefs? A particular passage in *The Collected Works* provides a hint that will lead us, with Rorty's help, towards an answer.

The others, I know, did not see the wounds appearing in the sky, in the air
 Sometimes a normal forehead in front of me leaked brain gasses Once a
 nose clogged right before me, a lock of skin formed over the nostrils, and the
 shocked face had to start breathing through mouth, but then the mustache
 bound itself in the lower teeth and he began to gasp loud the hah! hah! going
 strong--churned onto the floor, collapsed out, seeming in the end to be
 breathing out of his eye--tiny needle jets of air reaching into the throat I told
 no one. If Angela D had been with me then, not even her, not Sallie, John,
 Charlie, or Pat In the end the only thing that never changed, never became
 deformed, were animals (10)¹⁶

¹⁶ The "he" in this passage is no doubt Billy himself, who once had his nose broken That he speaks of himself in the third-person instances the schizophrenic annihilation of the self Nor is other spared Charlie was with Billy throughout the ordeal (*Collected Works* 82) Judith Owens has noticed that in this narrative Billy's attention moves steadily downward from sky to forehead to nose, and so on, to rest below the human level, on animals At this level he imagines "that quality which, in a more traditional metaphysical view, would belong to the highest sphere--immutability" (120) The view that Owens refers to--the 'mind/body distinction'--can be traced back to Plato As a way of distinguishing humankind from the beasts that perish, he considered that human beings were capable of *knowing*--knowing, unlike beasts, not merely singular facts, but universal, immutable truths Further, he thought that *voûs*--the Eye of the Mind, the intellect--was the eye of the soul, and that the soul became immaterial, capable of associating with the Godhead, upon internalizing eternal truths Kant wished to make the same distinction between human and beast, and posited the notion that we have dignity, a *moral sort* of dignity, rather than simple value (Rorty 1979 33-35, 38-41, 53) Having assigned the quality of mutability to humankind, it would seem that Billy has no belief in essential moral dignity, and, in this narrative, no hope of transcending material existence According to his reversal of the conventional formula, animals might live longer than he Nietzsche suggested that human beings might be a "peculiar sort of dying animal," capable of creating themselves by constructing their own minds (Rorty 1989 27) In view of Billy having destroyed himself by reconstructing his mind, no argument of transcendence, as Kovel has shown, can be furthered Regardless of his attempts to "split" mind from body (cf *CW* 11), or of his successful split of the self from self, Billy is, locked to space, time, and history, locked to the very limits of the body, and locked to the limits of the mind--the limits of knowledge

One element notably missing from Billy's account is its *communication* to his society. In view of Kovel's suggestion that the schizophrenic's apprehension of reality is a radically estranged vision from that of normal people--"not just distinct from the ordinary, but discontinuous with it" (334)--Billy's psychotic reality is, by not being communicated, *twice removed* from the reality of others. In refusing to communicate it, Billy might know full well his first remove--that his beliefs would not stand up to scrutiny by others. For it is in conversation, according to Rorty, that we evaluate and justify our beliefs; moreover, conversation *is* the determinant of our beliefs. Epistemic authority is explained "by what society lets us say," and "truth" cannot be more than "what our peers will. .let us get away with saying" (1979: 174, 176). We understand knowledge, he says, when we understand the social justification of belief (1979: 170). In other words, there is no method other than discussion to know good accounts from bad, and *knowing*, according to Rorty, is but the "right, by current standards, to believe" (1979: 389). Conversation with our fellow-humans is the only source of guidance in matters of reflection and truth, and, while participants may *hope* for agreement, "or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement," a successful conversation is a *continuing* conversation (1982: 165-66, 172; 1979: 318).

Peter Barham says much the same in a less philosophical way, and he will give us a bottom line on the "standards" that might allow us to get away with saying the things that we do. Drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of the intersubjective construction of reality--the "narrative enterprise"--both Barham and MacIntyre concur with Rorty's notion of inherited "starting-points" of the

conversation (1982: 166). Drafted into the story (or "conversation" or "dramatic history") that precedes the agent and is not of his making, the agent, says MacIntyre, is constrained in his storytelling by this wider action. Not just constrained by the terms of the inherited story, the agent is constrained by the storytelling of his contemporaries. To MacIntyre, unconstrained authorship is achieved only in fantasy.¹⁷

We can make partial account of Billy's narrative, free of collective deliberation on wounded air and brain gasses, accordingly. MacIntyre's theory of intelligibility, following, will posit the standard by which narrative reality is bargained or contested--for constraints are not to be understood as being final facts--providing us the means to further evaluate Billy's utterances.

MacIntyre believes that schemata exist for the members of a given culture by which they are able to act intelligibly to themselves, and to understand and interpret the action of others. Any interlocutor seeks the intelligibility of the utterances which constitute a conversation, and the intelligible description of an action allows one to identify the action as being "one of the many sorts of dramatic consequence that may ensue when human beings meet." The identification enables the interlocutor to see--or at the very least to conceive of--that action as having flowed intelligibly from an agent's intentions, motives, passions, or purposes. We thus "understand an action as something for which someone is accountable, about which it is always appropriate to ask the agent for an intelligible account."¹⁸

¹⁷ Barham, p 89

¹⁸ Quoted in Barham, pp 60, 130 Barham allows that frequently information or references

For the interlocutor to pronounce an action or occurrence unintelligible, he or she has not been provided a "narrative context" in which to place the action or occurrence, or is unable to imagine one that *could* account for the action.¹⁹ For instance, the problem with Billy's account of having shot Gregory is not that his passion or purpose remains unexplained (15). Rather, it is inconceivable that a chicken yanks twelve unbroken yards of vein from Gregory's neck, accomplishing more than any trained surgeon could. The problem with Billy's account of Charlie Bowdre growing eyes all over his body is the same (12). We could not conceive of an intelligible context in which to place the occurrence. Being taken through the desert without a hat no doubt explains *why* Billy says that he has been "fucked by Christ almighty" (78), but the account remains unintelligible. The red dirt that Billy chews--a kind of marijuana, according to Anne Blott--similarly qualifies the description of the photo that leaks water (50). Although delirium tremens could very well explain why Billy is able to put pen to paper when "millions" of ants are "all over crawling" (40), the account is not intelligible.

Given the demand made by the self and by others to provide an intelligible account of actions, we might wonder if an agent could possibly rewrite a dissatisfying narrative. Indeed, through a change in her or his knowledge or understanding of self or historical setting, and in light of her or his transactions with strategic or unstable others, the agent "has of necessity continually to refashion the...narrative forms in which he orders his life" (Barham 66-67).

which would render fully understandable all utterances may simply be missing from a given conversation. He remarks that a "conversation of any length may, moreover (even, perhaps, is *likely* to) contain digressions, blatant misunderstandings, areas of incoherence and other forms of departure from some rigorous rational norm" (130).

¹⁹ Barham, pp 130, 88

Germane to the understanding of Billy's subjectivity is a variant circumstance which demands that narrative revision be made. In this circumstance, the cultural guidelines for action and interpretation--*not* infallible--have in fact failed, leading the agent into error and deception, or they have simply proved inadequate for the agent to judge a particular occurrence of life that is "open to radically different possibilities of interpretation." In this circumstance of failed or inadequate schemata, which is one of an "epistemological crisis...that is at one and the same time a crisis in beliefs and in human relationships," the agent must resolve the crisis by the construction of a new narrative. Should an epistemic means of reasoning and belief *not* be restored, the crisis "must issue in a form of madness" (Barham 60, 64).

Both religious and juridical law have, in New Mexico in 1880, set out one fundamental guideline for human action and understanding: "Thou shalt not kill." But the guideline, we know, is frequently unobserved: over five acres of Boot Hill are filled with the bodies of murdered men (CW 9). Crossing himself daily from the age of twelve to eighteen, praying, "God please don't let me die today" (85), Billy eventually turns in his belief in God for a belief in *luck* (83). Moreover, Billy is aware of the failure of not just the religious schema to regulate or to explain human action: the Governor of New Mexico had agreed that "both sides [in the Lincoln County War] were guilty, and like a state of war there was no criminal punishment that could be genuinely brought against me without bringing it against everyone connected with that war" (82). The governor nevertheless and disingenuously brings charges against him. Billy is apparently unable to

formulate, through the process of narrative reconstruction, an interpretive schema which could allow him to account intelligibly for the drama of gunbarrels and death, and opts, in his crisis of human interdependency, not just for luck but for the annihilation that is schizophrenia.

James Glass regards the unintelligible narrative--"delusion"--as being a distinct commentary on power. Through the "logics" of symbolism are spoken "painful and disturbing messages" which describe "authority, rights, domination, justice, and injustice....desire, need, annihilation....deprivation" (405-406).

Kovel believes that neither the schizophrenic himself nor obvious "maddening conditions" can fully explain schizophrenic reality. Whatever "very violent and very awful" thing has happened, it cannot be named but only suggested, and "the words that suggest it are the words of poetry or the spirit" (335, 338).²⁰

Although Billy's speech *has* proved inadequate to the intelligible description of experience, through his terrible poetry we *do* come to understand domination and injustice, need and annihilation. "MMMMMMMMMM mm thinking," he recalls:

moving across the world on horses
body split at the edge of their necks
neck sweat eating at my jeans
moving across the world on horses
so if I had a newsman's brain I'd say
well some morals are physical
must be clear and open
like diagram of watch or star
one must eliminate much
that is one turns when the bullet leaves you
walk off see none of the thrashing
the very eyes welling up like bad drains
believing then the moral of newspapers or gun

²⁰ Kovel carefully distinguishes between the artist and the schizophrenic: while for both the "world is destroyed, but then remade," the artist's "new, transcendent product is associable, it can be communicated to others " For the schizophrenic, however, "the moment of destruction is amplified out of proportion to that of creation. The result is annihilation without corresponding production or association" (336)

where bodies are mindless as paper flowers you dont feed
or give to drink
that is why I can watch the stomach of clocks
shift their wheels and pins into each other
and emerge living, for hours (11)

Reviewing the murders he has committed, Billy contemplates the putative moral approach of the newsman: purely cerebral, scientific, technical. Social interaction nowhere in evidence, the newsman might be one who has attained objectivity. Billy himself has attempted to attain the same, coolly turning from the bullets that leave him. But in fact he has *not* escaped the bullets' material consequence, the thrashing bodies. Nor has he escaped their moral consequence. The image of the bodies that are like "mindless" flowers recalls the image of the Mexican flowers, "like brain the blood drained out," with which Billy confused his very self and cut down (56). Billy not only identifies with his victims but he identifies himself as the one who has caused their suffering. He then comes to recognize the *real* "moral of newspapers or guns," which he knows involves guilt.²¹

But to recognize guilt is not necessarily to contain it. Billy attempts to eradicate his moral knowledge by deploying part of his self as object, by ejecting the bad of the self on to the not-self. In one instance, realizing the "body split at the edge of their necks" to be *his* body, "neck sweat eating at my jeans," his success is fleeting. Dedifferentiation is again accomplished when he assigns both moral action and biological reality to clocks. *Their* action is indeed violent but ultimately harmless. The 'bodies' survive, and Billy, fragmented, is free of guilt--but only temporarily.

In the unintelligible account which follows "MMMMMMMM mm thinking,"

²¹ Cf. *Collected Works* 84

the bullet-riddled Charlie Bowdre is "pissing watch." He is pissing, we might guess, the "physical" aspect of the moral of guns that a diagram of a watch or star--or the workings of a 'biological' clock--fails to register. Billy witnesses Charlie's suffering and opts out of this hell of everyday reality, into the *better* hell of sprouting eyes and ambulatory livers (12).

The moral approach which Billy imagines of the typical newsman--technical and objective--probably derives from his experience in an interview with one of the species, an interview that sees the newsman as much as Billy himself highhandedly argue principles of morality. The first invests in the certainty of God's judgment, whereas Billy considers that without "real witnesses," "constitutional evidence," and "legal proof"--such language recalls Huffman's--a murderer simply cannot be held to his murders (81-83). While the two debate the laws of God and the laws of state, the *real evidence* of immoral action continues to fill Boot Hill.

Newsman and outlaw-lawyer together might stand for the priests, and later the Greek philosophers, and later still, the empirical scientists, and the German idealists, who each, as Rorty argues, told of an essential reality: the "ultimate locus of power" was said to be God, or the faculty of reason. In the Platonic-Kantian instance, transcendental, universal reason was thought adequate to condition the desires and passions, and to put particular actions to order under a system of general moral principles (1989: 26, 46, 32).

Rorty himself suggests that in our attempts to deal with one another, we ought to give up the idea that God, Science, Knowledge, Rationality, or Truth

will, "if only we perform the correct rituals, step in to save us" (1982: 208).

Rather, the only moral touchstone we might share with others concerns the only thing which can, in his view, define "the human": our "susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans--humiliation" (1989: 91-92). Futile are arguments for moral solidarity which are bolstered by beliefs of an essential humanity that "resonates to the presence of this same thing in other human beings" (1989: 189). And futile are those that attempt to answer *why* we should care about others:

human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one's world will not be destroyed. [W]ords like 'kindness' or 'decency' or 'dignity' do not form a vocabulary which all human beings can reach by reflection on their natures. Such reflection will not produce anything except a heightened awareness of the possibility of suffering. It will not produce a *reason to care* about suffering. (1989: 92-93)

We might create human solidarity simply by caring, by imaginatively identifying with the details of others' lives and with their suffering (93)--that which William Bonney upon occasion accomplishes. Moral progress involves trying to "extend our sense of 'we' to people whom we have previously thought of as 'they'," and trying to become aware of *all* the ways in which we might cause suffering (192, 92). Morality, as conceived by the pragmatist, has nothing to do with general principles but everything to do with "a set of practices, *our* practices" (60)

Billy has in him, says Sallie Chisum, both "bad" and "good" (CW 89). Billy himself says that he has a "range for everything": the wish for the rub of gun metal and the wish to crash things with an axe; the wish to "listen to deep buried veins in our palms" and to move "in dreams over your women night / near you"

(72). It has been widely argued, however, that it is *only* destructive needs that determine Billy's social relations. In particular, Billy's erotic interests and activities have been seen as purely pathological, poisoned by paranoia, "disgust," and a "peculiar confusion of sexuality and death." ²²

Granted: Billy's confusion of sexuality and death *is* peculiar. But viewed throughout the histories of psychology and literature, it is a confusion scarcely exceptional. Further, Billy's description of bathroom sex is notably free of paranoia or "disgust," showing, instead, remarkable *caring*:

And slowly and carefully she lifts her legs higher and hangs them on tight to my shoulders like clothespins. Come on Angie I'm drunk 'm not a trapeze artist Yes you are No And slowly I lift her up pressing her to me The smell of her sex strong now daubing my chest and shirt where she rubs it Youre too heavy for this I think, and we move careful to the floor (68)

It has also been said that Billy experiences a fear of engulfment by Angela D and, consequently, a "childish and impotent rage." ²³ We might consider such a fear in view of object-relations theory: without "some defense against penetration and engulfment, there can be no interiority." ²⁴ But the point is moot: as Billy takes his hat off upon entering "like a whale...my drowning woman my lady who drowns," neither of the lovers seems to be unduly concerned with either engulfment or penetration (CW 68).

Anne Blott, realizing that Billy "articulates the contact of bodies as if they were machines tensely working against each other," realizes at once the "beautiful completeness" of the machine, and its sensual and generational

²² Nodelman, pp 70-74, reading CW 21, 25, 64, 68, 76.

²³ Cooley, p 214, reading CW 64, 16

²⁴ Levin, p 521

qualities (CW 71, 42). She realizes, moreover, that the machine requires "the one altered move" in order to become self-destructively "maniac" (CW 41). But she finds that where the machine "is beauty on the edge of madness," the mechanized sex acts of Billy and Angela constitute a pattern "of the human *transformed* to machine, specialized and fragmented" (191-192; emphasis added).

In my opinion, Blott's characterization of the machine--"beauty on the edge of madness"--is also and keenly appropriate to Billy's erotic activities. It is, moreover, not much different from Socrates' description of the erotic: a "heaven-sent madness" (Alford 73). Ondaatje has said that on the "instinctual level," Billy is an artist.²⁵ His instinct yields his terror-filled poetry of annihilation just as it yields this--his much happier poetry of love-making. Plato saw eros as one "source of energy and inspiration that lead man higher, thereby acting as a bridge to the sublime" (Alford 73). Although Billy is, through eros, splendidly transported, he most certainly has not crossed the bridge. It is love, Plato thinks, that is required "for the growth of the soul's wings, by which the soul becomes capable of associating with the transcendent" (101). Still having one foot in hell, Billy gets by on the "instinctual level," *not* the transcendental

Plato also defined the sublime as the goodness and beauty that might be known when eros comes to serve not just bodily but cognitive function (Alford 101). Never aware of more than the mere fact that he puts pen to paper, William Bonney simply does not seek the sublime. Such is the undertaking, we will see,

²⁵ Pearce, p 142

of the self-conscious artist, Buddy Bolden.

II *Coming Through Slaughter: Over the Top and into the Sublime*

Buddy Bolden describes the passion that permeates both the Brewitt house and the "uncertain" and beautiful music that reaches his ears. "Everybody's love in the air" (92). Erotic energy drives forward Jaelin Brewitt's sound, and it is likewise the force behind Bolden's own "blood sperm music" (112). According to Plato, it is this combination of erotic energy and artistic pursuit that can lead one to participate in "the Good" and share in its perfection (Alford 98).

Contrarily, for a time the philosopher held that eros was "the enemy" of reason; that the body, a virtual prison of the soul, had to and could be transcended through a denial of its very claims (Alford 73). But when he saw that this attempt to transcend the contingent, the finite, and the mortal resulted in a loss of humanness itself, he modified his program for the "true lover of wisdom." Eros and reason together would allow man to experience the sublime (97-98, 73). This acceptance of the body and of contingency is a vital feature of Buddy's musical project.

Like his teacher Galloway, who is "so completely alone in his music," so far in advance of the "technician" with his mere pure notes, Buddy wishes to create a bubbling "mood of sound....Every note new and raw and chance" (95-96). Distrustful of the "sure lanes of the probable" and of "certain answers," Bolden bursts, "amateur and accidental," into the jazz scene and over hurdle after hurdle (14-16).

Conceiving of his project, Buddy inverts Plato's original formula, however, determining reason--"brain" or "mind"--to be the enemy of passion and

excellence. Believing that it is a brainless form of control that allows one to deftly cut carrots and play musical "mood" (31, 95), he elevates such brainlessness to the rank of an aesthetic principle. Moreover, he believes that the audience is oppressed by patterned, prescribed "emotions" and by beginnings and endings of music. These two principles sanction his dismissal of the "clarity and open-headedness" of John Robichaux and the "clear forms" which he fashions (93).

Bolden's aesthetic is contested from within his very own band, however. Frank Lewis, appreciating the Robichauxian synthesis of "mind" and "emotion," says of Bolden's music: it "had so little wisdom you wanted to clean nearly every note he passed...passed before he even approached it and saw it properly. There was no control except the *mood* of his power" (37).

It is quite possible that Buddy has simply never experienced the rational control which he loathes. Getting "lost" in Nora's "system of emotions," getting "lost in the details" of her stray hairs and body cells rubbed off, being unable to put "things" in their place, Buddy's "mind" is, the narrator tells us, "helpless against every moment's headline" (15).

Willy Cornish's view on Buddy's intellectual workings is interesting unto itself: "You never saw Bolden thinking, lots of people said that. He thought by being in motion. Always talk, snatches of song, as if his brain had been a fishbowl" (109). *This* notion--that movement might be the *fons et origo* of thought--is as credible as Buddy's idea that some movements require *independence* from thought. The "only way" to catch a fly, he says, "is to move

the hand without the brain telling it to move fast, interfering" (31).

While it is possible that Buddy's "mind" is much like a fishbowl, radically deficient and "helpless," it is more likely that by his own volition *mood* functions as the controlling mechanism of his music. And rather than a deprivation of reason, it is probably the very difficulty of making sense of the "headlines" of one's self and world that explains Buddy's loss of all bearings--a matter that I will return to.

The course of events and activities in Storyville would constitute good cause for *anyone* to adopt as their policy a suspicion of certainty and acceptance of contingency. Bellocq is sure that, in view of his illness, he will be "dead before forty." But he ironically meets with contingency in his attempt to accelerate his fate. The wall that he expects will clasp him to the "certainty" of his suicide "is not there" (57, 67).¹

Buddy himself slips into the "sure lanes" of knowing. He authoritatively declares that Willy and Nora have surpassed "the every-second change" he once observed of them; he thinks he sees the couple "as they are and always will be... complete and exact and final" (112). Professing to know not merely "the probable" but an indubitable and fixed reality, Buddy is squarely in the fast lane of the road. He should move over: contingent to *something*, Willy is married to Bella fifteen years later (147).

Unlike Buddy, the narrator posits something more than eyesight as the grounds for his epistemic authority. He claims that in looking at things he is able

¹ If one considers, like Freud, that "in fact everything to do with our life is chance, from our origin out of the meeting of spermatozoon and ovum onwards," one will see Bellocq's illness itself in the terms of contingency. Quoted in Rorty (1989), p. 31

to look "objectively" (24); moreover, he flaunts his simultaneous occupancy of two spatial locations (31)--a supernatural circumstance conventional of omniscient reporting. Little follows from such purchase, however. Informing the reader that Buddy spent his "second morning with the children, late morning (perhaps) with Pickett" (117), he obviously does not *always* make his way to the site of the action. Nor does he seem to regret being unable to establish the truth of yet another missed event: "IF Nora had been with Pickett. Had really been with Pickett as [Buddy] said....Then the certainties he loathed and needed were liquid at the root" (78). The certainties that he himself puts forth are, we learn, as contestable as Bolden's. Having declared that it will, counting from Spring 1906, take "two more years" for Buddy to return to Storyville (21), and that, counting from the same time, detective Webb takes "almost two years" to find him (63), he confidently and without explanation fixes Buddy's return to Spring 1907 (108).

The means by which Webb gleans his facts are, like the narrator's, occasionally wrapped in metaphysical mystery. His encounter of the notice of Isadora Duncan's death some twenty or twenty-five years in advance of the event makes a mockery of the usual constraints of time and space.² More often it is by the methods of evidence-gathering and inductive reasoning common to scientific inquiry that he fishes up his answers. His solution to the death of Nora's mother is, Nancy Bjerring notes, "inductively valid yet wildly improbable" (329). The chance that the lady was strangled by her snake, just as Duncan was strangled

² Stephen Scobie may have been the first to notice this anachronism. See "Coming Through Slaughter: Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webbs." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 12 (1978) 5-22

by her scarf, is indeed remote. Bjerring sees that although the "scientific world-view" is surely parodied, scientific method *does* work: it allows Webb to bring home his man. But if we doubt Webb's claim to have discovered the "mind" of Bellocq by observing his "head shape" and distinctive walk (57), we will see a parody of scientific method *and* of scientific "certainty"--*as well as the inconsistency of scientific success*. Such inconsistency is again spelled out: scientists *are* able to differentiate dolphin sounds, but they do not know how the dolphin makes two kinds of sounds simultaneously (6).

The effect of this voluminous exposition of failed certainties, unfailed contingencies, preposterous epistemic authority, and sheer limit, is, I think, that which Bjerring describes of the parody: "call[ed] into question [is] the capacity of human reason and its traditional methods to explain and verify the events of experience" (328). Further, we might understand that neither the lack of epistemic authority nor the ubiquity of contingency will prevent *anyone* from describing or explaining reality, and from believing their stories to be true.³

Buddy eventually reveals that his alternative to rational control has restrained neither his music nor his social relations. He explains that his musical anarchy is correlative to his own and others' amatory anarchy: "We had no order

³ Richard Rorty suggests that we "give up the neurotic Cartesian quest for certainty" (1982 161). He thinks that "great scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which *any* of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself. We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. Truth cannot be out there--cannot exist independently of the human mind--because [the sentences which express truth are elements of human languages which are themselves human creations]. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not" (1989 4-5). Cf. "Truth cannot be more than 'what our peers will let us get away with saying'" (above 19).

among ourselves. I wouldn't let myself control the world of my music because I had no power over anything else that went on around me, in or around my body" (99). His "whole plot of song" has reflected the whole plot of life: "scandal and incident and change.. the children and the ladies changing hands like coins.... contests for bodies....competition[s] to surprise each other with lovers.... money...pain...happiness....crazyness" (43, 113). Both of the plots are finally dismissed by him: "Cricket noises and Cricket music for that is what we are when watched by people bigger than us" (113).

The person whose actions stand as an exception to the moral chaos is Jaelin Brewitt. Cuckolded by Robin, he remains civil, making physical and emotional space for Buddy, becoming a silent witness to their disorder. "[F]ar more intelligent and sensitive and loving and pained" than anyone else, he manages moral self-regulation *and* some kind of comprehension: his "silence... understood them all" (99, 65). And so we return to the matter deferred: what are the possibilities and the limitations of making sense of the "headlines"--moral or otherwise--of the self and world? Rorty's discussion of self-creation, following, will answer that question and help us to answer one other: how has Buddy grown "bigger" than the person he once was?

To make sense of one's life, Rorty thinks it is necessary to conceive of that life in terms of its specific context, its contingent circumstances. Instead of conceiving of rationality as a central faculty, a central self, called "reason," he recommends that we think of it as a mechanism which adjusts contingencies to other contingencies. And "the idea of rationality" is not, to him, "the idea that we

need to bring particular actions under general principles if we are to be moral." Rather, he thinks of morality and prudence as "alternative modes of adaption" to contingencies (1989: 26, 33).

The process of making sense of the circumstances of a life, the process of attaining self-knowledge, is not, he thinks, a process of "coming to know a truth which was out there (or in here) all the time." Like Harold Bloom and Nietzsche, Rorty conceives of self-knowledge as self-creation. He sees that Bloom's "strong poet" produces not just original artworks but *a self* that is not a copy or replica of another. The strong poet manages to recognize the contingencies of the world she did not make, the world that she inherited. She tracks the causes which have left an impression upon her; she traces them home. She *appropriates* those contingencies and then tells "the story of [her] own production in words never used before." The "process of coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home, is identical with the process of inventing a new language--that is, of thinking up some new metaphors" with which to describe the self (24-29).

Like Bloom's strong poet, Nietzsche's "strong maker" recognizes the inherited descriptions of the contingencies of his existence. Escaping them, he tells a story about his causes in a new language (28-29). However, where Nietzsche sees that one *can* escape--can get beyond *all* inherited descriptions to a "*pure* self-creation"--Rorty does not (106). To him, self-creation will necessarily be "marginal and parasitic" (41). One will always exist in relation to a web of historical events, social conditions, and predecessors (106). Nietzsche wants,

he says, "sublimity, not just beauty" (106).

Finally, Rorty stresses that the aim of redescription is best thought of in terms of "expanding [one's] repertoire of alternative descriptions rather than [making] The One Right Description" (40). Contrary to any notion of resolution, the project of redescription will never be complete because "there is nothing to complete, there is only a web of relations to be rewoven, a web which time lengthens every day" (43). "[W]hat counts as resolution, perfection, and autonomy will always be a function of when one happens to die or to go mad" (99).

In his companionship with Bellocq, Bolden begins--but only begins--to recognize the contingencies of his world and the descriptions made of him. He believes, in retrospect, that the photographer tempted him away from the world of audiences, away from the descriptions of magnificence that were heaped upon him:

I had tried to catch everything thrown at me (91) .. You'd play and people would grab you and grab you till you began to--you couldn't help it--believe you were doing something important And all you were doing was stealing chickens, nailing things to the wall So I got so, with Bellocq, I didn't trust any of that any more It was just playing games (59)

However, rather than appropriating those stories to tell a new story about himself, he simply refused them and the world that generated them. Moving "off the edge" of the social map, he made a flight into "privacy" (64)--the first of his many flights into the "white privacy," the "crazy chaos of white, that is the eyes wide, wishing to burn them out till they are stones" (68).

The whiteness is only one aspect of his madness. "There can be," he

says, "the dark narrow focus of the eye" (68)--the "darkness," the "complications," of violent emotions (69). Thinking that Bellocq encouraged him "to become blind to everything but [his] owned pain," Bolden believes he met the need to "come home" to that "desert blackness" (91). The realization that Bolden gained was not, however, that of *apprehension*, but conversion of it into fact, into *realized existence*. Nora, Tom Pickett, and "everyone" else around him were made to suffer his "[b]reaking chairs and windows glass doors" (16), his "mood" of "filth" and straight razors (72); various foul extremes of his "rhetoric of fury" (78). The desert blackness is "casual"--a fitful, practically random, and practically unmeditated harangue.

In his companionship with the Brewitts, Buddy gets closer to home. Early into the relationship with Robin, he thought he could deny all histories other than that one being established (62). Moreover, he thought he could claim Robin as his personal possession: "Look you're either Jaelin's wife or my wife." Robin would not be held to such folly: "I'm Jaelin's wife and I'm in love with you, there's nothing simple" (69). Finally realizing that no one history or actor can be independent of other histories and actors, Buddy draws the three players together into one story. In view of his atrocious misconduct in the Buddy-Nora-Pickett affair, he makes definite moral gains by doing so:

Jaelin and Robin Jaelin and Robin and Bolden Robin and Bolden There was this story between them There was this deceit and then there was this honour between them (65)

He comes to understand that any well-told, comprehensible story requires the "beginnings," the "history of it all" (93-94). Implicit to the plots of life, like Bolden's

plots of song, are "the germs of the start" (43, 94) ⁴

Upon his return to Storyville, Bolden reviews his history with Nora and weaves that relationship anew. Once described by others as "the famous fucker" (106), and self-described as the "burglar" who customarily robbed her of love (111), he re-describes himself as a friend and as a brother to her (111, 120). Talking "gently and slowly," he develops their kinship, then re-describes himself again, as the husband who makes love with his "wife" (120, 122).

Finally, Buddy tracks home his musical causes. He sees how his course was shaped by his teachers' technical wizardry and strange bubbling moods. He also realizes the importance of Scott and Carey's invitation to join the perilous "game" of fame. Masters of self-destruction, they promised losses to "neurotic" women, to alcohol, or to the ease that money brings; they promised the loss of life itself (95-96) "In terror.. [of] becoming them"--or of becoming like Happy Galloway, with *no* desire to persuade anyone into his style (96)--Bolden wanted to become something other than a mere copy of these "remnants" and "ladders" (102). But he decided upon nothing original. Believing that his "fathers.. put their bodies over barbed wire" for his sake, he obligingly followed, climbing up and "over the barbed wire attached to [Carey's arrested] heart" (95-96). "[S]educated" by their "sacrifice" (95), he discovered the "[e]cstasy" of blind, "crucif[ying]"

⁴ A number of critics have argued that Bolden produces a music, without beginnings or endings, that is for the audience totally non-coercive and non-repressive. Although Bolden's beginnings are those tenuous germs of the start, and his endings "whatever point" in music he reaches when he stops playing, his music--just like Robichaux's--is indeed constrained by them (94). With regard to plots of life, both Alford and Barham recognize Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of the unity of the self. That unity "resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end" (MacIntyre, p. 191). It is the sense of historical continuity--past, present, and future--and not any particular elaboration, re-elaboration, counter-elaboration, or goal, that provides the sense of wholeness. See Alford, p. 196, Barham, p. 88.

drunks, of "[s]o many varieties of murder" before death (79, 49).⁵

In view of the plans Bolden makes for his musical comeback, his surrender to career suffering and self-destruction might seem to have been less than absolute. Strategizing for survival, he decides that he will not play "music" at all. Rather, by playing just the notes that he has perfected to "jerk forward in a spurt," by playing only the "beginning" and no middle or end, he will, he thinks, walk down this musical path "knowing it is just stone" (100-101). But Bolden fools not even himself. He knows that the survival he schemes is that of "an act of privacy," a "romantic...suicide" (101). He knows what he wants; he charts his longing.

At the corner of Customhouse and Liberty, he is challenged by a dancer, "one as cold and pure as himself," to outdo her erotic energy (130). He plunges into his romance: into his fathers' script and into his act of privacy. Like his fathers, the "old hero, old ego" leaves the stage; like them, he *loses* his "privacy," his very self. He gives his "brains" away (133), it is into the "sublime" reaches of schizophrenic annihilation that he soars (148).

It is *not* the sublime that Plato had in mind. "What good is all that [talent and wisdom Buddy stole and 'learnt' from people] if we can't learn or know," Cornish asks (145). Rorty would answer that it may be no good at all unless with

⁵ In "The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer" Susan Sontag describes the Christian tradition which "equates the discovery of the self with the discovery of the suffering self." She sees that in the modern "cult of suffering," the saint has been replaced by the artist as the exemplary sufferer. Suffering in life, the artist transforms this suffering into art, or into suicide, which is "conceived of not as an end to suffering, but as the ultimate way of acting on suffering" (52, 57) (*Against Interpretation* New York: Dell Publishing, 1961). I would argue Buddy's triumph to be greater than his fathers' in that he eventually brings directly into his field of artistic expression the self-destruction which they enact in and through their *non-artistic* pursuits. (Sam Solecki was the first to read *Slaughter* in light of Sontag's essay. Details will follow.)

it we tell a new story about ourselves. He would caution, however, that if we avoid Nietzsche's notion that "a life of self-creation can be as complete and as autonomous as Plato thought a life of contemplation might be--then we shall be content to think of any human life as the always incomplete, yet sometimes heroic, reweaving [of the web of one's relations]" (1989: 43). "There are no prizes," the novel closes, for old hero Bolden (156). A replica of the ones who have gone before him, he has missed becoming Bloom's strong poet.⁶

In his Acknowledgements, Ondaatje admits that some historical facts

⁶ Bolden's end has been seen otherwise. Constance Rooke hypothesizes that Bolden is an "extremist artist" and that the extremist artist is by definition a hero. She spends twenty-five pages arguing against the interpretation made by "many readers," that Ondaatje's closing words suggest a certain "defeat." In short, she sees that Bolden experiences a transcendental, thoroughly "happy ending." She concludes her essay with the "admission"--having never fully believed her argument, if she has believed it at all--that Ondaatje's ending "'can mean exactly the opposite' of what I'm thinking too. It is the risk an extremist critic has to take." Much more interesting than Rooke's essay is one that takes the extremist seriously. In "Making and Destroying *Coming Through Slaughter* and Extremist Art," Sam Solecki argues that the extremist is driven and ultimately overwhelmed by his emotions, which themselves become the material of his reckless, violent art. He is also driven by the audience that expects a self-destructive performance from him. Moreover, it is the very concept of the avant-garde--Bolden "must stay ahead not only of what others have done and are doing but even ahead of what he himself has recently done"--that forces him to be "predictably unpredictable." It becomes impossible for him to achieve a "stable, private self [and] identity." It is in schizophrenia, Solecki argues, that Bolden achieves "a wholeness of being, an equanimity and peace." It is in his silence that he achieves a release "from the compulsion to create." Solecki believes that this silence, which is "seem[ingly] preferable to the internal and external demands" of extremist art, indicates Ondaatje's disenchantment with such art. Ondaatje's text does not support such conclusions, however. Bolden's audience can scarcely be seen to set standards for the letting of blood. Rather, it is Bolden himself who sets those standards, urging his fellow musicians to play louder, to "put [their] hands through the window" (14). Lewis and Mumford survive not only the same audience as Bolden but his very entreaty, neither bursting blood vessels nor giving away their brains. Concerning the avant-garde, Galloway was, according to Bolden, miles ahead of everyone else, and seemed to have no trouble whatsoever in maintaining a private self and identity--although to Bolden, an utterly boring one (96). Further, Ondaatje apparently finds admirable the "pinnacle" that Bolden reached before his collapse (133). As I see it, it is neither the audience nor being on a new and cutting edge that sends Bolden over the top, but his irresistible attraction to suffering and self-destruction. As for the notion that Bolden experiences schizophrenic "equanimity and peace," the fantasy of agony that "happens forever and ever in his memory" suggests that Bolden is in a constant state of torment (136). He does indeed find rapes to be "sublime" (148), but the schizophrenic may not be a reliable judge of his or her situation. Much earlier Bolden had trouble, we can recall, with having no power over what went on in or around his body.

"have been expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction." Moreover, along with "real" characters, he has "used more personal pieces of friends and fathers." In the Credits of *The Collected Works*, he similarly declares that he has "edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked" his sources. In an interview with Sam Solecki, he discusses the "lying" that results in at least one aspect of "the truth of fiction":

There's a great deal of lying in poetry, by necessity. It's not a case of being tactful or misrepresenting something but of making art, art is, to a certain extent, deceit. And what disturbs me in having my work interpreted as either physically or biographically right or wrong is that there's an emotional or psychological rightness which, for me, is more important than the other two (1975: 23)

An author's depiction of the psychological reality of any person, whether with the person's co-operation or not, could scarcely be anything other than an imaginative construction, a fiction, a 'truth' with questionable truth-value. But in view of Ondaatje's manipulation of the "facts" and the "real" to achieve the truth of fiction, what can be said about the truth of history? What is the referential value of these stories about Charles 'Buddy' Bolden and William Bonney? Linda Hutcheon was the first to describe the workings of historiographic metafiction-- the fiction which self-consciously draws attention to its status as an artefact, and simultaneously "uses and abuses" the historical referent. Her account will provide us a way of thinking about the relations between Ondaatje's art and historical reality.

Historiographic metafiction is aligned, she says, with the long (and, to us, now familiar) philosophical tradition which argues that, "while reality may exist 'out there', it is unavoidably ordered by the concepts and categories of our human understanding" (1987: 173). Relying upon both Fredric Jameson and Hayden

White, Hutcheon sees that although the historical referent--the person, the event, the "brute experience"--obviously *did* exist in the past, its existence is utterly inaccessible to us now except in textual form (170). Hence, in this historiographic perspective it is not that the past is denied; rather, any claim that we might "know that past by any other means than textualized, interpreted 'reports' " is contested (1987: 170).

It is argued that, by virtue of the writer's selection and interpretation of referent, her employment of trope or allegory, *any* act of telling about the past "makes the 'given' into the 'constructed' " (170-173; 1985: 302). The brute "events" of the past give rise to, but are necessarily distinct from, the "always already interpreted" historical accounts--the so-called "facts" (176, 170).

Hutcheon emphasizes that "while all knowledge of the past may be provisional, historicized, and discursive, this does not mean we do not MAKE MEANING of that past" (176).

The writer of historiographic metafiction asserts the existence (but inaccessibility) of the past real by using the historical referent in the work (173). At once she or he invents clearly fictive, novelistic referents, thereby abusing the historical referent (172) In effect, the writer has his "historical referent and erase[s] it too" (172).

Ondaatje's Billy Bonney and Buddy Bolden both *are* (by virtue of the historical nature of the referents constantly being implied) and *are not* (by virtue of the fictionality of the referents being repeatedly stressed by the text's self-reflexivity) the "real historical" Billy and Buddy (1985: 305). The historical

Billy Bonney was shot by Pat Garrett but was *not* the chronicler of the event. The historical Buddy Bolden is drawn to the historical E.J. Bellocq but *only* by "[p]rivate and fictional magnets." Truth-value is both implied and blocked (1987: 174): Buddy Bolden *did* live and die in the actual world of Storyville but clearly *did not* meet Billy Bonney Antrim in the East Louisiana insane asylum.⁷ Moreover, narrative "fact"--Buddy is "formally married" to Nora (25); he studied with Galloway, Scott, and Carey--is accepted as true *only* until we reach the "thin sheaf of information" which provides a *different* discursive fact. One of those facts--"Bolden worked at Joseph's Shaving Parlor" (132)--was known to Ondaatje before he wrote *Slaughter* as being an often-repeated rumor, perhaps even completely untrue.⁸ "Historiographic metafiction does not deny," says Hutcheon, "that reality is or was; it just questions how we *know* that and how it is or was" (173).

We know reality through discourse, through language. To Hutcheon, modernism asserts the autonomy of both language and art. The modernist attempts to make "the play of signifiers discontinuous with representation and with the external world." But modernism has been challenged by the postmodern wish for "a return of the referent" (1985: 301; 1987: 171). Historiographic metafiction signals, however, that the return can never be naive and unproblematic: " 'there has been an end to innocence concerning the status of and access to the referent in discourses of all types' " (172).⁹

⁷ Stephen Scobie has pointed out that Billy is slipped into *Slaughter* under his historical name
Op. cit

⁸ Barbour, p. 100

⁹ Hutcheon quotes critic Peter Brooks

Historiographic metafiction further connects art with reality in that the author's performative process--his "act of searching and ordering" historical contexts--"forms part of the narrative itself " (1985: 303). The reader is likewise implicated. Her act of organizing and interpreting the textual fragments, her participation in the act of organizing the past itself, constitutes "the focus" of the book (304). History and narrative becomes "a process, not a product. It is a lived experience for both reader and writer" (306). Hutcheon concludes that

To write self-reflexively of history as process in progress, instead of as completed product, is to break down the finality of formal narrative closure. Such a self-conscious opening up of the borders of both history and narrative is a postmodernist restating of the traditional (and perhaps obligatory) mimetic connection between art and life. (312)

The project of historiographic metafiction is not to everyone's satisfaction, however. In "Postmodernism: Bourgeois Smoke Screen or Ethical Philosophy. A Comparison of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and Hubert Aquin's *Neige Noire*," Danielle Miller says that postmodern theory "purports" to address important social, political, and artistic issues (211). Hutcheon stands as her example of certain of the movement's theorists who view the practice of historiographic metafiction as "a means of destabilizing master narratives in order to include less frequently told stories" (212). Hutcheon emphasizes, says Miller, "the historical nature of postmodernism, *but notes history's dependency upon context [and discursivity]*" (emphasis added; 212).

Miller contrasts Hutcheon, "who seems to believe that the past can be understood in its own right," to Jameson, who "views history as a means of justifying the present" (212). Like Jameson, Miller thinks that the margin's access

to history, its "mastery" of the past, is a necessary step in the acquisition of "the identity they need to change their lot" (213-214).

What gets in the way of the postmodern ethical position is what, according to Miller, gets in the way of history: historiographic metafiction. The "emphasis that historiographic metafiction places upon a diversity of interpretations and upon the fictional nature of the past" impedes the margin's access to its history (214). Moreover, historiographic metafiction "undermine[s] the margin's identity by fragmenting and discrediting its history" (212) ¹⁰

Miller considers that "by appropriating history and consigning it to the

¹⁰ Miller's argument is, I find, often vague and turgid. I reproduce it because it is a fine example of the work being done in a very complex campaign--a campaign that will be of concern us to the end of this chapter.

Regarding *Coming Through Slaughter*, Miller understands "fragments" as the "interviews, official birth/death certificates, newspaper clippings," and "doses of historical context" that describe Bolden's history. His "marginal history" is "fragmented," reduced to "nothing more than media and context," becoming "simply another set of tales in a cultural collage" (212-14). There is, to Miller, evidence of another sort of fragmentation: "a flat, albeit fragmented, aesthetic space," an "aseptic unreal space that increases marginalization" (215-16). The narrator of *Slaughter*, she says, "collapses space by combining film reels produced in the 1960's, histories of both the East Louisiana State Hospital and of Buddy Bolden, a transcript of *Nora's Song* and a copy of a dust jacket from a recording by one of Buddy's successors. The narrator forces the reader not only to accept the incongruity that characterized the musician's life, but to reassess the character constantly in light of new information. Buddy Bolden is a family man, a barber, a husband, a lover, a criminal, an irrational artist, and a madman" (216). The postmodern collapse of space is not without a certain violence: "Postmodern space, by aestheticizing social problems, not only secures the art object's estrangement from reality, but betrays the artistic movement's fundamentally violent nature. In *Coming Through Slaughter* the new spacial aesthetic's emphasis on flatness, self-reflexivity, and appropriation illustrates the violence of the supposedly democratic doctrine" (215). Miller takes a new turn, towards issues of cultural homogenization. In Ondaatje's novel, "the characteristic flatness of postmodern space, rather than accurately depicting social diversity, confiscates the protagonist[s] claim to an identity." Bolden is "plunged into the 'acculturated' environment of the majority." His "life has suffered sufficient fragmentation and spacial flattening that it has lost any defence that might prevent its assimilation" (215, 217). Miller takes her final turn. She says that according to Harold Innis, "the preservation of a stable and powerful empire rests upon a nation's ability to control time and space." To Miller, Ondaatje's postmodern structure, "instead of promoting openness and plurality, insures the establishment's control of time and space" (212). "As such," she says, "postmodernism may be yet another master narrative whose terms, having been set by the establishment, help to extend western influence throughout the world by assimilating and administrating 'difference' in the name of democracy and openness" (217). Put much more simply, postmodernism "serves to reinforce the *status quo*" (212).

domain of the written," historiographic metafiction "strengthens a liberal, middle-class control of the past" (213) But in *Coming Through Slaughter*, "marginal history is depicted not only through writing, but through music" (213). And it is Buddy Bolden who, in contrast to the narrator, "represents a truly postmodern historian" (213).¹¹ Standing to Miller as an example, then, of how to do history right, Bolden

describes his surroundings by way of his instrument. Indeed, Bolden sees Bellocq as a shape in music, and characterizes his own sexual encounters, as a series of unusual breathing patterns¹². His musical sketches remain spontaneous, ephemeral, and give voice to the characters that surround him. As such, 'He did nothing but leap into a mass of changes and explore them and all the tiny facets so that eventually he was almost completely governed by fears of certainty'. Furthermore, a form of mediation and distortion, jazz is a product of a particular social environment and perhaps more sensitive to its intricacies than later written accounts. Bolden's music, in keeping with the concept, not the practice, of postmodern history, represents a communal project involving his audience, himself, and his predecessors whose 'Every note (was) new and raw and chance. Never repeated'. Since Buddy's practices do not meet with those of the established historians who seek to mobilize history, or rather since 'there was a discipline it was just that we didn't understand', any attempt to describe the cornet player in metafictional terms will only discredit him. (213)

To recapitulate: in league with his fathers and his collective, Buddy Bolden

¹¹ Miller explains why Bolden 'historicizes' by way of his cornet and why his music was never recorded: "class and personal interests prevented him from leaving any conventional record of his existence" (214). Without being an expert on the New Orleans music industry, it is only my guess that class interests--presumably those of the working class artist--would hold back none of the jazz greats from being recorded. It is my guess that the industry is sustained by recording, promoting, and, perhaps, exploiting as many of them as possible. Concerning Ondaatje's textualized Bolden, Frank Lewis's comment--"He was never recorded. He stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history" (37)--suggests that Bolden gladly refused the opportunity to be recorded. But the historical fact is such that Bolden would not have had that opportunity. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band cut the first jazz record in 1917, for Columbia. The surprised and horrified Columbia executives refused to release the "cacophony," and the band--a group of white musicians--next recorded with Victor. That recording was released in March 1917. The first black jazz record, by the New Orleans group W. C. Handy and His Orchestra, followed six months later. (See Jim Godbolt's *The World of Jazz*, London: Studio Editions, 1990.)

¹² Indeed, it is Webb who imagines Bolden as "an outline and music" (51). Miller also mistakes Bunk Johnson's inventory of Storyville's streetbands, thinking it is "a copy of a dustjacket from a recording by one of Billy's successors" (Miller 216, *Slaughter* 107).

mediates and distorts in exemplary jazz-historicist fashion the "intricacies" of his social environment. According to Miller, Ondaatje not only fails at such an enterprise but *deliberately prevents* a mobilization of history. The argument that grounds this assertion will allow me to finally posit what I think are the vital assumptions that underwrite, from start to finish, Miller's project. Relying upon Jameson, Miller says he argues

that postmodern art, despite its self-professed political implications, emits a contradictory message. At the same time that the work points to an outside reality to which it belongs, the piece exhausts the reader with its intratextual games so that he has little patience and even less desire to look beyond the work to where the 'collective fantasies and material culture industry lie' [Jameson quoted]. As is the case in *Coming Through Slaughter*, postmodern space pays lip service to specific social problems in such a way as to insure that nothing will alter the *status quo*. Ondaatje's novel employs an elaborate meta-narrative to divert the reader's attention away from the violence of Bolden's world. The reader grows sufficiently engrossed in deciphering fact from fiction that he forgets to examine the social conditions of Storyville. Upon closer scrutiny, Bolden's surroundings are far from the exciting and romantically decadent ambience described in 'His geography'. They are, more realistically, ridden with crime, pimping, and 'mattress whores' (216)

First, to address Miller's view of the apparently well-researched "His geography":¹³ it is not with approval that Ondaatje describes the "sporting district" murders, drug habits, venereal diseases, and prostitution racket. Indeed, he describes at length how the "whores" are, quite unromantically, shipped in from the suburbs, distinguished from "women," ranked according to race, graded by age, tagged with prices, and offered cures for gonorrhoea. On the other hand, I think he does approve of Olivia--she, "the best" oyster dancer, manages to nab some of the extra money that slides around town. French Emma is particularly cunning: her plan "wins" her two dollars in sixty seconds or less. And Grace

¹³ See Ondaatje's Acknowledgements

Hayes "even" trains a raccoon to pick pockets. Outmanœuvring their customers, the women experience small victories in the situation that obviously remains desperate.

Bolden's account of "the good life good time ever loving Storyville" is no less compelling than the narrator's. He describes the crime, the pimping, and the mattress whores--*and* he describes his own small victory. He, similar to the pimps, has a "fast rich walk" (119). However, he is also clearly a loser. Like the whores who have mattresses strapped to their bodies, he has one strapped to his "brain." And not much different from their "murdered" bodies is that "suicided" brain (119). Like the narrator, Bolden describes limited wins and dreadful losses. To Miller's charge of romantic description I would answer that, concerning Poor Tromped-on Buddy Bolden,¹⁴ and Buddy Bolden: Superior Historian, it is precisely that sort of description which she herself offers.

Besides romance, Miller's project depends upon, it seems to me, the following assumptions. There are occasions when she will be forced to accept that "incongruity" characterizes the life of a specific individual. However, "the margin" must not be described as having seven different roles or ways of being. The "margin's identity"--Miller assumes throughout that she knows what that is--must be understood in terms of some unchanging wholeness; a singular, pure essence. Further, knowing things about '3olden's history that everyone ought to, she assumes that this "marginal history" is an accessible obviousness. It is apparently something real, beyond textualization or fictionalization; it is knowable

¹⁴ I see no reason why Bolden would not pull in as much money as do the piano players: "several thousand in weekly tips" (9)

as it is in itself. There is no need for a diversity of interpretations or for any interpretation at all. The historian himself must, according to Miller, be concerned with the social environment and with political mobilization. She assumes there is only one kind of history: the socio-political. The function of that history--it has but one--is to found and direct the collective's present and future. She paradoxically assumes the existence of that which she abhors, a master narrative, The One Right Description, which secures. Lastly, the function of the art object and of the artist--to point to an outside reality to which it belongs and to alter the *status quo*--is one of social and political utility. There is no other purpose than that one. Nor could we expect it to be otherwise. The art object that manifests something other than social and political concerns is, to Miller, "estrang[e]d from reality." There is but one reality: the socio-political.

Central to Miller's discussion of the ethics of postmodernism is this very conception of reality. Before bringing Richard Rorty in on a discussion of the public, socio-political realm of existence, and that of the private, the individual, and the aesthetic, it will be worthwhile to look at the work of Christian Bök. His quasi-concern about the violence in Ondaatje's novels operates as a smoke-screen for this same discussion. It will also be worthwhile to look at Robin Mathews's work--he makes no pretense of discussing anything else. It will be worthwhile to bring Ondaatje himself into the discussion--one which will bear upon my analyses, in later chapters, of *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*.

Bök makes a short inventory of the "[e]xotic violence which has indeed become a hallmark of Ondaatje's style"--a style which achieves its "aesthetic

integrity through both technical precision and emotional detachment." Amongst his examples is that of Livingstone, who is "eaten alive by mad dogs"; Billy the Kid, who "goes into a frenzy and blasts away at rats"; Bellocq, who "deliberately immolates himself"; Bolden, who "uses a straight-razor" to mutilate Pickett; the bridge-worker, in *Lion*, who is "cut in two by a giant wire whip"; and Patrick Lewis, in that same novel, who "uses dynamite to obliterate a country hotel" (109-110). Such are Ondaatje's "sadistic visions" such is his "infatuation with brutality" (111).¹⁵

Bök also records Ondaatje's formalistic artistic transgressions, for "just as William Bonney and Buddy Bolden do violence to social codes, so also do the texts themselves do violence to literary codes." "Violating generic boundaries" and "juxtapos[ing] unrelated fragments," Ondaatje produces texts which, "like the characters depicted in them," "violently resist definitive categorization" (115).¹⁶ It is enough to "call to [Bök's] mind" Bellocq's defacement of his photographs--an acting out of "the artistic death-wish, in which '[t]he making and destroying come from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of'" (116). "Ondaatje's depiction of Bellocq actually suggests," says Bök, "that male artists are always potentially psychotic, that social integration for them is at best

¹⁵ On the subject of violence, Ondaatje says, "I don't think I'm a particularly violent poet, which some people feel I am, and I don't think I'm a grotesque poet, as some people think. I can see as much gentleness as violence [in *The Collected Works*], for me there's a balance. And I really tried to keep the number of deaths in *Coming Through Slaughter* to a minimum. The thing is it's a very real world to me and if people don't want to see that as part of the real world, then they're ignoring it. It's been said that violence is normal in our lifetime just as good manners were normal to the world that Jane Austen created. It's getting a balance between the two worlds--the violent and the gentle--but both exist." Pearce, p. 136

¹⁶ Ondaatje finds "appalling" the tendency of critics, "obsessed with all these categories," to try "to nail writers down within a literary tradition." Solecki, Interview (1984), pp. 328-329

temporary if it is ever at all possible" (116).¹⁷ Further, by "romanticiz[ing]" his violent protagonists, appearing to "encourage the reader to forgive, if not admire [them]" for their excesses, and by presenting the physical violence of his "male aesthetes" as an "extension," albeit "pathological," of their creativity, Ondaatje represents violence as "an aesthetic virtue" (109, 114).¹⁸

Bök spends less than one-half of a paragraph elaborating his concern about the social implications of this "motif " of violence. exposure to "such aesthetically rendered violence," to such an "aesthetic celebration of brutality," might desensitize the audience to violence and naturalize it as a social phenomenon (110). He spends the whole of the next elaborating an *acceptable* aspect of the portrayal of violence. Explaining the postmodern strategy of "defamiliarization," he says that "[g]raphic depictions of aestheticized brutality" might "disrupt any naturalized assumption that tries to efface its status as an

¹⁷ As we know, Alford regards regressive narcissism--as Kovel (339) and Barham (54) regard schizophrenia--as just one aspect of the human condition. Hence, psychosis is a potential for all male artists, as well as for the rest of us. Ondaatje would agree that you can't generalize much more than that. He dismisses any notion of Bolden (and we might extrapolate Bellocq) as being representative of *the* artist. "you can't generalize from one person. [you] can't make a general statement about the artist in society, because you can't make a statement like that through an individual." Pearce, p. 142.

¹⁸ Ondaatje clearly does otherwise. In the case of Bellocq, his "making" is assigned the characteristics of a religious event. The photographer, who swivels round his tripod and his hydrocephalic deformity, and the prostitute, who transcends for a fleeting moment *her* gritty present, experience an interdependent state of "grace" (54). With the event of "destroying," however, the "beauty" which Bellocq had "forced" into the photograph is unmistakably and horribly "defil[ed]" (55). Moreover, the sitter's appendectomy scar--one that is compared to the wounds of the Christ icon on her wall (54)--is qualitatively different from the "non-surgical" ones which Bellocq traces. Making, not destroying, is the "aesthetic virtue," and destroying, rather than being any sort of natural "extension" of creativity, appears to be the very perversion of creativity. That the *potential* to make and the *potential* to destroy coexist is beautifully explained by Canadian jazz pianist, collage artist, and writer Al Neil. "The energy in [sax player] Albert Ayler and in the Bomb (metaphor for all violence) comes from the same field. But the one is a breathtakingly beautiful psychic phenomenon, the other a terrible force which destroys every lovely thing that lives where the fire hits" (qtd. in Barry Maxwell's "Surrealistic Aspects of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*", *Mosaic*, Vol. 18.3 (1985) 101-114).

ideological construct"; they might, in other words, "shock an audience into a recognition of its own implication in violent, ideological processes." Violence so strategized is "not necessarily undesirable...Whatever has suffered violent marginalization because of oppressive ideology is in turn violently centralized" (111). With this, Bok readies his reader for the conclusion of his essay--his approval of what he perceives to have been Ondaatje's accomplishment with *In the Skin of a Lion*:

While Ondaatje has always emphasized that artistic innovation does not occur without some act of violent intensity, of extreme defamiliarization, [with *this* novel] he no longer appears to value such intensity purely for its own sake or for its privileged ability to generate a private vision that turns its back upon generalized oppression, instead, he values such intensity for its ability to energize a collective, social vision that resists specific forms of ideological authority (122)

An earlier statement has placed strict limits on this approval, however: "Ondaatje in effect does not reform his politics so much as qualify his romantic ethos," and he does this, according to Bök, by creating as his revolutionary protagonists a group of "*aesthetes* who passionately serve the social interests of the oppressed" (119; *emphasis added*). Let it be said, the violence of these *aesthetes* *is* motivated, *is* discriminate, *is* directed "against the exploiter, against Commissioner Harris and his waterworks", it *is* "endowed with social purpose" (120). It is, in short, the *right* kind of violence. Bök's concern with the implications of *this* "motif" of violence is precisely that the embodiment of the private, the aesthete, *coexists* with the embodiment of the public, the revolutionary. To put a twist on Patrick Lewis's statement--"The trouble with ideology, Alice, is that it hates the private. You must make it human"--the trouble

with Bök, as with Miller, is that he hates the private, the individual, the aesthetic. For him, *In the Skin of a Lion* can be no greater than the novel which "opts. for the romance of an art that centralizes the plight of the politically impotent" (121)

In his conference paper on violence in the Canadian novel, Robin Mathews quickly gets to the heart of the matter: it is "the violence of personal alienation" practiced by the "self-indulgent" protagonist and author that is his subject (1981: 39). It is the "tradition of individualism--a tradition that celebrates the writer's alienation and isolation"--that is his subject (40). The tradition is one, "essentially Romantic, [which] declares at once the powerlessness and the centrality of the individual as well as his or her pre-eminence before any social structure or contract"; a tradition which "results in a profoundly materialistic, individualistic, and anarchic point of view as manifesto for mainstream life" (40).

His spare textual examples concerning the work of Ondaatje run as follows. The barbership fight in *Slaughter* "is almost unmotivated violence and so can be celebrated as a part of individual peculiarity, and, perhaps, the cult of Michael Ondaatje" (42). The "life of Bolden...individualistic, materialistic, anarchic....must almost be researched into existence" by the "middle class...immigrant white from Sri Lanka,"¹⁹ and "seems to invite the world to live in the

¹⁹ Mathews has evidently never seen a photograph of Ondaatje nor read any biographical information pertaining to him. As Ondaatje describes the Ceylonese community he describes himself--"[e]veryone had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations" (*Running in the Family*, p. 41). In fact, Ondaatje has often enough been circumscribed by these very blood-lines. Cf. Interview in *Other Solitudes--Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, Arun Mukherjee's *Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition*, and Suwanda Sugunasiri's "'Sri Lankan' Canadian Poets--The Bourgeoisie That Fleed The Revolution" (*Canadian Literature*, No. 132, 60-79). Mukherjee describes Ondaatje as the colonized who, bound to political duty, acts irresponsibly and thereby sides with the colonizer. Sugunasiri replies that Mukherjee might be "blinded by an exclusive left-wing rhetoric," and counters that her own "authentic picture of pre-1956 society" shows that Ondaatje "was (through his community and class) the colonizer!" The fact that Ondaatje left Sri Lanka at age 10, that at

condition of the jazz negro, a condition of servitude, hype, personalist rebellion, and the ghetto symbol of loser-stud whose transcendence [sic] is never communal and social but personal and anarchistic" (41-42, 43). A few years earlier, Mathews declared *The Collected Works* to be a "celebrat[ion of] the U.S. renegade, Billy the Kid" (1978. 158) and declared its author--influenced by "U.S. ideas of radicalism, revolution, and 'dissent' which are individualistic out of an individualistic tradition"--to neither in his life nor his work "move against the exploiting power as it defines itself in U.S. imperialism, capitalism and class interest" (158)

Bök, who has read Mathews, combines Ondaatje, "celebrat[ing] violent individualism . . . from the position of a privileged class," provides us the "models of dynamic individualism" who "exemplify the socially irresponsible hero: both [Bonney and Bolden]..." "act out the romantic myth of the isolated, male artist unable to function within society, in part because of his anarchic sensitivity," (114), in part because of that individualism.²⁰ Moreover, "the aphasia of death

best he could have been a child-colonizer does not trouble Sugunasiri Her parenthesized question is clearly rhetorical "(isn't the personal the political?) " See pp 63-65

²⁰ Romantic isolation and dynamic individualism characterize Bonney and Bolden no more than they do E J Bellocq Webb may believe Bellocq to be "self-sufficient, complete as a perpetual motion machine" (56), but Bellocq expresses, again and again, his need for other He is "shocked" when Bolden--evidently the only person who treats him with any kindness, "[not] like a cripple or anything" (52)--leaves town (145) And he *would* like to leave his trace on women's bodies, to have his cock held or sucked (55), but, perceived by these women as "look[ing] like something squashed or run over by a horse" (124), he is denied--and "crushed" (126) Concerning Bellocq's privacy, Bolden perceives two aspects--"mole comfort, [and] mole deceit" (91) But Bellocq, who finds Bolden's once-experienced public, social world to be "enviabl[e]" (64), is far less deceived about the nature of isolation than Bolden thinks he is Somewhat deceived he is, however, in that he believes that the "mystic privacy one can be so proud of has no alphabet of noise or meaning to the people outside" (64) Paul Zweig distinguishes, says C. Fred Alford, between heroes, neurotics and madmen "His heroes are those who, after withdrawing into the sanctuary of the inner self, are able to communicate to others the potential for authenticity and wholeness that they find there His heroes risk the madness of isolation and are saved by their ability to reach out to others and touch them with what they have found" (202) Alphabet indeed exists, and incommunication of the private is madness

or the aphasia of madness" effected by Bellocq, Bonney, and Bolden is not, to Bök, merely the inarguable "violent rejection of society" (112), but "sociopolitical rebellion"--the "reject[ion of] discourse in the name of private protest" (120, 121).

In my opinion, it is due and pressing that Miller, Mathews, and Bök should get over their *utter paranoia* of the private, the individual, the aesthetic, and, when theorizing *How to Get to Where We're Going Next*, stop abusing it before finally erasing it from their conceptions of who We are. They should see that whether they like it or not, private aspects of human beings exist, and that, if one decides to take up public aspects of living, the private will by necessity coexist with the public.

Regarding their *Political Virtue* and the story they tell, Ondaatje might reply to them as he does to Linda Hutcheon's query: "the thing about writing is that you want to represent or make characters who are believable, who are fully rounded, and that stops you from making them just politically good or politically vicious. I'm more interested, I guess, in making people as believable and complex and intricate as possible than in making an argument in a novel or even a memoir--which is also a kind of political statement, I think. I think if you enter a novel with just an argument, you reduce the book" (*Other Solitudes* 198).

About the private, the public, and any presumptions of what his role as an artist is, Ondaatje says: "I think if people [were] conscious of themselves as artists *continually*, it would be a deadly situation to be in. One wants [also] to...live in a real world, as opposed to being an artist. I certainly don't feel any kind of duty to society as an 'artist' at all. God knows what the role of the poet is"

(Pearce 142) To those who *tell* him what his role is; that he should write, in this instance, 'Canadian' or 'ethnic', Ondaatje replies: "I guess I like being a writer because of the freedom that is allowed me. I can write about whatever I want to write about. Those demands seem to be more to do with the world of sociologists or motivated by political usefulness. I feel little responsibility to that sort of demand" (*Other Solitudes* 202). Regarding his work, Ondaatje strives for "permanent value," as judged by the public, but recognizes that should it not be attained, the "private satisfaction" of having written would remain unchanged (Solecki 1984, 330).

Rorty sees things much as Ondaatje does. Distinguishing the "vocabularies" of private lives and public lives, he distinguishes self-creation and social responsibility, private perfection and human solidarity, self-discovery and political utility, pagan heroism and Christian love, the contemplative and the revolutionary, the language of the self and the language of the tribe (1989: xiv, 120). *All vocabularies--"even those which contain the words which we take most seriously, the ones most essential to our self-descriptions--are human creations, tools for the creation of such other human artifacts as poems, utopian societies, scientific theories, and future generations."* No vocabulary is more "real," less of an "artifact," than any other (53).

The vocabularies of the private and the public, "the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity," are indeed "equally valid, yet [they are] forever incommensurable" (xv). That is, at the level of *theory* and *not* that of a lived life, the two realms cannot be held "in a single vision" (120, xiv). Private

purposes and public purposes, coexistent, cannot theoretically be synthesized to One through the wishful thinking that there are "beliefs or desires which belong to us qua human and which unite us to our fellow humans simply as human" (34). Nor is there any "metavocabulary" which can account for "*all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling" (xvi). Furthermore, "the vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange" (xiv).²¹ "The closest we will come to joining these two quests," says Rorty, "is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic.. and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time--causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged" (xiv). And, in meting out time for the self and time for others, Rorty concludes that there exist no theoretical "algorithms" to resolve the potential dilemma of "when to struggle against injustice and when to devote yourself to private projects of self-creation" (xv).

Concerning the role of the writer, Rorty asserts that the pursuit of private perfection is a "perfectly reasonable aim for some writers...[while s]erving human liberty...is a perfectly reasonable aim for other writers," and "[t]here is no point in trying to grade these different pursuits on a single scale" (145). However, the novel which *does* manage to speak at once of the aesthetic and of human solidarity is Ondaatje's very own: *In the Skin of A Lion*

²¹ It might be seen that Rorty's view contradicts that of Paul Zweig, who believes that sanity *depends upon* the very communication of private experience. In consideration of what Rorty has said elsewhere--"My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business" (1989-91)--my sense is that he is here conceptualizing the inviolability--precisely the *privacy*--of the self-governed private realm

III *In the Skin of A Lion*: Meandering to Town

The landscape in the opening scene of *In the Skin of A Lion* is cast in shades of grey. The meaning of the scene, however, would seem to be as black and white as the holsteins whose heat the exhausted loggers seek. The most recent immigrants to the country, they own neither herd nor land; they own nothing. And they are in further want, of social connection and of decent labour and living conditions:

Some die of pneumonia or from the sulphur in their lungs from the mills they work in during other seasons. They sleep in the shacks behind the Bellrock Hotel and have little connection with the town.. [Their rooms have a] raw table, four bunks, a window the size of a torso. These are built each December and dismantled the following spring. No one in the town of Bellrock really knows where the men have come from (8)

Alice Gull, nun turned actress and political activist, might say of the loggers' reality what she says of the leather dyers'--the dyers who would ignite if they lit a cigarette, who are burned from the galvanizing process, who suffer arthritis, rheumatism, and tuberculosis: "*That's the truth*" (124). It's the truth of the difference between the bleak lives of workers and the luxurious lives of those who exploit them--those who do not "toil or spin" (132).

But such socio-political truth is, in multiple ways, problematized. In the opening scene, the loggers touch the cows "gently, without any sense of attack or right," presuming the "farmer" who follows them to be the potentially agonistic "owner" from whom they stand aloof (7). However, this farmer clearly is not a threat: the companionship of the loggers is "a silent comfort to him in the dark of five A.M." Moreover, he could very well be one like Hazen Lewis, an ordinary

labourer who "works for two or three farms, cutting wood, haying, herding cattle" (11). If this farmer is, after all, the owner, his diurnal reality appears to be little different than that of the loggers: he has, at five A.M., been toiling for more than an hour.

Socio-political truth is further problematized: it is by no means a singular one. Patrick Lewis watches the loggers skate along the river, carrying burning cattails to illuminate their path. Experiencing "laughter... [s]omething joyous... a game" (21), theirs is a carnivalesque transgression of the boundary of night as well as the boundary of their diurnal misery. Moreover, *whose* private truth this is, is itself not black and white. "[M]agically revealing" to Patrick "the grey bushes of the shore, *his* shore, *his* river" (21), Other discloses the real territory of the Self *and* expands the imaginative: to the boy who had "lived life on that farm where day was work and night was rest, nothing would be the same" (22). And the shades of grey only increase: this shared reality is in fact limited by Patrick's refusal to join in with the skaters. Unable to trust "either himself or these strangers of another language," his "mind race[s] ahead of his body," short-circuiting his longing (22).

As indicated by these early scenes, the vexed nature of truths, realities, identities, and the act of identification itself suggests that Ondaatje's *In the Skin of A Lion* will be anything but one of those "clear stories" that Patrick read as a child, wherein

[a]uthors accompanying their heroes clarified motives World events raised characters from destitution The books would conclude with all wills rectified and all romances solvent Even the spurned lover accepted the fact that the conflict had ended (82)

Rather, we might think that Ondaatje's will be the sort of novel that "*realign[s] chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become*"--an order "very faint, very human" (146). The narrator advises that it is "*the best art,*" and adds: "Meander if you want to get to town" (146).¹

On the journey to Marmora, the reader gathers up, just as Hana does, fragments of stories--those about private lives and those about social and political processes and events from about 1915 to 1940. Meandering from Toronto to Bellrock to Marmora, we early on encounter Ondaatje's theoretical preoccupation with problems of representation.

Patrick discovers that his school atlas names Nepal, Durango, and the Caspian but fails to name the region that he was born into, homesteaded a hundred years earlier. Traditional techniques of describing the world are clearly unreliable. Further, the "coloured dyes" of the atlas cover, distinguishing Canada's political jurisdictions (9), in no way describe *lived* socio-political reality--most obviously, that of the leather dyers.

Patrick himself records his impressions of the world of insects. When years later he learns about the insects' feeding habits and their "formal titles," this inquiry takes "order and shape" (9). However, in that "[e]ven the real names are

¹ Ondaatje describes both his framing device and the multiple narrative voices: "With the frame, you have the young girl, Hana, listening to Patrick over a four- or five-hour car journey. The question becomes whether it's Patrick's story or Hana's story, and in a way it's much more Hana's story, because she's gathering it. That [frame] freed me to jump narrative voices, it allowed me to get closer inside certain scenes. There are scenes that Patrick does not witness, and so it doesn't make sense that he's the narrator. It's just as much Hana imagining certain scenes as it is her being told certain scenes. One of the problems with novels is that we tend to be so strict about narrative voice. I'm drawn to a form that can have a more cubist or mural [360-degree] voice to capture the variousness of things." Bush, Interview (1990), pp. 247-48.

beautiful," as beautiful as the "fictional" ones he once granted, it is suggested there is no qualitative difference between the descriptions made by science and those made by the 'story-telling' boy.²

When the narrator of the frame tells the reader that "the countryside is unbetrayed" by Patrick's own narrating (1), we stand advised that story-telling is no more likely to accurately reveal the world out there (or in here) than the methods of scientific inquiry.³ Moreover, the epigraph warns against granting absolute narrative authority to Patrick or to any other story-teller, present or past "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one " It is, of course, both epistemological constraints and proven political intervention in the formation of the historical record that give rise to such a warning Meandering to town, we will reach Ondaatje's revised version of it, and not Town Itself⁴

² Linda Hutcheon claims that the real names of the insects are "clearly secondary" to the fictive (*Postmodern* 94) She wishes to support her argument that in the "confrontation between the conventions of the realist novel (and so-called objective history-writing) and the self-reflexivity of postmodern metafiction" (94), the metafiction wins hands down Her argument is better supported by her observation that in the fiction, "certain fates have been imagined where the historical record is conveniently silent" (93) Indeed, Patrick studies numerous archival photographs and newspaper articles which document the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct, including one on daredevils that mentions the historical Nicholas Temelcoff The narrator's comment--these records "depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge" (145)--implicitly declares, as regards Temelcoff, the metafictional increase made upon the scant record (The degree of invention made upon historical sources is again indicated by the following anecdote Ondaatje told critic Douglas Barbour that he once met Temelcoff, who said in response to a question about his work on the bridge only that it was "difficult " Barbour, 1993 233 n 11)

³ I earlier outlined both Peter Barham and Richard Rorty's views on scientific method, story-telling, and truth See page 12 n 6, page 34 n 3

⁴ Fotios Sarris elaborates the problem of narrative authority by relying on Hutcheon's account of historiographic metafiction He notes the reader's participation in organizing and interpreting the biographical and historical fragments He says the "fragmentary structure of the novel and its refusal to illuminate all aspects of the story produce a narrative devoid of a rigid authority or officialism " Ensured is that "no 'single story' can emerge to deny all others" and that one of the novel's principal objectives--to betray official history--is fulfilled (188-90) Ondaatje himself emphasizes both his refusal of narrative authority and his own ideological purposes "I think reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer The newspapers have such power over the story and portrait of Canada You can see the newspapers moving

Believing himself capable of telling "the whole story" (244), Patrick begins with his own causes, the "Little Seeds" generative of his adult self. He tells about his relationship with his father--how together they rescue a drowning cow, how they meticulously search fields for caterpillar nests, how they lay the "modest and minimal" dynamite charges in the logjams (18). He sleeps with his father, imagines himself to be his "white midsummer shadow" (14), and assures him every thirty seconds, as demanded, of his safety in the river.

But Patrick's representation soon turns ragged. Hazen, kind and capable of great intimacy, is also an "abashed" man, "withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus" (15). He is "sullen even in the company of his son," as "self-sufficient, as invisible as possible" (18). And practicing his public "role" as dynamiter, in private he not only fantasizes blowing men apart but actually traces his son's body onto the drive-shed wall, "blows out a section of plank where the head had been," and carefully studies the "radius of the tremor" (18, 15).

Somewhere between Toronto and Marmora, Patrick studies the radius of his trauma *and* recounts having once joined Alice in a heartfelt toast to "holy fathers" (74). Mapping his father's identity as he attempts to map his own, he describes but provides no explanation of nor ever resolves Hazen's contradictions. Patrick may not have access to "the whole story," or this may

in a certain politically right-wing or economically right-wing direction, and this--before you know it--becomes the official voice of the country. But we know it's not a real truth. One of the things a novel can do is represent the unofficial story, give a personal, complicated version of things, as opposed to competing with the newspapers and giving an alternate but still simplified opinion, saying, 'No, *this* is right'. I think a novel can become a more permanent and political reflection of your time." Bush, Interview (1990), p. 247

be the only sort of story one might expect of a human subject.

Alice and her friend Clara Dickens believe, to the contrary, that access to the subject is easily won and a glimpse of human essence the payoff. Thinking that Patrick is able to "reveal...himself" and that he is able to do so while sleeping, they set work "blueprint[ing]" this "spirit" (75). Whether or not the "soul" is revealed and captured as they claim, certainly their own anger, honesty, and insight "stumble out" onto the paper (78, 75). Patrick himself remains skeptical of his "supposedly guardless nature" and of "soul" being anything other than the "disparate elements of his character" (78)

His skepticism proves entirely appropriate. Put to a hard test, Clara finds she cannot "climb above" her lover Ambrose Small to see the natural "horizon" that she presumes holds him together (213). When she finally witnesses, in the days before his death, the unnatural "walls" which separate his "diverse worlds" come down, she discovers not a tidy "nature" but "all the discontinuous moments of his past"--tales of other women, varied portraits of Clara herself, "[b]itten flesh and manicures and greyhounds and sex and safe-combinations and knowledge of suicides" (213-215). She "would not know him" (215) as she wished to, as a stable unified subject. Just as Alice moves between stage and life, from "her true self to her other true self" (153), so, it would seem, does everyone.⁵

Aspects of Patrick's self, like Small's, are confined by walls--by one in particular that we are given to understand is neither necessary nor beneficial. If the episode of Patrick's life which provoked the erection of this wall is that of

⁵ Theorizing a narrative selfhood, Alisdair MacIntyre sees the individual as a co-author and actor who participates in an ever-changing drama which is enacted upon the "stage" that is life itself Barham, p. 89.

Hazen's dynamiting of the tracing on the shed, both Hana and the reader have already learned by virtue of Patrick's telling that the wall is less than final and absolute:

There was a wall in him that no one reached. Not even Clara, though she assumed it had deformed him. A tiny stone swallowed years back that had grown with him and which he carried around because he could not shed it. His motive for hiding it had probably extinguished itself years earlier. Patrick and his small unimportant stone. It had entered him at the wrong time in his life. Then it had been a flint of terror. He could have easily turned aside at the age of seven or twenty, and just spat it out and kept on walking, and forgotten it by the next street corner. So we are built. (71)

In a discussion concerning the flexibility of political ideology to account for the "human," Alice quotes the lines from Lucretius: "I have taught you that the sky in all its zones is mortal....Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects" (135).⁶ We may finally figure subjectivity to be one of those loosely built objects; moreover, we may figure subjective identity to be analogous to socio-political identity. The "gulf" between the capitalistic rich and the starving (59) is clearly not a divinized expanse, nor is it natural; class identity is just as constructed, arbitrary, and mutable as the identity of the individual.

Patrick grows from the distrustful boy whose mind short-circuits his desire to join the loggers to the man who consciously "lock[s] away" his past (54), comes to the city and into alignment with lovers. But built with a stone and built, like his father, "abashed" (157), he slides through the company of Clara and Alice "as anonymously as possible" (77). Always having been to some degree "alien," a "watcher" (156, 157), Patrick's alienation dramatically increases upon his amatory loss of Clara to Small. "[R]educ[ing] himself almost to nothing"--to his

⁶ Douglas Barbour points out that the two sentences are taken, "with no acknowledgement, and the usual sly editing," from Lucretius' *The Nature of the Universe* (1993 234 n 19)

job in the tunnel and the company of his radio and linguistic estrangement in the Macedonian neighborhood--he is "*deliriously* anonymous" (113, 112; emphasis added).

Whether or not it has always been so, at this point in his life Patrick evinces certain characteristics of what Christopher Lasch calls the "survival mentality" of the "minimal self." Marked by a "withdrawal of interest in the past and the future," the mentality results in an "enfeebled self [that] is capable of doing no more than holding on to the tenuous present," a self that is shrunk "back into nothing but the self [in] a last-ditch effort to protect its integrity." Survival mentality, says Alford, is "the loss of what [Alisdair] MacIntyre calls a 'narrative self', the ability to see the events of one's life as connected and as having a meaning that can be projected into the future" (10)⁷

Patrick is eventually drawn back into the land of the living, however, by the Macedonians, Alice, and Hana. Becoming more entrenched in the present, he also, upon learning the ethnic name of the loggers he witnessed as a child, recovers his abandoned past, allowing it to inflect the present: "He knew now he was the sum of all he had been in his life since he was that boy in the snow woods" (152).⁸ Hearing stories about labour leader Cato, and discovering pieces

⁷ Alford discusses both Lasch and MacIntyre, pp 10-11

⁸ Having argued that the novel's structure ensures that no single story can emerge as though it were the only one, Fotios Sarris goes on to suggest that the world and the past might indeed be "named" to a final degree. "Knowledge is attained," he says, "when the referent is joined to its name," and it is precisely through naming that the individual's "integration" with the social and material world, as well as the past, is achieved. "Until the world [and the past] is named, the individual remains alienated from it." We might recognize such linguistic "resonance," he says, when Patrick and the people of the Macedonian community exchange names, and when the nomenclative connection between "Finns" and the skating loggers is made (Sarris 193). I would argue that although Patrick does find "a riddle"--one riddle--to be "solved" by naming the loggers (151), it could scarcely be held that he knew nothing of them before they were named,

of the histories of Alice and Temelcoff, Patrick comes to realize not only the narrative quality of his own life but the narrative network that he is part of:

He saw the interactions, saw how each one of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves. His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night web--all of these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day. The detritus and chaos of the age was realigned. (144-45)

But Patrick merely presumes to have sewn himself squarely into this narrative fabric, for he next discovers that when not "aligned" with those acquaintances of his own small orbit, "he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community. A gap of love" (157). He understands that he has never taken responsibility for the story. Unlike Cato or Alice, he has never played a "role" in the dissident drama. The "facts" of the ongoing story (157) are irrefutable, they are Alice's "truth." At centre-stage are the tanners who die from "most evil smell in history" (130), the labourers who stand ankle-deep in salt, the tunnellers--including Patrick--who are afraid of a collapse and "fast death" (106), the union leaders who are killed, the military troops that are posted to crush political activists.⁹

that their name is more definitive of them than their misery or their pleasure, or that naming can secure absolute knowledge of the thing named--the loggers, the material world, or the past. Hutcheon makes an argument similar to Sarris's: "Lacking the language of power, [the immigrants] cannot even symbolically name themselves and thus construct their own identity" ("Ex-centric" 133). It is clear that language and naming is powerful and potentially subversive--there can be no other reason why Police Chief Draper bans public meetings conducted in any language other than English (133). It is also clear that in lacking the language of power, one cannot defend oneself against social and political abuse (117), and that human solidarity may be established through language (185). But it is equally clear that "on this side of language" human identity persists, communication occurs, and moral bonds are forged (133, 136, 138, 116-19). Rather than arguing language to be the final solution to problems of knowing, identity formation, social integration, or even political empowerment, the novel sees language as a tool that is sometimes used, sometimes successfully, in such undertakings. The limits of language and naming to bring about absolute resolution are signalled by Patrick's observation: "Only a dead name is permanent" (165).

Compelled to act, Patrick's resolution could not be more swift--or more incidental to the crisis at hand: he offers to take up "[m]ore formally" his share of the responsibility for Hana (158). In order to understand his relative inertia, we must turn back to his and Alice's debate on what might constitute responsible communal action.

Alice's ideological position is one of a poeticized Marxism--"[y]ou reach people through metaphor," she says (123). Wielding the classic dialectic of ruling and working classes, the rich and the poor--and the equally classic (although not formalistic) one of enemies and friends--she understands power to rest exclusively with the rich. "[T]hunder" will roll (revolution will proceed) through a simple reversal within this structure of power: "Why leave the power in his hands?... You name the enemy and destroy their power. Start with their luxuries--their select clubs, their summer mansions" (123-24).

The ideological enemy of the Marxist is not only the capitalist, of course, but the liberal individualist--the one very often caricatured as the romantic, self-indulgent aesthete. And so Alice describes her friend. "You believe in solitude, Patrick, in retreat. You can afford to be romantic because you are self-sufficient.... you have a choice, what of the others who don't? . . . They can't afford your choices, your *languor*" (123).¹⁰

⁹ Rorty stresses that "[g]iven a language and a view of what the world is like, one can, to be sure, pair off bits of the language with bits of what one takes the world to be in such a way that the sentences one believes true have internal structures isomorphic to relations between things in the world. When we rap out routine undeliberated reports like 'This is water', 'That's red', 'That's ugly', 'That's immoral' [s]uch reports do indeed pair little bits of language with little bits of the world. [The point is] that carrying out this exercise will not enlighten us about why truths are good to believe, or offer any clues as to why or whether our present view of the world is, roughly, the one we should hold" (1982: 162). Nor, obviously, will such reports offer clues as to what we should do about the world.

To Patrick, the story is not so clear. He worries about unconditionally naming the enemy: "And if he is your friend?" (124) He considers the possibilities of education: "You can teach him, make him aware..." (123). He opposes murder and those who might demand it: "If it was valuable to some cause for me to kill someone would you want me to do it?" (125) He wonders to what degree Alice, the individual, inhabits her social role (124).¹⁰

In her role, Alice indeed vacillates. At one moment she asserts that by destroying the playthings of the rich a start will indubitably be made on meeting

¹⁰ Whether or not Alice consciously alludes to the doctrine of emotivism, the reader might understand that it is indeed the philosophical ballast of liberal individualism—or, as Alisdair MacIntyre calls it, "bureaucratic" or "modern" individualism. According to MacIntyre, the emotivist sees all moral judgments to be nothing but expressions of "attitudes, preferences and choices," secured only by the individual and not by "rational method" nor "rational criteria" (*After Virtue* 11-12). MacIntyre himself holds out for that which Rorty considers futile: "that genuine objective and impersonal moral standards can in some way or other be rationally justified" (18). To MacIntyre, it is the archetypal "character" of the aesthete who best exemplifies the emotivist self. Aesthetes are "those who see in the social world nothing but a meeting place for individual wills, each with its own set of attitudes and preferences and who understand that world solely as an arena for the achievement of their own satisfaction, who interpret reality as a series of opportunities for their enjoyment and for whom the last enemy is boredom" (24). In the discipline of psychology, Christopher Lasch's "minimal aesthetic" is one who, rather than operating from within "the conventions of artistic realism," produces "a type of art that no longer seems to refer to anything outside itself." He simply considers pathological this artist who does not "transcribe any shared experience or common perceptions of the world." The aesthetic's "inner agenda" is one that "seeks to recapture a sense of psychic oneness without taking any account of the obstacles, psychic or material, that lie in the way of oneness." The agenda is one that "underlines much of contemporary music, art, and literature." It is one that "precludes moral judgment and intelligent political activity" (qtd. in Alford, p. 10-11).

¹¹ To MacIntyre, one is not able to seek the moral good only *qua* individual. As a bearer of a particular social identity that is acquired through relationships with family, city, tribe, and nation, the individual inherits a "variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations" which constitute his or her moral starting-point and role (204-205). That said, there may be occasions when the "ideas, theories and doctrines expressed in and presupposed by the role may be quite other than the ideas, theories and doctrines believed by the individual who inhabits the role. [A] variety of degrees of doubt, compromise, interpretation or cynicism may mediate the relationship of individual to role" (27-28). One may rebel against one's social and moral identity, but without those particularities to begin from "there would never be anywhere to begin" (205). The emotivist, on the other hand, sees that it is "in the self and not in social roles or practices that moral agency has to be located. This democratized self which has no *necessary* social content and no *necessary* social identity can then be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view" (30, emphasis added).

communal ends; at another she approvingly quotes Conrad:

Of course I do not defend political crimes. It is repulsive to me by tradition, by sentiment, and even by reflection. Moreover a sweeping assertion is always wrong, since men are infinitely varied, and harsh words are useless because they cannot combat ideas. And the ideas (that live) should be combatted, not the men who die. (134)

She, like Patrick, clearly knows the most brutal "facts" of the story and believes in the need for change, but she, like anyone else, has no non-ideological category of truth which could guide her in her actions: "*I don't know*," she whispers (126). Conrad's qualification of the Spanish liberal insurgents--"But some of these men struggled for an idea, openly, in the light of day, and sacrificed to it all that to most men makes life worth living"--could well qualify Alice herself. Rorty sees that "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance" (1989: 189). Action--*any* action--can be no less contingent than the historical circumstances and beliefs that give rise to it. Driven by compassion for the proletariat and the need to act, Alice ultimately admits that she knows no more than Patrick does about the right means--the effective and ethical means--of socio-political redress.

Rather than this dilemma, Douglas Barbour sees the main source of novel's tension to be the "opposing political visions" which the novel sets out (1993: 203). For example, class lines are erased, he says, when Caravaggio, the "spokesman for a marginalized awareness of the various and subtle demarcations in society" (198), watches the rich woman writing. This "paradigmatic moment of empathy"

ignores Caravaggio's own insistence on demarcation, somewhat confusing the issue. The liberal sympathies of the text often clash with its leftist political agenda: here it takes Patrick's individualistic point of view rather than Alice's communal one. Cut off from the signs of power attached to her class, the woman can define herself as artist, while Caravaggio becomes 'anonymous, with never a stillness in his life like this woman's' (200)

But it would seem to be Barbour himself who insists on what constitutes Caravaggio's "issue." The thief, upon breaking into the poet's cottage, spends several hours talking with Anne as if it was "a continuation of his conversation with [his wife] Giannetta" (201). Anne tells about three generations of her family and her love for the lake, and offers the jailbird a place to stay for the night. It is not the "moment of empathy" which ignores demarcation, but the people involved. This is not a scene about spokespersons. Rather, it concerns two people of different socio-economic rank who forge personal bonds. The personal--in Patrick's terms, the "private" or the "human" (135)--disrupts the "language of politics" (122), the dialectics of rich and poor, enemy and friend. The momentary erasure of class identity indeed "confus[es]"--makes significantly more complex--the "issue" of tidy, steady socio-cultural-political demarcation.¹²

In "Which Side Is It On? Form, Class, and Politics in *In the Skin of a Lion*," Julie Beddoes argues that the text's tension arises from "its postmodern aesthetic practices [which] neutralize--or even oppose--its tentative thematizing of a radical class politics" (206). The novel's self-subversions--its lacunae and ambivalences,

¹² Michael Greenstein astutely remarks that on the two occasions when "demarcation" is uttered--when Caravaggio is painted to become indistinguishable from the sky, and Patrick made invisible in preparation for attacking the filtration plant--"we get the sense that it means its opposite--an effacement of all distinctions." In the "dialectic of boundaries" which sees a breakdown between fact and fiction, lyric and narrative, and "which parallels postmodern levelling of hierarchies in class and culture," the men prepare for their respective roles in the "alternating versions"--one pertaining to liberation and the other, destruction--"of loosening structures and zones" (119). I think we may see the exchange between Caravaggio and Anne as yet another version of the same story.

its repeated language and imagery--"do more than emphasize [the text's] own construction; they also make equivalent those scenes that the book's thematics suggest should have a quite *different* ethical value" (207). Beddoes takes as one example Patrick's love affairs which "mirror" each other:

The women are close friends, both actresses, and in both cases Patrick takes on the 'skin' of a former lover in Clara's case, that of the capitalist 'jackal' Small, in Alice's, that of, we presume, the 'lion' Cato, the Finnish union organizer. These repetitions, and the interlocking triangles of the relationships, suggest that people and lovers are, ultimately, interchangeable. It is as easy for [Patrick] to make love to a revolutionary as to the mistress of one of the ruling class (208)

A repetition "of visual image, of staging, also reduces to ethical equivalence the scene in which Small drops kerosene and a match on Patrick and that in which Patrick sets fire to the Muskoka Hotel" (209). The text's formal operations, Beddoes says, "make it impossible to assign clear meaning to the political violence that [the novel] describes" (207). She concludes that "aesthetics--the staging of scenes--blots out politics" (210).

For Beddoes, as for Barbour, a certain closure of the political narrative is sought. Intelligible leftist or radical politics demand that without political resolution, there "should" be no intercourse--of *any* sort--between the classes. The two sides "should" be absolutely distinguishable and absolutely discreet. Neither critic allows that the novel's thematizing of political visions coexists with the thematizing of socio-political demarcations made messy by friendship or love. Neither allows that empathy, and the correlation of the 'wrong' ethical profile with the 'right' political affiliation, are as much "issues" in the novel as class distinction and ensuing class warfare.

We have seen that Barbour pins the liberal-leftist ideological "clash" onto the sympathies and the agenda of "the text" and onto the representatives of those ideologies, Patrick and Alice, rather than onto the person who actually figures into the scene: "spokesman" Caravaggio. If we follow the critic through to the end of his discussion we will see that although he finds some inconsistency in the political configurations of the actors in the two scenes with which he is concerned--Patrick at Muskoka, and Patrick and Harris at the water filtration plant--it is lastly the text that "betrays a confused ideology" (205), and lastly a pair of spokesmen, and not two people, who palaver.

Barbour sees Patrick's bombing of the Muskoka Hotel as "an essentially romantic, sentimental gesture to Alice more than an act of faith in her politics" (197). He sees as no less equivocal his next "revolutionary" action. Patrick's "unconscious parroting of the popular songs of his day, even as he sets the charges [to blow up the waterworks], demonstrates his ability to separate himself from the larger culture they represent." (I assume Barbour considers that Patrick lapses from a populist bearing.) "It is another manifestation of the political ambivalence that drives this narrative, as is, perhaps, the surreally comical image of 'the blasting-box carried like a chicken under his right arm' " (203). "The confrontation between Patrick and Harris replays," he says,

but does not resolve the opposing political visions the novel has articulated. There is a dialogue serving a dialogic text. Harris sweeps Patrick's generalizations aside with his assertion of the aesthetics of pure construction, and then he accuses Patrick of failing to understand or respect power. He refuses the easy assignment of a villain, implying that there is no such thing. His are the arguments of the powerful, and they have a logic of power that the general populace--including most of us--has been taught throughout our lives. At this point, Patrick's only rejoinder is [the] story of how Alice died through a gruesome mistake. Yet, [Harris] does show sympathy, and his

knowledge of Alice's sources, like Diogenes, suggest that in some ways he is closer to her than Patrick is. [H]is use of another quotation from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* aligns his vision with that of the author in a strange loop of reference. In terms of both action and argument, this segment of the text remains unresolved, an earlier anarchist revolutionary act went terribly wrong [leading to Alice's death], while this one fails. Nothing has changed in the novel's world. Ambiguity prevails. (203-04)

To reiterate: the villainous and the powerful (although a sympathetic villain, and one strangely aligned with Ondaatje) comes to a stalemate with the chicken-toting revolutionary who is ultimately (if not always already?) impuissant. The ambiguity--the "ambiguous politics of the whole novel" and its "confused ideology"--are finally tucked away by Barbour: the novel's "power lies in its ability to express the variety of stances to be found in any society" (204-05).

Linda Hutcheon earlier provided the seminal analysis of the "plot about power, literal (dynamite) and allegorical" (*Postmodern* 102). There is some truth, she thinks, to Harris's accusation that Patrick dislikes and ignores the power that exists and surrounds him--although that truth is "ironically conditioned by the fact that Patrick is at that moment carrying a blasting-box" (103). The text suggests, she says, that the "responsibility for the silencing of history lies not only with the rich and powerful" (103).

Part of Alice's "legacy" to Patrick is that he has learned "a new role as actor--acting out history." His "entry into the world of action is destructive," she thinks, "yet necessary" ("Ex-centric" 134). He properly assumes the skin of a lion; he takes responsibility for the story. The torching of the Muskoka Hotel, a "translat[ion]" of Alice's "hatred of the exploiting rich," was a "revolutionary" act, although "one that land[ed] him in prison" (*Postmodern* 101). Patrick now stands ready to commit "his final political act: the attempted destruction of Harris's

waterworks" ("Ex-centric" 134)

The discussion of power, Hutcheon says, "comes to be tied to the notion of imagination and creation in a paradoxical postmodern way. Harris tells of dreams he had, dreams that turned out to be dreams of plans of places that could have existed in Toronto, but have been rejected. 'These *were* all real places. They could have existed' " (*Postmodern* 103). Those more powerful than himself, Harris argues, those with "real power," do not have tangible things around them, but paper. "So too, of course, does the novelist," Hutcheon says (103). Such power

is the power to change how we read history and fiction, to change how we draw the lines we like to draw between the real and the imaginary. The ex-centric, those on the margins of history--be they women, workers, immigrants (or writers?)--have the power to change the perspective of the centre, and that power is given voice in *In the Skin of the Lion*. As the work of Michel Foucault has shown, power is an ambivalent force, neither negative nor positive. It can build as it can destroy, it can be used to combat injustice as easily as to induce complacency. Literalized as actual dynamite in [the novel], power allows the conquering of nature in the name of civilization and yet also brings about the destruction of human life. The creative power of the novelist, however, the power to name the unnamed of history, may offer a less ambivalent model for yet another kind of power. (103-04)

Barbour responds to Hutcheon. that the ex-centric has power "may be true, but this power of naming is not the same as the power of owning to which Harris's thinking alerts us" (204). One might wonder if he--notably silent on the ethical dimensions of the political use of dynamite--would understand the "action and argument" of the waterworks episode to have been resolved, economic inequity to have been most mightily addressed, if Patrick's anarchist revolutionary act had in fact succeeded. To that critic, the torching of Muskoka (although effected by the "romantic.. conditional revolutionary" ;197) and the threat to

demolish the waterworks (although contrived by the man who is less than fully committed to the people) have apparently been the *right* political moves.

Similarly, it is hard not to think that Hutcheon discerns, in these "necessary" acts committed by the man who finally "face[s] his responsibility" (*Postmodern* 101), some sort of productive aspect. Beddoes thinks otherwise. Leaving off her analysis of form and content, her argument is supported less by textual evidence than by what is to me good practical sense:

Patrick the dynamiter is like a child playing with matches. Blowing up a Muskoka resort is as futile a gesture against the power of the rich as are Caravaggio's thefts. The even greater conflagration planned for the waterworks would, however, be suicide, murder, and an act against the general population. Rather than memorializing the workers killed during the construction, it would destroy their only memorial and deprive of water those who have survived. (211)

Contrary to Beddoes, Fotios Sarris strictly holds to his analysis of the relationship of formal operations and thematic concerns in order to make his ethical evaluation--one that strikes notes from all the (real or imagined) preceding ones

Sarris sees that the tensions of the novel arise from complex relationships between art, humanization, compassion, history, ideology, and the need for socio-political change. He opens his argument by seeing that, in *In the Skin of a Lion*, art is distinguished from official history. Hine's photographs "put a human face on American industry, and continue to reflect the human experience that official history often ignores" (187).¹³ One of the main functions of art and one of the "implied functions" of the novel is, then, to "humanize" history (195).

¹³ Sarris notes that Hine's documentation of the miserable working conditions in America contributed to the institution of child-labour laws in the early part of the twentieth century (187). The fact (which Ondaatje might well have known) points up the falsity of the supposition that "[o]fficial histories, news stories surround us daily, but the events of art reach us too late, travel languorously like messages in a bottle" (*Lion* 146).

Art, Sarris argues, "stands in opposition to [not only history but] ideology because, as Patrick says, 'The trouble with ideology, Alice, is that it hates the private. You must make it human' " (195). The kind of violent action that Alice's revolutionary ideology calls for and the imagery of violent revolutionary action in the novel stand "in sharp contrast to the humanization the novel extols" (195-96). For example, Patrick's behaviour throughout the entire episode at Muskoka is "vividly and insistently depicted as barbaric and inhuman" (196). Darkness underscores his isolation and alienation; he is portrayed as "a purely sensual, unthinking savage," cut off from civilization (197). The imagery of savageness, says Sarris,

shapes the action until the end of the episode. Ironically, the animal imagery reflects the condition of the workers in the tunnel, and raises the question of whether by taking action Patrick has in fact risen above that condition. His alienation from all humanity and disconnection from ideas would seem to make a mockery of the ideology under which he acts. The Muskoka scenes explicitly affirm the irrationality of Patrick's behaviour. 'At times like this he could put his hand under the wheel of a train to spite the driver'. (196-97)

Although the account of Patrick's second mission does not continue, says Sarris, the feral imagery of his first attack, the motif of darkness--and that of silence--is put to use (197). "Light and darkness, silence and speech, assume highly metaphorical functions in this scene. Darkness symbolizes the absence of the human; light, its insinuation" (198). In order to undertake violent action, Patrick must cut himself off from the human, from light and from language. But while he "is able to cling to darkness, Harris denies him the refuge of silence. Harris insists on talk" (198).

Harris tells Patrick, 'What you are looking for is a villain'. But villains are the stuff of the pulp fiction Patrick read as a boy--and of revolutionary ideology.

Alice's ideology requires and, so, appoints villains. Harris reaches Patrick in the darkness through words, attempting to persuade him that he is not dealing with a one-dimensional villain of pulp fiction but a complex, ambivalent, and ambiguous human being. Ideology hates the private 'you must make it human', Patrick claims. But if he looks his enemy in the eye, or listens to his voice, if he confronts him in the flesh as a living human being, he is unable to hurt him. A humanized enemy arouses his sense of compassion, and, as Alice tells Patrick, 'Compassion forgives too much. You could forgive the worst man. You forgive him and nothing changes'. In this conflict between the need for both compassion and change lies much of the novel's tension and ambiguity. (199)

Complex formal operations, complex thematic concerns, a complex ethical dilemma. Sarris deepens his analysis of this complex novel before making a strange turn towards arch reticence:

In the Skin of a Lion insists on the centrality of the human element in history. Only the inclusion of this element can bring about a proper understanding of both the past and the present, an understanding that may bring with it a recognition of a need for change. Yet the same human element that may reveal a need for action deters action. An unwavering emphasis on the human element precludes the violent action that could effectively bring about change. Hence, such action requires that the human dimension--that one's own humanity--be eschewed. 'Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story'. The implications of this interdependence of 'responsibility' and savageness are highly problematic, *one of the problems for the reader is what to make of such 'moment[s]' of assuming 'responsibility' and 'the skins of wild animals'*. To put it another way is Patrick to be praised for his first, successful act of violence, or for his second, aborted one? (199, emphasis added)

Surely any reader could have problems imagining how one might rewrite the socio-political narrative; just exactly how one might act in order to bring about the desired change. But the reader--Sarris himself--has already ferreted from the Muskoka action the sheer mockery that such alienated, barbaric action makes of revolutionary ideology. It would follow that "responsibility for the story" has *not* been assumed. In fact, rather than donning the animal skin that would allow him to break into responsible language and story-telling (157), Patrick makes ready for his attack on the waterworks by covering all his "unclothed skin" with *grease*

(228) But both the title of the novel and Harris's quotation from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* would suggest that Patrick is ultimately *not* unclothed. Like Gilgamesh, he wanders through the wilderness in the skin of a lion, foolishly prepared to slay the lions that glory in life (242). As powerful as the Goths, who "could have captured Rome by destroying the aqueducts...[c]utting off the water supply or poisoning it," is Patrick (220). But this power, this language of violence, is much like that of the "Gothic child" Ambrose Small "[A]imed nowhere, only out of his body" (214), it attacks Clara Sarris interprets otherwise, however:

The novel's insistence on the humanization of history includes the humanization of the enemy, a process that militates against the adoption of violent means to fight that enemy. The mollifying, even debilitating, effect of a humanistic perspective is demonstrated in the results of the contact that occurs between the two political antagonists, Patrick and Rowland Harris, at the end of the novel, and it is perhaps even more apparent in Harris's behaviour than in Patrick's, as Harris's treatment of Patrick, his would-be-assassin, shows extraordinary mercy and sympathy. On the other side, Patrick, who has invaded the filtration plant with the sole purpose of blowing it up, finally falls asleep in Harris's office forfeit[ing his] moral responsibility (199-200)

As accursed as humanism was at the time of both Ondaatje's and Sarris's writing (and continues to be), I believe it is only the latter of the two authors who finds such a perspective decidedly "debilitating."¹⁴ Like Beddoes and Barbour, Sarris ultimately seeks the political comforts of clearly defined "sides" and enemies--the clarity which Ondaatje simply does not offer. Ondaatje takes very

¹⁴ Sarris is not alone, of course. Robert Young presents both early and recent critiques of humanism, including those of Franz Fanon, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Abdul JanMohammed, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. See *White Mythologies--Writing History and the West*, esp. pp. 119-26. However, if we consider H. J. Blackham's observations--"Humanism proceeds from an assumption of responsibility for one's own life and for the life of mankind" (13). "The conditions of society are the conditions of morality" (17). "The single theme of humanism is self-determination, for persons, for groups and societies, for mankind together. Illumination of this theme is the perpetual business of humanism" (19)--it becomes difficult to understand from what perspective, if not that of humanism itself, Sarris is able to identify Patrick's forfeited "moral responsibility."

seriously the notion of a web and not sides--the "web" that draws together *all* of the "fragments of a human order" (145) He takes seriously the notion that a "mural" of stories is better than a lot of single ones (145) It's a narrative network that's strengthening and not debilitating (144), and it evidently constitutes the starting-point of any story-telling to come. This humanistic perspective--or, better, pragmatic one--points to the fact that we're in the story together and that, with the grandest story yet to be told--the one about "human dignity, freedom, and peace"--we can take as rudimentary grammar our knowledge that dynamite will lay up in pain, if not permanently lay down, certain of the co-authors¹⁵

As we turn towards *The English Patient*, we might consider Morris Ginsberg's traditional humanistic view of the path of progress--all the more traditional for its internal inconsistency. As formulated in the eighteenth century, he says,

the theory of progress contained three tenets. Firstly, the belief in human perfectibility, in the power of reason not only to utilize the forces of nature in the service of human needs, but also to bring about improvements in human relations and the behaviour of men. Secondly, the belief in the unity of mankind. This rested on the assumption that the powers of the mind were in essentials the same in all men, and that there was a moral obligation to reduce inequalities and break down the barriers that separate them. Thirdly, the belief that in the history of man there was in fact a movement towards these ends. It seems to me that the essential point in the theory of progress remains true, namely, that in the course of historical development man is slowly rationalized and that man is moralized in proportion as he becomes more rational (113) [As to] the unity of mankind, including the belief that

¹⁵ Richard Rorty suggests that we are still at the drawing-board in the attempt to even *imagine* such a future. "That is, we cannot tell ourselves a story about how to get from the actual present to such a future. We can picture various socioeconomic setups which would be preferable to the present one. But we have no clear sense of how to get from the actual world to these theoretically possible worlds, and thus no clear idea of what to work for. This inability to imagine how to get from here to there is a matter neither of loss of moral resolve nor of theoretical superficiality, self-deception, or self-betrayal. It is not something we can remedy by a firmer resolve, or more transparent prose, or better philosophical accounts of man, truth, or history. It is just the way things happen to have fallen out. Sometimes things prove to be just as bad as they first looked. This bad news remains the great intransigent fact of contemporary political speculation, the one that blocks all the liberal scenarios" (1989: 182)

progress is something shareable by all mankind. In dealing with this problem the early theories were undoubtedly Europe-centred. They tended to identify the progress of mankind with the progress of the European peoples, or even with the peoples they took to be the European *élite*. Nowadays this would be condemned as cultural imperialism, and stress is frequently laid on the plurality and distinctiveness of cultures or civilizations. This is undoubtedly a healthy reaction. But it does not follow that the theory that progress is something in which all peoples can share, each in its own way, is thereby shaken (118-19). An important aspect of the unification of mankind is the unification of law. More than half the population of the world is under the influence of the Common law or the systems derived from Roman law. It is true that within each region local differences remain. But against this it is to be noted that a conscious movement to facilitate unification has achieved a fair measure of success in the Commonwealth countries, the United States, and the Scandinavian peoples. In estimating future possibilities we should take into consideration not only the failures but also the successes. The systematization and rationalization of the Common Law of England took about a thousand years and is far from being fully achieved; the rationalization of world law may well not take so long (120-21). Of the quest for justice we can say confidently that it is a rational quest, for it is the nature of reason to exclude arbitrariness and to make for unity and integration. Justice, as Aristotle tells us, is 'a kind of equality'. We can now see that progress has consisted in the effort to determine what kind, and to define the relations between freedom and equality. These ideas have now spread all over the world and are everywhere contributing to the emancipation of peoples. (124)

Amen.

IV *The English Patient: The Holy and the Historical*

In the final days of World War Two, the English patient lies under an artificial bower in the Villa San Girolamo, badly burned, "eternally dying" (115), and in search of that part of his identity that has not been lost through his careful plotting. This "despairing saint" and (unknown to Hana) one-time guide to German spies is cared for by the young woman who, shell-shocked, is herself "more patient than nurse" (3, 95). Her uncle-by-choice Caravaggio has managed to locate the bombed-out villa; most recently an Intelligence officer with the British, he is, having been tortured by the Italians, yet another "in near ruins" (27). Kirpal Singh, the last to have stepped through the French doors, completes the present constellation of the wounded. A Sikh bomb-disposal expert with the British army, he is self-sufficient, a "survivor of his fears" (73)--but only by virtue of having learned to trust *nothing* and *no one* so completely as he trusts the "race of stones," the religious statues which have stood guard over him each night along his route through Italy (104).

With "hardly a world around them," the occupants of the villa are forced back on themselves (40), each into their private "sphere of memory and solitude" (47), each into their own "outpost" (48). But such defensiveness does not last. The villa is, says Ondaatje, "a kind of Eden before a Fall... an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war...where [very tentative] healing beg[ins]." ¹ Indeed, Hana soon defines this Eden--and she might well speak for all its residents--as a place of reading, listening, and celebration of "simple" adventures and victories,

¹ Wachtel, Interview (1992), p. 252, 255

the shared place where "there was nothing ...that belonged to the outside world" which itself carried "no representation of them...no sound or sight of them" (111-12). Here Kirpal and Hana eventually fall in love, each appearing to the other as a "saint" (128, 273), whilst Caravaggio--once distant and godlike, and even then adored by Hana--becomes a "friendlier human" (266). For his part, he discovers that he loves his niece "more now than he loved her when he had understood her better, when she was the product of her parents....He could hardly believe his pleasure at her translation" (222) Kirpal is a "sentinel" over all the others (286) but takes a special interest in the one who is a "sentinel" over him--his guide to all that's glued into Herodotus' *The Histories*, the English patient (218-19) To the Patient, the other three are simply a "gift," and beloved (257). By ever having entered the world that they've now left behind, Hana, Patrick, and Caravaggio betrayed Clara, that "demon for pleasure" who, "independent" and "private," unfooled, "determined," and "so wise," stayed away from war altogether (292, 296) The survivors who are now gathered at the villa surely repeat something of that Epicurean wisdom.²

However, this is not the third century BC but 1945, and the location is not a small cabin in Georgian Bay but the villa in war-ravaged Italy. Paradise is

² According to Georg Von Wrigh the "escapist wisdom" of Epicurean humanism may be regarded as a secularized form of a longing for salvation (25). H J Blackham adds that the Epicurean's understanding that man was mortal, that none would survive the death of the body, "prepared the way for wise living" (109) Embracing the moral ideal of "self-sufficiency or independence" (108), the Epicurean believed that rather than engaging in the "competitive strife of the world," one should "withdraw and live with chosen friends in a garden the simple life of enjoyment of enduring pleasures In this way, by wise choice and avoidance, one would keep one's fate in one's own hands securely to the end, and die full and content" (109) Blackham mentions that according to Cicero, Epicureanism " 'had occupied the whole of Italy' " (qtd 109) In the first century BC, the orator presumably speaks about the fourth and/or third, in which Epicurus lived and died (d 270 BC)

qualified by the knowledge and the experience--by and large traumatic--of its dwellers; no Return is this to fresh, innocent beginnings. In view of the possibility that the actual apple tree--that the whole damned garden--is laced with explosives (75, 87), neither is the villa any sort of absolute escape from the world out there. Hana has indeed ended the war by folding up her uniform, but Kip, in combat with his "opponent[s]," the inventors of bombs, still wears his (99)

The Patient's canopy of foliage is artificial; the actual garden is "ruined" (33)--yet Hana works with a furious passion to create a real bower and manages to impress "civilisation" upon a square foot of grass (43, 58). Just like the real garden, the holy one both *is* and *is not*. Eden and its saints are removed from, but are at once qualified by, the historical: by secular worldliness. There are the bombs. And there is the eternal condition ("eternally dying") of mortality, of changeability: a given which concerns people as well as things and ideas. Such ambiguity--the *is* and *is not*--such a lack of absoluteness, is central, we will see, to both the themes and the dominant philosophical inclination of *The English Patient*.

Ondaatje says that, in the novel, the "nuclear family is replaced by a kind of extended family...[whose members offer] that kind of support and affection which has very much to do with family, but nothing to do with blood" (Wachtel 259). Speaking of the desert, the Patient describes a similar situation the explorers went to that "pure zone ...to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry" (246). Having personally wished for erasure of all family names and nations, others, he says, staked a claim to the desert, applying their names to a

type of sand dune, or to this kind of tree or that tribe (139). Coming to hate nation-states, the Patient has finally seen consciousness of ancestry and desire for ownership result in war and unholy sermons in honour of it (139, 240). The family at the villa, distinctly unconcerned with blood-lines and nation-states, might be seen to stand as a model of human association alternate to the one upheld by those jingoistic priests--the one upheld by *all* the sentinels of humanistic "Western wisdom"--who steer this "shitty civilised world" (284-85, 123).

The political philosophy of humanism is expressed, says H.J. Blackham, in the notion of the "open society" (63). Such a society's political procedures and institutions are generally accepted to be democratic, and "rationally grounded in repeated experience" (48). Both the procedures and the institutions are

themselves provisional, open to further experience, and establish provisional knowledge or provisional laws and policies, open to revision (48) In the open society men are closely bound by and to one another by agreement so that they may be able to choose how they shall live In a modern society [a highly organized interdependence maintained by agreement] is the condition of freedom (57) The fundamental agreement [sought in the open society concerns] the rules regulating politics, governing access to and the responsible exercise of power Upon this basis there are rules of many different kinds, from the rules of debate to rules of the road, from manners to morals, from civil rights to company law, from statutes to judicial procedures (50) Underneath interdependence is a corset of hard agreements, but what strikes the eye is the grace and style of public amenity and public spirit which follow from general satisfaction with the social arrangements This can happen only if all interests are adequately represented (63) 'Open' is a key word To the open society might well be added the open heart and the open hand. The humanist seeks equality [H]e is permissive and tolerant . [and] inclined to be gentle and tender and affectionate . He would rather make love than make war--a vast understatement [T]he virtues he admires are candour and generosity, fortitude and fairness He regards truth as a primary value (80-81)

Kirpal's experience of racism in Europe speaks volumes about the standard exclusions--by race, by class, by gender--practiced in the "open" society. The "Wise white fatherly men" indeed welcome the "brown" races to

clear away their ticking bombs, but all geniality and common purpose end there. This helpmeet will remain "the foreigner, the Sikh" (105), the "anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world" (196). By no means is that world entirely invisible, however, and by no means is the open society tethered to the West. The object of the imperialists' gaze, the invisible world is "converted" and thereby improved by the "customs and manners and books and prefects and reason" of the colonizers (283).³ And the rules set out are far from provisional: "You," Kirpal accuses the English patient, "stood for precise behaviour: I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished" (283) ⁴

Scarcely is missionary zeal the singular motive of this invasion. At times concerned with the accumulation of "servants and slaves," colonists have *a/ways* been concerned with "tides of power," with ruling, with "enlarging their sphere of influence" (141). The British regulation of entry to and movement within the fort in Lahore (200) is but one measure in their undertaking to control native entry to political power and movement within the socio-economic hierarchy

³ The philosophical foundations of imperialism, says Elliot Gilbert, are, first, the belief "in the physical and moral superiority of the colonialists, second, [the belief] in the (at least temporary) physical and moral inferiority of the natives, and third, [the belief] in the possibility that the colonialists, by their presence and through their efforts, might improve the lot of the natives" (119) *The Good Kipling--Studies in the Short Story* Oberlin Ohio University Press, 1970 Robert Young offers details of numerous critiques that see humanism as being deeply implicated in the structures of colonialism. In short, throughout the history of colonialism 'the human' has been used as a highly politicized explanatory category "that purports to provide a rational understanding of 'man'--an assumed universal predicated on the exclusion and marginalization of his Others, such as 'woman' or 'the native' ". Humanism has been "a form of legitimation produced as a self-justification by the colonizers for their own people", the category of the human, "however exalted in its conception," has been used to justify the colonizers' classification of the native as subhuman (122-23)

⁴ I have noticed certain critics speak as though colonization in India was not, in 1945, an active enterprise. Although the desire for Indian independence was first formalized with the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 (Sullivan 14), it was not until 1947 that India finally won independence and 1950 that it adopted its own constitution

At the villa, Hana is no longer concerned with the rules, the orders, or the duties which lend to social configuration and "the greater good" (14). It is not agreement over rules but actual freedom--to her, a new and uncomfortable freedom--that distinguishes the relations between her and Kirpal:

Later she will realize he never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him. She will stare at the word in a novel, lift it off the book and carry it to a dictionary. *Beholden To be under obligation*. And he, she knows, never allowed that. If she crosses the two hundred yards of dark garden to him it is her choice. (128)

Her immense attraction towards and desire for Other is fundamental to the choice she repeatedly makes: "A man not of your own blood can break upon your emotions more than someone of your own blood. As if falling into the arms of a stranger you discover the mirror of your choice" (90). Much the same for Kirpal: he sees that in seeking to establish both sexual and platonic intimacy, he has always been drawn outside "blood" family towards the "stranger" (226). In a hill town of Italy, and on the basis of a deep affinity and affection, their two "continents" meet as "equal[s]" (225-26).

But all is not affinity. Hana's "nature"--a "depth of darkness" resulting from the deaths of loved ones and a lack of religious faith (271)--is entirely unlike Kirpal's. Having grown up "an outsider" and having his religion, he has various "allegiances" and "maps of fate" that he can switch between to find "solution and light" (271-72). Hana not only resents such relative ease but believes that his ability to "replace loss" prevents her from turning fully to him to be his lover (272). Yet, she sees that this is "his nature. She would not judge it in him. What right did she have" (272). So smart, "[i]deal and idealistic" (301), she tolerates his

idiosyncratic framework just as he tolerates hers, both apparently understanding that there is no absolute nature--no single, final way to be or to think.⁵

Unlike Hana, Katharine Clifton presumed that she knew the right answer from the wrong. In the 1930's she had an extra-marital affair with the Patient, discovering with him their "propinquity" in sado-masochistic compulsion (150). Theirs was a "tough romance," says Ondaatje (Watchel 254). Yet, all was not propinquity. Similar to Kirpal, the Patient sought self-sufficiency (238), a certain freedom--above all, he hated ownership (152). And similar to Hana, Katharine felt insecure with such freedom. She worked through her insecurity in ways different from Hana's, however. By glueing cigarette papers over "sections of *The Histories* that recorded wars that were of no interest to him" (172), the Patient was able to create the space required to record Katharine's own mighty campaign.

Above all, Katharine hated a lie (152), and she thought the Patient lied:

"You think you are an iconoclast, but you're not. You just move, or replace

⁵ In the tradition of idealism--an old one, dating back to Anaxagoras and Plato-- knowledge is seen to be "a relation to propositions rather than to objects" (Rorty 1982 144, 1979 148). Berkeley's claim in the nineteenth century--'nothing can be like an idea except an idea'--was, says Rorty, one way of insisting "that we can never compare human thought or language with bare unmediated reality" (1982 142, 139). For Berkeley, though, both thought and reality were mediated, by God, for Kant, it was the 'transcendental ego'--the 'thinkable but unknowable self the autonomous noumenal self'--that put one in touch with "the ultimate nature of reality" (146). Since Kant, idealism has broken off with any metaphysical explanation of knowledge, and contemporary idealists are largely engaged in an anti-empiricist polemic. Against the notion that "scientific theory is true or that scientific practice tends to discover truth," they argue that what is "real" or "true" is always relativized to a 'conceptual scheme' (1979 277-275). A conceptual scheme may be understood, says Rorty, as "simply a reference to what we believe now." "[O]ur present views about nature are our only guide in talking about the relation between nature and our words" (276). The distinction most relevant to idealism, he says, is the "distinction between finding out whether a proposition is true and finding out whether a vocabulary is good" (1982 142). The idealist, like the "thorough-going" pragmatist, is concerned with the latter undertaking. Rorty himself recommends a "thorough-going abandonment of the notion of *discovering the truth* which is common to theology and science" (149).

what you cannot have. If you fail at something you retreat into something else. "Nothing changes you" (173). It was an absurd accusation; the Patient was quite "disassembled" by her (155). She (the daughter of parents famous in the world of legal history) sought a guarantee, a writ of proprietorship: "You slide past everything with your fear and hate of ownership, of owning, of being owned, of being named. You think this is a virtue. I think you are inhuman. If I leave you, who will you go to? Would you find another lover?" (238). Fearful of her husband and believing in her honour (238), she eventually fell back on the social law against adultery--the law which neither she nor the Patient believed in (171)--and quit the relationship.

To the Patient, human association is a matter not of juridical maps or social "courtesy" (155), but desire, reverence, and mutual constitution. Faith is a matter of believing that "a stone or found metal box or bone can become loved and turn eternal in a prayer" (261) and history, a matter of the "glory" of places and people--a sort of holy nature--being inscribed upon the body

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography--to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps (261)

In striking contrast is the "faith of the humanist." That faith, says Blackham, "is first of all in reason, in the reliability of tested evidence" (28). The mind "remains open to the changes required by further evidence" (30), it is as

open as the open society, and its heart and hand. He adds that in the eighteenth century, Alexander Pope "called reason 'the god within the mind'. The phrase well represents the notion of reason as the godlike essence of man, akin to the divine mind that framed the universe, which is therefore able to decipher and spell out what is there, to 'think the thoughts of God' " (31-32). But humanists in the twentieth century conceive of reason as being "embodied in certain procedures of 'reasoning', the methods of the sciences" (32); and, further, believe that "there is no absolute knowledge which is beyond question, neither within the mind nor outside in any tradition" (31) Roland Barthes observes that "[a]ny classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins...one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature" (qtd. in Young, 122). The notion of reason as the essence of man--godlike or otherwise--is of a piece with such an abstraction, and could be seen by humanists other than Morris Ginsberg to be just as foundational.⁶ Be that as it may, to Hana, the evidence of war is sufficient to change *any* open mind:

Every damn general should have had my job . It should have been a prerequisite for any river crossing Who the hell were we to be given this responsibility, expected to be wise as old priests, to know how to lead people towards something no one wanted and somehow make them feel comfortable I could never believe in all those services they gave for the dead. Their vulgar rhetoric How dare they! How dare they talk like that about a human being dying! (84)

But the minds of those who pull the strings are evidently closed. Regarding reason itself, the young nurse, a self-proclaimed wise rationalist (296), concludes

⁶ Cf above 80-81

both its possibility and impossibility: "Reason was the only thing that might save [herself and her patients], and there was no reason" (50).

There was a period of time, however, when the humanist's mind was arguably more open, open not only to the changes required by empirical evidence but to the treasury of sacred and secular knowledges alike. The Patient describes the artistic and intellectual riot of the Renaissance--the accomplishments of painters, poets, and translators; the study of languages, rhetoric, philosophy, and nature (57). He also describes the crusade against humanism led by Girolamo Savonarola, whose interest was to shore up not only the crumbling authority of the Church but that of the State--the Florentine monk often forecast the overthrow of the Medicis and the ruination of Italy.⁷

everything was swept away--free will, the desire to be elegant, fame, the right to worship Plato as well as Christ. Now came the bonfires--the burning of wigs, books, animal hides, maps....the burning of Plato's statue, whose marble exfoliated in the heat, the cracks across wisdom like precise reports across the valley as [the translator] Poliziano stood on the grass hills smelling the future (57-58)

That future is now. In 1945, the State reigns supreme, and genuine wisdom is shot. But *against* Savonarola's hopes, Italy nevertheless stands in ruins. And further against his hopes, wisdom is shot only at the public level, for the residents of the Villa San Girolamo rebuff not only the authority of the State but the crass sciolism of the shitty civilised world.

Books are for Hana a much-needed door "out of her cell" (7). For the Patient, learning is like breathing: notwithstanding being only half alive, he mentally notes ethnographic details of the Bedouins who have dragged him from

⁷ David Ehrenfeld's *The Arrogance of Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 216

the fire And he teaches--to anyone who will listen--his concept of Virgilian man, and the routes and shapes of winds; particulars of tribal customs, and the dearth of brunettes among Florentine Madonnas; details of lakes having existed in deserts, and the oldest known sail, notions of the "oasis towns, the later Medicis, the prose style of Kipling, [and] the woman who bit into his flesh" (96). He tells about Herodotus who sought out--just as the Patient does--the "supplementary to the main argument," the "cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history," the personal histories which are most often not thought of as History (119, 145).⁸

"[W]ading up beachheads and the one thousand skirmishes of small wars and the bombing of Monte Cassino.. to be here," in the Sistine Chapel (77), Kirpal's purpose in Europe is as much a quest for holy wisdom as the setting up Bailey bridges and taking down of bombs. The Sikh--a guardian of the Hindu religion--searches for a "brother" in the crowd of da Vinci figures and finds him in Isaiah, the prophet whose face is "like a spear, wise, unforgiving" (77).⁹ In the face of the Virgin Mary he discerns the look of a sister, "[s]omeday a daughter"

⁸ In the fifth century, Herodotus wrote a history of the war that was waged between his own country, Greece, and the attacking Persian Empire. Supplementary to this main argument was an account of Greek culture, a history of certain kingdoms of the East, and ethnographic and geographic findings. He traced not only dynasties and ancestries but far more personal smiles, tears, obscene gestures, and bedroom scenes. See Donald Lateiner's *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (University of Toronto Press, 1989), Robert Drews' *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History* (The Centre for Hellenic Studies, Washington, D C , 1973), and K H Waters' *Herodotus the Historian* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

⁹ Re Isaiah 22:18, which is quoted on page 294. The historical circumstances behind Isaiah's prophecy that Yahweh "will surely violently turn and toss thee like a ball into a large country" are widely thought, says William Whedbee, to be those of the Assyrian invasion of Judah in 701 BC, and the resultant crisis of faith of Judah's leaders and populace (64). Isaiah condemned the "foolish, ineffectual" counsellors of the Jerusalem court (62). "[E]namored with their own wisdom" (19), they sought salvation by means of political alliances "instead of reliance on Yahweh and trust in his plan" (130). Isaiah is considered to be a paradigm of the problem of conflict between prophets and the "wisdom movement." The messengers of Yahweh's word and wisdom were prone to attack the secular sages of the court and their "wise" counsel--and "little love seemed lost between them" (14-15). *Isaiah and Wisdom* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971.

(80), in that of King Solomon, "judgement, piety and sacrifice" (70) He falls in love with the Queen of Sheba, who would one day learn, probably from Solomon, about the "sacredness of bridges" (70).¹⁰

The Patient sings the praises of Isaiah to the enquiring Kirpal, the latter hopes that he might carry that knowledge and pass it, like all of his knowledge of Western traditions, on to another (283). Meanwhile, the Sikh imaginatively guides Hana to the "magic" rivers of the Punjab, and to the saints, hymns, verses, and shrines of his temple, "a haven in the flux of life, accessible to all" (271). The Patient describes to Caravaggio his practice of certain traditions discovered in Herodotus, traditions "in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them eternal--a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing" (248). Operating from inside and outside of their own ancestral plots, the villa residents structure their relations with each other and restructure their own cultural identities.¹¹

Yet, for Kirpal the two cultures are like "two armies" within him (71). The "pact" between him and the della Francesca figures is provisional, "temporary"

¹⁰ King of Israel in the tenth century, the wise Solomon was famed for a particular judgement by threatening to cleave a child in two, he elicited the truth of which of the two women claiming to be its mother was indeed so. The real mother proved willing to give the child up in order to save its life and, hence, won custody (1 Kings 3 16-28). Kirpal might be familiar with the verses which describe Solomon, in the presence of his people, praying for condemnation of the wicked but forgiveness of all who confess (8 32-36), and for welcome and salvation for the stranger, the non-Israelite, who worships (8 41-43).

¹¹ Cultural anthropologist James Clifford suggests that rather than thinking of cultural identity in terms of an essence or source, a unified self or unchanging tradition, we should think of it as being "mixed, relational, and inventive" (4-10). "Twentieth-century identities," he says, "no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages" (14). He sees identity as an "ongoing process, [often] politically contested and [always] historically unfinished" (9), he conceives of the "authenticity" of any culture in no terms other than the "local tactic" which can be staged in political opposition to external, often dominating cultural alternatives (12).

he believes that Solomon and Sheba would ultimately "forget him, never acknowledge his existence or be aware of him, a Sikh" (71).¹² The history of colonial violence is far too long and impressive to allow any wise person a romanticization of intercultural contact. The resolution which remains out of Kirpal's reach will not, according to James Clifford, be found by anyone. "There is no master narrative," he says, "that can reconcile the tragic and comic plots of global cultural history"--the histories of "degradation, mimicry, violence, and blocked possibilities," and the "presents-becoming-futures" which are characterized by rebellion, syncretism, and invention (15).

Kirpal's pacts--between himself and Sheba, the villa residents, and the "Holy Trinity" of Lord Suffolk, Miss Morden, and Mr. Harts (178)--are founded upon his desire for knowledge and his desire for intimacy. He is attracted to the quality which both the Patient and Suffolk share--the "abstract madness" of autodidacts, their ability to "read the motives and spirit behind any invention" (111, 186). He is attracted to the sheer eccentricity of Suffolk and to the gentleman's values. The "lord who had never stepped out of England" is most comfortable at his retreat, the Home Farm, where he fixes things, observes robins and badgers, and ponders over the historical and geographical accuracy of *Lorna Doone* (185-87) And Kirpal is attracted to those who are attracted to him. The Trinity draw him into their "clan," their "family," whereafter he develops for them the "same strength of love" that he eventually develops for Hana (186, 189, 197).

¹² Kirpal is apparently unaware that his egalitarian relationship with "brother" Isaiah is mere presumption. Isaiah observed the father-son convention which distinguished the wisdom movement. "The recipients of wisdom teaching," says Whedbee, "are typically designated as 'sons', and the primary demand is for sons to hearken, to obey instruction." *Op cit*, p 37.

Surely this family stands as a model of association alternate to the one imagined by nineteenth-century imperialists.¹³

Stephen Scobie argues that at the level of political allegory, the Patient and Lord Suffolk both stand for the "paternal relation of England to India, the imperialist power celebrated in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and rejected here by Kip" (1994: 98).¹⁴ The Patient himself readily agrees that he bodies forth the guilty Empire. Employing his own allegory, he draws a parallel between David and Goliath and Kirpal and himself (116); the Israelite warrior, we know, slew the Philistine aggressor. And he accepts Kirpal's charge that he is the composite English-American "father" who, having dropped the bombs on Japan, broke justice in two: "Do it," he tells the sapper, who holds him in his rifle sight (285-86)

At the level of the real, the Patient's status is somewhat more complicated. According to nationality, he is Hungarian, and as far from the imperialist centre, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek argues, as Kirpal and Caravaggio. But as one of the "English" who loves Africa, one whose "brain reflects the desert precisely," he is

¹³ Zohreh Sullivan says that the "familial trope of a world in which mother England would be caretaker to lesser children of imperial Gods" was common to colonial discourse "[I]ncreasingly threatened by separatism after the loss of the American colonies," the English were, she says, "accustomed to discussing relations with empire in familial terms." She quotes from an 1829 periodical "It is pretty much with colonies as with children, we protect and nourish them in infancy, we direct them in youth, and leave them to their own guidance in manhood, and the best conduct to be observed is to part with them on friendly terms." The familial metaphor, she says, "superimposes the domestic and familiar upon unknown territories and imposes linguistic order on an uncontrollable relationship. By so doing, it appears to deny difference as it delivers the [speaking] subject from the anxieties of political complexity" (2)

¹⁴ Scobie is certainly not the first to describe Kipling's work as such a celebration. Hana herself seems to recognize both the strengths and weaknesses of *Kim*, remarking on the "delicate and holy" quality of its ending (94), and writing into the flyleaf a note of political savvy--the English did *not* reign without bloodshed (118). There is no shortage of criticism that explores the subtleties of what Empire apparently meant to Kipling (see, for example, Elliot Gilbert's *Kipling and the Critics*). Contrary to any simple view of Kipling or of Empire, Zohreh Sullivan argues to book-length how that author reproduced, wittingly and unwittingly, the ambivalent desires and fears as well as the ambivalent modes of discourse (e.g., the loving family unit, and the glory of imperial mastery) that distinguished the colonial enterprise

no "foreigner" there (33) and, hence, neither Hungarian nor English. By state of mind, he is African. As the Patient sees it, both he and Kirpal are displaced, each by their own desire: "international bastards--born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives" (176). As the object of Clifton and Bagnold's surveillance, and once literally caged by the English, the international bastard is scarcely a "very English Englishman" (252, 255, 251). But he surely *is* one of the European map drawers, in correspondence with the Geographical Society that *is* an arm of Empire (141). Concerned, however, with theorems of exploration--"dune formation...the lost culture of deserts... latitudes...an event that happened seven hundred years earlier" (143)--concerned with teaching the concept of photography to Abd el Melik Ibrahim el Zwaya, and with the God that is to be found in the desert (250), he cuts a very poor figure of an imperialist bastard. The answer to his question: "This country--had I charted it and turned it into a place of war?" (260) is a qualified one: yes, but inadvertently.

Scobie continues his argument:

It is Kip, most of all, who wants the Patient to be English so that he can project onto him all the ambivalences of his response to the imperial centre, both his colonial emulation of the English master (Lord Suffolk) and his postcolonial rejection of the English warmonger (complicit in the bombing of Hiroshima). But [Ondaatje's narrative] undermines any such easy postcolonial reading. The English Patient may represent the centre of Empire, but as a patient he is no longer an active force, and as Almásy he is no longer even English. Englishness is thus written out of the novel, always already, the centre is empty. Always already, there is *only* the post- (99)

As I see it, Scobie is confusing matters of allegory and matters of the real. On the level of political allegory, the text argues that Kirpal indeed emulates the

master "he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son" (217). But the individual who stands at the foot of the Patient's bed has in his actual responses and with no ambivalence whatsoever repudiated those fathers and their codes. Having "decided that in a war you have to take control" (187), Kirpal has trained his power--just as 'the Holy' Suffolk once did--against the ticking "limbs of evil" and those politicians who ordered their manufacture and placement (285).

On the level of allegory, the Patient *is* English, *is* the centre of Empire, and *is* dying. But again Scobie meshes the allegorical and the real. The thorough immobility of the real Patient does *not* signify the active force of Empire having come to termination. Nor does his real nationality cause an erasure of the Englishness of those who remain at the centre. The political allegory of the novel does allow us to understand the politically real: the empire is crumbling. But it is *not* crumbling because of the centre's "always already" receptivity to the so-called "post-." ¹⁵ Rather, (if India is any example) both the colonized--we might think of Kirpal's brother--and certain not so very English Englishmen have fought long and hard for the colonies' independence.¹⁶

¹⁵ I believe that Scobie makes injudicious use of the qualification "always already"--a peculiar qualification which was to my knowledge invented by Louis Althusser. Althusser theorized the individual who, at the moment of "hailing" or "interpellation" of a given ideological apparatus, is unavoidably "recruited" and "transformed" to the subject of that apparatus (163). We are, he considered, "always already" subjects in that ideologies are "obviousnesses" that we cannot fail to recognize (161). ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* Ben Brewster, trans. Bristol NLB, 1971.) Hence, "always already" describes the essential state of being receptive to and transformed by that which is confronted. As I understand its common usage, the qualification more generally signifies an essential state of being. To argue that England was always already prepared to abandon the centre, or that there exists, in 1945 or in any other year, a state of "post-" essentially void of the history of colonization, would, of course, be arguments difficult to sustain.

¹⁶ Sullivan recounts that an Englishman was a leading figure of Indian Nationalism. Agitating for

When the bombs land on the Japanese, Kirpal's ability to distinguish the private from the public evaporates. In pain, in fury, he determines that the Patient is absolutely English, and the "new revealed enemy" (284). He takes aim; the "palace of strangers" is demolished (294).

Hana fears the personal will *forever* be at war with the public (292). But forever is far too absolute. Hurtling down the roads of Italy, Kirpal "feels he carries the body of the Englishman with him....in an embrace with his" (294). Moreover, he does not fail an assignation with another holy statue--albeit one, "bandaged in scaffold" (291), as wounded as he. "[F]acing the past" (294), he flies towards a future in which his losses will be replaced by work, family, and another garden. He will frequently recall the intimacy he knew at the villa. And he will wish for a return, having known that possibility *and* knowing its impossibility.

native rights and for a parliamentary government, in 1883 Allan Octavian Hume "wrote letters to every graduate of Calcutta University asking for 'fifty volunteers to begin a movement for the regeneration of their country 'There are aliens like myself', he wrote, 'who love India and her children but the real work must be done by the people of the country themselves' " (49-50) His commitment to the cause, she says, "galvanized Indian resistance and the leadership of W C Bonnerjee, G S Iyer and P Mehta among others, result[ing] in the first Indian National Conference (1883) and .the birth [in 1885] of the Indian National Congress" (50) Not surprisingly, the pamphlets he wrote throughout the 1880's "brought upon him the wrath of officials who thought he aimed at becoming 'the Indian Parnell' " (50)

Conclusion

Ondaatje problematizes subjectivity, social relations, and history, and he unpacks the problems, as I've argued, in ways that accord with philosophical pragmatism. That tradition supposes things such as the human subject, society, truth, morality, rationality, and inquiry to be without any essential nature. As such, the accounts we might make of these things will not be constrained by the way the things are in themselves. Hutcheon's discussion of Ondaatje's use of the historical referent hinges upon the idea that it's not reality itself but the concepts and categories of our human understanding that determine our descriptions of the world. According to pragmatic thought, because these concepts and categories are human creations, inventions, the descriptions we make of the world will be inventions, and never an accurate representation of the way the world is. To Rorty, we can expect to attain no absolute apprehension of things--things, like our selves and our societies, that are themselves less than absolute.

Throughout Ondaatje's works we've seen the subject characterized by opacity, instability, and vicissitude rather than any sort of unchanging nature. Ambrose Small's diverse and discontinuous worlds are said to mirror his self, an apparently variable self. Patrick is convinced that Alice shifts from one true self to another, and so she does. She first appears as a timid nun, next, as an outspoken political activist. Patrick himself swerves from one self, enfeebled and minimal, to another, bold and barbaric. Like Patrick, Hazen is alternately abashed and brutal. But his shifts, unlike Patrick and Alice's, are completely unaccounted for.

Philosophers of a historicist persuasion insist that it is socialization, and thus historical circumstance, that defines the subject. We've seen that the self-reconstruction undertaken by Billy and Buddy is indeed a strategic response to--at least in some measure--the demands of their social environments. But a paradox quickly surfaces the fact that their new schizophrenic realities are marked by reduced or resigned participation in their collective narrative enterprises shows that an escape from social constraints is quite possible. However, insofar as the schizophrenic self is a self without a locus of subjectivity, and one that is often terror-stricken, it's argued that the schizophrenic falls dramatically short of attaining personal freedom from social conditions. It's not the operations of schizophrenia but, according to Rorty, the process of self-creation that can offer us some hope for release from the scripts the world imposes. That Buddy gets past some but not all of the scripts set out for him conforms with Rorty's belief that one will never succeed in getting beyond all inherited descriptions to a pure self-creation. The residents of the Villa San Girolamo, in retreat from historical events, fail, like Buddy, in their own bid for freedom. Pure autonomy, transcendence from social and historical conditions, is, in Ondaatje's works, unattained.

As I've argued, Ondaatje treats society as he treats the human subject. Society is made and not found, created by human beings and not God, and built loosely, impermanently. The class, racial, and sexual hierarchies of Toronto, New Orleans, or Fort Lahore are clearly mutable, although it is clear to neither Toronto's radical left nor its liberals how to bring about the desired change.

Further, the demarcation between the socio-political and the private is itself loose. We've seen socio-economic and racial boundaries as well as the frontiers of political affiliation overrun by friends and lovers. Of course class order and racism do not, as a result, vanish. But friends and lovers do, as it happens, achieve more equality in their kitchens and bedrooms than the political opposition does in the public sphere. Unlike certain critics and theorists, Ondaatje clearly values the private, the individual, the aesthetic, conceiving of it in terms other than romantic self-indulgence, social irresponsibility, remarkably vicious regressive narcissism, or estrangement from the reality--a singular reality--of the socio-political. He conceives of ethical merit: the personal expressions made by ones like Caravaggio, Anne, and Hana are commendable, as is the act itself of recognizing and protecting the private sphere. As Patrick says, any ideology that hates the private is inhuman. Alice's claim to be driven by compassion for humanity and a sense of justice and her coterminous belittlement of the private is no small contradiction. Rorty states the case more broadly. a just and free society will allow its citizens their private purposes and projects--their private lives.

We've seen that one's culture and nation are as constructed and as changeable as one's society. The Villa residents are bound to no single cultural tradition, rather, they draw together ancient and less ancient Asian and European knowledges, beliefs, and practices. National identity is like cultural identity--less a matter of ancestry or birth domicile than one's own invention. To Ondaatje's characters, political allegiance qualifies the native Englishman as more English or

less, whereas a thorough understanding of the desert qualifies the Hungarian as more African than European. An alternative conceptual scheme allows that mobility can result in a plurality of homelands and, simply, internationality. The schemes by which identity is determined are as plentiful as the identities themselves. Who we are is at the very least an issue of who we think we are and the categories of identity we contrive for our thinking.

The idea that ultimate sources of knowledge exist is one not so readily given up by certain of Ondaatje's characters and narrators. We've seen them place their faith in scientific method, in ideology, in story-telling, and in metaphysical privilege. But the truths that they advance--the truth about Bellocq's mind, a murder, dolphin noises, or geography; Alice's truth about the abolition of class order and the end of history; the truth about who Billy is or what Nora did with Pickett or when Buddy returned to New Orleans or how Garrett talks when he's alone--are, at best, partial truths. For the most part they are wholly unsubstantiated, and some contradicted by others just as dubious. Chances for epistemic authority are further subverted by the apparent subjective interests of certain inquirers and--not least--laws of physics. What these characters are left with is what, according to Rorty and Barham, we all are: conversation and deliberation with others; provisional, socially justified truths; the constraints of the narrative enterprise.

We've also seen characters place their faith in reason--the reason thought essential to all men; the reason from which springs absolute moral principles as well as the humanist's open society. Moreover, characters place their faith in

their own political office. What follows is not, according to Ondaatje, the reasonable and the good, but class order, racism, and colonialism; laws against adultery and murder that fail to regulate desires and passions; the leave to wage war; and a lot of official histories empty of the facts of human suffering and full of self-praise. To Ondaatje, there's what he calls the unofficial story, the personal and complicated version of things. It's the story that both he and Rorty tell. It's a story about moral choice and not moral principles. And it's about moral practice--imaginatively identifying with the lives of others and with their suffering--and moral progress: extending our sense of 'we' to people whom we've previously thought of as 'they'. As the Patient says, it's a story about freedom, desire, reverence, and mutual constitution.

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