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**The Eye As Author:
Photographic Theory in the Works of Michael Ondaatje**

Andrew G. Brown

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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

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Abstract

The Eye as Author: Photographic Theory in the Works of Michael Ondaatje

Andrew G. Brown

This thesis examines the use of photographs and photographic technique in Michael Ondaatje's texts, specifically: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, and *The English Patient*. It is an attempt to trace the method in which Ondaatje's narrative style parallels John Berger's model for the way photographs can provide narrative, which is found in his text, *Another Way of Telling*. Ondaatje uses photographic discourse as an analogue to structure the narratives of his texts in a tenebristic fashion; the story moves between light and dark. He manipulates time the same way a photograph does. He presents a series of textual fragments which form the bricks of the architecture of his texts. These fragments capture moments (like a photograph captures a moment) and these moments are arranged within Ondaatje's photographically inspired literary structures. The textual fragments parallel the events in Berger's model, but these events are not presented chronologically. Berger's reflections on photography provide a useful model for Ondaatje's narrative progression.

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The Eye as Author: Photographic Theory in the Works of Michael Ondaatje

Introduction

"There is a terrible truthfulness about photography. The ordinary academician gets hold of a pretty model, paints her as well as he can, calls her Juliet, and puts a nice verse from Shakespeare underneath, and the picture is admired beyond measure. The photographer finds the same pretty girl, he dresses her up and photographs her, and calls her Juliet, but somehow it is no good - it is still Miss Wilkins, the model. It is too true to be Juliet."

George Bernard Shaw, 1909

"If the human mind could compute the perfect balance of light, speed and distance in less than a millisecond, the astounding Nikon F90 might not have been invented."

Nikon advertisement

"If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera."

Lewis Hine

In his texts Michael Ondaatje consistently demonstrates a comprehensive way of seeing that, when translated into words, becomes another way of telling. I wish to argue that this type of perception is, in fact, "photographic seeing" (Sontag, 97), which methodically breaks reality into an array of potential photographs. In Ondaatje's texts "one finds not only photographic metaphors but photographically inspired literary structures" (York, 9-10). His photographic way of seeing allows for appearances to become the structure of narrative. These appearances are exhibited through sequences of textual fragments in which Ondaatje manipulates light, space (including the space between words), and time to create his images. These are the primary ingredients of every photograph. As Sam Solecki has stated, "the styles of the books have the same relationship to each other as a person's portraits taken at long intervals" (Solecki, 333). This portrait, although seemingly of the protagonists of the texts, is in fact usually the self-portrait of the writer.

The concept of a methodical "way of seeing" is the focus of many writers of photographic, or image, theory. Among them are Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag. However, it is John Berger who in 1972 used this phrase as the title of his most popular book, *Ways of Seeing*, which attempts to describe

visual perceptions through the perspective of a Marxist art critic and novelist. Later, in 1982, after reviewing Susan Sontag's book *On Photography*, he elaborated on this "way of seeing" and applied his theories in his book *Another Way of Telling*. In it he attempts to translate between appearances and narration. The bulk of the book is taken up by photographs without text which attempt to describe the life of a French peasant woman. The text is absent because to include it would "impose a single verbal meaning upon appearances and thus...inhibit or deny their own language" (133). This way of seeing photographically has produced a unique way of telling, of narration. Berger also includes an essay called "Appearances" which serves to provide the theoretical background for this way of telling.¹

Michael Ondaatje, through the act of writing and through the reader's act of reading, relies on the same method of translating appearances into narrative that Berger experiments with. He also relies heavily on photographs to provide meaning and structure to each text. This is possible because a photograph is "read" within its visual language in much the same way as text is "read" within its language. Victor Burgin clarifies the metaphorical distinction between language

¹ Ondaatje's interest in Berger is made obvious when he clearly states in a 1984 interview: "The writers I admire are various and many. I suppose I would pick up and read anything by John Berger" (Solecki, 328). His reaction to Berger's novel, *G*, confirms this admiration. He claims that the novel, "knocked me out" (qtd. in Barbour, 181).

systems when he writes that, "Photographs are texts inscribed in terms of what we may call photographic discourse" (as qtd. in York, 17).

Berger's perspective emanates from a series of previous critics: from Walter Benjamin to Roland Barthes, whose final book before his death was *Reflections on Photography* (1981), and Susan Sontag, who published *On Photography* in 1977. It is interesting to witness these critics of language systems, of literature and text, so concerned with photography, an apparently image-based system. What becomes obvious is that these critics view photography in very much the same terms as they do linguistic structures. Barthes initially concluded in 1964 that photographs are "a message without a code" (*Image Music Text*, 36). Sontag later placed photographs within a cultural context in which "the image world is replacing the real one" (154), and that "instead of just recording reality, photographs have become the norm for the way things appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality, and of realism" (87). Berger reacts to Barthes and Sontag and enlarges the scope of concentration from photography to appearances. He asserts that appearances constitute a half-language from which photographs are quotations.

It may be useful to examine the way in which Berger compares the two genres, photography and writing. In *Another Way of Telling* he emphasizes that the comparison is metaphorical and one of form, not function:

Their resemblances, their influence one upon the other, are purely formal; functionally they have nothing in common.

Yet however true this may be, a crucial question remains: why can photographs of unknown subjects move us?...I have argued that photographs quote from appearances. This may suggest that appearances themselves constitute a language (111).

The photograph and the textual fragment can be compared at the level of how they provide meaning when they are "read" within their own languages. The reference system for "photographic discourse" is comparable to that used for words. In fact, Berger notes that the areas in the brain which "read and store our visual experience...are structurally identical with those...which process our experience of words. The apparatus with which we deal with appearances is identical with that with which we deal with verbal language" (114). Appearances "cohere within the mind as perceptions" (113) and this "coherence proposes a unity not unlike that of a language" (114). Berger's statements here allow this thesis to compare "photographic discourse" and Ondaatje's texts.

Linda Hutcheon provides a useful hint of how to examine the progression of narrative in Ondaatje's texts. She credits Barthes for making "the fragment one of the major postmodernist forms" (Hutcheon, 304). This fragment becomes the basis for the writing of Ondaatje. Ondaatje writes his texts as a series of textual images or interconnected fragments. He tries to piece his fragments into a narrative

in much the same way as Barthes describes: "Each piece is self-sufficient, but is never more than the interstice of its neighbours" (as quoted in Hutcheon, 304).

Perhaps the best example of this placing of fragments in succession is in the early narrative poem *the man with seven toes* (1969). The book opens with the following:

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

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

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

It continues on the next page:

She woke and there was a dog
sitting on her shoulder (10)

Here Ondaatje provides a moment, a single self-contained fragment, with no outside experience involved. He does not tell us where she came from, what she looks like, or why she is there; neither does he connect the narrative between the two fragments on consecutive pages; they are independent moments. Just as in a photograph without a caption, it is up to the observer (here it is the reader) to place the moment within a context. The form of the text is in essence a

photograph album, one poem section arranged on each oversized page, with an abundance of white to represent the gaps in the narrative, and in time. Ondaatje speaks of the origin of this form in a 1975 interview:

In *the man with seven toes*, I guess that book was influenced in a lot of ways, though not in theme, by Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems*, somewhere where she talks about a narrative form as a kind of necklace in which each bead-poem while being related to the others on the string was, nevertheless, self-sufficient, independent, lyrical. That got me really interested in the form for *the man with seven toes*. (Solecki, 24)

Sam Solecki, in his essay "Point Blank: Narrative in the *man with seven toes*", discusses the text in terms of fragmented form. He writes that the text is in a

form made up of brief self-contained, often cinematic, lyrics each of which explodes on the reader with a single startling revelation (138).

Although Solecki mentions filmic technique, it would seem as if photographs provide a better model for the "brief self-contained" fragments he suggests are the basis of the form of Ondaatje's text. Solecki provides a clue to this contradiction when he writes that, "the reader knowing nothing about the scene's past can make no valid conjectures about the future" (140). This comment does not apply to a film (in which a present unfolds before the observer) as readily as a photograph (which is a moment). It seems strikingly similar to the way Berger interprets photographs:

An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future. (*Another Way of Telling*, 89)

In *the man with seven toes* Ondaatje provides on each page a fragment of a greater whole. The fragments consist of events in the narrative between which the reader must fill in the gaps. This metaphorically parallels the act of looking at a series of portraits taken over time so that the spectator must re-organize the gaps in time and personal history to provide a meaning. These gaps exist in both fictional time, the time between events in a narrative, and in real time, the time it takes to read. This is similar to Berger's observation that "between the moment recorded and the present moment of looking at the photograph, there is an abyss" (*Another Way*, 87). In other words, there is a gap between the present of the photograph and the present of looking at the photograph.

Ondaatje writes his texts as fragmented, both on the page and in narrative time, in order to make use of these gaps. His narratives are rarely chronological. They do not embrace traditional ways of telling stories and photographic literary structures allow this. As Lorraine York emphasizes, "Writers who want to break free of traditional forms of plot - who want non-linearity, find in the photograph a ready analogue" (17). Ondaatje comments on this process of telling his stories in a

recent interview. In response to a question about Berger's epigraph in *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje replies:

I don't believe stories are told from A to Z anymore, or if they are, they become very ponderous. I'm used to commercial breaks. We discover stories in a different way. I discover something about you after knowing you X number of years, and then after thirty years I will find out some other changes that occurred five years earlier. That sense of discovery, of memory, and how we reveal ourselves to each other - none of that is chronological (Wachtel 59).

This way of telling parallels the way photographs reveal meaning. It is like looking at a photograph of a woman in the past, before you knew her, to discover something about her which affects how you perceive her now, whether it is profound insight or simply her appearance. Perhaps it is a wedding photograph, perhaps she is now dead.

Lorraine York discusses the relationship of photography to narrative as well as summarizing the theories of Barthes, Sontag and Berger in terms of photography as a language system. She mistrusts Barthes' statement of photography as a "message without a code", his emphasis on the denotative message, placing photographs as the "Edenic state of the image" (*Image Music Text*, 42). Her poststructuralist mistrust in the "Edenic" phenomenon is shared by current theorists such as Berger who emphasize the connoted message of any image by placing photographs within the context of human culture; they "always emphasize the importance of cultural meanings in the

decoding of visual signs" (York, 13). Therefore, she logically infers, "if photography is imbued with culture, then it must be a message with a code (to alter Barthes's phrase), a language" (York, 16).

When applying this language system to narrative her comments are very similar to those of both Solecki and Berger. She seems to speak of narrative in terms of these same textual fragments, which Ondaatje sees as the bricks of the "architecture" of his texts (Solecki, 322). York writes that

the very fact that one feels tempted to place photographs in a certain sequence in order to reproduce a linear narrative should tell us that the narrative qualities of the single photograph are *not* linear. Rather, narrative in photographs is always implied narrative - the freezing of a moment in time, because it excludes the moments before and after the exposure. (17)

This statement is remarkably similar to Solecki's method of describing *the man with seven toes*, and Berger's insistence on the necessity of the reader to supply the past and future, leaving the present (as in the present of a photograph) as a fragment of the whole.

Berger provides a useful model to describe this narrative process, one that I will try to apply consistently to Ondaatje's texts, specifically *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, and *The English Patient*. Berger obviously deals with the connotative message inherent in any photograph. In *Another Way of Telling* he tries to represent a narrative structure in which a photograph becomes a quotation from the half-language

of appearances. He represents this diagrammatically:

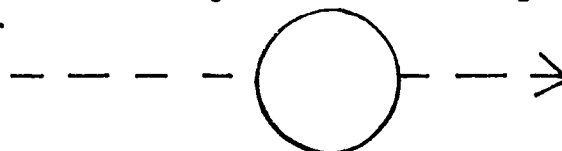
In life it is an event's development in time, its duration, which allows its meaning to be perceived and felt. If one states this actively, one can say that the event moves towards or through meaning. This movement can be represented by an arrow.



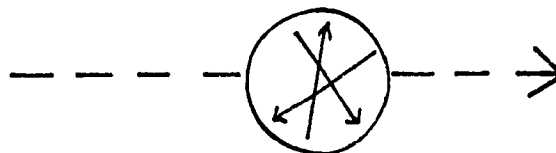
Normally a photograph arrests this movement and cuts across the appearances of the event photographed. Its meaning becomes ambiguous.



Only by the spectator's lending the frozen appearances a supposed past and future can the arrow's movement be hypothesised...If one thinks of this cut as a cross-section of the event, one can represent it frontally, as it were, instead of from the side, as a circle...The diameter of the circle depends upon the amount of information to be found in the event's instantaneous appearances. The diameter may vary according to the spectator's personal relation to the photographed event...The exceptional photograph which quotes at length increases the diameter of the circle even when the subject is totally unknown to the spectator.

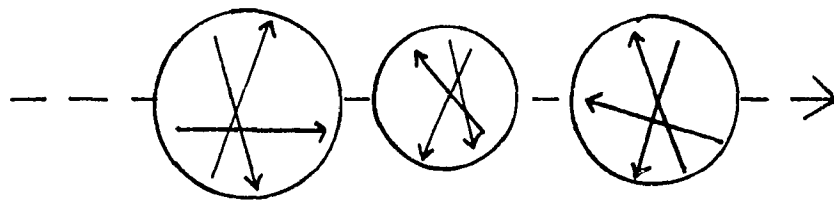


This increase...extend[s] the event beyond itself. The appearances of the event photographed implicate other events.



Thus the discontinuity which is the result of the photographic cut is no longer destructive, for in the photograph of the long quotation another kind of meaning has become possible. (*Another Way*, 120-121)

The model that Berger presents is useful in examining the structure of Ondaatje's texts, or at least how the narrative proceeds. If, for the "event" being photographed, we substitute the plot fragment, the "freestanding particle" (Sontag, 23) of text, then the model becomes a way of examining how Ondaatje tells his stories, not "from A to Z" but with "commercial breaks". What I would suggest is that his texts, at least the ones I will examine, follow Berger's model, but because a text is compiled of many "events" the model must be extended. It would therefore look like this:



Each event refers to other events outside the narrative of the story. For example, Sallie Chisum's comments on Billy the Kid cannot tell the reader everything she knows of Billy. It is an oral event that "extends the event beyond itself" and implies other events. The diameter of the circle indicates the level of meaning placed on the event or the amount of reference it implies, which, in Berger's terms, is the length of its quotation. Because Ondaatje chooses to "tear apart the plot" (*Slaughter*, 37), each event becomes a fragment placed within the context of the model above but does not necessarily proceed in a chronological way.

Traditionally, as in Forester, plot has been defined in terms of causality. Ondaatje wants to break free of traditional forms of plot; he is suspicious of "Novels and their clear stories" (*Skin of a Lion*, 82). Berger suggests that this traditional, linear plot, is "cultural paranoia" (*Sense of Sight*, xviii). His model of photographic narrative represents causality in the sense that each event implies other events in the narrative because "every narrative proposes an agreement about the unstated but assumed connections existing between events" (*Another Way*, 284). In this sense the causality lies in the gaps of narrative. Events implicate each other in a similar way that cause and effect are connected. For Ondaatje, who does not maintain chronology, the effect may preclude the cause. An example of this is Patrick's act of burning down the Muskoka Hotel before it is discovered that the death of Alice was the cause of this act. Therefore, within Berger's model and within Ondaatje's narratives, chronology is displaced but causality is maintained. The reader / observer must become a participant in re-ordering the narrative, in linking the events. Berger's model provides the structure for Ondaatje to write non-linear narratives which "tear apart the plot".

Ondaatje translates a way of seeing into a way of telling much in the same way that John Berger does. By manipulating the visual into narrative or story, Ondaatje writes in much

the same way as photographs, or quotations from appearances, produce a story. As Lewis Hine made evident, both words and photographs produce stories: "If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera". I will attempt to use the above model as the basis for this argument and proceed to examine *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Coming Through Slaughter, In the Skin of the Lion,* and *The English Patient* within these theoretical guidelines.

Chapter 1

The Narrative Necklace: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid:
Left Handed Poems*

"I take this picture of myself
and with my sewing scissors
cut out the face.

Now it is more accurate:

where my eyes were,
every-
thing appears"

Margaret Atwood

"The camera is my tool. Through it I give a reason to
everything around me."

Andre Kertesz



On the cover of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) is a photograph that provides a model for the form of the text, and that is consistent with Berger's notion of a series of photographed events arranged along a narrative axis. It is a picture of a man riding a horse taken by Eadweard Muybridge at the end of the last century. Muybridge was famous for taking multiple succeeding exposures of the same event. Most notable were his photographs of a race horse taken in order to discover whether or not a moving horse lifted all four feet off the ground at once. He was using the camera to discover something that could not be seen with the human eye. As Perry Nodelman points out, "paradoxically, by stopping motion in photographs the workings of motion could be clearly seen ...Billy's life is understood in the same way" (69). Susan Sontag also writes of Muybridge who "had subdivided the subject's movements into a precise and lengthy enough sequence of shots" (60). Ondaatje has arranged his text as a series of poem and prose fragments which are exposures of Billy's life caught at intensely visual moments in the same way that the camera arrests motion.

On the first page there appears an empty frame and underneath is a quotation from the photographer L.A. Huffman, which Ondaatje states "appears in his book *Huffman, Frontier*

*Photographer...*some of the photographs in this book are his"

(4). The quotation is as follows:

I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked - Pyro and soda developer. I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot across the line of fire - bits of snow in the air - spokes well defined - some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main - men walking are no trick - I will send you proofs sometime. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle without ground glass or tripod - please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion. (5)

Huffman's comments are particularly relevant to Ondaatje's style and form. The technique that Huffman employs is a metaphor for the way Billy views his life. The camera is used to "take" the object "as quick as it can be worked", much as Billy's left hand is in constant motion, ready to be used as a machine to "take" people, the gun replacing the camera. T.D. MuLulich views Ondaatje's text as "exploiting the paradoxical relationship of photography and motion" (108).

Ondaatje presents his text as Billy's posthumous attempt to capture his own life. Ondaatje wants to give the illusion that it is Billy who writes the text but the word "Works" in the title is ambiguous. Is it Billy's or Ondaatje's work; does it refer to the poetry or to the killings? In the end they both become metaphors for photographs and what is seemingly a self-portrait of Billy takes shape as a self portrait of the writer Ondaatje. Billy becomes an enigma partly because he can not be represented through a photograph.

The frame above Huffman's quotation is significantly empty: Billy cannot be fixed. As Paulita Maxwell says, "I do not think it does Billy justice" (19). The subject of the book is left out, has not been "taken". This is in order to explore the appearance of the object without actually seeing it. The half-language of appearances is not confused with Ondaatje's language in the poem and prose sections. What is significant about the empty frame and its relation to photographs is the notion of absence.

The conceptualization of a photograph as a representation of an absence is an important one. John Berger constantly repeats this. For example he writes, "The first photographs were thought of as marvels because, far more directly than any other form of visual image, they presented the appearance of what was absent" (*Another Way*, 87). More specifically he comments that

a visual image, so long as it is not being used as a mask or a disguise, is always a comment on an absence. The depiction comments on the absence of what is being depicted. Visual images, based on appearances, always speak of disappearance. (*The Sense of Sight*, 207)

The best way to describe this concept is to recognize what happens when we look at the photo of a loved one in our wallet. The presence of the photo replaces the absence of the loved one, which creates meaning for the observer. Berger describes this act in the first poem of *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, as well as in his analysis of migrant

workers in *The Seventh Man*:

He looks for the photo among the over-handled papers, stuffed in his jacket. He finds it... A woman or perhaps a child. The photo defines an absence. Even if it is ten years old it makes no difference. It holds open, preserves the empty space which the sitter's presence will, hopefully, one day fill again. He puts it immediately back in his pocket without glancing at it. As if there were a need for it in his pocket (16).

This "empty space" is what represents Billy on the first page of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Ondaatje attempts to create a complex character that has been mythologized, such as in the "Wide Awake Library" section of the text. Therefore, the "real" presence of him in a photograph, of what would be perceived as real, Ondaatje realizes would be misleading to his purposes. Ondaatje has Billy attempt to create his own visual reality based on the photographic quality of the text. As Sontag makes clear, "A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence...they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality" (16). Ondaatje reverses Sontag's conception by using the absence of the photograph to represent this "pseudo-presence" of Billy (and it is specifically a photograph and not another visual image: "I send you a picture ..."). He wants to "lay claim to another reality", which is away from the myth of Billy the Kid, at the same time that he is contributing to it.

The reality conjured up by a photograph is a different reality from the present reality. It is a remembered or

implied reality. One only has to think of the loved one in the photo in the wallet to realize that the reality of the photo is remembered, nostalgic, because it represents an absence. Therefore, this absence on the first page of the text establishes a reality which is shifting, that is uniquely Ondaatje's Billy and not some other representation of the legend. Ondaatje creates a meaning from absence, in the same way as the gaps in his narrative: what is between the events creates meaning. The frame also implicates itself with the first poem where it becomes apparent that Billy is already dead, "Blood a necklace on me all my life" (6). In this way Ondaatje can create Billy within his writing of him. As Denisoff concludes:

Billy lists himself as dead early on in *Billy the Kid* by arguing that while the assumed, historical figure is no longer alive, its linguistic counterpart is revived through language...Billy is reborn as a body of discourse (Denisoff, 54).

This empty frame is also used many times by Berger to represent appearances, specifically photographs. In *The Seventh Man* the empty frame appears with the caption "Illegal Migrant" beside it (88), emphasizing a migrant worker's anonymity, his absence from "home". In *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* the empty frame appears above a story which starts "The photograph which lies on the table in front of me has become incriminating. Better not to print it" (16). It also appears with the caption "The Visible" before another essay (*Keeping a Rendezvous*, 124). Obviously the concept of

the empty frame and the recognition of absence it creates is well founded in Berger's writing and has influenced Ondaatje on the very first page of his text.

What is interesting to notice is that in fact the frame is not completely empty. What is written on the back of the page comes through exactly within the boundaries of the frame. What is written there, what is the "picture of Billy", is in fact the first poem of the book:

These are the killed.
(By me) -
Morton, Baker, early friends of mine.
Joe Bernstein. 3 Indians.
A blacksmith when I was twelve, with a knife.
5 Indians in self defence (behind a very safe rock).
One man who bit me during a robbery.
Brady, Hindman, Beckwith, Joe Clark,
Deputy Jim Carlyle, Deputy Sheriff J.W. Bell.
And Bob Ollinger. A rabid cat
birds during practice,

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

This first page, front and back, (5, 6) acts as the metaphor of the mirror that Sallie Chisum uses to describe Billy in a poem called "Sallie Chisum / Last Words on Billy the Kid. 4 A.M." that was left out of the text but appears in

the last section of *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* (1979). Sallie describes Billy in the following terms:

Billy was a fool
he was like those reversible mirrors
you can pivot round and see yourself again
but there is something showing on the other side always.

Sunlight. The shade beside the cupboard (98-99)

Here then is the elusive Billy, one side visible in the mirror describing his life, the self portrait of death contained in the poem; the other side an empty frame, a space for sunlight, the blank photograph. Both are "a picture of Billy". It is probable that Ondaatje intended the first poem to fall within the confines of the empty frame. He oversees the design of his books with meticulous care, as he describes in an interview:

Certainly with *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* design was very important. We had to determine the type, the paper design, the paper texture, where the photographs would go, things like the first page on which Billy's photograph doesn't appear... the printing itself is an art form and I'm deeply involved in it. (Solecki, 21)

This would be consistent with Berger's notion in "The Moment of Cubism" that "Space is a part of the continuity of events within it. It is in itself an event, comparable with other events. It is not a mere container" (*Sense of Sight*, 178). The empty frame of Billy is a significant event. Absence is an event. For Ondaatje, the spaces of the book, the gaps in the narrative, are as significant as the other events. This in turn emphasizes the "necklace" metaphor that

appears in the first poem as a necklace of blood, and which Ondaatje claims was an influence in the form of *the man with seven toes*. Berger's model of the way photographs are another way of telling is in effect also a necklace, each event an independent bead, connected by the space of other comparable events which are absent.

Lorraine York has analyzed the use of the actual photographs in Ondaatje's text, but her conclusions are somewhat incomplete. She claims the photographs serve to "emphasize [the] necessary interplay between fixing Billy's story but not rendering it as a static artifact from the past" (106). She, like most critics of *Billy the Kid*, is obsessed with the notion of fixity in a world of flux, of which the photograph is a representation. This has left Nodelman to conclude that "Ondaatje's choice of specific images is bewildering" (68), and York to leave out the important factor of time and space inherent in any photograph. She claims that on the first page "the words are undercut by the blank image above them" (107). This would seem to be too simple a reading of this page, and does not take into account that the empty space is as significant as the photos; it is an image because it is framed and takes on the nature of an event. This is the only image that is captioned in the text. The fact that text accompanies the blank space and that blank text accompanies the actual photos would seem significant.

To apply a caption to a picture is to put it in a context, whether it is a date or a title. Giving a date places a photograph within a context of time. Take two photographs, both of the same young boy. Add to one the caption "1927" and the photograph takes on new meaning. Who is that child now, is he still alive? The one without the caption is left ambiguous. As Berger states, to apply text to photographs is "to impose a single verbal meaning upon appearances and thus to inhibit or deny their own language" (*Another Way*, 133). Dennis Cooley has observed this lack of captions and in an endnote asserts that captions "would insist on overly determined readings"; instead "we are left / required to make our own connections, knowing they can only be ours. Indeterminate" (237, 238). Because York has not taken this into account she misses the message. Her reading of the photo on page 31 is indicative of this.

She makes the claim that "the placid portrait of a man and a woman, calmly facing the camera, [is] very likely to represent Sallie Chisum and Billy, since it faces on the opposite page Sallie's recollections of Billy" (York, 107). Here she consciously applies the text on the opposite page as a caption to the photograph, thereby denying what is present there. Surely the man in the photo is not Billy since his photographic absence is crucial to the theme of the book. It is doubtful that Ondaatje would have a blank portrait which he captions as "a picture of Billy", and then include an actual

picture of Billy. In fact, Douglas Barbour has pointed out that this is a photograph of Stuart and Sally Mackinnon, to whom the book is dedicated (Barbour, 53). This photograph serves as an anachronism. Ondaatje manipulates time ironically by including a modern portrait of his friends dressed in frontier garb and not captioning it, thereby shifting the reality for the observer. What is the photograph's reality is not within the context of the observer's reality, leaving the meaning of the image ambiguous. This is an example of the connection that occurs in Berger's model in which the event is extended beyond itself.

Another set of photographs displays a theme important elsewhere in the text. One of the qualities of *Billy the Kid* which critics have noted is the camera-like effect of magnification or reduction of events and landscapes through Billy's perspective, much like a macro or zoom lens. The photograph on page 45 of a cabin bedroom reappears in a magnified form on page 91, focussing on the guns beside the bed. This produces the effect of a zoom lens. Perhaps this is in reference to the detail that comes at the end of the passage about the night of drinking at the Chisum ranch: "On the nail above the bed the black holster and gun is coiled like a snake, glinting also in the early morning white" (71). The black holster and gun is contrasted with the white, echoing a black and white photograph. This process of

magnifying details, of zooming in, also plays an intricate role in the text.

As Dennis Cooley has observed, Billy "notices details with such intensity... as if [he] were a close-up lens enlarging the details because of his agitated state" (216).

Billy lives in

a world that's so precise
every nail and cobweb
has magnified itself to my presence (74)

This magnification of detail occurs often in the text and serves to simulate a photographic mode of seeing. Billy uses this photographic eye elsewhere,

or my eyes
magnifying the bones across a room
shifting in a wrist (39)

The references to eyes in this book are too numerous to mention, although Cooley provides a preliminary list (237). Like a photographer or movie director, Billy is concerned with lines of sight and angles in a room, perhaps due to his fear of being taken by surprise, "I am very still / I take in all the angles of the room" (21). He tries to gain control over his surroundings through this visual manipulation:

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

Cooley makes the connection of this scene to one "beloved of Western directors" (236); it is like a scene in a Western movie. In fact, Ondaatje claims that, "with *Billy the Kid* I

was trying to make the film I couldn't afford to shoot, in the form of a book" (Solecki, 20).

Billy the Kid progresses from Billy's photographic interpretations of his world to a cinematic point of view which is out of his control. Films move temporally; photographs are spacial with temporal gaps. The latter is exactly the model Ondaatje provides by emphasizing the gaps in the narrative, by not allowing the plot to move uniformly in time. In cinema there are no visual gaps. Because photographs allows gaps, details can be focused on for a longer period of time, and therefore it is photographic objectivity which allows for the magnification of details such as the "snow on Charlie's left boot" (22). This mode of applying meaning from photographic detail is discussed at length by Barthes in *Reflections on Photography*. These details give life to the photograph (or textual fragment), animate it, and provide its meaning. He calls this detail the *punctum*.

In *Reflections on Photography* Barthes makes the observation that certain photographs "pierce" him, that there is some detail in them which punctuates: "the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points" (27). He asserts that "a photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). By magnifying details Ondaatje emphasizes the *punctum* which allows for

stronger visualization for the reader. When reading a text some detail may "prick" or seem "poignant" (this is a literary tool) in the same way as when looking at a photograph. The text and image overlap metaphorically through the *punctum*. The detail of the snow on Charlie's boot is an example of this punctuation, this sensitive prick. In fact, these details take over the subject, stand for the subject in its entirety, as Barthes says it "annihilates itself as *medium*, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself" (45).

In photographs it is often time that is this *punctum*. Barthes writes: "I know that there exists another *punctum* than the 'detail'. This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time" (96). This seems to be why the first poem in *Billy the Kid* is so striking. The detail "Blood a necklace on me all my life" (6) is a prick, but it is through time that this prick is possible. Billy speaks about his life but we realize as he is speaking that he is already dead. It is this line which punctuates the intensity of Billy's life. What is happening when we read this line, the same as if we were to look at a photograph of someone about to hang, is that we feel at the same time, "*this will be and this has been*" (Barthes, 96). By making this line come at the beginning of the text Ondaatje emphasizes this *punctum* of time. His use of this punctuating element occurs frequently in his texts, most notably in *Coming Through Slaughter*.

Cooley gives a good analysis of the way photographic technique functions in *Billy the Kid*. He comments that "Billy desperately wants, more than anything, by his unblinking gaze, to freeze action in a series of still photographs, or a series of shots approaching still photographs" (227). The poem and prose fragments either describe the event or the visual process of capturing the event into words: "I take in all the angles of the room" (21). Billy's world is "planned by [his] eye" (75). As Berger says, "the event instigates the idea. And the idea, confronting the event, urges it to go beyond itself and to represent the generalization carried within the idea" (*Another Way*, 124). The use of photographic technique allows these events, the poems and prose fragments, to "go beyond" themselves to get at the idea which is Billy's self. This technique is revealed in what Cooley calls "the doorway" poem:

This nightmare by this 7 foot high doorway
waiting for friends to come
mine or theirs
I am 4 feet inside the room
in the brown cold dark
the doorway's slide of sun
three inches from my shoes
I am on the edge of the cold dark
watching the white landscape in its frame
a world that's so precise
every nail and cobweb
has magnified itself to my presence...

I am here on the edge of sun
that would ignite me
looking out into pitch white
sky and grass overdeveloped to meaninglessness
waiting for enemies' friends or mine (74)

Billy is motionless in a room watching the light. The world is framed by the doorway, like a photograph is framed, or when looking through a lens the world is framed. The outside world, under the influence of the sun, is "overdeveloped to meaninglessness". Although his camera eye can focus in the light and the dark, the light becomes "meaningless". Later the white rooms take on a level of nostalgic importance, a sense of purity in light: "[W]aking in the white rooms of Texas after a bad night must be like heaven I think now" (69) and, "my last white room, the sun coming through the shutters" (79). Billy himself becomes overdeveloped after being captured by Garrett where the "sun sat back and watched while the juice evaporated" (76) in his brain. If Billy's eyes act as a lens then his brain is where the images are developed, and at times of crisis he can "overdevelop" into madness. The sun is the vehicle of meaning or meaninglessness. Photographs depend on its light. In fact, early photography was called "heliography, sun writing" (Sontag, 160). Ondaatje is extremely meticulous, as meticulous as a photographer, in his descriptions of light and dark.

Billy exists either under the open heat of the sun or in shaded rooms. When inside, the windows and doors act as frames to the outside world. Billy is essentially inside a camera. Billy describes why he rested in a barn for a week to burn off a fever:

But it was the colour and the light of the place that made me stay there, not my fever. It became a calm week. It was the colour and the light. The colour a grey with remnants of brown - for instance those rust brown pipes and metal objects that before had held bridles or pails, that slid to machine uses; the thirty or so grey cans in one corner of the room, their ellipses, form where I sat, setting up patterns in the dark...When I had arrived I opened two windows and a door and the sun poured blocks and angles in, lighting up the floor's skin of feathers and dust and old grain. The windows looked out onto the fields and plants grew at the door. (17)

It is the colour and the light that are important to Billy. However, the colours seem to exist only as greys and browns, similar to the sepia-toned prints that were being made in his time. The window and door let in the light to reveal shapes, a shutter letting in light. The colour and light are events in themselves. This use of light is further emphasized at the Chisum ranch.

Here Billy again is stationary, waiting for his burnt legs to heal. In the three days he stays there he again notices the light and shadows of the rooms:

the sun took over the house and scorched it at noon, or dropping sideways in the early afternoon sent rays horizontal through the doors and windows...she had...John build shutters for every door and window, every hole in the wall. So that at eleven in the morning all she did was close and lock them all until the house was silent and dark blue with sunless quiet... And I sat there for three days not moving an inch, like some dead tree witnessing the tides or the sun and the moon taking over from each other as the house in front of me changed colour - the night, the early morning yellow, the gradual move to dark blue at 11 o'clock, the new white 4 o'clock sun let in, later in the gradual growing dark again. (33-34)

Billy watches the way light moves in the room over the course of time. The shutters provide the metaphor of the camera lens

opening and closing, "each one the sudden blacking out of clarity in a section of the room" (34). Billy is trapped in the camera; the exposure time is measured in hours. This scene is very similar to the final one in *Coming Through Slaughter* in which Buddy Bolden spends his days watching the light move across the floor. The light and dark are reversed, as in a photographic negative, in the scene at night on the Chisum ranch.

John and Billy go outside to see Sallie's animals and as Billy enters the darkness it is again the light that he notices:

Around us total blackness, nothing out there but a desert for seventy miles or more, and to the left, a few yards away, a house stuffed with yellow wet light where within the frame of the window we saw a woman move carrying fire in a glass funnel and container towards the window, towards the edge of the dark where we stood. (37)

Sallie appears as a photograph, within a frame of light, moving towards the edge of the darkness which is the edge of the photograph. In this way Billy perceives his world. Ondaatje writes of movement from light to dark and back again, a passage through fragments of illumination in the narrative. Both presence *and* absence, light *and* dark, supply meaning. Each fragment becomes an event complete with associations, and the events exist independently along the narrative necklace as beads of light, as in a series of photographs.

The text gradually moves from a photographic point of view towards cinematic technique. The palindromic poem (27) can be read either as a positive / negative from a photograph, or as "reversed film footage" (Cooley, 224). As Ondaatje has Garrett close in on Billy, the gaps in the narrative become smaller and the cinematic form is more conducive to represent this narrative. Cooley makes the claim that "photographs exist in space, movies in time" (223), which is not entirely true. A movie's present unfolds before the observer's present, whereas in a photograph there is an "abyss" between the present of the photograph and the present of the observer. As the technique in *Billy the Kid* becomes more cinematic, time (the present) catches up with Billy and eventually results in his death. In fact, the camera moves from his eye to being totally out of his control. For example:

Down the street was a dog. Some mut spaniel, black and white. One dog, Garrett and two friends, stud looking, came down the street to the house, to me.

Again.

Down the street was a dog. Some mut spaniel, black and white. One dog, Garrett and two friends came down the street to the house, to me.

Garrett takes off his hat and leaves it outside the door. The others laugh. Garrett smiles, pokes his gun toward the door. The others melt and surround. All this I would have seen if I was on the roof looking.
(46)

Here the camera's point of view is from the roof but it is not

Billy's; the camera has left his eye. Ondaatje writes this poem as if it were two takes of a movie scene, "Again" being the director's command. This appears in much the same way as "Sound up" at the beginning of another fragment just before Billy is shot (90). As the cinematic world closes in, Billy's ear becomes as focused as his eye, "my ears picking up all the burning hum of flies" (90).

This cinematic world is expressed by Ondaatje in terms of a screenplay. It must be remembered that he "was trying to make the film [he] couldn't afford to shoot, in the form of a book" (Solecki, 20). The screenplay directions appear in capitals:

OUTSIDE
the outline of houses
Garrett running from a door
- all seen sliding round
the screen of a horse's eye

NOW dead centre in the square is Garrett with Poe
- hands in back pockets - argues, nodding his head
and then ALL TURNING as the naked arm, the arm from
the body, breaks through the window. The window -
what remains between the splits - reflecting all the
moving too. (94)

The capitalized words supply stage directions. The eye of the horse has become a "screen" as has the window. They reflect the "moving" and no longer the stills of a photograph. The image of a movie reflected in an animal's eye recurs in *Secular Love*:

On the front lawn a sheet
tacked across a horizontal branch.
A projector starts...
Later when the wind frees the sheet...
pictures fly without target...
and the dog walks under the hover of the swing
beam of the projection bursting in his left eye. (16, 17)

Here it is obvious that the eye has become a screen for a movie. In both cases the film is out of control, out of Billy's control certainly. It is no longer his eye that interprets. The fact that Ondaatje makes his poems become screenplays would imply that it is he, the writer, who is taking control; Billy then becomes simply a character. Cooley has pointed out that Billy's failure in the cinematic world is ironic (229) because of the fate of Frank James, another outlaw, who must tear tickets at a movie theatre and "was by then an alcoholic" (24). Billy does not succumb to this fate; his photographic eye fails in the cinematic world.

How Ondaatje creates Billy's photographic perception to supply meaning to his text has been discussed by various critics. What they seem to agree upon is that Billy sees photographically in order to maintain a position of fixity in a world of flux.² This fixity / flux dichotomy can also be seen in Ondaatje's poetry. In the poem "King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens" the poet Stevens represents fixity and Kong

² This position of fixity is one that has been perceived as rendering Billy as an emotionless automaton and is one I shall consequently dispute.



exists in constant flux:

Take two photographs -
Wallace Stevens and King Kong
(Is it significant as I eat bananas as I write this?)

Stevens is portly, benign, a white brush cut
striped tie. Businessman but
for the dark thick hands, the naked brain
the thought in him

Kong is staggering
lost in New York streets again
a spawn of annoyed cars at his toes.
The mind is nowhere. (*Trick*, 61)

What becomes obvious is that although Stevens is fixed, his mind is in flux, and although Kong is in constant movement, his mind is "nowhere". It seems significant indeed that Ondaatje eats bananas as he writes this poem because he equates himself with both the poet and the beast, just as Billy is both the creator of the "works" and compared to an animal: "no other animal of any kind remained in that room but for the boy in the blue shirt" (18). The poet must fix the flux of the world into words, the photographer into images. Ondaatje creates "word pictures" (Nodelman, 69) in order to achieve this.

Billy alternates between resting in rooms and "moving across the world on horses" (11). These "conflicting elements of fixity and flux" (York, 104) parallel Huffman's fixing of images while "in motion" (5). MacLulich argues that Billy has a "detached way of responding to the external world" (107), claiming the text is "a warning against the dehumanizing

consequences of photographic voyeurism" (109). Nodelman "fixes" Billy by saying, "his character and attitudes are static, his vision unchanging" (69). Both critics take their viewpoints based on the perception of Billy as being fixed, as being an emotionless automaton, full of "emotionless neutrality" and "an absence of emotion" (MacLulich, 111, 112). Yet MacLulich contradicts himself when he claims the poems express "emotional conflicts" (113).

Billy is like Wallace Stevens, who "is thinking chaos is thinking fences" (*Trick*, 61). This statement is left ambiguous because of the lack of punctuation. Is chaos thinking about fences, or is Stevens thinking of both chaos and fences, flux and fixity? Billy is equally as ambiguous as a character. It would seem as if he is not emotionless, as Scobie notes: "it strikes me as an extraordinarily emotional book, and Billy's consciousness presents his world with almost unbearable intensity" (208). The passages about Charlie's death or making love with Angela are proof of this emotional intensity:

Tilts back to fall
black hair swivelling off her
shattering the pillow
Billy she says
the tall gawky body spitting electric
off the sheets to my arm
leans her whole body out
so breasts are thinner
stomach is a hollow
where the bright bush jumps
this is the first time
bite into her side leave
a string of teeth marks

she hooks in two and covers me
my hand locked
her body nearly breaking off my fingers
pivoting like machines in full speed (16)

York points out that "Ondaatje's use of several perspectives as well as several genres or media suggests that even a simple being - a man who has become a machine - may be viewed in a myriad of ways" (106). Ondaatje purposely does not "fix" Billy. To do so would forfeit his ambiguity and this ambiguity is important because, as Berger asserts, "all photographs are ambiguous. All photographs have been taken out of a continuity" (*Another Way*, 91). Ondaatje creates the continuity but leaves out the photograph, leaving Billy equally ambiguous.

Billy documents himself in both of the ways that Sontag addresses as the relation of the photographer and the world:

Photography recapitulates both of the traditional ways of radically opposing self and world. Photography is seen as an acute manifestation of the individualized "I," the homeless private self astray in an overwhelming world - mastering reality by a fast visual anthologizing of it. Or photography is seen as a means of finding a place in the world by being able to relate to it with detachment. (119)

Billy interprets his world in both these ways, through an expression of ego but also from detachment. In this way Billy exists in an ambiguous state between fixity and flux.

Not only does Billy fix his reality, trying to master it, he attempts to gain control over it, to make it succumb to his

own reality. Photographs allow this power. Sontag makes this clear: "a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it" (155). Through his photographic eye, and his gun, Billy attempts to gain control over the shifting reality all around him. In the end the camera leaves his eye and he loses the control that his photographic vision had allowed.

The debate over Billy's level of detachment, whether he has emotion or is emotionless, is at the center of most critical arguments on the photographic element in the text. Neither Nodleman nor MacLulich takes into account Garrett when discussing the emotional neutrality of Billy. In this sense they miss a "major structural pole of the book" (Scobie, 209). Billy is an extremely emotional being when compared to Garrett who is, in fact, an emotionless machine: "Pat Garrett, ideal assassin. Public figure, the mind of a doctor...Had the ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke" (28). Garrett learns French, never to use it; he teaches himself how to drink, forcing his mind to control itself. It is Garrett who is afraid of anything he has no control over: "He became frightened of flowers because they grew so slowly that he couldn't tell what they planned to do" (28). It is Billy who stops to smell the flowers, "sweat like lilac urine smell / getting to me from across a room" (56).

Just like Livingstone breeding his mad dogs, Garrett "seemed a pretty sane guy" but "had been mad" (60). Garrett is emotionless and Billy is "seen almost entirely as victim" (Scobie, 203).

In fact, it is only Billy's left hand that is mechanical, the sprockets of guns or cameras. Garrett comments: "I noticed his left hand churning within itself, each finger circling alternately like a train wheel...It was the most hypnotising beautiful thing I ever saw" (43). It is not coincidence that Garrett's only display of emotion comes in reference to Billy's left hand. He can sympathize with the mechanics of it. Garrett is the right-handed rational pole and Billy is the left-handed creative pole, the subtitle of the text being *The Left Handed Poems*. The fact that Billy uses his hand to write implicates the process of writing with the taking of reality through a mechanical device (whether a gun or a camera). His ability to continue the narrative as writer and his loss of control over the camera can therefore be paralleled. Interestingly, Billy's left-handedness comes from two sources, one photographic and one cinematic. Scobie points out that "it was the reversed image of one famous photograph of Billy which led to the mistaken idea that he was left handed" (191). He also claims that Ondaatje got his subtitle from one of his "favourite films...Arthur Penn's *The Left Handed Gun*" (185). The subtitle of the book implies that Billy himself is the artist, "Not a story about me through

their eyes then" (20). His mechanical left hand writes, shoots, and takes pictures in order to "come to chaos neutral".

Ondaatje gives the illusion that it is Billy who is the artist, is actually shaping the text:

my fingers touch
this soft blue paper notebook
control a pencil that shifts up and sideways
mapping my thinking going its own way
like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood (72)

Ondaatje resurrects Billy as "a body of discourse" and presents him as an artist, as a writer / photographer who attempts to document his own world.³ This connection between photographs and writing occurs in a later poem "The Gate in His Head":

And then from Gibson's your letter
with a blurred photograph of a gull.
Caught vision. The stunning white bird
an unclear stir.

And that is all this writing should be then.
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
so they are shapeless, awkward
moving to the clear. (*Trick*, 64)

This is Billy, "caught vision" attempting to break out of his frames, his doors and windows, and move into the clear. He is trying to embrace the paradox of fixity in a world of flux,

³ Because Ondaatje uses the first person singular the reader is never sure if it is Billy or Ondaatje writing. The above quote uses an ambiguous "my fingers". The reader knows that the Billy of legend is dead because of the first poem; Ondaatje then resurrects Billy so that he can present himself as a disguised Ondaatje (such as in the final photograph).

which is a photographic paradox. Billy writes himself into his own life by describing photographs taken of him, both paralleling the one of the gull:

My eyes are burning from the pain of change and the whiskey and I can't see very well. John's rocker is going slow but his checkered shirt leaves just a red arc daze like some blurred picture. I remember, when they took the picture of me there was a white block down the fountain road where somebody had come out of a building and got off the porch onto his horse and ridden away while I was waiting standing still for the acid in the camera to dry firm. (68)

I was thinking of a photograph someone had taken of me, the only one I had then. I was standing on a wall, at my feet there was this bucket and in the bucket was a pump and I was pumping water out over the wall. Only now, with the red dirt, water started dripping out of the photo. (50)

The fluidity of the world is captured only partially in photographs or writing; the goal of the artist is to show the impossibility of fixing the flux in a complete way. Billy is not the focus of the photographs but rather it is the "beautiful things caught at the wrong moment". The man moving to his horse, John's shirt, and the water from the pump all become a blur. It is these things that represent the world and it is these things that Billy and Ondaatje choose to comment on. Photography, therefore, becomes a metaphor for the writing, the capturing of vision.

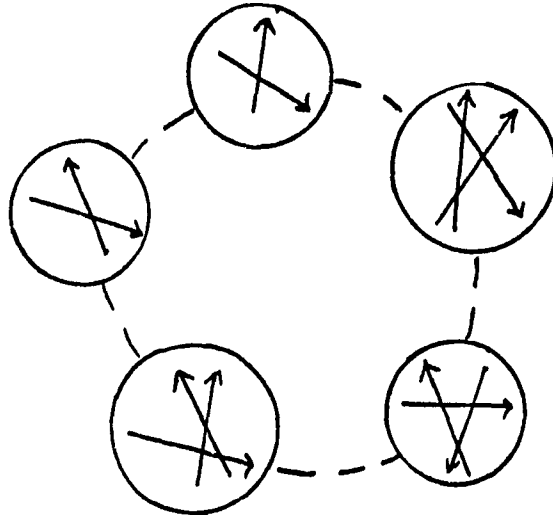
Just as Ondaatje equates himself with Kong and Stevens, so does he establish himself as the writer Billy. The last two pages of the text, one a prose fragment and one a photograph, establish this connection. Denisoff argues that

these images suggest "mutual penetration" (56) between Billy and Ondaatje, that "this relationship is acknowledged within the text itself by the conflation of Ondaatje with various unspecified narrators" (56). In the prose fragment "the poet himself speaks...and he is seen washing away the smoke of a bad night, the night in which he finished the book and purged himself of its hero" (Nodelman, 77). The fragment reads in much the same way as Billy waking up in his white hotel rooms in Texas. Ondaatje has included himself in the narrative necklace, and the process of writing the book becomes another bead.

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

Following this fragment is a large blank space on the page. This is significant because on the following page appears the artist, Ondaatje, as a young boy in a photograph. The blank space represents the shift in time from the man to the boy. In the photograph he is dressed as a cowboy, equating himself with the western legends, and Billy. It is Ondaatje the Kid. The photograph appears in the corner of a frame that takes up the page. This brings the text full circle, from the blank framed "picture of Billy" on the first page to the frame now partially filled by a picture of Ondaatje. In this closure Ondaatje inserts himself into the

photographic reality of the text, in a way that Billy never could be represented. In effect, the narrative necklace has joined together, the writer supplying himself as the final bead fragment, or perhaps the clasp.



Chapter 2

Writing Photographs:

Beyond the Realm of the Pose in *Coming Through Slaughter*.

"We photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished, there is no contrivance on earth which can make them come back again. We cannot develop and print a memory."

Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1952

"Memory does not make films, it makes photographs."

Milan Kundera

"Men who shave off beards in stages, pausing to take photographs."

Michael Ondaatje,
Elimination Dance

Just as the Muybridge photograph provided a photographic reference for the form of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the sonograph provides a similar reference at the beginning of *Coming Through Slaughter*. The sonograph is a photograph, or rather three photographs read together, which are meant to represent the sounds of dolphins. It is an attempt to capture sound in the form of a photograph; it is a translation from one language to another, from sound to appearances. The sonographs are an attempt to define a language; to make a code out of a visual image. This code is strictly denoted until it is put at the beginning of the text, placed in context, connoting the image. Without the caption "Three sonographs..." the image would be meaningless to most readers of Ondaatje's text, but knowing that it is an attempt to capture language, songs, into photographs becomes significant in an analysis of *Coming Through Slaughter*.

Jon Kertzer in his review of the book claims that this sonograph is a flaw:

A symptom of weakness in *Coming Through Slaughter* is its preface, consisting of three sonographs, with commentary, of a dolphin's squawks, whistles and clicks. This is puzzling, as it was certainly intended to be, but not really intriguing. (300)

Kertzer misses the connection between the language of appearances and the vocal language. Buddy Bolden plays his

music in much the same way as the dolphin's music described in the sonograph. He tries to create a new music, always in the present tense, never repeating himself, playing "the devil's music and hymns at the same time" (134), playing in a way that is unknown: "No one knows how a dolphin makes both whistles and echolocation clicks simultaneously" (6). This realm of the unknown is where Bolden finds himself at the climax of his playing in the parade, and it is what causes him to collapse.

This preface works in the same way as the first page of *Billy the Kid*; it describes Bolden's music as well as his lifestyle by referring to a photographic image. Ondaatje's language in writing the book, the vocal language of the dolphins which can not be translated except through an image, the language of Bolden's music, and the language of photographs, all merge in the text. The preface is a combination of sound, text, and image, which provides a miniature model of the way these three language systems interact in Ondaatje's text. Ondaatje's form tries to capture Bolden's playing.

Ondaatje has Frank Lewis comment on Bolden, "We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot" (37). Ondaatje does much the same in the form of his text, which he has called a "soup" (Solecki, 324). Ondaatje writes in such a way as to reveal the plot by tearing it up. The first section

jumps in time, generally marked by an asterisk, the second section fills in the gaps of the story, and the third section is an ordered four days when Bolden returns. In this way Ondaatje has not told his story "from A to Z...none of that is chronological" (Wachtel, 59). He narrates through a series of events, textual fragments similar to the photographic fragments in *Billy the Kid*, events which "implicate other events" (*Another Way*, 121). For example, the same event is seen from different characters' points of view or in different time frames. Webb interrogates Crawley (30), and at the same moment in time Bolden watches a woman cut the carrots (31). This implicates Bolden's own version of Crawley's story at the train station, significantly "frozen" by the moment, like a photograph (39). These events implicate each other, whether through detail or through time.

Ondaatje writes the way Bolden plays. They both attempt to "show all the possibilities in the middle of the story" (43). When contrasting his music with that of Robicheaux who is the musical equivalent of Pat Garrett, full of order, Bolden speaks for his and Ondaatje's style of creating narrative:

I wanted them to be able to come in where they pleased and leave when they pleased and somehow hear the germs of the start and all the possible endings at whatever point in the music I had reached *then*. (94)

R.P. Bilan, in his review, claims this is making "use of a cinematic narrative technique, abruptly cutting from one brief

scene to the next" (293). He accredits this to "Ondaatje's poetic ability to present scenes and visual images that are sharply and distinctly seen" (294).⁴ It also implies Berger's model in which each event on the narrative chain implicates the other events, thereby making it possible to enter at one event and see "the germs of the start and all the possible endings". In this sense Ondaatje is again using Berger's photographic narrative technique. There is only one "start", but there are many "possible endings". In a photograph the start is the present of the photograph, the moment it was taken; the possible endings are the various presents of the observers, or the various interpretations of its ambiguity. This ambiguity is emphasized by Ondaatje: "the right ending is an open door you can't see too far out of" (94).

The observer, the reader, must lend a past and a future to every photograph. This is especially true of Bolden, who has no past. His past is "the ultimate intertext" which is "constantly deferred" (Hutcheon, 307). Webb

discovered that Bolden had never spoken of his past. To the people here he was a musician who arrived in the city at the age of twenty-two. Webb had known him since fifteen. He could just as easily be wiping out his past again in a casual gesture, contemptuous. Landscape suicide. (22)

⁴ The visual nature of Ondaatje's writing can be expressed by Conrad's (a writer who appears intertextually in *In the Skin of a Lion*) statement in his preface to *The Nigger of Narcissus*: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, before all, to make you see".

Bolden exists only in the present tense, like his music, "new and raw and chance. Never repeated" (95) and like a photograph, "dated in half an hour" (43). He was "never recorded" (37), his music has no documented past, his image is only recorded in one "shitty picture" (52). The one photo that exists of Bolden is significantly unclear, as it should be because Bolden (just as with Billy) is a "beautiful formed thing caught at the wrong moment" so that he is "shapeless" and "moving to the clear" (*Trick*, 64).

This is emphasized in Bolden's last night with Robin. Bolden claims that Webb, who has used a photograph "as a forensic tool" (York, 108) to find him, has "placed my past and future on this table like a road" (86). This last night with Robin becomes "a significant moment," one that Bolden wants to record, as if with a camera. Instead he must use his memory: "We follow each other into the future, as if now, at the last moment we try to memorize the face a movement we will never want to forget" (87). His memory tries to function in a photographic way.

The connection of photographs and memory has been discussed at length by both Berger and Sontag. Sontag calls photographs "not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement. It is not reality that photographs make easily accessible, but images" (165). A photograph replaces memory. We do not remember the reality of being five years old but instead remember the reality implied

from a photograph of being five. We remember the incident of the photograph in a visual way, not the experience itself; not reality but an image of it. This is demonstrated by Webb before getting the photograph of Bolden: "Hope Bellocq has the picture. I can't even remember what you look like too well. I'd recognize you but in my mind you're just an outline and music" (50-51). Webb needs the photo to replace his memory. In "Burning Hills" the same photographic effect of memory is obvious:

The summers were layers of civilization in his memory they were old photographs he didn't look at anymore for girls in them were chubby not as perfect as in his mind (*Trick*, 59)

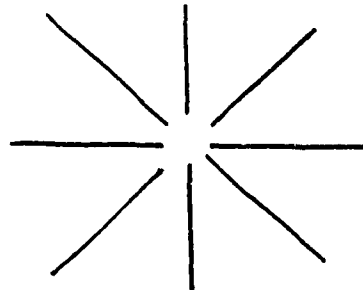
He does not look at the photographs for fear they will replace his memory.

Bolden "creates an eternal present of immediate expectation: memory ceases to be necessary" (*About Looking*, 55). Living his life and playing his music in the eternal present allows Bolden to escape his past. He can never escape his own memory, however, because memory does not work in a unilinear way. Berger also equates a series of photographs to memory in a nonlinear way: "[T]he energy of the montage of attractions in a sequence of still photographs destroys the very notion of *sequences*...The sequence has become a field of coexistence like the field of memory" (*Another Way*, 288). Memory implies other events in the same way as photographs. As Berger demonstrates:

Normally photographs are used in a very linear way³ - they are used to illustrate an argument, or to demonstrate a thought which goes like this:



Memory is not unilinear at all. Memory works radially, that is to say with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event:



(*About Looking*, 60)

As has already been mentioned, Ondaatje does not write in the unilinear way. He incorporates many situations into the same event. The diagram Berger uses to demonstrate the way memory works is enormously significant in *Coming Through Slaughter*. It is the diagram of the fan in Bolden's barber shop; it is a model for Bolden and his personal narrative. Webb discovers this during his investigation: "Their stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them" (63). Rooke points out that "on the ceiling is another image of that rimless wheel, the fan 'turning like a giant knife' (47) that hovers over all the book" (Rooke, 273). This rimless wheel of narrative "hovers" over the text; Ondaatje presents the book in this form. Scobie notes that Bolden's audience, his fans, also "hover" over him (13). Only Bellocq escapes the ever-

³ Such as in a newspaper report or an advertisement.

present turning narrative: "[H]e was so short he was the only one who could stretch up in the barbershop and not get hit by the fan" (91).

The form of the book is a rimless wheel which turns so that only the spokes will hit the road; it is not a constant narrative, and meaning comes from what is between the events of the spokes touching the ground:

The story does not ultimately depend upon what is said, upon what we, projecting onto the world something of our own cultural paranoia, call its plot. The story does not depend upon any fixed repertoire of ideas and habits: it depends upon its stride over spaces. In these spaces lies the meaning it bestows on events. (*Sense of Sight*, xviii)

When the rimless wheel turns, it "strides over spaces", leaving its imprint of events on the road of narrative. These spaces are chosen by the author and the reader must react to this awareness of choice by filling in the gaps, the spaces of narrative. Ondaatje acknowledges this when he says: "I knew very little about Bolden. I'm really drawn to unfinished stories. There's all those empty spaces you can put stuff in" (qtd. in Jarrett, 34). At the close of the book Bolden enters these spaces in his memory to try and gain meaning:

Bolden's hand going up into the air
in agony.
His brain driving it up into the
path of the circling fan.

This last movement happens forever and ever in his memory (136)
This is the nightmare he has of the rimmed wheel running over his hand, of the story becoming plot. The image of the fan,

itself a symbol of memory and story, occurs as a loop of film in his memory. With his hand, Bolden enters the spaces between events, caught in the present, about to be sliced by the future. It is a moment which is like a photograph that has stuffed itself in his memory and in doing so has replaced the reality of what is remembered.

Echoing the first page of *Billy the Kid*, Webb says, "I need a picture" (50). Most of the story of *Coming Through Slaughter* is the process of narration that this picture creates. It is the one "shitty picture" of Bolden. To try to find Bolden Webb must first try to "fix" him, the best way being through a photograph (York, 108). He needs the photograph to replace his memory. This photograph, which appears either on the cover or after the preface depending on the edition of the text, is described by Ondaatje within the text; he has "translated the visual into linguistic terms" (York, 115):

Jimmy Johnson	Bolden	Willy Cornish	Willy Warner
on bass		on valve trombone	on clarinet

Brock Mumford	Frank Lewis
on guitar	on clarinet (66)

Here the photograph has become "touch[ed] into words" (*Running*, 22). The photographic language has become text and

is therefore a translation, not a caption. Webb hopes to discover the future through the use of the past. The photograph, the "tool", is trapped in the present like Bolden himself. It is significant that Ondaatje introduces this description with the words: "This is what you see" (66). The words are seen, just as the picture is seen; their languages merge through the sense of sight, the reader and the character connecting via this ambiguous "you". York describes this as

a comment on the interdependence of the word and the image. In fact, many readers probably read the testimonies by the band members in the book, flip to the photograph key, and then to the photograph itself, to see the image behind the word - a fluid reading style which forms a perfect testimony to the complex inter-relationships between the image and the word which Ondaatje has created in *Coming Through Slaughter*. (115).

Ondaatje includes the photographer Bellocq to provide the same sense of photographic objectivity that Billy was capable of. He gives his source for Bellocq as *Storyville Portraits*, edited by John Szarkowski. He states this text was "an inspiration of mood and character. Private and fictional magnets drew him and Bolden together" (157). It implies the real Bellocq was an enigma, it mythologizes him, and Ondaatje works with the legend in the same way that he did with the legends of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden.⁶ This is what Hutcheon refers to when she speaks of Ondaatje constantly using a "histiographic referent" (305), neither a historical

⁶ Or in the same way that Berger writes of Picasso.

nor real referent but instead one created in the text's writing. From *Storyville Portraits* Ondaatje gets some facts of Bellocq's life and the germ of his fictionalization. We discover from it that Bellocq was a "hydrocephalic semi-dwarf...who cultivated the company of prostitutes" (8), that he photographed ships for a living, as well as the opium dens in Chinatown.

Bellocq is not introduced until the second section. Webb goes to him to find a photo of Bolden but is received with Bellocq's camera as a weapon. Bellocq's camera acts as a weapon, a crutch, an extension of the man. It is "like a bow", "a metal animal grown into his back" (123). Sontag has stated that "there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera" (7). Bellocq's camera becomes his tool of power, it becomes his body, in much the same way as Billy's hand is a camera but also a weapon.

Bellocq makes the one blurred photo of Bolden and the band for Webb. It is interesting to note that Ondaatje's description of the developing process is inaccurate. Bellocq develops the print in the "acid tray" but later it is "bleach[ed] out" (53); he never puts it into the fixative. Photographs are developed using a base, not an acid. What is more significant is that the developing process is described as an act of creation: "[I]t slowly began to grow black shapes, coming fast now. Then the sudden vertical lines which rose out of the pregnant white paper...The dark clothes coming

first, leaving the space that was the shirt" (52). The photograph "grows", the paper is "pregnant"; Bellocq is a creator of images, an artist. He then destroys the negative of this photograph: "[H]e dropped the negative into the acid tray and watched it bleach out to grey. Goodbye. Hope he don't find you" (53). The photographic reality parallels the reality of Bolden's disappearance, "the friend who in reality had reversed the process and gone back into white" (52-53). The one blurred photo comes to represent the reality of Bolden; the image world replaces the real one. Like Billy, he has become "overdeveloped to meaninglessness" (*Billy the Kid*, 74).

Bellocq is both creator and destroyer, a paradigm that Ondaatje addresses in many of his works. In Bellocq's case, the "making and destroying [came] from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of" (55). York comments that this destructive impulse is "a positive act" because it leaves Webb with only a photographic reality, which leads him away from the actual reality of Bolden's life; only Bellocq "has access to that secret, inner world" (York, 113). There is the abyss between the photographic present and the real present. Webb wants to eliminate the abyss to find Bolden.

This destruction comes into play again with Bellocq defacing his own photographs of the Storyville prostitutes. This defacing also appears in *Storyville Portraits*, where the

participants in the interview speculate that Bellocq's brother, who was a priest, scratched out the faces (16). Ondaatje creates a fictional context for these actual photographs:

Some of the pictures have knife slashes across the bodies. Along the ribs. Some of them neatly decapitate the head of the naked body with scratches. These exist alongside the genuine scars mentioned before, the appendix scar and others non-surgical. They reflect each other, the eye moves back and forth. The cuts add a three-dimensional quality to each work. Not just physically, though you can almost see the depth of the knife slashes, but also because you think of Bellocq wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the bodies. (55)

Bellocq wants to "enter" the photographs, bridging the gap between the photographic reality and his own. This emphasizes the "compulsively destructive nature of the creative impulse" (Scobie, 247). The cuts on the photographs are "no longer destructive, for in the photograph of the long quotation another kind of meaning has become possible" (*Another Way*, 121). Bellocq destroys the negatives of Bolden and Nora, scratches the faces of the Storyville prostitutes, trying to "enter" the photographic space, and then destroys himself in a final creative act.

Bellocq's suicide can be seen in photographic terms as well. Rooke calls it a "mocking self-portrait" (280). He arranges the room like a portrait of himself, the chairs around him forming a frame "20' by 20'" (67). He "sets fire



to the wallpaper half way up to the ceiling" (67) which forms a rim, a frame at the height of his brain. The room becomes a photograph inflamed, another destroyed portrait. Like the picture of Bolden that he had put in the acid until it was bleached out, he also becomes "surrounded by whiteness" (67). Bellocq at the last second tries to embrace the "certainty" of the margin but he discovers that the photographic room can no longer contain him, the wall is not there. Instead "he falls, dissolving out of his pose" (67); nothing can fix him into the "certainty" of a photograph any longer. A pose implies the self-consciousness of being observed, of being photographed, just as Bolden is only "posing as human" (100) for his audience. Through his final self-portrait Bellocq leaves the realm of the pose, of the image world, and this becomes Bolden's inspiration.

The prostitutes also leave the realm of the pose when Bellocq photographs them; they become conscious of the camera and its audience. The scratches on the photographs parallel the scars on the bodies of the prostitutes. Bolden cuts "the roads" (71) on Pickett's face (who is also presumably photographed by Bellocq in the opium dens), an act which also leaves scars paralleling the prostitute's scars and Bellocq's scratches on the photographs. Ondaatje himself "enters" this space because "with a razor blade [he] cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be...The slow trace of the razor almost painless" (133-134).

The distinction between the fictional, real, and photographed bodies is broken down.

The scars are symbols of past (Bolden's past and future are also "like a road"), of stories that left their "trace" in the same way a photograph leaves a "trace". Berger writes that "the material relation between the image and what it represents is an immediate and unconstructed one. And is indeed like a trace" (*Another Way*, 93). The meaning of the scratches is found in the relation of Bellocq to the photographs, not in the photographs themselves. Ondaatje supplies a context because without it there can only be the speculations of the participants in *Storyville Portraits* about the brother priest. This creative / destructive relation of Bellocq to his photographs is necessary because "without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning" (*Another Way*, 89). For Ondaatje scars become a symbol of the story in much of his work: "We remember the time around scars" (*Dainty Monsters*, 49). The scratches and scars are stories which bridge the real and image worlds, the present and the past, "they reflect each other, the eye moves back and forth".

The relationship of Bolden and Bellocq is central to the text. Bolden is a "social dog...he roamed through conversations as if they were the countryside not listening carefully just picking up moments" (56) but "what was strong in Bellocq was the slow convolution of that brain. He was self-sufficient, complete as a perpetual motion machine"

(56).⁷ They are both "picking up moments", Bolden through his music and Bellocq through his camera. They are both artists but Bolden's art is extroverted and spontaneous, whereas Bellocq's is introverted and self-sufficient. Bellocq offers Bolden a new "way of seeing".

Sam Solecki addresses this fact when he writes that "the narrator suggests how Bellocq's mode of thinking became Bolden's" (259). This mode of thinking is also a way of seeing, which is in fact derived from Bellocq's photographic sensibility. Solecki points out that "of the various images associated with Bellocq...the one most insistently repeated is 'brain'; it's an image that only occurs in scenes involving Bolden after he has met Bellocq" (259). In other words, Bellocq causes Bolden to become as introverted and self-conscious an artist as himself; he "had pushed his imagination into Buddy's brain" (64). Before meeting Bellocq Bolden was spontaneous; there was no thought to his playing. His life process was parallel to the cutting of carrots:

If she thinks what she is doing she will lose control. He knows that the only way to catch a fly for instance is to move the hand without the brain telling it to move fast, interfering. (31)

Bellocq makes Bolden think so that he loses control. It is Billy who catches the flies but there is "angry weather" (*Billy the Kid*, 58) in his head as well. Bolden's brain

⁷ Bellocq's brain and Billy's hand are similar machines and both can be compared to cameras.

gradually begins to "interfere" with his own life, with his conception of self: "I feel my brain has walked away and is watching me" (100).

Bolden describes Bellocq's influence on his perception of himself, and his music:

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. Everytime you stopped playing you became a lie. So I got so, with Bellocq, I didn't trust any of that...any more. It was just playing games. We were furnished rooms and Bellocq was a window looking out. (59)

Bolden has discovered that "certainty may be instantaneous; doubt requires duration; meaning is born of the two" (*Another Way*, 89). He begins to see the interrelation of events in the narrative. Previously he lived only in the present, that of a photograph, but he comes to realize that "an instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself" (*Another Way*, 89). It is Bellocq who allows Bolden to become "more theoretical" (101) by examining himself and trying to "extend beyond" his "furnished room".

The self-consciousness Bolden feels due to Bellocq's influence is the same as that felt by the prostitutes who become the objects of Bellocq's photographs.

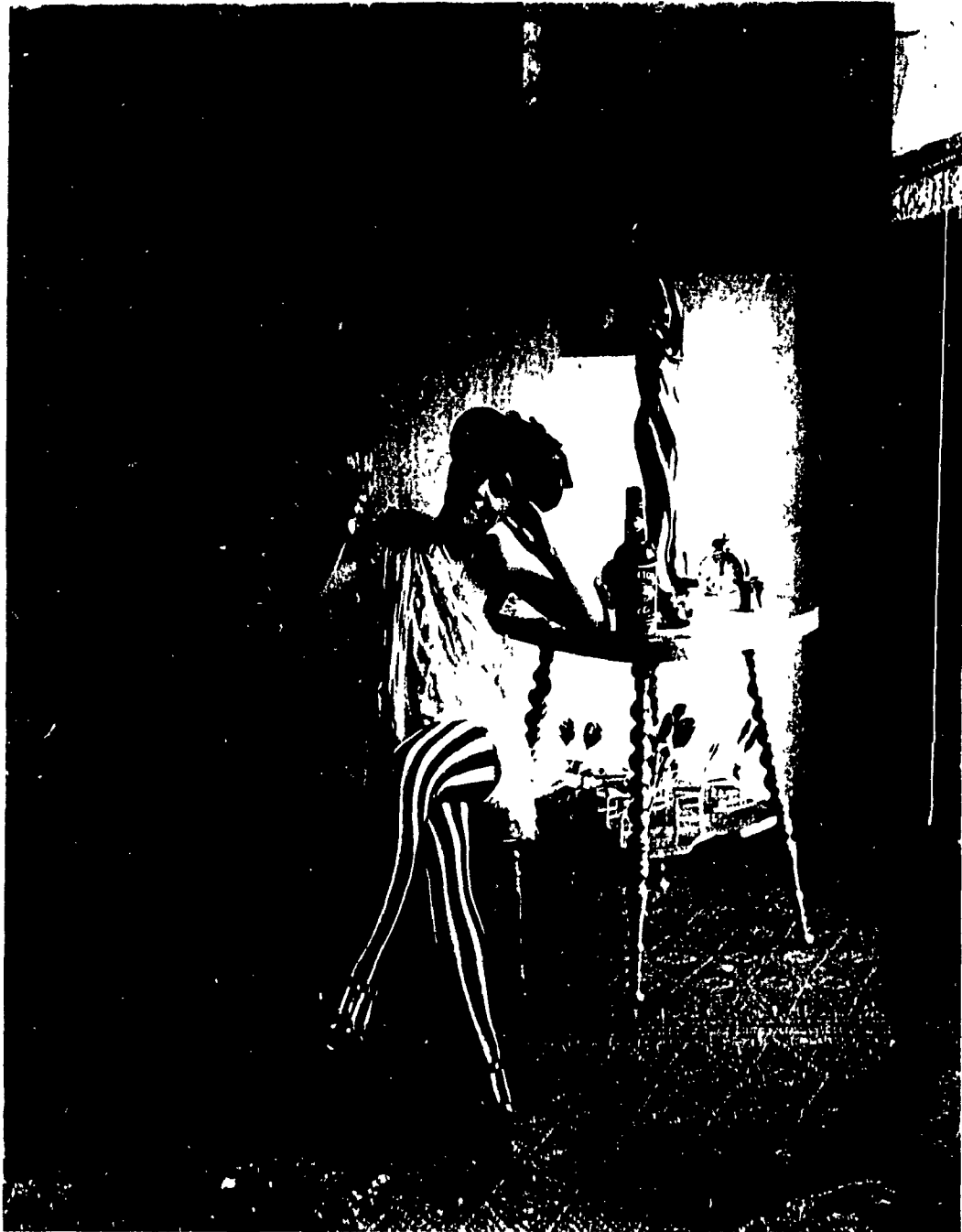
Ondaatje has revised Lee Friedlander's comment about Bellocq's photographs:

It almost looks as if each girl decided what she wanted to be like. I mean some of them wanted to be nude and some of them wanted to look like they were going to church. He just let them act out whatever they had in mind for themselves. He seems to have gathered their confidence enough to allow them to be exactly what they were. (*Storyville Portraits*, 15)

One snap to quickly catch her scorning him and then waiting, waiting for minutes so she would become self-conscious towards him and the camera and her status, embarrassed at just her naked arms and neck and remembers for the first time in a long while the roads she imagined she could take as a child. And he photographed that.

What you see in his pictures is her mind jumping that far back to when she would dare to imagine the future. (54)

Ondaatje rewrites the first passage having the prostitutes "think about what they were doing" so that they "lose control" (31) of their pose. They are no longer simply "posing as humans" (100), no longer living for an audience, which is what Bolden does before he meets Bellocq. As she poses she remembers a moment in her past, which is like the present of a photograph of her as a child, and she can see the possible futures leading down the "road" of narrative. She examines her present state in relation to the imagined present states that were her future as a child. She becomes conscious of the abyss between the actual present and the present she imagines in the photograph which is an event in her memory. Bellocq lays out her "past and future...like a road" (86) just as his photograph does to Bolden. When looking at the photographs of the prostitutes Ondaatje is suggesting that we find them



meaningful because "we are lending [them] a past and a future" (*Another Way*, 89). Ondaatje describes this process and parallels Berger when he says:

What happens in a novel is that we are in symbolic time. That is, a whole life is comprised into two hundred pages. So every action or thought that occurs leaps back to what a character was and leaps forward to what he or she might become. It's the complexity that this range of time produces that makes the characters thick or real in a novel. (Bush, 246)

Bolden also connects himself to the mattress prostitutes that Bellocq photographs: "My brain tonight has a mattress strapped to its back" (119). Although Bolden lives on the edge, the mattress prostitutes are even further into the margins, "even with me they step into the white" (119). Bellocq must destroy their photographs just as he does the photographs of Bolden.

Bellocq teaches Bolden to see photographically. When they go together to photograph the prostitutes it is Bolden who puts what he sees into a photographic context:

He brushed his free hand against the blue embossed wallpaper. He saw a photograph of a girl sitting against it, alone on the stairs, no one around. Maybe a plate of food. The wallpaper would come out light grey. (123)

He translates what he sees into a photograph, the blue wallpaper would be grey. He examines the space around him as a "set of potential photographs" (Sontag, 7). This is his new way of seeing. That there is a visual relation, connected to the brain, between Bellocq and Bolden is made evident at numerous times. Nora recognizes the influence Bellocq has had

over Bolden and she expresses this in visual terms, "Look at you. Look at what he did to you. Look at you. Look at you. Goddamit. Look at you" (127). She demands that he "look"; she wants him to see things like he used to do, before Bellocq. However, Bolden is now self-conscious of his sight and his brain; he can not go back. In fact, in the final parade he loses his ability to see altogether thereby losing that self-consciousness. Ondaatje equates Bolden's playing, the sound, with sight in the final lines of the parade section:

watch it listen it listen it, can't see I CAN'T SEE. Air floating through the blood to the girl red hitting the blind spot I can feel others turning, the silence of the crowd, can't see...What I wanted. (131)

Bolden finally receives a reprieve from the self-consciousness of his photographic sight and this is what he essentially wants, to break free of the "way of seeing" which drove Bellocq to suicide.

The poem "White Dwarfs" provides a central theme of Ondaatje's; that desire to go to the edge, to the margin of the photograph, and try to break through:

Why do I love most
among my heroes those
who sail to that perfect edge
where there is no social fuel (*Trick*, 69)

Bellocq goes over the edge, as does Bolden. Bolden, who was a "social dog", escapes the frame of audience where he must

constantly be posing. Ondaatje frequently refers to frames and the claustrophobic space they provide for Bolden and Bellocq, who would "talk for hours moving gradually off the edge of the social world" (64).

Bolden describes himself and Bellocq in terms of frames "We were furnished rooms and Bellocq was a window looking out" (59). Bellocq is a window; he is within the frame but his way of seeing allows the possibility of leaving it: "He was a photographer. Pictures. That were like...windows" (59). Both Bellocq and Bolden are "yearning for more than a room contains" (Rooke, 275). In this sense the space of a room becomes "an event comparable to other events" (*Sense of Sight*, 178). The room becomes text. The rooms are events within the possibilities of narrative; of paths which lead to alternate presents trying to escape through the frame of the window. Late in the book Bolden's body is in the frame of a room but essentially he "wasn't even in the room" (120). Bolden is "pointed relentlessly toward a new psychic space" (Rooke, 287).

In the beginning of the text Bolden, in a rage, almost puts his hand through a window but stops himself at the last second (16). He realizes the potential of breaking out of the framed room and he tries to express this through his music; he tells the band to "put your hands through the window" (14). After Bellocq's death Bolden also tells Webb to "put your hand through this window" (91). Bolden eventually does go through

the window in his fight with Pickett: "Push again and he goes over the ice through the front window...I won't let go and I come through too over the ice and glass and empty frame" (74). They "come through" the empty frame and Bolden is presumed mad. Later, again considered mad, he will "come through" Slaughter, looking at his "landscape suicide" through the window of the train. Both these scenes of madness can be connected with the rain that falls "like so many little windows going down around us" (75).

Before the final parade Bolden feels "locked inside the frame" (112). During the parade he "puts his hand through the window" and breaks free of the frame; he "sails to that perfect edge". In the end of *Billy the Kid*, Billy puts his hand through the window but it is simply a final desperate grasp at meaning before his death (94). Putting the hand through the window, leaving the frame of "certainty" or a photograph, seems to lead to madness, suicide, or as in Billy's case, death. But this is simply because outside the frame there is "no social fuel"; one does not "pose" for an audience or a photograph to document the event.

Where a photograph meets its margin is a "perfect edge", where the black, white and greys meet the white of nothingness. Rooke rightly asserts that "the Bellocq-Bolden relationship is a study in black and white" (278). Bellocq, who works in the darkroom, the "black room" of himself, is primarily associated with "the narrow dark focus of the eye"

(68). Bolden with his white shirts, is associated with "the crazy chaos of white" (68). Bellocq offers Bolden "black empty spaces" (91) but Bolden turns to the "white room" (86) of Nora and Robin to "clear away the chaos he embraced" (110).⁸ He lives "full of the white privacy" (68). It is Bellocq's brain which pulls him "under into the darkness into the complications" (69). The extremes of black and white are reconciled in grey. Just as "the photographer's art requires black and white" (Rooke 278), so does Bolden eventually embrace the "black empty spaces" of Bellocq. And Bellocq, in his final seconds, is "surrounded by whiteness", the whiteness he reduced Bolden to in his photograph of him. Rooke points out that, "in Bolden's final room, a scene only apparently of misery, grey becomes the colour of a perfect blend" (278). For Bolden the "white rooms" and "black empty spaces" have merged into the final photograph, the room "with the grey walls that darken into corner" (156).

Just as the colour grey functions as the "perfect blend" between the extremes of black and white, so does the symbol of the cloud act as the link between the visible and invisible in the text. The cloud is the blurred photograph in "The Gate in His Head"; it is an attempt to try "to overcome this awful and stupid clarity" (100). It is memory that "has begun to blur", Bolden's relationships becoming "anonymous as cloud" (100).

⁸ Billy also turns to women in their white rooms.

Berger writes that "Clouds gather visibility, and then disperse into invisibility. All appearances are of the nature of clouds" (*Sense of Sight*, 219). When Bolden sees Robin's absence after a night of love making it is revealed by the "blue cloud light in the room" (87). Robin then becomes "anonymous as cloud". She has "dispersed into invisibility". Rooke echoes Berger when she states that:

"Blue" marks the point at which the visible and invisible meet, as the gas when Bolden lit Nora's stove "popped up blue, something invisible finding a form": (124). But now it goes the other way: "she's gone" (87). Bolden too, when he has achieved his "real" (93) form, will retreat into invisibility. (Rooke, 285)

The cloud is the symbol of appearance finding form. As Rooke explains, "the cloud itself suggests that point where the cycle achieves tangible, but still evanescent form" (275). The technique of Bolden's playing is "something invisible finding form" and is described as such:

The way the side of his mouth would drag a net of air in and dress it in notes and make it last and last, yearning to leave it up there in the sky like air transformed into cloud. He could see the air, could tell where it was freshest in the room by the colour. (14)

Bolden is a cloud. He comes into visibility where he is recognized by the audience, then retreats into invisibility and silence. He lives most of his life on the edge, between that visibility and invisibility. Therefore, in his final room, invisible from society, he can "Look away from the window when clouds and other things go by" (156). He no longer has need for those "things" on the edge of visibility

because he has gone past that edge.

The "blue" cloud which is something invisible finding a form is also echoed in the *punctum* of *Coming Through Slaughter*. The "blue cloud light" (87) is also the "wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky" (60). Wet chicory is blue in colour (Rooke, 283). This phrase is a detail that "pricks" Bolden who is "lost in the details" (15). Berger describes the way of seeing that takes in the details in his novel *A Painter for Our Time*:

Whilst walking he had, like most painters, an eye whose fancy one could not predict. An unusually white wall, a pile of chairs on the sidewalk, a negress - these he might pick out whilst ignoring a magnolia tree in full bloom. (27)

This tendency to focus on the details, which Berger's painter and Bolden have in common, implies that they see photographically, that they have discovered the *punctum*. Barthes claims that when looking at a photograph, "certain details may prick me" and that "very often the *punctum* is a detail" (*Reflections on Photography*, 47,43). Ondaatje discovers his *punctum* in a mirror which is compared to a photograph: "The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read that he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory" (133). This "shock" is Ondaatje's recognition of a *punctum*. However, the detail that is this *punctum* for Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* is,

"Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky".

This phrase initially appears on its own page, separated from its context (60). Without its context the meaning is left ambiguous and this provides the "prick" that Barthes deems necessary in defining the *punctum*. It creates its own context as *punctum*; it is "no longer a sign but the thing itself" (Barthes, 45). Ondaatje "transform[s]" this *punctum* after repeating it within the context of "The Train Song" (85). He examines the detail; he rearranges the words to try and produce a variety of meanings, but because the *punctum* is out of context the meaning is as chaotic as Bolden's maddened brain.

When the phrase appears for the third time it is in complete context:

Am walked out of the House of D and put on a north train by H.B. McMurray and Jones. Outside a river can't get out of the rain. Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky. The trees rocks brown ditches falling off the side as we go past. (139)

Outside the frame that is the train window Bolden sees photographically. The "trees rocks brown ditches" represent the bulk of what is seen, what Barthes would call the *stadium* (25). The phrase "Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky" supplies the *punctum* for the train ride through Slaughter. It is the detail, framed by the window of the train, that "pricks" Bolden in his madness. The meaning of this phrase becomes clear because it is now placed in context, within a photograph, and the fact that it was previously an

silent after creating the art, this being Bolden's final parade performance. Bolden has "eliminated the audience from [his] art" (Sontag, 8) which, in fact, is a liberating act: "by silence he frees himself from servile bondage to the world" (Sontag, 6). Like Bellocq he has left the realm of the pose and is therefore free to pursue "all the possibilities in the middle of the story" (43).

Sontag writes of silence in terms of language, in much the same way that Berger writes of photographs. Bolden's silence is similar to Billy's absence on the first page of *Billy the Kid*. Just as one needs silence as a pole for language (Sontag, 19), so does one need absence as a pole for appearances. However, both silence and absence exist within their language systems and not outside them. Bolden's silence and absence from the social world allow him to exist in a state of possibility. Sontag is consistent with Berger when she asserts that:

There is no such thing as empty space. As long as the human eye is looking, there is always something to see. To look at something which is "empty" is still to be looking, still to be seeing something (10).

It is the same with Bolden's silence. He simply places new meanings on the sun and the things he touches every day in the hospital, "the taps on the bath, the door frame, benches, things like that" (150). What Bolden comes to realize is that "The mystic privacy one can be so proud of has no alphabet of noise or meaning to the people outside" (64), and he therefore

remains silent.

Bolden's silence in fact frames the book. In the beginning he "Never spoke of the past" (38); his history is silent. After the final parade he disappears again into silence for his remaining twenty-four years. When Ondaatje travels to do his research, Bolden is not only "silent" but "there is the complete absence of him" (133), which of course is really a "pseudo-presence". Bolden's body has "disintegrated, and has been lost in the water under the earth of Holtz Cemetery" (133) in the same way his image was bleached out in Bellocq's photographic tray. His life, depicted in Ondaatje's text, is of the nature of a cloud, a photograph. As Sontag makes evident:

Language is demoted to the status of an event. Something takes place in time, a voice speaking which points to the before and to what comes after an utterance: silence.
(23)

Bolden's life is a series of events strung together in narrative, as in Berger's model, but there is silence at either end complete with the possibilities it affords. Ondaatje emphasizes this in another book, *Elimination Dance* (1978), in which the last page is blank with the heading "Further Eliminations" to allow for the possibility of further contributions to the story. According to Berger, this silent space or absence, and all the gaps in the narrative and on the pages, are events "comparable with other events". The book moves from absence to presence to absence again; from silence

to music and again to silence. *Coming Through Slaughter*, therefore, becomes a moment captured in time, in history: "It is a black and white photograph, part of a history book" (134).

It has been said of this ending of silence that it "leaves a flat, sour taste in the mouth" (Scobie, 21) and is "a little puzzling" (Bilan, 295). It is Constance Rooke who echoes Ondaatje's own interpretation that the ending is a "happy" one. Ondaatje has stated that

if Bolden ends up as a rank amateur worrying whether Perry Como is going to record his other songs - this is worse to me. I don't find *Slaughter* depressing. There's a calm in Bolden that's justified for him. If it's justified for *him*, then that's all right. Obviously the book is not *joyous*, but I don't find it depressing at all. (Pearce, 141)

Rooke would agree with Ondaatje's statement here and with Sontag's aesthetic of silence. She acknowledges how some readers might find the ending "a portrait of misery" but she asserts that "it is the right ending" (291). Bolden has given us a clue to this when he says "The right ending is an open door you can't see too far out of. It can mean exactly the opposite of what you are thinking" (94). This open door is the empty frame that leads into the possibilities of the space just beyond it; it is the porthole between events in the narrative. For Rooke there is no threat to Bolden in his final room in the hospital; it is "entirely satisfactory... there seems to be no need to look out the window...as

everything is there in the grey room already" (290, 291). In fact, "Bolden can fulfil in this new psychic space the potential of the white room, making 'something unknown in the shape of this room'(86)" (Rooke, 290).

This final room is seen in terms of time and light, the principal ingredients of a photograph:

The sun comes every day. Save the string. I put it in lines across the room. I watched him creep his body through the grilled windows. When the sun touches the first string wham it is 10 o'clock. It is 2 o'clock when he touches the second. When the shadow of the first string is under the second string it is 4 o'clock. When it reaches the door it will soon be dark. (140)

Here time is "no longer destructive" (Rooke, 290). A camera also turns time into a creative process; the exposure time is measured in hours, because "History was slow here" (9). In this room it is the eternal present, as in a photograph, and this is what Bolden "wanted". In this room past, present, and future merge in the sun; the past tense "watched" becomes the present "wham it is" which becomes the future "will soon be". The space of this final room provides the potential to explore time.

The sun provides light for Bolden and becomes his only "friend" (148). This is the opposite of Billy, for whom the sun becomes an enemy. The sun is described as "travelling spokes of light" (148) which parallels the image of the fan or Berger's diagram of memory. The sun provides the light and the time for the narrative to proceed as it "strides over spaces". Through the light of the sun, this room replaces

Bolden's memory just as a photograph will replace memory. ⁹

Just as in *Billy the Kid*, the final scene in the grey room has been interpreted as Ondaatje himself writing the text. The room allows him to explore time and light through the form of his text, just as Bolden does with the string. This exploration is evidenced by the anachronistic sense of real time being interpreted into his fiction. For example, the newspaper story on Isadora Duncan precedes her death by at least twenty years. She died in 1927 and Bolden goes mad in 1907. Similarly there were no official radio broadcasts before Bolden goes mad yet he twice listens to the radio. Also the fact that Bolden was not recorded is emphasized by Ondaatje yet the first jazz recordings were not done until 1917, after Bolden would have gone silent.

Bolden and Ondaatje are similar artists who occupy the same psychic space. Ondaatje states: "For me, Bolden is a character who is important to me only as I knew him...now and then I'll see something in the street that I will see the way he saw it" (Pearce, 134). The connection comes on the final page:

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

Here is all the space an artist needs, a grey room with

⁹ Bolden does not remember Willy Cornish, his other visitor.

a window to "put your hand through". Ondaatje makes a direct connection between himself and Bolden that reappears here, "When he went mad he was the same age as I am now" (133); they are both thirty-one. *Coming Through Slaughter* is like a series of photographs in which Ondaatje, while writing, is in the real present of being thirty-one and Bolden is in the photographic present of being thirty-one. The "abyss" between them is of sixty-nine years (1907-1976) and within this abyss lies the possibility for the stories.

Sam Solecki has made the Bolden / Ondaatje connection:

Coming Through Slaughter, even granting that it is fiction and not autobiography or even confessional poetry, is the story of Michael Ondaatje; it is the work in which he most explicitly declares that a fictional character created by him is really a self-portrait. (254)

This is no longer the actual "self-portrait" that Ondaatje includes of himself as a boy in *Billy the Kid*, but rather it is a "mirror image" (Solecki, 254). In the text mirrors and windows "reflect each other", as in the barber shop. Both act as the frames of potential photographs. The mirror breaks along with the glass in the fight with Pickett and, like a camera, the mirror and glass become weapons. Ondaatje accepts his mirror image:

The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be. (133)

The photograph and the mirror provide an access to memory. In

his memory, the fan in his brain, Ondaatje connects himself with his mirror image. In fact he "puts his hand through" the frame of the mirror to try and capture the link between his memory and its fictional counterpart: "What was there...that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself?" (134). Ondaatje does not want to "pose" in his "accent" (134); he wants the possibilities outside the pose, outside history, outside the framed window which Bolden's silence offers him.

Ondaatje is not only writing, however, he is also taking photographs: "There is so little noise that I easily hear the click of my camera as I take fast bad photographs into the sun aiming at the barber shop he probably worked in" (133). Like Bellocq with the photograph of Bolden, the sun has now "bleached everything" (133) and the town has disappeared into history. Ondaatje's photographic technique, "fast bad photographs", is reminiscent of the cutting of carrots and the playing of Bolden; he can not "think what [he] is doing" (31) without losing control.

Both Bolden and Ondaatje share a way of seeing; they see photographically, and they are both writers. That Bolden is a writer is made evident at the end of the second section, "Alcohol sweat on these pages. I am tired Webb. I put my forehead down to rest on the booklet on the table" (102). Bolden is also the editor of *The Cricket* which is filled with fragments paralleling Ondaatje's own in *Slaughter*. Ondaatje's

writing even takes on the nature of snapping photographs at times:

Snap. Lady with a dog. Lady on a sofa half naked.
Snap. Naked lady. Lady next to dresser. Lady at window.
Snap. Lady on balcony sunlight. Holding up her arm for the shade. (55)

The process of writing and the process of photography have merged, the relationship between spectator and object has blurred. *Coming Through Slaughter* becomes the result of the merging of the processes. Ondaatje "presents a series of illuminating fragments which, while never entirely chaotic, are an apt expression of Bolden's temperament" and are organized "by continual reference and cross-reference" (Kertzer, 299). These fragments are the events of the narrative which "extend beyond" themselves. They are written photographs.

Bolden's silence allows him to take the train ride to the hospital past Slaughter. Ondaatje makes the same trip, in another present, and introduces both times within the narrative events of his text. The process of writing *Coming Through Slaughter* is one of documenting Bolden's "history". It is equated with the photographic documentation and fictionalization in which Ondaatje participates because "some facts have been expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction" (Acknowledgements). Both Bolden and Ondaatje are coming through slaughter, literally and figuratively. On this journey, chronology, but not form, has been slaughtered

leaving only photographic text fragments to create the narrative and bridge the "abyss" between the time of Bolden and the time of Ondaatje.

Chapter 3

Taking Responsibility for the Stories: *In the Skin of a Lion*

"In the garden around the pagoda I met a young man who had studied English for a few years but had never spoken to a person who speaks English and he spoke to me, he said, "I am studying photography", and when I answered him he was astonished, he couldn't believe that I really understood him, I responded to his comments, but every so often he would ask, "Do you really understand me?" as if I were only being polite, or pretending, and then he realized he was really speaking the language he had studied, and we embraced and had ourselves photographed, because he was studying photography."

Robert Kroetsch

"Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling."

Walter Benjamin

Ondaatje self-consciously subtitles *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), "A Novel". It is his first attempt to transfer his fragmented, photographic style into a work of considerable length and complexity. Although he writes a novel he does not resort to more traditional forms of narrative; he is still suspicious of conventional plot and continues to follow Berger's model of photographic narrative in much the same way that he did in his earlier texts. In fact, *In the Skin of a Lion* appears to be the text most obviously influenced by Berger, hence Ondaatje's choice to use Berger in his epigraph to the novel. This influence is also supported by a statement that Ondaatje made in an interview in 1984, which is when he was writing *In the Skin of a Lion*: "I suppose I would pick up and read anything by John Berger" (Solecki, 328).

The debt to Berger is most pronounced in terms of the political direction the novel takes, which is new ground for the apolitical Ondaatje. In a 1975 interview he seems politically naive:

I avoid reading books on philosophy, psychology, politics. It's a funny thing, political theses I find impossible to read... The whole political thing has been obsessing me in the last year but I find it impossible to read someone like Trotsky, no...what's his name?

- Marx?

Yes, Marx. I can't sit down and read them. (Solecki, 25)

However, in this later text he embraces an increasingly Marxist perspective with an emphasis on the immigrant working class, class relations, and a need to tell untold history. These are all issues that John Berger is constantly addressing in his texts, including *G*, a historiographic metafiction which Ondaatje states, "knocked me out" (qtd. in Barbour, 181). In *G* the characters also witness historical events from the sidelines. In much the same way Ondaatje writes of characters who are outside of official history. Just as a camera records an event which is considered significant enough to document, such as the building of the tunnel, or the "4000 photographs from various angles of the bridge" (26), so are the stories of the characters' lives caught between these events and in turn create new events worth documenting for Ondaatje.

Ondaatje remains interested in the way a story is told and chooses Berger's words "Never again will a single story be told as though it is the only one" as his epigraph to emphasize his need to "tear apart the plot". He paraphrases Berger in an interview: "Although I guess you always do go back and write the same story. The least you can do is to try to make it look like something else" (Solecki, 325). In this sense Ondaatje makes a conscious effort to retell a story as if it were not the only version. The "roads" that were the stories in *Slaughter* have given way to the river which forms the geography of much of the text (most importantly the past

of the novel's protagonist, Patrick Lewis). This same river, "Depot Creek", appears in an early poem of Ondaatje's entitled "Walking to Bellrock". The river is a metaphor for plot in the poem, in which the narrator's feet move on "the silt of history / that was there when the logs went / leaping down for the Rathburn Timber Company 1840-1895" (*Trick*, 82). However, Ondaatje expresses dislike for the simplicity of the winding river of plot, "following the easy fucking stupid plot to town" (83). Patrick has experienced the same geography and the same plots: "All his life Patrick Lewis has lived beside novels and their clear stories. Authors accompanying their heroes clarified motives" (82). He discovers that this is not the plot of life, that in reality the river consists of spots where he and his father exploded dynamite, that the plot is not smooth and "clear" but is "scarred" (95) which also creates stories.¹⁰ His experience tells him that a plot consists of events which "implicate other events" by constantly "extend[ing] the event beyond itself" (*Another Way*, 120). Ondaatje parallels Berger's language when he has Patrick come to recognize:

the interactions, [he] saw how each one of them was

¹⁰ Perhaps Ondaatje self-consciously calls *In the Skin of a Lion* a "Novel" because he is concerned that this term implies the same "clear stories" of Patrick's youth, whereas what he writes is not in the traditional novel format complete with a consistent plot of cause and effect complete with "clarified motives".

carried by the strength of something more than themselves
... his own life was no longer a single story but part of
a mural. (145)

This mural is constructed using the techniques Ondaatje is already familiar with: those of time, light and dark, colour, and, of course, photographs.

Again Ondaatje introduces his text with a prologue. Although not as visual as the sonograph or the empty frame on the first page of *Billy the Kid*, it is equally important in "framing" the structure of the book. John Berger, commenting on the nature of writing, says, "in life one begins at the beginning: in literature one begins at the end" (qtd. in McMahon, 206). Ondaatje begins his novel with Patrick and Hana driving to meet Clara, which is the final event of the novel. All other narrated events which form the structure of the text are recounted on this journey. Within the prologue are contained clues to the structure of the novel.

It is discovered that the entire novel is recounted "driving the four hours to Marmora". It is a novel concerned with time, history, and the past but the way it is written is completely unchronological ("not told A to Z") which further emphasizes Ondaatje's complex method of storytelling. The "story a young girl gathers" is "elliptical". The end of the novel returns the reader to this prologue but gives an altered possibility for the story: it is now Hana who drives while Patrick "luxuriates in the passenger seat" (244). She adapts the rear-view mirror to reflect her version of the story

behind her. Because no story can be told as though it is the only one, this sense of the various possibilities of the story is also contained within the prologue: "The man who is driving could say, 'In that field is a castle,' and it would be possible for her to believe him".

The story is recounted "as the vehicle travels through darkness". This is significant because it is a diagram of how the novel progresses in terms of its tenebristic narrative. Ondaatje manipulates light and dark to an even greater extent in *In the Skin of a Lion* than in his previous texts. The narrative is moved along through darkness with brief illuminated events, similar to the taking of photographs, and in accordance with Berger's narrative model. The vehicle travels in darkness but its lights illuminate the next event on the road of narrative; it passes through darkness and again illuminates. This is how Ondaatje presents the story. In the end Patrick has Hana turn on the lights, "Lights, he said" (244), and this symbolizes the beginning of another event which is outside the narrative confines of the novel, outside its margins. In this sense the end is another beginning.

Fotios Sarris provides an important reading of *In the Skin of a Lion*, and explains Ondaatje's technique of tenebristic narrative. His essay is primarily concerned with "light and darkness, a pattern of imagery that is introduced immediately (in the prologue), dominates the close, and

suffuses the narrative in between" (183). In the prologue the "the faint light of the speedometer" is the only source of light inside the car. Ondaatje constantly uses the technique of describing a scene visually which is composed from a single source of light, which produces in a photograph or "on a canvas a dramatic interplay between bright (or hot) spots and shadow" (Sarris, 185). Some examples:

He saw it was a black-garbed bird, a girl's white face. He saw this in the light that sprayed down inconstantly from a flare fifteen yards above them. (32)

"I got about twenty scars," he said, "all over me. One on my ear here." He turned and leaned forward so the wall-light fell onto the side of his head. "See?" (37)

Ambrose Small holds a wooden match above his head, its glare falling onto the shoulders of his nightshirt. (93)

He picks up the lamp, and begins his walk back to the others. There is no hurry, there is no other light in the tunnel but this one lamp and as he moves his shadow shifts like a giant alongside him. (107)

These are just a few of the many examples of tenebrism in the novel, where the darkness is illuminated by a single source of light.

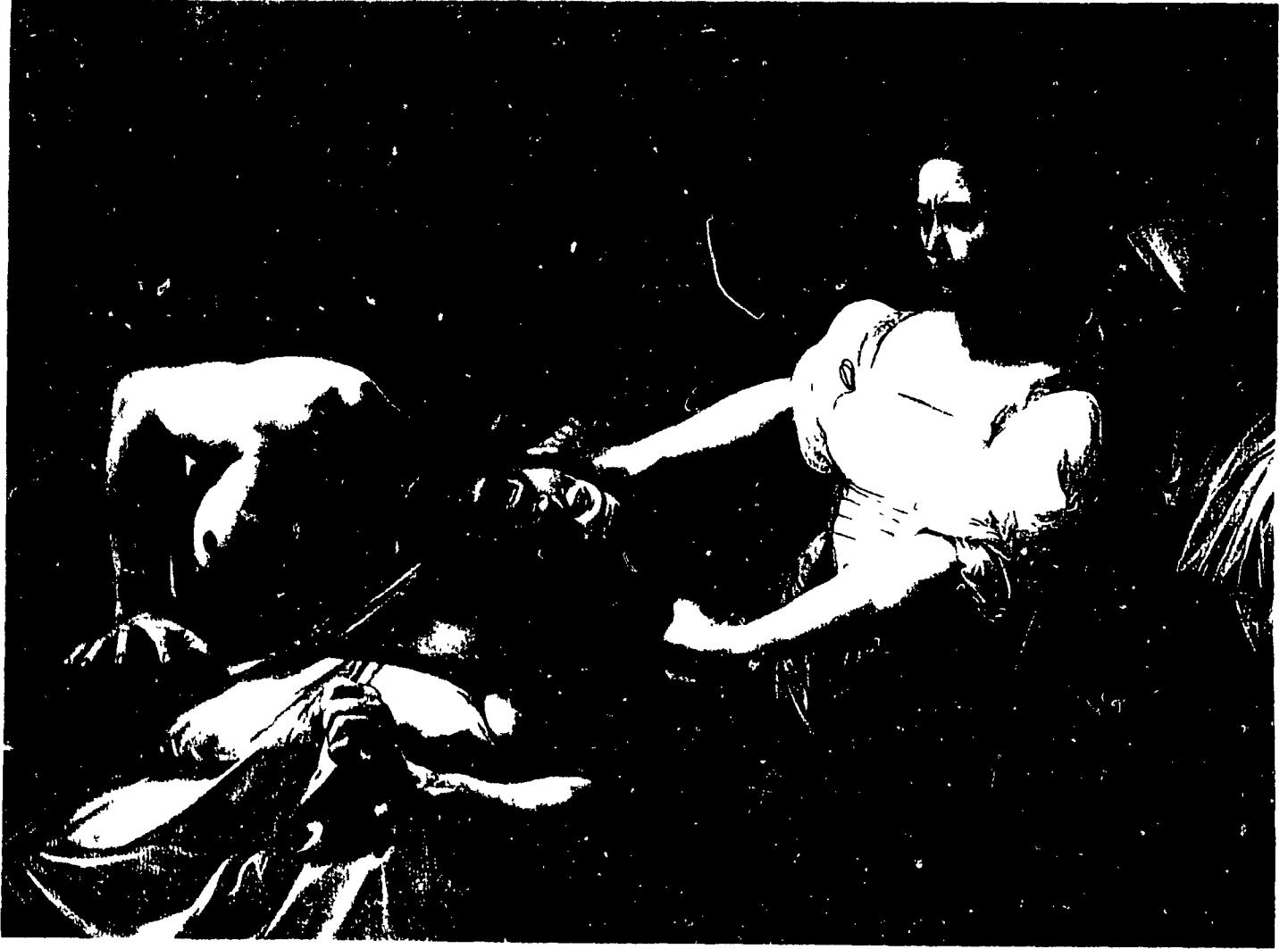
This visual style was first introduced by the painter Caravaggio:

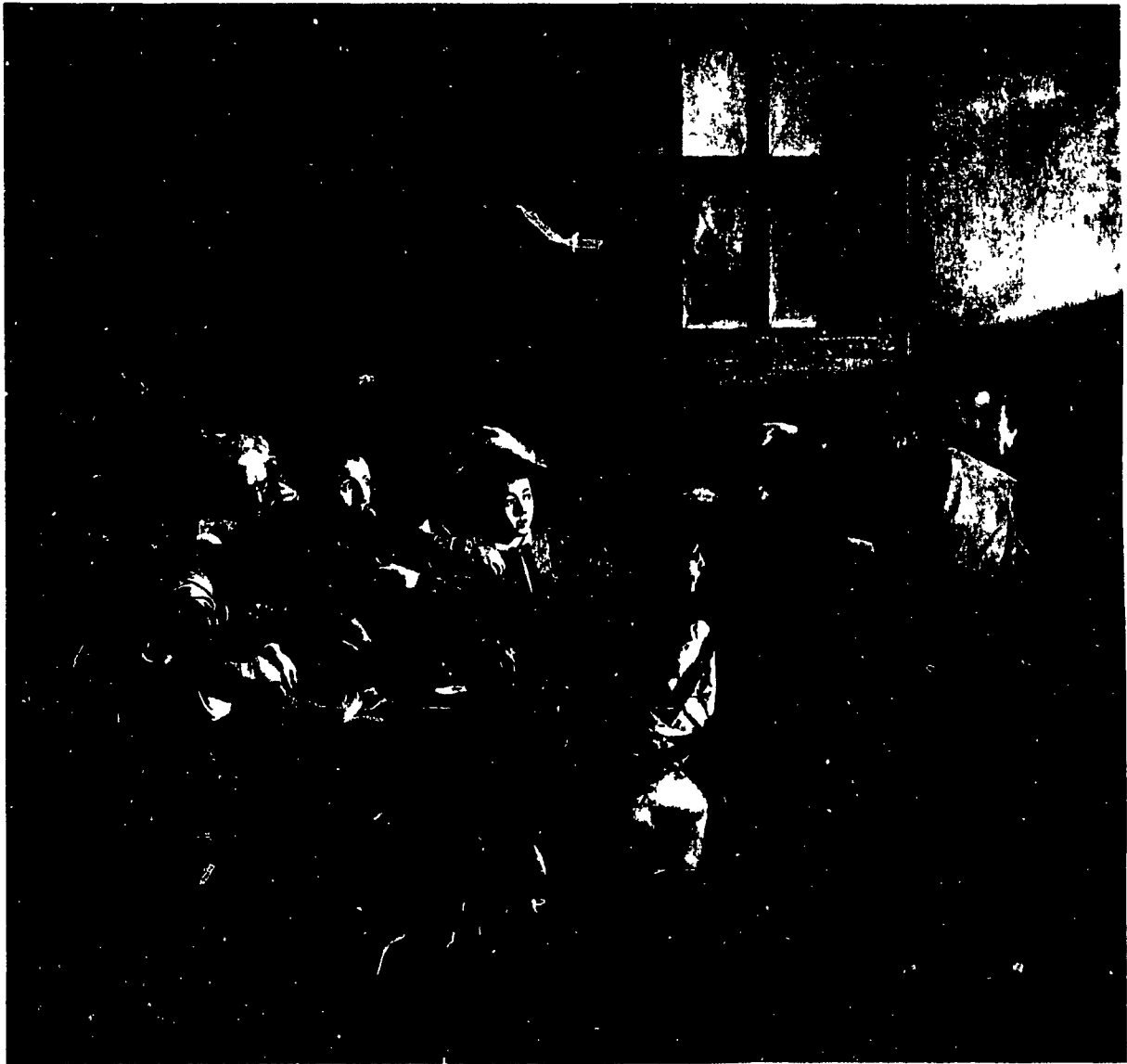
Chief among Caravaggio's innovations was a use of light that departed from the practices of his Renaissance predecessors, as well as from those of his contemporaries, most of whom remained faithful to the Renaissance tradition. A distinguishing feature of Caravaggio's style is that light in his paintings generally emanates from a single source, usually undefined or lying outside the frame, producing on the canvas patches of illumination and a sharp contrast

between light and dark. This style is often referred to as the "dark manner" or "tenebrism". (Sarris, 184)

It is no coincidence that Caravaggio becomes one of Ondaatje's characters. As if the connection were not already obvious he has Caravaggio, who is covered in blue paint, introduce himself, "I'm Caravaggio - the painter" (182). Ondaatje even mentions one of the historical Caravaggio's paintings, *Judith and Holofernes* (79), when describing Patrick's relationship with Clara and Alice. The painting is a graphic depiction of a woman slitting a man's throat. Significantly, John Berger names Caravaggio as his favourite painter in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*. He appeals to the Marxist Berger because he was the first to paint "the lumpenproletariat, the lower orders" (79) and in doing so create "a new kind of space, defined by darkness as well as by light" (80). Ondaatje writes of the same lower orders, those outside of history books, and does so in a style in which alternating darkness and light drive the narrative. Berger describes this darkness in terms reminiscent of Ondaatje:

His darkness smells of candles, overripe melons, damp washing waiting to be hung out the next day: it is the darkness of stairwells, gambling corners, cheap lodgings, sudden encounters. And the promise is not in what will flare against it, but the darkness itself. (81)





Darkness is space; it is an event comparable to other events in the narrative. This darkness is where Ondaatje's Caravaggio dwells: "He had trained as a thief in unlit rooms...In daylight he moved slowly" (189). It is the "darkness" of "the thick vegetable air" (192) describing the mushroom factory: "He was a man who thrived and worked in available light. At night... the room around him continued to be alive, his body porous to every noise, his stare painting out the darkness" (184). As a thief Caravaggio feels alive in the dark.

In the novel this darkness is where the characters dwell until they are revealed to themselves and each other through moments of illumination. In this sense they are like the moths that Ondaatje keeps introducing: "A blue moth had pulsed on the screen, bathed briefly in light, and then disappeared into darkness" (20). The moth becomes a metaphor for the way in which the characters are revealed within the narrative. The immigrants approach the Waterworks the way a moth approaches a window, "Emerging from darkness, mothlike, walking towards the thin rectangle of the building's southern doorway" (115). Caravaggio approaches the woman in the boathouse in the same way: "If she had turned to her right she would have seen his head at one of the small panes of glass, the light from the oil lamp just reaching it... mothlike on the edge of burning kerosene" (198). The moth symbolizes the movement between light and dark and is therefore a metaphor for the tenebristic narrative and the character's "strange

half-lit lives" (84).

This tenebristic narrative parallels Berger's diagram, and is most fully developed in this novel. As in his previous texts, Ondaatje has written episodic fragments as well as leaving blank space on the pages:

The physical gaps between all these fragments or "moments of illumination," the large blank spaces and empty pages in the book, embody actual gaps or patches of darkness in the narrative itself. (Sarris, 189)

This darkness is therefore as significant to the story as the light. A large portion of the narrative takes place in the dark: at night on the bridge, in the tunnel, Caravaggio's escape, the mushroom factory, the underwater journey in the waterworks, and of course in the car driving to Marmora.

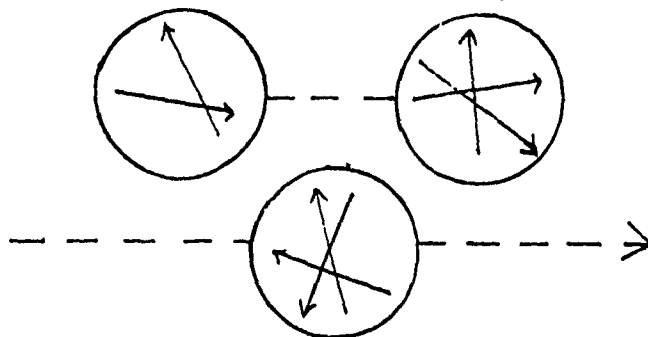
Ondaatje writes of two events which are the mirror images of each other and reflect Berger's model of narrative. One is the passing from daylight to a brief period of darkness, the other at night with brief moments of illumination. They serve to demonstrate the tenebristic narrative of Sarris as well as emphasize Berger's model:

During Cato's funeral, while Alice held the infant Hana, there was an eclipse. The mourners stood still while the Finnish Brass Band played Chopin's "Funeral March" into the oncoming darkness and throughout the seventeen minutes of total eclipse. The music a lifeline from one moment of light to another. (159)

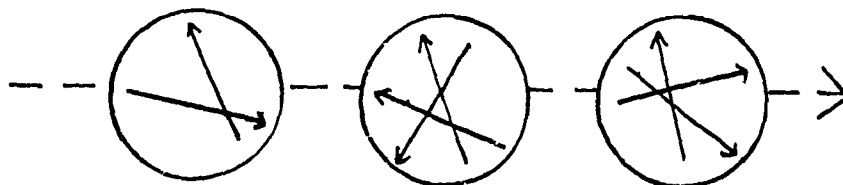
A sudden flinging of sheet lightning and Clara sees Alice subliminal in movement almost rising up into the air, shirt removed, so her body can meet the rain, the rest of her ascent lost to darkness till the next brief flutter of light when they hold a birch tree in their clasped hands, lean back and swing within the rain. (76)

In the case of the eclipse darkness is the event that links the narrative, that bridges the gaps. As Sarris notes, "This scene can function as a mini-allegory of the novel's broader framework and its theme of art as a guide through the darkness" (Sarris, 195). The music, like the narrative, connects "one moment of light to another". The lightning scene acts as a mirror of the eclipse, or perhaps as a photographic negative. Hana is revealed by the lightning in brief illuminated moments, as if she were having her picture taken. Ondaatje makes the connection of lightning and photographs in his poem "Light". Between the moments of light is darkness in which she continues to move. Like a photograph, the lightning only reveals moments of her movement, just as in a larger sense Ondaatje's writing style only reveals moments; the rest lies in darkness.

These two fragments can be represented diagrammatically:



When put together they form Berger's model:



Each event implicates other events along the narrative: Cato's funeral is a moment which is connected to Alice's dance in the rain. Alice is the bridge. Of course there are many other events which are also implicated by this: Cato's letters, the spirit paintings of Patrick, Alice's relationship with Clara, with Cato, with Patrick. The scene of the eclipse and the lightning scene are two events which are written eighty-three pages apart but "implicate other events by way of an idea born of the appearance of the first event" (*Another Way*, 121). This "idea" becomes important for Ondaatje and Berger. It is the connection the reader/observer makes based on the "appearance" provided in the mind's eye by the illuminated textual fragment. The events "appear" on the page in words, "the idea, confronting the event, extends and joins it to other events, thus widening the diameter" (*Another Way*, 122). The event may be an instant in time but its diameter, its importance to the overall narrative, shifts based on the connectedness of the event to other events, its idea. This "idea" could be interpreted as Clara's voice on the radio which wakes Patrick (85), or the caterpillar fires in his dream; both have their meaning in the connections Patrick makes.

Ondaatje significantly describes both this narrative model and Berger's notion of "idea":

He has walked through the pools of light hanging over this platform and light has not attached itself to him. Walking through rain would have left him wet. But light,

or a man polishing one tan shoe at four A.M., is only an idea. (166)

In this passage Patrick moves between "pools of light", passing from event to event. The light is the idea. The brief moments where light illuminates the narrative, like the moments that create photographs, are the exposed events waiting for the reader to connect them.

Where this connection occurs is also significant: it is the darkness. Consistent with Berger's model this darkness is also described in theoretical terms, "Black space is time" (35). The space between the events, which the eclipse has proven is an event in itself, is the darkness between the light; it is the time between the recorded moments. Harris likes the night because it "removed the limitations of detail and concentrated on form" (29). In photographic terms, the light is the taking of the photograph, its idea, and the "black space" is the time it takes to develop the "unborn photographs" (136).¹¹ In the darkness there is time for "all the possibilities in the middle of the story" (*Slaughter*, 43) to provide "form", which are then only briefly revealed as "detail" by the light.

Blindness and sight are connected with the theme of darkness and light. Throughout the novel practically every

¹¹ The photograph is "born" for Ondaatje, just as it is for Bellocq and his "pregnant white paper" (*Slaughter*, 52). In a similar way Berger writes that the "idea" is "born of the appearances of the first event".

character is described as being blind. For Nicholas Temelcoff, working on the bridge, "it does not matter if it is day or night, he could be blindfolded" (35). For the other workers the image which brings them nightmares is "Chaplin, blindfolded, rollerskates near the edge" (43). Alice says, "You could blindfold me now, Patrick, and I would be able to take you there" (140). Caravaggio is blindfolded when the prisoners cut his neck (185). Even the iguana is blind (83). It is Patrick who is most often and most significantly referred to as being blind; he is "the blind man dressing the heroine" (157). He practices being blind:

Sometimes when he is alone Patrick will blindfold himself and move around a room, slowly at first, then faster until he is immaculate and magical in it. He will parade, turn suddenly away from lampshades, duck under hanging plants, even run across the room and leap in his darkness over small tables. (79)

In the same way that the narrative is revealed through moments of darkness and light so does Patrick experience blindness and sight. In his fight with Ambrose he is blinded: his "left eye goes linen white, and he knows he is possibly blind there" (95). Then in the mythical "Garden of the Blind" he is "unseen among the blind" (167), but again becomes blind in a frozen moment: "They are a frieze, a statue in this garden, a woman with her soft palms covering a tall man's face, blinding him" (170).

Ondaatje, so fond of margins, is having his characters explore the distinctions between the visible and the invisible. Patrick practices being blind, which heightens his

other senses, of which the woman in the garden tries to make him aware. As Sarris points out, "Patrick's sojourn in the Garden of the Blind contrasts sharply with the events that surround it" (197). It is a calm event between his acts of violence, the darkness between the hotel fire and the lights of the ship. Patrick needs the isolation and darkness that blindness gives him: "without light he felt more awake" (236). He needs the periods of darkness to gain control over form, ("When you can move through a house blindfolded it belongs to you" *Secular Love*, 87) and this control allows him to be more comfortable with the periods of detail and light.

Ondaatje attempts to apply a meaning to this lack of the visible. Caravaggio escapes from prison by becoming invisible. He tells Patrick, "*Demarcation ... That is all we need to remember*" (179). Just as the roof disappears against the blue sky so do the characters of the book appear and disappear in the narrative. Ambrose disappears, as does Clara. Alice disappears as a nun and then reappears later in the narrative. Nicholas is a bridge worker, leaves the story, and enters again as a baker. For this reason Patrick and the reader become "searchers". What Ondaatje wants to emphasize in the novel is the "uncertain[ty] of clear boundaries" (179) in art and life. This theme is carried over from his previous texts; it is the concept of the blurred photograph of the gull. We need to remember what lies outside of the visible, all that space where the narrative lies but is unrecorded, is unmarked

in history. We need to remember that "outlines are an invention" (*Sense of Sight*, 221) and that "the visible is arbitrary" (*Picasso*, xvii). Patrick understands Caravaggio and practices blindness for this reason, but he also enters the same state of demarcation in his final act: "Patrick is invisible except by touch, grease covering all unclothed skin, his face, his hands, his bare feet. *Demarcation*" (228).

Just as periods of light exist beside periods of darkness in the narrative, sight becomes important beside blindness. After he is blinded by Ambrose, Patrick thinks, "If you can't see you can't control anything" (96). He has a need to see just as he needs the darkness. When blind he forfeits control to others because "each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story" (157). This necessary act of seeing produces the story, it orders the chaos: "He saw himself gazing at so many stories" (144).

Blindness produces a new way of seeing. When the blindfold comes off it is possible to see things freshly. Work on the bridge has become so automatic for Nicholas that "he could be blindfolded" (35), but after saving the nun he sees through her eyes:

When he walks into the fresh air outside the Ohrida Lake Resort, on the morning after the accident on the bridge, he sees the landscape as something altered, no longer so familiar it is invisible to him. Nicholas Temelcoff walks now seeing Parliament Street from the point of view

of the woman. (48) ¹²

The same thing happens to Patrick after getting out of prison, he uses his eyes to try and gain control of his surroundings: "Slowly his vision began to swing. He turned his head to the left to the right to the left, discovering the horizon...He felt invisible" (210). Because he feels the powerlessness of invisibility he uses his vision to order his world.

This ability to see empowers the characters just as Sontag argues that a camera gives power. It is almost as if Caravaggio is looking at a photograph when he watches the woman framed by the lit window:

He knew there was such intimacy in what he was seeing that not even a husband could get closer than him, a thief who saw this rich woman trying to discover what she was or what she was capable of making. (198)

This same glimpse of intimacy again occurs through windows:

A rectangle of light went on below them. Then another. The night-shift workers were starting to get up. They could be seen in grey trousers and undershirts, washing at their kitchen sinks. (126-127)

In both these instances the reader/observer creates meaning through the sense of sight. Each window frames a life, a story, "each room a subplot" (243). Ondaatje continues to examine the "room as text" (Leckie, 283) which he initiated in *Billy the Kid*. As Berger puts it in *G*, "Every lit window suggests to him the room within. Through each window he pulls out the drawer of the room" (51). This is the same way a

¹² This is similar to Bolden's new way of seeing after talking to Bellocq.

photograph means: it is a framed moment, a "rectangle of light", which reveals intimacy.

Ondaatje frequently uses windows in his narratives to this effect; he continues in this novel what he began in his previous texts. He demonstrates this in the first paragraph:

he stands at the bedroom window and watches: he can see two or three lanterns between the soft maple and walnut tree... [he] moves to a window in the kitchen where he can look down the driveway. They move from right to left. (7)

The window acts as a frame, like a photograph. The loggers move from frame to frame, like a series of photographs, and therefore, within the first paragraph lies Berger's model for the progression of the narrative to follow. This is further emphasized: "She closes the door firmly and watches him through the window on his walk to the train station, striding from one frame of glass to another" (78). Although this framing is important to "control" the narrative, demarcation is equally important because "outlines are only inventions" of the writer or photographer. The story exists outside the margins, off the page as well: "Patrick never believed that characters lived only on the page. They altered when the author's eye was somewhere else" (143). Hazen Lewis frames an outline of Patrick only to blow it up (15). Within art, therefore, it is necessary to be blind in order to see, to have the unmasterable darkness with illuminated moments, to both frame and to leave unclear boundaries. Ondaatje uses Judith Mara Gutman's words when he writes, "*Only the best art*

can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and the order it will become" (146)(Gutman, 38). He does not write a novel of "clear stories" but one that aspires "in its very ambiguity and lack of clarity, toward the 'best' that art can be" (Sarris, 192).

Ondaatje makes a similar use of actual photographs in this novel as he did in his earlier texts. In *Slaughter*, he refers to the historic photographer Bellocq; here it is Lewis Hine. Hine's photographs are like looking into windows and seeing the intimacy revealed there:

There were no photographers like Lewis Hine, who in the United States was photographing child labour everywhere - trapper boys in coal mines, seven-year-old doffer girls in New England mills. *To locate the evils and find the hidden purity...* Hine's photographs betray official history and put together another family. The man with the pneumatic drill on the Empire State Building in the fog of stone dust, a tenement couple, breaker boys in the mines. His photographs are rooms one can step into. (145)

Patrick goes to the library to get a grasp of the lives of "those who actually built the bridge" (145) but instead he finds only "official history"; there is no sense of the private. What he finds are the "4,000 photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time lapse evolution" (26). He finds the picture of the cyclist who was

The first member of the public. Not the expected show car containing officials, but this one anonymous and cycling like hell to the east end of the city. In the photograph he is a blur of intent. (27)





The photograph of the cyclist is reminiscent of the photograph of Billy, a blurred thing "caught at the wrong moment...moving to the clear". This anonymous cyclist becomes part of official history but in fact it was the workers who were the first on the bridge but this event is not officially recorded. Ondaatje must supply the written photograph for the reader, the unofficial history:

The previous midnight the workers had arrived and brushed away officials who guarded the bridge in preparation for the ceremonies the next day, moved with their own flickering lights - their candles for the bridge dead - like a wave of civilization, a net of summer insects over the valley. (27)

The same sense of the official recording of events through photographs takes place in the tunnel. Harris will not enter the tunnel himself but sends his eye in the form of a photographer:

In the tunnel under lake Ontario two men shake hands on an incline of mud. Beside them a pickaxe and a lamp, their dirt-streaked faces pivoting to look towards the camera. For a moment, while the film receives the image, everything is still, the other tunnel workers silent. (105)

In those photographs moisture in the tunnel appears white. There is a foreman's white shirt, there is white lye daubed onto rock to be dynamited. And all else is labour and darkness. Ash-grey faces. An unfinished world. (111)

This world is unfinished because the photographs only reveal the official images, what Harris wants to see; the private photographs (like Hine's) are missing. Dennis Duffy provides interesting archival evidence for the photographs Ondaatje

mentions in his text: the cyclist and the photograph of the workers in the tunnel. What Ondaatje tries to do in his novel is to supply the context to the official photographs, the official histories. This is exactly what Berger writes is the purpose of photography, what it can achieve. In his essay "Uses of Photography", a response to Susan Sontag, Berger writes:

We must now distinguish between two quite distinct uses of photography. There are photographs which belong to private experience and there are those which are used publicly. The private photograph - the portrait of a mother, a picture of a daughter, a group photo of one's own team - is appreciated and read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it. Nevertheless such a photograph remains surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed. A mechanical device, the camera has been used as an instrument to contribute to a living memory.

The contemporary public photograph usually presents an event, a seized set of appearances, which has nothing to do with us, its readers, or with the original meaning of the event. It offers information, but information severed from all lived experience. (*About Looking*, 51-52)

The public photographs of the tunnel and bridge which represent the official history of Toronto are severed from the private meaning that created them; there is no intimacy. Ondaatje tries to supply the "lived experience" so that we, as readers, can understand and sympathize with the context of the photographs. This celebration of the private is the contextualization of personal history which is an activity in which Patrick engages.

In the library Patrick has a photograph of three workers on the bridge which he found in Hana's suitcase. He searches

for the continuity from which it was removed; he wants to make it private in order to restore its meaning: "He turned the page to the photograph of them and he pulled out the picture he had and laid it next to the one in the newspaper. Third from the left, the newspaper said, was Nicholas Temelcoff" (144). In this brief moment the photograph changes from a public "official" one, to a private image with meaning to Patrick. He can now implicate other events with the one in the photograph; he can supply a context.

It is Nicholas himself to whom the photograph has the greatest meaning, who gives the event the largest diameter. Nicholas never mentioned his past working on the bridge but when Patrick shows him the photograph something very significant happens:

Nicholas is aware of himself standing there within the pleasure of recall. It is something new to him. This is what history means...Patrick's gift, that arrow into the past, shows him the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories. He is a tentative man, even with his family. That night in bed he tells his wife the story of the nun. (149)

For Nicholas the photograph triggers memory but only because it is a private photograph. The result is the context of the photograph revealed in story, in the unofficial history that Ondaatje makes narrative in his novel. This is exactly what the Marxist Berger desires when he writes:

If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would re-acquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments. (*About Looking*, 57)

Through the photograph Nicholas is able to make his own history, escape the confines of the present and "re-acquire" a past which expands that present and supplies meaning. Patrick tries to do the same thing for himself with Alice and Clara.

When Patrick is searching for Clara he goes to her mother and asks for a photograph. He wants to uncover her past and by looking at her honeymoon photograph he tries to extract something of Clara: she was "so young, her hair almost blonde then, not as dark as it was now. A fuller face, innocent" (91). He uses the photograph to give context to the present, "not as dark as it was now". The past and the present exist simultaneously within the photograph; Patrick experiences what Barthes calls "the look" thereby recognizing "*that has been*" and "there she is" (*Reflections on Photography*, 113) at the same moment. Because Patrick obtains pieces of Clara's past he is able to keep an image of her in his memory. Clara admits many things to Patrick about "the complex architecture of her past" (66). The photograph provides a witness to this past for Patrick. The same is not true of Alice.

Because Patrick knows of Clara's past he can remember her; however, he knows nothing of Alice's past and loses the memory of her face:

He brought Clara's face directly back into memory - as if it were a quizzical smiling face on a poster advertising a hat to strangers. But Alice's face with its changeability, he could not evoke. (210)

In fact, after Alice dies Patrick "knows he does not have long before he loses the exact memory of her face" (163). Unlike Clara, "his relationship with Alice had a horizon. She refused to speak of the past" (137); "She reveals no past, remains sourceless" (74). Again, he looks for a photograph to replace this image, to discover her past in much the same way that Webb needed a photograph to find Bolden. In Hana's suitcase are the links between many stories represented by photographs. There is also the only photograph of Alice; however, she is in a performance, she is masked. Patrick tries to obtain a context for his time with Alice, but like Billy there is no photograph to refer to. Patrick uses the photograph of the workers on the bridge to try and discover a context for Alice. This results in Nicholas "sewing himself into history" but also allows Patrick some speculation about Alice's past. He thinks, what "if Alice Gull had been a nun?" (146). In the novel photographs supply the necessary context for memory and serve to fill gaps in the narrative. This is what Ondaatje refers to when he says:

I discover something about you after knowing you X number of years, and then after thirty years I will find out some other changes that occurred five years earlier. That sense of discovery, of memory, and how we reveal ourselves to each other - none of that is chronological. (Wachtel, 59)

Through photographs Patrick "discovers" in such a way as to fill in the gaps of meaning within his own life. He connects other lives to his own this way, making them private.

Ondaatje makes time malleable within the frame of his novel, "Figures remember within memories, and analepses contain Chinese boxes of further flashbacks and flash-forwards" (Barbour, 181). The past and the future become interconnected. While Patrick is hunting lightning bugs in his youth Ondaatje comments on the future:

Years later, Clara making love to him in a car, catching his semen in a handkerchief and flinging it out onto bushes on the side of the road. *Hey, lightning bug* he had said, laughing, offering no explanation". (20)

Another example is when Patrick watches the men skating in the first section and Ondaatje provides a glimpse of Cato's letters: "It takes someone else, much later, to tell the boy that" (8); "So they were Finns... Now in his thirties he finally had a name for that group of men he witnessed as a child" (151). In this way the events in the narrative are not arranged chronologically but rather with the past and the future existing within the continual present of the writing of the story. Different events emerge and fill gaps but time alone is not the structuring element. Berger describes this method of writing in *G*:

The uniqueness of an event can be explained by its causes and effects. But I have little sense of unfolding time. The relations which I perceive between things - and these often include causal and historical relations - tend to form in my mind a complex synchronic pattern. I see fields where others see chapters. And so I am forced to use another method to try to place and define events. A method which searches for co-ordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time. (152)

Ondaatje writes of causes and effects, the past and future,

within the same "space" of his novel. When Ambrose reveals himself to Clara it is in such a way. She is left, "attacked by all the discontinuous moments"; she "caught glimpses of faces and argument and there was no horizon" (214, 215). The darkness of the story stretches beyond the margins, off the page.

Ondaatje deals with this sense of time and space in much the same way that Berger writes of Cubism. He claims that he is "drawn to a form that can have a more cubist or moral voice to capture the variousness of things" (Bush, 248). Nicholas "floats at the three hinges of the crescent-shaped steel arches. These knit the bridge together. The moment of cubism" (34). He "links everyone" on the bridge but also within the narrative. These links occur in space rather than through cause and effect. "The Moment of Cubism" is the name of an essay by Berger in which he argues that Cubism redefined space and time. It was not a period in history, neither style nor policy, but a moment (just as a photograph is a moment). It is a moment where all possibilities reveal themselves at the same time, the paintings becoming various perspectives shown within the same space. The perfect example of this are the "4,000 photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time lapse evolution" (26). It is easy to imagine Nicholas working on the bridge, "floating" in space, as a Cubist painting. The edge of the bridge, like the penitentiary roof, is difficult to define.

For Ondaatje the narrative exists within the interaction of these spaces, these dark gaps; in process not plot. For Berger the importance of the Cubist moment lies in that the future becomes more important than the present. This is representative of Nicholas while he is working on the bridge, working towards his future bakery, or the moment of Toronto's history the novel contains in which everything was possibility. This possibility ("all the possibilities in the middle of the story") is revealed through the dreams of Harris in which past projects are dreamed anew, "They could have existed" (237). It is also evident when Patrick witnesses the skaters at night so that "at this stage in his life his mind raced ahead of his body" (22).

The attempt to capture a moment through painting plays an important role in *In the Skin of a Lion*. These are the spirit paintings of Alice and Clara:

They uncover the face of Patrick hidden in the green blanket. This is enough...They begin to draw hard and quickly, as if copying down a blueprint in a foreign country. It seems as illicit as that. Approaching a sleeping man to see what he will reveal of himself in his portrait at this time of the night... They have done this often to each other, these spirit paintings, the head leaking purple or yellow - auras of jealousy and desire. Given the vagueness of his covered body, they draw upon all they know or can guess about him. (75)

They have a need to make the image private. They hope to reveal something through their painting just as Ondaatje hopes to reveal something in his writing. Like a painting he goes back over areas and adds layers of meaning, a palimpsest. In

fact Sarris uses these spirit paintings as a metaphor for the novel: "The novel is akin to these spirit paintings, for its author tries to capture the essence of a historical subject whose vagueness forces him to draw upon all he knows or can guess about it" (Sarris, 192).

Berger comments that the difference between photographs and painting is one of time, "For the moment of a painting, unlike a moment being photographed, never existed as such" (*Sense of Sight*, 205). In this sense a painting is an act of translation and is akin to the act of writing. Ondaatje uses the image, whether a painting or a photograph, to represent an event; the "image overwhelms narrative" (Beddoes, 209). For this reason photographs are "records of the past" and paintings "are prophecies received from the past, prophecies about what the spectator is seeing in front of himself at that moment" (207). This sense of painting as prophecy is revealed in Patrick's wish to paint the tanners: "If he were an artist he would have painted them but that was false celebration...What would the painting tell... That they would die of consumption and at present did not know it" (130, 131). *In the Skin of a Lion* is such a prophecy; it is a portrait of a "moment" in Toronto's history that is "painted" by Ondaatje, a "re-imagining or a dreaming backwards of a Toronto that has not yet been articulated" (Leckie, 286). Barbour notes that, "As it expands to analyze the dyers' early deaths due to the dye invading their bodies, the writing enters into the process

of historical time in a way no painting could" (Barbour, 194). Like a painting the moment never really existed and in this sense is "false celebration". Because the only photographs that exist are "official histories" and paintings are "false celebrations", Ondaatje turns to himself to write the private histories of the immigrants in such a way as to become prophesy for those readers/observers of the novel in the Toronto of 1987. In the novel private moments must be painted, as in the spirit paintings of Clara and Alice, because the official moments are documented in photographs. Both Berger and Ondaatje stress the need for photographs to function privately, to become as personal as the spirit paintings.

Ondaatje tries to supply a language to express this narrative that is neither painting nor photography but uses elements of each. He tries to give speech to those who are in the dark places of the story, unrecorded in history. He describes this in an interview in terms of painting:

A lot of factual stuff is so interesting in the real world that none of us really know about. I think the painter Jack Chambers maybe kind of realized that, just being in London Ontario. He would just paint a scene out of his window and make it come alive and in that sense it would be like taking a moment out of history and discovering all the kinds of wealth that there is in that. (Scrivener, 68-69)

Ondaatje's moment is Toronto's moment of Cubism. He recognizes the interactions between the immigrants because they are the ones filled with the possibility of the future

ahead of them. Like Ondaatje himself, most of the characters are immigrants: Finns, Macedonians, even Patrick is "an immigrant to the city" (53). They are all workers, the proletariat. They work in the tunnel, at the tannery, on the bridge.

John Berger describes the tannery in a story before Ondaatje uses it: "The only other smell as strong as the smell of the he-goat, Marius continued, is the smell of a tannery. When I came back to the village, you could pluck a hair out of any part of my body... sniff it, and say: this man has worked in a tannery" (*Once in Europa*, 78). Berger writes of the peasantry in his *Into Their Labours* trilogy as well as the migrant classes; he used part of his Booker prize money to publish a book on the migrant classes in Europe called *The Seventh Man*. Here he comments in detail on migrant workers building a tunnel (153-170). This scenario appears again in *G*: "The St Gothard tunnel was opened in 1882. Eight hundred men lost their lives in its construction" (13). Ondaatje further emphasizes the capitalist relationship:

- You fought. You fought. Think about those who built the intake tunnels. Do you know how many of us died in there?

- There was no record kept. (236)

Ondaatje tries to record the lives of an immigrant working class because there is no history of the private. He juxtaposes these lives with those of Small and Harris, who are the public figures of history. It appears obvious that

Berger's Marxist concerns have influenced the previously politically naive Ondaatje's focus on the immigrant in *In the Skin of a Lion*.

This process can be described as "historical revisionism" in which Ondaatje "focuses on political ceremonies, not from the point of view of politicians but from the perspective of an anonymous public" (Greenstein, 121). In this sense Nicholas is saved from "archival oblivion" (Greenstein, 122). Ondaatje wants to interpret history in human terms just like the painter Caravaggio. In an interview he states:

I did an enormous amount of reading - about the Bloor Street Viaduct for example... And I can tell you exactly how many buckets of sand were used, because this is Toronto history, but the people who actually built the god-damn bridge were unspoken of. They're unhistorical! (qtd. in Sarris, 186)

Ondaatje tries to do in his novel what Lewis Hine did in his photographs, "betray official history and put together another family" (Sarris, 187). Patrick tells Alice, "The trouble with ideology, Alice, is that it hates the private. You must make it human" (135). He can race around the room blindfolded but when Clara moves, his order collapses and he thinks, "So much for the human element" (81). Ondaatje introduces this human element into a blindfolded official history. When it collides with an "unspoken of" humanity, there is a need to revise and narrate. This human element, therefore, is not individualistic but rather socially defined. For Ondaatje, and most Marxists, history must embrace the human element, must be socially

conscious. As Sarris puts it:

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, and understanding that may bring with it a recognition of a need for change. (Sarris, 199)

This statement parallels Berger's account of the necessity to "re-acquire a living context" by making an image private, by introducing a human element into the image which allows "the living to take the past upon themselves" to become "an integral part of the process of people making their own history". This is done by taking responsibility for the story, by turning silence into speech.

Ondaatje is concerned with how language becomes a barrier for the immigrants trying to integrate into history. It is the immigrants' language that connects them with the past, that keeps them outside of official history, but also allows them to "take the past upon themselves... making their own history". Significantly it is cinema that provides a language link between them in *In the Skin of a Lion*. At work they are silent; they are silenced by their powerless positions in a capitalist society. They learn English through the cinema: "The event that will light the way for immigration in North America is the talking picture" (43). Although Patrick lives and works with the immigrants they can not communicate until the language barrier is broken. His moment of communication is realized in the cinema:

Once, when they were at the Teck Cinema watching a Chaplin film he found himself laughing out loud, joining the others in their laughter. And he caught someone's eye, the body bending forward to look at him, who had the same realization - that this mutual laughter was conversation. (138)

The image becomes their common language. They use this language to privatize their experience and create new languages to communicate their personal histories. This is why Nicholas begins to tell stories after he is shown the photograph; just as in film the characters move from silence into speech.

Ondaatje's progression toward this novel is also one of silence into speech. In *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter* the protagonists are violently self-absorbed and move further and further from the "social fuel" of society. They are the heroes of "White Dwarfs" that inevitably implode. At the end of *Slaughter* Bolden has moved into a space of complete silence and isolation. Ondaatje's increasingly political concerns, however, affect *In the Skin of a Lion*. Patrick initially burns down the Muskoka Hotel. He then fails in destroying the water works but succeeds in introducing the human element for Harris. Patrick leaves behind his romantic "narcissistic self-pity" (Barbour, 198) in the "Garden of the Blind" and embraces more socially responsible action; he sings to save Caravaggio in prison - silence to speech. Although not a deliberately political person, Patrick believes in the human element: "I don't believe the language of politics, but I'll

protect the friends I have" (122).

Christian Bok writes of the increasingly political role Ondaatje has taken: "Ondaatje's later texts begin to reevaluate the ethics of such violence and suggest that it must ultimately serve a socially responsible end" (109). The violence is no longer misdirected but serves a social purpose. In effect the silenced characters can move into speech; they can have a language. Bok states:

Whereas his earlier texts deal with a silence that individuals impose upon themselves in order to escape social ideology, *In the Skin of a Lion* deals with a silence that social ideology imposes upon individuals in order to prevent them from exercising power. (120)

Ondaatje gives a voice to those without power, those left out of the margins of history, by supplying them with a private voice. It is for this reason that a story can never again be told as if it is the only one. It is Berger's influence that has led Ondaatje to leave behind Billy, Bolden, and Mervyn, who "move away from all social gesture toward silence," and introduce Patrick and a human element which "moves in the opposite direction and finds in a newly discovered language some sense of social communion and social purpose" (Eok, 119). Julie Beddoes disagrees with Bok in that she claims form is more important to the novel than politics. Perhaps it is because Ondaatje was previously so politically naive and copies his Marxist stance from Berger that Beddoes feels the novel takes an ambiguous political position, indeterminate. The form of the text, its tenebristic

narrative overwhelms the politics, in fact: "In *In the Skin of a Lion*, the repeated privileging of the formal over the historical ultimately asserts that it does not matter whose experiences are represented" (Beddoes, 211). In this sense Ondaatje makes history universally human through the tenebristic form of his narrative.

Ondaatje also steers away from introducing himself as writer in this text, a strategy which provided closure in the earlier texts. In this novel he moves away from the individualistic self and emphasizes a "social purpose" through the use of an editorial, omniscient narrator. At the end of the novel Harris needs the light and speech of the recorded event, the official histories, whereas Patrick is more comfortable in the dark spaces of the narrative. Ondaatje learns from Berger to be socially responsible for the version of the narrative he communicates to the reader, one version of many, and in doing so he finds that he must take responsibility for the stories.

Chapter 4

The English Patient: The Moment of the Tableau

"The Quechua-speaking Indians of the Andes look at time differently from the way we do. We tend to view the past as behind us and the future as ahead, as in "Let us go forward into the future." The Quechua, more logically perhaps, recognize the past as what is already known, so it's right in front of you. The future is behind your back because it's what you can't see, unless you catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of your eye, over your shoulder. Our whole conceptual framework is based on a metaphor. A good writer can turn your head around."

Eleanor Wachtel

"That Abd el Melik Ibrahim el Zwaya who lived in Zuck oasis pasturing camels was the first man among those tribes who could understand the concept of photographs."

The English Patient

The English Patient (1992) is Ondaatje's most fully formed novel but is a continuation of his story-telling methodology. He again creates for the reader/observer a complex series of interconnected events which are "not told from A to Z". Although not as concerned with the photographic element in this text as in previous texts, Ondaatje manages to incorporate many of the same narrative tools: the tenebristic narrative, history, an analeptic sense of time, margins, and a style of a "carefully casual *bricolage* of disassociated moments" (Barbour, 209).

Ondaatje describes his vision for the novel in a number of interviews, all of which express his need to "tear apart the plot", to portray the story as a series of interconnected events which would parallel Berger's model of photographic narration. He states that "For me, it primarily concerns *situation*, as opposed to theme" (Wachtel, 56). The novel is presented as a tangible encounter between characters thrown into the same event, the same situation. Therefore, the writing presents a moment and tries to discover "all the kinds of wealth that there is in that" (Scrivener, 69). This is emphasized when Ondaatje describes the scene in which Hana plays the piano while the two soldiers watch her. He claims that he "wasn't expecting them. But it was a *moment*" (Wachtel, 52). Just as Caravaggio is taken by surprise by the

camera capturing the moment, so do the scenes of the novel come to the writer photographically. He emphasizes this further when he states:

The idea of people who can conceive of a plot because it's about something is foreign to me. I'm sure people can write like that - John Milton did - but for me, ideas come out of events or situations or character or nuance, something like that. My stories come very gradually; they're built on grains of sand. With *The English Patient*, it was a couple of scenes. One was the one with Caravaggio in the dark room, and he's trying to get his photograph back. (Hull, 25)

Inspiration for the novel comes from a situation concerned with photography; essentially, Ondaatje is trying to supply captions to the moments he "sees" in his mind. In this sense the novel "is pieced together with little bits of mosaic" (Wachtel, 57). These fragments of text are like shrapnel, they are "shards written down" (231).

The telling of stories and the way they are told becomes important in this text. Books serve as a link to history, but also as a means of escape for both Hana and the patient. Hana reads to him but the plot becomes unimportant:

So the books for the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night. (7)

Here, then, is a metaphor for the way *The English Patient* progresses, with "gaps of plot" because it is a series of moments. Between the moments lies the dark spaces of narrative, the "missing incidents". The reader is left to connect the moments. This process of reading is similar to

lending a past and future to a photograph; it is speculation on what lies between the events recorded. The act of reading and the act of observing merge in the photographic fragments of text. Because chronology is displaced but causality is maintained, the reader becomes a participant in the restructuring of cause and effect, organizing the plot in their own mind.

Ondaatje echoes his comments from *In the Skin of a Lion* about the "clear stories" in which "authors accompanying their heroes clarified motives" (82) when he writes: "Many books open with the author's assurance of order. But novels commenced with hesitation or chaos. Readers were never fully in balance" (93). Hana reads novels with "clear stories", such as *Kim* or the *Annals* of Tacitus; however, they are picked up only in fragments, making them more chaotic, more like Ondaatje's own stories. The English patient has no functional body, only words: "He speaks in fragments about oasis towns, the later Medicis, the prose style of Kipling, the woman who bit into his flesh" (96). Therefore, he tells a fragmented story of his past complete with gaps in its plot, including his identity; in fact he asks, "Am I just a book? Something to be read" (253). The patient is always described as English, he can only be represented by a language. In fact:

The English patient is at once signified and signifier: he is, on the one hand, a burnt body, devoid of demarcation, a black hole completely unreadable; but for that very reason he becomes a signifier infinitely interpretable, an anonymous text to be read. (Scobie

1994, 97)

His past must be read by Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio in the same way the reader interprets the novel, complete with gaps. Over the course of the novel Ondaatje attempts to fill some of the gaps anachronistically.

Again Ondaatje is writing a tenebristic narrative, moments of illumination flare against the dark gaps of plot:

If he happened to fall asleep she would continue, never looking up until she herself was fatigued. If he had missed the last half-hour of plot, just one room would be dark in a story he probably already knew. (94)

The story is described in terms of rooms, some of which are lit and some of which are dark. The events described within the text fill up the lit rooms but there are many dark rooms in the house. Patrick explores these dark rooms in *In the Skin of a Lion* when he is blindfolded. It is the villa which provides a space for this tenebrism to be more fully explored; in rooms of light and dark. The villa is "a space for reading" which is "untrustworthy" and precariously explosive (Simpson, 217). It is here where Hana plays hopscotch in the candle light, then blows out the candle to continue the same pattern in the dark (15).

The English Patient is Ondaatje's most tenebristic text. In the villa candle light is used, and throughout the text scenes are often revealed by lightning, like the flash of a camera. The setting, therefore, becomes tenebristic: "a room of four people in an abandoned villa lit only by candlelight

and now and then light from a storm, now and then the possible light from an explosion" (111-112). What follows are simply some of the many examples of this tenebrism:

In the kitchen she doesn't pause but goes through it and climbs the stairs which are in darkness and then continues along the long hall, at the end of which is a wedge of light from an open door. (3)

He stood with his valise at the far end of the hall. He put the bag down and waved across the darkness and the intermittent pools of candlelight. (30)

Their clothes wet while they watched her whenever the lightning was in the room among them, her hands playing now against and within the lightning and thunder, counter to it, filling up the darkness between light. (64)

The flare sprayed out of his hand like a wand. He pulleyed himself across to her face, his Queen of Sadness, and his brown hand reached out small against the giant neck. (72)

She walks through the garden towards the sapper's hurricane lamp, which hangs off the arm of St. Christopher. Absolute darkness between her and the light, but she knows every shrub and bush in her path. (125)

He had been walking through the church a few evenings earlier when lightning filled the darkness, and he had seen large human figures in the tableau. (279)

Through these examples it becomes obvious that this tenebristic effect is used to illuminate a moment, to capture it as if on film, or else to represent movement. Lightning exposes the moment in which Hana plays the piano and Kip arrives in the darkness. This "filling up the darkness between light" parallels the funeral scene in *In the Skin of a Lion*, in which the music is "a lifeline from one moment of light to another", both reflecting Berger's model of

narrative. Often the characters move through the darkness toward the light. This movement through "intermittent pools of light" is a microcosm of the way in which the novel's narrative progresses through time. Our final image of Caravaggio represents this. He walks along a hemp rope in midair moving away from the villa, lightning exposing him at intermittent moments:

She seals the letter and stands up, moves across the room to close the window, and at that moment lightning slips through the valley. She sees Caravaggio in midair halfway across the gorge that lies like a deep scar alongside the villa... Every time there is lightning, rain freezes in the suddenly lit night. She sees the buzzard hawks flung up into the sky, looks for Caravaggio. (297)

At each flash of lightning, each illuminated moment, Hana looks for Caravaggio. Earlier she acknowledges his tenebristic humanism: "You used to be like those artists who painted only at night, a single light on in their street" (55). Just as she observes him moving along a line in darkness, then light, so do we as readers discover the narrative of the novel. Every flash reveals a moment; each event along the narrative is a moment illuminated with meaning; the gaps appear along the rope on which "readers were never fully in balance" (93).

The climactic flash at the end of the book is the explosion at Hiroshima and can be seen in photographic terms:

[T]he blinding Hiroshima flash which literally photographed the shadow cast by beings and things, so that every surface immediately became war's *recording* surface, its *film*. (as qtd. in Scobie 1994, 229)

This "nuclear photography" (Scobie 1994, 230) is described by Ondaatje as "the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom" (284).

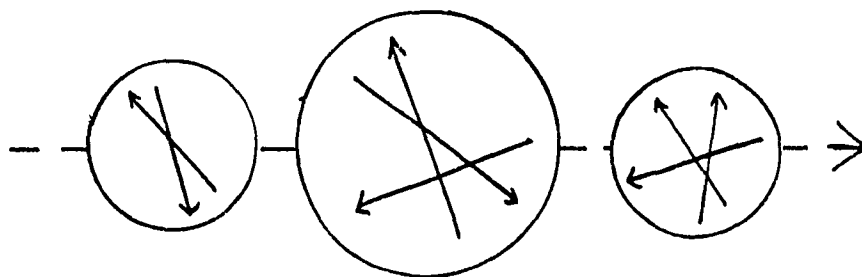
Ondaatje expands his "room as text" motif in this novel to incorporate the villa, the space of light and dark rooms where the narrative progresses. He describes the origin of the villa: "When I began the novel, the villa was in my mind as a very limited space. It was almost like being inside a lyric poem" (Wachtel, 51). This villa can be interpreted as the space in which the novel as a whole is contained:

The naive Catholic images from those hillside shrines that he has seen are with him in the half-darkness, as he counts the seconds between lightning and thunder. Perhaps this villa is a similar tableau, the four of them in private movement, momentarily lit up, flung ironically against this war. (278)

The villa is a "tableau"; it is an *image* "momentarily lit up" like a photograph. The walls and rooms of the villa are crumbling; they are "missing incidents". Holes in the walls are like the gaps in the plot where the light can enter. The walls are painted as a garden; the villa becomes visual, just as Barthes calls the photograph "a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant" (*Reflections on Photography*, 32).

Hana and the patient remain in this isolated image space, while Caravaggio and Kip explore outside its borders. However, the entire narrative takes place within the confines of the villa; all mentions of the past, which take the reader

to the desert, to England or elsewhere in Italy, are revealed by the characters while at the villa. The patient tells the story of his past while lying in a room, Kip in his tent with Hana, Caravaggio talks from any available chair. The reader is taken outside the villa but the characters remain there. The villa is an event "momentarily lit up" which "implicates other events" along the narrative. These other events, in the desert, in England, are connected to each other through "an idea born of the first event" (*Another Way*, 121) which is the villa. It is like looking at a photograph of the four characters in the villa and making connections, recounting stories, about each character's past and future. In every photograph the observer must create a past and future and this is what Ondaatje is doing: he supplies a context for each of the four characters for the "moment" that they are within the confines of the villa's borders. Therefore, the villa becomes the event with the greatest "diameter" in Berger's model:



The story continues outside the margins of the villa, but is not observed by the reader; it is a dark area of narrative. This is exemplified when the patient shows Caravaggio a location on a map:

He traces his black hand along the Numi river till it enters the sea at 23° 30' latitude. He continues sliding his finger seven inches west, off the page, onto his chest; he touches his rib.

"Here. The Gilf Kebir, just north of the Tropic of Cancer". (167)

The narrative exists off the page as well, outside the villa. However, it must be told on the page through the tools of the writer, within the memories of the characters in the villa.

When they leave the illuminated event of the villa they encounter the darkness of narrative. Hana describes this in visual terms:

In Siena there was that mural she had seen. A fresco of a city. A few yards outside the city walls the artist's paint had crumbled away, so there was not even the security of art to provide an orchard in the far acres for the traveller leaving the castle. That was where, she felt, Kip went during the day. Each morning he would step from the painted scene towards dark bluffs of chaos. (273)

This metaphor is earlier applied to Patrick: "Her father loved a city of his own invention, whose streets and walls and borders he and his friends had painted. He never truly stepped out of that world" (91). The same is true of Hana. She isolates herself within the (both literally and figuratively) painted borders of the villa. For the "moment" of the novel she does not venture beyond the order of the villa and into the "dark bluffs of chaos". The villa is like the desert fire: "If a man leaned back a few inches he would disappear into darkness" (143). Outside the candlelight there is "no representation of them in the world" (112).

The last two images of the patient are of him "Slip[ping]

into darkness, away from the room" (285) but also away from the illuminated moment of the villa's capacity to continue to be the vessel of the narrative. In fact, the final image of the villa is one of a movement from light to darkness:

The villa drifts in darkness. In the hallway by the English patient's bedroom the last candle burns, still alive in the night.

For him now the world is without sound, and even light seems an unneeded thing. He will tell the girl in the morning he wants no candle flame to accompany him while he sleeps. (297-298)

Light is no longer necessary because the "moment" of the event has ended, the exposure time has elapsed. The rest of the story is off the page, outside the margins in darkness.

The most photographically important event in the novel is born from one of Ondaatje's original "moments", that of Caravaggio stealing back his photograph. It is an event which exemplifies the analeptic sense of time a photograph allows, as well as emphasizing Berger's statement, "Never again will a single story be told as though it is the only one". First, Caravaggio is photographed at a party:

But one of the women had brought a camera and was snapping at the German officers, and I was caught in mid-step, walking across the ballroom. In mid-step, the beginning of the shutter's noise making me jerk my head towards it. So suddenly everything in the future was dangerous. (35)

Then he must steal the camera back because the photograph has

become incriminating.¹³ This is the opposite process that Patrick engages in with the picture of Nicholas. Instead of giving a context to the photograph so it can be read with meaning, Caravaggio wants to eliminate all representation of himself so that no meaning can be read. He is "looking for a photograph of himself" (38) because it represents his presence, whereas he wants to remain an absence. Hana keeps the photograph of Kip's family at the end of the novel, reversing the process. For her, the photograph represents Kip's absence.

When Caravaggio steals back the camera the scene is described in the same way, with the same gestures, as the taking of the photograph:

A car beam - like something sprayed out of a hose - lights up the room he is in, and he pauses once again in mid-step, seeing that same woman's eyes on him, a man moving on top of her, his fingers in her blonde hair. And she has seen, he knows, even though he is now naked, the same man she photographed earlier in the crowded party, for by accident he stands the same way now, half turned in surprise at the light that reveals his body in the darkness. (36)

Essentially the image on the undeveloped film is repeated in reality. The illuminated "moment" captured on film by the camera is captured again in the illuminated "moment" of the writing. The woman's eye gives meaning to both. Between the periods of light when the car beam lights up the room,

¹³ This is similar to Berger's blank frame in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*: "The photograph which lies on the table in front of me has become incriminating. Better not to print it" (16).

Caravaggio's eye also saves an image photographically: "His mind recalls the woman's blond hair, the black ribbon in it" (37). As a thief his eye sees the potential in a room: "only Caravaggio would walk into a room and look up into the high corners to see if he was alone" (74). This is similar to Kip who has

the skill of a three dimensional gaze, the rogue gaze that could look at an object or page of information and realign it...able also to imagine the worst devices, the capacity for accident in a room. (110-111)

Ondaatje gives his characters the techniques of observation, so that they can see photographically in order to "realign" the story.

In this sense the story is being told more than once, just as Berger emphasizes: once through the medium of the camera, in photographic language, and once in the writing of the recovery of the photograph. The image becomes text. To further emphasize the necessary repetition of story, Caravaggio describes the event analeptically. First he tells the story of being in the room and stealing the camera, then he goes backward in time to describe how he got into the room, finishing with the moment that initiated the story. This repetition of story, of the image and text being mirrors for each other, serves to demonstrate how Ondaatje's illuminated textual fragments, the events in the narrative, can be read as a series of photographs.

Time is once again made malleable; it functions

analeptically. The incidence of Caravaggio stealing back the camera is an example of this. Ondaatje's sense of time is similar to the effects of morphine on the body, "It races in him, imploding time and geography the way maps compress the world onto a two-dimensional sheet of paper" (161). It is a photograph which most clearly renders time on a two-dimensional sheet of paper; it reproduces a moment on the page. Ondaatje also reproduces moments on the page; therefore, he must manipulate time.

The novel commences with the same time as *punctum* as in *Billy the Kid*: "He whispers again, dragging the listening heart of the young nurse beside him to wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died" (4). The death of the patient is announced at the opening of the story. The rest of the novel catches up to that death, revealing the moments proceeding it. The same flashbacks and flash-forwards occur here that gave structure to his previous texts. Paralleling the "lightning bug" flash-forward in *In the Skin of a Lion* (20), Ondaatje writes here: "Years from now on a Toronto street Caravaggio will get out of a taxi and hold the door open for an East Indian who is about to get into it, and he will think of Kip then" (208). Time also flashes backward: "This pale aureole on her arm. I see the instrument scratch and then punch the serum within her and then release itself, free of her skin, years ago, when she was nine years old, in a school gymnasium"

(158). As in the slashed photographs of Bellocq, the scar becomes story.

The concept of time as *punctum* is most succinctly stated when describing the patient: "He is old. Suddenly" (175). Significantly Ondaatje uses a Caravaggio painting as a metaphor to describe this phenomenon:

There's a painting by Caravaggio, done late in his life. *David with the Head of Goliath*. In it, the young warrior holds at the end of his outstretched arm the head of Goliath, ravaged and old. But that is not the true sadness of the picture. It is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man, how he looked when he did the painting. Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand. The judging of one's own mortality. I think when I see him at the foot of my bed that Kip is my David. (116)

In the painting the past and future exist simultaneously. The painter Caravaggio is like that prostitute in *Slaughter* who imagines the roads she could have taken as a child; Caravaggio's "mind jump[s] that far back to when [he] would dare to imagine the future" (54). In the painting he is old, suddenly, like two photographs of the same person years apart. Meaning is derived from the gap in time and the potential in each moment that contributes to that gap. Ondaatje presents the patient's past in just such a way, as potential moments which lead to his present state in the villa. However, in reality he is already dead. The novel ends in the future, which is also the present of the text: "Wherever Hana is now, in the future..." (282); "These years later..." (299). It is discovered that it is Kip who is in the future looking back on



the events that make up the present of the villa. In essence it is like he is looking at a photograph of the villa captured at that moment in time. He can hold his past, the youthful Kip, in an outstretched hand in order to judge, to give meaning. The whole novel comes from a "trigger of memory...as if a camera's film reveals" (300) it to Kip. Therefore time in the novel becomes a device which is manipulated by Ondaatje to provide meaning for his characters, to give them a sense of their mortality, to integrate them into history.

The relationship between the patient and Katharine exemplifies what Ondaatje meant in the interview in which he states, "I discover something about you after knowing you X number of years, and then after thirty years I will find out some other changes that occurred five years earlier" (Wachtel, 59). After their affair they look back on the past and interpret it differently:

Later when we were aware of mutual desire, these previous moments flooded back into the heart, now suggestive, that nervous grip of an arm on a cliff, looks that had been missed or misinterpreted. (235)

They go back over moments, like old photographs, to apply a new meaning, enlarging the "diameter" of the event. Ondaatje makes this private phenomenon universal:

When we meet those we fall in love with, there is an aspect of our spirit that is historian, a bit of a pedant, who imagines or remembers a meeting when the other had passed by innocently, just as Clifton might have opened a car door for you a year earlier and ignored the fate of his life. (259)

In this sense everyone is an historian, and history is just as

open for manipulation as is time.

Due to the enclosed villa "situation" at a "moment" in time, each character must invent a past and future for him/herself. Because the villa represents their present, as in the present of a photograph, their contextualization of themselves in narrative fragments does not need to be chronological. Therefore, the patient tells the fragmented story of his past which parallels the fragments and stories in his Herodotus, and in all history.

The patient's copy of Herodotus represents "official" history but he has included personal fragments, privatizing history:

And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus' *Histories*, are other fragments - maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing is his own name. (96)

Ondaatje seems to feel that history is made up of what an individual chooses to remember, just as Sontag describes the image world in terms of events worth photographing. For Ondaatje these events are private. What is presented to the Royal Geographic Society is the public, official history, but what is more significant for Ondaatje are the private events:

That is the way Madox spoke to other geographers at Kensington Gore. But you do not find adultery in the minutes of the Geographical Society. Our room never appears in the detailed reports which charted every knoll and every incident of history. (145)

Again Ondaatje must take it upon himself to historicize the private, give a voice to those outside of official history.

His novel becomes a version of the patient's copy of Herodotus, filled with his characters' personal narrative fragments. The narrative style, which follows Berger's model, parallels the telling of history:

I was walking not in a place where no one had walked before but in a place where there were sudden, brief populations over the centuries - a fourteenth century army, a Tebu caravan, the Senussi raiders of 1915. And in between these times - nothing was there. Sporadic appearances and disappearances, like legends and rumours through history. (141)

History is described by Ondaatje as being made up of layers of time, but because time is analeptic and fragmented in his novels, so is history. As with a photograph the present is always conscious of the past. Ondaatje writes of a present by peeling back the fragmented layers of past and arranging them anachronistically in new layers to form a private and personal history that becomes the architecture of the novel:

But once I got into the desert stuff, and through that, to Herodotus, I began picking up a sense of the layers of history. I was going back deeper and deeper in time. There are churches in Rome that stand on the remains of two or three earlier churches, all built on the same spot. That sense of history, of building overlaid with building, was central in my mind - *unconsciously*, I think. Looking back now it seems to have to do with unearthing, baring history. (Wachtel, 51)

This is like Caravaggio, who when listening to the patient bare his history, "stays alongside him reordering the events" (248).

History becomes a personal thing for Ondaatje; it gives everyone a chance at immortality: "There were traditions he

had discovered in Herodotus 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). The same has been said of writing:

Writing links up one's own life with the history of our time, which may go back to the fourth century. You place yourself against the cave wall, where hundreds of years of art have been inscribed, then you link yourself to it in some way. For me, that's the relationship between history and writing, all contemporary writing. I'm always more fascinated by minor characters in history, people who don't usually get written about. (Wachtel, 58)

The patient literally places Katherine "against the cave wall"; he attempts to submerge her in a layer of history. He tries to make their lives historic: "He looked up to the one cave painting and stole the colours from it. The ochre went into her face, he daubed blue around her eyes" (248). He wants her to be "immune to the human" (248). Ondaatje writes about these minor characters who are human and outside of official history, but by writing about them he gives their lives the sense of a permanent present. There in the borders of the villa, they are trapped in the history layered around them to which they must contribute their own fragments.

Just as the villa represents an enclosed border, the desert is a place of shifting borders, leaving those who inhabit it nationless: "Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states... Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert" (138,139). Ondaatje is again emphasizing the arbitrary nature of margins, of what is on the

page and what is off because, as Berger states, "outlines are an invention". The patient becomes a symbol of someone who can ignore such boundaries: "it was easy for me to slip across borders" (139). The desert is also a place where "you have time to look everywhere, to theorize on the choreography of all things around you" (150). The visible and the political meet.

Kip and the patient are beyond borders; they are anonymous and also invisible, demarcation. They are both "international bastards" (176). Kip has been alienated from his home country and his family and forced to adopt an eccentric English family.¹⁴ He becomes invisible due to his race and religion:

He was accustomed to his invisibility. In England he was ignored in the various barracks, and he came to prefer that... It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world. (196)

Kip divulges the advantage of being invisible when contrasting himself to his brother:

Quite early on I had discovered the overlooked space open to those of us with a silent life. I didn't argue with the policeman who said I couldn't cycle over a certain bridge...I just stood there, still, until I was invisible, and then I went through. (200)

Initially, Kip is politically invisible; he is as nationless

¹⁴ The name Kip would seem to have been derived from Kipling, but also from Kim, a mirror image of Kip. Kim is a white youth equally as invisible in India as the brown Kip is invisible in Europe. Ondaatje emphasizes the colonial dilemma of the loss of a center, and therefore, the loss of identity.

and anonymous as the patient. They act as mirrors for each other. In an interview Ondaatje states that, "The English Patient is a totally anonymous figure" (Wachtel, 54). He has erased his name, and his nationality. Like Bolden: "He had erased the path he had emerged from" (170).

Ondaatje leaves behind Berger's Marxism and explores new political ground with this text. Ondaatje, an "international bastard" himself, writes here from a post-colonial perspective. He takes his emphasis on the immigrant one step further because, "We are all migrants, it's a migrant generation" (*Scrivener*, 70). Hana is "surrounded by foreign men. Not one pure Italian" (64). All the characters have been displaced, leaving their sense of center blurred, their margins unclear. Once again Ondaatje has written a political novel, but one which moves away from the theoretical guidelines of Marxism and toward a much more individual, and for Ondaatje, a much more personal political agenda. Barbour acknowledges this:

A Ceylonese-born Canadian, he is necessarily in one way or another a post-colonial writer, and seemingly off-hand allusions, like the one to perhaps the most famous novel in praise of colonization, or the various references in the chapter on Kip's training in Britain when he falls under the spell of an eccentric paragon of the best British values, create a climate in which the sudden and final break Kip makes with his three chosen comrades seems sadly inevitable. (Barbour, 211)

After the bomb is dropped by the West on the East, Kip reacts, his illusion of invisibility shattered. He can no longer remain invisible and therefore he acts. He realizes his

citizenship as an "international bastard" and the uneven power relations that borders imply: "Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world" (283).

Ondaatje is much more politically subtle in this text than in the Marxist *In the Skin of a Lion*. He does not ignore the political but simply chooses to personalize it, making it more relevant to a "migrant generation". He, himself, is a mirror image of Kip, the Asian schooled in England. He acknowledges this when discussing the novel:

This was not about someone else but rather inventions of the self, sides of the self. This is the intimacy of fiction, what Vargas Llosa calls "truth by lying." Much the same thing happened with *The English Patient*, even though these four people may seem very different from who I am. (Wachtel, 58)

Perhaps it is for this reason that he goes back to a device he used in the earlier texts, that of introducing himself as author at the end of the novel: "She is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life" (301). *The English Patient* moves politically away from Berger but maintains the same sense of tenebristic imagery and emphasis on the human element, trying to give a voice to those who are invisible or off the page of history.

Afterword

"I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts
have been replaced by moving images."

George Duhamel, 1930

"I'm looking forward to seeing you grow older from film
to film."

Peter Handke
(from epigraph to *Secular Love*)

The narrative process from *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* to *The English Patient* is one of filling in gaps. The earlier texts leave many gaps in the narrative and subsequently on the page as well. For this reason they also contain actual photographs. When Ondaatje starts to write "novels", these gaps are still present but there are fewer of them, and there is less blank space on the page. This pattern is broken by what Ondaatje chooses to include in his most recent published work.

In the 1994 *Writing Away: The PEN Canada Travel Anthology* Ondaatje contributes "Six Photographs". He provides six photographs which he has captioned himself. He turns back to the dependence on photographic language which his earlier work best expressed. He again provides the gaps in narrative.

These gaps make themselves evident not only from one photograph to the next but in the way Ondaatje has chosen to caption them. In *Billy the Kid* Ondaatje does not supply captions to the photographs he uses but here he allows the text to compete with the visual language. When the caption and photograph are read together various meanings emerge, simply because the caption is not arbitrary whereas the image is. One photograph is of an Indian man shaving another Indian man. The caption reads, "Tomorrow: a roundtable discussion on

whether English will continue to dominate the world". Although the image is simply of a man getting a shave the caption takes it out of its public context, and privatizes it, making it political. In fact, the two read together become an extension of *The English Patient*, and its post-colonial agenda. It describes the end of the novel in a photographic way. Other captions provide an ironic or humorous context to the photographs. A boy gets a haircut and the caption reads, "The Golden Age of Sculpture in Sri Lanka".

Ondaatje goes back to the pure form of Berger's model. He provides actual photographs to represent events along the narrative which is one concerned loosely with travel. He then provides captions in order to implicate other events which lie in the darkness, in the gaps. Although Ondaatje is simply contributing to a travel anthology it becomes enormously significant for the purposes of this thesis that he has chosen to communicate with photographs. It reaffirms faith in Berger's narrative model.



Tomorrow: a roundtable discussion on whether English will
continue to dominate the world

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