

Moving to the Clear: A Study of the Grotesque  
in the Writing of Michael Ondaatje

By

Michael D. Greene

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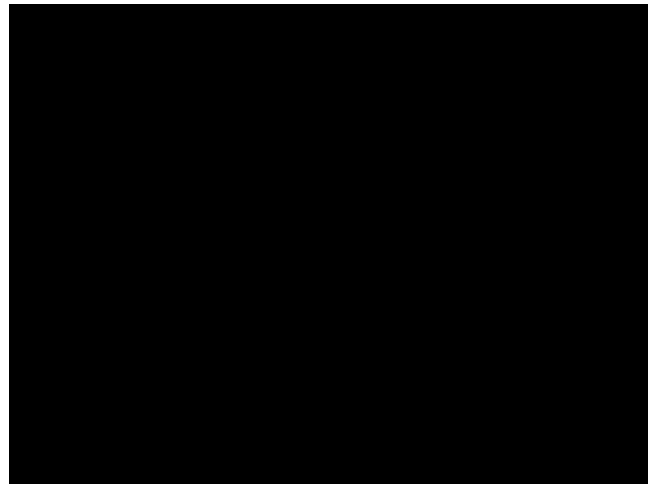
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## ABSTRACT

Since the late 1960s, the work of Michael Ondaatje has been noted for the intensity with which it evades categorization and resists static interpretive formulations. In this work, fragmentary and discontinuous generic structures complement thematic ambiguity and paradox in a way that imbues each work with a sense of indeterminacy. So potent is this capacity for ambivalence that critics have commented on Ondaatje's ability to simultaneously support mutually exclusive perspectives or philosophical positions in the same textual gesture. This thesis explores these aspects of Ondaatje's work -- and the ways in which they condition reader response -- against the theoretical backdrop of the grotesque, a psychological and aesthetic concept that associates the typological and thematic incoherence of certain artifacts with the difficulties that characterize the process of responding to such objects.

My first chapter investigates the history of the grotesque itself, examining the efforts of critics (from pre-Classical times to the present) who have sought to delineate its characteristic qualities in their attempts to laud or condemn the grotesque as a viable (or valuable) aesthetic category. In our time, the grotesque has been portrayed as a disturbing experience that acts as a phenomenological testing ground for the enactment of relationships between mind, art, human perception, and the world. As such, it is hostile to categories and conceptual barriers generally, and is particularly antagonistic to the traditional lines that segregate the functions of artist, audience and art. With this in mind, the four chapters that follow explore the idea of the grotesque in Ondaatje's early short poems, and in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, and *Running in the Family* respectively. In each case, the demands of the grotesque text/experience urges a particular kind of active reader response, a participation in the act of meaning-creating that explores the underpinnings of human understanding and perception at the same time as it obscures the usual distinctions of author, reader, and textual subject. My final chapter, an analysis of the changing face of the grotesque later in Ondaatje's career, examines the relationship between genre (specifically, the novel) and the grotesque in *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*.

## Acknowledgements

*"A literary work is a communal act. And this book could not have been imagined, let alone conceived, without the help of many people."  
(Running in the Family 205)*

To an extent, what is true of art is also true of criticism and interpretation. And while I may have been able to *imagine* the completion of this project without much help, I am indebted to a number of people who provided invaluable assistance throughout the process by which the vague suggestiveness of a thesis proposal takes on eventual final solidity through dialogue and revision.

First, I would like to thank the members of my committee -- Drs. Douglas Barbour, John Baxter, Len Diepeveen, Patricia Monk, and Douglas Smith -- for their patience and for the valuable suggestions and questions they offered. I also extend warm thanks to my advisor, Dr. Andrew Wainwright; his insight, critical acumen, and forthright practicality have greatly facilitated my work on this study and, for that matter, all stages of my doctoral work at Dalhousie.

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## Introduction

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramón,  
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly starred,  
And of ourselves and our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.  
(Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West")

"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." ("The gate in his head" *Rat Jelly* 64)

Writing on the experimentalism and diversity of Canadian poetry in the 1960s, Margaret Atwood provides an interesting observation on Michael Ondaatje who, in that decade, published *The Dainty Monsters* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. According to Atwood, Ondaatje "evades categorization, but his exotic imagery and violent mini-plots have gained him a reputation as one of the most vital and inventive of the younger poets" (*The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* xxxviii). Ondaatje's ability to evade categorization, and the attendant power of his work to problematize unitary interpretation, have engendered a significant theme in the body of criticism on his work to date. In an article on *Coming Through Slaughter*, for instance, Sam Solecki notes the paradox implicit in Ondaatje's thematization of art as a potentially self-destructive, violent enterprise: as Ondaatje identifies himself with jazz artist Buddy Bolden he seems to applaud Bolden's lapse into "an artist's silence," but does not share in that silence ("Making and Destroying" 264). This ambiguity has given rise to several contradictory readings of Bolden's story, ranging from Constance Rooke's argument that the novel has a happy ending to R. P. Bilan's dismissal of the analogy between author and protagonist as one Ondaatje "does not intend us to press . . . too hard . . . ." Bilan ends by admitting he is "a little puzzled by the fact that Ondaatje seems to approve of Bolden's withdrawal into silence at the same time that he writes his own novel" (295).

Not surprisingly, indeterminacy and contradiction are now acknowledged as earmarks of Ondaatje's *oeuvre*. Several critics have chosen to see the dynamism and changeability of this writing as positive qualities rather than dismiss the frequent difficulties they occasion. George Elliott Clarke's "Michael Ondaatje and the Production of Myth" presents these aspects of Ondaatje's work as partaking in the most fundamental of literary archetypes; Ondaatje is continually dramatizing "the story of mutability -- the tendency of matter to become something other than what it first appears to be. All literature is merely a metaphor of this first myth" (2). In his introduction to *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, Sam Solecki applauds Ondaatje's "astonishing ability to enact two often powerfully contradictory attitudes or two aspects of a single thematic structure within one lyric or within a single dramatic moment" (9).

This capacity for aporic contradiction and paradox engenders Ondaatje's particular vision of the world: one in which the inchoate flux of reality is continually, and often violently, at odds with categorizing ideologies through which reality is perceived, or represented. At the same time as Ondaatje's art struggles to capture aspects of our world, it invariably throws into doubt assumptions about the ability of art to reflect reality. The pervasive violence of Ondaatje's fictional worlds relates to a basic metaphor of his work, which equates the processes of artistic production and reception with a two-fold act of aggression: reality is forced to yield to stasis and to the dictates of art, and art is subsequently forced to submit to the conventions of interpretation.

A useful theoretical framework in which to examine these aspects of Michael Ondaatje's writing is provided by the grotesque, an aesthetic and ideological concept that has long been used to describe certain visual art, and has more recently been explored as a literary trope. (Ondaatje himself mentions the concept throughout his

monograph on Leonard Cohen, another Canadian poet/novelist with a keen sense of the grotesque.) Difficult to define by nature, the grotesque encompasses a broad variety of phenomena, including hybrid monsters of mythology (many of which appear in Ondaatje's poetry), various examples of medieval art, Gothic fiction, pagan and medieval revels, the works of Rabelais, and certain types of early opera. The grotesque, this study shall argue, is widespread in Ondaatje's work, and is intimately involved with his presentation of the world and his sensitivity to the relationship between art and the subjects art strives to represent. At the level of theme and form, the grotesque has been central to Ondaatje's presentation of this mythic "story of mutability" throughout his career.

The word "grotesque" was probably born in Italy during the Renaissance, when it was used to describe a group of dainty frescoes dating from pre-classical Rome (Harpham 23). Originally created by the Roman sculptor Fabullus for the palace of Nero, much of this work survived for nearly 1500 years, buried beneath the site of the colossal house that had been destroyed by Nero's successors. Unearthed around 1480, it provided Renaissance eyes with a rare look at imagery that had (quite literally) gone underground during Rome's classical era. The word "grotesque" itself is a derivation of the Italian "grotte," meaning "cave," which refers to the subterranean setting in which these hidden artifacts were discovered.

Composed of ornate and fancifully combined human, animal and vegetable forms, the frescoes reveal the basic qualities of the grotesque. An energetic representation of the multiplicity and unity of life, these images transgress usual boundaries and categories, introducing "impossible" hybrid forms that connote linkage among all life -- a fusion of metaphor and metonymy -- as they affront the categorizing intellect. Mikhail Bakhtin focuses on these functions of the grotesque in his own description of the Roman frescoes:

These forms seemed to be interwoven as if giving birth to each other.

The borderlines that divide the kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world were boldly infringed. Neither was there the usual static presentation of reality. There was no longer the movement of finished forms, vegetable or animal, in a finished and stable world, instead the inner movement of being itself was expressed in the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleting character of being. (*Rabelais* 32)

As Geoffrey Harpham notes, this is a particularly appropriate circumstance for the origin of the word, as Nero's palace was certainly never intended to be identified as a cave. Moreover, this setting had itself become an architectural grotesque as the vaults became confusedly commingled with other structures, erected and destroyed on this site after Nero's reign (27).

Interestingly, these forms were subject to classicist condemnation even during the era of their conception. Horace begins his *Ars Poetica* by ridiculing grotesque hybrids (including a feathered centaur and a mermaid) as "idle imaginings shaped like the dreams of a sick man" (Bate 51). A more vocal opponent of the grotesque image is found in Marcus Vitruvius, whose writings during the reign of Augustus reveal the strongly classical/rationalist ethos that would ultimately predominate in Roman art and criticism. Vitruvius condemned the grotesque image as an aberration, something with no mimetic value and no tie to the world of nature and proportion: ". . . For our contemporary artists decorate the walls with monstrous forms rather than reproducing clear images of the familiar world. . . . Such things, however, never existed, do not now exist, and shall never come into being" (qtd in Kayser 20). As we shall see, arguments about the relationship of the grotesque to the natural world and reality remained a subject of debate into our own century.

One of the most prominent Romantic writers to address the subject of the grotesque was Victor Hugo, who, in the preface to *Cromwell* (1827), argues for the

grotesque as a hallmark for literature of his time. Significantly, Hugo sought to remove the grotesque from the margins of artistic endeavour to a position of centrality because, unlike Vitruvius, he saw it as a true expression of existence. Philip Thomson writes that "Hugo associates the grotesque not with the fantastic but with the realistic, making it clear that the grotesque is not just an artistic mode or category but exists in nature and in the world around us" (17). This crucial association with the "real" transforms the grotesque from a "low" or trivial mode of playful imaginative invention to an aesthetic phenomenon of greater significance and value. In Thomson's terms, the grotesque began to be seen as potentially able "to make us see the (real) world anew, from a fresh perspective which, though it be a strange and disturbing one, is nevertheless valid and realistic" (17).

This question of the value of the grotesque rises again in John Ruskin's essay "Grotesque Renaissance," from *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853). Sensitive to the aspect of play that characterizes all manifestations of grotesquery, Ruskin sought to resolve the problem of evaluation by sub-categorizing the grotesque into two distinct styles. He distinguishes what he called the "false" or "ignoble" grotesque, which is purely frivolous, from the "true" or "noble" grotesque, which is thematically focused on the fundamentally tragic aspect of man's existence (Thomson 15). Since Ruskin, theorists of the grotesque have largely dismissed this distinction, acknowledging that the grotesque can be simultaneously tragic and frivolous, and that this ability to simultaneously enact such contradictory modes -- to be both "low" and "high" -- is a characteristic quality of the grotesque.

Nonetheless, Ruskin's strategy is interesting; it constitutes an attempt to bring the grotesque into the sphere of high art by marginalizing its "low," festive and purely playful aspects, cauterizing the very qualities that later critics recognized as its ultimate source of energy. Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Francois Rabelais celebrates these festive

and popular aspects, regarding the grotesque as a force that has always existed, and through which art challenges both aesthetic convention and dominant official authority. All-encompassing and always changing, the grotesque is envisioned as an entity in conflict with the static, the canonical, or the absolute. In Bakhtin's own words,

grotesque images preserve their peculiar nature, entirely different from ready-made, completed being. They remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of "classic" aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed. (*Rabelais* 25)

Since the identification of the grotesque, critics and theorists have sought to learn what "family resemblances" (to borrow Wittgenstein's valuable phrase) unite or define its different manifestations. Contemporary theories of the grotesque portray it as a disturbing aesthetic experience that acts as a phenomenological testing ground for the enactment of relationships between mind, art, human perception and the world. Paradoxically, the grotesque is "as much a mental event as a formal property" (Harpham 23); the word suggests as much about the psychology of response as it does about the experience or object that stimulates that response. Such experience generally involves a jarring acknowledgement of paradox; it presents a fusion of incompatibles that confounds the ability of the intellect to achieve resolution or closure. Appearing often as a violent, incongruous clash between form and content, grotesque art can be both ridiculous and frightening in its presentation of the essential indeterminacy of life. As it alienates us from the familiar, the grotesque undermines conventional modes of perception and comprehension and highlights the limitations of the categorizing intellect in apprehending various facets of reality. While the endeavour to find a unifying master principle of the grotesque remains (perhaps necessarily) inconclusive, its ability

to elude categorization has not undermined an area of theoretical consensus that establishes some key aspects. These can be illuminating when considered in works of art that partake in the processes of the grotesque. Indeed, as Harpham observes, it is considerably easier to talk about "the grotesque 'in' a work of art" than it is "to apprehend the grotesque directly," or to talk about it in the abstract (Harpham xvi). It is nevertheless useful and necessary to sketch several "family resemblances" that suggest the grotesque, and which are particularly germane to the writing of Michael Ondaatje.

Perhaps the clearest earmarks of the grotesque as an aesthetic category are its ambivalence and typological incoherence. When the grotesque is at work in a piece of art or a lived experience, it generally becomes difficult to fit such art or experience into familiar categories or patterns. So potent is this resistance that language itself is hardly adequate to describe the field of the grotesque, or to delineate the meaning of the word itself. While it is fairly easy to recount the history of the word "grotesque," it is considerably more difficult (indeed, impossible) to offer a reliable definition. An amalgamation of vague connotations without any stable denotation, "grotesque" may be applied both as an aesthetic term and, quite significantly, as an adjective for phenomena in the real world. It has described medieval statuary and car accidents, poems and plaid suits. In all these contexts, as Harpham notes, the word never fulfils a stable function, always betraying "an irreducible queerness":

As an adjective it has no descriptive value; its sole function is to represent a condition of overcrowding or contradiction in the place where the modifier should be. This place can never be occupied by any other single adjective but only by a number of adjectives not normally found together. . . . As a noun it implies that an object either occupies multiple categories or that it falls between categories; it implies the

collision of other nouns, or the impossibility of finding a synonym, nothing more. . . . The word designates a condition of being just beyond the reach of language. It accommodates the things left over when the categories of language are exhausted; it is a defense against silence when other words have failed. In any age . . . its widespread use indicates that significant portions of experience are eluding satisfactory verbal formulation. (3-4)

The ability of the grotesque to suggest those aspects of experience that are beyond the range of language's capacity for "satisfactory . . . formulation" foregrounds the contingency of our most fundamental means of structuring experience (language itself) at the same time as it says something about whatever subject it describes.

In literature, the broad categories of language are further ordered by categories of genre, the conventional typology of ways in which language is structured into different kinds of coherent literary artifacts. Broadly speaking, the grotesque is antagonistic to genre and to generic stasis, to all of the historically-conditioned and conventional categories and contracts that allow readers to make easy determinations about what kinds of stories they are reading. This alienating capacity is often achieved through a generic hybridization not unlike the imagistic cross-breeding Bakhtin celebrated as a true expression of the "ever incompleting character of being." In the end, grotesque artifacts (literary or otherwise) obstruct generic categorization; "[u]nlike conventional forms -- a sonnet, a flatworm, a dodecahedron, a Corinthian column -- they cannot be described generically, in the abstract" (Harpham 7). Profoundly resistant to any sort of totalizing exegesis, the grotesque overleaps categories and generic boundaries, playing freely among and between them in an exposure of the delusory nature of categorical demarcations, a mythic vision of the essential interconnectedness of everything.



This defiance of the categorical -- the ability to stand in the place of multiple, mutually exclusive signifiers -- accords the grotesque an indissoluble ambivalence that Bakhtin and others see as a constitutive earmark. For Bakhtin, grotesque imagery "reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming." Because grotesque metamorphosis is never complete, always suggesting the mutually exclusive possibilities of its beginnings and endings, ambivalence is its "indispensable trait" (*Rabelais* 24). Later critics generally echo this conviction. Philip Thomson, for instance, suggests that a "lack of resolution" defines the conflict of possibilities at the core of grotesque images (21). For Geoffrey Harpham (as for Bakhtin), the ambivalence of the grotesque depends on its eternal "as yet unfinished" quality, the fact that, as he puts it, "The grotesque occupies a gap or interval; it is the middle of a narrative of emergent comprehension" (15). As such, the grotesque is resistant to closure and to interpretation; its emphasis on the flux of *process* rather than the fixity of *product* allows "opposing processes and assumptions [to] coexist in a single representation" (Harpham 14). This statement is surely related to Solecki's observation of Ondaatje's capacity for aporia, his ability to "enact two . . . contradictory attitudes . . . within a single dramatic moment." It also suggests the ability of the grotesque to reveal the fundamental limitations of logic and language -- which Ralph Waldo Emerson complained of when he wrote, "It is the fault of our rhetoric that we cannot strongly state one fact without seeming to belie some other" (172). The grotesque equalizes all possibilities with their opposites, simultaneously encouraging and resisting widely divergent interpretations. Vaulting the gap between aesthetics and experiential phenomena, the grotesque always emerges as a field of possible meanings in which contradictory things somehow coexist without negating each other, manifesting as what Harpham calls "a species of confusion" (xv).

As I have suggested, the ability of the grotesque to play with our conventional expectations about genre and signification imbues it with a profoundly auto-referential

aspect. A confused and polymorphous response to some phenomenological *subject* and an exploration of the forces at play in the processes of perception and representation are always coincident in the grotesque. The "subject" of the grotesque, then, is always double; it simultaneously represents a search for meaning and a dramatization of that search, which underscores its limitations. Grotesque art is very much "about" these limitations, demonstrating the plasticity of even our most trusted structures of order and logic, forcing us to acknowledge a domain of experience that the delusory categories of intellect cannot keep in check. In art, the grotesque generally recasts the traditional relationship between content and form so that the contingency of perception and representation is foregrounded both in work and in response. It accomplishes this, once again, through a fusion of incompatibles, a series of obstacles to various kinds of structured thought. By juxtaposing exclusive generic categories or remote, disjunctive imagery, or by encouraging contradictory readings or "inappropriate" emotional responses, grotesque literature italicizes the play between form and content and reconceptualizes that "play" as an antagonism. As Harpham states it, "Grotesque forms place an enormous strain on the marriage of form and content by foregrounding them both, so that they appear not as a partnership, but as a warfare, a struggle" (7). The result of this struggle focuses attention not on the seamless interaction of form and content -- which would be celebrated by the classicist aesthetics of the "ready-made and the completed" -- but on the gaps that separate them, the final inability of form and structure to completely "capture" the essence of a content that is elusive or inchoate.

The intrinsic violence of this situation is related to what I said above about the "two-fold act of aggression" at the heart of Ondaatje's works -- his fascination with the stasis that both art and its interpretation require. Before the grotesque artifact, the reader stands in a position analogous to the artist; our struggle to apprehend a stable meaning for the difficult and confusing phenomenon before us directly relates to the

original creation of the work, the original relationship between that work, the artist and the ineffable experience for which the artifact itself is a surrogate. Just as art necessarily distorts its subject by imposing on it stasis and some kind of order, interpretation "disfigures the artifact by rearranging it, taking elements out of their contexts and placing them in new juxtaposition to one another . . ." (Harpham 21). Because writing too is a form of interpretation, and thus disfiguration, grotesque literature postulates a particular set of relationships between content, form, author and reader, in which these functions are themselves commingled in an auto-referential dramatization of the construction of meaning. Readers, like writers, must creatively "write" their own experience of the grotesque, actively participating in the construction of a meaningful experience. As this process takes place in a discourse setting largely devoid of traditional formulae for finding coherence (genre), this very personal readerly writing is itself foregrounded throughout the experience of the text. In short, grotesques allow us to perceive ourselves, projected in our attempts to bring order to the confusion they represent, simultaneously participating in the roles of author and subject of the art before us. And because meaning cannot be brought to the grotesque artifact in conventional ways, the reader becomes unable to overlook her or his own role in the creation of that meaning, the usually invisible or unconscious structures through which perception and experience are always brought to order. Grotesques tend to be partial or fragmented, and subsequently they challenge us at the same time as they call these structures into consciousness:

They hold our attention, especially if we are patient, imaginative, inquisitive, and impious. But although they are frustrating they are far from pointless, for with their help we can arrive at a better understanding of the methods of representation, of the relation between play and creation, and of the force of habit and convention in

understanding. Looking at ourselves looking at the grotesque, we can observe our own projections, catching ourselves, as it were, in the act of perception. (Harpham 43)

The experience this process engenders not only brings the act of perception into the sphere of consciousness, it also potentially represents a liberation from the limitations of convention for the reader as much as for the artist. Harpham focuses on a representative experience of the grotesque described by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Scylla enters Circe's poisoned bathing pool and is astounded when her lower body is transformed into the form of black, howling dogs. At first she cannot accept the fact that these antagonists are part of her own body; she attempts to flee, but paradoxically "what she runs away from / She still takes with her . . . ." Finally, she stands still, fully engaging the grotesqueness of her situation: "Her legs, her feet, she finds, in all these parts, / The heads of dogs, jaws gaping wide, and hellish. / She stands on dogs gone mad, and loins and belly / Are circled by these monstrous forms" (qtd in Harpham 16). However Scylla copes with her partial transformation, the scene is illustrative of the course of the experiential grotesque, in which "the entire sequence could be framed as the death of the theorizing mind, the temporary reign of the senses (or, more accurately, the confusion of theory), followed by a resurrection of theoretical certainty" (Harpham 17). Significantly, the newer, "resurrected" certainty is comparatively freer and more open than the certainty that preceded (and initiated) the experience of the grotesque.

Ovid's very physical imagery of Scylla's transformation relates to one final characteristic of the grotesque, as it is theorized by various critics. Like the images that adorned Nero's walls, this transformation represents the bodily involvement of two generically and biologically incompatible kinds of life: a biomorphic (con)fusion that is related to the grotesque intermingling of the functions of perceiver, subject and

representation in works of art. This scene is typical of the ways in which the grotesque often reformulates the position of humanity in the world, as it has been described by theorists like Geoffrey Harpham and Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's study of Rabelaisian imagery reveals a conception of the body that is always participating in the materiality of the cosmos, the eternal cycles of degeneration and regeneration that connect all life. Such imagery offers a profound challenge both to Linnaean logic, which discriminates and categorizes a hierarchy of life, and to the collective strategies by which we hold ourselves above animals -- at the top of that hierarchy -- employing the tools of civilization to mask our bodily participation in the physical world. The Rabelaisian grotesque focuses instead on the very acts that define that participation, revealing a vision of humanity eternally living and dying, feeding upon the earth and swallowed by the earth. This imagery focuses on the body, concentrating on its orifices and convexities (mouth, eyes, ears, genitals and anus), the zones where the interaction between within and without take place. This interaction defines the sphere of the body's participation with the world, another grotesque revelation of boundary-crossing, which is manifest in various acts of "bodily drama" that predominate in Rabelaisian imagery:

Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body -- all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 317)

Rabelaisian imagery also implies a dissolution of the usual demarcation of body and mind, reimagining the mind as a site for the reception of the senses, of physical awareness itself, rather than a zone of pure intellect that is always at odds with the

physical appetites it must restrain and control. In its capacity to topple the kinds of strict categorical boundaries insisted upon by the intellect, the grotesque forces us to reengage phenomena at a sensory level; this is the "temporary reign of the senses" that Harpham posits as the middle ground of his "sequence" of the grotesque. For the process of growth Harpham is postulating, this often distressing moment is a necessary one. "Mind" -- analogous to what Blake called the "mind-forg'd manacles" of conventional thought -- is obstructed by the confusion of the grotesque, which momentarily engages us on a physical and emotional level before we can begin to construct a new theoretical structure that embraces hitherto unfamiliar possibilities.

As we shall see in the following chapters, this brief outline of some salient characteristics of the grotesque highlights many of the most interesting qualities of Michael Ondaatje's work. As I have shown, the capacity of his work to create and maintain contradiction is widely acknowledged by readers who are variously laudatory and critical of this property. More significant is Ondaatje's ability to focus attention on the processes of perception, representation and reception -- the ways in which his works narrate the dialogue between imagination and the world. Like Wallace Stevens (a poet often alluded to in Ondaatje's own work), Ondaatje is fascinated by the capacity of the imagination -- indeed, the *necessity* of the imagination -- in properly apprehending his subject. He is fascinated also by the "idea of order," as it applies to both art and perception, and by the idea of chaos, the anarchic flux of experience that evades the categorization of logic and the fixity of art. Many of his works dramatize the play between form and content in a way that agrees with the grotesque antagonism discussed above, showing the limitations of different kinds of discourse as the writing itself shifts and metamorphoses, playing in a field of overlapping genres. In this writing, we are invited to acknowledge the gaps left between the "reality" being

represented and the ordered structures of narrative and language. These gaps are analogized both by the grotesque poly-generic nature of the longer works and -- in the earlier works -- by their stylistic fragmentation. Ondaatje often suggests a fusion of the functions of reader and writer by incorporating the difficulties he has had dealing with a particular subject into the work itself, providing his audience with an analogous readerly experience. The confusion that arises from these difficulties invariably highlights the contingency of perception and representation -- the generally unconscious processes by which texts order reality and readers order texts. It recasts the reader's role as more active, more like that of an author just beginning to apprehend a difficult but suggestive subject.

On the whole, Ondaatje's works are often hostile to the intellect's need for clarity in art, a clarity which (as Ondaatje's writing seems to suggest) renders art a far more easily interpreted field than the field of contingent reality that art attempts to represent. The confusion and complexity of his writing often cancel out the intellect, approximating the phase of Harpham's "reign of the senses" or "confusion of theory," which happens in the interval before "the resurrection of theoretical certainty." Attempting to approximate the fragmentary and impressionistic qualities of perception itself, Ondaatje's writing often does not provide the luxury of clarity or completion; struggling against his own rage for order, the writer moves through the range of the grotesque, focusing on "The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment / so they are shapeless, awkward / moving to the clear." Indeed, "moving to the clear" suggests a useful metaphor for Ondaatje's career as a whole.

The idea of *movement* itself is crucial to understanding the manifestation of the grotesque throughout his work, as the writer textually "moves" in a field of genres, crossing and recrossing different typological boundaries. Flux and movement are central to the transformative energy of the grotesque, the process of growth it can

represent. In the story from Ovid, the process by which Scylla finally recognizes that the dogs are a part of her is intimately associated with a flight from the intellect -- an instinctive, bodily reaction of running which analogizes her psychological movement from one cognitive space to another. As we shall see, this equation of physical movement with imagination and thought is clearly illustrated by characters like Ondaatje's Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden; moreover, gerund-titles like *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family* clearly suggest the importance of such movement. This equation of the mental and physical is significant too, for Ondaatje's most difficult writing is deeply sensuous at the same time as it is confusing or ambiguous; the body itself -- seemingly free of the fetters of structured thought -- is often represented as the primary site of experience and reception. This equivalence of mind and body undermines the static categories of logic, and generally suggests a grotesque unity between humanity and animals, civilization and wilderness, intellect and instinct. For Ondaatje, the world is a place that mediates and commingles these kinds of "mind-forg'd" incompatibles, a place where the ordinary and extraordinary coexist without clear demarcation: in Alice Munro's memorable phrase, a world of deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum. In such a world, the grotesque provides the writer a way to suggest this coexistence of the commonplace and the wondrous, to speak to us in "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds."

The aim of this study, then, is to detail the manifestation of the grotesque throughout Ondaatje's career, highlighting its capacity to interrogate humanist beliefs about consciousness, reason, and objectivity, and explore the ability of discourse to contain and describe the essence of contingent reality. As such, the following chapters focus upon the zone of exchange between genre and response, the formal and thematic means through which Ondaatje's work acknowledges an equivalence of writing and reading, art-making and art-receiving.



Never stable or fixed, the function of the grotesque itself changes significantly throughout the evolution of Ondaatje's career. Indeed, this is another way in which the phrase "moving to the clear" divulges something of the complexity of Ondaatje's work. Potentially, this line says a great deal about the evolution of his writing and about the grotesque conflict between the desire for order and the equally important need to acknowledge the illegitimacy of any process of epistemological ordering, the chaos and disorder that continues to shift and struggle beneath the imposed logic structures of the categorizing mind. Read as a totality, Ondaatje's work to date narrates this conflict, exposing and dramatizing the interplay of two antithetical and yet coextensive artistic impulses, which may very well be universal to all forms of artistic endeavour and which may also be essential for the historical evolution of art itself. In *The Story of Modern Art*, Norbert Lynton succinctly characterizes these two impulses in his discussion of Expressionism:

It would be possible to survey modern art in terms of a debate between those who see it as a means for offering images and models of beauty (a new beauty, possibly) and those who see it as a means of dynamizing (and sometimes dynamiting) everything that offers stability and security.

Within Expressionism itself . . . there was a comparable duality of intentions. In addition, I believe that every artist would like to refine and develop his work towards an ideal of finality and completeness, yet at the same time feels the urge to disrupt his own habits and to break his tried methods in order to see what lies outside and beyond them. The process is common to mankind and is responsible for both material progress and for the non-progressive change which is natural to art. (40)

This "duality of intention" is readable in the textual landscape of Ondaatje's career, in the changing writing of an author who has admitted a fundamental need to "disrupt his

own habits," in his own words, "to start each new book with a new vocabulary, a new set of clothes" (Solecki, "Interview" [1984] 325). What is surprising, given Lynton's description of an evolution of art towards forms that are malleable enough to disavow "stability" and embrace chaos, is the particular course of Ondaatje's metamorphosing generic vocabulary -- one which would seem, in his latest and most widely known work, to move increasingly towards relative stability and clarity, at least on the level of genre. The late works -- *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* -- incorporate the grotesque in ways that are quite different from *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. The most recent writing is subtler in its engagement of the grotesque, potentially suggesting an author who is becoming more comfortable with his own capacity for order-making. In these novels, the paradigm of the grotesque established throughout the earlier works of Ondaatje's career (and evinced both on the textual/generic and fictional levels of the work) is projected more completely into the fictional world of the story. At this level, we watch characters engaging in precisely the kinds of order-making and chaos-avowing that Ondaatje's readers have been themselves engaged in all along, but in these works "incomplete" stories are nevertheless rendered within more "complete" (and more traditional) artistic structures. As such, the novels require different kinds of response and analysis if we are to apprehend their continued fascination with the bifurcated artistic objective that engenders the aporic play of the grotesque.

In the process of examining this objective, my first chapter will discuss a selection of short poems from *The Dainty Monsters* and *Rat Jelly*, emphasizing the presence of the grotesque at the level of content and imagery, and correlating the poetic vision inherent in this poetry with the theoretical aesthetic philosophy underlying the grotesque. The next three chapters will investigate *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, and *Running in the Family* respectively, examining

how each of these represents a kind of grotesque "species of confusion," playing among various genres and dramatizing the limitations of history and narrative. *Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter* are parables of creation and reception; in each, our response to a difficult and fragmentary text analogizes the writer's search for a meaningful apprehension of the books' historical subjects. *Running in the Family* enacts a similar process on a far more personal level, as the writer's "search" involves a potential reclamation of his family history, and an attempt to understand the chaotic life and death of his estranged father -- an imaginative act of identification that never unequivocally announces success or failure. In either case, *Running in the Family* evinces a far more unified tone than either of the previous works; the voice of the "author" is consistently readable across the matrix of shifting genres that comprise this act of searching, and, for this reason, the book may suggest a transitional moment in Ondaatje's career.

As I have suggested, after the strange revelation suggested by *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje's writing changes significantly, entering a phase that is clearly different from the era of *Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. Moving to the clear in a sense, the recent novels -- discussed in the final chapter -- achieve an unprecedented level of generic clarity, announcing themselves as "novels" at the same time as they explore the complicated interface between individual and community, interpersonal relationships and larger socio-political contexts. As we shall see, this move is a complicated one, certainly suggesting a diminution of the grotesque at the formal level of the text, while at the same time reflecting what I believe to be a significant shift in the writer's attention, from the Romanticism of the isolated individual hero to the possibilities of enduring human connection and the value of community. On one level, the malleability of the novel as a generic structure -- its ability to admit and embrace a heteroglossia of competing voices and viewpoints --

makes it the ideal structure for Ondaatje's kind of writing. Indeed, the fact that *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* are recognizable "novels" has occasionally supported the argument that this is the generic destiny that his increasingly "novelized" earlier works have been evolving toward all along -- away from the monologic lyric and toward the polyphonic novel. Simultaneously, however, the fact that the novel is the predominant genre of our time (indeed, it is a genre that Ondaatje's other long works have participated in) means that the generic indeterminacy that typifies earlier works is largely absent from these recent texts; they are less difficult and more "accessible" (to use the conventional, if uncritical, term). Once again, these novels do not formally participate in the grotesque to the same extent as the earlier literature. Instead, they thematically encapsulate the crux of its message, revealing the contingency of the order Ondaatje's characters struggle to construct -- even if we do not share in the analogous process of construction to the same degree that we do in *Collected Works* or *Coming Through Slaughter*. In these novels, as I have indicated, the grotesque prevails primarily at the level of theme and character.

Indeed, like several of the poems to which we now turn, the late novels seem more comfortable with the indeterminacy they embrace; they do not formally represent the desire to dissolve all mystery, crushing their subjects in the grip of a poetics of stasis. Like the poem that lends this study its name, "'The gate in his head'," they focus instead on the evanescence of experience, valuing freer, more open kinds of structures that illustrate "not clarity but the sense of shift" that defines perception and the recollection of experience (*RJ* 62). Simultaneously, these novels explore the possibilities of community at both personal and socio-political levels, and in both novels a new vision of interpersonal relationships emerges that is entirely in keeping with their formal acceptance of indeterminacy. Here, to a far greater extent than in *Collected Works* or *Coming Through Slaughter*, relationships and community are

envisioned as profoundly beneficial and sustaining despite the omnipresent gaps and distances that qualify even the warmest intimacies. As we shall see, this is true not only for the association between fictional characters, but -- as in all of Ondaatje's work -- for the relationship between author and reader as well.

**Chapter One:  
"An Unclear Stir": The Early Short Poems**

It is common usage to call "monster" an unfamiliar concord of dissonant elements: the centaur, the chimera are thus defined for those without understanding. I call "monster" all original inexhaustible beauty.  
-- Alfred Jarry, "*Les Monstres*" (qtd in Harpham 14)

Published in 1967, *The Dainty Monsters* is an excellent introduction to the thematic and aesthetic issues that now characterize Ondaatje's work, and clearly suggests the importance of the grotesque in the representation of these issues. This early poetry reveals Ondaatje's concern about the potentials and limitations of language, poetry and art in seeking to represent aspects of reality and experience, and demonstrates his sensitivity to "the extent to which the mind distorts reality in any act of perception and description" (Solecki, "Nets" 94). These poems simultaneously evaluate the poet's creative process and their own representation of reality as they struggle with their respective subjects. Ondaatje's ability to explore the limitations of his own art and to engage the forces of contradiction and ambivalence -- the range of the grotesque -- consistently disallows our complacency: while reading this poetry we become engaged in a particular relationship with the text, wherein the revelation of the difficult and chaotic nature of existence and our inability to resolve the ambivalence of the poetry are coeval. Writing on the grotesque, Harpham notes that it invariably "confuses the distinction between art and the ground or subject of art. And because it calls forth contradictory interpretations, and interpretations to which it refuses to yield, it disrupts the relationship between art and the meaning of art" (179). In attempting to represent an inchoate and ultimately unfathomable reality, Ondaatje's poetry analogizes these qualities through indeterminacy, ambivalence, artistic self-doubt, and, often, violence -- thereby reflecting and demonstrating the limitations encountered by the intellect in apprehending reality. And in so doing, Ondaatje continually illustrates the realistic value of the grotesque that Hugo's preface applauds.

The presence of the grotesque is immediately obvious in the Coach House Press edition of *The Dainty Monsters*. Covered in an arabesque of stylized bird and vegetable images, the book's capacity for illicit juxtaposition is suggested by Ondaatje's title, which links the innocuous and the monstrous. (Interestingly enough, "dainty monsters" also suggests an apt description of Nero's frescoes.) This linkage is central to the collection as whole, in which numerous connections unite human and animal, the domestic and the mythic, the mundane and the fantastic, in Ondaatje's presentation of what Bakhtin calls the "contradictory and double-faced fullness of life" (*Rabelais* 62).

The collection's long first section, "Over the Garden Wall," begins with an epigraph from Auden: "We've been watching you over the garden wall for hours, / The sky is darkening like a stain, / Something is going to fall like rain and it won't be flowers" (*DM* 9). This choice of epigraph focuses our attention on the act of perception in a particular way; the almost sinister confession, "we've been watching you," combines with the image of the impending storm to create a threatening tone of potential violence. The act of perceiving a subject is equated with something covert and perhaps menacing. The garden wall is a significant setting for this act; it introduces the notion of a barrier, something that disallows the watchers to close the distance between themselves and their subjects. The garden itself is important because it represents an uneasy compromise between nature and culture, wildness and domesticity; in this tiny, walled landscape the natural and artificial coexist in a zone of conflict and compromise, each inhabiting the other to the extent that they are inseparable. As we shall see, this essentially grotesque vision of life, in which the "civilized" is both in conflict with and fused with the world of nature, is an important theme in Ondaatje's cosmology, both in his short poems and in longer works like *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

A significant final effect of the epigraph depends on its heavily metaphorical poetic language. Of all literary tropes, metaphor is most intimately involved with the

grotesque since both are involved with the association of incompatible elements through which meaning can be provisionally derived; invariably, the revelation of the effectiveness of the metaphor is simultaneous with the understanding of its literal impossibility. As Harpham writes,

in the case of both metaphor and the grotesque, the form itself resists the interpretation that it necessitates. We remain aware of the referential absurdity of the metaphor despite our attempts to transcend it, and the discord of elements in the grotesque form remains discordant. But this is precisely the reason that both are capable of standing for the entire field of art. Art lives by resisting interpretation as well as by inviting it, and it is this double movement that is figured in both the metaphor and the grotesque. (178)

Metaphor remains central to the ability of literature to close the distance or to apprehend its subject through the creation of an unlikely equivalence. Throughout his poetry, Ondaatje explores the potentials and limitations of metaphor, often by pushing his own beyond what his readers can easily reconcile, into the realm of the grotesque. The effect is generally jarring; the images created confound our ability to understand the metaphor in usual ways, and we are forced to approach the subject anew, with a fresher perspective and with a new degree of self-awareness regarding the nature of perception and poetic representation. We are never permitted to become unconscious of the artificiality of the trope in its attempt to depict some aspect of reality.

We become aware of this facet of Ondaatje's poetry in the first poem of the collection, "'Description is a Bird'" (11). The use of the word "is" (rather than "of") in the title of this lyrical representation of a flock of swallows alerts us immediately to an epistemological problem in metaphoric referentiality. A metaphor itself, this title equates subject with art, birds with poetry. In this poem, Ondaatje alerts us, lyric



description becomes a surrogate for the actual phenomenon of the now absent birds -- henceforth, they shall be constituted by their poetic presentation alone. The sense of unease created by this title is sustained throughout the poem by its conspicuous reliance on metaphor:

In the afternoon while the sun twists down  
they come piggle piggle piggle all around the air.  
Under clouds of horses the sand swallows turn  
quick and gentle as wind  
All virtuoso performances  
that presume a magnificent audience.  
The leader flings his neck back,  
turns thinner than whims.  
Like God the others follow  
anticipating each twist,  
the betrayals of a feather.  
For them no thumping wing beat of a crow,  
they bounce on a breath  
scattering with the discipline of a watch.

Most of the metaphors here are fairly easy to accept, and some even approach cliché ("clouds of horses," "quick and gentle as wind"). Others are more creative, and more demanding; our ability, for instance, to accept the notion that a swallow's aerial turns are "thinner than whims" is premised on our willingness to attribute a physical characteristic (thin) to an abstract psychological experience (whim). Although, on the whole, the metaphors in this act of representation are not too difficult, the title obliges us to look more carefully at the relationship between subject and object throughout the poem -- especially, perhaps, at the idea that the swallows' acrobatics are "virtuoso

performances / that presume a magnificent audience." For if this poem is truly a lyrical surrogate for the experience of seeing these birds, then we too are engaged in witnessing an artistic performance -- one in which we, as "audience," have already been "presumed" by Ondaatje, as poet. At this level, we are following his "thin" whims, and anticipating his movements. The feeling of increased distance from the poem's subject that this interpretation creates is intensified by the thematic concentration on the "betrayals" we observe in "anticipating each twist" of the poem. (The twisting itself provides another image of indirection and artifice here; even the sunshine "twists down" in this poem.) Finally, although the poem has focused on the whimsical and chaotic movements of the swallows throughout, Ondaatje's final line shows that his "performance" is a paradoxical product of extreme "discipline" as well. The comparison of the scattering movement with the "discipline of a watch," creates a significant *double entendre*: the final word can refer both to the precision of a mechanical time-piece, and to the ordering discipline inherent in the act of watching. In this way, "'Description is a Bird'" seems to encompass a contradictory dual function; embodying a traditional poetic representation of a flock of swallows, the poem asserts itself as a stand-in for the experience of witnessing these birds, but simultaneously focuses our attention on the distortion of reality implicit in the processes of perception and self-conscious artistic re-creation. Ultimately, we are never able either to dismiss or accept the validity of the title's metaphor.

The difficulties inherent in this first piece characterize a great deal of Ondaatje's poetry, illustrating his perception of the relationship between object, artist and audience. In "For John, Falling," Ondaatje again engages ambivalence and indeterminacy in his description of a construction worker who falls to his death on the work site. Although the subject of this poem is horrifying and violent, it is difficult to ignore the touches of dark humour, such as the man's "ridiculous" request for air, and

the slightly embarrassed ineffectuality of the other construction workers (Barbour 22). Moreover, the prosaic understatement of this event seems somehow to diminish the death -- rendering it even more disturbing -- at the same time as Ondaatje subtly hints at a connection between this event and the death of Christ (in the request the "arched" man makes, and in the useless putterings of his twelve co-workers):

No one ran to where  
 his tense muscles curled unusually,  
 where jaws collected blood,  
 the hole in his chest the size of fists,  
 hands clutched to eyes like a blindness.  
 Arched there he made  
 ridiculous requests for air.  
 And twelve construction workers  
 what should they do but surround  
 or examine the path of falling. (56)

The entire poem is characterized by what J. E. Chamberlin calls "shifting tones and unexpected voices;" in this "tonal collage," he writes, "shifts between what Walter Bagehot once called the pure, the ornate and the grotesque are obvious, and wonderful" (36). It is through this grotesque tonal collage, and this unification of humour and horror, that Ondaatje explores the complexity of response to a shocking stimulus. The indeterminate nature of the poem's language leaves some doubt about exactly what has transpired; as Douglas Barbour notes, it is even hard to tell just what the worker has fallen from (22). This confusion, when compounded with the disturbing effects of the tonal shifts and the commingling of the humorous, the horrifying and the banal disrupts our ability to make sense of Ondaatje's representation of the event. As readers, we are left in a position analogous to the poem's shuffling construction workers, unsure of how to react to what has happened.

This effect intensifies to a grotesque extreme in the poem's last lines:

And the press in bright shirts,  
 a doctor, the foreman scuffing a mound,  
 men removing helmets,  
 the machine above him  
 shielding out the sun  
 while he drowned  
 in the beautiful dark orgasm of his mouth.

This final metaphor, in juxtaposing the image of ecstatic sexual release with the blood-filled mouth of the dying man, presents a shocking affront to the categorizing intellect, which is unable to reconcile this combination of incompatibles. In terms of literary convention, the image itself seems as out of place as the intrusion of violence and death onto a sunny work-day. Philip Thomson, writing on a similarly difficult metaphor in a poem by Rilke, offers a useful description of the experience of encountering such a grotesque parallel. Ultimately, he posits, "we are not able to accept the figurative expression. The two things brought together are so disparate, their combination so impossible, that we withdraw from the poetic world and see the image as both obscene and ridiculous" (66). This ability to fracture the usual boundaries between "the poetic world" and the real is essential to the definition of the grotesque. In "For John, Falling," this structure forces us to acknowledge the inadequacy of language and rationality in apprehending the enormity of the poem's subject. Rather than simply dismiss Ondaatje's ending as "obscene" or "ridiculous," however, we are obliged to reconsider our relationship to the poetic text and its subject, and hopefully to recognize the affiliation to reality that is an element in many instances of the grotesque. Here, the unlikely "realism" depends on the fact that this metaphor "renders violent death in a way that violates our sense of what's proper, just as the death itself did for those who were there to experience it" (Barbour 23).

In "Song to Alfred Hitchcock and Wilkinson," language itself comes under examination as a medium for the expression of experience. We have already seen the use of child-like onomatopoeia in "'Description is a Bird'" ("piggie piggie piggie"); in "Song," however, this strategy supplants conventional poetic diction almost entirely:

Flif flif flif flif very fast  
 is the noise the birds make  
 running over us.  
 A poet would say 'fluttering',  
 or  
 'see-sawing with sun on their wings'.  
 But all it is  
 is flif flif flif flif very fast. (18)

In this short poem, traditional poetic description and metaphor are locked within quotation marks, and ultimately dismissed. The only other metaphor Ondaatje uses here is the odd association of the birds' flight with the act of "running" in the third line. Another examination of the limitations of poetic art and language, this poem is both ironic and paradoxical in its rejection of what "a poet would say," in favour of something much simpler, and perhaps more truly mimetic. As a whole, the poem records another self-conscious attempt to capture experience that is ultimately beyond language.

In each of these three poems, Ondaatje struggles simultaneously with the elements of reality and experience he seeks to capture, and the medium -- both literary tropes and language itself -- through which his art must operate. By pushing the relationships between these elements into the range of the indeterminate and the grotesque, Ondaatje highlights the presence of this struggle. This alienates us from usual ways of responding to his poems and causes us to reexamine our own relationship

with literary convention, and with language itself. Writing on the philosophy of the grotesque writer, Christian Morgenstern, Philip Thomson discusses the importance of the disorientation that accompanies this kind of art, and of the potential value of this alienation. Thomson writes that Morgenstern

is on record as claiming that man's basically unsatisfactory relationship to his fellows, his society and the world in general stems from his being imprisoned by language, which is a most unreliable, false and dangerous thing, and that one must "smash language," destroy man's naive trust in this most familiar and unquestioned part of his life, before he can learn to think properly. (65)

Language, as writers like Morgenstern and Ondaatje are aware, is a repository for all of the categories and epistemological strategies that structure our view of the world. The grotesque acts to "smash" these categories, to connect what was formerly distinct and separate, to confound our intellectual ability to establish meaning and value in a familiar context. Writing of developments in art in our century, Norbert Lynton offers a lucid observation on the contradictory forces that propel artists to explore the grotesque and illuminates why "language" conflicts with the course of such exploration:

I believe that every artist would like to refine and develop his work towards an ideal of finality and completeness, yet at the same time feels the urge to disrupt his own habits and to break his tried methods in order to see what lies outside and beyond them. The process is common to mankind and is responsible both for material progress and of the non-progressive change which is natural to art. And if, nonetheless, this seems difficult to grasp except as a negative process, that must be in part due to the fact that language itself has oddly few words to offer for the 'negative' side that are not negative words: disorder, distortion,

obscurity, irrationality and so on. Oddly? Perhaps not: it is just that language too is on the side of order, of a limited experience. That is why . . . modern writers often seem to violate language in their desire to report on the chaos of life. (40)

On the subject of language, Harpham's theoretical discussion of the grotesque defines it as a "species of confusion," especially confusion of linguistic categories themselves; appropriately, he summarizes with a paradox: "'Grotesque' is a word for the paralysis of language" (6).

The indeterminacy and ambivalence of so much of Ondaatje's writing is similarly important in fulfilling his desire to report on the chaotic nature of existence. The difficulties that confronted critics grappling with themes of artistic expression and silence in *Coming Through Slaughter* are presaged by many of Ondaatje's short poems, in which, as we have seen, it is often impossible to arrive at a resolved, final interpretation. An ambivalent combination of dichotomous elements is a crucial characteristic of the grotesque, and provides a significant strategy in Ondaatje's presentation of the mythic "story of mutability."

Many theorists concede that the experience of the grotesque generally involves an apparently irreconcilable duality; simultaneously repellent and attractive, the grotesque "is a structure comprehending binary oppositions or a synthesis of contradictory ideas" (Makaryk 85). The ability to consolidate categorically incompatible elements enables the grotesque to create an image of the world that is antithetical to the aesthetics of the complete and the closed, and unfettered by the boundaries and borders with which language and intellect usually define experience. There is, at this level, a correlation between the grotesque and what George Elliott Clarke and Geoffrey Harpham call myth; as Harpham writes: "Our kind of logic is built on an avoidance of contradiction. Myth does not merely tolerate contradiction,

but seeks it out and mediates it through narrative" (53). This "mediation" is fundamental to Ondaatje's poetic world, where domestic life and elements of the mythic and fantastic interact, revealing the poet's acute sensitivity to the terrible wondrousness of everyday life. This poetry reveals a dense garden of contraries, in which the structures of the ordered, rational and civilized coexist in an often quiescent but occasionally violent association with the wild energy of the mysterious, the irrational and the chaotic -- forces that logic and reason continually strive not to acknowledge. As Harpham points out, this essential dualism has been variously described and/or personified throughout the history of ideas (67); this host of ideological descriptions embraces Blake's Reason and Energy, Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysus, and Freud's Id and Ego, to name only a few. Ondaatje's poems grapple with the representation of this conflict by incorporating elements of contradiction and ambivalence that frustrate our desire to decide the poet's stance, or to achieve a resolved, static interpretation. Often, Ondaatje's poems narrate instances of collision between the categorical/logical, ordering mind and the experience of something shocking, chaotic and grotesque in character. Invariably, these poetic manoeuvres illuminate aspects of the creative process itself, revealing a vision of the violence and deception that are somehow central to the endeavour of artistic representation.

Mythic qualities of ambivalence and contradiction are manifest in many of Ondaatje's shorter poems, in which this recurring conflict between the ordering tendency of human perception and the chaotic dynamism of experience continuously evades resolution. "The Republic," for instance, begins with a description of the regimental discipline, artifice and order of a well-kept house:

This house, exact,  
coils with efficiency and style.

A different heaven here,



air even is remade in the basement.  
 The plants fed daily  
 stand like footmen by the windows,  
 flush with decent green  
 and meet the breeze with polish  
 no dancing with the wind here. (*DM* 21)

These lines highlight the sense of the unnatural order that pervades the house, with its artificial air and polished, militaristic house-plants that refuse even to bend with the breeze. The lines that follow undermine this vision; with the coming of night, the wildness that lurks beneath this veneer of order is released, and the poem seems to celebrate the grotesque and energetic movements of dream and natural passion:

Too much reason in its element  
 passions crack the mask in dreams.  
 While we sleep  
 the plants in frenzy heave floors apart,  
 lust with common daisies,  
 feel rain,  
 fling their noble bodies, release a fart.  
 The clock alone, frigid and superior,  
 swaggers in the hall.

Here the grotesque cracks the mask of reason as the plants re-engage the natural world; their new capacity for flatulence and the tearing of floor-boards signals an illicit typological hybridization of vegetal and animal life forms. Only the hall clock, representative of linear time and the restrictive forces of reason, remains partially aloof from this carnivalesque, category-smashing celebration. The energy of this section of the poem lends itself to an interpretation of "The Republic" that places the wildness of

night above the stasis and artifice of day in Ondaatje's evaluation. This reading is problematized by the poem's final lines, however: "At dawn gardenias revitalize / and meet the morning with decorum." Where we might expect an image of the tyrannical influence of rationality and order overthrowing the vibrancy of night we instead encounter the oddly heroic decorum of the gardenias, whose ascension seems as natural and noble as a changing of the guard. We are left unsure of Ondaatje's view of these seemingly oppositional forces, and the poem disallows any final resolution to this conflict. Ultimately, perhaps, the indissoluble ambiguity of this cyclic, ongoing battle illustrates the essential and paradoxical codependence of order and chaos -- a theme that is powerfully dramatized in both *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*.

Such ambivalence is characteristic of much of Ondaatje's work and suggests a vital association between his art and the grotesque. Theorists, at least since the writing of Wolfgang Kayser, have agreed on the essential role of indeterminacy in distinguishing the grotesque from other aesthetic and ideological structures. As Philip Thomson expresses it,

The *unresolved* nature of the grotesque conflict is important, and helps to mark off the grotesque from other modes or categories of literary discourse. For the conflict of incompatibles, fundamental though it be, is not exclusively a criterion of the grotesque. Irony and paradox depend on this sort of conflict or confrontation, and all theories of the comic are based on some notion of incongruity, conflict, juxtaposition of opposites, etc. We . . . may confidently take it that the lack of resolution of the conflict is a distinguishing feature of the grotesque. (21)

This ongoing conflict between the energetic turmoil of nature and the static, artificial order imposed by perception and intellect is a prevalent motif in Ondaatje's writing.

We first noted its presence in the odd emphasis on "discipline" in the last line of "'Description is a Bird'" where it performs a similarly disconcerting and contradictory function. As we shall see, this thematic struggle is crucial to Ondaatje's expression of certain paradoxes implicit in the nature of artistic representation.

As aforementioned, Ondaatje's poetry presents an often starkly realistic representation of daily life which is constantly being impinged upon by forces of the fantastic and mythic. In this way, the poet explores the mythic and wondrous underpinnings of so-called ordinary life -- what Lorraine York has called "the other side of dailiness." The nature of the relationship between myth and reality throughout Ondaatje's poetry reflects this impulse, and once again provides a vital link between his work and theories of the grotesque. Speaking on the role of the mythic in *Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje highlights this connection: "I don't like pop westerns and pop Billy the Kids. Myths are only of value to me when they are realistic as well as having other qualities of myth. Another thing that interests me about myth is how and when figures get caught in myths" (qtd in Mundwiler 10). This conception of myth as something necessarily "realistic," something that characters from a familiar fictional world can become "caught in," is very much in keeping with the hybridization of myth and "reality" present in the grotesque; as Harpham describes the phenomenon, "the grotesque consists of the manifest, visible, or unmediated presence of mythic or primitive elements in a non-mythic or modern context" (51).

Like "The Republic," many of Ondaatje's poems focus on the energy and wildness that underlie the civilized and domestic. This tendency is clearly represented in his "Biography," which explores the unacknowledged savagery dormant in the tamest of house pets:

The dog scatters her body in sleep,  
paws, finding no ground, whip at air,  
the unseen eyeballs reel deep, within.

And waking -- crouches,  
 tacked to humility all day,  
 children ride her, stretch,  
 display the black purple lips,  
 pull hind legs to dance;  
 unaware that she  
 tore bulls apart, loosed  
 heads of partridges,  
 dreamt blood. (*DM* 17)

By focusing on the deeply repressed energy and wildness of the aging dog, Ondaatje forces us to acknowledge the other violence of the poem, through which the children, unable to see past the purely domestic aspect of the dog's existence, "tack" the unresisting animal to its "humility." As always, Ondaatje's representation of a generally neglected level of reality illustrates the multiplicity of life, and depicts the essential violence of the attempt to "capture" these facets of existence through description.

Like "Biography," many of these poems reveal the essentially flawed nature of human perception in the apprehension of the subject. In the opening lines of "The Diverse Causes," such a juxtaposition of myth and reality appears in the description of a morning at the cabin:

Three clouds and a tree  
 reflect themselves on a toaster.  
 The kitchen window hangs scarred,  
 shattered by winter hunters.  
 We are in a cell of civilized magic.  
 Stravinsky roars at breakfast,  
 our milk is powdered.

Outside, a May god  
 moves his paws to alter wind  
 to scatter shadows of tree and cloud. (24)

The association of powdered milk and an animalistic spring god here is typical of Ondaatje's ability to synthesize the realistic and mythic. Another poem about the violence and distortion inherent in any act of description, "The Diverse Causes" begins by focusing on an indirect act of perception, and with an image of the latent threat of brutality. The kitchen window, which represents both a means of perception and a barrier between perceiver and object, has been broken by hunters; the poet himself, however, looks at the outside world only as it is reflected on the side of a toaster. The indirection of this act of seeing is compounded by the sense of entrapment or limitation created by the poet's viewpoint from within a "cell of civilized magic." The appearance of Stravinsky in the next line is vital in an appreciation of the conflict that defines the poet's vision of the world. Inspired by the rituals and energy of paganism throughout his career, Stravinsky represents an odd balance between the forces of myth and chaos and the sphere of civilization and culture that continues to venerate his artistic accomplishment. Interestingly, Ondaatje's mention of the "roaring" Stravinsky is almost immediately before the appearance of the poem's May god; the music (most likely a recording of the composer's infamously paganistic *Le Sacre du Printemps*, in which a human sacrifice is offered to the god of spring) is directly correlative to the poet's apprehension of the outside world. By revealing a relationship between this poetic representation of a spring morning and an imported piece of art, Ondaatje suggests a complicated exchange between art and reality which defines his perception and subsequent description of his surroundings. Viewing the natural world through its reflection in a modern appliance while listening to a recording of Stravinsky, the poet is distanced from the reality he endeavours to describe both by physical barriers and by

the influence of cultural and artistic forces that are essentially unrelated to the evasive actuality of his subject. It is only in the poem's final lines -- for which nothing earlier in the poem prepares the reader -- that this dialogue of art with art is supplanted (at least in part) by a true act of mythopoeia. Focusing largely upon commonplace events, chores around the cabin and the head of the poet's sleeping wife, the final stretch of the poem climaxes with the image of his daughter as she "burns the lake / by reflecting her red shoes in it" (25). Another result of reflection, this ambivalent image suggests both destruction and creation, as it simultaneously partakes in and transcends the "borrowed" myths of Stravinsky's roaring.

Other instances of this association of the fantastic or mythic with the quotidian or realistic serve to highlight the presence of the grotesque in the world around us; pulling the mythic in from the margins of perception, this poetry calls for an integration of the grotesque with our vision of normal life. Often, these poems heighten the jarring effect of the association between the mythic-grotesque and so-called non-mythic "reality" by juxtaposing the fantastic with the most banal of domestic details. Exactly such a juxtaposition occurs in "In Another Fashion," which begins simply enough with a description of a cat on a fence:

The cat performs,  
 rippling shoulder  
 on a strip of fence.  
 Pneumatic scratching  
 beats each jaw, shows  
 earrings of scar  
 through yellow leaves  
 and laundry. (*DM* 39)

A treatment of fairly prosaic subject matter, this stanza is followed by very different lines, calling for nothing less than a new mythopoeia, in which Christian and pagan,

human and animal are incorporated in a grotesque union:

We must build new myths  
 to wind up the world,  
 provoke new christs  
 with our beautiful women,  
 bring  
 plumed  
 thin boned birds  
 to claw carpets  
 to betray  
 majesty in a sway  
 Pale birds  
 with rings on ugly feet  
 to drink from clear bowls  
 to mate with our children

The poet's dissatisfaction with the rational tendency to discount the importance of myth and the pervasive influence of the irrational in everyday life gives way to a vision of grotesque energy and unity which brings his own children together with strange birds, and ties the holy to the secular in calling for the salvation of new, lustful messiahs. Here, the violent amalgamation of human and animal, civilization and nature, assumes positive, liberating possibilities as the fetters of logical and semantic categories are momentarily cast off.

In "A Toronto Home for Birds and Manticores," this fusion is again celebrated as representing the potential for growth and evolution, but with a more ominous, perhaps pessimistic tone:

When snows have melted  
 how dull to find just grass and dog shit

Why not polemic bones of centaurs  
 --remnants of a Toronto bullet,  
 punishment for eating gladioli.  
 Luring animal fashions in  
 these beasts will nerve the city,  
 clog sewers,  
 and giving them this head start  
 we can establish once more  
 a survival of the fittest. (*DM* 41)

In this poem, the grotesque act of "luring animal fashions" back into the human sphere is presented as a risky business -- one in which the need for "punishment" often attends the transgression of such boundaries. Here, the "Toronto bullet" becomes analogous with the lethal encroachment of the categorizing or logical intellect, which cannot tolerate this affront to its classification system.

Indeed, the limitations and frequent violence of "our kind of logic" in confronting the grotesque and contradictory is emphasized throughout this poetry, often when the categorical and logical is described, or impinges on the perception of the subject. In Ondaatje's allusively titled "Over the Garden Wall," the menacing aspects of perception and representation signalled by the Auden epigraph are reexamined. An imaginative celebration of grotesque imagery and dark humour, the poem begins by focusing on ties between the poet's life and the animal world:

My mother while caressing camels  
 had her left breast bitten off,  
 so I was weaned on half a body.  
 In spite of this I've no objections  
 to camels, one hump or two,  
 and I like their quivering jaws



that crunch bone  
 and stones with equal ease,  
 while the Canadian wolf  
 with flailing  
 double jointed legs  
 is to my mind  
 awesome on this continent. (33)

This strange meditation on the camel and wolf gives way to a grotesque and fantastic vision of unity between human and animal life, as humorous, hybridized beast-humans leave the farmyards, forests and deserts, again crossing boundaries into strictly human spheres:

I mean  
 the infamous camel  
 would look profound in a felt hat,  
 pigs could trot, cherub white,  
 down the high streets,  
 leopards in a two-seater  
 would be star spangled roués.

Ultimately, however, this imaginative vision is challenged by the intrusion of the authority of the categorizing intellect in the last lines of the poem:

Yet, in spite  
 of warnings by Daphne du Maurier,  
 we find the 'potamus barred from public swimming pools,  
 and a vulture calmly resting at a traffic light  
 would undoubtedly be shot, very messily,  
 by the first policeman who spotted him. (34)

In the end, a violently civilized world of boundaries and categories brutally enforces its own need to keep things "in their place," and -- with another "Toronto bullet" -- disallows the realization of this imaginative grotesque unification.

In all of the poems that explore the liminal areas where the mythic and the realistic impinge on one another there is a sense of blurring that is in accord with "the sense of formal disorder we perceive in grotesqueries, in which ontological, generic, or logical categories are illegitimately jumbled together" (Harpham xxi). The art of the grotesque is in a process of continual interrogation of the potentialities and limitations of the conventional forms it simultaneously co-opts, synthesizes and distorts. The grotesque reconceptualizes the notion of the "marriage" of form and content as a perpetual struggle, in which form seeks to net a content too ornery and amorphous to be securely contained. This conflict, and the related antagonism between the mythic and the conventional are explored in "Dragon," a poem that clearly represents the merging of the fantastic with a contemporary or non-mythic context. "Dragon" reveals the modern world as an inhospitable setting for elements of myth and fantasy, in which the few, aged "dragons" that are left seem to lack colour and vitality:

I have been seeing dragons again.  
 Last night, hunched on a beaver dam,  
 one held a body like a badly held cocktail;  
 his tail, keeping the beat of a waltz,  
 sent a morse of ripples to my canoe.  
 They are not richly bright  
 but muted like dawns  
 or the vague sheen on a fly's wing.  
 Their old flesh drags in folds  
 as they drop into grey pools,  
 strain behind a tree. (*DM* 19)

The sense of the dragons' helplessness in the modern world is heightened in the final lines of the poem, in which one of the creatures is captured and exposed to the view of others:

Finally the others saw one today, trapped,  
 tangled in our badminton net.  
 The minute eyes shuddering deep in the creased face  
 while his throat, strangely fierce, stretched  
 to release an extinct burning inside:  
 pathetic loud whispers as four of us  
 and the excited spaniel surrounded him.

In this poem the mythic becomes grotesquely entangled in the realistic as the netted dragon is surrounded by its audience. The dragon's impotent rage and the barking dog underscore the potential violence of this encounter, which is at odds with the quiescence of the poet's first sightings near the beginning of the poem.

Easily read as an allegory of artistic process, "Dragon" engenders a particular view of the relationships that define the locus of art, artist and audience. "Seeing dragons," the solitary poet is imaginatively aware of the existence of elements of chaos and sources of mythic energy that underlie the surface of daily life. His connection to these facets of existence is indirect but definite; the "morse of ripples" sent to the poet by the dragon's tail suggests a message in code, and the need to actively participate in understanding or interpreting the existence of the mythic, fantastic or grotesque in our individual lives. By itself, however, this relationship is inadequate for sustaining the creation of art and the poet must ultimately present this relationship to others, attempting to make public his ever-imperfect apprehension of the subtle sources of wonder that inhabit the world. As before, however, this act represents a violent misappropriation of its subject; captured by the badminton net, the surrounded dragon

hisses with a mute, flameless fury, and the cryptic connection that characterized the poet's earlier relationship with the dragon has vanished. Here, as in other examples of Ondaatje's poetry, the net is a symbol for the artistic traditions, the ordering tendencies of the mind, the imprecision of language, and the disfiguring capacity of human perception through which the poet must present his world. As we shall see, the net (and the related symbol of the web) is central in Ondaatje's representation of the creative process; it is a symbolic tool with which the ineffable chaos of reality is confined, and made to adhere to the need for stasis demanded by art. Ironically, however, this attempt to "net chaos" usually results in the sense of an even greater gap dividing artist and subject.

In "The Sows," Ondaatje again explores linkages between human and animal, and the nature of the categorizing intellect, as he describes a group of pigs lounging in their pen on a hot, summer afternoon. Characterized by utter stasis in this tiny, fenced world, these animals are complacent and secure in the perception of their surroundings: "On spread thighs and immobile, / they categorize the flux around them" (16). Later, in "Sows, one more time," he returns to this subject in a far more metaphorical mode, equating the apathetic animals with "wounds," saints, and finally as poets:

Wearied intellectuals in the sun.  
 Shelley and others on the Poet's Coast  
 taking in the view or lack of grass.  
 Caustic laughs,  
 dry about their sensitivity.  
 Poets  
 in a poet's world. (35)

Sketched as effete idlers, the pig-poets are complacent categorizers and bored intellectuals; paradoxically "dry about their sensitivity," they reside in a world of their

own making, confident in the unquestioned and unchallenged structures that define reality and their role in perceiving it. By their very nature and the utter insulation of their surroundings, they seem protected from any exposure to the shocking or grotesque which might disturb their serenity or confound their staid modes of understanding the world. Significantly, the poet doesn't allow his readers this kind of luxury, for these poems demonstrate a capacity for indeterminacy in their presentation of the sows. Their ambivalence depends on Ondaatje's willingness to see the world "in a pig's eye" in the first poem, and the odd metaphors used in the second. While the ineffectuality of the sows' vision of the world seems clear, we are not sure how to react to their association with saints and Romantic poets, or to the hints of envy and identification that appear in his description of their reassuringly well-ordered world.

Throughout his writing, Ondaatje's "mediation" of the forces of ambivalence, contradiction and the grotesque reveals a complex view of the relationship between the disciplined, ordering tendencies of art and intellect, and acknowledgement of the dynamic flux of extra-artistic reality. In "Application for a Driver's License," Ondaatje offers an ironical and humorous narration of the necessity of achieving distance from the shocking and grotesque:

Two birds loved  
 in a flurry of red feathers  
 like a burst cottonball,  
 continuing while I drove over them.

I am a good driver, nothing shocks me. (*DM* 40)

Here, the image of the birds is vague and uncertain, they lose their shape, distinctiveness and detail in a grotesque "flurry of red feathers," and in the strange, violent image of a "burst cottonball." We are nonetheless unprepared for the

revelation, in the fourth line, that we have been watching them from within an approaching motor vehicle that drives over them in the road. The darkly humorous understatement of the final line intensifies the reader's shock just as the poet denies his own. Here, the humour of the poem becomes a tool through which the poet/driver achieves a more comfortable distance from the actuality of a shocking experience. Ondaatje narrates a process by which the logical mind struggles not to acknowledge the effect of witnessing (and perhaps killing) the two birds in the middle of the road. As in "'Description is a Bird'," the poem ends by stressing the need for discipline -- this time the discipline required to ignore the birds and remain "a good driver" in spite of everything. As a thematic representation of the relationship between poet and subject, "Application for a Driver's License" clearly indicates a strong potential for a kind of violence, as the act of making a poem is equated with coolly running the subject over with a car. At this level, the poem's title can be read as an ironic comment on artistic representation. The discipline and detachment required to operate a motor vehicle are equated with qualities necessary for the creation of art, and the disturbing anecdote of the birds becomes a demonstration of competence, an application for a sort of "poetic" license -- which may also be a license to kill.

Repeatedly, then, Ondaatje's poetic treatments of the world occasion troublesome questions regarding the nature of the endeavour of artistic re-creation. As we have seen, his portrayal of the relationship between artist and subject is one fraught with potential violence, in which acts of perception and description at times seem akin to a sort of entrapment or mutilation of the subject matter. The nature of this relationship is made even more explicit in several poems that deal directly with artists and with acts of artistic invention. These poems present their "original" subjects only indirectly, dealing primarily with the presentation of the endeavour of artistic portrayal.

Often they offer anecdotal and self-conscious descriptions of the poet's experience of trying to capture a lyrical moment or personal event, and confronting instead his own awareness of the disquieting implications of this process that his other poems have revealed. "Four Eyes" records one such instance, as the poet-figure regards his wife as they are listening to music one night:

Naked I lie here  
 attempting to separate toes  
 with no help from hands.  
 You with scattered nightgown  
 listen to music, hug a knee. (*DM* 53)

Beginning with a description of the poet's attempt to separate his toes from each other, intensifying his sense of demarcation that distinguishes the individual objects around him, Ondaatje goes on to describe the poet's subsequent and related desire to categorize his experience. In an attempt to close the distance between his own perception and the woman's, the next lines catalogue the salient features of his setting:

I pick this moment up  
 with our common eyes  
 only choose what you can see  
 a photograph of you with posing dog  
 a picture with Chagall's red  
 a sprawling dress.

The focus here on the photograph and the picture underscores significant aspects of Ondaatje's representation of perception and the poetic process. Like the "roaring" Stravinsky in "The Diverse Causes," the background music and the picture "with Chagall's red" highlights the presence of other artistic forces that impinge upon the poet's consciousness, and subsequently upon the lyrical presentation of this moment; as

in so many of Ondaatje's poems, the attempt to capture some facet of extra-literary reality occasions a paradoxical dialogue of art with art. The photograph of the woman and the "posing" dog is thematically bound to another aspect of Ondaatje's lyrical enterprise. Having admitted his own interest in photography to Solecki ("Interview" 42), Ondaatje's writing makes frequent use of the photograph as a symbol of the artistic desire for fixity or stasis that is in constant conflict with the flux of real experience. His need to fulfil this desire becomes clear as the poem continues:

This moment I broke to record,  
 walking around the house  
 to look for paper.  
 Returning  
 I saw you, in your gaze,  
 still netted the picture, the dog.  
 The music continuing  
 you were still being unfurled  
 shaped by the scene.  
 I would freeze this moment  
 and in supreme patience  
 place pianos  
 and craggy black horses on a beach  
 and in immobilised time  
 attempt to reconstruct. (*DM* 53-54)

Not content to remain a living part of this scene, "Ondaatje" becomes preoccupied with the perception of it, and must attempt to "record" it, an act which involves breaking away from the moment, and (as the first line might also suggest) breaking the moment itself. Returning with his paper, the poet "nets" the scene, noting the extent to which



his primary subject is "shaped" by music and setting. The poem's final lines underscore the photographic nature of what Ondaatje tries to accomplish with poetry, and perhaps admits the frustration that inevitably attends this venture. By creating a poem in which time is "immobilised," the poet strives to "freeze this moment," an act that requires the discipline of "supreme patience" and ends in the "attempt to reconstruct" a moment that has been paradoxically broken by the very attempt to fix it with a permanent poetic record. That this reconstruction remains only an attempt is perhaps a proof of the notion that "the freezing of a moment in time, because it excludes the moments before and after the exposure, irresistibly impresses on us the linearity of experienced time and our own inability to freeze time" (York 17). Clearly, Ondaatje identifies the conflict between the desire for fixity and the eternal motion of experience as a contradiction central to the endeavour of artistic representation.

The need to freeze time, achieving the quality of stasis demanded by art, is also examined in several poems -- spanning *The Dainty Monsters* and *Rat Jelly* -- which narrate Ondaatje's reactions to the work of other poets and visual artists. Several of these focus on the painting of Henri Rousseau, and especially upon the artist's faculty for "fixing" his subject matter. Like Ondaatje's, Rousseau's work depicts the underlying wildness of existence through his fascination with the animal world, and with the intermingling of the human world and the jungle that he saw as a central motif in the morphology of dreams. There is a sense of unnatural quiescence in Rousseau's vividly colourful representations of this subject; his commingling of human and animal spheres is unthreatening when compared to Ondaatje's more violent and grotesque poems. This odd, peaceful quality is at least partially a function of the formal concreteness of Rousseau's style. His highly disciplined demarcation of zones of bright colour and his inclination for stylized shapes and patterns give his jungle scenes a surreal stillness, as if his human and animal subjects were truly frozen in a zone of

"immobilised" time. As Ondaatje writes in "You Can Look But You Better Not Touch,"

rousseau wisely eliminated  
 leopards from his follies  
 A mistake to imagine them static  
 Parts  
 of elaborate metronomes. (*DM* 37)

While it is purely whimsical to suggest that leopards could not have appeared in Rousseau's painting, the notion that these large cats represent a vital energy that cannot be netted by art is significant, as is the reference to this art as "elaborate metronomes." This metaphor clearly illustrates the almost mechanical precision and order that characterizes Rousseau's art.

In "Henri Rousseau and Friends," Ondaatje underscores Rousseau's capacity to fix his subject in this way, and questions the validity of the vision of life that results. In this poetic description of a Rousseau painting, the jungle is sterilized by the intrusion of art; netted by the painter's art, this setting is defined by an unnatural and formulaic order reminiscent of the first lines of "The Republic" (quoted above):

In his clean vegetation  
 the parrot, judicious,  
 poses on a branch.  
 The narrator of the scene,  
 aware of the perfect fruits,  
 the white and blue flowers,  
 the snake with an ear for music;  
 he presides. (*DM* 28)

In this sanitized jungle the parrot -- like the dog in "Four Eyes" -- "poses" among the perfect plants, "presiding" near a snake that appreciates music. Here, the jungle is

cauterized by the order that attends the artist's eye; a sleepy hierarchy of parrot, apes and oranges characterizes the setting: "a jungle serfdom which / with this order / reposes." The lines that comprise the body of the poem elaborate on the unnatural perfection that typifies the plant and animal inhabitants of Rousseau's jungle:

They are the ideals of dreams.  
 Among the exactness,  
 the symmetrical petals,  
 the efficiently flying angels,  
 there is complete liberation.  
 The parrot is interchangeable;  
 tomorrow in its place  
 a waltzing man and tiger,  
 brash legs of a bird.  
 Greatness achieved  
 they loll among textbook flowers  
 and in this pose hang  
 scattered like pearls  
 in just as intense a society.  
 On Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot's walls,  
 with Lillie P. Bliss in New York. (29)

It is difficult to say precisely how, or from what these "ideals" represent a "complete liberation," but their staid, symmetrical uniformity suggests a potential flight from the fearful or chaotic aspects of reality that Ondaatje's art explores. The "greatness" that qualifies Rousseau's art is significantly past tense as, caught in an eternal pose, the motionless jungle becomes almost lifeless. Like scattered pearls, the inhabitants of Rousseau's dreamy junglescape were once connected to life, but have become purely

ornamental -- they serve now only as decoration in a crass, aristocratic setting that Ondaatje ironically describes as "as intense a society." Like the world in the painting, this society is constrained by artificial order and etiquette, and evokes a potent sense of estrangement from the essential appetites and the grotesque energy of life. Proving his ability to animalize the human as well as personify the animal, Ondaatje ironically completes the thematic connection of high society to Rousseau's dainty monsters in an illustration of their pretension and imaginative captivity. Vulgar in their beauty and easily shocked, their evasion of the disturbing or mysterious aspects of existence depends on superficial appearances, and caution:

And there too  
 in spangled wrists and elbows  
 and grand façades of cocktails  
 are vulgarly beautiful parrots, appalled lions,  
 the beautiful and forceful locked in suns,  
 and the slight, careful stepping birds. (30)

Rather like the denizens of the pig-pen in "Sows," the inhabitants of this clean and vulgar jungle will brook little that affronts their petty hierarchies and sense of decorum. In this way, the de Groots and Blisses achieve a kind of imaginative stasis that defines their (and perhaps our) perception of the art on these walls.

However negative Rousseau's role may seem in this poem, Ondaatje's stance toward this painter's work and toward the qualities of artistic fixity it represents is more complex than this poem might suggest on its own. The frequency with which Rousseau appears in Ondaatje's writing alone proves the poet's fascination with the artist, and occasions necessary questions about Ondaatje's own artistic requirement for fixity or stasis.<sup>1</sup> The complexity of this relationship is readily apparent with

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Scobie provides a comprehensive list of Rousseau's appearances in

Rousseau's reappearance in *Rat Jelly*. Published in 1973, several years after the publication of *Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje's second collection of poems explores many of the same themes we have examined in his earlier work, perhaps with an even greater awareness of the violence inherent in the relationship of human perception, artistic representation and reality, and with a more explicit concentration on the role of the artist and the act of art-making. Several of these poems are explicitly self-referential, narrating their own creation with an analysis of the contradictory forces at work throughout this process. "Burning Hills" is a fine example of this genre as it offers a third-person narration of its own conception, during a creative summer retreat. Enclosed in a run-down, mildewy cabin, the poet becomes involved in a meditation on his own youth which is framed by descriptions of the actual preparation for and completion of the poem's first draft. Significantly, Rousseau has a place among the poet's equipment:

Hanging his lantern of Shell Vapona Strip  
 on a hook in the centre of the room  
 he waited a long time. Opened  
 the Hilroy writing pad, yellow Bic pen.  
 .....  
 What he brought: a typewriter  
 tins of ginger ale, cigarettes. A copy of *StrangeLove*,  
 of *The Intervals*, a postcard of Rousseau's *The Dream*.  
 (RJ 56)

Among the writing implements, political poetry and insecticide, the Rousseau postcard stands out, somehow intimately involved with what the poet is attempting. Although

\_\_\_\_\_ (continued)

Ondaatje's work, and, drawing on the scant biographical material that deals with this enigmatic artist, suggests why he (like William Bonney or Buddy Bolden) may have caught Ondaatje's interest. See "His Legend a Jungle Sleep: Michael Ondaatje and Henri Rousseau," pp. 42-46.

the poet again focuses on the fixity and stasis of Rousseau's work, this quality is now revealed as equally necessary for Ondaatje's creative enterprise; the postcard becomes "a test pattern by the window / through which he saw growing scenery." The contradictory union of the stasis of the test pattern and the organic flux of the "growing" scenery reveals the conflict between life and art observed throughout *The Dainty Monsters*, and suggests the essentially paradoxical vision of artistic representation that emerges in *Rat Jelly*.

Isolated and properly equipped for the enactment of the creative process, the poet finds that the room becomes a "time machine" that allows him to reexamine the summers of his distant past. Remembering the now nameless faces of nearly forgotten friends, the poet recalls the lusty, youthful energy of summer nights, "the devious sex-games with their simple plots," and bemoans the disparity between his "perfect" memories and the unremembered flaws caught in "old photographs he didn't look at anymore" (57). In spite of this reluctance to consider old photographs, the poet focuses on a particular image nearer the end of the poem, which "fuses the 5 summers":

Eight of them are leaning against a wall  
 arms around each other  
 looking into the camera and the sun  
 trying to smile at the unseen adult photographer  
 trying against the glare to look 21 and confident.

The summer and friendship would last forever. (58)

Older now, the poet can readily identify the artifice of the boys' pose, the attempt to look "21 and confident." Despite this awareness, however, Ondaatje expresses genuine regret at his own position in the picture; either unaware of the importance of the moment or consciously avoiding the contrived expressions of his comrades, the young poet-to-be is distanced from the others, eating an apple: "That was him / oblivious to

the significance of the moment. / Now he hungers to have that arm around the next shoulder. / The wretched apple is fresh and white." The older poet bemoans his earlier inability to engage in the deceptive (though obvious) fiction-making of the other boys, and is frustrated by the fixed image of his own indifference in the photograph. Issues of fixity and deception are central to "Burning Hills," and to the processes of poetic representation generally, and if the younger Ondaatje was unwilling to engage in the necessary deceptiveness of creative self-representation, the older poet is less timid in this respect.

Speaking of his own work, Ondaatje has said that "there's a great deal of lying in poetry, by necessity. . . . art is, to a certain extent, deceit" (Solecki, "Interview" [1975] 23). What links the two "Ondaatjes," young and older, presented in "Burning Hills" is their consistent unwillingness to disavow the necessary presence of autobiographical or lyrical distortion; while the younger poet refuses to partake in the obvious posing of his friends (perhaps simply assuming a subtler pose of indifference), the older poet completes "Burning Hills" with a poetic "frame" that derails our ability to put complete faith in his previous self-presentation, and occasions serious questions regarding the nature of representation and authorship:

Since he began burning hills  
 the Sheli strip has taken effect.  
 A wasp is crawling on the floor  
 tumbling over, its motor fanatic.  
 He has smoked 5 cigarettes.  
 He has written slowly and carefully  
 with great love and great coldness.  
 When he finishes he will go back  
 hunting for the lies that are obvious.

Significantly, this revision (the result of which we have just finished reading) will not purge the poem of all its "lies," just the ones, like that of the boys' overconfident pose, which are too easily detected. Again, this deceptive "fixing" of reality is paralleled with a lethal act of violence as the poet watches an insect dying from the effect of the insecticide that has been working since he began writing. The "fanatic" throes of the dying wasp seem to result directly from the art-making activity the poet is engaged in -- a correlation supported by earlier lines in which the poet imagines coming to the cabin without attempting to write poetry, and envisions a more direct and harmonious relationship with his surroundings:

One year maybe he would come and sit  
for 4 months and not write a word down  
would sit and investigate colours, the  
insects in the room with him.

In this way, the Shell Vapona strip may be related to the Rousseau "test pattern;" both become representative "tools" of the craft of poetic representation, required to achieve the stasis necessary to transform the vigorous flux of experience into art.

The image of the dying wasp indicates a thematic connection to "Spider Blues," another of Ondaatje's imaginative examinations of the darker implications of the artistic impulse. With black humour, this grotesque unification of artist and arachnid likens the relationship between poet and subject to that of murderous predator and its victim. The poem begins with a description of the spiders' fascination for the poet's wife:

My wife has a smell that spiders go for.  
At night they descend saliva roads  
down to her dreaming body.  
They are magnetized by her breath's rhythm,  
.....  
My own devious nightmares



are struck to death by her shrieks. (*RJ* 63)

As the poem continues, Ondaatje turns to a consideration of the spiders themselves; besides sympathizing with their fascination for his sleeping wife, he admits to a degree of respect for the discipline and control with which they perform their "art:"

Having once tried to play piano  
 and unable to keep both hands  
 segregated in their intent  
 I admire the spider, his control classic,  
 his eight legs finicky,  
 making lines out of the juice in his abdomen.  
 A kind of writer I suppose.

Here, the poet voices his respect for the spider's capacity for discipline and self-mastery -- qualities evinced by its ability to "segregate" the functions of each "finicky" leg. (Recall the poet's desire to "separate toes / with no help from hands" in "Four Eyes.") Once the identification of spider with poet is made, Ondaatje focuses on the parallel in an illustration of artistic motivation as something hungry and murderous; lurking in dark corners, the many-eyed poet awaits its audience/victim with deceptively self-effacing, lethal patience:

Spiders like poets are obsessed with power.  
 They write their murderous art which sleeps  
 like stars in the corner of rooms,  
 a mouth to catch audiences  
 weak broken sick

As the thematic affiliation between artist and spider gains weight, it becomes clear that this "murderous obsession" to fix or perfect the subject is a source of frustration for the poet, who is never entirely able to close the distance between the artistic "I" and the

subject without suffocating this relationship. As occurred in "Dragon," the poet/spider's need to "net" reality is revealed as a provisional, ever-imperfect resolution of their need to engage the world more directly, and paradoxically results in a disappointingly heightened sense of artifice or division from the reality his art seeks to capture. The particular nature of this artistic "fatal attraction" is explored as the poem continues:

And spider comes to fly, says  
 Love me I can kill you, love me  
 my intelligence has run rings about you  
 love me, I kill you for the clarity that  
 comes when roads I make are being made  
 love me, antisocial, lovely.

And fly says, O no  
 no your analogies are slipping  
 no I choose who I die with  
 you spider poets are all the same  
 you in your close vanity of making,

.....

And the spider in his loathing  
 crucifies his victims in his spit  
 making them the art he cannot be. (*RJ* 64)

As the narration of Ondaatje's "devious nightmare" continues, the spiders -- outdoing themselves in a fantastic and grotesque masterpiece -- surround his wife with complex web scaffolds, turning the bedroom into "a shattered pane of glass" as they lift her sleeping body into the air. Everyone appreciates the spectacle; even the flies applaud, spared by the peculiar ambition of this performance. Everyone exclaims at

the beauty of the spider-poets' work, "ALL / except the working black architects / and the lady locked in their dream their theme." Significantly, these final lines reinforce the connection between the poet and the spiders by focusing the poem's reader on the nature of this act of perception and representation. This is a vision of art in which the subject is wholly passive to the will of the perceiving eye of the artist. Sleeping and unaware, the poet's wife is transformed into art that is abstracted from her individual and actual self, and is consequently reliant on her silence, and her unconsciousness. The spiders must be careful not to wake their subject if they wish to keep her "locked in their dream," just as Ondaatje's own "devious nightmares" are "struck to death" when his wife regains her consciousness, and her voice.

As in earlier examples of Ondaatje's poetry, the process of artistic creation continues to be defined by a paradoxical union of emotional engagement and dispassionate discipline -- writing "slowly and carefully," Ondaatje composes his poems "with great love and great coldness." His poems represent an attempt to transform the chaotic aspects of reality into something static and permanent through the exercise of discipline, to "learn to pour the exact arc / of steel still soft and crazy / before it hits the page" ("Taking" *RJ* 55). Repeatedly, the attempt to impose stillness and order on the "soft and crazy" world of human experience reveals as much about the deficiency of perception and the categorizing intellect as it does about the extra-textual world. Quite often in Ondaatje's poetry, this revelation is attended by an expression of frustration which arises from the limitations of art, or paradoxical poetic meditations on the potential liberation from the impulse to create art and the implications of the resulting "artist's silence."

Surely one of the most profound and grotesque of Ondaatje's presentations of the violence and frustration of art-making is "Peter," the long final poem in *The Dainty Monsters* (86-93). A terrible parable of the development of artist and art, "Peter"

recounts the capture and mutilation of a wild man by villagers; physically and spiritually broken, the title character is reduced to the role of an amusing freak in a nobleman's court. Here, because those around him are unable to tolerate the anguish in his howls and grunts, he is horribly robbed of his voice when his captors cut out his tongue:

There followed months of silence,  
 then the eventual grunting;  
 he began to speak with the air of his body,  
 torturing breath into tones; it was despicable,  
 they had made a dead animal of his throat.  
 He was little more than a marred stone,  
 a baited gargoyle . . . (88)

Rendered inarticulate, Peter finally begins to speak, beyond language, with the voice of his body, uttering his pain through tortured gesticulations of lung and throat.

Significantly, his only other expressive outlet is through art, as he creates "violent" grotesques of sculpture and metal-work which link functional, civilized objects with various organic images:

All this while Peter formed violent beauty.  
 He carved death on chalices,  
 made spoons of yawning golden fishes;  
 forks stemmed from the tongues of reptiles,  
 candle holders bent like the ribs of men. (90)

Here, the artist's craft transforms the trappings of a cultured dinner table into symbols of a grotesque reunion with the bestial world of nature. The utensils and candle holders with which the courtiers "civilize" the act of eating -- distancing themselves from the brutal realities of consumption (mastication, digestion, excretion), and from

acknowledgement of their own position within the food chain -- become representations of reptiles, fish, and human bones. In this way, the tools of culture become symbolic reminders of a connection with nature; the alienating animal images reinforce man's role in a larger syntagm of predators and prey, just as the image of the human ribs connotes the biological necessity of eating. Peter, who is found at the beginning of the poem gorging (undoubtedly without the aid of utensils) on the remains of a cow he probably killed himself, conveys his own sensitivity to the unacknowledged duality of human existence through his art. By carving "death on chalices," the artist links the celebratory and life-affirming elements of the feast with the inevitability of death, and conveys his essentially grotesque understanding of life as an on-going mediation of contraries which, although categorically incompatible, are inextricably linked and interdependent. Bakhtin's analysis of the cosmology of Rabelais suggests that Peter's conception of the world is particularly well-suited to the medieval setting of Ondaatje's poem, and represents a primeval conception of the significance of the act of eating:

Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. (*Rabelais* 281)

Peter's dainty and monstrous table-ware foregrounds the grotesque aspect of dining by linking "man" more intimately with the "world" that feeds him and which, in death, he must ultimately feed.

In capturing the violence of existence, Peter's grotesque art is focused on fragments of the world around him. Unable or unwilling to attempt to synthesize a coherent vision of the world, Peter's art communicates a sense of futility that attends the acknowledgement of all that is open, indeterminate or unfinished. Exploding classicist ideals of completed forms and images, this art explores the realm of the incomplete or the partial in a nebulous statement of the artist's desire and of the difficulty of art-making:

He made fragments of people: breasts  
 in the midst of a girl's stride,  
 a head burrowed in love,  
 an arm swimming -- fingers heaved  
 to nose barricades of water.  
 His squat form, the rippled arms  
 of seaweeded hair,  
 the fingers black, bent from moulding silver,  
 poured all his strength  
 into the bare reflection of eyes. (90)

Peter's desire becomes focused as Tara, the nobleman's daughter, begins to mature physically. Throughout the poem, Peter's relationship with the girl seems benign, although he offers her strange gifts, including "golden spiders" and "silver frogs," which seem ominous in the light of "Spider Blues." The relationship changes as Peter becomes aware of the burgeoning sexuality that attends Tara's growth. In the poem's final section, Peter attacks her, committing a rape which is clearly analogous to the predatory violence inherent in the creation of art:

An arm held her, splayed  
 its fingers like a cross at her neck  
 till he could feel fear lashing at her throat,

while his bent hands tore the sheet of skirt,  
 lifted her, buttock and neck to the table.  
 Then laying arm above her breasts  
 he shaped her body like a mould,  
 the stub of tongue sharp as a cat. cold,  
 dry as a cat, rasping neck and breasts  
 till he poured loathing of fifteen years on her,  
 a vat of lush oil, staining,  
 the large soft body like a whale. (93)

In this ugly, violent act, the roles of victim and tormentor shift and intermingle as Peter vents his frustration in an attempt to possess and "mould" the young woman.

Ultimately, as often happens in these poems, the attempt is a failure. Destroying the connection he formerly had with Tara, Peter forces a deadly intimacy which not only fails to relieve his frustration, but also binds him to the misery born of her victimization: "Then he lay there breathing at her neck / his face wet from her tears / that glued him to her pain."

The relationship between Peter's horribly enforced silence and his art once again suggests the inadequacy of language before the ineffable realities of experience and human suffering. Occasionally, Ondaatje's poetry turns to silence itself as the only legitimate response to these aspects of the world, and perhaps as the only way to avoid the violent objectification that seems implicit in the artistic representation of experience. The clearest statement of this theme comes in "White Dwarfs," from *Rat Jelly*. Here, Ondaatje expresses his fascination for figures whose suffering has propelled them into a region beyond language, where only a profound silence, the gaps and shadows that qualify their stories, can express any sense of their experience. The poem begins with a description of the narrator's "heroes:" those who are so extremely

true to their own nature that they transcend social values and norms, occupying a solitary zone on the margins of society and history:

This is for people who disappear  
 for those who descend the code  
 and make their room a fridge for Superman  
 -- who exhaust costume and bones that could perform flight,  
 who shave their moral so raw  
 they can tear themselves through the eye of a needle  
 this is for those people  
 that hover and hover  
 and die in the ether peripheries  
 .....

Why do I love most  
 among my heroes those  
 who sail to that perfect edge  
 where there is no social fuel (RJ 70)

Anticipating the thematic paradox critics recognized in *Coming Through Slaughter*, "White Dwarfs" seems to celebrate the absolute candour and directness of an "artist's silence" (which is itself an oxymoron) within the context of a poem. The figures who maintain this silence, make their space a "fridge for Superman"; the "great coldness" Ondaatje claims is necessary for the creation of art is, for these people, essential to their ability to maintain a particularly autonomous sense of self. This reference to Superman is doubly allusive, referring both to Nietzsche's conception of the superman, and to the Arctic retreat of the comic-book hero. The pop-culture Superman's icy and mysterious "Fortress of Solitude" connotes the isolation that typifies the space these heroes occupy, while the philosophy of Nietzsche speaks to the potential of these



individuals to reach an ideal state wherein integrity and absolute fidelity to their own nature creates a zone that is beyond categorizing human values. While Ondaatje does not seem to aspire to a perfect silence, "White Dwarfs" upholds such silence as perhaps the only appropriate response to the tragi-comic multiplicity of existence -- a response so honest that it dissolves the usual interface between individual and community:

that silence of the third cross  
 3rd man hung so high and lonely  
 we don't hear him say  
 say his pain, say his unbrotherhood  
 What has he to do with the smell of ladies  
 can they eat off his skeleton of pain?

The Gurkhas in Malaya  
 cut the tongues of mules  
 so they were silent beasts of burden  
 in enemy territories  
 after such cruelty what could they speak of anyway  
 And Dashiell Hammett in success  
 suffered conversation and moved  
 to the perfect white between the words

Respectful of the profound significance of their silence, Ondaatje, once again, does not join in. Instead, he uses his voice to draw attention to the "ether peripheries" where his heroes hover and die after a brief flash of fame or notoriety, born out of the manic directness of their attempts to communicate the essence of themselves in a largely unappreciative, hostile universe: "there are those burned out stars / who implode into silence / after parading in the sky / after such choreography what would

they wish to speak of anyway." Ondaatje is forthright about his own incapacity for "creative silence," and about the fear that such silence holds for him:

There is my fear  
of no words of  
falling without words  
over and over of  
mouthing the silence

Valuing his own place in a community, and the limited potentials of speaking to that community with the voice of art, Ondaatje balks at the possibility of his own silence, making a partial retreat back into the problematical realms of language and the attendant abstractions of perception and representation.

As we have seen, however, Ondaatje's "voice" never speaks without simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of its authority; this voice strives to incorporate its own significant silences, its own meaningful gaps, through its fundamental indeterminacy, and the double-speaking, two-faced ambivalence of the grotesque. Throughout the poetry of *The Dainty Monsters* and *Rat Jelly*, Ondaatje explores both the limitations and the potentials of his art in its capacity for the self-conscious mediation of the logic-driven ordering tendencies of human perception and the inexhaustible, protean multiplicity of the world. This conceptually grotesque combination of apparent incompatibles is especially integral to "King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens" (*RJ* 61). Exploring imaginative linkages between the poets (both Ondaatje and Stevens) and MGM's giant, mechanical gorilla, the poem renders a poetic meditation on the locus of order and chaos potentially created through art. Near the end of the poem, Ondaatje has his Stevens considering these relationships: "Meanwhile W. S. in his suit / is thinking chaos is thinking fences." These lines parallel the unordered chaos of life with the intellectual "fences" represented by categorical

boundaries, and would seem to argue for the necessity of both in any attempt to represent experience. The parataxis of the second line creates the possibility of several interpretations. The lack of a comma after the word "chaos" may suggest that Stevens must handle these ideas simultaneously if he is to be able to create art. Another reading would imbue chaos itself with the ability to conceive of fences ("chaos is thinking fences"). Finally, the line could also be read as a statement that thinking of fences is an inherently chaotic, or risky, activity. In any case, this line reinforces the notion that order and chaos are always involved in a dynamic and co-dependent, though frequently antagonistic relationship. The acknowledgement of this relationship attends the realization that, for Ondaatje, the creation of art is always a grotesque amalgam of order and chaos, synthesis and analysis, categorical division and paradoxical fusion.

Recognizing the abstraction and potential violence of representation does not paralyze Ondaatje as a poet, or force him to assume the artistic silence examined in "White Dwarfs." Rather, Ondaatje continually employs the grotesque to explore this violence in a context wherein both poet and reader are made to acknowledge it, and to acknowledge the limitations of language, perception and art in their respective attempts to capture or represent reality. Grotesque art, by evading categorical analysis through contradiction, foregrounds the violence inherent in all acts of subjective representation or interpretation. In Harpham's terms, "[a]ll interpretation disfigures the artifact by rearranging it, taking elements out of their contexts and placing them in new juxtaposition to one another . . ." (21). Ondaatje's poems narrate the processes by which we receive stimuli from the outside world -- whether the stimulus is a poem, or another sort of experience -- and challenge the validity of the conventions and paradigms through which we generally do so. Engaging the grotesque, Ondaatje's art frequently focuses on the "civilized," artificial constructions that help us distance ourselves from the world.

The title poem from *Rat Jelly* is exemplary; grotesque in the extreme, it analogizes the creation of a poem with the preparation of a strange dish, and dispenses with any attempt to prettify its ingredients or origins:

See the rat in the jelly  
 steaming dirty hair  
 frozen, bring it out on a glass tray  
 split the pie four ways and eat  
 I took great care cooking this treat for you  
 and tho it looks good to yuh  
 and tho it smells of the Westinghouse still  
 and tastes of exotic fish or  
 maybe the expensive arse of a cow  
 I want you to know it's rat  
 steamy dirty hair and still alive (31)

The ostensible "subject" of this poetic feast, the rat endures the same sorts of violence that we have seen represented in other examples of Ondaatje's poetry. Captured, this subject is made static when it is frozen in a modern Westinghouse freezer. The rat is then carefully vivisected, and carefully presented (to us, the audience and dinner guests) for consumption. Abstracted from its own essence by the methods of its preparation and presentation, the rat now "looks good," and tastes of fish or beef. In this way, the poem represents the deception that occurs when art refines or recreates its subject to fit the conventional "tastes" of artist and audience. Significantly, however, Ondaatje doesn't allow his own poem to end here; with grotesque determination, our chef reacquaints us with our meal, focusing our attention on the "steamy dirty hair." This rat, moreover, is still alive; by nourishing us it remains a vital part of a greater organic chain that links its captors -- even through the civilizing filters of the

Westinghouse and the oven -- to the bestial world of predators and prey. It is alive, further, in its capacity to offend, to remain a rat in a context where rats don't normally belong. Because there is no conventional acceptance of rats as a legitimate source of food, we are unable to divorce ourselves from the reality of what is presented to us: while the "arse of a cow" can become "beef," rat remains rat, even in a jelly. In this way, "Rat Jelly" represents both the cauterizing, abstracting tendencies of human perception, and a relentless refusal to allow those tendencies to estrange us from the real raw material of the poetic subject. The resulting poem elicits disgust as it acknowledges and affronts conventional expectations.

Ondaatje's search for a less violent, less abstracting mode of engaging the world manifests in other ways as well. There are moments, throughout the poems in *Rat Jelly*, when the searching poetic eye seems to recognize its own limitations and, rather than attempt to capture or freeze its subject, is content to pass on, acknowledging and perhaps celebrating the ephemeral nature of experience. In "White Dwarfs," for instance, the poet is content not to pry too forcefully into the white "silences" of his heroes, and seems to value the unspoken mysteries and depths that these gaps imply. The silence itself is ultimately conceived of as an egg, "-- most beautiful / when unbroken, where / what we cannot see is growing / in all the colours we cannot see" (*RJ* 71). For a calm moment, the poet affords himself a degree of respectful contentment, a reprieve from the usual egg-breaking of poetic omelette-making. Here, the violence that attends the act of "netting chaos" is avoided, as the desire to capture reality is momentarily suppressed in favour of a less "complete," less closed, but more tolerant, and finally more realistic mode of seeing and describing. Instead of "pinning" or "freezing" a moment or experience, the art of the grotesque calls for a less absolute vision of artistic production, one that does not seek to catch the essence of its subject in the usual way. The grotesque experience of an object occurs in the moments before we

have received "a clear sense of the dominant principle that defines it and organises its various elements" (Harpham 16). It would seem that this is close to Ondaatje's vision of perfect poetry -- one which, as Solecki notes, conceives "the ultimate poem [as] the one which transforms reality into poetry without 'crucifying' it" ("Nets and Chaos" 104). Rather than imposing order and stillness on the inchoate world of human experience, this sort of poem leaves reality unfocused, incorporating the fleeting dynamism of life through indeterminacy, and acknowledgment of the fragmentary nature of perception. In "'The gate in his head'," a poem written for Victor Coleman, Ondaatje reveals his own belief in this sort of poetry -- poetry, like Coleman's, that expresses "not clarity but the sense of shift" (*RJ* 62). The poem goes on to present another image of Ondaatje at work, this time valorizing the flux of the artistic process itself over the fixity of a finished poem, or image:

My mind is pouring chaos  
 in nets onto the page.  
 A blind lover, dont know  
 what I love till I write it out.  
 And then from Gibson's your letter  
 with a blurred photograph of a gull.  
 Caught vision. The stunning white bird  
 an unclear stir.

The presence of the photograph here functions differently than in other examples of Ondaatje's poetry. Unlike the people and animals caught in the other photos that appear in this work, this gull is not "posing," nor, significantly, is the bird actually "caught" by the camera at all. Blurred by the gull's motion, the photograph catches the essence of "vision"; impressionistic and transitory, the photographic image of the bird is as incomplete -- and almost as real -- as the sight itself. The poem's final lines

emphasize Ondaatje's belief in a poetics quite contrary to what Bakhtin called "the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed" (*Rabelais* 25): "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."

Throughout the poetry of Ondaatje's early career, then, the grotesque acts as a phenomenological testing ground in which the poet explores the locus of art, reality, and the paradigms of perception and representation. Whether these poems demonstrate the violence that attends the process by which experience is transformed into art, or suggest more provisional, less "classical" artistic ideals, the relationship they establish between poet, text, reader and reality is a complex one. If we value these poems, it is always with the acknowledgement of gaps that separate us from their subjects, and of the limitations inherent in the relationships that define our stance toward them. As readers of Michael Ondaatje, we too are always moving to the clear, always being engaged in the dynamism of the poet's imagination, and in the wonderfully grotesque manifestation of his sensitivity to worlds just beyond the clutching grasp of art.

Chapter Two:  
"The Ambidextrous Gun: Reading the Grotesque in  
*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*"

In 1970, the year after the appearance of *The Dainty Monsters* and two years before the publication of *Rat Jelly*, Ondaatje garnered national acclaim by winning the Governor General's Award for poetry. The winning book, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, is about as strange a selection for Canada's highest literary award as one could expect. Eschewing any kind of clear "Canadian content," *Collected Works* comprises a bizarre poetic historiography of one of the most infamous outlaws of the American West: cattle-rustler and killer, William Bonney, a.k.a. Billy the Kid.<sup>1</sup> Showing many of the same thematic concerns that typify his short poetry, *Collected Works* is perhaps the most potent demonstration of the importance of the grotesque in advancing Ondaatje's vision of the contingent nature of representation, and of the inchoate or chaotic aspects of experience, perception and existence. As Douglas Barbour observes, "there is a power to the book that resists analysis, something in it that seduces readers into a game of complicity with the writing and makes them the highly active readers every writable [and, I would add, grotesque] text desires" (36).

Like so many of the short poems examined in the last chapter, *Collected Works* thematizes the confrontation between the categorizing strategies that characterize the intellect and the dynamism of experience that is essentially hostile to categorical demarcations -- and to the stasis they seek to impose. In *Collected Works* these two ostensibly incompatible visions of the world engage in an unresolvable brawl, in which the mind and body of Billy the Kid become a grotesque and chaotic site where categorical oppositions of all types are violently transgressed. A grotesque parable of

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this honour was shared with bp Nichol's *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid*, another Canadian treatment of Bonney's life. Stephen Scobie paraphrases Nichol's observation that the amount each author received when the prize



historical (and artistic) representation, *Collected Works*, like Ondaatje's shorter poems, analogizes the act of representation with violence, thematizing the endemic violence of Billy's historical context as a paradigm for the creation of history and art. In this context, Billy emerges as a crosser of geographic and conceptual boundaries -- a paradoxical hero/villain on that mythic "frontier" where order and chaos collide and coexist.

Ondaatje's representation of the final years of Bonney's life engages the grotesque on levels of form, image and character. A typological ferment of prose and poem, quotation and imagination, *Collected Works* is a generic grotesquerie, and contains some of the most powerfully grotesque imagery in Ondaatje's *oeuvre*. Moreover, I hope to illustrate how Ondaatje, playing the grotesque meta-historian, seeks to engage his reader in a complex writerly game wherein the usual boundaries that distinguish writer, reader and character are violated. Here, the functions and identities of poet and reader, subject and object, and even outlaw and sheriff, become illicitly commingled in a text that dismisses the myth of historical closure in favour of the open-endedness of myth.

Since his death in 1882 (at the age of twenty-two), Billy has existed at the margins of historical record, in a liminal space where history and legend are without clear demarcation. Billy's enduring "fame" usually amounts to a sketchy sense that his life, an archetype of the mythic "Western," was a short and violent one. The fact that he is remembered today at all is as much a function of popular culture, and its fascination with violence, as it is a result of traditional historical inscription. Supplementing the (very) rough material of Billy's historical representation (including popular biographies and films) with his own imagination, Ondaatje creates a vision of the Kid that disavows traditional modes of historical or biographical discourse, and

\_\_\_\_\_ (continued)

was divided (\$5000) was identical to the amount of reward money originally offered for Billy the Kid ("Two Authors" 205).

highlights Billy's ex-centricity (to use Linda Hutcheon's term). In so doing, Ondaatje exploits the potential for such a figure to de-centre the authority of history itself, as well as that of representation generally.

Traditional historical representation, argues Hutcheon, seeks to create an apparently seamless relationship between historical discourse and the events or figures that comprise the subject(s) of that work. Defined only by an aura of authoritative objectivity, history seeks to efface its own "authored" aspect and deny any common ground with other types of narrative. This vision of the authority of history has recently come under considerable scrutiny by theorists and historians like Hayden White, whose writings on this subject throw far greater emphasis on the processes of narrativization by which the sundry raw materials accreted through historical research are fashioned into appreciably meaningful (albeit provisional) structures. White spends considerable time demonstrating the dependence of history on traditional literary genres in reaching this objective; in his view, "history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation" (23). Quoting an essay by Dennis Duffy on Timothy Findley, Hutcheon describes her own sense of the overlapping of historical and fictional modes, and advances a caveat regarding the nature of historical objectivity or historical truth:

. . . to write history (or historical fiction) is (equally) to narrate, to represent by means of selection and interpretation. History (like realist fiction) is *made* by its writer, even if events are made to seem to speak for themselves. For example, as Dennis Duffy has noted, the effect of reading in fragmented form about the thematized archival researching process in Findley's *The Wars* is to make us aware that stories "do not tell themselves. They do not come to us with beginnings, middles and ends waiting to be bevelled neatly against each other. They come from

scraps and tags, and we order them according to our notions of meaning rather than out of a certainty that it had to have been this way." (66)

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* formally refutes the traditional concept of historical truth, presenting a collection of "scraps and tags" that obliges the reader to find the beginnings, middles and ends -- to take an active role in the construction of an image of Billy the Kid that is very much our own. At the same time, we are obliged to acknowledge the poet's role in ordering our "raw" materials, and in fashioning -- out of his own imagination and artistic agenda -- the lyrical and fictional passages that construct Billy's voice(s) throughout the text. As is never the case in traditional histories, Ondaatje (as author) is a strongly implied *presence* in *Collected Works*; indeed, his function of ordering and narrating Billy's story is made overt through a thematic correlation between author and protagonist. The "voices" of Ondaatje and Bonney are coextensive in *Collected Works*, emerging throughout the text as always duplicitous, always double in their endlessly shifting perspective.

What is more, Ondaatje erodes the boundaries of authorial/characterological identity even further through his presentation of Billy's killer -- and first biographer -- Patrick Garrett. Throughout *Collected Works*, Billy's identity and imagination are magnetized by Garrett, who, in his mission to capture, control and ultimately kill the evasive young outlaw, is thematically representative of history's need to "fix" Billy the Kid, to net him in the discourse of narrative. In this way, Garrett's role as sheriff is a thematic paradigm for Ondaatje's role as poet-historian insofar as he too is attempting to "capture" the Kid. Ultimately, the reader becomes involved in this strange fellowship, joining and commingling with author, protagonist and antagonist in the communal goal of bringing order to Billy's story.

In this text, then, subject and object are illegitimately conflated -- toppling the legitimacy of history as a viable treatment of the past as a static object, and reinforcing

the essential quality of history (and of narrative generally) as a dynamic *process*. This notion is germane not only to contemporary historiography and narrative theory but also to ways in which the grotesque has been theorized as reconstituting the act of reception: "[t]he grotesque is never a fixed or stable thing, but always a process, a progression" (Harpham 14). At the heart of grotesque instability is its potential to play with these processes; the grotesque "plays not only with things but also with the act of representation. It invites a search for meaning at the same time that it calls attention to the act of artistic creation. It suspends belief, and therefore takes reading out of the shadow of dogma" (Harpham 38-39).

The suspension of belief inherent in *Collected Works* is, as I have indicated above, very largely a function of genre. The question of genre itself is among the most difficult, and certainly the earliest of the problems Ondaatje's readers face upon picking up this text. A fragmentary generic amalgam of poetry and prose, original material and (generally unreferenced) "borrowed" or quoted text, *Collected Works* comprises a variety of photographs, partial transcripts, a newspaper interview, passages from various biographies, a comic-book legend, a sexist joke, testimonials, historical digressions, tall tales, several fictional prose passages and numerous lyrics. Frequently, the identity of the focalizing consciousness (in both the prose and lyric sections) is obscured or ambivalent, making it nearly impossible to determine the identity of the speaker, and obliging us to consider the possibility that characterological identity in *Collected Works* is as fragmented and overlapping as the generic categories that define its form. Moreover, the organization of these "scraps and tags" shows little regard for chronological order or for establishing logical causality; readers are obliged to adopt a very associative mode of reading if they are to endure the particular demands of this text.

Early in *Collected Works*, there is a description of the graveyard at Boot Hill: "There is an elaborate gate / but the path keeps to no main route for it tangles / like branches of a tree among the gravestones" (9). Implicit in this is a metaphor for the structure of *Collected Works* itself, in which separate documents (textual "gravestones") are presented in a manner that is disorderly in the terms with which historical discourse generally defines "order." Here, stories begin (or end) only to be concluded (or introduced) later in the text (or not at all). Certain events, including the deaths of Charlie Bowdre and of Billy himself, are represented more than once, and in some cases the representations are significantly contradictory. On the whole, Ondaatje's poetic graveyard "becomes a work that can be read in almost any order from within" (Barbour 37).

In many ways, the discontinuous structure of this grotesque generic hybrid is a potent contradiction of the conventions of traditional historical discourse, which emphasizes linear chronology and causality, reflecting its basic faith in the boundaries that distinguish figures and events, as well as in the narrative connections that rationalize and explain the course of those events. The generic disharmony of *Collected Works* qualifies a number of common assumptions about history-writing, maintaining -- indeed, highlighting and sustaining -- the kinds of indeterminate hermeneutic gaps that history endeavours to obscure. Such gaps, and the dilemmas they occasion for readers, are essential to the grotesque as a generic "species of confusion." Quoting Henry James, Harpham defines his sense of texts in which "the very openness of the invitation defeats, or at least renders partial and provisional, all interpretive responses," and concludes that "readers must themselves find a way to 'glory in a gap,' to profit, rather than suffer, from indeterminacy and ambivalence" (80). This message is echoed in the voice of Billy himself, when he addresses the reader of *Collected Works* and offers a starting point for his story: "Find the

beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, to be in" (20). To "begin" to find our way in this grotesque generic maze is thematized by the act of filling a gap, specifically, the "g" that transforms "be in" to "begin" in the passage itself.

The very first of these gaps, significantly, comes on the first page of *Collected Works*, where readers are confronted by a large empty frame, and an italicized passage that begins, "*I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked . . .*" (5). Who is speaking here? And what is the relationship between the passage and the framed lacuna above it? Assiduous attention to the "Credits" (CW 3) provides at least one answer; the text, we learn, comes from Western photographer L. A. Huffman's *Huffman, Frontier Photographer*, and we also discover that some of the other photographs in *Collected Works* are his. The photograph *manqué* itself is not explained by this information, however, and the reader must respond to this gap in other ways. On some level, the absentee subject of the "photograph" represents a subtle comment on the authoritative texts that comprise historical representation. Later, our sense of another photo of Billy will be conditioned by Paulita Maxwell's unfavourable response to it (discussed below), and a fictional account of Billy's own memory of "posing" in Sumner:

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)

This ingenuous comment by Billy says a great deal about the photograph, and especially about the process involved in its creation. Whereas the Huffman quotation says only that a Perry shutter is used, "as quick as it can be worked," Billy's memory of having his photograph taken underscores the illusory nature of the fixity photography

achieves. If all photography misrepresents its subject by eliminating the possibility of motion that attends temporality, this photograph is doubly misleading, achieved as it is only through the imposition of a static pose that spans the time it takes a man -- beyond the frame of this artificial world of stillness -- to mount a horse and ride off.

Throughout the lyrical and prose sections of *Collected Works*, Billy is almost invariably in motion; it is precisely this aspect of his character that the Perry shutter occludes. This, compounded with Paulita Maxwell's argument that the picture is inaccurate in other ways (see below), engenders a wholly textual picture that forces the reader to imagine the absent, original image and -- simultaneously -- occasions grave doubts about the ontological value traditionally ascribed to such images.<sup>2</sup> Ondaatje's empty frame indicates a great deal about the relationship of content and form in *Collected Works* -- a relationship that is defined by grotesque conflict -- and "suggests that Billy lies outside the poem, cannot be contained in a single frame" (Kamboureli, *Genre* 185).

The fact that the absentee photograph functions in this way raises questions about the passage below it, and, more generally, about how Ondaatje's recontextualization of historical documents reforms them. By including Huffman's passage at this point, Ondaatje transforms the statements made about photographic experiments into a subtle commentary on the act of representation, and simultaneously recasts Huffman's "voice" so that it becomes commingled with the poet's. "I send you a picture. . ." introduces not only the parado.: of the empty space that precedes it, but

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, a flashy 1993 reprint of *Collected Works* includes a famous photograph of Billy in a tombstone-shaped frame on the front cover. At first, this might seem like a simple acknowledgement of the power of the image, but a close examination of the photo reveals risks in this interpretation. This image compounds the other illusions of photography because, here, Billy has been "colourized" or hand-tinted to fit in with the colourful desert scene (green and yellow cacti, lurid orange sand, etc.) that frames him. What's more, around Billy's neck the colourist has included a conspicuously red (and rather chaotically rendered) handkerchief, which may not even exist in the original photo. This rather duplicitous visual comment contains a caveat about the effect of recontextualizing historical artifacts, and surely is connected to Billy's own statement about Garrett slicing off his head: "Blood a necklace on me all my life" (*CW* 6).

the paradoxical text(s) that is/are to follow as well. It is therefore important to consider how the passage constructs and comments upon acts of representation in its entirety:

*I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square 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. (CW 5)*

Surprisingly perhaps (given what has already been said about the photograph of Billy), this passage reveals a sensitivity to the importance of motion, as well as to photography's potential for "accuracy." Of course, the ultimate stasis achieved by photographs is indicated by the scientific language of the passage, the references to "experiments" and to "specimens." Moreover, the violence Ondaatje typically associates with the achievement of artistic fixity is subtly connoted by Huffman/Ondaatje's metaphor of "the line of fire," which thematically connects the camera to the gun, both of which are used to "fix" Billy in society, history, and in art. Yet here is a photographer who is clearly fascinated by movement, who focuses on trotting horses, falling snow, men walking, and who, very significantly, takes pictures not only of "moving targets," but from the perspective of motion, upon his own horse. Here is a vision of photography that would seem to accord with the artistic philosophy of "'The gate in his head'" (*RJ* 62), in which the "aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 25) is renounced in favour of an artistic statement of the fragmentary and "unfocused" nature of perception and representation. Emphasizing



process over product and flux over fixity, this photography, like Victor Coleman's poetry, expresses "not clarity but the sense of shift" that defines experience and perception (*RJ* 62).

This is, once again, a result of what Geoffrey Harpham describes as one of the constituent characteristics of the grotesque object or experience: that it occurs before we have received "a clear sense of the dominant principle that defines it and organises its various elements" (16). Indeed, this characteristic is applicable to the generic structure of *Collected Works* as a whole, in which, as we are beginning to see, the "dominant principles" that organize its "various elements" tend to remain partly or entirely occluded. At the heart of this wilful obscurity -- this resistance to interpretation -- is the grotesque conception of the relationship between form (or genre) and content; as Harpham puts it, "[g]rotesque forms place an enormous strain on the marriage of form and content by foregrounding them both, so that they appear not as a partnership, but as a warfare. a struggle" (7). This struggle in *Collected Works* is presented through formal or generic discontinuity on one level, and is strongly suggested by the prefatory Huffman passage, and by the framed blank space from which its referent has already made his escape.

Not surprisingly, many of the critics who have dealt with *Collected Works* have sought to delineate or reconceptualize the text from a generic standpoint, often endorsing a generic tag that is in keeping with their view of the book, or of Ondaatje's career as a whole. (It is within this tradition that I suggest "grotesquery" at the outset of this chapter.) Treatments of *Collected Works* have variously described it as a generic "collage," or "montage," a "docudrama," an "outlaw narrative," and, using a variety of adjectives, as being intimately related to photographic or cinematic genres.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to essays by Keith Harrison, Steven Heighton, Manina Jones, Smaro Kamboureli, T. D. MacLulich and Judith Owens for considerations of these generic labels.

Of course, none of these generic labels for Ondaatje's text is self-given, and while they each allow the critics who suggest them to say important things about the text, it is both useful and interesting to consider the title and (too often overlooked) sub-title of the work itself as a place to begin considering genre.

"*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*" establishes a particular relationship between text and reader from the start. The phrase "collected works" is, at the most basic level, as good a term as any for labelling this textual miscellany. However, "collected works" also denotes a fairly familiar generic type, specifically, a publication that reprints selections from the work of a given poet. If the signifier, "Billy the Kid," stands, then, in a position analogous to the writer who has produced these verbal artifacts we, as readers, are obliged to view "Billy" as a kind of artist, somehow sharing in the responsibility for the ordering of his own story. This view of the title is complicated by the fact the collected works of Billy the Kid are also "by Michael Ondaatje" who, in turn, has further complicated the notion of authorship by incorporating a variety of secondary material into *Collected Works*. The (at least) doubled authorship connoted by the title is the first suggestion of the fusion of object and subject that I mentioned above; it signals the coextension of author and character, and suggests a tacit admission that *Collected Works* is as much about writing and reading as it is about the life and death of Billy the Kid. As Stephen Scobie describes it,

[w]hat results from the title "*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje" is in fact a composite figure: Billy the Kid, outlaw as artist, and Michael Ondaatje, artist as outlaw, meeting in one persona, which is part history, part legend, part aesthetic image, part creator of images. ("Two Authors" 193)

There is, however, a further complexity to Ondaatje's title, which arises from the essential ambivalence of the word "of." It is possible, of course, to read this as a

synonym for "comprising," rather than reading it as "by." Such a reading would reconceptualize the title as a statement about the indirection of historical knowledge, and would suggest that, however exhaustive the base of research, our understanding of figures like Bonney remains wholly textual in origin, or that, as Hutcheon phrases it, "history, while it had a real 'referent' once upon a time, is accessible to us now only in textualized form, that is, through documents" (66). Taking this view, Manina Jones describes Billy as a "hero of representation, for these documents are his 'collected works' not because he composed them, but because he is composed *of* them. The signifier 'Billy the Kid' becomes the shifting locus of their intersection, the place where problems of documentation become unavoidable" (28). Simply put, there is no way to categorically refute either of these readings, which would seem to contradict one another. With characteristically grotesque ambivalence, the text seems to encourage both readings simultaneously. At one point, fairly early in *Collected Works*, Paulita Maxwell (reputed -- falsely we are told -- to have been one of Billy's "sweethearts") comments on the picture taken of Billy by a travelling photographer (discussed above), complaining that the photo "makes him look rough and uncouth:"

*The expression of his face was really boyish and pleasant. He may have worn such clothes as appear in the picture out on the range, but in Sumner he was careful of his personal appearance and dressed neatly and in good taste. I never liked the picture. I don't think it does Billy justice. (19)*

Over the page, as if in answer to the unfairness of the historical documents that construct his image, Billy responds, "Not a story about me through their eyes then" (20), seeming to avow his responsibility in (re)telling his own story. The juxtaposition of these passages reinforces the contradictory dualism of "*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje;" the second, by conflating the authorial roles of Bonney

and Ondaatje (outlaw and artist), the first, by underscoring the provisional ontological value of historical artifacts through which Billy has been and will be judged.

Interestingly, the full title of *Collected Works* contains Ondaatje's own generic label. Looking closely at the inset title page of the book, readers may notice the subtitle, "Left Handed Poems." Assuming we accept all of what is to follow as "poems," it is vital to establish the relevance of left-handedness in defining our expectations and responses about what we are reading. Meaning "left-handed," the word *sinistral*, a close etymological cousin of "sinister," betokens the commonly held historical association of left-handedness with evil, and the belief that left-handed people were duplicitous, and perhaps even dangerous. This connotation of duplicity is easily applicable to the whole of *Collected Works*, in which Ondaatje cleverly mingles the personal and historical without providing his readers with any clear way of extricating the two. Once again, the use of photography throughout the text is illustrative of this point. As mentioned, many of the photographs reproduced in *Collected Works* come from Huffman's work. Unlike the role of photography in traditional types of historical texts, however, the relationship between the photographs and the text that generally surrounds them is dubious. An etching of an anonymous prostitute is juxtaposed with one of Billy's descriptions of Angela D. (CW 64); a picture of an unidentified man with a dog prefaces the story of Livingstone, the madman who in-breeds grotesque spaniels (CW 59-62), and so on. Yet these photos have no direct relationship to what surrounds them; their relationships to these passages are a function only of the readerly association that attends their textual juxtaposition. In other words, their position invites the search for connection, and connections (direct or otherwise) are generally found.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, the man on page 59 is not Livingstone, and the woman pictured on page 64 is not Angela. In fact, the character of Angela D. is one of the clearest examples of Ondaatje's conflation of the historical, the popular, and personal. Corresponding with no actual historical figure, Angela Dickinson is named for one of Ondaatje's favourite actresses (Barbour 53). Interestingly enough, given her thematic

Several of the photos in *Collected Works* clearly illustrate the *presence* of Ondaatje as the author of this "history." The photograph of the man and woman on page 31, for instance, comes just as the text introduces us to John and Sallie Chisum, and we are strongly obliged on some level to "view" the historic brother and sister in the visual terms presented by the picture. In fact, this very contemporary (though authentic looking) photo is of Stuart and Sally MacKinnon, two of the friends to whom Ondaatje dedicated *Collected Works* (Barbour 53-54). This grotesque fusion of the authorial and the characterological is also evinced in the tiny, final photograph that concludes *Collected Works*; showing a young boy dressed in an ornate cowboy costume, six-shooters pointed out at us, this photo seems related to the empty frame at the beginning of the text. The grinning subject of this final framed image is, as we might suspect, a young Michael Ondaatje playfully partaking in the role of the pop-culture cowboy (Scobie, "Two Authors" 205). Revealing the intimacy with which Ondaatje constructs his own relationship with his protagonist, the duplicity suggested by these photographs simply underscores the (even greater?) deception of history, which endeavours to efface its discursive point of origin altogether.

In the context of a treatment of Billy the Kid, the idea of left-handedness suggests the unwitting duplicity of history in still other ways. In part because of the association of the sinistral with the sinister, left-handedness has become a significant part of the legend of Billy the Kid, owing very largely to the 1958 Arthur Penn film, *The Left Handed Gun*. It is probable, however, that Billy was actually right-handed, and that the misconception regarding this aspect of his character is the result of misreading the very same photograph that Paulita Maxwell criticized (above) as unjust:

Indeed, it was the reversed image of one famous photograph of Billy which led to the mistaken idea that he was left-handed. All

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association with Garrett (discussed below), Angela Dickinson's most famous role was as the title character in the television series *Police Woman*.

contemporary authorities, including Garrett, remember Billy as right-handed; but his left-handedness fits in better with the legendary image of the outsider. (Scobie, "Two Authors" 191)

One final way of reading "Left Handed Poems" has to do with more contemporary ways of explaining the phenomenon of handedness generally, and with current theories regarding the structures and functions of the human brain. Modern psychology has long held that different facets of the human mind are localized in different parts of the brain, and has more recently drawn a general distinction between the functions of the brain's left and right hemispheres. The left hemisphere deals in terms of logic, linear causality, language and syntax; it corresponds roughly with "reason," and the ordering and categorizing tendencies that allow us to draw distinctions and demarcations among phenomena in the world. The left brain is rational and systematic; it is responsible for structuring experience into meaningful patterns. Where the left brain distinguishes, the right brain synthesizes; it is associative and connective, working on the level of imagery and instinct. The right brain is unfettered by logic and is capable of making indirect connections, and of imaginatively finding patterns that do not meet the conditions of direct causality required by the left brain. The right brain is irrational, chaotic and unpredictable, but it is also responsible for imagination, for inspiration, and for the wild, grotesque transfigurations of dream. As it happens, contemporary psycho-physiology acknowledges a physical cross-over in the central nervous system, so that the left side of the human body is associated with the right hemisphere of the brain, and vice versa. Therefore, left-handed is also right-brained, and we are, by this reading of the subtitle, confronted with a collection of "Right Brained Poems" -- texts which necessitate a particular mode of associative, non-linear reading if the reader is to have a productive relationship with *Collected Works* as a whole. This accords with the disjointed narrative structure of the text, and with the

lyrical sections of the text, which fracture syntax in ways that confound unitary, left-brained modes of interpretation. (Indeed, very often the difficult nature of these poems is a reflection of the fact that they try to express the essence of psychological trauma with such immediacy that the left-brained capacity to maintain control is preempted.)

For most people, of course, right- and left-brain function cooperatively and collectively; nevertheless, the dichotomy they illustrate -- between fixity and flux, and order and chaos -- broadly suggests what I have described as the central thematic duality of Ondaatje's early poetry; it is through the portrayal of strife between these impulses -- which are at once complementary and antithetical -- that Ondaatje's work engages the grotesque. In *Collected Works* the principle site of this struggle is in the character of William Bonney.

As I have suggested, Ondaatje's portrayal of Billy the Kid transforms the legendary outlaw into a characterological grotesque that functions as a locus for the enaction of various kinds of thematic or ideological conflict. An influential reading of this struggle is that of *Savage Fields*, in which Dennis Lee explores what he calls the cosmology of "world" and "earth" in *Collected Works* and in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. In Lee's terms, "earth" corresponds roughly with those "natural," or wholly instinctive aspects of the planet that are not bound by culture or artifice, "world," with the realm of technology, civilization and of the ordering, categorizing tendencies of human perception and intellect. Lee's own delineation of these terms is valuable here:

"World" includes "civilisation," but it is more than civilisation as it has traditionally been understood. World is the ensemble of beings which are either conscious, or manipulated by consciousness for its own purpose. And world's main purpose is to dominate earth. It does this

by reducing earth to modes of existence which it can control: first and foremost, to the status of being neutral or value-free.

"Earth" includes "nature," but it is more than nature as it has been traditionally understood. Earth appears to world as the ensemble of beings which are some or all of: material, alive, and powered by un-self-conscious instinct. Earth sets itself against world by tantalizing or humiliating world; it accomplishes this by the fact of existing, which obliges world to recognize that it too is earth -- material, alive, and powered by instinct. (4-5)

As Lee is well aware, the cosmology of "savage fields" is itself a conceptual grotesque -- precisely because these two forces, so often perceived as categorically distinct and antithetical, are simultaneously overlapping and inseparable. Paradoxically, the antagonism between world and earth -- itself a function of world's insistence on categorical oppositions -- is undermined by the irrefutable oneness of these conceptual entities. A garden, like the one in the epigram to *The Dainty Monsters*, is both worldly, in its contrived arrangement and in the discipline of pruning and weeding with which it is maintained as a "garden," and earthly, insofar as it is intimately connected to basic organic processes common to all vegetable life, to the seasons, to weather, and because of its inexorable resistance to the worldly methods by which it is contained or controlled, tending always toward wildness. (Lee makes a similar argument by showing the essential "earthiness" of a telephone.) For Lee, the unity that underlies the antagonism -- the contradiction inherent in his own cosmology -- is unavoidable:

The terms "world" and "earth," then, must be defined in a particular way. They must let us affirm that a global war exists. But they must not imply that you could draw a physical or mental line through what is,



and find world on one side of the line and earth on the other. Each domain is co-extensive with the whole of what is. Everything that is, is world; everything that is, is earth. Yet at the same time earth and world are trying to destroy each other. (8)

Ultimately, this paradox is indissoluble (as paradox is wont to be); Lee's cosmological *bricolage* is not unmindful of this ambiguity, but rather accepts it, allowing the avowed contingency of his own categorical scheme to become a self-conscious comment on the provisional nature of categories (functions of "world"-view) generally. Lee is not terribly apologetic regarding this aspect of his argument either; rather, he often seems to value the effect of this confusion on the usual, world-centred aspect of rational consideration:

World and earth are shown as being at war, yet they keep turning out to be the same thing. How can we resolve the contradiction?

The answer is that we cannot. We must accept it . . .

To conceptualize this unusual state of affairs takes a certain amount of effort -- indeed, a willingness to bend one's mind in unaccustomed directions. (?-8)

This necessary tolerance of unresolvable contradiction -- of the simultaneous enaction of two mutually exclusive visions of unity and warfare -- is, as we have seen, an earmark of the grotesque, which is capable of "comprehending binary oppositions or [synthesizing] contradictory ideas" (Makaryk 85). Likewise, Lee's vision of the operative cosmology of *Collected Works* shows affinity to George Elliot Clarke's notion of the mythic "story of mutability" in Ondaatje's writing, and to Geoffrey Harpham's vision of myth itself, which "does not merely tolerate contradiction, but seeks it out and mediates it through narrative" (53). Harpham has this to say about the essential grotesqueness of myth:

Perpetual metamorphosis is the central premise of mythic thought, which operates on the principle of the cosmic continuum. According to this principle, no realm of being, visible or invisible, past or present, is absolutely discontinuous with any other, but all equally accessible and mutually interdependent. (51)

Grotesque mutability, then, is primary to what theorists like Harpham and Clarke see as the essence of the mythic -- an unrestrained, associative mode of thought that is, therefore, hostile to the static formulae and categories that characterize the logical, ordering intellect.

*Collected Works* enacts a demonstration of this grotesque cosmic continuity through its presentation of strife in which categorical demarcations are traversed and violated. World and earth are, like "grotesque," broad and loosely defined terms, and stand as paradigms for an endless host of related oppositions. Many of these are germane to our consideration of the potential of this text to undermine categorical analysis; multiplying endlessly, they include: violence/peace, sheriff/outlaw, sanity/insanity, human/animal, civilization/nature, domesticity/wildness, life/death, intuition/intellect, right-/left-brained, mind/body, body/world, and so on. In *On the Grotesque*, Harpham suggests his own sense of the ongoing conflict implied by these dichotomies, and of the thematic usefulness of the Western mythic "frontier" as a site for the enaction of such conflict:

On one side in all these constructs there is clarity, abstract logical order, stability, and linear time; on the other, formlessness, contradiction, ambivalence, instability, and cyclic or tenseless time. Once this elementary grammar is fixed in the mind we see it everywhere, projecting it onto the Mason-Dixon line, the Mexican border, cellars and attics, city and country, and such Manichean categories as "white" and "colored." . . .

These dualisms define the margin of ambivalence inhabited by the grotesque. (68)

It is primarily through Billy, grotesque outlaw-artist, frontier anti-hero and border-crosser, that the conceptual demarcations that define these apparent contraries are collapsed. Powered by his own engagement of paradox, Billy mediates contradiction and is partially unfettered by a unitary ego. At times, his inability to maintain an autonomous identity causes this identity to coalesce with that of other characters (particularly Pat Garrett's) or with the personality of Ondaatje himself. At other times, Billy seems to achieve a grotesque oneness with the earth that is antithetical to the fixed or categorical.

One of Billy's most characteristic actions is the crossing of some form of physical boundary or border. He spends much of his time either traversing -- or pausing in -- some liminal space, such as a river or a doorway. This physical location analogizes Billy's position as a grotesque, simultaneously mediating both halves of various categorical oppositions, or sharing in seemingly contradictory functions or roles (such as author and character, subject and object). Significantly, when Billy takes responsibility for telling a story that is "not through their eyes," he offers an image that may well be the "slight silver key" to unlocking some of the confusion in this grotesque "maze:"

Two years ago Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. Our horses stepped from country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of tree green. The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge of action rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat. That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning. (20)

Although this image may not seem to be particularly "accurate" in terms of the detail it presents, Billy's claim that it is thematically impoverished or superficial is misleading. One of only two references to Canada in the entire text, this passage obliges us to see the relationship between character and author analogized; Billy crosses the border just as Ondaatje, as Canadian writer, crosses national and generic borders. The passage says a good deal about Billy in other ways as well. It is hard to know if Billy's confession about the lack of "significant accuracy" is ironically deceptive, but the concern for accuracy emerges throughout Billy's attempts to construct order out of his experience. Here, we also see something of the profound sensory perceptiveness that defines Billy's vision, his inability to ignore "different colours of tree green." (Note "Billy"'s use of Canadian spelling here.)

To a large extent, these qualities -- Billy's concern for accuracy, and his sensitivity to the world around (and inside) him -- define the conflict between order and chaos that he represents. As a grotesque figure, Billy does not merely stand on one side of this dichotomy; he is not merely the chaotic "subject" that the artist/historian -- acting on the side of "order" -- must try to fix. For, at the same time as Billy shares in the role of author with Ondaatje, he too experiences the need for order -- the need to maintain a sort of discursive and psychological control of himself. Indeed, this characterological attribute defines the enactment of the grotesque throughout Ondaatje's *oeuvre*, maintaining its significance even in the late novels, where the grotesque no longer functions on the level of the text in the same way as it does in this fragmented book. Here, in what is arguably Ondaatje's most grotesque work on the level of the text, we pick up a strand that will continue in the later works (albeit increasingly on the level of the fiction) as characters struggle to make order out of their stories at the same time as they recognize the limitations of whatever order they can create, and the beleaguering chaos on the margins of that order. This is as true for characters within

the more ordered textual structure of *The English Patient* as it is for Billy; the difference between these works is in the earlier book's potent demonstration of this struggle for order through grotesque metatextuality, the ways in which *Collected Works* demands reader and author to partake more actively in the characters' process of construction and deconstruction.

After the Huffman passage, the first sections of *Collected Works* (all written in Billy's voice) illustrate the outlaw-artist's desire to control, beginning with a list of the casualties of his violent story that begins "These are the killed" (6). Divided in two, the list delineates those killed "(By [Billy])" and "(By them)." Paraphrasing Billy's career (and perhaps his identity) as a killer (and as a victim), the listing represents a fairly conventional (and utterly reductive) strategy for ordering historical information; there is little detail here, and the profound emotional responses that must have characterized each of these events is largely occluded. If this list is representative of Billy's need to order his life story, there are certainly points at which this order is threatened. The list highlights some of the gaps it incorporates, telling us that Morton and Baker, the first two victims on the list, were "early friends" of Billy's, but refusing to explain how these friends became enemies. Moreover, there is a profound irony in the statement that Billy killed "5 Indians in self defense (behind a very safe rock)." Finally, this historical list does not accord with history itself; including a "rabid cat" and birds shot during practice, the list of Billy's human victims contains only twenty men, whereas the usual historical account of Billy's "record" is twenty-one.

There is, then, a potential for disorder beneath the ordered surface of this list -- a list which, disturbingly, ends with its creator: "and Pat Garrett / sliced off my head / Blood a necklace on me all my life." Here, ultimately, the usual discursive relationships that define historical order are exploded. This is obviously not a chronological retelling of Billy's story, since what we are reading represents the disembodied voice of a protagonist already dead:

The poem's discourse, then, is largely uttered by a dead subject. It is this paradox that defies most critics' attempts to identify the narrative pattern that leads to Billy's death. Billy does not die in the poem. He is already dead when he utters his first monologue. (Kamboureli, *Genre* 189)

As a historical figure, Billy the Kid is, to a large extent, comprised by his death and the nature of that death. Death is a constituent facet of the enduring legend of Billy's short and violent life. For readers of Billy's history, his violent death is both necessary and inevitable -- presumed from the start. Ondaatje's Billy -- grotesquely amalgamated with his author -- knows this, recognizing that the symbolic blood of his death has now been integrated with our view of his life *in toto*. Death -- thematically associated with historical fixity itself -- has become the paradoxical site from which his story begins.

Billy's need and capacity to control the transformation of experience into narrative is further emphasized by the next "collected work," a prose account of the death of one of Billy's friends, Tom O'Folliard, at the hands of Pat Garrett. Billy tells us of how he and five friends had been "told that Garrett had been made sheriff and had accepted it" (7). Once again highlighting the capacity for indeterminacy that underlies the seemingly dispassionate order of Billy's narrative, he tells us, without explanation or development, that he "killed Jim Carlyle over some mixup, he being a friend." This chaotic "mixup" conflates the roles of friend and enemy at a point in the text when Garrett (once friend to Billy) assumes the roles of sheriff and foe. As the story continues, Billy describes how O'Folliard left the group, planning to rendezvous with them at Christmas in Sumner. Billy describes O'Folliard's proficiency with rifles, noting "he was always accurate." The story then turns to Garrett who, with Deputy Azariah Wild, awaits the arrival of Billy's gang at Sumner. As O'Folliard rides into

the ambush, Billy, seeming somehow to witness the scene, describes events with what seems like utter neutrality:

. . . [Garrett] went straight to the window and shot O'Folliard's horse dead. Tom collapsed with the horse still holding the gun and blew out Garrett's window. Garrett already halfway downstairs. Mr. Wild shot at Tom from the other side of the street, rather unnecessarily shooting the horse again. . . . (7)

The ostensible dispassion of this passage is qualified by indeterminacy in several ways, suggesting at times that a sort of black humour is being employed to distance the speaker (and us) from the subject at hand. There is an unavoidable humour implicit in the understatement with which Billy notes the "rather" unnecessary shooting of the already dead horse, as well as in the grotesque and outrageous grammatical ambiguity of "Tom collapsed with the horse still holding the gun . . . ." These touches of humour seem out of place in Billy's presentation of his friend's murder, and may indicate a strategy for repressing the chaos of his true emotional response. Later in the story, as O'Folliard is finally killed by Garrett, the possibility of this repressed response briefly flickers on the margins of the ordered narrative as grotesque physical imagery appears, and structures of syntax and punctuation are violated:

Tom O'Folliard screaming out onto the quiet Fort Sumner street, Christmas night, walking over to Garrett, no shoulder left, his jaws tilting up and down like mad bladders going. Too mad to even aim at Garrett. Son of a bitch son of a bitch, as Garrett took clear aim and blew him out. (7)

At this point, it is not even possible to be sure whether the repeated, unpunctuated references to Garrett as a "son of a bitch" are solely attributable to either O'Folliard or Billy -- both of whom are losing control in a narrative that suddenly problematizes the

identity of the narrating voice itself. Ultimately, Billy regains control of his story, focusing his attention (quite significantly) on the truly glacial dispassion of Garrett, who even forgets about the body of the deputy killed by O'Folliard:

Garrett placed O'Folliard down, broke open Tom's rifle, took the remaining shells and placed them by him. They had to wait till morning now. They continued their poker game until six a.m. Then remembered they hadn't done anything about Wild. So the four of them went out, brought Wild into the room. At eight in the morning Garrett buried Tom O'Folliard. He had known him quite well. Then he went to the train station, put Azariah F. Wild on ice and sent him back to Washington. (8)

The dispassion and control shown by the end of this story carries over the page, into the lyrical consideration of the Boot Hill graveyard. With typical historical abstraction, this poem orders the pervasive violence of Billy's world by treating Boot Hill as a collection of statistics -- static factoids that seek to embrace the totality of this world without directly acknowledging the violence and chaos of what is being ordered:

In Boot Hill there are over 400 graves. It takes  
the space of 7 acres. . . .  
300 of the dead in Boot Hill died violently  
200 by guns, over 50 by knives  
some were pushed under trains . . .  
Some from brain haemorrhages resulting from bar fights  
at least 10 killed in barbed wire.

In Boot Hill there are only two graves that belong to women  
and they are the only known suicides in that graveyard (9)



Here, statistics take over for narrative and for explanation. The motivation for the two suicides (and, for that matter, for all of the murders) is absent. This vision of Boot Hill diminishes responsibility almost entirely; the three hundred who died violently were not killed by other men, for demonstrable reasons, but "by guns," "by knives," "from brain haemorrhages," and "in barbed wire." In part, this ordering of the implicit violence of Boot Hill is achieved through distance, as both the ordering, speaking consciousness (Billy/Ondaatje) and the reader apprehend the cemetery as a wholly textual "site," a static accretion of data.

The contingency of the control these passages maintain is subtly emphasized by the questions begged by the poetic lists, and by the signals of repression suggested in the account of O'Folliard's death. Billy's orderings of his life story clearly indicate his own desire for order, his need to achieve an artistic fixity that is analogous with a kind of self-control. As we have seen, however, each of these attempts to order experience contains the seed of its own deconstruction: faint insinuations of the latent inner chaos that underlies the external order. At the heart of that inner confusion is Billy's sensitivity both to other people and to the world around him generally -- his apprehension of "different colours of tree green," for instance. Throughout *Collected Works*, Billy displays a profound awareness of his physical surroundings -- an awareness that is "physical" itself, grounded in the body, in the most basic of sensory perceptions. Despite his rage for order, Billy is the "right-brained gun;" he usually demonstrates a wildly imaginative and associative mode of thought that is at odds with the sorts of ordering strategies that he uses in the early pages of the collection. Wherever Billy's particular vision is forced to confront the violence of his world, he engages the grotesque.

The existence of these elements in Billy's character, of the disorder that defines his inner world, is acknowledged immediately after the Boot Hill lyric, in a prose

paragraph that recalls grotesque experience (at this point, the experience is not direct), and underscores Billy's need to repress such experience:

The others, I know, did not see the wounds appearing in the sky, in the air. Sometimes a normal forehead in front of me leaked brain gasses. Once a nose clogged right before me, a lock of skin formed over the nostrils, and the shocked face had to start breathing through the mouth, but then the mustache bound itself in the lower teeth and he began to gasp loud the hah! hah! going strong -- churning onto the floor, collapsed out, seeming in the end to be breathing out of his eye -- tiny needle jets of air reaching into the throat. I told no one. If Angela D. had been with me then, not even her; not Sallie, John, Charlie, or Pat.

(10)

Typical of many of the passages in which Billy is confronted by the grotesque, this description is characterized by discursive disorder and indeterminacy. Billy seems grounded in his own perception of normalcy here, and realizes that his vision is different from other people's. Yet it is hard to know how to respond to what follows. Is this an actual memory of experience of watching someone die, or (as occasionally happens later in *Collected Works*) is this the description of a nightmare? In either case, Billy's emotional engagement of the experience is highlighted by the violation of syntax and grammatical order throughout the passage. This loss of control, we learn, must be repressed, as Billy lists "the others:" the close friends (including, at this point, Pat Garrett) with whom he could never share this part of himself.

Billy's personal conflict between the order with which he would like to control his story (and himself) and the chaos that inhabits him is represented in one of the most significant early poems in *Collected Works*, appearing immediately after the grotesque passage above:

MMMMMMMM mm thinking

moving across the world on horses  
 body split at the edge of their necks  
 neck sweat eating at my jeans  
 moving across the world on horses  
 so if I had a newsman's brain I'd say  
 well some morals are physical  
 must be clear and open  
 like diagram of watch or star  
 one must eliminate much  
 that is one turns when the bullet leaves you  
 walk off and see none of the thrashing  
 the very eyes welling up like bad drains  
 believing then the moral of newspapers or gun  
 where bodies are mindless as paper flowers you dont feed  
 or give to drink  
 that is why I can watch the stomach of clocks  
 shift their wheels and pins into each other  
 and emerge living, for hours (11)

A complicated and perhaps contradictory piece, the poem begins with Billy humming; the physical generation of sound is equated with the process of Billy's "thinking." At the same time, significantly, Billy is in motion; "moving across the world on horses," Billy is only distinguishable from his mount by the "body split at the edge of their necks." Here, fairly typically, the processes of thinking and imagining are equated with moving through a physical landscape, as Billy considers what it would be like to have "a newsman's brain."

As Douglas Barbour notes, it is vital to recognize the association of movement with thinking, and, further, to recognize that most of this poem is qualified by the

conditional mode ("so *if* I had a newsman's brain") of the sixth line (47). The association of moving and thinking emphasizes the physical nature of Billy's mode of perception -- the fusion of body and mind so strongly implied by the grotesque prose passage discussed above. In fact, it is this aspect of Billy's mind that allows him to imagine having a newsman's brain at the same time as it disqualifies him from ever having one. Focusing on this correlation of the physical and psychological, Barbour describes this imaginative process:

Even as [Billy] is "moving across the world on horses," . . . he is thinking, he is exploring possibilities. Such "thinking/moving" takes him across borders, as the next two lines imply, with their suggestions of boundaries breaking down, even the boundary of the body itself. Because he imaginatively crosses borders he can wonder about a different kind of brain, which eliminates what it cannot comprehend . . .

(47)

It is vital, then, to ascertain what defines a "newsman's brain," and to consider why Billy would be fascinated by the possibility (or, as Barbour argues, the impossibility) of his possessing such a brain. This brain is, first and foremost, characterized by discipline and control; certain that "morals" are "clear and open," the morality of the newsman's brain is fixed and static, "like diagram of watch or star."

Fully understanding this line requires jumping forward in *Collected Works*, and making an association with a related poem. Here, Billy draws a connection between the ordering discipline like that of the newsman's brain and the line that distinguishes sanity and insanity, control and chaos:

I have seen pictures of great stars,  
 drawings which show them straining to the centre  
 that would explode their white  
 if temperature and the speed they moved at

shifted one degree.

Or in the East have seen  
 the dark grey yards where trains are fitted  
 and the clean speed of machines  
 that make machines, their  
 red golden pouring which when cooled  
 mists out to rust or grey.

The beautiful machines pivoting on themselves  
 sealing and fusing to others  
 and men throwing levers like coins at them.  
 And there is the same stress as with stars,  
 the one altered move that will make them maniac. (41)

Caught up once again in images of mechanism and of stars (with a knowledge of astrophysics that is not attributable to the historical Billy), Billy simultaneously records both his fascination with the ultimate order they represent, and his awareness of the omnipresent vulnerability of that order, of that potential shift of only "one degree" that will be the "one altered move" that transfigures order into chaos and madness. It is precisely this potential that the ordered (but reductive) newsman's brain refuses to acknowledge. Disavowing responsibility as well as the emotional and psychological chaos that attends the perception of certain aspects of existence, such a brain "eliminate[s] much" in order to survive. It turns away from the messy results of its own violence, seeing "none of the thrashing," never confronting the grotesque images of "eyes welling up like bad drains," and reducing its victims (as Billy himself has been reduced) to mindless "paper flowers you dont feed / or give to drink" (11) -- static and lifeless achievements of artifice.

The last three lines of the "newsman's brain" poem are paradoxical and indeterminate, resisting interpretation by disallowing the reader's determination of whether or not they represent Billy's participation in the mode of the newsman's brain, or the opposite. A great deal depends upon how we respond to the image of "the stomach of clocks" with which Billy is fascinated. Why is Billy captivated in this way, and why is it significant that he is able to "emerge living, for hours"? As mentioned above, one of the constituent dualisms that define the ambivalence of the grotesque is that between historical linear time, and mythic, "cyclic or tenseless time" (Harpham 68). The first represents the inexorable narrative movement toward Billy's inevitable death, the second, a non-linear conception of time as a grotesque cycle of degeneration and regeneration, which cancels out the very possibility of the closure of "death," and, heedless to historical demarcations that usually isolate "events," coalesces Billy's variety of life into collective experiential moments that are lyrically and eternally *present*. Billy's fascination with the clock might suggest his concern for historical time, for causality and narrative progression as means of ordering his story; the poem itself, however, at least partially undermines this reading. Significantly, Billy is not looking at the face of the clock; the hands and numbers that represent the passage of (linear and artificial) time are absent. Billy's bodily metaphor for the clockworks ("the stomach of clocks") indicates an organic appreciation for their movements as they endlessly "shift their wheels and pins into each other." Nevertheless, the poem ends with a subtle suggestion of the return of linear time. If Billy's engagement with the clockworks has allowed a temporary and paradoxical escape from time itself, the passage of time (and the system of discrete units by which that passage is defined) is potentially reasserted by the last words of the poem, which tell us that Billy can watch the stomach of clocks, "for hours" (11).

This lyric contains one of the moments in *Collected Works* where Billy considers a mode of fixing or controlling experience that his own inner chaos and

sensitivity ultimately disallow. As if to reinforce this point, this poem is followed by the graphic representation of an experience that potently demonstrates Billy's inability to "eliminate much:"

When I caught Charlie Bowdre dying  
 tossed 3 feet by bang bullets giggling  
 at me face tossed in a gaggle  
 he pissing into his trouser legs in pain  
 face changing like fast sunshine o my god  
 o my god billy I'm pissing watch  
 your hands

while the eyes grew all over his body (12)

Unable to construct an ordered representation of his friend's death out of the emotional and psychological chaos elicited by the experience, Billy's response is grotesque; fracturing language itself, this passage eschews proper syntax or punctuation in a more direct representation of the horror of what is being described. In phrases like, "tossed 3 feet by bang bullets giggling / at me face tossed in a gaggle," onomatopoeia ("bang") is illegitimately mixed into a linguistic context that nearly unhinges any sense of the relationships between words and their referents. Who (or what) is giggling, and why are they doing so? Does the second appearance of the word "tossed" refer specifically to the face (Charlie's?) that's "in a gaggle," or is it an out-of-place restatement of the previous line? This lyrical representation of Charlie's death catches "not clarity but the sense of shift" that defines the immediacy of Billy's psychological trauma. As such, the lyric defies left-brained exegesis; it is out of control, defined by the chaos of Billy's inner world. The last line records his inability to follow the exhortation of the newsman's brain, to "walk off and see none of the thrashing / the very eyes welling up like bad drains."

Interestingly, ten pages later, the reader is presented with another, entirely different, "revised" presentation of the death of Bowdre. Also in Billy's voice, this prose narrative powerfully demonstrates his need to gain mastery over himself by repressing the complexity and disorder of his psychological response:

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

Constructing his representation of the event to meet the requirements of an ordered narrative, Billy begins his revision by establishing place and time; the relatively unproblematic syntax of the entire passage would seem to contradict the psychological turmoil evinced by the earlier telling. This seems a more dispassionate, more distanced kind of discourse; Billy turns away from his own emotional response to the event, ignoring (and occluding) his own profound awareness of the dying man's body. Ultimately, this version of the murder is notably gentler -- Charlie is "lifted" back into the room, rather than unceremoniously "tossed 3 feet" -- and focuses more on the issues of cause and effect necessary for the processes of the narrativization of experience. Billy focuses on Charlie's actions and, in the last two sentences of the passage, asserts his own judgement that the act of shooting Charlie (which was perhaps a result of the man's unfortunate decision to borrow Billy's hat) was unjustified.

On the whole, the passage shows a preoccupation with detail, with the snow on Bowdre's boot for instance. This concern for minutiae simultaneously suggests the profound emotional impact that Billy is repressing in this story, and acts as a way for him to achieve control, obscuring the chaos of his inner world by focusing on the



outer. This tendency is evidenced further as the story continues, and Billy exhorts his dying friend to stand and confront his killer. (Here, significantly, there is no reference either to "pissing" or to the "eyes" growing on Bowdre's devastated body.) Billy's response to the confrontation of Bowdre with Garrett is representative of his own struggle for self-mastery:

[Bowdre] stood there weaving, not moving. Then began to walk in a perfect, incredible straight line out of the door towards Pat and the others at the ridge of the arroyo about twenty yards away. He couldnt even lift his gun. Moving sideways at times but always in a straight line. Dead on Garrett. Shoot him Charlie. They watched him only, not moving. Over his shoulder I aimed at Pat, fired, and hit his shoulder braid. Hadnt touched him. Charlie hunched. Get up Charlie kill him kill him. Charlie got up poking the gun barrel in the snow. Went straight towards Garrett. The others had ducked down, but not Garrett who just stood there and I didnt shoot again. . . . Charlie went straight, now closer to them his hands covered the mess in his trousers. Shoot him Charlie shoot him. The blood trail he left straight as a knife cut. Getting there getting there. Charlie getting to the arroyo, pitching into Garrett's arms, slobbering his stomach on Garrett's gun belt. Hello Charlie, said Pat quietly. (22)

In spite of its obvious intent to order, this passage belies something of the distress so powerfully evoked by the earlier poem. Billy stifles the turbulence of his emotions by focusing repeatedly on the "incredible straight line" of Charlie's progress, showing a fascination for geometrical order that becomes characteristic of his portrayal in *Collected Works*. Nevertheless, there are strong indications of the artifice at work in the ostensible dispassion of this narrative. The syntax and grammar here, although

certainly more orderly than in the first representation of Bowdre's death, are undisciplined, tending always toward indeterminacy and tenseless confusion, and serving to underscore the contingency of language as a medium for the representation of "truth." We are never sure, for instance, if it is Billy who is repeating "Shoot him Charlie," or even if the words are being spoken aloud at all. The sentence describing Billy's attempt to shoot Garrett also suggests semantic confusion; the referent of the first "his" is grammatically ambivalent: "Over *his* shoulder I aimed at Pat, fired, and hit *his* shoulder braid." Logically, the referent of the first "his" would be Bowdre (the subject of the previous sentence) as Billy aims over Bowdre's shoulder to hit Garrett, the clear subject of the second "his." As Bowdre walks his straight line, however, the identity of the two, of killer and victim, seem to fuse as they are superimposed in Billy's "sight." Significantly, Billy hits Garrett's "shoulder braid" -- exactly what we might expect him to hit if he were aiming "[o]ver his [Garrett's] shoulder."

The grotesque ungrammaticality and repetition of the passage would seem, then, to suggest the contingency of Billy's attempt at dispassionate self-control. As a representation of the death of a comrade, this narrative has much in common with the death of Tom O'Folliard (7-8). In both stories, Garrett figures prominently, and in each case he stands with Eastwood-esque indifference as he is approached by one of his dying victims. The profound dispassion of Garrett (who is not present in Billy's earlier response to Bowdre's death) seems to galvanize Billy's determination to get his story under control. (Paradoxically, however, Billy's apprehension of Garrett's type of control -- as the sheriff stands, awaiting Bowdre, greeting him finally with a quiet hello -- petrifies him to the point where he cannot even fire on his nemesis.) By retrospectively ascribing an objective "focus" to this horrific experience, Billy forces this event to "make sense," and achieves a provisional kind of order -- one that we already know "eliminates much."

Throughout the remainder of *Collected Works*, Billy is engaged in this struggle, crossing borders between order and chaos, fixity and flux, as he struggles to suppress his own profound awareness of the grotesque in the world around him. In the liminal, "frontier" world he inhabits, however, this project is continually problematized by the omnipresence of images of violence and death, as in this representation of his encounter with a decomposing corpse on the range:

Getting more difficult  
 things all over crawling  
 in the way  
 gotta think through  
 the wave of ants on him  
 millions a moving vest up his neck  
 over his head down his back  
 leaving a bright skull white smirking  
 to drop to ankles  
 ribs blossoming out like springs  
 the meat from his eyes (40)

The poem doesn't explicitly specify what is "[g]etting more difficult," but the need to maintain the control that allows him to hide his engagement with the grotesque is certainly implied by this failed attempt to "think through" an image that ultimately overtakes the entire poem. This vision of death is truly grotesque, conflating the organic with the mechanical in imagery that commingles death with regeneration ("ribs blossoming out like springs"), focusing on the grotesque humour implicit in the "smirking" white skull. Billy responds to the violence of his surroundings (and of his response) with his own violence; the horror around him invades him, projecting itself into his dreams: "Last night was dreamed into a bartender / with an axe I drove into glasses of gin lifted up to be tasted" (40).

Not surprisingly, Billy often tries to avoid confrontation with the grotesque or the violent in his ongoing attempt to achieve order. In this way, Billy emerges as a textual paradox throughout *Collected Works*; accepted today as a personification of the violence of his time and place, Ondaatje's Billy is constantly questing for ordered surroundings, for domesticity and peace. Analogizing this contradiction, characters from Billy's story often recall the Kid's ability to explode his own stereotyped image, even in his own time. Sallie Chisum, for instance, recalls how surprised she is by the genial "clear-eyed boy" that supplants her own image of Billy as a "bloodthirsty ogre" when she and Billy are introduced (CW 52).

The Chisum ranch itself represents the primary setting for several of calmer moments of *Collected Works*. The ranch takes on an almost Edenic quality, providing Billy with a peaceful resting place that is ordered by a timeless repetition of routine. As Billy and Angela ride toward the ranch at one point, he anticipates the physical setting of the ranch, and is able to imagine, in prolific detail, exactly what Sallie and John are doing at that time of the day (CW 32). Billy is reassured and sustained by this pervasive sense of order. The ranch is a place where the grotesque, symbolized by "the tame, the half born, the wild, [and] the wounded" animals in Sallie's menagerie (36), is caged, and temporarily quiescent.

Even this setting, however, is not entirely without the potential for chaos and violence. When Billy and Angela arrive at the ranch, Garrett (not yet acquainted with Billy at this point) is there, and the presence of Garrett and Angela disrupt the routine Billy is used to:

So we are sitting slowly going drunk here on the porch. Usually it was three of us. Now five, our bodies on the chairs out here blocking out sections of the dark night. . . .

The thing here is to explain the difference of this evening. That in fact the Chisum verandah is crowded. It could of course hold a hundred

more, but that John and Sallie and I have been used to other distances, that we have talked slowly through nights expecting the long silences and we have taken our time thinking the replies. (67)

This unsettling of Billy's expectations represents, in a small way, the potential for disorder and violence to reassert itself at any time. The usual tranquility of the ranch cannot finally be counted upon; after a "bad night" of drinking, sex and vomiting, Billy awakens to an image of the serpent that inhabits this provisional Eden: "[o]n the nail above the bed the black holster and gun is coiled like a snake, glinting also in the early morning white" (71).

This essentially grotesque cohabitation of the domestic with the wild and violent is powerfully illustrated by another poem that focuses in part on Sallie. In this instance, the potent realization of the inseparability of peacefulness and strife is a function of Billy's right brain, of an association of the two worlds that underscores their contradictory unity:

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

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

The chiasmic repetition in the second stanza emphasizes the impossibility of determining whether this lyric represents Billy's remembrance of putting his hand into a man's stomach as he washes the tea pot, or remembers having tea as he removes a bullet. The question is, in any case, irrelevant, and misses the point that these two events -- so categorically dissimilar that they should have nothing in common -- have been reconciled in a grotesque paradigm, bound together by the mind of the right-brained poet/outlaw and grounded in the immediacy of a physical sensation.

The frequent appearance of Sallie in Billy's description of calm and peaceful moments suggests the importance of Billy's relationships with those around him in illustrating his position on the margin of order and disorder. Indeed, his relationships with women, specifically with Sallie and Angela D., are especially enlightening insofar as his two lovers represent entirely different qualities that both attract and repel him. As we have seen, Billy's relationship with Sallie is fairly serene and unthreatening. Sallie's personal strength -- though profound -- is quietly nurturing and maternal. Characteristically, she nurses Billy back to health when his legs are burned (CW 33-35). As is not the case with Angela, Billy's sexual commerce with Sallie is never represented explicitly; nevertheless, the scenes of intimacy between the two connote Billy's sense that he is in control, that she is sufficiently "malleable" to be fixed in his ordering of narrative. At one point, he compares her body to raw material that can be "sculpted" or ordered by narrative: ". . . the brown tanned feet of Sallie Chisum resting on my chest, my hands rubbing them, pushing my hands against them like a carpenter shaving wood . . ." (35).

Whereas the understated calmness of Billy's relationship with Sallie is fairly static, the dualism of attraction and repulsion is especially strong in Billy's affair with Angie. At the same time as he is magnetized by her physical and sexual energy, these aspects of her frighten and overpower Billy throughout *Collected Works*. Angie's first

appearance in the text (in which she remains unnamed) describes their (first?) sexual union, in which Billy is clearly threatened by her:

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 final speed (16)

Angela's energy is clear from the outset; tilting, swivelling and spitting electricity, she "shatters" the pillow with her hair. The perspective of Billy's observing eye makes him seem utterly static in comparison. He describes her in terms of a strangely vibrant and threatening landscape, in which the "bright bush" (like an ambush) "jumps." Billy engages the implicit violence of Angie's sexuality with a love bite, which seems timid when she "hooks in two and covers" him, locking his hand and threatening to break the fingers that represent Billy's potency as a gunman. Significantly, the image of

"pivoting like machines in final speed" anticipates the poem in which Billy considers the "one altered move" that will drive such machines "maniac," underscoring the loss of control Billy is feeling with Angie. As the poem concludes, a post-coital Billy considers his own symbolic emasculation, seeming to cross the boundary of gender itself: "later my hands cracked in love juice / fingers paralysed by it arthritic / these beautiful fingers I couldnt move / faster than a crippled witch now" (16).

The second appearance of Angie (in which she is still unnamed) more clearly indicates the profound ambivalence Billy feels toward her. As Billy sits on a bed, surrounded by peeled and unpeeled oranges, watching Angie move about the room, he is impressed by her movement, which is suggested by the strong verbs he uses to describe the scene:

she walks slow to the window  
 lifts the sackcloth  
 and jams it horizontal on a nail

.....

she is crossing the sun  
 sits on her leg here  
 sweeping off the peels

traces the thin bones on me  
 turns toppling slow back to the pillow (21)

In "crossing the sun" like an eclipse, Angie takes on a "cosmic vastness" (Owens 127), which dwarfs Billy, whose "thin bones" she traces. Throughout the poem, Billy is motionless: "I am very still / I take in all the angles of the room." The lines seem to underscore the relatively calm ambivalence of Billy's mood; taking in all the "angles" suggests not only the aforementioned fascination with geometrical order, but is also a pun on Angela's name, indicating a tenderness and attraction toward her (Barbour 58).



The textual representation of Billy's relationship with Angie continues to vacillate between desire and fear; the next lyrical presentation of the relationship (which finally names "Miss Angela Dickinson of Tucson") reinvests her sexuality with a predatory aspect as she is described "catching [Billy] like a butterfly / in the shaved legs in her Tucson room" (25). The fact that the referent of the phrase "like a butterfly" is ambiguous -- standing either for Billy or for Angela -- signals one of the ways in which she is most threatening to Billy. The potency of their sexual intercourse generally has the effect of eroding the boundaries that define Billy's selfhood, undercutting the autonomy of ego and identity. This effect is clearest when Billy and Angie have sex on a toilet in one of the bathrooms of the Chisum ranch; as the lovers join, the physical intimacy of this carnivalesque scene conditions and constructs their increasingly communal "voice:"

. . . she comes in and straddles me and drops her long hair into my open shirt as we slip our tongues into each others mouths. Her skirt over both of us and the can. Billy come on. mmm I say yes, get up first. No. Shit Angie. No. . . . Come on Angie I'm drunk 'm not a trapeze artist. Yes you are. No. . . . (68)

Here, "[t]he absence of usual grammatical markers, especially quotation marks, causes Billy's and Angie's identities to both merge and dissipate" (Barbour 60). Significantly, the possessive apostrophe is missing from the phrase, "each others mouths," underscoring the commonality of the tongue(s) they share. Billy, unwilling to play the "trapeze artist" in this performative, intimate act of swinging across the gaps that frame the autonomous self, is clearly made uncomfortable by this peculiar seduction, as it obviously problematizes his ability to maintain discursive or psychological self-mastery.

Billy endeavours to gain control over Angie -- and over his relationships with women generally -- in a number of traditional ways. The inclusion of a fairly generic

sexist joke that equates women with horses (CW 57) once again suggests the utility of humour as a means of repressing fear, of "making light" and thereby gaining control over the subject of the joke. Significantly, Billy's own vaudevillian "song about the lady Miss A D" (CW 64) attempts to inscribe Angela and gain mastery of her physical power through a kind of discursive dismemberment, a strategy of bodily fragmentation that represents a very conventional mode of pornographic representation (Barbour 59):

Miss Angela Dickinson

blurred in the dark

her teeth are a tunnel

her eyes need a boat

Her mouth is an outlaw

she swallow your breath

a thigh it can drown you

or break off your neck

Her throat is a kitchen

red food and old heat

her ears are a harp

you tongue till it hurt

Her toes take your ribs

her fingers your mind

her turns a gorilla

to swallow you blind (64)

Significantly, the strategy of fragmentation also represents a way of dealing with grotesque experiences; according to Harpham, "breaking down [of] the strange into the

recognizable" potentially allows us to maintain "conventional, language-based categories" to the extent that, perceiving the grotesque "in bits, the mind moves toward a level of detail at which those categories are adequate" (5). In this case, however, Billy's contradictory "song" strongly suggests Angela's power to threaten him, even as it represents an attempt to inscribe and achieve control of her. As Barbour observes, this form of inscription is ultimately a failure, because "each separate part [of Angela] -- mouth, teeth, eyes, throat, thigh, fingers and toes -- continues to exercise its power" (59).

Indeed, the prevailing "power" of Angela's body -- "blurred in the dark" -- is attested to by one of the most tenebrous poems in *Collected Works*, where the imagery of Billy's song commingles with the one of the representations of his death. Here, Angela's ability to threaten Billy by transcending the boundaries of identity takes an ominous turn. Now she is conflated not only with Billy, but with the figure of the sheriff as well:

The eyes bright scales  
bullet claws coming  
at me like women fingers  
.....  
Miss Angela D her eyes like a boat  
on fire her throat is a kitchen  
warm on my face heaving  
my head mouth out  
she swallows your breath  
like warm tar pour  
the man in the bright tin armour star  
blurred in the dark  
saying stop jesus jesus jesus JESUS (73)

Here, in Billy's chaotic final moments, description is undermined by almost complete indeterminacy; starkly imagistic, this poem, like many in *Collected Works* collates visual and tactile stimuli in a poetic context that is intensely resistant to the intellect. It is fairly clear, however, that the fatal bullets are somehow connected with "women fingers," and Angela (who is not present for any other representation of Billy's death) partakes in the role of both lover and killer, still partially fragmented by the discourse of the earlier song. Eros and Thanatos become one as, "blurred in the dark," she is grotesquely hybridized with "the man in the bright tin armour star." (Recall that she shares with Garrett in disrupting the usual routine of Billy's evenings at the Chisum ranch.) This poem, containing Angela's valedictory appearance in *Collected Works*, most powerfully expresses the contingency of Billy's attempts to order his life through his relationships with others. Drawn to Angela, Billy simultaneously fears the dissolution of identity -- and the attendant loss of control -- that results from their intimacy.

At the same time as the ambivalence implicit in Billy's relationships with Angie highlights his struggle for order, it also partakes in what Bakhtin identifies as a venerable and mythic conception of women -- one which acknowledges existence as a grotesque mediation of degeneration and regeneration:

She [the mythic conception of "woman"] is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb . . .

Womanhood is shown in contrast to the limitations of her partner (husband, lover, or suitor); she is a foil to his . . . abstract idealism. . . . She represents in person the undoing of pretentiousness, of all that is finished, completed and exhausted. . . . [S]he lifts her skirts and shows

the parts through which everything passes (the underworld, the grave)  
and from which everything issues forth. (*Rabelais* 240-241)

Angela D. partakes in this grotesque and mythic ambivalence; defined by flux, her overt sexuality magnetizes Billy, just as it threatens to destroy him. Ultimately, her place in this text becomes an ambiguous locus where desire is conflated with disorder and destruction, as she reveals the capacity to undermine and corrupt Billy's pretensions of control.

The hazard implicit in Billy's relationships with other people leaves him generally dissatisfied with social interaction as a site from which to order his life. As we have seen, this is a text in which friends become enemies; Billy knows he can't count on the fixity of his relational roles, especially given his tenuous grip on his own ego-autonomy. These relationships are defined by repression; as we have seen, Billy shares the particular nature of his grotesque "vision" with "no one" (10). Not surprisingly, then, Billy's rage for order leads him, at times, away from the perils of human interaction entirely, and toward what he perceives as the innate orderliness of the world of nature. The border between civilization and nature is one that Billy frequently crosses in *Collected Works*, as he is represented alone on the range. Even more powerfully than the Chisum ranch, the natural world represents the site for several of Billy's calmest and most peaceful moments:

A river you could get lost in  
and the sun a flashy hawk  
on the edge of it

a mile away you see the white path  
of an animal moving through water

you can turn a hundred yard circle

and the horse bends dribbles his face  
 you step off and lie in it propping your head

till dusk and cold and the horse shift you  
 and you look up and moon a frozen bird's eye (26)

Here, Billy allows himself to get "lost" in the liminal space represented by the river -- "immersing" himself in a natural world that contains nothing threatening (with the possible exception of the "flashy hawk" of the sun, which stays "on the edge" of this experience).

Billy identifies the natural world as a zone of unchanging stillness. What movement there is is endless and cyclical; the river is a place where you can "turn a . . . circle," and the rising moon, unnaturally still in Billy's vision, is "a frozen bird's eye." Billy conceives of nature as being pristine and perfectly ordered, an Edenic realm unproblematized by the encroachment of human beings and the disorder Billy associates with them. In Lee's terms, Billy's is a vision of "earth" that fails to acknowledge the co-presence of "world," which doesn't recognize the grotesque capability of these two realms to inhabit one another.

After admitting that he cannot allow others to know about his visions, Billy makes a statement that illustrates his feelings about nature: "In the end the only thing that never changed, never became deformed, were animals" (10). Patently inaccurate, this remark is contradicted at least three times in the "works" that follow. Invariably, Billy's faith in the order of nature (and in nature's autonomy from "culture" or "civilization") proves to be flawed and provisional. As we have seen, Billy's frontier world is hostile to such demarcation; just as the "civilization" of this world incorporates violence and wildness, "nature" is similarly inhabited by the ever-encroaching world of men. (Indeed, Billy's own movement represents that encroachment.) At the locus of

these two coextensive contraries, Billy is forced to confront the grotesque, and acknowledge the potential for chaos that exists in both worlds, as they exist in each other.

One of the most powerfully grotesque passages in *Collected Works* results from the interface of culture and nature, in John Chisum's story of Livingstone, the breeder of mad spaniels (59-62). Arriving at the Chisum ranch for one of his visits, Billy is confronted by the "[s]trangest looking thing:" Sallie's new dog, Henry:

They call it a bassett says Sallie, and they used to breed them in France for all those fat noblemen whose hounds were too fast for them when they were hunting. So they got the worst and slowest of every batch and bred them with the worst and slowest of every other batch and kept doing this until they got the slowest kind of hound they could think of.

Looks pretty messy to me, I said. (59)

This discussion of breeding -- by which the usual course of natural selection and reproduction are subverted by artificial means of control -- leads John to tell the story of Livingstone who, although he "seemed a pretty sane guy," "had been mad apparently" (60). Beginning with two healthy spaniels, Livingstone secretly sets out to control the course of their reproduction, and to express his mastery over them by breeding a race of grotesques. Feeding them little but alcohol, Livingstone inbreeds the dogs, breeding them and rebreeding them

with their brothers and sisters and mothers and uncles and nephews.

Every combination until their bones grew arched and tangled, ears longer than their feet, their tempers became either slothful or venomous and their jaws were black rather than red. . . .

[The dogs], when the vet found them, were grotesque things . . . . Their eyes bulged like marbles; some were blind, their eyes had split. (60-61)

Ultimately, the dogs are reduced to "heaps of bone and hair and sexual organs and bulging eyes and minds which were chaotic half out of hunger out of liquor out of their minds being pressed out of shape by new freakish bones that grew into their skulls" (61-62). As if to reinforce the ubiquitous potential for chaos that underscores Livingstone's insane act of control, he is consumed by his monstrous dogs -- the madness he sought to hide from the world in an enclosed coop escapes and destroys him. Ultimately, Livingstone's attempt to project his madness into the natural world (like Billy's projection of his need for order onto nature) is a failure.

At the end of John's story, Billy hears Sallie whispering to Henry, "Aint that a nasty story Henry, aint it? Aint it nasty" (62). The speaker of the final sentence, which ends with a period rather than a question mark, is indeterminate and foregrounds the powerful irony of Sallie's remark to Henry, who, as she has already observed, is the product of precisely the same kind of "nastiness." At first unable to "walk up a stair at first because [he] was so heavy and long," Henry is grotesque in the eyes of those (like Billy) who don't yet recognize "basset hound" as legitimate category of "dog."

The process of Billy's projection and failure is highlighted, earlier in the text, by a description of his stay in an unused barn "at the edge" of a farm (CW 17-18). At first recovering from a fever, Billy stays in the barn for "a calm week," enjoying his solitude and ordering the "colour and light" of his surroundings through precise measurement of its dimensions ("It was twenty yards long, about ten yards wide.") and by observing the geometrical "blocks and angles" of light on the floors and walls. (Significantly, the accuracy of Billy's sense of place is imperfect; the lack of chromatic demarcation between a tap hanging from the ceiling and the surrounding walls causes Billy to knock himself unconscious when he collides with it [CW 17].) As the week progresses, Billy undergoes a kind of evolutionary atavism, crossing the border that separates human and animal, becoming just another of the inhabitants of the barn:



There were animals who did not move out and accepted me as a larger breed. I ate the old grain with them, drank from a constant puddle about twenty yards away from the barn. I saw no human and heard no human voice, learned to squat the best way when shitting, used leaves for wiping, never ate flesh or touched another animal's flesh, never entered his boundary. We were all aware and allowed each other. . . . When I walked I avoided the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish. The flies caught in those acrobat nets were the only murder I saw. (17)

Paradoxically, oneness with the animals is predicated on the maintenance of individual autonomy -- the fact that, even as he seems to bridge the gap between animal and human, Billy never enters another animal's "boundary." Billy associates this quiescence with nature itself, observing no violence except for the flies caught in the "acrobat nets" of spider webs (a significant and ominous echo of "Spider Blues" and of his own aforementioned "trapeze" act with Angela).

Of course, this peacefulness is illusory and transitory. The barn itself is representative of the uneasy compromise at that ambivalent boundary where nature and civilization, earth and world, come together. The illusory restfulness of this compromise is unhinged when a group of rats (earth?) begin to eat grain that has fermented with the neglect of long storage (world?). Drunk on the grain, the rats abandoned the sanity of eating the food before them and turned on each other and grotesque and awkwardly because of their size they went for each other's eyes and ribs so the yellow stomachs slid out and they came through that door and killed a chipmunk -- about ten of them onto that one striped thing and the ten eating each other before they realised the chipmunk was long gone so that I, sitting on the open window with its

thick sill where they couldn't reach me, filled my gun and fired again and again into their slow wheel across the room at each boomm, and reloaded and fired again and again till I went through the whole bag of bullet supplies . . . (18)

Grotesque and violent, the rats transform the barn (formerly the world of the "stable") into a site of chaos, turning both outward (toward the chipmunk) and inward (onto each other) in their frenzied expression of utter discord. Billy, physically unthreatened by the rats in the peripheral space of the window sill, is psychologically assailed by the grotesque scene before him; no longer able to ascribe order to his surroundings, Billy's response underscores the extent to which he has been invaded by chaos. Like the spider-artist in "Spider Blues," Billy regains and enforces order and control through a lethal repression of disorder, firing his gun "until no other animal of any kind remained in that room . . ." (18). The damage has been done, however; Billy has internalized the chaos before him and its association with the rats as well. Later, in the most grotesque of the several representations of his death, the chaotic actions of the rats are connected with his ultimate loss of control; Billy dies with "a rat fyt in [his] head" (38).

The conflict between order and chaos that we see enacted within Billy is powerfully evinced on another level through his relationship with Patrick Garrett. As we have seen, Billy often seems fascinated by Garrett, who seems to embody the "Western" ideal of heroic dispassion and psychological self-mastery. As left-brained lawman, Garrett represents order and the need for fixity. Hostile to the flux and motion that typifies life itself, he attains a nearly absolute control with which Billy can only experiment on the margins. Truly possessing a "newsman's brain," Garrett is far more successful than Billy in achieving a mechanical ordering of his own self and of

his surroundings. Playing the icy hearted machine-man, Garrett is unencumbered by the moral doubts or grotesque visions that qualify Billy's reactions to the violence around him. All other concerns are subjugated by the intensity of his concern for absolute order.

Ondaatje's portrayal of these two characters may usefully be read as an exploration of two very different types of artist -- or, more likely, of two contrary and complementary artistic impulses. As we saw in the previous chapter, Ondaatje's conception of the artistic personality is based on an ambivalence; simultaneously left- and right-brained, this personality is driven by the contradictory goals of wanting to "refine and develop his work towards an ideal of finality and completeness," and simultaneously desiring to "break his tried methods in order to see what lies outside and beyond them. . . . to violate language in [the] desire to report on the chaos of life" (Lynton 40). It is therefore tempting (and useful) to read *Collected Works* as a kind of parable of artistic representation, in which these impulses are personified by Billy, who helplessly concedes the grotesque ambivalence at the heart of existence, and Garrett, for whom the imposition of artistic fixity is paramount. Whereas Billy exists largely through interior lyric monologues (a timeless mode which is antithetical to the requirements of historical narrative), Garrett is aligned with the inexorable, linear motion of narrative and history:

Garrett is, above all, the hero of narrative. Billy, who has sought to survive inside lyric monologue, proves no match for Garrett once he's bounced into the story line. Supremely triumphant on the paradigmatic axis, Billy is no match, finally, for Garrett on the syntagmatic axis where time happens. . . . As Billy's interior monologues begin to collapse, the once scattered and forestalled narrative moves into place, enlarges its role. Garrett, law man and story man, lays claim to the

book, on Billy and on the reader. . . . Garrett's story. Billy's death.  
(Cooley 231)

Garrett, then, is the sheriff/artist, the modernist "spider"-poet who searches after order, and is responsible for capturing inchoate "outlaw" content (Billy the Kid) in the net of a concrete, structured and meaningful narrative. (Significantly, the historical Garrett "fixed" Billy not only with his gun, but with his pen as well, writing a biography of the Kid that was selling in New York only six weeks after Billy's death.)

Though valuable, this categorical symbolic scheme is hardly perfect, and is problematized by the extent to which these two figures are attracted to each other. Billy, as we have seen, is especially difficult to categorize as Garrett's opposite; an artist-figure himself, the Kid is fascinated by the paradigm of control the sheriff represents. There are suggestions, also, of a latent disorder that underlies even Garrett's capacity for control. In the end, there is much common ground shared by these two figures, outlaw and lawman, who are as necessary for each other in the parable of artistic representation of *Collected Works* as they are in the morphology of Western legend.

In the terms of this morphology (and perhaps in the eyes of Ondaatje's Billy the Kid), Pat Garrett is the archetypal steely-nerved gunman. Ignoring the graphic visions of death that confront him, Garrett is an "ideal assassin," an "academic murderer" who has "the mind of a doctor." Indifferent to violence, he can "kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke" (CW 28). Billy's story of Garrett's life suggests the struggle Garrett has undergone to achieve his particular kind of order. Threatened by the possibility of losing control, Garrett goes on a two-year drinking binge, until "he could drink anything, mix anything together and stay awake and react just as effectively as when sober" (29). Significantly, Garrett briefly loses control when, addicted, he becomes "locked in his own game" until his addiction is finally cured by Juanita

Martinez. Threatened by the flux of life, Garrett "became frightened of flowers because they grew so slowly that he couldn't tell what they planned to do" (28). Appropriately, Garrett takes up taxidermy in an assertion of his need to impose stasis and fixity, stuffing and displaying birds that arrive packed in ice (CW 88). Throughout *Collected Works*, Garrett is neurotic about maintaining his sanity, a sort of "control freak." The repressed phobia of losing control suggested throughout Billy's description is emphasized in its last line, which labels Garrett as "a sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane" (29). The repetition, which ends significantly by emphasizing "-in sane," suggests not only that order and sanity can be pushed to "insane" extremes, but that sanity and insanity are coextensive, always defining and inhabiting each other in an earth/world that renders their distinction arbitrary and ambiguous.

However dubious the underlying nature of Garrett's style of control may be, Billy (as we have seen) experiments with this kind of order throughout his sections of *Collected Works*, as he crosses the borders that demarcate his personality from Garrett's in the thematic dualism of chaos and control. This experimentation is apparent in one of the early poems in which Billy describes how he "[c]rossed a crooked river / loving in my head / ambled dry on stubble / [and] shot a crooked bird" (CW 14). The repetition of the adjective, "crooked," reappears much later in *Collected Works*, in a passage where Sallie Chisum stresses the word three times in a short description of Garrett (CW 89). By traversing the "crooked" river, Billy symbolically moves into Garrett's territory, rather uncharacteristically shooting a bird -- an act that is surely associated with Garrett's taxidermy. Later in the text, two juxtaposed lyrics recall Garrett's strange paranoia about live flowers. In the first, Billy seems to be affronted by the grotesque equivalence of life and death, degeneration and regeneration, in the smell of pollinating blossoms:

To be near flowers in the rain

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

The second lyric continues in this vein, describing how the chaotic, ambivalent "sweat like lilac urine smell" is "getting to [Billy] from across a room" (56). Significantly, this poem offers a suggestion of a way to regain control of the experience, to make the flower smell "sane:" "if you cut the stalk / your face near it / you feel the puff of air escape / the flower gets small smells sane / deteriorates in a hand" (56). Here again, the imposition of control and stasis onto the flux of living reality is ultimately lethal.

Garrett's ability to kill someone and finish a joke is also represented by one of Billy's "experiments" in controlling the violence that pervades his story. As we have already seen (in the story of O'Folliard's death, and in the sexist joke), Billy occasionally uses humour to control his fear and horror. In the passage that describes Billy's killing of Gregory, however, this strategy becomes extreme. After explaining that he had shot Gregory "well and careful / . . . / so it wouldn't last long," the poem engages the grotesque with black frivolity; Billy is

about to walk away  
 when this chicken paddles out to [Gregory]  
 and as he was falling hops on his neck  
 digs the beak into his throat

straightens legs and heaves  
 a red and blue vein out

Meanwhile he fell  
 and the chicken walked away

still tugging at the vein  
 till it was 12 yards long  
 as if it held that body like a kite  
 Gregory's last words being

get away from me yer stupid chicken (15)

Simultaneously comic and horrifying, this tall tale has the effect of occluding Billy's responsibility for Gregory's death almost entirely. The poem begins with Billy reassuring his reader that the shot was as merciful as possible, but by the time we finish this strange poem, Billy's role in Gregory's death has been almost entirely obscured by the onslaught of the suddenly carnivorous chicken. There is, nevertheless, much in this poem that suggests its role in helping Billy to repress the psychological impact of his own deadly action. The appearance of the chicken is coincident with Billy's intention "to walk away," following the directive of the newsman's brain, which chooses to "walk off [and] see none of the thrashing" (11). The chicken interrupts this retreat by attacking Gregory, and becomes an analogue for Billy, an unlikely alter-ego that assumes much of the responsibility for the disturbing violence of the scene. As Gregory continues to fall, now the victim of a doubled attack, the chicken itself "walk[s] away." The "killer/chicken," however, is still connected to its victim -- to the ugly reality of its own violence -- by the long blue-red vein that holds the victim's body

"like a kite." The word "yer" in Gregory's dying utterance is significantly ambiguous, acting as a colloquial pronunciation of either "you" (chicken) or "your" (Billy's). A true grotesque, Billy's chicken (Billy/chicken) represents both a strategy for distancing himself from the sense of disorder occasioned by violence and, paradoxically, an image that underscores the chaotic intimacy between Billy's inner state and the violence that surrounds and contextualizes him.

Although Garrett, representative of order and fixity, has far more expertise stifling and repressing his own potential to lose control, his sections of *Collected Works* imply a great deal about how he maintains this control, and about his ambivalence toward his less disciplined counterpart. Throughout Garrett's description of the first days of his acquaintance with Billy the Kid (at the Chisum's), he suggests a quiet fascination for Billy, who doesn't fit "the image of the sallow punk that was usually attached to him by others" (43). Garrett observes Billy with an almost scientific eye, making a study of the young outlaw. When Billy and Angela decide to extend their stay at the ranch, Garrett is relieved, explaining that he "didn't understand either of them and wanted to see how they understood each other" (44). Noticing that Billy never uses his left hand to do anything besides fire a gun, Garrett is fascinated by the intricate exercises Billy uses to keep the hand from atrophying, the "left hand churning within itself, each finger circling alternately like a train wheel. Curling into balls, pouring like waves across the tablecloth" (43). Garrett's construction of the image connects the mechanical with the natural or organic; it is difficult to tell whether he is impressed because of the discipline this action connotes, or with Billy's "bodily" aspect, his profound connection with his own physical self. In any case, Garrett's reaction to the sight is significantly -- and uncharacteristically -- emotional: "It was the most hypnotising beautiful thing I ever saw," he tells us.

At times, Garrett intentionally seems to understate his opinions of Billy, or to dismiss him. He doesn't understand the way Billy thinks any more than Billy can think



with "a newsman's brain"; in Garrett's view, Billy's mind is simply ruled by an undisciplined (if charismatic) imagination, which Garrett critiques as "usually pointless and never in control" (43). The other time Garrett seems to repress his response to what Billy represents comes at the end of Garrett's narrative, after the scene which describes his shooting of the poisoned cat that hides under the Chisum house. Asking the others to go outside, Billy washes his hands and takes off his boots. Ranging about inside, Billy locates the cat with a kind of animalistic instinct, sniffing and listening with ears and feet, finally shooting the cat through the floorboards. Garrett's reaction to the event is noteworthy:

Our faces must have been interesting to see then. John and Sallie were thankful, almost proud of him. I had a look I suppose of incredible admiration for him too. But when I looked at Angie, leaning against the rail of the verandah, her face was terrified. Simply terrified. (45)

Interestingly, Garrett's admission of his own "admiration" for Billy's act is qualified by a hint of reluctance ("I suppose"), but his assessment of Angela's reaction is perhaps even more revealing. The profound terror Garrett ascribes to Angela seems wrong somehow; at the very least, it is uncharacteristic given her representation elsewhere in *Collected Works*. This raises the possibility that, like Billy, Garrett uses projection to repress chaos -- in this case, the emotional chaos of a terror that is very much his own.

Like Billy, Garrett is both impressed and threatened by what his counterpart represents. In the scene at the Chisum ranch, Garrett criticizes what he identifies as Billy's lack of imaginative and intellectual control, but is both impressed by and afraid of the extent to which Billy's being is centred in the body, in the potency of instinct. Meanwhile, as we have seen, Billy is fascinated by Garrett's ability to extend his intellectual control to his emotions, to maintain the boundaries that distinguish the sheriff's inner world from his victims and from the world around him generally. One

of the most significant of the categorical oppositions that these two characters represent and mediate is that of body/mind. As the right-handed (left-brained) gun, Garrett's control is a function of "mind." His strategic alcoholism represents a disintegration of the interface between his body and his mind, a way for him to eliminate one source of potential chaos that arises from the combination of alcohol and the body. His other modes of self-discipline are also intellectual in nature; he teaches himself to speak French, for instance, although he never uses the language, or even reads French books (28). Garrett represses the bodily in his constant project of keeping his mind "unwarped" (27).

The representation of Billy the Kid's relationship with his body is entirely different, as we have seen. Expressing the indissoluble unity of mind and body, Billy's consciousness is centred in the physical; his apprehension of the world around him is grounded in the sensory and the instinctive, he "thinks with his body" (Barbour 47). His imagination and perception suggest a profound sensitivity to physical imagery, to the numerous bodies hovering between life and death all around him. Several of the lyrical passages of *Collected Works* focus on this aspect of Billy's character, powerfully representing the bodily and sensory nature of his perception:

One morning woke up  
 Charlie was cooking  
 and we ate not talking  
 but sniffing wind  
 wind so fine  
 it was like drinking ether

we sat hands round knees  
 heads leaned back taking lover wind  
 in us sniffing and sniffing

getting high on the way  
 it crashed into our nostrils (49)

Later, in a poem that equalizes Billy and Ondaatje through a portrayal of the act of writing, a profound sense of the body is occasioned as the shadowy composite writer-figure considers the physical aspect of writing itself: "while I've been going on / the blood from my wrist / has travelled to my heart / and my fingers touch this soft blue paper notebook / control a pencil that shifts up and sideways / mapping my thinking going its own way" (72). Here, once again, thinking is analogized with physical motion, this time the movement of fingers and of circulation.

The dissolution of personal identity implicit in this last poem suggests one of the most important aspects of Ondaatje's portrayal of Billy's body, which emerges, throughout *Collected Works*, as the primary site for the enaction of the grotesque. Ondaatje's portrayal of the body is grotesque and Rabelaisian; exploding not only the demarcation that divides mind and body, his vision of Billy cancels out the boundaries that separate the body from other people, from the world around it, from the entire universe in which it partakes, illustrating what Harpham (quoted above) called the mythic principle that "no realm of being . . . is absolutely discontinuous with any other, but all equally accessible and mutually interdependent" (51). Imaginatively engaging with other ways of thinking and being, and identifying with his victims, lovers, the natural world, his killer, and even his "author," Billy constantly shows his ability to transgress "even the boundary of the body itself" (Barbour 47). Indeed, Billy crosses the boundaries that define physical, psychological and -- in the sense of the *corpus* of historical discourse -- textual "bodies" throughout *Collected Works*.

It would be hard to imagine a bodily function in which Billy does not engage at some point in *Collected Works*; Billy not only rides, but eats, drinks, sleeps, heals, bleeds, urinates, breathes, defecates, vomits, sniffs, copulates, and even dies his way

through this text. The boundaries that distinguish even these functions are grotesquely transgressed. Billy feeds a dog with the contents of his own stomach (CW 70), he has sex while sitting on a toilet (CW 68). Even the representations of his death embrace the vibrancy and diversity of life in images of planets, oranges, rats, "red grass" and "floating barracuda" (CW 38, 95). Through his representation of Billy's body, Ondaatje focuses us on the connection between that body and the outer world; on the whole this is a mode of representation that accords with Bakhtin's belief that

the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. . . . The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation . . . the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body . . .

The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements. (*Rabelais* 26-27)

Bakhtin's description of the grotesque conception of the body embraces Ondaatje's representation of Billy's capacity to fuse with his surroundings. The stars and "blood planets" Billy sees when he is dying represent his grotesque participation in the cycles of death and life common to all "realms of being;" he represents and embodies the macrocosm in which it partakes:

the grotesque body is cosmic and universal. It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos; earth, water, fire, air; it is directly related to the sun, to the stars. . . . This body can merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents. It can fill the entire universe. (*Rabelais* 318)

Nowhere in *Collected Works* is this mythic potency of Billy's body better represented than in the powerful scene in which he describes the visions that attend his sun-stroke (76-78). This passage -- perhaps the most grotesque of any in Ondaatje's work -- utterly destroys the boundaries that distinguish Billy from his world, transforming his body into a site of grotesque unity, wiping out the oppositional status that logical thought attributes to mind and body, dream and reality, even to profanity and divinity. The scene engages the grotesque as a personified sun reaches down, plucking out Billy's hair and peeling back the layers of skin, skull and brain. The onslaught that follows is defined by powerfully evoked physical imagery, as the bodily and cognitive are grotesquely and violently commingled in Billy's stream of consciousness:

He [the sun] took a thin cool hand and sank it into my head down past the roof of my mouth and washed his fingers in my tongue. Down the long cool hand went scratching the freckles and warts in my throat breaking through veins like pieces of long glass tubing, touched my heart with his wrist, down he went the liquid yellow from my busted brain finally vanishing as it passed through soft warm stomach like a luscious blood wet oasis, weaving in and out of the red yellow blue green nerves moving uncertainly through wrong fissures ending pausing at cul de sacs of bone then retreating slow leaving the pain of suction then down the proper path through pyramids of bone that were there when I was born .

. . . and down the last hundred miles in a jerk breaking through my sacs of sperm got my the cock in the cool fingers pulled it back up . . . squeezed it through the skull bones, so there I was, my cock standing out of my head. (77)

Happening as Billy rides along, having been captured by Garrett, the intense psychological lyricism of this passage signals a profound evasion of the narrative control the sheriff represents (Barbour 64). Intensely visceral, the writing/thinking/moving at this point leaves Billy's emotional state powerfully ambiguous -- teetering in a grotesque zone between agony and an ecstasy that is at once psychic, spiritual and sexual. Significantly, the reader's reaction to this passage must be similarly complicated, as we confront the grotesque physical imagery of the vision, the ambivalence of Billy's voice, and attempt to reconcile the pervasive violence of the passage with the potential hilarity implicit in that final image, which bawdily equates mind and body in a grotesque, comic image.

It does not get any easier, either, when Garrett -- at least as unable as we are to determine what is happening -- asks Billy what's wrong, and receives the answer: "I've been fucked. Ive been fucked Ive been fucked by Christ almighty god Ive been good and fucked by Christ" (78). The significance of the answer is indeterminate and disturbing; a great deal of our sense of the passage as a whole depends upon how we interpret the significance of being "fucked by Christ," which is problematized (as usual) by fractured syntax and absent punctuation. Of course, Billy could be simply cursing here; "fucked" (and its close slang cousin, "screwed") embrace various denotations, including having been poorly used, or violently mistreated. The various repetition of Christ's name could be semantically empty; Billy is merely cursing because of strong emotion. The structure and repetition of Billy's answer, however, energetically undercuts this reading, suggesting something far more complex and

ambiguous. The power of the line potentially indicates a profound connection between Billy -- at a moment of extreme psychological and physical trauma -- and Christ. That Billy has been "fucked" by the archetypal saviour suggests an intimacy with the divine, with grace itself -- albeit a strangely violent one. At most, the intimacy suggested here represents a grotesque fusion of Billy and Christ, "Western" legend and Christian myth, outlaw and messiah -- both tragic heroes of the imagination, both immortalized by their deaths in a myth of degeneration and regeneration.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, the coextension of life and death, death and life at the centre of Christian myth (and of Ondaatje's western myth) accords with Bakhtin's sense of the grotesque body in other forms of representation: "One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born" (*Rabelais* 26). This dualism is reflected in Billy's description of the Christ-sun's hands that enter and dissect him: "[t]wo hands, one dead, one born from me, one like crystal, one like shell of snake found in spring" (*CW* 77). Later, this dualism of life-giving-death is illustrated in a parodic image of Billy's "resurrection" in discourse. An anonymous voice considers digging Billy up, and describes the "very little" that would be left of the legendary outlaw: bones, a bullet, buck teeth, and leg irons. The passage concludes with its only hint of ambiguity, by denoting "[h]is legend a jungle sleep" (*CW* 97). The final phrase connects the slumber of death with the vibrancy of the jungle, suggesting a sleep characterized by (Rousseauian?) dream, or a wakeful sleep with one eye open. In any case, the patently dead Billy described in the passage as a whole rises again to "true life" over the page, on the cover of the "Wide Awake Library" (98).

A final, significant aspect of Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body is one we have been discussing all along: the capacity for such a body to overleap the boundaries

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<sup>5</sup> Recall the repetition of the name of Christ in one of the lyrics of Billy's death (*CW* 73), in which Angela (Billy's Mary Magdalene?) is present for the only time.

that distinguish it from others, to collapse the ego-boundaries that define and delimit identity itself. The grotesque body "is presented not in a private, egotistical form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people" (*Rabelais* 19). As the shifting and indeterminate focus of *Collected Works*, Billy certainly represents "all the people" involved in the enaction of his own story -- a story, of course, that is only "his own" insofar as he is the locus that equalizes the functions of reading and writing, insisting on order and acknowledging chaos. Garrett's attempt to capture Billy, to "bring him back alive," is an utter failure; he must first kill Billy, impose the stasis necessary for his subsequent documentation, before achieving his order. This documentation -- beginning, significantly, with Garrett's biography -- cannot coexist with the living Kid, whose capacity for motion hinders and undercuts the authority of historical or narrative discourse. This motion, as we have seen, occasionally allows Billy to merge with Garrett, whose goal of getting Billy (Billy's story) under control is shared not only with Billy himself, but with Ondaatje and with the reader as well.

After Billy escapes from prison, the sense of connection with Garrett becomes increasingly profound, especially in the repeating (but different) representations of the final confrontation between the two men in Pete Maxwell's dark bedroom. One of the first of these passages records the sensory impressions of one of the two men in the room. The first paragraph, which focuses on the senses (and would therefore seem to represent Billy) is relatively unproblematic, and is usually read as a description of Billy's thoughts upon entering the room to talk to Pete, as yet unaware of the presence of Garrett, also in the bed:

My ears picking up all the burning hum of flies letting go across the room. The mattress under Pete Maxwell shifting its straw, each blade loud in the clear flick against another. Even the now and then crack at



the glass as the day's heat evaporates from the window against the dark of the desert. (90)

The next paragraph focuses on the revelation of the presence of "*the other*," which is signalled to the focalizing consciousness by the sound of breathing, "of the dark air going up through the nose, down to the stomach rolling around on itself, and then up and out like a fountain spilling through his teeth hisssssssssss sssssssssssss". The lack of punctuation and the preoccupation with visceral imagery would still seem to denote Billy as the focalizer here, but the long hiss that ends the passage presents a problem. Earlier in the text, the interview taken from the "Texas Star" contains a long explanation about Billy's once having had his nose broken and imperfectly re-set (CW 82). As a result of this event, we are told that "[i]f you were near [Billy] when he was breathing heavily -- when excited or running, you could hear this hissing noise which was quite loud." As a result of this historical aside, it becomes impossible to determine the identity behind the voice in Maxwell's bedroom, as the consciousness of outlaw and sheriff seem coextensive or indeterminate. Confusion of identity is also a factor in the second (lethally humorous) description of this scene, in which Billy momentarily mistakes the body in bed beside Pete as that of Paulita Maxwell, Pete's sister (CW 93). The profound confusion of identity in each of these scenes lends a heavy irony to Garrett's discussion with Deputy Poe (paraphrased from an account written by Poe) after the shooting:

*"It was the Kid who came in there on to me," Garrett told Poe, "and I think I got him."*

*"Pat," replied Poe, "I believe you have killed the wrong man."*

*"I'm sure it was the Kid," responded Garrett, "for I knew his voice and could not have been mistaken." (103)*

That Garrett would rely on his attribution of voice in his own ultimate act of "fixing" the Kid says a great deal about his potential to "have been mistaken" in a text that

explodes the demarcations that define the unitary ego, and potently undermines the attribution of narrative control or voice. Indeed, Billy and Garrett are conflated throughout the text, right-brain and left-brain, like the two half-blind owls in Sattie's menagerie that appear to Billy as one "vast" bird in the darkness (37).

As I have indicated, the various grotesque ambivalences of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* depict, on one level, a parable of the enaction of representation. Billy's ability to function as a site of multiple and ostensibly contradictory impulses suggests a fusion of subject and object, of writer, reader and character. In this grotesque "history," author, outlaw, reader and sheriff share in the goal of capturing Billy the Kid, in bringing order to the chaos of his life and death. Like Garrett, we want to "apprehend" Billy, to hold him still in our minds in part so that we may judge him. Like Billy, however, we are also confronted by chaos in a fragmented text that analogizes the violence of his world; we too are grounded in a context that provides too few answers, too much indeterminacy, and which forces us to confront our own (often coincident) reactions of anger, confusion, revulsion and laughter. We become the paradoxical "object" of this writerly text as the obstacles it presents allow us to "read ourselves" in the potency of our various reactions. The very nature of the text -- in its formulation of the relationships being discussed -- is carnivalesque: it "does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 7). The fundamental quality of the carnivalesque is the dissolution of the boundaries that traditionally define and distinguish the roles of art, artist and audience, and the functions of creation and reception. Geoffrey Harpham offers a valuable description of this aspect of reading such texts:

Grotesqueries confront us as a corrupt or fragmented text in search of a master principle, which Ernst Kris likened to a "strong ego" to unify the parts. They hold our attention, especially if we are patient, imaginative, inquisitive, and impious. But although they are frustrating they are far from pointless, for with their help we can arrive at a better understanding of the methods of representation, of the relation between play and creation, and of the force of habit and convention in understanding. Looking at ourselves in the grotesque, we can observe our own projections, catching ourselves, as it were, in the act of perception. (43)

The reader's involvement with the construction of this text -- and the attendant shift to a position as "object" -- is a constituent facet of the grotesqueness of *Collected Works*, which therefore engenders a sort of textual "double exposure" that equates extratextual participants (Ondaatje and his readers) with Billy in this communal performance: "Up with the curtain / down with *your* pants / William Bonney / is going to dance" (CW 63; my italics).

Significantly, the intermingling of author and character is represented in the final passage of the text, which is the description of "a bad night" for the speaker:

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

Potentially either Billy or Garrett, the passage most powerfully suggests a fictional analogue for Ondaatje, whose "bad night" is described soon after the section in which Garrett boasts of finally "getting" the Kid (103). The room is filled with smoke, and there is smoke in the shirt of the unidentified speaker. We are strongly obliged to

connect the cigarette smoke to the gun smoke in the earlier scene and in this way the writer-figure is intimately connected to the violence of that passage. Perhaps this is the morning after a night in which the author "took aim" at his subject. If this is so, he seems considerably less confident than Garrett; the identity of Billy (or, for that matter, of the writer-figure) doesn't approach solidity, but remains evasive and diffuse, like the smoky "amoeba" sliding and hanging in the morning sun. The true Billy, whose ultimate escape is clear from the first page, has done it again.

All that remains is the sense of what this strange, multivalent legend reveals about the provisionality of representation and perception, and about the contradictory impulses that underlie the artistic personality. Like the eponymous character from "Peter," Billy (as artist/outlaw) reminds us that, as human animals, ours is always a "frontier story," as we exist within that liminal space between instinct and civilization, nature and culture. At this grotesque site, we must reconcile our rage for order and our necessary engagement of chaos -- the codependent and inseparable functions of right- and left-brain -- to apprehend something of the essential ambivalence of existence. And so *Collected Works* ends with that final image of the artist *in toto*, of the artistic personality that unifies contraries, confronting and mediating contradiction: "Michael the Kid" -- with pistols levelled out at us, in both hands.

Chapter Three:  
Storyville's Tale of Shit: The Grotesque in *Coming Through Slaughter*

How all men wrongly death to dignify  
Conspire, I tell. Parson, poetaster, pimp,  
Each acts or acquiesces. They prettify,  
Dress up, deodorize, embellish, primp,  
And make a show of Nothing. Ah, but met-  
aphysics laughs; she touches, tastes, and smells  
-- Hence knows -- the diamond holes that make a net.  
Silence resettled testifies to bells.  
'Nothing' depends on 'Thing', which is or was:  
So death makes life or makes life's worth, a worth  
Beyond all highfalutin' woes or shows  
To publish and confess, 'Cry at the birth,  
Rejoice at the death,' old Jelly Roll said,  
Being on whiskey, ragtime, chicken, and the scriptures fed.  
-- A.J.M. Smith, "The Wisdom of Old Jelly Roll"

Six years after *Collected Works* won the Governor General's Award for Poetry, *Coming Through Slaughter* appeared, winning Ondaatje the *Books in Canada* "best first novel" award for 1976. As was the case with *Collected Works*, the generic label that attends this accolade is quite reductive, dismissing the actual difficulty readers have had ascribing generic value to the book, and subsequently in achieving a set of readerly expectations with which to begin. On the surface, *Slaughter* seems formally to have much in common with *Collected Works*; both fuse the historical with the fictional, commingling historical documents (some of which are Ondaatje's fictions) with obviously original acts of imagination. As before, Ondaatje's work is punctuated by a variety of documentary forms, including a photograph, sonographs, transcripts taken from film reels, fact sheets, jazz lyrics, song titles and snippets of interviews (real, fictional or "polished to suit the truth of fiction" [CTS 159]). Once again, this grotesque generic amalgam comprises a kind of artistic "search" for a character on the margins of history, in which (once again) Ondaatje's authorial role is conflated with that of his subject in an interrogation of the relationships between knowledge and discourse.

The "best and the loudest and the most loved jazzman of his time" (*CTS* 14), Charles "Buddy" Bolden emerged onto the New Orleans jazz scene at the turn of the century, becoming involved in the infamous (and, from our point of view, fortuitously named) Storyville district, which was a centre for the early development of jazz music until it was "closed down" by municipal order in 1917, after the United States entered the war. Never recorded, his music is not extant, yet he is universally acknowledged as a pioneer jazz horn player. Speaking biographically, there is very little information about Bolden; Ondaatje's pursuit of Bolden begins with the (possibly apocryphal) story that Buddy "became a legend when he went berserk in a parade" (*CTS* 134). Despite his "legendary" status, however, all the information Ondaatje accumulates amounts only to "a thin sheaf" (*CTS* 134).

As we shall see, clear points of thematic similarity complement the formal commonality of the two works; like William Bonney, Bolden personifies the conflict between order and chaos that defines the structure of *Slaughter* itself. Like Billy, Buddy becomes a locus for the violent confrontation of categorically opposed impulses that define the act of art-making. As is the case in *Collected Works*, the presence of the grotesque in *Slaughter* formally and thematically reinforces the struggle between form and content, and resists the kind of stable closure that invites easy interpretation. Like Bolden's music, the text fuses contraries, dramatizing the ambiguity of existence and conflating the roles of character/subject, author and reader. Despite the similarities, however, *Slaughter* is a unique achievement, compellingly distinct from Ondaatje's earlier work in tone and mood, and powerfully illustrating his need "to start each new book with a new vocabulary, a new set of clothes" (Solecki, "Interview" [1984] 325). As we shall see, the formal hybridity of *Slaughter* is quite different from that in *Collected Works*, illustrating (I would argue) some of the significant differences between Ondaatje's earlier protagonist and Buddy Bolden, who emerges more clearly as

an artist-figure, and has a very different relationship with the implied "Ondaatje" that dramatizes the writing of *Slaughter* itself. Finally, the grotesque dissolution of the individual ego we observed in *Billy the Kid* takes on a new significance in *Slaughter*, where it defines Bolden's role as a performing artist, and the nature of the relationship he has with his various "audiences."

However "new" Ondaatje's formal "vocabulary" is in *Slaughter*, much of its early criticism tends to downplay its uniqueness, emphasizing instead its similarity to *Collected Works* in a partial evasion of the onerous task of delineating this generic "species of confusion." One of the earliest reviews of *Slaughter* describes Ondaatje's move from poetry to "prose fiction" as "not very drastic" (Bilan 293); another asserts that the grotesque imagery and paradoxical juxtapositions of *Slaughter* will be "familiar" to readers of Ondaatje's earlier work (Kertzer 298). Fortunately, later and more detailed critical work necessitated a considered engagement with these aspects of *Slaughter*, simultaneously underscoring the significant differences between *Slaughter* and *Collected Works*, and problematizing *Slaughter*'s role within the generic category of "novel."

Significantly, Ondaatje himself is the first to express discontent with this label. Unforthcoming regarding details or content, Ondaatje makes a telling comment in a 1975 interview with Sam Solecki (the year before the appearance of *Slaughter*): "Right now I'm working on some prose but if I mention it people say that I'm working on a novel and I'm not. To me the novel is a 100 yard hurdles which you have to plan and prepare etc. And what I'm doing doesn't have a preformed shape" (26). Noting the subsequent acceptance of "novel" as the prevailing tag for *Slaughter* in critical discourse, Stephen Scobie defines his own sense of its unsuitability. Commenting that Ondaatje seems to be moving from poetry to prose "on the surface," Scobie is "uneasy

about calling *Coming Through Slaughter* a novel, in any sense [because] it is a 'novel' in which the real action takes place on the level of the poetic image" ("*Slaughter*" 5-6). Obviously building on this, Alice Van Wart attempts to describe the basic formal difference between *Collected Works*, in which narrative and poetic modes are juxtaposed in ways that "support and amplify each other," and *Slaughter*, in which "the traditional devices of prose fiction are recast to function as poetic image" (4). Roughly speaking, these readings of the form of *Slaughter* attempt to reconcile the stylistic duality of the text -- to address the unavoidable fact that, while the operative mode of the book is prose narration, this mode is qualified by the conspicuous absence of several of its traditionally constitutive signifying structures (chronology, continuity, unitary narration, etc.). Ultimately, the book obliges us to read "poetically"; to consider the paradigms of imagery offered by the book's fragmented, sensuous mini-narratives is generally more availing than any attempt to (re)construct the chronological syntagm of Bolden's "story."

It is an oversimplification, then, to simply observe that *Slaughter* suggests movement "from" poetry "to" narrative prose. While this formal transition is undeniable in one sense, on a contrary, deeper level the text evinces a fusion of these modes in its search for a formal representational style that is "supple enough" to dramatize the duality of ordered artistic expression and "life's anarchic energy and randomness" (Solecki, "Making" 250). The result is a book that confounds usual categories of generic delineation -- even extremely loose ones like "prose poem" -- and emerges as a formal grotesque, a "hybrid work" (Van Wart 26).

The notion of hybridity, compounded with Ondaatje's above statement that the work "has no preformed shape" (and therefore could be called "improvisational"), suggests jazz itself as a generic correlative for the structure of *Slaughter*, one that connects form and theme, author and character. By focusing on the life of one of the



great jazz originators, Ondaatje spotlights the emergence of a new form of music that fused a variety of cultural influences and dramatized the conflict between disorder and classicist conceptions of musical control. Subverting classical notions, jazz refused to reduce chaos to order in traditional ways; as a result, jazz existed in a liminal realm throughout most of this century, floating between "popular" and "classical," and problematizing traditional conceptions of composition. The word "jazz" itself is of entirely uncertain origin and, like "grotesque," it has no stable denotative or connotative value. Widely believed to have originated in the South long before 1900, "jazz" may have been a common Black slang term that could be used either as a noun or a verb describing sexual intercourse. Later usage revealed that it could also mean "to excite," "to dance," or could simply mean "enthusiastic" or "peppy." In its early history, the word jumps back and forth between honorific and pejorative connotations, at one time used to mean "progressive" or "modern," and also being "used to describe every disagreeable phenomenon" since the word's appearance (Gold 162-163).

As one of the most prevalent musical forms of the early 20th century, jazz has been associated with other aesthetic modes that seek to capture and represent that chaos of existence. In an essay linking *Slaughter* to the movement of surrealism, Barry Maxwell quotes Julio Cortazar's statement that jazz is "the only surrealist music" in that it is hostile to order, to plot (108). Maxwell's consideration of surrealism in general is interesting too, for if jazz is "surrealist music," it is also clear that surrealism is grotesque art. Partaking in the grotesque, surrealist imagery seeks to undermine the unitary and autonomous conception of ego-centric identity, to the extent that our "very selves become porous, unanimous" (Maxwell 105). This kind of image accords with the Rabelaisian notion that the grotesque body "is presented not in a private, egotistical form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 19). Andre Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*

establishes further common ground with the grotesque by delineating his sense of the kinds of discord that define the surrealist image:

[The image] cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.

The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be -- the greater its emotional power . . . (qtd in Maxwell 103).

This agrees with the essence of grotesque union, in which, as we have seen, there is the sense "that things that should be kept apart are fused together" (Harpham 11). In the words of Max Ernst, surrealism -- like the grotesque -- results from "the exploitation of the fortuitous encounter of two distant realities on an unfamiliar plane . . . in short, the cultivation of the effects of systematic displacement" (qtd in Maxwell 101). Jean-Pierre Cauvin adds that any attempt to deal with the surrealist poetry of Breton

must begin with mention of a notion for which there unfortunately exists no corresponding term in English, and that is the notion of *dépaysement*: the sense of being out of one's element, of being disoriented in the presence of the uncanny, or disconcerted by the unfamiliarity of a situation experienced for the first time. (qtd in Maxwell 101)

Predictably, I would argue for the existence of a word in English that *does* embrace this sense of confusion that arises from "the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response" (Thomson 27). That word, as we have seen, is "grotesque." The issues shared between jazz, the theory of the grotesque and the aesthetics of surrealism -- specifically in regards to formal juxtaposition and the dissolution of ego -- are crucial in delineating the experience of reading *Coming Through Slaughter*.

It is useful to note that jazz -- both as a word and as a musical form -- can be most easily correlated with the grotesque as it existed in Bolden's era, when jazz was

"primitive," emergent and most extremely undefined, before long exposure deemphasized our sense of its affront to the conventions of the day, of its capacity to be aesthetically and politically subversive. Bolden's passionate, improvisational music is entirely antithetical to the conception of static musical structures, once again, to what Bakhtin calls the "aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed" (*Rabelais* 25). Commingling various musical influences both "high" (European, classical, spiritual, etc.) and "low" (blues, etc.), early jazz emerged as a hybrid form, revealing what Bakhtin saw as the essential function of hybridization in the grotesque: to reveal the contingency of life, the "ever-uncompleted character of being" (*Rabelais* 32). It is this potent double-faced and ambivalent quality of Bolden's music that Dude Botley is simultaneously threatened and "hypnotised" by, when he hears Bolden mixing hymn with blues in a grotesque, musical "battle between the Good Lord and the Devil" (*CTS* 81; discussed below).

Instead of being first composed and then performed, Bolden's jazz dramatizes process, largely composed by the performative act, which itself is a function of mood, place and time. Bolden's jazz -- like Harpham's conception of the perception of the grotesque -- is grounded in process, in progression (14); it reflects the essential unity of artist and art, conflating creator with creation, and -- by thematic extension to *Slaughter* as a whole -- Ondaatje with Bolden. Buddy's music demonstrates a "knack of decentring conventional formal structures, [and] denying his listeners the comfort of synthesis and order," just as Ondaatje formally "mingles history with fiction and document with narration, yet offers no authoritative synthesis of them" (Bjerring 330, 331).

As mentioned above, there is much common ground shared by Bolden and Ondaatje's Billy the Kid. Both characters represent historically marginalized figures, although the peripheries they each occupy are quite distinct. Billy, although most

North Americans know "of" him, is largely occluded behind the persona created by his own pop-culture legend. Buddy, alternatively, is of considerable importance to music history as a jazz originator, yet almost nobody knows of him, in part because his playing was never recorded. For this century's jazz horn-players, from Armstrong to Gillespie to Davis, all roads of stylistic evolution lead to Bolden (Hodeir 24), back to a paradoxically silent site, accessible only in traces where Bolden's influence can be somehow attributed to later, recorded musicians. The nature of this missing music is crucial to Ondaatje's presentation of Bolden, so -- like the missing photograph that begins *Collected Works* -- the particular nature of this music is textually described at various points (and from various viewpoints) throughout *Slaughter*. In this way, much of the text shares in the function of the sonographic images of dolphin noises on the first page, which constitute suggestive, yet obviously inadequate, attempts to inscribe their sound, to reduce the squawks, whistles and clicks to static, two-dimensional images.

The sonographs function in other ways as well, obliging us to find areas of commonality between the dolphin sounds and Bolden's horn playing, and the possibilities here are intriguing. The explanation that appears below the sonographs differentiates the multi-frequenced "emotional expression" of the squawk from the "pure" whistle, which signals both identity and location, and emphasizes the fact that dolphins are able to make different kinds of sounds simultaneously (*CTS* 5). Like the dolphin sounds, where "echolocation clicks" serve to denote location, Bolden's music is a function of place, as he lyrically responds to his immediate environment, musically telling the stories of Storyville.

At his apogee (in Ondaatje's book), Bolden worked at the N. Joseph Shaving Parlour, collecting stories for his own gossip rag, *The Cricket*, and listening while "His mind became the street" (*CTS* 42) -- an image of the grotesque (and surrealist)

dissolution of ego. The common experiences of the streets of Storyville are central to Bolden's music. What is more, Bolden's playing reveals an even more direct and intimate relationship with his surroundings. Like Billy the Kid, Bolden seems to have a heightened sensitivity to his physical surroundings; when he was playing, he "could see the air, could tell where it was freshest in a room by the colour" (CTS 14). His music represents a fusion of performance, time and place that cannot be captured by recording. Ondaatje has Frank Lewis, one of Buddy's contemporaries, tell us,

it is good you never heard him play on recordings. If you never heard him play some place where the weather for instance could change the next series of notes -- then you *should* never have heard him at all. He was never recorded. He stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history, those who said later that Bolden broke the path. It was just as important to watch him stretch and wheel around on the last notes or to watch nerves jumping under the sweat of his head. (CTS 37)

Recording is reduction; the stasis required by history once again occludes the dynamism that defined the original phenomenon, an intensely physical music that simultaneously expresses self and community, time and place, dissolving the boundaries between musical forms, and (as we shall see) between artist and audience. In any case, the sonographic preface of *Slaughter* serves as a reminder that no matter how precise or scientific the description of such phenomena might be, they ultimately function, not to "capture" their essence, but to show us their capacity to evade representation, to underline the enduring presence of what "No one knows" (CTS 5).

The sections that describe Bolden's playing are nevertheless important, and say a great deal about what his music represents, both to him and to the people around him. In a way, Bolden's jazz is a paradigm for the lyric sections that punctuate *The*

*Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. As we have seen, this music is the product of the moment; impossible to reproduce or repeat, it lyrically engages the synchronic, sharing in what Harpham views as the capacity of grotesque art to "[impale] us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future" (16). In spite of the predominance of prose narration as the representational mode throughout *Slaughter* the immediacy of this lyricism seems typical of Buddy's vision. When Buddy walks his children to school in the mornings, he teaches them "all he knew at the moment" (*CTS* 13). Significantly, Buddy arrives on the Storyville scene (on the scene of history itself) unannounced, devoid of any future outlook or, for that matter, any personal history at all:

Where did he come from? He was found before we knew where he had come from. Born at the age of twenty-two. Walked into a parade one day with white shoes and red shirt. Never spoke of the past.

Simply about which way to go for the next 10 minutes. (*CTS* 37-38)

This sense of lyrical "nowness" infuses Buddy's playing; his music is without conventional beginnings or endings -- it merely reflects the contingency of Buddy's inner and outer world at the time of its creation. By traditional ideals, the resulting performance seems "messy," despite its power:

It was a music that had so little wisdom, you wanted to clean nearly every note he passed, passed it seemed along the way as if travelling in a car, passed before he even approached it and saw it properly. . . . when he was playing he was lost and hunting for the right accidental notes. Listening to him was like talking to Coleman. You were both changing direction with every sentence, sometimes in the middle, using each other as a springboard through the dark. You were moving so fast it was unimportant to finish and clear everything. He would be describing

something 27 different ways. There was pain and gentleness everything jammed into each number. (*CTS* 37)

Significantly, Bolden's jazz is not a non-representational art at all; conversely it describes things "27 different ways," never allowing a single authoritative synthesis to take precedence. Recalling the nature of Billy's "thought" in *Collected Works*, Bolden's music is defined by motion: "travelling in a car," "changing direction," leaping through darkness, "moving so fast." (Later in the text, Willy Cornish observes that Bolden always "thought by being in motion" [109].) The energetic vibrancy of this musical and physical movement collapses notions of closure and clarity, mediating contraries in its exploration of the essential ambiguities of existence, the "contradictory and double-faced fulness of life" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 62). The subtle reference to Victor Coleman, and therefore to the poetic philosophy of "'The gate in his head'" (*RJ* 62), which seeks "not clarity but the sense of shift," is crucial to understanding Bolden's grotesque musical art. Partaking in the creation of music that is "awkward, shapeless / [and always] moving to the clear," Bolden eschews conventional styles of musical control; "never professional in the brain," Bolden's jazz is "amateur and accidental" (*CTS* 14).

The grotesque dynamism of this music is, once again, largely a function of its capacity to represent the particularities of setting and moment. As such, it embraces not only the artist and the rest of the band, but the audience, the building and the entire dark world outside as well. The music is carnivalesque; Bolden's impossibly loud horn playing dissolves the boundaries between stage and audience -- it has all the physicality of a bodily function, and it wildly collapses the distinction between Bolden's body/ego and that of his listeners. Bolden's jazz, "hurdle after hurdle," is described as

A race in which he would stop and talk to the crowd. Urging the band to play so loud the music would float down the street, saying 'Cornish,

come on, put your hands through the window'. On into the night and into blue mornings, growing louder the notes burning through and off everyone and forgotten in the body because they were swallowed by the next one after and Bolden and Lewis and Cornish and Mumford sending them forward and forth and forth till, as he could see them, their bursts of air were animals fighting in the room. (*CTS* 14)

Like Billy, Bolden gravitates toward liminal spaces, specifically windows, which signal his capacity as a crosser of borders, and a site of contradiction. His music, floating down streets, and "burning through and off everyone" is immediate and visceral; utterly transitory, it reflects the locus where his (e)motion reflects the endlessly shifting world around him.

A revealing incident occurs as Buddy is playing on stage and a man is shot at the back of the bar. Knowing what happened, Buddy shifts tempo, offering a musical correlative for the violence at the back of the audience, and actually holds his listeners' attention until the police arrive (*CTS* 43). Webb, the detective who finds Buddy after his disappearance, listens to this music after working on the case, considering his old friend's playing, which he seems to find strangely repellent:

Far back, by the door, [Webb] stood alone and listened for an hour. He watched him dive into the stories found in the barber shop, his whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change. The music was coarse and rough, immediate, dated in half an hour, was about bodies in the river, knives, lovepains, cockiness. Up there on stage he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story. (*CTS* 43)

Once again, Bolden's music distills the collective experience of Storyville. His "whole plot of song" is, ironically, antithetical to conventional definitions of 'plot'; Bolden's music does not suggest the structure of a typical narrative story-line. It condenses



discontinuous narratives, focusing not on finding beginnings or on achieving closure, but -- with a lyrical disregard for the diachronism of narrative -- upon "all the possibilities in the middle". Indeed, this is an excellent description of a great deal of Ondaatje's literary "jazz:" a zone of possibilities in which closure and dissolution of mystery is constantly deferred, and it is a constituent quality of the grotesque, which, in Harpham's terms, "occupies a gap or interval; it is the middle of a narrative of emergent comprehension" (15).

The nature of Buddy's art -- indeed, his role as an artist generally -- constitutes one of the most essential points of difference between *Slaughter* and *Collected Works*. Although the reader of the latter is obliged to consider Billy the Kid as a kind of artist, struggling against the disorder and chaos that intrude upon his attempts to control and structure his experience, Bolden's role as an artist is far more overt. Subsequently, perhaps, Ondaatje's relationship with his protagonist is more visible as well. Our sense of the "Ondaatje" behind *Billy the Kid* is largely through a kind of palimpsest, as we perceive the author "implied" through or beneath the particular combination of recontextualized quotations, or behind the contradictory motives that drive his characterological analogues. In *Slaughter*, the presence of the implied Ondaatje is far more explicit, as he considers the life of Buddy Bolden, an artist with whom he seems to have significantly more in common than he does with his own representation of Billy.

"Ondaatje"'s voice emerges clearly at several points in the text; it is this voice that welcomes readers to a contemporary reality of what was once the Storyville of Bolden's day, as it drives down streets largely forgotten by jazz history, and asks us to consider "His geography" (*CTS* 8-10). Obviously familiar with the history of his surroundings, this narrator provides a thumbnail sketch of the district, moving from the abstract and general to the specificity of anecdote, and finally focusing on Bolden

himself. We learn the price of a teenage virgin in 1860, we learn that there were 2000 prostitutes, about 70 professional gamblers and 30 piano players at work in the area at one time. Then, we learn about Tom Anderson's "Blue Book," and about Olivia the Oyster Dancer, and about French Emma's "60 Second Plan." Finally, Buddy's name is specified for the very first time when we are told that Anderson (who never emerges as a significant character hereafter) is "the closest thing to a patron that Bolden had," as the narration, *moving* simultaneously through history and geography, comes at last to "the barber shop where Buddy Bolden worked" (CTS 10).

Much later in the text, we return to this contemporary narrative frame, and to the narrator's consideration of the "thin sheaf of information" to which Buddy has been reduced (CTS 134). This passage foregrounds the extent to which author identifies with character throughout his contingent attempts to read through the stories told "of" Bolden by others, "The excesses [that] cloud up the page." This identification, especially regarding Bolden's eventual (legendary) breakdown and subsequent silence, is profound, as the narrator considers Bolden's only photograph, and the cemetery under which his body disintegrated: "There is the complete absence of him -- even his skeleton has softened, disintegrated, and been lost in the water under the earth of Holtz Cemetery. When he went mad he was the same age as I am now" (CTS 133).

The sense of identification between Ondaatje and Bolden raises questions about Bolden's role as an artist in *Slaughter*, and, more specifically, about the differences between Bolden and Billy at this level. Billy's "art," as we saw, consists of his collective attempts to bring order to the story of his life, as Ondaatje pits the Kid's fictional voice against the multiplicity of voices (historical and popular) that have constructed his image. Throughout *Collected Works*, we see Billy engaged in a continual struggle to repress the pervasive chaos and inner disorder that results from his engagement with an intolerably violent and chaotic world, attempting to maintain the

boundaries that segregate an ordered, balanced inner-self from a problematical and contingent environment. This struggle is suggested thematically by his relationship with Garrett, and formally by the juxtaposition of lyric and narrative modes. Billy is a grotesque to the extent that he fails in this enterprise; the struggle to maintain control ultimately highlights the ambivalence of life, the contradictory coextension of order and chaos. Conversely, Bolden's jazz suggests a very different kind of artist -- one which, as we have seen, is far more able to acknowledge and value the fusion of inner and outer worlds and the dissolution of ego as necessary prerequisites for the creation of his particular brand of art. As we have seen, Bolden's is an art that dramatizes the flux of life; existing in the moment, it ultimately evades even the stasis imposed by recording.

What Bolden fears most, throughout the course of *Slaughter*, is what Billy seeks: his own capacity for order and fixity. For Bolden, these things are fundamentally illusory and artificial, they distance him from the vision of life -- of life defined by uncertainty and flux -- that is crucial for his art. Rather than searching for a kind of stasis, Buddy flees from it (although, like Billy, he also represents the potential he fears), preferring "all the possibilities in the middle" to the rigid fixity of predetermined art or narrative. For Bolden, the contingency of art and life are necessarily coeval; as he tells us, "I wouldn't let myself control the world of my music because I had no power over anything else that went on around me, in or around my body" (CTS 99). The sentence equates Bolden's horn-playing with his body, with bodily functions that are connected with artistic creativity throughout *Slaughter*. Bolden's admission that he "wouldn't let" himself control his music also underscores the duality of his character as an artist; significantly, Bolden doesn't say "couldn't" -- the tendency and temptation to order and control is a part of him, a part that he struggles to subdue. This struggle, as I have argued, is at the centre of Ondaatje's engagement of the grotesque throughout his career, and, interestingly, *Coming Through*

*Slaughter* itself emerges as a significant intertextual echo in much later works, like *The English Patient*, where Bolden's solitude and unwillingness to achieve order emerge as symptoms of the trauma occasioned by different characters' experience of the overwhelming slaughter of war. As we shall see, Bolden's role in this later intertextual context (within the discourse setting of the more generically "ordered" structure of a more conventional novel) is complex and suggestive, revealing the extent to which Ondaatje's vision of the interplay of order and chaos has refocused throughout his career. In the late novels, the alignment with disorder that engenders the strange and distanced intimacy of author and character in *Slaughter* becomes a point of departure, a self-involved solitude away from which characters move in a process of healing and reconnection, back towards the contingency and hazard of provisional order-making and community. Even in this context, however, the continuance of Bolden's "voice" at the level of fiction signals the writer's enduring fascination with the idea of chaos and its eternal coextension with the idea of order.

In the context of *Slaughter* itself, as in *Collected Works*, aspects of the protagonist's mediation of order and chaos is represented in his relationships with other characters -- with his wife, Nora; his lover, Robin Brewitt; his detective-friend, Webb; and with E. J. Bellocq, a crippled photographer who takes pictures of the Storyville prostitutes. These characters represent sites upon which Buddy projects his fear of stasis and order, and exemplify different conceptions of the role of artist, specifically regarding the nature of the relationship between artist and audience. As aforementioned, Bolden's music represents a carnivalesque union of musician and listener -- a dissolution of the ego that attends his performance. This relationship is problematized by Bolden's rising fame, which affords him a position of centrality that is antithetical to the carnivalesque, and by an audience that subsequently tries to hold him rigidly in the centre, distinct and separate. Ultimately, Bolden realizes "that

reputation made the room narrower and narrower, till you were crawling on your own back, full of your own echoes, till you were drinking in only your own recycled air" (CTS 86). In response to this, Buddy de-centres himself twice in *Slaughter*; once when he leaves Storyville to spend two quiet years with the Brewitts, and finally, after he has been found by Webb, "in the public parade [where] he went mad into silence" (CTS 108). This indeterminate, final silence embodies the ambivalence that defines Buddy throughout *Slaughter*, as he is pulled in different directions by his own contradictory fears and desires.

Buddy's feelings about his capacity for order and control emerge, very early in *Slaughter*, in the presentation of his relationship with Nora. Regarding his feelings for his wife (and for his art), Buddy is "almost completely governed by fears of certainty," which he detects in her "delicate rules and ceremonies" (CTS 15). Buddy's ambivalence is clear at once, for at the same time as he seems afraid of the certain, he seems helpless in his impulse to uncover it. (Later, when the "certainty" of his wife's fidelity is thrown into question, Bolden's behaviour potently underscores his paradoxical relationship to certainties both feared and needed.) Like Webb, the detective figure, Buddy tries to get his wife in an "exact focus"; with "utmost curiosity," he studies her, "questioning her long into the night about her past" (15). Ultimately, his questioning fails; he can not "put things in their place," or achieve the focus he seems to desire. In any case, the "certainty" Buddy detects in (or perhaps projects onto) Nora's repetitive gestures and statements enrages him: "he attacked it again and again in her, cruelly, hating it, the sure lanes of the probable. Breaking chairs and windows glass doors in fury at her certain answers" (15-16). In a representative instance, Bolden lashes out at a window as he sits with Nora, pulling back so that only for

a fraction of a second his open palm touched the glass, beginning simultaneously to draw back. The window starred and crumpled slowly

two floors down. His hand miraculously uncut. It had acted exactly like a whip violating the target and still free, retreating from the outline of a star. She was delighted by the performance. Surprised he examined his fingers. (16)

Interestingly, Nora's thematic affiliation with certainty and probability is thrown into doubt by her "delight" at Bolden's sudden and violent "performance." The image of shattering glass is repeated throughout *Slaughter*, suggesting, once again, Bolden's ability to cross boundaries, with violence if necessary. Here, he withdraws from the act just in time; the window "stars" but his hand "retreats." The star imagery recalls the appearance of similar images in earlier works, where it generally symbolizes the provisional fixity art seeks to impose on the world. Star imagery functions in this way in "Spider Blues," where it is analogized with the image of the spiders' web, and in *Collected Works* in the form of the lethally authorizing sheriff's badge. Undoubtedly, however, the most significant allusion is to "White Dwarfs," in which, as we saw, Ondaatje considered the profound quiet of "those stars / who implode into silence / after parading in the sky" (*RJ* 71).

Buddy's first implosion comes when he flees from his life with Nora and from his reputation as a performer, spending two quiet years with the Brewitts, who are significantly "The silent ones. Post music. After ambition" (*CTS* 39). At Shell Beach, in the days before he arrives on Robin's front lawn, Buddy achieves a silent anonymity and grotesque oneness with his new setting. Seeming to fuse the thematic roles of spider and fly, Bolden becomes a "fat full king" (41), living off of the dirt and grime from buses and banisters, the "alley shit" that collects on his shoes, while at the same time he is "sober as a spider perfected in silence" (40). He spends his time listening to others, their "wet fluid speech with no order, unfinished stories" (40), until he "Sank though the pavement into the music of the town of Shell Beach" (41). This

shifting, discontinuous music of place, of geography itself, becomes for Bolden "the perfect band" (41). Finally, however, hunger and physical exhaustion drive Bolden from the utterly decentred site of his life on the street to the hazards of community in the Brewitts' household, where considerable similarities gradually emerge between Buddy's relationships with Nora and with Robin Brewitt.

Arriving at the Brewitts', helplessly shaking and filthy from days living on the street, Bolden inaugurates his extended visit in the bathtub, where the heat of the water purges him of his past, of his associations to his past and public existence, as "everything drain[s] off him" (*CTS* 58). Cleansed, Buddy enters his new bedroom, a room which, by the time Webb arrives to direct Buddy back to Storyville, is emblematic of the escape from ego represented by Buddy's hiatus, in which he once again fears the certainties he thinks he's escaped:

Here. Where I am anonymous and alone in a white room with no history and no parading. So I can make something unknown in the shape of the room. Where I am King of Corners. And the fear of certainties I had when I first began to play . . . Robin and Jaelin brought me back to that open fright . . . (86)

Alone with his room, Buddy can conceive of creating "something unknown," an act of private creation unqualified by the demands of an audience. The statement that he is the "King of Corners" is puzzling and suggestive, emphasizing the room's most peripheral spaces, ambiguously connoting both entrapment and (artistically fertile?) solitude. The corner allows Bolden an escape from the centrality of his earlier "parading." It is a site where the physical components of his surroundings meet and fuse; it is where everything changes direction. (Recall Billy's fascination for straight lines in *Collected Works*.) Significantly, it is in the corner of Buddy's room -- near the door -- that he first makes love with Robin (61-62).

At first, the strange love triangle established when Buddy moves in with the Brewitts (in which he occupies one of the "corner" spaces) seems to be free of the certainty he ascribes to his relationship with his wife. Imagining Webb for an audience, he describes a night at the Brewitts' during which he dissolves his identity into a strange *menage a trois* that conflates the musical and the physical in a grotesque communal sharing of passion and pain, with "[e]verybody's love in the air:"

Three of us played cards all evening and then Jaelin would stay downstairs and Robin and I would go to bed, me with his wife. He would be alone and silent downstairs. Then eventually he would sit down and press into the teeth of the piano. His practice reached us upstairs, each note a finger on our flesh. The unheard tap of his calloused fingers and the muscle reaching into the machine and plucking the note, the sound travelling up the stairs and through the door, touching her on the shoulder. The music was his dance in the auditorium of enemies. But I loved him downstairs as much as she loved the man downstairs. God, to sit down and play, to tip it over into music! (92)

This carnivalesque love scene says a good deal more about Bolden's opinion of Jaelin and his music than it does about his feelings for Robin. Intimately connected with Robin, Bolden is utterly preoccupied with the possibilities suggested by Jaelin's isolation, "alone and silent downstairs," and by the potentials of his quiet, suggestive music -- music that paradoxically seems to suggest silence, the "unheard" fingers on the piano keys. Ultimately, Buddy seems reassured by the act of submerging himself into this complex relationship, which, he would have us believe, is defined by a diffuse, all-encompassing love: his passion for Robin, and his fascination with Jaelin's silence, which "understood them all" (*CTS* 65).



Significantly, this bittersweet memory does not suggest the profound ambivalence of his relationship with the Brewitts. Soon after Buddy arrives, Robin, like Nora, begins to represent the certainty Buddy fears, and Buddy begins to show his capacity for violence and rage as a result. When Robin invites him to stay, Buddy tries to deemphasize his own impact on their lives, asking Robin to confirm that nothing will change between her and Jaelin. When he tells her that he "wouldn't feel different if [he] was [Jaelin]," Robin answers, "I can't do things that way Buddy," refusing to ignore the "certainty" that her relationship with Bolden will have its impact (*CTS* 58). Buddy's statement is interesting insofar as it represents an attempt to dissolve the ego, to imagine a love relationship devoid of the solid hazards of possession. The ambiguity of the status of his own ego is underscored later in the text (but earlier in the story) by the dramatic violence of the scene of Buddy's fight with Tom Pickett (*CTS* 71-75) -- violence that Buddy instigates because Pickett convinces him that Nora has not been faithful, a "certainty" Buddy seems to require.

This same ambiguity is suggested later in his stay with the Brewitts, when Buddy gets angry with Robin for some reason and throws a jug of milk on her. When the two talk, Robin wonders "which window [he is] going to break next, which chair" (69), and asks Buddy how he thinks Jaelin feels. His surprisingly ego-centric response illustrates the ambivalence that defines his own inner conflict:

Look you're either Jaelin's wife or my wife.

I'm Jaelin's wife and I'm in love with you, there's nothing simple.

Well, it should be. (69)

Buddy now seems to be characterized by the need for clarity and certainty he so fears, as he tries to rewrite his relationship with Robin in a way that contradicts the story he later tells Webb (quoted above). Buddy's stay with the Brewitts, then, is not entirely successful in distancing him from the hazards of ego and certainty; like the stage, the Brewitts comprise a site that grows "narrower and narrower" over time.

After Webb finally finds Buddy at the Brewitts', and sets him back "on course" to Nora and to the stage, Buddy spends several weeks alone in Webb's cabin on Lake Pontchartrain, preparing for his return to public life. Significantly, this reflective, silent time allows Buddy to consider his own music-making, and, once again, emphasizes his need to avoid the temptation to try to achieve control, or artistic fixity. Sequestered at the cottage, Bolden's life takes on an unreal, almost dreamy routine, in which the diurnal course of his mornings and evenings analogizes his ambivalent struggle against the temptations of an illusory clarity:

Everything is clear here and still I feel my brain has walked away and is watching me. I feel I hover over the objects in this house, over every person in my memory -- like those painted saints in my mother's church who seem to always have six or seven inches between them and the ground. Posing as humans. I give myself immaculate twenty minute shaves in the morning. Tap some lotion on me and cook a fabulous breakfast. Only meal of the day. So I move from the morning's energy into the later hours of alcohol and hunger and thickness and tiredness.

Trying to overcome this awful and stupid clarity. (100)

Gauging the rising and falling energy of his body throughout the days of drinking and practice, Bolden has no desire to be a posing "painted saint," which he obviously identifies with the "awful" artificial clarity he must overcome if he is to continue making art. Throughout *Slaughter*, this clarity is what Bolden must avoid if he wishes to continue as a grotesque artist, capable of coalescing the particularities of time and place, audience and artist. Yet the discipline and order that exists on the other side of the formal discontinuity of Bolden's voice and vision constantly reasserts itself. A true grotesque (like Billy, or like the titular character in "Peter"), Bolden is not only a

creator of grotesque art, but is himself defined by an irreconcilable duality of order and chaos, ego-centrism and ego-dissolution. This ambivalence is clear throughout the text, in Bolden's relationships with Nora and with Robin, and in his involvement with Webb and Bellocq.

As a musician, Buddy most clearly expresses this inner dichotomy when he sits alone in the Pontchartrain cabin, listening to Webb's radio. At first, all he hears is some news which frustrates him in a way that clearly denotes a need for "clarity:" "People talking about a crisis I missed that has been questionably solved. Couldn't understand it. They were not being clear, they were not giving me the history of it all, and I didn't know who was supposed to be the hero of the story" (CTS 93). Bolden can't understand because the story isn't "clear," and he requires "the history of it all" (a significant allusion to the first section of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, a novel that, thematically, has much in common with *Slaughter*). Bolden desires a "story" that is utterly unlike his own music, his own storytelling; he wants to know who is at the centre of the plot, looking for an authoritative ego-figure that might bring order to the confusing narrative -- the "hero of the story." Buddy's psychological hunger for clarity is even more powerfully revealed as he continues to listen to the radio, and hears the music of John Robichaux's band:

John Robichaux! Playing his waltzes. And I hate to admit it but I enjoyed listening to the clear forms. Every note part of the large curve, so carefully patterned that for the first time I appreciated the possibilities of a mind moving ahead of the instruments in time and waiting with pleasure for them to catch up. I had never been aware of that mechanistic pleasure, that trust. (CTS 93)

Bolden, whose own music is a product of the moment, of the connection of body and instrument, is unfamiliar with the pre-planned nature of Robichaux's mechanical music.

Bolden's jazz would be destroyed by a mind "moving ahead," by the conscious thought of these waltzes. Earlier in the text, Bolden watches a woman (Robin?) un-self-consciously cutting carrots. As with Bolden's music, the woman's paradoxical "control" is a function of not thinking, of excluding the mind, for "If she thinks what she is doing she will lose control" (CTS 31). Listening to Robichaux, Bolden considers the other kind of control, wherein Robichaux -- the "hero" of his band's performance -- welcomes his centrality and, as a result, has a completely different kind of relationship with his audience. Buddy tries to reject this, describing why he hates to "admit" his enjoyment of the radio performance, and self-consciously critiquing his own temporary consideration of the mode of "awful" clarity:

I loathed everything [Robichaux] stood for. He dominated his audiences. He put his emotions into patterns which a listening crowd had to follow. My enjoyment tonight was because I wanted something that was just a utensil. Had a bath, washed my hair, and wanted the same sort of clarity and open-headedness. But I don't believe it for a second. You may perhaps but it is not real. When I played parades we would be going down Canal Street and at each intersection [the site where streets meet in corners] people would hear just the fragment I happened to be playing and it would fade as I went further down Canal. They would not be there to hear the end of phrases, Robichaux's arches. 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 that I had reached *then*. Like your radio without the beginnings or endings. 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. (93-94)

Here, Buddy acknowledges and comments upon his own desire for a "utensil" music, showing a degree of self-awareness -- of consciousness of his own duality -- that is not discernible in *Billy the Kid*. (Indeed, Bolden's ability to acknowledge his ambivalence -- to see both aspects of his character simultaneously -- provides a thematic correlative for the particular formal ambivalence of *Slaughter* itself.) Bolden at once sees the potential desirability of Robichaux's power, standing still at the "centre," directing both band and audience, but Bolden rejects that authority -- that control that is based on stasis -- in favour of a grotesque, de-centred music based on movement ("parade music"), which collapses the "arch" of beginnings and endings, and embraces "opposites." Paradoxically, order and disorder are two of the contraries his music mediates; as Frank Lewis tells us, in Buddy's music "there was a discipline, it was just that we didn't understand. We thought he was formless, but I think he was tormented by order, what was outside it" (*CTS* 37). Forebodingly, the scene in which Buddy considers Robichaux's music, and his own, ends as the radio station goes off the air, and Buddy is left alone in the room with the "buzz" of radio static (94).

The attraction to opposites and the "torment" of order and "what was outside it" are integral to Buddy's experience of making art, and figure prominently in what he has learned from his "fathers:" the men, including Happy Galloway and Mutt Carey, who taught Buddy about music-making. These were his "real teachers," the ones who "never teach you craft" (*CTS* 95), and each man plays a different role in Buddy's jazz training. Galloway's guitar playing is obviously influential, teaching Buddy "not craft but to play a mood of sound I would recognize and remember. Every note new and raw and chance. Never repeated. His mouth also moving and trying to mime the sound but never able to for his brain had lost control of his fingers" (95). In the end, Galloway, who avoids people, has a stroke and is soon forgotten.

More interesting, perhaps, is Buddy's relationship to the trumpet-player, Mutt Carey, whose career evinces an ambivalence similar and yet opposite to Buddy's. Like

Robichaux, Carey's music is characterized by mechanical order and discipline:

Carey's trumpet was a technician -- which went gliding down river and missed all the shit on the bottom. His single strong notes pelting out into the crowds, able to reach any note that he wished for but always reaching for the purest. He was orange juice he was exercise, you understand. He was a wheel on a king's coach. So that was technique.  
(96)

Losing his hard lip, Carey stops playing and begins drifting from bar to bar, spending his accumulated wealth. Like Buddy, who enjoys Robichaux's music and then attacks it, Carey is magnetized by his musical opposite, attracted in his late years "to the crazy music he chose to die listening to, bitching at new experiments, the chaos, but refusing to leave the table and go down the street and listen to captive jazz he himself had generated. A dog turned wild in pasture" (97). As a mentor not only in music, but in the essential ambivalence of life, Carey reveals the indissoluble contradictions at the root of artistic creation, the play of attraction and repulsion between the coextensive and contrary impulses toward "perfect" aesthetic order, and toward the improvisational chaos that is "outside it." The force of this magnetism is undeniable, as artists like Buddy (and his "fathers") are "[d]rawn to opposites, even in music we play" (CTS 96).

The fact that Buddy is "drawn to opposites" is powerfully dramatized throughout *Slaughter* in the representation of his relationships with Webb and Bellocq, two characters who represent opposing poles in Buddy's struggle to determine his role as an artist in relation to his audience. As we have seen, Bolden seeks a grotesque identification with his audience through his art -- a potent symmetry of power in the indivisible processes of creation and reception. This vision of the relationship of art, artist and audience is overthrown by Bolden's ascending fame early in *Slaughter*, and

the characters of Webb and Bellocq represent the two extremes that define the range of Bolden's options as a grotesque artist.

Wholly fictional, Webb is one of the most interesting figures in the book, at once representing the need for clarity and certainty, and the desire to cast Bolden as the "hero" of his own art -- the central figure whose ordered patterns of sound determine the experience of his listeners. Although he considers himself a friend to Bolden, Webb's role as a police detective in *Slaughter* finds a thematic antecedent in the character of Sheriff Garrett in *Collected Works*. Like Garrett, Webb analogizes the roles of author and reader in the communal task of "searching for" Buddy Bolden, of imaginatively invading the spaces Buddy has occupied and attempting to enter the mind of the missing musician. Also like Garrett, Webb needs to order his experience and find explanations for what goes on in the world around him, ultimately secure in the detective's belief that, through intellectual objectivity, reason and induction, the world is an ultimately knowable phenomenon, that its mysterious contingencies are dissolvable by scrupulous application of the intellect. Even Webb's name connotes his need for order and fixity, recalling Sergeant Jack Friday of the 1950s television series *Dragnet* and his reductive passion for "just the facts" (which Webb does not really share, since he is more concerned with unveiling the hidden motives that underlie the facts). Webb's name also suggests the image of the webs in "Spider Blues," with which the spider-artist kills for clarity.

Webb is a student of behaviour. Threatened by the sudden or unexpected, he is nevertheless assured of the hidden logic -- the causality -- behind even the most inexplicable acts; as the narrator tells us, "Webb took much more seriously than others of his profession sudden actions and off hand gestures. Always found them more dangerous, more determined" (*CTS* 22). For Webb, making a "determination" cauterizes the "dangerous," or mysterious, and his actions are therefore "determined"

by his need to undo mystery itself, to explain the unexplained. This aspect of his personality is clear after the hilariously grotesque tale of the strangulation and subsequent disappearance of Nora's mother. Webb continues to think about the case for a year, until a newspaper story about a woman strangled by a scarf that had been caught in the rear wheel of her car brings Webb to the conclusion that Mrs. Bass had been likewise strangled by her pet snake, which -- still alive -- left the "crime scene" without a trace (*CTS* 27). Apparently, *any* explanation is preferable to the continuance of mystery, which Webb abhors.

When Webb visits Nora and discovers Buddy's unexplained disappearance he is predictably affronted. Significantly, it is not only the mystery of the act that bothers him, but his sense that Buddy has somehow fallen out of his proper place; without his band, *The Cricket*, and his family, Buddy is nothing; he has "gone lost" (*CTS* 19). Webb determines to find Buddy, convinced that he cannot allow the silence of "a great talent" (20). Immediately on the case, Webb begins to invade Buddy's space, to try to get a sense of his missing friend's mind. As he questions Nora, he moves toward her, "leaning very close to her, like a lover" (20). Indeed, intrusion is central to Webb's detective work; he intrudes on Tom Pickett (70), breaks into Bellocq's place (50), enters the Brewitt's house unannounced, going first into Robin's bedroom and then, finally, into the bathroom where Buddy is in the tub (82-83). Later, when Buddy is ensconced at the Pontchartrain cabin, Webb breaks his word and sends Crawley out to visit him (101). At every turn, Webb undermines Buddy's desire for solitude and privacy, demonstrating one of the destructive potentials of the relationship between artist and audience, and revealing Webb's belief that, "All suicides all acts of privacy are romantic . . ." (101). As a kind of "private eye," Webb is intent on returning the artist to the "public eye," on transfiguring Buddy into a wholly public persona. In this way, Webb becomes representative of exactly the kind of audience that disallows the



grotesque, carnivalesque equilibrium Buddy seeks through jazz. The Webb-audience seeks to "fix" the artist, holding him in the centre that is defined by the surrounding audience itself. Buddy's only defense -- a position he is unable to take -- would be in fighting webs with webs, in assuming the position of the spider-artist who, like Robichaux or Carey, "patterns" and controls the audience and their response with controlled music, music that excludes chaos and the grotesque. (The only time Buddy uses jazz in this way is during his first visit with the Brewitts, when, not wanting the evening to end, Bolden "did a merciless thing. For the first time he used his cornet as jewelry," playing gentle music "with every sweet stylized gesture that he knew" [*CTS* 33].)

It is interesting that, for all of his rage for order, Webb represents something of a paradox himself, both in his role as a mystery-solving detective, and as an avatar of Bolden's audience. When Webb finally finds Buddy in the Brewitts' bathtub, Buddy is understandably shocked at his appearance: "At first Bolden was laughing. He couldn't get over it. He wanted to know how. Webb gave him all the names. Nora. Cornish. Pickett. Bellocq" (*CTS* 83). As readers, we may well empathize with Bolden's curiosity about Webb's success. After all, we have already witnessed Webb interacting with each person on the list, and we know that each of these interviews has been unavailing; Webb has "discovered nothing. . . . Their stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them" (*CTS* 63). Webb's explanation, then, offers no "clues" about the mystery of his appearance at the Brewitts'; Webb's solution is itself qualified by enigma. Moreover, Webb occupies a contradictory space as a representative of Buddy's audience as well. When he comes to listen to Bolden's jazz after the shooting (and, quite significantly, after two days of "trying hard to keep out of Buddy's way" [*CTS* 43]) Webb stays "[f]ar back, by the door" (*CTS* 43). At an earlier "stage" in their relationship, Webb

"tracks" Buddy for a few days, until he first hears his friend play for an audience: seeming to feel the power of Bolden's "voice," Webb quickly turns and walks away, "till he no longer heard the music or the roar he imagined crowding round to suck that joy. Its power" (*CTS* 36). Determined to get Buddy's "great talent" back on the stage, Webb nevertheless seems ambiguous in his personal stance toward his friend's music -- probably because Buddy's jazz music mediates forces that Webb himself cannot reconcile. Webb, as the detective who is hostile to mystery, cannot abide "all the possibilities in the middle of the story."

Indeed, this represents one final point of commonality between Webb and Garrett: the fact that both lawmen are thematically associated with the syntagmatic drive of narrative, and hostile to the affront of any lyrical hiatus. Accordingly, Webb is intent to remove Buddy from his position of silent retreat at the Brewitts', and to reimmerge him back into the narrative flow of "Storyville." For Buddy, the significance of being discovered by Webb is profound, unavoidable and immediate as, significantly, Webb uses stories to realign Buddy back onto the path of his own history:

When Webb was here with all his stories about me and about  
Gravier and Phillip Street, the wall of wire barrier glass and of glass  
Bolden can not break] went up between me and Robin. And when he  
left we were still here, still, not moving or speaking, in order to ignore  
the barrier glass. . . . He could reach me this far away, could tilt me  
upside down till he was directing me like wayward traffic back home. . .

. . .  
He came here and placed my past and my future on this table like a  
road. (*CTS* 86)

With the power of narrative, Webb redirects his "wayward traffic," shutting Bolden off from Robin's "after ambition" world, and restoring a chronological linearity that does

not accord with non-linear resistance to closure represented by Bolden's music, and by the grotesque generally.

Bolden's inability to resist Webb in this instance illustrates the complexity of the relationship between the two men, and the inner conflict that defines Buddy's grotesque ambivalence. It is important to note that Buddy's relationship with Webb does not begin when Webb assumes the missing jazzman's "case." Rather, Webb is an important influence in determining Buddy's initial rise to fame in Storyville. Like Buddy's musical "fathers," Webb provides an example that Buddy must decide to follow or reject. During the early history of their relationship, in either case, it is clear that Webb has a great deal of influence over Buddy. At a time when Buddy is seventeen and Webb is twenty, the two young men live together and "gradually paste their characters onto each other" (*CTS* 35). Even their taste in women, "diverse at first, becomes embarrassingly similar" (*CTS* 42). At this point, before Bolden's emergence as a musician, Webb predominates; he is "the public figure, Bolden, the side-kick, the friend who usually stayed around. If others spoke of the two of them it was usually with surprise at what Webb could see in Bolden" (35). Ultimately, however, Bolden surpasses his mentor, leaving Webb behind, and assuming his own position in the limelight: "After two years Bolden had gone to New Orleans and Webb stayed in Pontchartrain. Since then it was Bolden the musician that Webb heard stories of. It was Bolden that had jumped up, who had swallowed everything Webb was" (36). There are significant indications that Buddy has internalized much of Webb's need for certainty. The way he questions Nora about her past is suggestive of this, as is his work on *The Cricket*, which contained all manner of "stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies" (*CTS* 24). Significantly, the "thick facts" that comprise *The Cricket* are gathered by informants called "spiders." Moreover, Bolden's work on the paper often requires him to engage in detective-like work: "Whenever a celebrated murder occurred Bolden was there at the scene drawing amateur maps" (24).

Once again, then, Webb ("swallowed" by Buddy) is representative of the same attraction to order -- the same vision of the world as a place finally of clarity -- that is suggested by the music of Robichaux and Carey. And although Buddy is tantalized by this vision, he has an almost visceral instinctive counter-reaction, which acknowledges the pervasive sources of chaos and grotesque ambivalence that underlie (and are repressed by) structures of order. Buddy's acknowledgment of and revulsion toward what Webb represents as an audience-figure is strongly suggested by Buddy's withdrawal from public life in the first place. However, Webb's importance in Buddy's life -- in defining Buddy's mediation of these contraries -- clearly does not end when Buddy flees to the Brewitts'; the definitive ambivalence of Buddy's character is not so easily nullified. Indeed, the clearest indication of Webb's enduring power is in his ability to remove Buddy from his "Post music" retreat with Robin and Jaelin, putting him on a course back to public life that Buddy clearly doesn't welcome. Lying in bed after making love with Robin for the last time, Buddy feels "crucified" -- another image that recalls "Spider Blues." Significantly, Buddy spends much of his time, after leaving the Brewitts', writing monologues that are addressed to Webb, or as Nancy Bjerring conjectures, "to the part of himself that is Webb-like" (332). In one of the earliest of these passages, at the Pontchartrain cabin, Buddy comments on his early relationship with Webb, and expresses grave doubts about the path his friend has placed him on:

Our friendship had nothing accidental did it. Even at the start you set out to breed me into something better. Which you did. You removed my immaturity at just the right time and saved me a lot of energy and I sped away happy and alone in a new town away from you, and now you produce a leash, curl the leather round and round your fist, and walk straight into me. And you pull me home. Like those breeders of bull

terriers in the Storyville pits who can prove anything of their creatures, can prove how determined their dogs are by setting them onto an animal and while the jaws clamp shut they can slice the dog's body in half knowing the jaws will still not let go.

All the time I hate what I'm doing and want the other. . . . All you've done is cut me in half, pointing me here. Where I don't want these answers. (89)

The grotesque reference to Bolden as a dog recurs throughout *Slaughter* right up until Bolden refers to the insane asylum where he dies as the "pound" (139). Bolden's symbolic reduction in stature is humorously attested to while he stays at Webb's cabin, and imitates a visiting dog by scuffing over the dog's urine with his foot, noting the event as "a major breakthrough in the spread of hound civilization" (90). Specifically, Bolden's self-identification with the grotesque Storyville terriers (which recall the story of Livingstone in *Collected Works*) signals the extent to which he is helpless to resist Webb's influence -- an influence that bifurcates the duality of his character, slicing him in half.

Bolden's other half -- the half that is ultimately responsible for his initial flight from Storyville -- finds its characterological analogue in the figure of the crippled photographer, Bellocq, whose extant photographs of New Orleans prostitutes have been compiled in *E. J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*.<sup>1</sup> Bellocq is a traditional kind of physical grotesque; a disfigured dwarf, Bellocq is also a hydrocephalic, with a "blood and water circulation which was of such a pattern that he knew he would be dead before forty and which made the bending of his knees difficult" (*CTS* 57). He is often described as an amalgam of man and mechanism, a "perpetual motion machine" with a

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<sup>1</sup> John Szarkowski, ed., *E. J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970).

"pendulum" walk (56-57), or as a weird hybrid of man and camera, which "was a part of his bone structure. A metal animal grown into his back" (123). A real historical figure, Bellocq is, ironically, far more ambiguous and shadowy than Webb, and although the basic opposition represented by Webb and Bellocq has become a commonplace in criticism of *Slaughter*, the two characters do share some common ground, specifically insofar as they each suggest the spider's need for fixity and stasis at some level. On the surface, it is clear that Bellocq stands in opposition to Webb as he refuses to acknowledge the value Webb places on Buddy's music, or on the particular nature of his responsibility to art and audience. At the same time, Bellocq represents an artist-figure himself, and one that emphasizes the predatory and self-destructive capacities of artistic representation. Bellocq's role as an artist is essentially paradoxical as he photographs the prostitutes, partaking in both the functions of the creator of images, and as a sort of vampiric, "spider-" audience. He is not interested in "grotesque poses" (CTS 54), because his grotesque art places no value on "poses" of any sort; what Bellocq takes from his subjects is far more personal and, in an ironic way, far more intimate as well:

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 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, parading with love or money on a beautiful anonymous cloth arm. Remembering all that as she is photographed by the cripple who is hardly taller than his camera stand. Then he paid her, packed, and she had lost her grace. The picture is just a figure against a wall. (54)

This is a cruel intimacy for the prostitute, who is robbed of her "grace" by Bellocq's camera eye, which not only focuses on the woman's present status as a commercialized sex object, but seeks to transcend the illusion of her complicity in this role, and to record the degradation of her past hopes and dreams. By forcing the women to remember earlier imaginings of the future (a future that is significantly reflective of Bolden's art in its references to "parading" and to the connection with an "anonymous" other), Bellocq deflates the ego of his subjects (which is exactly what he does for Buddy as well). Even this is not always enough for Bellocq, however, for at times he wants an even greater intimacy, yearning to close the distance between artist and subject, "wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the bodies" (*CTS* 55). When this urge becomes acute, "he had to romance them later with a knife," slashing the photographs, "defiling the beauty" with a care that is "precise and clean" (55). The grotesque dualism of the artistic impulse is underscored as the narrator tells us, "The making and destroying coming from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of" (55).

Like Buddy's early relationship with Webb, his friendship with Bellocq is peculiar, initially defined by the apparent incompatibility of the two men. Webb considers this as he leaves Bellocq's place after procuring the photograph -- the "fixed" image of Bolden -- that he needs to continue his investigation. Referring to Bolden as a "social dog" -- a dog, once again, that he has "trained" -- Webb attempts to imagine what could have attracted Buddy to the photographer:

Buddy was a social dog, talked always to three or four people at once, a racer. He had no deceit but he roamed through conversations as if they were the countryside not listening carefully just picking up moments. And what was strong in Bellocq was the slow convolution of that brain. He was self-sufficient, complete as a perpetual motion machine. What could Buddy have to do with him? (56)

Once again revealing his tendency to be "attracted to opposites," Buddy is magnetized by precisely the qualities that Webb sees as antithetical to the nature of the Buddy Bolden he thinks he knows. Even Buddy is aware of the peculiar nature of the relationship, explaining to Webb at one point, "More and more I said he was wrong and more and more I spent whole evenings with him" (*CTS* 91). Nevertheless, Buddy and Bellocq have much in common. Like Buddy, Bellocq refuses to "consider himself professional," knowing that his photographs are "on the level of fetish, a joyless private game" (*CTS* 64). As we have seen, this "private game" teaches Bellocq a great deal about the relationship of artist, art and audience, as his own art conflates the role of artist and subject and underscores the predatory and destructive aspects of art itself. This self-conscious insight -- which renders his fetishist art "joyless" -- makes Bellocq extremely cynical about Bolden's rising fame and the carnivalesque equilibrium the jazzman desires. Ultimately, Bellocq comes to represent an alternative to the narrowing room afforded by Bolden's increasingly fixed public persona; like the heroes of "White Dwarfs," Bellocq too exists "on that perfect edge / where there is no social fuel" (*RJ* 70-71). It is toward this space that Bellocq attracts Buddy, who from Bellocq's perspective, "had once been enviably public" (*CTS* 64). During the long hours of their conversation, the two men move "gradually off the edge of the social world" (64).

Shortly after he arrives at the Brewitts', Buddy is alone with Robin, and he tries to explain the disillusion of his relationship to his audience, and the escape represented by Bellocq, "the first person [Buddy] met who had absolutely no interest in [his] music" (*CTS* 59):

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.



Every time 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)

Bellocq, the only person Buddy knows who is short enough not to get hit by the symbolic, spinning "fan" at the shaving parlour (*CTS* 91), becomes a kind of anti-fan, the opposite of an audience. He opposes -- both in philosophy and in stature -- the "giraffes of fame" that watch and begin to define Buddy's performances, preferring the silence of his own "private game" to the illusory "importance" that begins to feed Buddy's ego, occluding the artist behind the performance, turning him into a "lie." Buddy flees from his public self -- travelling through the window Bellocq represents, but surpassing even Bellocq in finding a marginal space. As in his relationship with Webb, Buddy exceeds his mentor, moving past Bellocq, "like a naive explorer looking for footholds" (64). Ultimately, Buddy's relationship with Bellocq collapses the ego and dismisses the social icon Buddy is becoming, as Buddy tries to explain to "Webb" during his quiet time at Pontchartrain:

He was offering me black empty spaces. . . . wanted me to become blind to everything but the owned pain in myself. . . . Whatever I say about him you will interpret as the workings of an enemy and what I loved Webb were the possibilities of his silence. . . . I can't summarize him for you, he tempted me out of the world of audiences where I had tried to catch everything thrown at me. He offered me mole comfort, mole deceit. Come with me Webb I want to show you something, no come with me I want to *show* you something. You come too. Put your hand though this window. (91)

The repetition of Buddy's exhortation at the end of the passage, and the inclusion of the confusing "You come too" suggests a grotesque conflation of Webb with Buddy's other

"audience," the readers (and writer) of *Coming Through Slaughter*, as we are all invited to put our hands through the window -- the transgressable border zone that divides artist and audience, self and ego, public and private. As readers, we too share in the grotesque "performance" of *Slaughter*, a fact that is illustrated by Bolden's earlier demand that Willy Cornish -- the too ordered, "overlooked metronome" of Bolden's band (112) -- also put his hands through a window while performing (14).

Webb and Bellocq, then, delineate the oppositions that frame Buddy's grotesque ambivalence regarding his own status as a creator of art. Buddy's vacillation between these poles is represented in a series of achronologically juxtaposed vignettes that span the historical time corresponding to his achievement of notoriety in Storyville -- before his flight to the Brewitts'. The cumulative effect of this period is powerfully represented in the juxtaposition of the scene where Buddy first appears on the New Orleans music scene, joining in his first parade (which is ominously similar to his last parade), and a scene where Buddy cowers alone at Shell Beach Station. In the first, Frank Lewis recalls being at "that first parade" and experiencing Buddy's "very famous entrance" (*CTS* 38). True to the carnivalesque spirit of his art, Bolden does not simply join the band on the street, rather he "jumps" and "struggles" through the audience and the moving band, joining the musicians for a few moments before fading back into the crowd, only to return "fifteen minutes later, 300 yards down the street" (38). Lewis ends by noting that, "After two or three times we were waiting for him and he came." Arguably, this seemingly innocuous statement signals the end of Buddy's engagement with the truly carnivalesque, which exists only for the fleeting moments of Buddy's first few appearances. The relationship established when Lewis claims "we were waiting" and "he came" suggests Buddy's emergence as a central focus of attention; his actions are already starting to be perceived in the light of the expectations of his

audience. On the next page, we see the end result of his relationship with such an audience; here, in the early stages of his flight from Storyville, Buddy is "scared of everybody. He didn't want to meet anybody he knew again, ever in his life" (39).

In the interim period, chronologically between these two scenes, Bolden becomes increasingly troubled by his relationships with others. In a fictional interview between Webb and Brock Mumford, Mumford remembers Bolden as being "impossible during that time, before he went" (*CTS* 76). He recalls his last encounter with Bolden, when Bolden's popularity was beginning to wane. Mumford, who is "avoiding people," doesn't answer the door when Buddy knocks, so Buddy enters the solitary space of Mumford's apartment through the window, and with paranoid conviction that "they were probably watching the door," he leaves the same way (76-77).

A number of other events during this phase of Bolden's career illustrate the grotesque dissolution of his ego that is, in part, the result of his interaction with Bellocq. The shaving parlour where Bolden works is, of course, intimately connected with the ego; echoing the line from "Spider Blues" that refers to the spiders' "close vanity of making" (*RJ* 64), Bolden admits that -- crouched beneath the whirling "fan" -- he "work[s] with the vanity of others" (*CTS* 48). The barber shop, with its mirrors, fans and windows, also provides the symbolic setting for Bolden's aforementioned fight with Tom Pickett, "one of the great hustlers, one of the most beautiful men in the District" (*CTS* 71).

On the surface, this fight begins after the two men talk about pimping (Bolden is historically reputed to have been a pimp), and Pickett momentarily destroys Bolden's faith in the "certainty" of Nora's fidelity. However, the subsequent fight, and its narrative representation, suggests a more complicated exchange between these battling figures. The violence begins as Buddy is giving Pickett a shave, working with Pickett's "vanity" as both men look into the large mirror in front of them, and Buddy

begins to cut his customer with his razor, recalling Bellocq's act of "romancing" his photographs with a knife. The correlation of these two acts of cutting, along with a later passage in which Ondaatje recalls reading about how Bolden "stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself . . . Defiling people [he] did not wish to be" (*CTS* 133), suggests that Bolden's attack on Pickett is also an attack on certain aspects of himself, that "Pickett the handsome pimp, who mirrors Buddy's own strutting ego, is a displaced version of that enemy within" (Rooke 281). Here, then, the "vanity of others" becomes a reflection of the vanity of his own ego, as the identities of Bolden and Pickett are fused into one self-destructive grotesque, motivated by the need to be freed from the ego itself. This postulate is supported by the imagery of the violent scene, which is punctuated by broken mirrors and windowpanes, and also by the formal commingling of voice that defines the representation of this fight, as the narrative jumps back and forth, shifting almost seamlessly, between its two fighting narrators. Significantly, the weapons used in this fight are all tools of "vanity:" the razor, the towel, shards of the now-broken mirror, and the "strop" and barber's chair that join the combatants together as they both break through the shop window, which folds "like a spider web," as they fall through, onto "Liberty" (*CTS* 73-74). Finally, the two men disentangle -- a symbolic representation of Bolden's ego-dissolution -- and immediately thereafter Bolden is accused of madness, both by Nora and by the retreating figure of Pickett, which foreshadows the later scene of ego-sacrifice that places Bolden in an asylum.

As important as this scene is as an allegory of the destruction of ego, it does not represent any kind of final solution to Bolden's problem; significantly, he isn't even self-conscious enough to see the forces that are motivating his seemingly arbitrary actions. After his initial attack on Pickett, he wonders, "What the hell is wrong with me?" (73), perhaps beginning to identify the extent to which his actions are determined

by ego. Moreover, the doubts Pickett has occasioned about Nora's fidelity (which affront the ego) are not entirely dispersed after the fight. In a later scene, Buddy is getting drunk with Cornish, increasingly convinced of Nora's relationship with Pickett. Here, Bolden cannot bear the thought of Nora's having a separate life (or even a past life) which he "had nothing to do with"; when Nora defends Bolden in the street fight, Bolden becomes aware that "the scene on the street included a fight which did not include him" (CTS 79). Illustrating the relationship between ego-centred consciousness and the issues of order and control that define Bolden's ambivalence, we are told that the very possibility of Nora's unfaithfulness reveals to Bolden that "the certainties he loathed and needed were liquid at the root" (78).

Drunk, Bolden demands that Cornish affirm his own opinion of "the bitch," but Cornish refuses, insisting that "she's a beautiful lady" (79). Falling to the floor, laughing bitterly, Bolden is unable for a moment to answer this; when he does, his response reveals his awareness of the power of his own ego: "You know ... in spite of everything that happens, we still think a helluva lot of ourselves!" (79) After Cornish leaves, it is clear that it is this revelation, more than any suspicion about Nora, that is at the centre of Bolden's misery, and for a moment, Bolden considers a way out:

He lay there crucified and drunk. Brought his left wrist to his teeth and bit hard and harder for several seconds then lost his nerve. Flopping it back outstretched. Going to sleep while feeling his vein tingling at the near chance it had of going free. (79)

"Crucified," as he will later feel after making love with Robin for the last time, Bolden considers self-destruction as a means to undo the terrible authority of his own ego. Ultimately, he loses his "nerve," possibly because (as I will argue below) Bolden's desire to escape ego carries with it no correlative desire to destroy the *self*.

In balking at the potential to destroy himself utterly, Bolden diverges from Bellocq's path -- a path that leads the photographer to an unexplained self-immolation

in his apartment. While there is nothing in the representation of Bellocq's (fictional) suicide to indicate his motivation, it is possible that the act is at least partially a result of feelings of responsibility over Bolden's disappearance. In any case, Bellocq's suicide engenders a grotesque parody of a kind of performance that is utterly contrary to his own photography. Remembering Bolden as "enviably public," Bellocq ends his life with an experiment in centrality, arranging the space of his suicide like a surrounded stage. He arranges chairs as an imaginary audience around the outer edge of the room, and ignites the wallpaper around him in a square. Bellocq then assumes his place in the very centre of the room and even breathes "formally" (*CTS* 67). Ultimately, this lethal experiment is a failure; Bellocq, who has always inhabited the uncertain edge, is driven out of the centre by a physical imperative as he loses control; he "vomits out smoke and throws himself against the red furniture," toward the walls that frame the periphery of his space. Even the walls, however, have lost their solidity, and Bellocq "falls, dissolving out of his pose. Everything has gone wrong. The wall is not there to catch or hide him. Nothing is there to clasp him into a certainty" (67).

The symbolic flouting of the ego represented by Bolden's fight with Pickett is (appropriately) followed by the diminution of his celebrity as a Storyville jazzman. Unpopular because of his attack on Pickett and as a result of his growing paranoia about relationships in general, Bolden is eventually replaced in the band by a younger musician. He retreats from the sight and sound of the reconstituted band, "like a rooster ignoring everybody" (80), fleeing to the barber shop where he once again passes through the frame of the still-broken front window, dropping the pretension of pride on the site of his fight with Pickett. Taking his cornet, Bolden begins a performance that is not a performance at all; unaware of a tiny eavesdropping audience

that describes the music for the reader, Bolden plays a hybrid music that grotesquely mingles the divine and the banal in an expression of the ambivalent multiplicity of existence. Dude Botley, listening quietly from the street, describes Bolden's grotesque musical fusion:

Thought I knew his blues before, and the hymns at funerals, but what he is playing now is real strange and I listen careful for he's playing something that sounds like both. . . . He's mixing them up. . . . I'm sort of scared because I know the Lord don't like that mixing the Devil's music with His music. But I still listen because the music sounds so strange and I guess I'm hypnotised. When he blows blues I can see Lincoln Park with all the sinners and whores shaking and belly rubbing and the chicks getting way down and slapping themselves on the cheeks of their behind. Then when he blows the hymn I'm in my mother's church with everybody humming. The picture kept changing with the music. It sounded like a battle between the Good Lord and the Devil. Something tells me to listen and see who wins. If Bolden stops on the hymn, the Good Lord wins. If he stops on the blues, the Devil wins.  
(81)

The narrative ends there; the closure Botley seeks never comes, and the grotesque conflict he perceives is ultimately irresolvable, as the worlds of Lincoln Park and the church -- of carnival sexuality and funerals -- are inextricably woven together. Still struggling with the vestiges of his ego, Bolden rejects the crowd and stage of Lincoln Park and, almost totally isolated in the destroyed shaving parlour, is empowered once again to mediate contraries, to engage the grotesque through the artistic expression of his own abiding duality.

Much later, after he has retreated to Shell Beach and after he has been found by Webb, Bolden talks with Crawley about music at the Pontchartrain cabin, and describes

the sort of music that he would like to play -- a music that equalizes performance and place, but without the complications, it would seem, of an audience. Bolden explains about getting up in "the empty room" and hitting "the squawk at just the right note to equal the tone of the room" (101). Dismissing the primacy of the ego, this music is an expression of self, a kind of anti-performative gesture. This vision may represent Bolden's realization that the paths represented by Webb and Bellocq are both premised upon a kind of deception; whereas Webb would have Bolden on the stage, "just playing games" (59) with his listeners, the solitary silence Bellocq represents is "mole deceit" (91). Bolden's empty room suggests an attempt to find a middle way that is neither dishonest or "joyless." Crawley's caveat -- indicating the untenability of Bolden's solution, or perhaps his own inability to apprehend what Bolden really desires -- hardly seems necessary: "You learn to play like that and no band will play with you . . ." (101).

Formally, the third section of *Slaughter*, in which Bolden finally returns to Storyville, back to the "public parade" where he goes "mad into silence" (CTS 108), is the most discontinuous and fragmented part of the text. Incorporating snippets of interviews, "fact" sheets, and transcripts of film reels into the course of the fictional passages, the formal grotesquery of this final section dramatizes the process of Bolden's representation, analogizing his final silence in the asylum with the paucity of the historical traces from which Ondaatje has created his protagonist. The section begins with a tiny fragment of an interview with John Joseph, commencing with the unnamed interviewer's injunction, "To get back to Buddy Bolden --" (105), the "Buddy Bolden" that must be inscribed by history. The exchange between interviewer and interviewee is interesting to the extent that a seemingly distracted Joseph serves only to confirm what the interviewer has already "heard:" that Bolden "lost his mind" and "died in the bug house" (105). The rumours are hardening into history.



Over the page, we see Buddy on the bus, moving inexorably toward the site of his break-down, "Travelling again. Home to nightmare" (106). As he rides, he considers his journey and comments on the capacity of his audience to reduce him to personae -- to disallow the carnivalesque equilibrium his art strives for: "All my life I seemed to be a parcel on a bus. I am the famous fucker. I am the famous barber. I am the famous cornet player. Read the labels. The labels are coming home" (106). In this way, Buddy's "audience" expands to encompass not only the people who listen to him play, but the people (like the anonymous interviewer) who also try to reduce him to "labels."

Throughout this final section, Buddy is characterized by a profound ambivalence; his motives are indeterminate for, while he clearly doesn't welcome his return to the public eye, it would seem that his return to Storyville, and his appearance in the final parade are at least partially wilful, as he agrees to play with Henry Allen's band (108). Indeed, as Buddy moves closer to his own final silence -- to the point where history alone fills the mysterious space he leaves behind -- he becomes increasingly less clear to his readerly "audience." His actions are unoccasioned, and our sense of what motivates Buddy is increasingly occluded as the text proceeds. (It is no coincidence that Webb -- who would find this unbearable -- makes only one, appropriately distressed appearance in this section of *Slaughter*.) Showing the enduring influence of Bellocq, of his years at the Brewitts', and his weeks of solitude at Pontchartrain, Bolden is turning inward, away from his need to find certainty in the world around him, away from the other characters, and away from us.

Returning home to find Nora living with Willy Cornish, Buddy remains calm, almost serene, but remembers how his Webb-like need for certainty -- his Pickett-ego -- would have conditioned his response at an earlier stage:

A couple of years ago I would have sat down and thought out precisely why it was Cornish who moved in with her why it was Cornish she

accepted would have thought it out as I set the very type it was translated into. *The Cricket*. But I shat those theories out completely. (113)

Throughout this last section, Buddy's old friends note how much he has "changed" (113); in conversations now punctuated by "long silence" (109), Buddy refuses to "enlarge stories as he used to" (120). Interestingly, Nora is concerned about the effect of exposing Buddy to his old friends, who cluster about him like an audience. For Buddy, however, it makes little difference, his "mind slipped through them" (120). His "brain suicided," Bolden is beginning to share in the immunity of the gypsy foot whores, whose broken ankles protect them from the sticks of skulking pimps (118-119). Once a pimp himself, Bolden can now identify his own role as a product of exploitation, an artistic prostitute before the demands of his audience -- and this identification grants him a kind of serenity; considering the mattress whores, Bolden can determine "no horror in the way they run their lives" (119). To Nora, however, Buddy's serenity is otherworldly and distressing, and she blames Bellocq for changing Buddy, telling him "*Look at you. Look at what he did to you. Look at you. Look at you. Goddamit. Look at you*" (127). Nora is only partially correct, for Buddy has already gone past Bellocq, who Buddy remembers having cried when he looked at his own pictures of the mattress whores, and then burning the prints, just as he would later burn himself to death (119).

Finally, on the fifth morning after Buddy's return to Storyville, he performs in the legendary parade, and, in a powerful prose section that recalls the scene in which Billy is raped by the sun in *Collected Works* (76-78), Buddy achieves his grotesque apogee, finally realizing an absolute dissolution of ego and finding the "one person who will be the right audience" (89). Certainly the most grotesque passage in *Coming Through Slaughter*, the final parade scene is crucial in determining our response to the

work as a whole. Coming at the end of his musical career, the "legend" of Buddy's break-down during the parade is a sort of historical anchor -- like Billy the Kid's violent death, this narrative climax is unavoidable. The numerous references to the event scattered throughout the earlier parts of *Slaughter* contribute to this sense, just as the multiple representations of Billy's death in *Collected Works* highlighted the pervasive effect of that death on the entirety of his "life story." As a historical figure, Bolden is largely defined by his break-down; his career, its music unrecorded, is retrospectively read (as we shall see) as an explanation for his collapse. Significantly, the parade functions as a kind of paradoxical "beginning" even for Ondaatje -- it is at the very centre of the grotesque identification that conflates author and character throughout *Slaughter*. Talking to himself, the author addresses his protagonist:

Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, 'Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade ...' What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? (134)

This crucial "sentence" (actually, this is only a "fragment"; significantly, Ondaatje has only given us the middle of the original sentence) contains a kernel of the paradoxical unity of Ondaatje and Bolden, which is the seed of *Coming Through Slaughter* itself.

Although the event of the final parade is determined by its importance to the historical "narrative" of Bolden's life -- a narrative that Bolden is redirected to by Webb -- Ondaatje's representation of the scene engenders a paradox. Bolden's "break-down" constitutes a grotesque "break-through" that frees him from the restraints of Webb's kind of narrative, which is based on "certainty" and structured by clearly demarcated, individual ego-identity. As Bolden moves with the parade toward Liberty -- the site of his earlier fight with Pickett -- he shrugs off the inhibitions of musical

control, just as his own intensely visceral stream-of-consciousness undermines the narrative control and clarity that Webb represents and requires. Bolden's grotesque moving/playing transports him to a potentially ambiguous site that conflates intense pain and pleasure, the physical, psychological and spiritual. This ambiguous emotional state reflects the potential complexity of the reader's reaction to the passage, as we are confronted by its stylistic discord and violent imagery. The similarities between this passage and the solar assault in *Collected Works* are significant; like the earlier passage, the scene of Bolden's final parade underscores the function of the grotesque in the work as a whole, potentially illustrating both the dissolution of ego that defines the grotesque body and the seamless participation of that body in the macrocosm -- in the mythic cycles of degeneration and regeneration.

As the scene begins, Bolden seems to be watching himself with the eyes of his audience, self-conscious about his come-back: "My new red undershirt and my new white shiny shirt bright under cornet. New shoes. Back in town" (129). Throughout the early parts of the scene, he seems to be playing a role he no longer believes in, aping the Buddy Bolden he knows the crowd is expecting, partaking in the "Parade of ego, cakewalk, strut, every fucking dance and walk" he remembers, as he hits "each boundary of crowd" (129). Significantly, the musical disorder that begins to signal his "break-down" is encroaching on the performance; even as the scene begins, Henry Allen is eying Bolden, "worrying . . . about keeping the number going." Bolden's playing is increasingly grotesque and uncontrolled, his notes "sharp as a rat mouth under Allen's soft march tune," are "like a bird flying out of the shit" (129).

The reference to shit is significant, partaking in one of the most pervasive lines of imagery in *Slaughter*. The word "shit" itself was often used to describe jazz music -- with both positive and negative connotations -- and was (and is) commonly used to denote "stuff" in ways that are suggestive "either of essence or of nonsense" (Gold

275). Buddy's intensely physical music, which transcends the distinction between mind and body, grows out of shit, as he distils the experiences of Storyville, his grotesque musical "nonsense" somehow mediating the ambivalent "essence" of his world. Bolden's music is, in this way, entirely different from Carey's, which "went gliding down the river and missed all the shit on the bottom" (96). Fly-like, his music survives on the pain and waste of his surroundings, the "alley shit" (40) that collects on his shoes in Shell Beach, the "driblets of manure" (119) left by the mattress whores. Significantly one of the earliest scatological references in the text comes when Webb is interviewing Crawley, who is on a special water diet, "aiming for the tail of shit," which he describes as

this fantastic shit [that] comes out like a tornado. It's all the crap right at the bottom of your bowels, all the packed in stuff that never comes out, that always gets left behind. . . . Like someone removing a poker that's been up your arse all your life. It's fantastic. (30)

In the course of the discussion, Webb discovers that Bolden, having embarked on his own symbolic "diet," was last seen on a boat, also requiring water in his journey away from Storyville, toward his own eventual "tail of shit." The thematic importance of images of consumption and defecation also bear upon Bolden's mediation of order and chaos -- his simultaneous need for and fear of certainty and control -- as these issues are reflected by his relationship to Webb. A grotesquely humorous way of reading these two characters' ability to imaginatively participate in each other throughout the course of *Slaughter* would be to suggest that Webb, and the need for certainty he represents, passes through Bolden at a symbolic level that mingles the physiological with the psychological. During his teens, Bolden had "swallowed everything Webb was" (36). Much later, Bolden "passes" Webb, voiding his own inner detective. This becomes clear as he sits and looks over *The Cricket* (only days before the final parade),

considering the paper's testimony to his own earlier need for clarity and explanation, in the time before he "shat those theories out completely" (113).

The scatological reading of the final parade also illustrates the equation of defecation and creativity that accords with Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body. (This grotesque equivalence is a theme in *Beautiful Losers* as well -- a novel that abounds in Rabelaisian imagery.) Defecation is one of the characteristic gestures of what Bakhtin terms the "ever unfinished, ever creating body" (*Rabelais* 26), a body that "is presented not in a private, egotistical form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people" (*Rabelais* 19). It is appropriate then, that the powerful visceral imagery of the final parade is coextensive with the appearance of a figure that represents the ultimate fusion of artist and listener, allowing Bolden to escape the "Parade of ego," and finally transcend the "boundary of crowd:"

But where the bitch came from I don't know. She moves out to us again, moving along with us, gravy bones. Thin body and long hair and joined by someone half bald and a beautiful dancer too so I turn from the bank of people and aim at them and pull them on a string to me . . . . Get there before it ends, but it's nearly over nearly over, approach Liberty. She and he keeping up like storm weeds crashing against each other. . . . She's Robin, Nora, Crawley's girl's tongue. (129-130)

First emerging as a small crowd, Bolden's "audience" ultimately merges into a single composite figure, a shape-shifting grotesque that both represents an amalgam of the objects of Bolden's desire, and recalls Bolden's own appearance in the first parade, where he existed in that liminal space between the band and the crowd. (Indeed, the fact that he refers to her as a "bitch" reflects his own self-conception as a strutting "spaniel" [129].) Leaving Henry Allen and the band behind, Bolden directs his music

at this figure alone, at first trying to control her, pulling her "on a string," until this is no longer possible. As the scene progresses, she grows in stature and power, partaking in the process of Bolden's performance to the extent that the roles of artist and audience finally collapse:

. . . the girl is alone now mirroring my throat . . . I can't hear the music as I play it. The notes more often now. She hitting each note with her body before it is even out so I know what I do through her. God this is what I wanted to play for, if no one else I always guessed there would be this, this mirror somewhere . . . Half dead, can't take more, hardly hit the squawks anymore but when I do my body flicks at them as if I'm the dancer till the music is out there. . . she is sliding round and round her thin hands snake up through her hair and do their own dance and she is seven foot tall with them and I aim at them to bring them down to my body and the music gets caught in her hair, this is what I wanted, always, loss of privacy in the playing, leaving the stage, the rectangle of band on the street, this hearer who can throw me in the direction and the speed she wishes like an angry shadow. (130)

Like the early moments of Bolden's appearance in his first parade, the last moments of his final parade are truly carnivalesque; here, the "loss of privacy in the playing" is not a function of an audience that is trying to "fix" him, or keep him in the centre. Conversely, this relationship involves "leaving the stage," and engaging in a relationship with the audience that is powerfully ambiguous, mingling desire, intimacy and energetic violence. Significantly, the linear progress of the parade -- a paradigm for the linearity of narrative -- has been interrupted; Bolden stops moving forward with the "march" and begins going "round and round" at the intersection of Liberty and Iberville (130). The syntactical and grammatical confusion of the passage increases in

a crescendo, as Bolden's performative interaction with his grotesque counterpart occasions a breaking down of the boundaries between mind and body, the psychic and the sexual, and, ultimately, player and instrument. Here, the sexual energy of the passage recalls the etymological association of "jazz" with sexual intercourse, as well as Bolden's earlier wish to put his "horn" up Crawley's girlfriend's skirt (101). At the same time, the concupiscence of the passage is commingled with images of exhaustion and death, underscoring the grotesque unification of degradation and regeneration, eros and thanatos, signaled by Bolden's experience:

Fluff and groan in my throat, roll of a bad throat as we begin to slow.  
 Tired. She still covers my eyes with hers and sees it slow and allows the slowness for me her breasts black under the wet light shirt, sound and pain in my heart sure as death. All my body moves to my throat and I speed again and she speeds tired again, a river of sweat to her waist her head and hair back bending back to me, all the desire in me is cramp and hard, cocaine on my cock, eternal, for my heart is in my throat hitting slow pure notes into the shimmy dance of victory, hair toss victory, a local strut, eyes meeting sweat down her chin arms out in final exercise pain, take on the last long squawk and letting it cough and climb to spear her all those watching like a javelin through the brain and down into the stomach, feel the blood that is real move up bringing fresh energy in its suitcase, it comes flooding up past the heart in a mad parade, it is coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet, god can't stop god can't stop it can't stop the air the red force coming up can't remove it from my mouth, no intake gasp, so deep blooming it up god I can't choke it the music still pouring in a roughness I've never hit, watch it *listen* it, 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 (130-131)

With Rabelaisian grotesquery this passage illuminates a profound exchange between the inner world and the outer, between the body/mind and its environment. This grotesque transcendence is what Bolden's jazz has been reaching for all along, as we have seen. The creation of his art (which, for Bolden, is a product of breath itself) occasions a profound bodily consciousness; the passage reveals the capacity of grotesque physical imagery to display "not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and inward features are often merged into one" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 318). Moreover, this passage conflates artistic and physical fertility in a vision of performance that reveals the capacity of the grotesque body to transgress its own boundaries. Throughout the scene, in accordance with Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, "stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (*Rabelais* 26). Much of that stress is laid on Bolden's mouth -- where his "hard kiss" (*CTS* 131) fills the instrument with his own blood -- which Bakhtin considers "the most important of all human features for the grotesque" (*Rabelais* 317). Indeed, the image of this hard kiss of blood -- coming after the pervasive sexual imagery throughout the scene -- recalls the image of the dying construction worker in "For John, Falling," and the violently ambiguous image of the "beautiful dark orgasm of his mouth" (*DM* 56). Once again, this conflation of sex and death accords with the mythic and cyclical vision of the grotesque in which the body participates in the greater "body" of the world itself; indeed, the convulsive motions and spasms of Bolden's final performance symbolically distill the characteristic gestures of bodily participation with the world -- what Bakhtin calls "the acts of bodily drama:"

Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose [or of a horn], sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body -- all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and the end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (317)

Bolden's participation in the coextensive roles of artist and audience, performer and listener -- and his bodily participation in inner and outer worlds -- suggests a thematic analogue for the fusion of intra- and extratextual "worlds" represented by the parade as a narrative gesture in the overall structure of *Slaughter*. In this "gesture," Bolden turns inward, dragging the focus of the narrative with him for one grotesque, transcendent moment, just as his performance represents an outward movement that encompasses and equates performance and reception. Throughout the parade the exchange between Bolden and his desired audience conflates the functions of representation and perception, of writing and reading. This equivalence is suggested by the identification of Bolden and Ondaatje, who is both author and audience to the quasi-historical jazzman. Moreover, the powerful ambiguity of the relationship in the parade mirrors the exchange between the scene itself and Bolden's extratextual audience of readers, who must attempt to mediate the contradictions of this chaotic event in the hope of ascribing meaning to the historical climax of Bolden's story. Through indeterminacy, our position is rendered analogous to the fictional/historical audience that watches Bolden's breakdown during the parade; although we have known all along that the event is coming, our preparedness is undermined by a violently ambiguous representation of the event that problematizes the attribution of stable meaning. Indeed, much of the remainder of *Slaughter* itself dramatizes this need to find/create a meaningful ending for Bolden's story, either by representing the reactions of his

characterological "audience" to Bolden's "crack-up" and subsequent silence, or by foregrounding the paucity of historical information that analogizes that silence for Ondaatje and his readers.

This latter problem is highlighted immediately after the representation of the parade on a page of static facts, dates and addresses that loosely delineate the course of Buddy's life, from the questionable date of his birth to his stay at the asylum after the parade, and finally to his death in 1931 (*CTS* 132). Utterly contrary to the stylistic drama of the preceding parade, this list of historical facts seems more sterile than reassuring. These facts constitute a page of the "thin sheaf of information" that corresponds to the ultimate hiatus inaugurated by the final parade. Addressing his subject, the Ondaatje-figure emphasizes this equivalence: "There was the climax of the parade and then you removed yourself from the 20th century game of fame, the rest of your life a desert of facts. Cut them open and spread them out like garbage" (134). This historical "garbage" is spread throughout the remainder of *Slaughter*, revealing the basic inadequacy of this kind of fixed discourse in capturing Buddy Bolden. There is a collection of fragments from an interview with Lionel Gremillion, who worked at the state hospital where Buddy died (137-138), and there is a further sampling from his *A Brief History of East Louisiana State Hospital* (143-144). Each of these touch on Buddy only occasionally and indirectly, highlighting Bolden's position on the periphery of discourse.

The very gaps created by Buddy's silence, however, do not diminish the requirement for explanation and closure required by his contemporaries, who retrospectively attempt to ascribe order and meaning to Buddy's "collapse." Gremillion's interview, for instance, reads Buddy's career as a "pendulum swing" from celebrity to withdrawal; he cites a reverend who described Buddy as a "hyperactive individual" during his earlier performances in New Orleans (attempting to establish a

line of progression and causality), and finally advances a suggestion for the root cause of Buddy's grotesque narrative/psychological *denouement*: a possible "endocrine problem" (137). The reductivism of such explanatory narrativization is related to the "labels" that Buddy sees himself becoming before the parade (106), and ultimately to his final label, "Dementia Praecox. Paranoid Type" (132).

Other characters participate in this retrospective attribution of order, recasting Bolden's career in different ways in order to make the parade function as a logical and satisfying narrative conclusion. Anticipating some of the critical difficulties occasioned by *Slaughter* itself, many of these attempts illustrate the need to fit Bolden into one of the most popular archetypes of the "20th century game of fame," that being the self-destructive artist, or the celebrity-recluse. (Think of figures as diverse as Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Vincent Van Gogh, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Janis Joplin, J. D. Salinger, or Elvis Presley as characteristic embodiments of this archetype.) Early in *Slaughter*, Ondaatje suggests the prevalence of the theory that Bolden's break-down is attributable to a history of fast living: "What he did too little of was sleep and what he did too much of was drink and many interpreted his later crack-up as a morality tale of a talent that debauched itself" (13). Significantly, Ondaatje's attempt to imagine and re-story Bolden's life resists the tendency to turn this life into this kind of "morality tale"; addressing his protagonist Ondaatje admits that he

Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body,  
and you like a weatherbird arcing round in the middle of your life to  
exact opposites and burning your brains out so that from June 5, 1907  
till 1931 you were dropped in amber in the East Louisiana State  
Hospital. Some saying you went mad trying to play the devil's music  
and hymns at the same time, and Armstrong telling historians that you  
went mad by playing too hard and too often drunk too wild too crazy.  
The excesses cloud up the page. (134)

Ondaatje's desire to "think" in the "brain and body" of his character recalls Webb's intrusions into Buddy's space, with Nora, with Buddy's friends, and ultimately with the Brewitts. Unlike Webb, however, Ondaatje remains open to the enduring ambivalence of Bolden's life, as he goes "arcing round in the middle," "to exact opposites." Ultimately, Ondaatje recoils from the narratological "excesses" that seek to explain Buddy as Webb would need him explained.

This openness allows Ondaatje to follow Bolden where Webb cannot, on Bolden's journey "through Sunshine, Vachery, and Slaughter" (*CTS* 155) to the asylum itself. Here, Ondaatje's imaginative delineation of Bolden's consciousness reveals the extent to which Bolden continues to act as a profoundly grotesque site for the mediation of contraries. A personification of ambivalence, Bolden seems to have transcended even the most basic oppositions of positive and negative in his escape from the valuating order of narrative. Still considering himself a kind of grotesque dog, Bolden remembers his "beautiful snout" being hit by one of his attendants as he travels to "the pound" (139). In this passage, Buddy's explanation of the operation on his neck underscores the indeterminacy that qualifies his self-perception, his physical unity with the natural world: "You see I had an operation on my throat. You see I had a salvation on my throat. A goat put his horn in me and pulled. Let me tell ya, it went winter in there and then it fell apart like mud and they stuck it together with needles and they held me together with clothes" (139). The imagery here is biomorphic and value-neutral; Bolden has entered a lyrical mode that disallows an accessible narration of the experience of his operation and problematizes our ability to be sure of his feelings about experience. Even his description of being raped by his attendants has no more narratological weight than any other part of Bolden's "speech" -- including the grotesquely humorous description of trying to eat after his throat operation:

They make me love them. They are the arms looking after me. On the second day they came into my room and took off all my clothes and

bent me over a table and broke my anus. They gave me a white dress. They know I am a barber and I didn't tell them I'm a barber. Won't. Can't. Boot in my throat, the food has to climb over it and then go down and meet with all their pals in the stomach. Hi sausage. Hi cabbage. Did yuh see that fuckin boot. Yeah I nearly turned round 'n went back on the plate. Who is this guy we're in anyway? (139)

The brutality of Bolden's violation is qualified by its being intermingled with a strange affection; Bolden passively receives the rape with a kind of "love" (albeit a forced love) and recognizes that his rapists also represent protection. Freed from his ego, Bolden once again becomes the King of Corners (146). As such, he seems to achieve a kind of grace, believing that "Everyone who touches [him] must be beautiful" (135). In this state, as I have said, Bolden can no longer function as the central ego that organizes and prioritizes events in a conventional narrative discourse; in the asylum (a word that can also mean sanctuary), the representation of different events is grotesquely levelled as Bolden himself has moved beyond the control of the traditional kinds of narrative that seek to ensnare him. At one point in the text, Bolden seems aware of this as he addresses an anonymous audience from inside the asylum: "Laughing in my room. As you try to explain me I will spit you, yellow, out of my mouth" (140).

This image recalls the physical/psychic elimination noted earlier, when Bolden "shat out" the "theories" of certainty and causality that represented Webb's influence. Interestingly, this influence (indeed, Webb himself) is largely absent from the section of *Slaughter* leading up to the symbolic "tail of shit" suggested by the parade, and afterwards during Bolden's stay in the asylum. Webb's sole, valedictory appearance comes very near the end of the book, in a scene where he talks to Cornish's wife, Bella, at a party. In the course of the conversation, Webb learns that Buddy, whom he had believed dead because of a misleading letter from Nora, is still alive at the asylum

(CTS 149-151). As Bella describes and repeats the image of Buddy "touching things" all day, talking to no one, Webb is clearly distressed; even the certainty of Buddy's death (ultimate fixity) is undermined as Webb (perhaps) confronts his own feelings of responsibility for Bolden's state. Finally, Webb retreats from Bella, claiming that he has to throw up. As he leaves, Bella notices the "damp mark" where Webb's sweat had "driven itself onto the wall" (151). Once again, Webb -- like Garrett -- is the avatar of narrative, and the narrative of Buddy's "story" is lost after his entry into the asylum. Accordingly, Webb is absent from the most fragmented and disjunctive section of *Slaughter* itself, apparently unconscious of Bolden's very existence. All that is left of him finally is the two-dimensional image of his sweat, plastered to the provisional "certainty" of the wall, just like the projections of the film reels that are described immediately after this scene (CTS 152-155). Moreover, the expression of Webb's anxiety (and remorse?), symbolically represented by his need to vomit, never materializes; in the terms of Rabelaisian, bodily "fertility" described above, Webb is empty within, "there was nothing to come up at all" (151).

On a formal/thematic level, then, Webb's relative absence from the final section of *Slaughter* is crucial. Nevertheless, Webb's need for fixity, for a stable narrative structure capable of bringing meaning to Bolden's story, is represented by other characters who attempt to "explain" him. In an interesting fictional passage, Willy Cornish both partakes in and criticizes the vampiric audience that continues to watch and construct Bolden after his entrance into the hospital. Cornish seems to view the relationship between Bolden -- inward-turned and silent -- and his "company" with extreme discomfort:

Then *jesus* that, *jesus* that hospital and the company there which he slid through like a pin in the blood. With all his friends outside like they were on a grandstand watching him and when they began to realize he

would never come out then all the people he hardly knew, all the fools, beginning to talk about him ... (145)

Cornish watches as the musicians that played at the same time as Buddy enter the "game of fame" themselves, and comments upon Buddy's evasion of history itself:

Then everyone was becoming famous. Jazz was now history. The library people were doing recordings and interviews. They didn't care who it was that talked they just got them talking. Like Amacker, Woodman, Porteous, anybody. They didn't ask what happened to his wife, his children, and no one knew about the Brewitts. All I had of Buddy was the picture here. Webb gave that to me. I never wanted to talk about him. (145)

Cornish is quite sensitive here to the ways in which history prioritizes and orders, marginalizing Bolden and utterly dismissing the stories of his wife, children, and of the Brewitt's -- characters that never appear throughout the final section of *Slaughter* either, as if in deference to the historical imperative that dismisses them. Pressed for an explanation for the life of his friend, Cornish does advance a theory about Buddy, suggesting that "Bellocq corrupted him with that mean silence," which ultimately led to Buddy's going "crazy in front of children and Nora and everyone" (145).

Significantly, the silence of Buddy and Bellocq is "mean" (perhaps a double entendre connoting both meanness and meaning) because it disallows an authoritative synthesis of Bolden's story, rendering every "reading" of his life dubious and provisional.

Indeed, one of the reasons Cornish is unwilling to be one of "the fools" talking about Bolden is simply that he

Didn't know what to say. [Bolden] had all that talent and wisdom he stole and learnt from people and then smashed it, smashed it like ice coming onto the highway off a truck. What did he see with all that? What good is all that if we can't learn or know? (145)



Cornish's question, interestingly enough, augurs a significant theme in the critical response of that other audience, contemporary readers of *Slaughter* itself. There is little question that some of the difficulties occasioned by this strange book are characterized by the irresolveability that various theorists see as essential to the grotesque. (For Bakhtin, the ability of grotesque images to reflect "a phenomenon in transformation" makes ambivalence "indispensable" [*Rabelais* 24]; for Philip Thomson, a lack of resolution to thematic conflict is a "distinguishing feature of the grotesque" [21].) At the end of the text, the authorial stance toward Bolden's withdrawal into silence -- indeed the very relationship between author and character itself -- is indeterminate, qualified by paradox. This aporia has occasioned a good deal of critical apprehension about the conclusion of *Slaughter*, as well as a variety of conflicting interpretations of the text, as each critic finds ways of addressing the ambivalence that analogizes Bolden's silence.

These difficulties arise early in the course of the critical response to *Slaughter*. R. P. Bilan's review of the book deems the ending a disappointment; the equation of the creating extratextual artist (Ondaatje) with his silent protagonist-artist leaves Bilan "a little puzzled," but he dismisses this, suggesting that the analogy shouldn't be pressed "too hard" (295). Indeed, most of the responses that focus on the ambivalent conclusion of *Slaughter* seek to delineate this relationship, identifying it as a sort of key to unlock whatever Ondaatje is trying to assert about the role of the artist, or the creation of art itself. Several early essays on *Slaughter* read Bolden's story as a paradoxical parable of the "self-destructive" or "extremist" artist (paradoxical because Ondaatje is not seen as partaking in this "destruction" himself). Sam Solecki concentrates on this aspect of *Slaughter* in "Making and Destroying," which focuses on the potential of the artistic temperament for self-destruction, what Solecki calls "the

single most disturbing notion in the novel" (262). Solecki follows through, examining this "disturbing notion," and writing about Bolden's "suicide" with such determination that his readers might easily be led to believe that Bolden actually kills himself.

Interestingly, Solecki looks to several of Bolden's thematic precursors in Ondaatje's earlier poetry to substantiate his vision of *Slaughter*. Two of the most important of Solecki's intertexts are Ondaatje's heron poems, "Birds for Janet -- The Heron" (*DM* 12-13), and "Heron Rex" (*RJ* 52-53), in which Ondaatje handles the "dangerous topic" of suicide ("Making" 249). In the first poem there is the image of "a heron's suicide / [its] tracks left empty / walking to the centre of the lake" (*DM* 13). In Solecki's terms the treatment of the theme of suicide here is "sparse," lacking "a closing revelation" that might delineate "the cause of the suicide" (249). He argues that this revelation comes later, in "Heron Rex," a poem that evinces considerable thematic similarity to *Slaughter*. Like Bolden, the "Heron King" is also a King of Corners; the poem is written for "those who faced corners forever / those who exposed themselves and were led away . . ." (*RJ* 52). In this poem, celebrity exists near the root of the suicidal madness Solecki ascribes to Bolden:

There are ways of going  
physically mad, physically  
mad when you perfect the mind  
where you sacrifice yourself for the race  
when you are the representative when you allow  
yourself to be paraded in the cages  
celebrity a razor in the body (*RJ* 53)

Significantly, however, the final image in the poem -- the "small birds" that are "frail as morning neon," which could be broken by "15 year old boys" -- suggests only fragility and vulnerability, not the utter suicide Solecki is trying to explain.

Ultimately, of course, the ambiguity of the two poems cannot be explained, a fact for which Solecki finally blames the poet, projecting his own desire for clarity onto Ondaatje's creative objectives:

Neither of the two poems is a complete success because in both Ondaatje wants to say more than he has said. His heron has an indeterminate status between being an image -- heron as heron -- and a symbol -- heron as something more -- which while it ensures the success of the poems on a surreal or oneiric level prevents the fuller expression of the meaning implicit in them. (249-250)

Refusing to value the grotesque indeterminacy of the heron -- the puzzling suggestiveness of the "something more" it represents -- the critic projects the contingent uncertainty of his response back into the sphere of the poems' creation, critiquing them because their "expression of the meaning" is somehow incomplete. In the terms of this readerly disposition, *Slaughter* itself must share in the partial "failure" represented by the heron poems.

Interestingly enough, these poems are amplified as intertexts by references to waterfowl throughout *Slaughter* and to the illustrations of John James Audubon -- all of which heighten the sense of ambiguity that Solecki resists. These images first appear near the beginning of *Slaughter*, when Buddy talks with Nora's mother, who gets increasingly intoxicated as she talks about her own collection of Audubon prints:

Hardly able to talk around a slur now she'd interpret the damned birds, *damned*, as she saw them, for she was sure John James Audubon was attracted to psychologically neurotic creatures. She showed him the drawing of the Purple Gallinule which seemed to lean over the water, its eyes closed, with thoughts of self-destruction. You don't know that! Shut up, Buddy! She showed him the Prophet Ibis, obviously paranoid,

that built its nest high up before floods came . . . and her favourite -- the Anhinga, the Water Turkey . . . [which] would hide by submerging completely and walk along the river bottom, forgetting to breathe, and so drown. . . . Bolden shook his head. You tell a good story Mrs Bass but I don't believe you . . . (25-26)

The interpretive possibilities occasioned by this rather comical passage are numerous and contradictory. Mrs. Bass's wildlife psychology could easily represent the response of a reader of *Slaughter* itself who believes that Ondaatje, like Audubon, is "attracted to psychologically neurotic creatures." This equivalence could easily provide a frame upon which to build a reading of Buddy as a kind of "damned bird." Mrs. Bass's intoxication and Buddy's protestations, however, raise other possibilities. Her determined certainty and refusal to acknowledge Buddy's insistence that her assertions are groundless suggest that, whoever is attracted to neurotics (Ondaatje, Audubon, or Mrs. Bass herself), the neurosis perceived may be a function of the attraction. Arguably, in other words, these birds (like Buddy) are "damned" by interpretation -- the "good story" that Buddy resists, and which we must choose whether or not to "believe." Appropriately, Buddy's participation in this line of imagery throughout *Slaughter* is characterized by ambivalence. Bolden's actions occasionally recall Mrs. Bass's descriptions of the neurotic waterbirds, as during the two bathtub scenes that frame his stay with the Brewitts. In both episodes, Bolden submerges like the Anhinga, once in an act of purgation and the second time to escape Webb's voice, which beckons him back to Storyville (*CTS* 58, 83). In both instances, however, the "suicides" represented by this act are abortive, dramatically undermined in both cases by resurgences that shower the room, and Webb, with water. Later, during Bolden's trip to the asylum (his final submergence?) he passes "through the country that Audubon drew" (*CTS* 155), stopping briefly in this landscape when his attendants

decide to stop at a river to swim. Here, where we might expect it, the symbolic imperative of Bolden's submergence goes unrealized; as the others swim, Bolden "just stood on the bank," occupying a solitary space that is ambiguous and unreadable -- partaking in the "indeterminate status" of Ondaatje's herons which -- for Solecki -- render their representation unfulfilled.

Stephen Scobie's "Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webbs" advances another negative reaction to the conclusion of *Slaughter*. Scobie begins by asserting what he sees as the essential difference between Ondaatje and Bolden. It is Ondaatje who controls and orders Bolden's story for us, imaginatively invading the absences left by his protagonist; thus, as Scobie argues, "Ondaatje's most successful identification in the book is not with Bolden but with Webb" (20). Continuing with a comparison of *Slaughter's* conclusion to the ending of *Collected Works* (which he sees as far more positive), Scobie delineates his sense of the profound negativity of Bolden's story:

Bolden, [unlike Billy the Kid], is destroyed. Ondaatje reduces the years in the asylum to flat, prosaic statements, lists of dates and interview transcripts in which Bolden is scarcely mentioned -- a far cry from "Billy the Kid and the Princess." Buddy plays no more music; his vital if disordered sexual life is reduced to sordid homosexual rapes; he is offered the possibility of a razor-blade and refuses to use it (p. 148). In the poem "White Dwarfs," there is a kind of glory in the silence of the "people who disappear" (*RJ*, p. 70) . . . but there is none in *Coming Through Slaughter*. If Ondaatje is evaluating the experience of this kind of artist, then *Coming Through Slaughter* is his most blankly pessimistic conclusion so far. (20)

There is much in this argument to suggest that the black pessimism Scobie ascribes to *Slaughter* is a direct function of his own role as the "audience" of Bolden's story, of

Ondaatje's performance. His evidence is questionable, qualified by the ambivalence that underlies *Slaughter* as a whole. The narratological reduction of Bolden's years in the asylum can also be read as being indicative of Bolden's evasion of Webb's kind of narrative/historical control, and subsequently of his withdrawal from the "game of fame." What is more, the representation of Bolden's "rape" (discussed above) embodies a profound ambivalence that cancels out the apprehension of the "sordid." Scobie does not clearly define his reasons for considering William Bonney's reduction to a pop-culture, comic-book figure more affirmative than the withdrawal through which Bolden evades similar kinds of representation. Finally, Bolden's refusal to take advantage of his opportunity to use the "razor-blade" (actually the sharpened bottom of a broken cola bottle) would suggest a contradiction to the urge to self-destruction that defines the kind of artist Bolden represents.

Indeed, the whole scene involving the (too often overlooked) figure of Bertram Lord offers a potent contradiction to the vision of Buddy as the suicidal or self-destructive artist generally. One of the other patients at the asylum, Lord "knew of Bolden's reputation, [and] was always trying to persuade him to escape" (*CTS* 141). Representing a particular kind of audience, Lord's interest in Buddy is provoked by the jazzman's silence; Lord is "the shadow who had been using [Bolden's] silence as an oracle" (141). He is like the "company" Cornish describes, watching Buddy before they "began to realize he would never come out" (145); to him, the early stages of Buddy's withdrawal are suggestive and inviting, perhaps indicating a creative hiatus that will be explained or made meaningful by closure, by another artist's re-emergence, another eventual "come-back story." Unable to accept the possibility that Buddy's silence is final (and therefore unreadable), Lord becomes obsessed with the possibility of Buddy's escape, unaware that through the profound ego-dissolution during Buddy's earlier "come-back" the former jazzman has already made his final escape; Bolden has

already come through the symbolic "slaughter" (a word with significant connotations of sacrifice and sustenance) of his ego. During Lord's first escape attempt, when he takes a doctor hostage, he calls out for Buddy to follow him, but Buddy only watches his last fan depart (142). So determined is Lord, however, that he returns to the asylum -- allowing himself to be recaptured and beaten -- armed with a sharp piece of glass, hidden in his shoe. In a mysterious act of protest or potential escape, Lord distributes the glass to a number of patients, who cut their tendons during the night in a communal act of self-mutilation. Bolden, waiting for the sunrise in his room, simply pushes the glass back under his door when it is offered. For him, the act is meaningless; the "egocide" represented by the final parade and his withdrawal into silence has effectively freed him from the dictates of his audience and his own social persona -- no further act of self-destruction is required or desired.

Bolden sits alone at breakfast on the morning after the other patients have cut themselves, enjoying only the "company" of the sun he has waited for, the mystical "friend" that signals Bolden's transcendent otherness, his state of quiet sublimity and grace:

He kept putting down his spoon in the tin bowl and placing his hand over the warm yellow of his friend and his friend magically managed to put his light over Bolden's hand simultaneously, so that it was kept warm. Later in the day he moved following his path. He washed his face in the travelling spokes of light, bathing and drying his mouth nose forehead and cheeks in the heat. All day. Blessed by the visit of his friend. (148)

The personification of the sun here connotes a Christ-like presence in Bolden's life -- a figure to whom Bolden has been connected throughout *Slaughter* through the repeated use of crucifixion imagery. (Recall also Cornish's italicized invocation of Christ to

describe the hospital [quoted above], and the significance of Christ to the solar rape scene in *Collected Works*.) This scene undermines the simple, unitary reading of Bolden's "suicidal" nature and occasions profound questions about the nature of his grotesque otherness, the imaginative vision that fuses his personality with the world and mediates contraries, which is reduced to "madness," both by the doctors who label him as "Dementia Praecox. Paranoid Type," and by critics who read him as a doomed representative figure of the "extremist artist." Such readers seek to resolve the paradox of Buddy's story by looking to the archetype of the self-destructive artist to create their own versions of the "morality tale" this story represents. Far too often, this readerly stance underemphasizes the extremism of the audience (which, by thematic extension, they are a part of) whose "excesses cloud up the page." Ultimately, engaging the paradoxes implicit in Bolden's final state undermines this kind of interpretation, revealing that Bolden's "asylum" is also a sanctuary, his "destruction," an apotheosis. Buddy comes not only through "Slaughter," but through "Sunshine" as well (*CTS* 137, 155).

The grotesque duality of *Slaughter* is fully realized on the final page, in a moment of profound identification between Ondaatje and Bolden that dramatizes the indeterminate nature of the text as a whole:

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

Recalling the final page of *Collected Works*, this passage represents a grotesque conflation of author and character as Ondaatje invades Bolden's final space. This fusion is underscored by the restatement of Ondaatje's age -- the age at which Bolden broke down during the parade. The link is imperfect, however; "thirty-one" represents



only the age at which Bolden entered the hospital, and doesn't suggest the span of years he spent there. Moreover, the gloom potentially readable throughout the passage doesn't accord with the transcendence and warmth of Bolden's last appearance in *Slaughter*, enjoying the presence of his "friend" at the breakfast table. Indeed, the source of "gloom" itself is indeterminate, possibly resulting from the cumulative effect of the image of the "teeth" in the window, the brevity of the individual sentences, and of the strange final apothegm, the meaning of which -- although it is presented with the discursive force of an aphorism -- is hardly self-evident.

Making a determination about the relative pessimism or optimism of *Slaughter's* conclusion generally hinges on an interpretation of this sentence, of the value of these unspecified, absent "prizes." On one level, the phrase can be read (as it is often read) as an embittered commentary on the role of the artist, the focalizing consciousness recoiling from the vision of the intersection of the artist and a thankless society. However, the complex site this sentence occupies -- at the end of *Slaughter* and spoken by a voice that is grounded in indeterminacy -- opens up other possibilities. That Buddy has removed himself from the "game of fame" in the first place suggests that the "prizes," whatever they are, are not worth the price they demand. When Webb arrives at the Brewitts' to send Buddy back to Storyville, Buddy -- again identifying himself with the canine -- realizes that "Webb was releasing the rabbit he had to run after, because the cage was open now and there would always be the worthless taste of worthless rabbit when he was finished" (*CTS* 83-84). Here, the "worthless" prize of the symbolic rabbit is a constituent aspect of the control exerted by his audience and his public persona; the fact that, by the end of *Slaughter*, there are no prizes may then be taken as a positive indication of Bolden's ultimate transcendence of this kind of control. Significantly, the film reels of the Frank Amacker interviews come almost immediately prior to this final passage (*CTS* 152-154), revealing an artistic personality that places

far more value on such prizes. Seventy-five years old, committing himself to a mode of recording never possible for Bolden, Amacker is still ruled by his ego, bragging about his guitar playing, forgetting the titles of tunes he later claims to have written (152). Amacker's potently egotistical belief that "he is being saved for something special by God" (153), is a sterile, hollow parody of Bolden's blessed unity with the Christ-like sun. A vaguely pathetic piece of "living history," Amacker provides dubious fodder for the "library people" Cornish mentions as a part of the process of the narrativization of jazz history. His position in *Slaughter* is roughly analogous to that of Frank James in *Collected Works*, whose infamy as an outlaw is ultimately rewarded by his reduction to an innocuous cultural icon, an alcoholic "celebrity" doorman at a movie house (CW 24). Like Billy's death, Bolden's withdrawal into silence precludes the possibility of this kind of "prize," a booby prize awarded to those who play the "game of fame" too long.

*Slaughter* ends, then, on an ambiguous note, once again illustrating the profound ambiguity of the text as a whole. The complexities of the book confound the attribution of static values like "pessimistic" or "optimistic." Ultimately, the questions regarding Ondaatje's relationship to his protagonist can only be answered provisionally, for the grotesque paradoxes that occasion these questions are finally irreducible. In this way, the text is extremely hostile to the actuation of interpretive responses that seek a final, fixed meaning; its subject fully partakes in the problematical "indeterminate status" Solecki ascribes to Ondaatje's poetic herons. Indeed, this is a text in which "there are no prizes" for readers who search for final answers to the mysteries occasioned by Bolden's hermetic silence, and the analogous indeterminacy of *Slaughter* as a whole. In the end, we are left (like Bolden, like Ondaatje) in the grotesque grey area of Bolden's grey room -- a site that coalesces negative and positive, and still embodies "all the possibilities in the middle of the story." Despite Scobie's argument

that Ondaatje's "most successful identification" is with Webb, this paradoxical space could never be entered by Webb, with his need for clarity and closure; despite Solecki's concern for "fuller expression of the meaning," Ondaatje refuses to "say more than he has said" -- he refuses (just as Bolden refuses) to "finish and clear everything" (*CTS* 37). Ultimately, Ondaatje's unclear conclusion is Bolden's "right ending"; the closed room is also an "open door," and it "can mean exactly the opposite of what you are thinking" (*CTS* 94).

Like *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Coming Through Slaughter* illustrates the basic qualities of the grotesque; true to the form of a grotesquery, *Slaughter* "confronts us as a corrupt or fragmented text in search of a master principle . . . a "strong ego" to unify the parts" (Harpham 43). Both Ondaatje and his protagonist refuse to provide that "master" ego, that stable centre upon which unitary and static interpretive structures can be founded. What is required of us as the "audience" of *Coming Through Slaughter* is to acknowledge our own role in the communal "performance" of the text. Dissolving our own egos in a (sometimes frustrating) process that conflates the functions of creation and reception, artist and audience, we too are "coming through" *Slaughter*, to a place where we "arrive at a better understanding of the methods of representation, of the relation between play and creation, and of the force of habit and convention in understanding" (Harpham 43). The effect of actively considering these opposing forces, the energetic "play and creation" thematically suggested by Buddy's innovative, grotesque jazz, and the constraints of "habit and convention" reflected in Webb's requirement for fixity and closure, allows us to measure our response in more self-conscious ways, making us more able to identify our own inner "Webb," our own "Bolden"-aspect. Just as these characters are "attracted to opposites," containing at some level the values represented

by the other, our own experience of *Slaughter* is determined by a mediation of our contradictory and inseparable impulses to order and chaos, flux and fixity. As a grotesque work, *Slaughter* produces a textual situation wherein "we can observe our own projections, catching ourselves, as it were, in the act of perception" (Harpham 43). In this way, the subject of *Slaughter* embraces its reader -- we become intimately involved in the identification of author and character, sharing in the functions of both as we are enabled to "read ourselves" in the very act of bringing meaning to a fragmented text.

Of course, the ways in which each reader engages in this process cannot be precisely defined -- the experience of *Coming Through Slaughter*, like the experience of the grotesque itself, is based on process; never stable, it is different for each reader, and each reading. This is not to argue, however, that *Coming Through Slaughter* does not encourage a particular kind of reading in a broad sense, or to suggest that the text doesn't discourage other modes of response. If *Slaughter* is, as I have indicated, a book without "prizes" it is certainly not without its potential rewards. "What good is all that if we can't learn or know," asks Cornish, as he considers Bolden's story -- a story for which he can determine no final "moral." Perhaps he is only half right; for while the moral of this story remains opaque -- it is what we cannot ultimately "know" --, the story certainly invites us to "learn," even if that learning never crystallizes or becomes reducible to paraphrase. The learning is a function of our engagement with and validation of the powerful ambiguities of the text and, once again, a self-consciousness toward the vagaries of our own response. In the very first poem of *The Dainty Monsters*, "'Description is a Bird'," Ondaatje equates his own art with the flight of a flock of sparrows; their aerial performances, like all of Ondaatje's works, "presume a magnificent audience" (11). Ultimately, the challenge of *Coming Through Slaughter* is in finding the "magnificent audience" the text requires, who will keep up

with Ondaatje's grotesque "parade," crossing the boundaries that separate centre and margin, performer and listener, writer and reader, and appreciating the possibilities of art and of silence. To follow Buddy's injunction to put our hands "through this window," we must match the ambivalent energy of *Slaughter* with imagination; like Bolden, we too must mediate the contraries that define us, and read with gravy bones.

#### Chapter 4: "Beautiful *False Compare*": Keeping Up with Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*"

Thus the theory of description matters most.  
It is the theory of the word for those

For whom the word is the making of the world,  
The buzzing world and lisping firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,  
In which nothing solid is its solid self.

-- Wallace Stevens, "Description Without Place"

In an article on *Coming Through Slaughter*, Sam Solecki prophesied that the book, which he saw as representing a "summary" of Ondaatje's work to that point, probably represented "an end of a phase of his career" ("Making" 248). To an extent, this conclusion would seem to be validated by the appearance of *Running in the Family*, a text that exhibits significant differences from both *Slaughter* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Here, the endeavour of examining the epistemological capacities of narrative and language is somewhat refocused, as Ondaatje turns away from more "public" historical figures like Billy the Kid and (to a lesser extent) Buddy Bolden, to explore his own personal, familial history, and the larger historical context of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the island of his birth from which Ondaatje emigrated as a boy. Interestingly enough, the acknowledgements that follow the last pages of *Slaughter* confess something of the unity between Ondaatje and his protagonist discussed in the previous chapter, and foreground the importance of some of the figures that appear in *Running in the Family* in influencing Ondaatje's work: "While I have used real names and characters and historical situations I have also used more personal pieces of friends and fathers" (CTS 159). It is rather tempting, then, to view *Running in the Family* as a kind of unmasking, an attempt by Ondaatje to work through certain issues in a way that is more direct, more immediate than the grotesque, fragmentary parables represented by *Collected Works* and *Slaughter*. This is, after all, a reasonable expectation, given

the traditional assumptions that attend the generic "family" of memoir and autobiography. What is more, *Running in the Family* evinces a more unitary delineation of voice than is the case in either *Collected Works* or *Slaughter*, perhaps suggesting the author's movement toward the even more unified discourse of the two novels to follow, their consistent mode of third-person omniscient narration.

Nevertheless, such expectations are disappointed by the actual experience of this book, which ultimately has a great deal in common with Ondaatje's earlier work, and which, in fact, is potentially the most grotesque of all of his works when considered as a generic "species of confusion." Fragmentary and discontinuous, *Running in the Family* underscores the contingency of various kinds of discourse (including autobiography) as a means of apprehending the past, and employs formal juxtaposition of entirely different kinds of discourse to highlight the interplay between the historical and the personal, the public and private, and also between art and reality. Defined by hybridity, the text is "running" (operating, functioning, coming through) in a "family" of genres. (Indeed, "genre," "genus," "species" and "family" are all intimately related concepts.) The book both participates in and cancels out categories like biography, autobiography, memoir, travelogue, writer's journal and photo album; fiction and reportage are juxtaposed in a way that confounds usual modes of apprehending meaning in the work as a whole. Ultimately, the text serves as the locus for a variety of shifting and contradictory intertexts -- allusions to literature and art, transcribed stories from narrators who are variously identified or left anonymous, cultural and familial myths, gossip and cultural history -- all mingled and equalized in a textual amalgam that never entirely declares itself, or even offers an stable definition of its subject.

From the standpoint of the aesthetics of the completed and cleared, the indeterminate fusion of generic categories in *Running in the Family* connotes a kind of typological confusion and illegitimacy; it accords, once again, with "the sense of

formal disorder we perceive in grotesqueries, in which ontological, generic, or logical categories are illegitimately jumbled together" (Harpham xxi). The notion of textual illegitimacy -- and the attendant connotations of parentage and genealogy -- suggest a correlation between Ondaatje's generic/textual and characterological/familial "precursors" (a word in which the Latin root is the verb, "to run") as the extraordinary stories that surround different members of the author's extended family provide an analogue for the formal unconventionality of the text itself, and the multiplicity of its grotesque generic "voice." For Ondaatje, the exploration of the mysteries of his ancestral history -- and especially of the ambivalent site represented by the songs and silences of his father, Mervyn Ondaatje -- is coextensive with an exploration of the limitations of different modes of discourse, and ultimately of language itself, as the medium for such investigation.

So profound is the generic indeterminacy of *Running in the Family* that nearly every critical evaluation of the book begins with some consideration of genre. For Linda Hutcheon, Ondaatje's investigation of the boundaries between art and his "defiance of the limits of conventional literary genres" are coeval (81). Smaro Kamboureli's response to the text's genre is more detailed; she begins her consideration with the rather extreme assertion that

*Running in the Family* is not a bona fide book at all. For if the act of reading is to some extent a response prescribed by the generic referents of a text, *Running in the Family* refracts any singular response. As it playfully runs from one genre to another, it deliberately postpones the naming of its genre. ("Slippages" 79)

In the absence of an exclusive, authorized and authorizing genre, the "playful" grotesquery of the text undermines monologic interpretation with typically grotesque irresolvability and ambivalence. Kamboureli offers a precis of some of the ways early



critics and reviewers of the book responded to genre, attempting to find appropriate labels with which to delineate its "generic niche" ("Slippages" 80). These designations are numerous, including "existential biography," "family saga," "travel account," "oral history," "memoir," and others. Several readers simply seem bewildered by the genre of the text; for instance, Kamboureli quotes a *Globe and Mail* review of the book in which the reviewer argues (somewhat misleadingly) that "it clearly isn't a memoir in the conventional sense, for we learn very little about the author" (80). Kamboureli accords some value to each of these attempts to define the book's genre (certainly, none of them are utterly cancelled out by the text), but ultimately argues that "the textuality of *Running in the Family* keeps its final intelligibility forever at bay by practising a deferral of meaning and of generic definition related to the autobiographical elements of the book" (80).

The critical imperative to delineate genre is an understandable and crucial one. Indeed, the very idea of genre -- especially as it applies to the problematical generic transgression of a text like *Running in the Family* -- is at the centre of any discussion of readerly participation in the book (or any book for that matter). "Ultimately, it is readers who define genre," writes Linda Hutcheon, and expands on this by quoting Jonathan Culler's definition of genre as a function not solely of authorial intention, but of response also: "Genre can then be redefined as 'a set of expectations, a set of instructions about the type of coherence one is to look for and the ways in which sequences are to be read'" (83). An amalgam of instruction and expectation, genre (like *gender*, like *genus*) is an exclusive typological denotation, as well as a kind of textual contract that allows us to discern the "type of coherence" to look for as we read. In a fragmented, multi- or anti-generic text like *Running in the Family* this "contract" is never entirely honoured; without providing a stable, traditional definition of literary genre to follow, the text realizes the capacity of grotesque art to encourage a paradigm

crisis, to raise our consciousness about the processes by which we generally ascribe meaning to texts of different kinds, and to interrogate the limitations of our methods. "Confused things lead the mind to new inventions," writes Harpham; the apprehension of the grotesque (potentially) engenders "larger categories, [and] freer thought" (17).

The equivalence of creation and reception, author and reader, in Culler's redefinition of genre is largely hidden in texts that employ conventional generic categories, which do not necessitate readers' acknowledgement of their own role in creating textual meaning. *Running in the Family*, like all of Ondaatje's works to this point, refuses to work in this mode, emphasizing the importance of readerly participation by analogizing the functions of author and reader. In this book -- as in the art of the grotesque generally -- "the act of interpretation we perform with all language, and with all images, is intensified to the point where it rises above our threshold of awareness so that we can, as it were, catch ourselves in the act" (Harpham 178). In reading through and drawing connections between the various fragments of *Running in the Family*, we reflect and are reflected by the process of Ondaatje's research and writing; the author's search for meaning and for a form capable of expressing the chaos of his family history is coextensive with our own. Ultimately, the generic scandal represented by this text is the result of this grotesque, dualistic performance, which conflates the search for a meaningful apprehension of content with an investigation of the potential of discourse itself. The consequence of this bifurcated objective is a paradoxical writerly and ostensibly "autobiographical" text in which Ondaatje (the writer of the book) continually supplants Ondaatje (the subject of the book) by focusing instead on the performance of the text, which itself unseats "Ondaatje" as autobiographical subject. In this "performance," both author and reader partake in an evaluation of the discursive modes represented by the various intertexts that appear throughout *Running in the Family*, of literary tropes like metaphor, and of language

itself, as means of apprehending and describing the past -- or the self. As Smaro Kamboureli puts it, such a text underscores the extent to which "the autobiographer is dis-figured by his tropes of writing. He is not so much a subject written for the reader's interpretation, as he is a writing subject invariably slipping into the subject of writing" ("Slippages" 85). This "disfigurement" characterizes the play of the grotesque throughout *Running in the Family*, for as is so often the case with grotesque art, the very acts of representation and reception in this text become conflated with content at the level of *subject*.

Interestingly, Ondaatje's "Acknowledgments" (printed after the text proper) once again provide significant clues about his own feelings regarding genre, and the relationship between author and reader. The first paragraph is brief and suggestive: "A literary work is a communal act. And this book could not have been *imagined*, let alone conceived, without the help of many people" (*RF* 205). On the surface, this would seem to represent a fairly standard introduction to the next paragraph, a description of the contributions of people who helped the author throughout the creative process. The position and structure of this short passage, however, opens it up to other readings. Significantly, these two sentences stand on their own, rather than being incorporated in the paragraph that follows; moreover, Ondaatje chooses to grant a further degree of autonomy to the first sentence, beginning the second sentence with a conjunction rather than combining the two. The reading eye must, at least for a moment, consider the possibilities that underlie the statement that literature is a communal act -- especially at the conclusion of a text in which the "community" that is embraced by the textual performance includes the extratextual reader. We too are implicated and "acknowledged" in this "communal act;" at its best, our role is defined by the same imagination that is necessary for the book to be "conceived."

Over the page, near the conclusion of the "Acknowledgments," Ondaatje adds a rather ironic comment on the play of fact and fiction throughout *Running in the Family*:

While all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or "gesture." And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts. (206)

There is a kind of duplicity here that suggests a great deal about the mediation of different kinds of discourse throughout the book. A kind of double-barrelled apology, this paradoxical disclaimer underscores the ambivalent nature of the "atmosphere" of his Sri Lanka, which smells of both "an air of authenticity" and of "fictional air" in its conflation of the autobiographical and novelistic. Ondaatje's final, apothegmatic equivalence of a "well-told lie" with "a thousand facts" -- what he "can only say" -- resists satisfying explanation. Once again equating the categories of fictional and authentic (suggesting what he called "the truth of fiction" in the acknowledgements after *Slaughter* [159]) this statement has a profound retroactive effect on our reading of *Running in the Family* as a whole.

This passage is significant for other reasons as well, indicating some possibilities for labelling the difficult genre of the text. The suggestion of "portrait" as a generic tag is problematical for the reasons discussed above; even the most impressionistic portraiture tends to be judged as a representation of its subject, which remains obscure and multiple in *Running in the Family*. "Gesture" is a more interesting possibility, connoting an act of signification largely devoid of prescriptive generic or formal characteristics. Related to the grotesque, auto-referential capacity of the text, gestures, as Barbour notes, "can either signify or point, and sometimes do both; a gesture can signify something else, or it can merely signify itself, the act of gesturing, of pointing toward that which cannot be named" (137). Moreover, the connotative value of "gesture" as a description of *Running in the Family* connects it to numerous moments throughout the text (and in the title) where the act of writing is

analogized with physical motion or bodily awareness. Central to Ondaatje's examination of the limitations of language throughout the book is a reconceptualization of language as a potently visceral act, grounded in intensely sensory experience. Like the earlier protagonists with whom he identified himself, Ondaatje often thinks by moving in this text, revealing a sensitivity to his surroundings that recalls his representations of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden. Like Bolden's jazz, language -- the medium of Ondaatje's art -- is reimagined as a physical act capable of expressing this intimate unity of perception and place. This discursive movement provides (paradoxically) the only kind of static, writable language capable of approximating the chaotic oral tradition from which so much of his personal history is gathered.

The first pages of *Running in the Family*, before and within the section titled "Asian Rumours," suggest many of the formal and thematic concerns mentioned above, announcing the author's auto/biographical desire to reclaim his family history (and, more specifically to "find" his father), and simultaneously proffering caveats about the kinds of discourse through which he (and we) must attempt to realize this goal. Readers fortunate enough to have an early, hard-cover copy of the text are welcomed to the setting of most of the book by an old map of "Ceilan" just inside the front cover, which is almost immediately followed by a more contemporary map of the island.<sup>1</sup> In a strategy of textual displacement that is one of the characteristic tropes of *Running in the Family*, the early map is described much later in the text, when Ondaatje identifies it as one of the "false maps" that decorate his brother's wall in Toronto. Punningly titled "Tabulae Asiae," the fragment that describes these maps underscores the provisional nature of early attempts to delineate and represent a landscape explored only imaginatively, and from a distance:

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1       Regrettably, only the latter map is reproduced in the recent New Canadian Library paperback edition.

Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations -- by Ptolemy, Mercator, Francois Valentyn, Mortier, and Heydt -- growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy.

Amoeba, then stout rectangle, and then the island as we know it now, a pendant off the ear of India. Around it, a blue-combed ocean busy with dolphin and sea-horse, cherub and compass. Ceylon floats on the Indian Ocean and holds its naive mountains, drawings of cassowary and boar who leap without perspective across imagined "desertum" and plain.

(63)

Initially, we may be tempted to dismiss the association between these "mythic" and "naive" "portraits of Ceylon" and Ondaatje's own claim to portraiture, quoted above. The ambiguity of the entire passage, however, disallows this dismissal, obliging us to compare two different stages in the evolution of Ceylon's representation as we read along. The result of these early "glances" from trading vessels are imaginative translations of the unknown or the unexpressible; they are initially "without perspective," contextualizing Ceylon with the grotesque iconography of ancient cartography, and reading the "blank slate" of Ceylon largely as "desertum." Ondaatje's description of the process by which these "mythic shapes" grew into "eventual accuracy" reveals the ambiguity of this evolution. He describes the earliest illustrations of Ceylon as "amoeba" which progressively took on a more geometrical kind of order, growing into "stout rectangles" and eventually into "the island as we know it now." Paradoxically, however, we can only "know it now" through another metaphor, as Ceylon becomes a "pendant off the ear of India." In this way, all of the "maps" -- ancient, modern and textual -- are revealed as being qualified by contingency, characterized by "inaccuracy" or reductivism, demonstrating the

essentially provisional relationship between reality and representation. (In this way, the cartographic epigraphs in *Running in the Family* function in much the same capacity as the sonographs that introduce *Coming Through Slaughter*.)

However provisional the attempts to inscribe Ceylon, these inscriptions are not without authority. One of the figures on the ancient maps is a "Moorish king who stands amidst the power of books and armour" (63). The image captures the equivalence of the power of pen and of sword, and introduces a passage wherein Ondaatje explores this relationship, focusing on the correlation of the succession of Ceylon's inscriptions and the course of its colonial history:

The maps reveal rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark, mad mind of travellers' tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese and medieval records. The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape, -- Serendip, Ratnapida ("island of gems"), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon -- the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. (64)

The invasionary "rumours of topography" (which will lead us back to Ondaatje's own "Asian Rumours") write and re-write Ceylon (whose name has already changed again) enforcing pre-determined colonial agendas and visions with language and the promise of violence, until finally the island's "shape stood still, [and] became a mirror [that] pretended to reflect each European power . . ." (64). This unnatural and misleading stasis is the function of a kind of authoritative, monologic and colonial "interpretation" of Ceylon by its succession of invaders, which ultimately allows them to see their own aspirations and biases reflected back from this "tabula Asiae." The reflection, however, is a pretense only; Ceylon remains, grotesquely shifting in shape and name,

beyond the final definition of its invaders, except, perhaps, for those who "spilled their nationalities," who "stayed and intermarried," becoming integrated with its living landscape. It is in this manner that the author's first ancestor arrives in Ceylon in 1600; healing a residing governor's daughter with an herbal remedy this mysterious figure "is rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language" (64). Significantly, this man's original name and his point of origin are either unknown or withheld, cancelled out by the "ruling language" that renames him. Nevertheless, he offers our own Ondaatje a familial originary site, albeit a rather nebulous one: "Here. At the centre of the rumour. At this point on the map" (64).

This description of Ondaatje's reclamation of an origin is significant in considering the ambiguous space Ondaatje himself occupies throughout *Running in the Family* -- where he too exists at the centre of rumour. His consciousness of the ways in which Ceylon has been abstracted by different kinds of invaders and transient visitors occasions a profound self-consciousness of his own ambiguous role as native and emigre; as he writes at the outset of a section titled "The Karapothas," "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (79). Significantly, "karapothas" is the writer's niece's name for foreigners, referring to a species of expatriate insects (?), "the beetles with white spots who never grew ancient here, who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the 'inquisitive natives' and left" (RF 80). As we shall see, some of the most important intertexts in *Running in the Family* are reflections on Ceylon by writers who pass through its weather and foliage, with greater and lesser degrees of familiarity and tenure. These bits of discourse -- both affirmative and condemnatory -- provide Ondaatje with a way of measuring his own response to his homeland, of recognizing his own duality as karapothas and "inquisitive native." What is more, the passages dealing with foreigners and colonial invaders



embody a similar message regarding the processes of reception by which Ondaatje's readers interpret his/our textual "Ceylon" as well. Like the early travellers who inscribe their own imaginations in maps, we partake in the (generic) naming and shaping of *Running in the Family*, as we attempt to uncover a perspective that would allow this grotesque book to be "governed" by the enaction of its reading. What these passages urge, both to reader and writer, is a mode of response that symbolically enters the contradictory landscape of Ceylon -- and textual landscape of *Running in the Family* -- partaking willingly and intimately in the ambiguities and enduring mysteries that exist "at the centre of the rumour," where all maps are at least partially "false." In a grotesque text that "simultaneously allows and denies conventional readings" (Barbour 136), the alternative would be to maintain our readerly distance, projecting conventional kinds of order onto a text that only "pretends" to reflect us.

Returning to the beginning of the text, we find two other (textual) epigraphs, which in many ways seem thematically and structurally related to the juxtaposed maps that precede them. The first of these is a quotation from "Oderic," a 14th century friar who describes an island we assume to be Ceylon (although there is no citation for this passage anywhere in the text that would confirm this). Oderic's description seems related to the imaginative, grotesque detail-work of the early map, portraying Ceylon as a wondrous bestiary: "I saw in this island fowls as big as our country geese having two heads . . . and other miraculous things which I will not here write of" (9). While the appearance of the two-headed geese will occasion doubts about Oderic's reportage, the passage as a whole belies a kernel of commonality with Ondaatje's grotesque and imaginative writing. As Kamboureli notes,

Ondaatje's narrative echoes, too, the "miraculous" natural phenomena and superstitions of Sri Lanka, as when he mentions a wild pig stealing his Pears Transparent Soap in order to bathe itself (143) and the

thalagoya tongue which children in Ceylon are given to eat in order to "become brilliantly articulate" (73). Here, and in many of his earlier works . . . local superstition, blended with magic realism, is enhanced -- sometimes to excess -- by Ondaatje's imagination. ("Slippages" 81-82)

In addition to the imaginative apprehension/creation of the "miraculous," Oderic's epigraph demonstrates a further similarity to *Running in the Family* in its characteristically grotesque capacity to foreground the gap between the subject and ground of representation. The writer of the passage emphasizes this gap by announcing what gets left out in the act of inscription -- what he calls the "other miraculous things which I will not here write of." Simultaneously, this final line foregrounds the distance that separates writer from subject at the time of writing; what Oderic saw "in this island" is patently distinct from the "here" of his writing (and our reading).

The epigraph that follows Oderic represents a temporal shift that roughly analogizes the historical distance between the two maps. In a quotation from the *Ceylon Sunday Times*, Douglas Amarasekera (about whom we never learn anything else) denotes his own sense of the empowering significance of language: "The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the world was flat" (9). Here, supposedly enabled by English, Western culture is viewed as achieving a technological mastery that allows a man to walk on the moon (shades of colonization to come?), whereas in Amarasekera's eyes, the relative (and very specific) linguistic incompetence of the Sinhalese and Tamils falsifies their conception of the world. The ironies at work in this passage are profound, especially given its juxtaposition with the two maps, and the passage from Oderic. Amarasekera's epigraph is contemporary with the second, "accurate" map of Ceylon; indeed, his reference to space exploration is significant for without that same technology,

manifested in the form of satellites, such cartographic "accuracy" would still be impossible. Significantly, however, the limitations shared by both maps are suggested by the one thing they have in common, which is their two-dimensional nature, the fact that they both ultimately render the world "flat." That Amarasekera denigrates Ceylon's non-English natives for believing that the world itself is flat is made even more ironic by the presence of Oderic -- a voice from a time when this conviction was held by English-speaking Westerners as well.

Between these epigraphs and the sections of *Running in the Family* listed in the "Contents," is a strange, third "epigraph" which is original rather than intertextual, its indeterminate status -- in a grotesque space both within and outside of the text proper -- highlighted by italics. Like Oderic's epigraph, this "exergue" (Kamboureli, "Slippages" 82) emphasizes the act of writing; it also announces the generic crisis of the text by supplanting autobiography with a novelistic opening:

*Drought since December.*

*All across the city men roll carts with ice clothed in sawdust. Later on, during a fever, the drought still continuing, his nightmare is that thorn trees in the garden send their hard roots underground towards the house climbing through windows so they drink sweat off his body, steal the last saliva off his tongue.*

*He snaps on the electricity just before daybreak. For twenty-five years he has not lived in this country, though up to the age of eleven he slept in rooms just like this . . . (17)*

In the present-tense, third-person omniscient voice, this passage represents some kind of fictional biography. The narrator's eye is all-encompassing, moving from the general drought in the country to the most personal space of the unnamed subject of the narration ("he"), and ultimately into the very dreams of that figure. The biographical

information presented in the third paragraph implicates Ondaatje at the same time as the narrative mode used to communicate this material formally masks his role as writer, undermining the usual *authority* of autobiography by novelizing and disrupting the sense of a unitary ego that controls the course of his own self-narration. Interestingly enough, the narrative modality of the first paragraphs becomes less determined as the passage continues:

*Dawn through a garden. Clarity to leaves, fruit, the dark yellow of the King Coconut. This delicate light is allowed only a brief moment of the day. In ten minutes the garden will lie in a blaze of heat, frantic with noise and butterflies.*

*Half a page -- and the morning is already ancient. (17)*

With the description of the garden, the narrating voice changes slightly, so that it is no longer as easy to be certain of the focalizer here. This difficulty becomes extreme in the last paragraph, where the distinctions established by the preceding narrative fall apart. Here, in the absence of a pronoun of any kind, the roles of writer and subject play about with one another, as the writing process of what we have just read is thrust into the foreground. Ultimately, Ondaatje the writer and Ondaatje the biographical subject are conflated in a way that is entirely different from traditional autobiography, where these two functions are never discriminated to begin with; here, the relationship between the two Ondaatje-functions is related to the textual position of the passage as a whole, in a liminal space between textual and extratextual. Their relationship is ambivalent, for while the subject and creator of *Running in the Family* have much in common, that "subject" is still ultimately a *result* of the writer's writing, and the reader's reading. On the whole, this final epigraph once again emphasizes the provisional relationship between artist, art and reality, the gaps that exist between writer and subject -- even when that subject is (in part) the writer himself.

Alerted to the capacity of this passage to reveal the grotesque complexities of writerly performance in *Running in the Family*, we might reread the passage with this in mind. Working backwards from the revelation of the final line, we encounter once again the image of the lush garden outside the writer/subject's bedroom. Ondaatje's consciousness of the garden (which, as we have seen, has been a symbolic setting for the mediation of grotesque contradictions since *The Dainty Monsters*) focuses on a transitional phase of the garden's diurnal routine; at dawn, the "delicate light," which lasts only for a "brief moment" bathes the garden in "clarity," which will be conquered, ten minutes hence, by the chaos of "a blaze of heat, frantic with noise and butterflies." As has been the case in Ondaatje's earlier work, the act of creation takes place in a zone typified by the ambivalent play of chaos and order -- both are central to the experience of Ceylon and to the oral family history the author must try to recover. Significant too is the grotesque oneiric imagery that begins the passage as the wildness of the garden transgresses its limits and invades the author's bedroom, thirsty for the moisture in his body. As we shall see, this invasion of the natural into the artificial or "civilized" is one of the most common motifs of *Running in the Family*.

The text proper begins with a short autobiographical (first-person) narrative titled "Asia," the first of two sections in a larger section titled "Asian Rumours" -- a title that underscores the processes of fictionalization at the heart of what we are reading. The opening of "Asia" recalls the last epigraph, opening in Canada with a dream of chaos, of the father he will ultimately begin "running" after:

What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto. I was sleeping at a friend's house. I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were screaming and barking into the tropical landscape. The noises woke me. I sat up on the uncomfortable sofa and I was in the jungle, hot, sweating. (21)

These first sentences suggest much about the text to follow; the "bright bone" of dream reveals the chaos and mystery of what Ondaatje is moving toward -- the chaos his writing will have to order and explain. The rest of the passage begins to suggest some of the contingency of whatever explanations will be arrived at by subtly suggesting the influence of other texts, and other art. The final image of the dreamer on his sofa in the jungle belies a relationship between the representation of dream and Rousseau's *The Dream*, a painting which Ondaatje has already associated with the capacity of art to fix its subject. The subtle allusion to Rousseau foregrounds the interrelationship of texts -- the dialogue of art with art -- through which meaning is engendered in the act of creation and -- for the reader who notices the association -- in the act of reception as well. The foregrounding here partially undermines the authority of the passage, causing us to become suspicious of Ondaatje's "dream" as a factual, strictly autobiographical delineation of experience, and underscoring the essentially grotesque conception of the affiliation of content and form, in which "they appear not as a partnership, but as a warfare, a struggle" (Harpham 7).

As this section continues, there is a description of Ondaatje's wild farewell party that presages the extravagance of the narratives that are to come. In this setting, intoxicated, the writer analogizes the textual performance of *Running in the Family* with an impressive physical trick:

. . . in the midst of my farewell party in my growing wildness --  
dancing, balancing a wine glass on my forehead and falling to the floor  
twisting around and getting up without letting the glass tip, a trick that  
only seemed possible when drunk and relaxed -- I knew I was already  
running. (22)

Significantly, we learn that Ondaatje has already "planned the journey back," spreading maps on his floor and searching out "possible routes to Ceylon" (22). It is only when

he is surrounded by his friends at the party, however, that he fully realizes that this will also be a journey back to the stories and figures of his extended family: "I realised I would be travelling back to the family I had grown from -- those relations from my parents' generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words. A perverse and solitary desire" (22). As the italicized epigraph would suggest, then, the trip to Ceylon is premised on the possibility of writing: *Running in the Family* is no memoir of Ondaatje's recollected experiences -- it is the possibility that partially motivates the journey itself, a result of the "perversion" that Kamboureli terms "[a] writer's desire" ("Slippages" 85). Indeed, the essentially writerly nature of the text is foregrounded throughout the rest of this introductory section. For instance, Ondaatje's description of his desire to "touch" his family "into words" (a significantly physical imagining of the act of writing) is followed by an allusion to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, which explains his sense of having "slipped past" his own childhood (22). This is followed, as if to remind us of the linguistic nature of what we are reading, by a consideration of "Asia," not as a place, but as a word (once again, on a map):

*Asia*. The name was a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered, would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe, America, Canada. The vowels took over, slept on the map with the S. I was running to Asia and everything would change. (22)

Over the page, "Jaffna Afternoons" begins by abruptly announcing the temporal and geographic shift to Ceylon where, at "2:15 in the afternoon," the writer sits not in a garden, but in "the huge livingroom of the old governor's home in Jaffna" (24). Quickly, the writer's eye turns to a fan hanging from the ceiling of the room, and he comments on the capacity of his new atmosphere to resist too-formal attempts to

impose order: "No matter how mechanical the fan is in its movement the textures of air have no sense of the metronome. The air reaches me unevenly with its gusts against my arms, face, and this paper" (24). An interesting passage, Ondaatje's consideration of the fan foregrounds the extent of the writer's awareness of his physical surroundings, but also focuses our attention, once again, on "this paper" -- the notebook with which Ondaatje begins the writing process, ordering his surroundings with words. The mode of present tense used throughout the passage urges us to see "this paper" as the text before us as well, to which we must bring our own order, and from which meaning emerges not like a metronome, but "unevenly," in fragmentary "gusts." The ordering capacity of the mechanical fan is unnatural and provisional, to be warned against it seems; later in the text, the writer nearly loses his toes to a portable fan (hidden beneath a table) when he stretches his legs toward the "precise luxury" of a "magically" cool breeze (158).

Throughout "Jaffna Afternoons," the space Ondaatje occupies is a contradictory mediation of order and chaos. Built around 1700, the Dutch governor's house represents the colonial influence that has shaped Sri Lanka; Ondaatje foregrounds the profound orderliness of this "prize building," describing it as a "fort," complete with a moat and posted sentries who guard the order within from the disorder without. The success of this project is only partial, however, for the energy of Ceylon's landscape has encroached upon the inside; Ondaatje notes the mosquito netting over every bed, and (perhaps recalling the fan's inability to control the air) comments that the sentries "unfortunately have to stand exactly where marsh gases collect" (25). What is more, the stories (rumours?) that surround the history of the ancient house go a long way toward undermining the ultimacy of the "order" that defines the inner, colonial space the house represents. Mentioning one of the bedrooms that is so convincingly haunted that Ondaatje "retreats" from it without ever turning his back (25), he later tells us the



story of the ghost that supposedly resides therein: the daughter of the Dutch governor, who in 1734 "threw herself down a well after being told she could not marry her lover" (26). Ultimately, even the layout of the vast house is characterized by confusion; sitting in the livingroom once again, Ondaatje describes the space he occupies as the "spacious centre of the labyrinth of 18th-century Dutch defense" (25).

Among the various ghosts of this historical labyrinth, the writer sits with his sister and his Aunt Phyllis, attempting to trace the even more intricate vagaries of the "maze of relationships in [their] ancestry" (25). Phyllis, one of the relations from Ondaatje's parents' generation that he anticipates encountering in "Asia," seems particularly at home in this "maze" of relational narrative; strangely, Ondaatje calls her "the minotaur of this long journey back" (25), rewriting the grotesque, mythological hybrid as a helpful guide figure rather than a threat to be avoided or destroyed. Significantly, Ondaatje also tells us that he is "especially fond" of Phyllis because of her affiliation to his father, the figure who will supplant his son as the biographical subject of *Running in the Family* by the end of the text.

Considering his recovered relationship with this aunt, Ondaatje describes the daily routine at the house in Jaffna, returning finally to his favourite time, the afternoon hours when everyone is awake and engaged in the "intricate conversations" from which Ondaatje collects the fragments of *Running in the Family*. Indeed, his anticipatory description of the story-telling says a great deal about the constitutive narratological strategies of the text itself:

In the heart of this 250-year-old fort we will trade anecdotes and faint memories, trying to swell them with the order of dates and asides, interlocking them all as if assembling the hull of a ship. No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hilarious scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgements thrown in. In this way history is organized. (26)

As we shall see, our reading of the anecdotes and variously told and retold stories of *Running in the Family* analogizes the circuitous fictionalizing of his family's "maze" of narratives.

This section ends with another dream that frames the first part of the text, and relates to Ondaatje's "chaotic" dream of his father. In an "image that repeats itself," the writer sees himself at the top of acrobatic pyramid composed of his relatives, a kind of inverted family tree in which he is "quite near the top" (27). Still engaging the power of the anecdotal, the whole family is "chattering away like crows and cranes" making it nearly impossible to determine the stories they are partaking in. The strange human pyramid moves slowly across the living room of the governor's house until it reaches the huge door that is still too narrow to allow them all to pass through. The dream ends in a grotesque, boundary-crossing triumph of illogic, as "the whole family ignores the opening and walks slowly through the pale pink rose-coloured walls into the next room" (27). Here, as elsewhere in the text, the nonconformity of Ondaatje's family, the extreme nature of their lives, and the attendant narrativized "scandal" of their oral history is associated with the discontinuity and grotesquery of *Running in the Family* itself. Once again, our task in confronting this text is reflected by Ondaatje's attempt to piece together a sense of his history from the shifting locutions of his relatives' chaotic story-telling, the twists and turns of a grotesque narratological maze that contains both author and reader. As Ondaatje's dream suggests, finding the way through this maze requires an act of individual imagination (like the dream itself), which might allow him (and us) to transcend the limits of gossip and anecdote, to pass through the very "walls" that surround us.

The second section of *Running in the Family* begins with two photographs of Ondaatje's father and mother when they were quite young. The title of the section, "A

Fine Romance," which is printed above the photographs, encourages us to believe that what is to follow will involve a narrative development of the early relationship between Doris Gratiaen and Mervyn Ondaatje. In fact, the fragments that follow disappoint this expectation, dealing far more with historical contexts than with the mysterious relationship at the nebulous centre of these stories, some of which seem almost entirely unrelated to Ondaatje's parents. Significantly, we learn that the title of the entire section is from a parodic popular love song that was one of his mother's favourites (*RF* 46). This titular reference is at once emblematic of the often comical turns taken throughout the section, as Ondaatje describes the youthful energy that defined the historical context of his parents' youth, but also of the writer's reliance on intertexts to outline and apprehend that context.

The section begins with a fragment called "The Courtship," which traces a series of Mervyn Ondaatje's misadventures that ultimately bring him together with Doris Gratiaen. Ondaatje begins by describing an instance of textual misrepresentation, in which Mervyn -- anticipating Ondaatje's own journey -- goes to England to be educated, and lies to his parents about being accepted into Queen's College. Having failed to pass entrance exams, Mervyn simply "eliminated the academic element of university," rented "extravagant rooms," and spent more than two years writing his parents "modest letters about his successful academic career . . ." (*RF* 31). When his family somehow discovers the deception, they confront Mervyn and a comedy of errors ensues in which the young man excessively demonstrates "his technique of trying to solve one problem by creating another" (*RF* 33). Significantly, Mervyn practices his "useful habit of retreating into almost total silence" when confronted by the rage of his own father, Philip (32). Leaving for a few hours in the heat of the argument, Mervyn returns and announces a socially advantageous engagement to the daughter of a respectable English family, and thereby diffuses most his father's anger (32).

Returning to Ceylon to await the marriage date, however, Mervyn one day announces a new engagement to Doris, reawakening his father's rage, and occasioning a flurry of letters in the mail when his sister writes to inform the English fiancée of the dissolution of the engagement. (At this point, Ondaatje mentions his Aunt Phyllis's role in planning the aborted wedding, thereby subtly suggesting a kind of oral bibliography for at least part of this narrative.) Following one grand gesture with another, Mervyn joins the Ceylon Light Infantry on the morning after his engagement with Doris. The section ends as Ondaatje conjectures about how his mother and father might have met and describes how Doris nearly broke off the engagement, until Mervyn, suicidal with grief and alcohol, went to Colombo to see her; ultimately, we learn only that "the problems were solved and the engagement was established once more. They were married a year later" (35).

The narratological minimalism of these last sentences, which give absolutely no clue regarding the motives for Doris's rejection of Mervyn, or any details of the reconciliation, is typical of the entire section. Actions and events are viewed from a distance; underlying emotions and motivations are undeclared, hidden behind an "almost total silence." Indeed, the various broken engagements and promises of the section as a whole are thematically related to the broken promise of its title, "The Courtship." This teasing title simply labels a textual gap, inaccessible and therefore unwritable within the confines of biography. Ondaatje is forced to engage in guesswork when attempting to determine how his parents became engaged. He even incorporates a quotation from a secondary textual source, Rex Daniels's journals, to help describe the "radical" dancing act his mother occasionally performed -- which may or may not have had something to do with attracting the attention of Mervyn Ondaatje after his return to Ceylon (*RF* 31-32).

These kinds of "broken promises" continue throughout the sub-sections of "A Fine Romance." The very short fragment, "April 11, 1932" quotes an unidentified

speaker who begins, "I remember the wedding . . ." but what follows has nothing to do with the ceremony itself, providing only an account of a comical incident on the way to the wedding. "Honeymoon" is even more disappointing; not even mentioning his parents, Ondaatje lists a variety of historical events and intertexts that collectively outline the world in which the titular event took place, some of which surely were reflected in the unknowable thoughts and actions of his newly married parents:

The Nuwara Eliya Tennis Championships had ended and there were monsoons in Colombo. The headlines in the local paper said, "Lindbergh's Baby Found -- A Corpse!" . . . The lepers of Colombo went on a hunger strike, a bottle of beer cost one rupee, and there were upsetting rumours that ladies were going to play at Wimbledon in shorts. . . . Charlie Chaplin was in Ceylon. He avoided all publicity and was only to be seen photographing and studying Kandyan dance. The films at the local cinemas were "Love Birds," "Caught Cheating," and "Forbidden Love." There was fighting in Manchuria. (37-38)

The reference to Nuwara Eliya in the first sentence is expanded upon in the next, longer fragment, which retreats from the subject of his parents, and moves back into "[t]he era of grandparents" (RF 41), and the setting of Nuwara Eliya, the cool "up-country" where the well-to-do weather the hot months of April and May. The title of the section, "Historical Relations," seems fairly straightforward -- denoting an older generation of Ondaatje's family. Reading further into *Running in the Family*, however, we discover that this title is another comment on the way "history is organized." Later in the text, in a section that explores reactions of other writers to Ceylon, we discover that *An Historical Relation* is the title of the 17th-century memoir of Robert Knox who, "held captive by a Kandyan king for twenty years, wrote of the island well, learning its traditions" (RF 82). Unlike the "karapothas" discussed earlier, Knox engages with the

setting of Ceylon, becoming one of "very few foreigners [who] truly knew where they were" (83). The textual presence of Knox's memoir behind the title of Ondaatje's depiction of his grandparents' world reemphasizes both the extent of Ondaatje's desire to apprehend the lost world of the past and the reliance of *Running in the Family* generally on historical intertexts -- the corpus of antecedent textual "relations" that stand in an analogous position to the author's familial predecessors.

Working with a number of these textual secondary sources, again including Rex Daniels's journal, Ondaatje deals with his grandparents only indirectly in this fragment, focusing on a series of infamous, often grotesquely comical stories; a man with large teeth is mistaken for a boar and shot to death, another is bitten by a rabid dog and leaves Ceylon without knowing (40-41). It is only in the very last paragraph of the section that we are introduced to Ondaatje's grandparents, and our view of them is brief and fragmentary -- snippets of information that cross the boundaries between the personal and public. We learn of Philip Ondaatje's famous collection of wine glasses, that Willy Gratiaen "dreamt of snakes" and that both of Ondaatje's grandmothers "blossomed" after the deaths of their husbands (41). At this point, we are briefly introduced to Lalla, Ondaatje's maternal grandmother, who later emerges as a major figure in the unfolding of *Running in the Family*. As we shall see, Lalla embodies much of the grotesque energy of the text as a whole; as with Mervyn, the extremism and unconventionality of her life places her in an ambiguous zone, largely composed of gossip and story, and yet somehow existing beyond any single narrative construction.

Ondaatje returns to the era of his parents in "Flaming Youth," focusing primarily on the exploits of several of their friends, including Francis de Saram who "had the most extreme case of alcoholism in [Ondaatje's] father's generation," and H-----, "the great rake, notorious all over the island (44-45). The notoriety of these figures makes them a rich source of anecdotal narrative -- which at times impinges on

the life of his father, taking Ondaatje indirectly into Mervyn's "Cambridge life," the escapades of the "notorious Sharron K-----," and the time his father tricked another man out of his bed (*RF* 45). The section continues with a description of Gasanawa, a rubber estate that provides the site of many of the parties in which these figures partook; the author tells us, significantly, that "[p]eople's memories of Gasanawa, even today, are mythic" (46). He goes on to list examples of the popular music of the era (including "A Fine Romance"), and describes the dancing that went on. Francis seems to occupy a pivotal role at the parties; indeed, after his death at the very end of "Flaming Youth," the parties stop in a way that conspicuously recalls Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*: "The waste of youth. Burned purposeless. They forgave that and understood that before everything else. After Francis died there was nowhere really to go" (47). In life, however, Francis is the intoxicated life of the party, infamous for his "tango solo," which -- as Ondaatje describes it -- may suggest a symbolic microcosm of the life of a character like Buddy Bolden, or Ondaatje's own "performance" of *Running in the Family*:

He would put on "I kiss your little hand, Madame" and mime great passion for an invisible partner, kissing the mythical hand, pleading to the stars and jungle around him to console him in an unrequited abstract love. He was a great dancer but with a limited endurance. He usually collapsed at the end of his performance . . . (47)

The significance of Francis's "unrequited abstract love" is surely related to the self-conscious abstraction of the narratives from which Ondaatje must construct his representation of the past, to the distances that still lie between the author and the familial "subject" -- that "invisible partner" -- he desires to apprehend.

The mythic performance of the text continues in "The Babylon Stakes," in which Ondaatje begins by describing the compulsive obsession with gambling in

Ceylon. Nearer the end of the fragment, however, the writer turns his attention to another kind of dance: the nocturnal "devil dances" that took place during the long warm nights after the horse races. In this dance everyone and everything "seemed to have a purpose"; what is more, the "devil dances cured sickness, catarrh, deafness, aloneness" (*RF* 52). As Ondaatje's writing moves away from the public anecdotes and stories of Ceylonese horse-racing, toward the more secretive and private site of the dance, he engages in a sort of textual "devil dance." Momentarily escaping from his own "aloneness" as a distanced reporter of cultural history and anecdote, the writer enters the grotesque dance, crossing generic boundaries out of the strictly biographical and into the novelistic, where wholly imagined but necessary details exist:

A hand cupped the heel of a woman who wished to climb a tree to see the stars more clearly. The men laughed into their tumblers. They all went swimming again with just the modesty of the night. An arm touched a face. A foot touched a stomach. They could have almost drowned or fallen in love and their lives would have been totally changed during any one of those evenings.

Then, everyone very drunk, the convoy of cars would race back to Gasanawa in the moonlight crashing into frangipani, almond trees, or slipping off the road to sink slowly up to the door handles in a paddy field. (52)

The first imagined image suggests an attempt to change position, to augment perception, to see "more clearly." This act is analogized by the narrative mode of the passage as a whole, in which Ondaatje's eye becomes "omniscient," seeing the underwater movements of the disrobed swimmers -- the gentle touches that connote an intimacy unattainable by biography --, the course of the cars heading back to the estate, and the moonlight (or the cars?) "crashing" into the foliage. In the final image, the



cars slip "off the road" of nonfiction narrative, into a private, unbiographable space where writer (and reader) cannot follow. Ultimately, the chaotic course of the devil dance nights defeats biography; they represent a zone where lives are "totally changed," but in ways that cannot be apprehended or recorded by the text.

Ondaatje forthrightly avows this frustration in "Tropical Gossip." Here, the writer begins with the frank comment that most of his relatives "at some time were attracted to somebody they shouldn't have been" (53). The minimalism and straightforwardness of the exposition contrasts with the imaginative vision of intimacy that precedes it. As the writing continues, there is a statement of the limitations of narrative -- both historical and apocryphal -- as Ondaatje reflects on his own inability to understand the romantic "energy" of an earlier generation's relationships:

. . . during their flaming youth, this energy formed complex relationships, though I still cannot break the code of how "interested in" or "attracted" they were to each other. Truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships. There are stories of elopements, unrequited love, family feuds, and exhausting vendettas, which everyone was drawn into, had to be involved with. But nothing is said of the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other's presence. No one speaks of that exchange of gift and character -- the way a person took on and recognized in himself the smile of a lover. Individuals are seen only in the context of these swirling social tides. It was almost impossible for a couple to do anything without rumour leaving their shoulders like a flock of messenger pigeons. (53-54)

Here the (auto)biographical writer disavows his own responsibility for producing an authoritative representation of the past. The passage as a whole represents a correlative

difficulty for the reader of *Running in the Family* for, as Kamboureli poses it, "[w]hat is the reader of autobiography to do when the writer himself relinquishes authenticity and factuality?" ("Slippages" 86). In a generic, seemingly autobiographical, setting -- where we most expect and require the author to function as that "'strong ego' to unify the parts" -- *Running in the Family* has no such authoritative author-figure; like Ondaatje's previous works, the book is a textual grotesquery: confronting the reader as a "corrupt or fragmented text in search of a master principle," it once again allows us to "observe our own projections, catching ourselves, as it were, in the act of perception" (Harpham 43).

In this passage both history and gossip are shown to conceal the kind of truth the writer is searching for as he reads and listens to the stories, the texts that play against each other in providing his sense of the young lives of his parents. The textual nature of Ondaatje's own story-fication of their experience is highlighted by the first line of the quotation, in the reference to "their flaming youth," which recalls the title of Ondaatje's own earlier fragment as a kind of intertextual echo. All of these narratives do not allow the writer to "break the code" and enter the private world he searches for; this is the unrequited nature of his own performance. Indeed, as we have read through the fragments and misleading titles in "A Fine Romance" our moments of confusion and disappointment have only analogized Ondaatje's, underscoring the grotesque equivalence of reading and writing, author and reader throughout *Running in the Family*. Our questions, our feelings of desire for clarity, reflect those of a writer who is frustrated by his inability to still the scandalous "swirling social tides" that keep him from the direct and private truths he desires:

Where is the intimate and truthful in all this? Teenager and Uncle.  
 Husband and lover. A lost father in his solace. And why do I want to  
 know of this privacy? After cups of tea, coffee, public conversations . .

. I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover. (*RF* 54)

Perhaps because of the overt desire for order and clarity suggested by this last passage, the opening of the next section, "Kegalle (i)," focuses on the figure of Ondaatje's paternal grandfather, Philip, "a strict, aloof man" who "ignored everybody in Kegalle social circles" (*RF* 55). Avoiding the "swirling social tides" his grandson cannot make sufficiently transparent, Philip emerges as an icon of stability, order and control; his self-built estate, Rock Hill, connotes solidity and permanence. Determined to be "a good father and patriarch," Philip sets himself against the disorder of the rest of his family, maintaining "a constant tradition in the house -- no matter what chaos [Ondaatje's] father was causing at the time" (56). Philip lives his life by order and routine, insisting on familial good-morning and good-night kisses, and "English" customs at the dinner table. He takes a biannual trip to London to buy new crystal for his collection of wine glasses and to perfect the latest dance steps. Meanwhile, the chaotic lives of his family members threaten to undo the order of his life: "There was Aelian [Philip's brother], who was always giving money to ecclesiastical causes, the cousin who was mauled to death by his underfed racehorse, and four star-crossed sisters who were secret drinkers" (56). In the end, when Philip dies, this disorder and chaos goes unchecked, affecting even Philip's funeral which "was spoken about with envy and outrage for months afterwards." Even though, typically enough, Philip thought "he had organized it well," his funeral goes awry as a violent argument between his "recently liberated" wife and his sisters ensues about how much to pay the pallbearers, and threatens to delay the ceremony indefinitely.

The identification here with his grandfather rather than his father once again suggests the writer's frustration with the chaos of his subject matter -- his own acknowledgement of the contingency of structures of order, which is roughly analogous

to his grandfather's suspicion that "his carefully built ceremonies were being evaded by a weak-willed family" (56). However, the grotesque comedy of the funeral, in which "it seemed the body would never leave the house" (57), impels us to recognize the contingency of order. What follows the narrative hiatus after the funeral reveals the writer focusing on a very different subject, and writing in a very different way. Here, Ondaatje turns back to the chaotic figure of his father, and to the disintegration of the Rock Hill estate in the years after Philip's death. Initially avoiding Kegalle, Mervyn finally returns to Rock Hill to take up farming after he has been divorced from Ondaatje's mother and remarried. In times of need, he sells off pieces of the estate and converts the rest into a farm where he raises chickens. Collecting stories gathered from Mervyn's second wife, Maureen, and his half-sister, Susan, Ondaatje describes his father's final years, the violent cycles of dipsomania, and his eventual death. After another hiatus, the writer describes a trip taken with Susan to visit the old estate, now inhabited by a Sinhalese family. The house, "now small and dark, fading into the landscape," occasions a strange "memory" of his father, drunk, encountering a polecat that had invaded the house:

He emerged out of his bedroom to damn whoever it was that was playing the piano -- to find the house empty -- Maureen and the kids having left, and the polecat walking up and down over the keys breaking the silence of the house, oblivious to his human audience; and my father wishing to celebrate this companionship, discovering all the bottles gone, unable to find anything, finally walking up to the kerosene lamp hanging in the centre of the room at head level, and draining *that* liquid into his mouth. He and his polecat. (60)

Significantly, this memory cannot be the writer's; the event as it is represented takes place after Mervyn's marriage to Maureen. What is more, the fact that Mervyn

emerges from his bedroom "to find the house empty," signals an even greater epistemological crisis. Ultimately, this detailed encounter between Mervyn and the polecat is unwitnessed; there is no way to ascribe traditional biographical authority to the account of what occurs here. As his father drunkenly rewrites the lyrics to "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean," Ondaatje rewrites the rules of conventional biography so that he can apprehend his father with "utter directness," imaginatively invading his father's private space like the performing polecat, shifting so smoothly into a fictional mode that we may not even notice that the book in our hands has momentarily become a novel.

On the whole, "Kegalle (i)" records a symbolic breaking down of order, beginning with the ordered and ordering figure of Philip and the solidity of Rock Hill, followed by the eventual collapse of the kind of control Philip represents. The section ends, significantly, by briefly returning to the figure of his grandfather with a statement that underscores this collapse of order, and which broadly generalizes the idea of order in a paradigm that embraces the narratological, familial and colonial:

Gillian [another of the writer's half-sisters] remembered some of the places where [Mervyn] hid bottles. *Here* she said, *and here*. Her family and my family walked around the house, through the depressed garden of guava trees, plantains, old forgotten flowerbeds. Whatever "empire" my grandfather had fought for had to all purposes disappeared. (60)

Colonial orderings of Ceylon -- both by early invaders and by later foreign visitors -- are highlighted throughout "Don't Talk To Me About Matisse," the next major division of the text, which begins with "Tabula Asiae" and the consideration of the "false maps" discussed above. Later in the section, Ondaatje looks back over a host of various reactions to Ceylon by foreigners, and comments on the island's grotesque

capacity to support dramatically divergent interpretations. He juxtaposes a legend that holds "Seyllan" only forty miles from Paradise with rumours of D. H. Lawrence's hatred for the climate, Pablo Neruda's Ceylonese poems of "vegetable oppressiveness," and Robert Knox's view of the island as a comfortless place of desolation and sickness (*RF* 80-81). Ondaatje understands that the paradise of Ceylon has a "darker side" -- he quotes an ancestor who knew of "fifty-five species of poisons" readily found in the landscape. More significant, however, are the writer's attempts to mediate the contradictory intertexts that define his sense of Ceylon's past representations, which generally suggest the necessity and inadequacy of relying on textual knowledge. Considering the profound differences between Knox's view of Ceylon and the legend that maintains the near-paradisal status of the island, Ondaatje comments that

The leap from one imagination to the other can hardly be made; no more than Desdemona could understand truly the Moor's military exploits.

We own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens and invaders.

Othello's talent was a decorated sleeve she was charmed by. (81)

Significantly, Ondaatje's imaginative leap from the imagination of one intertext to another hinges on the importation of yet another, even more indirectly related text -- one which focuses us on the act of narration, the "decorated sleeve" of "Othello's talent" (and, perhaps, Iago's talent) for storytelling. The grotesque equivalence of reading and writing is here emphasized by the dramatization of Ondaatje's employment of secondary sources to construct his own vision of Ceylon -- by the play of the textual. This exchange is highlighted further -- for the reader whose reading includes *Othello* -- by the correspondence of the grotesque imagery of Othello's descriptions of foreign lands and the "miraculous things" in Oderic's epigraph.

Interestingly, several of the intertexts that attempt to order and categorize Ceylon come from members of Ondaatje's own family. One of these writers is

William Charles Ondaatje, the aforementioned botanist who catalogued the island's natural poisons and other flora. In a profound moment of familial and writerly identification, (Michael) Ondaatje considers a long passage in his forebear's biological notebooks, fascinated by a moment of generic transgression that analogizes the formal grotesquery throughout *Running in the Family*: "In his most lyrical moment, in footnote 28 of his report on the Royal Botanical Gardens, William Charles steps away from the formal paper, out of the latinized garden, and, with the passion of a snail or bird, gifts us his heart" (82). In a symbolic act of creative writing, Charles "invents 'paper' out of indigenous vegetables;" his occasional capacity to step beyond the "latinized garden" affords him the ability to engage the landscape intimately, almost as if he were "a snail or bird." The present-day Ondaatje is drawn to this potential; indeed, the unconventional "gift" of his ancestor's footnote has already been approximated by the writer's own "Monsoon Notebook (i)." Here, he attempts to coalesce the reality of Ceylon into a single lyrical utterance, a cross-section of experience that shifts from event to event -- nearly hitting a drunk man in the street, the blisters left by walking in fifteen cent sandals, the sudden drama of a rainstorm -- always emphasizing the sensuous: "I witnessed everything. One morning I would wake and just smell things for the whole day, it was so rich I had to select senses" (71).

The writer's inimacy with the landscape and with the diurnal course of life in Ceylon, denoted throughout "Monsoon Notebook (i)," sets him apart from earlier writers, like Lawrence, whose work never records such a reaction. Aware of his own dual role, as "foreigner" and "prodigal," Ondaatje opens himself to the landscape around him in ways that represent a critique of earlier intertextual interpretations of Ceylon. This engagement of the reality of his homeland also necessitates imaginatively opening himself to local and familial superstitions and stories as well. For instance, in "Kegalle (ii)," Ondaatje tells the story of a grey cobra that continually invaded the

house at Rock Hill after his father's death. Some coincidence invariably protects the snake from the family's repeated attempts to kill it, until everyone -- including Ondaatje -- accepts "what had become obvious, that it was [his] father who had come to protect his family" as a reincarnated reptile (*RF* 99). In "Tongue," the section that follows "Monsoon Notebook (i)," Ondaatje comes across the corpse of a kabaragoya, another reptile which, along with its smaller cousin the thalagoya, plays a role in local legend:

The thalagoya has a rasping tongue that "catches" and hooks objects. There is a myth that if a child is given thalagoya tongue to eat he will become brilliantly articulate, will always speak beautifully, and in his speech be able to "catch" and collect wonderful, humourous information.  
(73)

Refusing to deny this superstition, Ondaatje describes how a thalagoya can be killed and consumed, and relates how his uncle ate half a tongue -- at the insistence of Lalla, "who had a habit of throwing herself dangerously into such local practices" -- and eventually became "a lawyer and a great story teller" (*RF* 74). The writer goes on to describe some of the other uses of the thalagoya, one of which, significantly enough, involves a symbolic act of transgressing boundaries: "We used the thalagoya to scale walls. We tied a rope around its neck and heaved it over a wall. Its claws could cling to any surface, and we pulled ourselves up the rope after it" (74-75).

To "catch" the wonderful information of *Running in the Family*, then, a different kind of language and narrative is needed -- not one that can only "speak beautifully," but one that can also violate barriers, as this final image of the thalagoya suggests. Here, as in the dream where his entire family moves through a wall, an image of transgression is tied to the possibility of articulation. Significantly, this essentially grotesque capacity is demonstrated by Ondaatje himself as the section concludes:



About six months before I was born my mother observed a pair of kabaragoyas "in copula" at Pelmadulla. A reference is made to this sighting in *A Coloured Atlas of Some Vertebrates from Ceylon, Vol. 2*, a National Museums publication. It is my first memory. (75)

The first two sentences of this short paragraph are unproblematical; the story itself is supported by two "textual" sources: the anecdote we easily imagine as the means by which the author first came across this information, and the official recording of the incident in the zoological "atlas." The meaning of the final sentence, however, is utterly indeterminate, creating a grotesque epistemological scandal that forces us to interpret and reinterpret the word "memory," the very source of autobiography itself. Is this actually an "in utero" memory of the kabaragoyas "in copula," or is this memory only of the textual representation of the event in the *Atlas*? Or, in the *recollected* and narrativized structure of the author's life, is this second-hand (?) "memory" simply chronologically "first"? The text defies final exegesis, simultaneously inviting and frustrating all of these possibilities and refusing to declare the ultimate "source" for this memory -- the authority that would validate it as a piece of traditional autobiographical discourse.

A similar act of transgression is enacted earlier, in a section titled "St. Thomas' Church," as Ondaatje and several other members of his family look for historical roots in the ancient church. Arriving at the church by driving along "Reclamation Street," the writer enters and moves back through time as he walks toward the front of the building, reading a series of brass plaques on the surrounding walls (65). Finally, he arrives at his own family name inscribed, not on the walls, but on the stone floor of the church, near the communion rail. For the writer, the revelation of the ancient name on the floor has a self-effacing effect:

To kneel on the floors of a church built in 1650 and see your name chiseled in large letters so that it stretched from your fingertips to your

elbow in some strange way removes vanity, eliminates the personal. It makes your own story a lyric. So the sound which came immediately out of my mouth as I half-gasped and called my sister spoke all the excitement of smallness, of being overpowered by stone.

What saved me was the lack of clarity. (66)

Although it is impossible to determine exactly how or from what the "lack of clarity" offers the writer salvation, the obvious significance of the statement bears directly upon the dualism of chaos and order that underlies the creative process of Ondaatje's grotesque and historiographic "reclamation." That this process comes close to eliminating the personal is attested to by the writer's use of the word "your" throughout the first sentences, emphasizing once again what is shared by the functions of author and reader throughout *Running in the Family*.

The lack of clarity manifests itself in a number of ways; in the fading light of the church, Ondaatje must ask his own children to "move their shadows" -- the symbolic projection of the present which obscures the past -- before the adults can successfully transcribe the worn letters of the inscription. Even when the transcription is successful, however, the past seems unclear; shocked that the first wife of Philip Jurgen Ondaatje was only fifteen when they married, the writer confronts a historical fact that "can't be right," and yet "[m]ust be" (66). Searching primarily for the historical Philip Ondaatje, the writer and his family find a great many more references to other Ondaatjes who partook in the history of the church. Taking the scarred pages of ancient ledgers outside, he pours over the "immaculate recordings of local history and formal signatures," learning that when Philip died, "his son Simon took his place and was the last Tamil Colonial Chaplain of Ceylon" (66-67). What follows this disclosure may suggest a great deal about how the artist is "saved" by the "lack of clarity" of historical discourse.

Here, we are presented with a portrait of Simon's relationship with his three brothers, all of whom for years "tried but were never able to have a meal together" because each "was obviously too didactic and temperamental to agree with his brothers on any subject of discussion" (*RF* 67). What is most interesting about this passage is the fact that the raw material for Ondaatje's detailed representation of the four brothers' explosive arguments certainly does not come from the church ledgers; indeed, there is no authorizing primary "source" for this material at all. What is more likely, upon consideration of this suspicious story, is that the fighting brothers -- who cannot be held together in a clear vision of familial order -- represent another intrusion of fiction into the text, one which thematically emphasizes the chaos of the historical subject with the comic image of the brothers riding off in four different directions. This scene, in fact, will be recalled much later in the text, as the writer considers the disunity of his own family: "Magnetic fields would go crazy in the presence of more than three Ondaatjes. And my father. Always separate until he died, away from us. The north pole" (172). Ondaatje's view of his family in the present, then, conditions his narrativization of his more distant ancestors, projecting itself back onto the historical brothers, just as his childrens' shadows obscure the writing etched on the St. Thomas floor. It is in this way that the "lack of clarity" saves Ondaatje, allowing the grotesque and indeterminate historical gaps into which the modern historiographer can project himself, keeping his own voice from being entirely "overpowered by stone." The final sentence of the writer's reflection on the brothers underscores the limitations of history, showing that it is only during various kinds of public ceremony that they come together, and once again projecting the importance of his own father back onto the figure of Simon (another Philip's son): "Whenever a funeral or baptism occurred . . . all the brothers would be there. The church records show Simon's name witnessing them all in a signature very like my father's" (67). Once again, the absence of Simon (and of

Marvyn) is highlighted here; the fading signature denotes this absence, taking over for the actual Simon in the act of "witnessing" -- a verb Ondaatje himself uses in "Monsoon Notebook (i)," quoted above.

Interestingly, Ondaatje's performance -- his act of representing what he witnesses -- occasionally offers a paradigm for the earlier Ondaatje's act of stepping out of the "latinized garden," by retreating from a non-fiction prose style and into poetry. In this way, he paradoxically attempts to "invent paper" out of the raw material of the island by moving to the most "oral" kind of discourse writing allows. "Sweet Like a Crow," the first poem of the section, is a masterpiece of the grotesque imagination, working on a potently imagistic level to deconstruct the aesthetic barriers that discriminate beauty and ugliness. Significantly, the poem begins with another intertextual epigraph, from another writer -- Paul Bowles -- with something negative to say about Ceylon and its natives: "*The Sinhalese are beyond a doubt one of the least musical people in the world. It would be quite impossible to have less sense of pitch, line, or rhythm*" (76). It would be difficult to read this poem's epigraph without recalling the earlier epigraph from Douglas Amarasekara, and the ironies of that denunciation of the language of the Sinhalese and Tamils. Here, Bowles's statement about the Sinhalese voice is undercut by the strange verse that follows, in which grotesque images and juxtapositions, somehow both beautiful and hideous, are represented in a form that demonstrates the writer's profound "sense of pitch, line [and] rhythm:"

Your voice sounds like a scorpion being pushed  
 through a glass tube  
 like someone has just trod on a peacock  
 .....  
 a bone shaking hands  
 a frog singing at Carnegie Hall.

Like a crow swimming in milk

.....

a womb full of twins, a pariah dog

with a magpie in its mouth

.....

like 8 sharks being carried on the back of a bicycle

like 3 old ladies locked in a lavatory

like the sound I heard when having an afternoon sleep

and someone walked through my room in ankle bracelets. (76-77)

On the whole, this poem does a good deal more than undercut Bowles's too-specific and closed sense of what constitutes the "musical." A catalogue of thirty-one similes for the sound of a voice, "Sweet Like a Crow" also raises issues that are central to the nature of artistic, and specifically literary, representation. Like several of the poems examined from *The Dainty Monsters*, this poem explores the capacity of that most fundamental of literary tropes, the metaphor. Here, as in his description of the cartographic images of Ceylon, metaphor is revealed as being both essential to any act of representation and yet eternally provisional in its epistemological value. As before, foregrounding the existence of metaphor occasions consciousness of the trope, which in turn reveals the struggle between the static form of that representation and its always abstracted subject -- the ongoing struggle of the grotesque, to which, as I have said, metaphor is intimately related. Once again,

in the case of both metaphor and the grotesque, the form itself resists the interpretation that it necessitates. We remain aware of the referential absurdity of the metaphor despite our attempts to transcend it, and the discord of elements in the grotesque form remains discordant. But this is precisely the reason that both are capable of standing for the entire

field of art. Art lives by resisting interpretation as well as by inviting it, and it is this double movement that is figured in both the metaphor and the grotesque. (Harpham 178)

In the end, art leaves us with art, the true subject of which -- in this poem and in *Running in the Family* as a whole -- is always in part the processes of art itself, the energy of its making and shaping by artist and audience. Here, this grotesque self-reflexivity is foregrounded by the fact that the "subject" of this poem is voice itself, rendering the poem a sort of semantically self-contained, potentially self-demonstrative gesture, a description of itself. That this voice is initially described as "[y]our voice," only reemphasizes the equivalence of reader and writer, the fact that every act of reception is an act of reconstitution, a changing of the literary work into our own "voice," a function now of the reader's imagination and interpretation as much as the words on the page.

A few pages later, the essentially indirect nature of metaphor is attributed to language itself, the very words on the page. Immediately after Ondaatje's description of how his botanical ancestor stepped out of the "latinized" garden to create paper out of the indigenous vegetables of Ceylon, he turns to consider the Sinhalese alphabet, which he believes (*pace* Paul Bowles) to be "the most beautiful alphabet" in the world (RF 83). This alphabet is entirely at home in the Ceylonese landscape, its fluid cursive style largely a result of the fact that "the Ola leaves which people wrote on were too brittle. A straight line would cut apart the leaf and so a curling alphabet was derived from its Indian cousin. Moon coconut. The bones of a lover's spine" (83). Here, the writer resorts to metaphor to declare his sense of the letters in this ancient alphabet; as the passage continues, and the writer remembers learning to use these letters, it becomes clear that the letters themselves are metaphors. The alphabet in which they partake has an auto-referential capacity that transcends spelling and syntax; the letters themselves are grotesque biomorphic pictographs, an almost physical living language:

When I was five . . . I sat in tropical classrooms and learned the letters . . . repeating them page after page. How to write. The self-portrait of language. [At this point there is a Sinhalese character]. Lid on a cooking utensil that takes the shape of fire. Years later, looking into a biology textbook, I came across a whole page depicting the small bones in the body and recognized, delighted, the shapes and forms of the first alphabet I ever copied from Kumarodaya's first grade reader. (83)

This memory, significantly, links to another memory of the writer's childhood when he had to write "lines" as punishment for various kinds of misbehaviour at St Thomas' Boy's School. As the writer considers his own past feelings about the endless "I must nots" that slowly fill his page, he offers an interesting statement about official and unofficial use of the alphabet he has learned, and about literature as well:

The idiot phrases moved east across the page as if searching for longitude and story, some meaning or grace that would occur *blazing* after so much writing. For years I thought literature was punishment, simply a parade ground. The only freedom writing brought was as the author of rude expressions on walls and desks. (84)

Ondaatje's statement that his own earlier belief that literature was a "parade ground" recalls *Coming Through Slaughter*, and the crass exhibitionism from which Buddy Bolden ultimately flees. Writing, at this point, does not provide the young writer with access to the "blazing" meaning (or grace) he searches for; the only thing writing provides is "freedom" from authority and the official, when it takes the form of graffiti.

Immediately after his own admission about writing "on walls and desks," Ondaatje considers two other kinds of Ceylonese graffiti poems whose dates of composition are separated by centuries. Together, these different forms of poetry

reveal much about the literary tropes through which poetry finds its own "blazing" meaning, and about the conflict between official and unofficial language in arriving at the enduring "truths" of history. The writer first looks at poems from the 5th Century B.C. that are inscribed on the stone face of Sigiriya, "the rock fortress of a despot king" and which "spoke of love in all its confusion and brokenness" (84). Ondaatje's response to the poems is interesting, at once somewhat reverential and yet showing a poet's awareness of the limitations of the tropes that define them: "The phrases saw breasts as perfect swans; eyes were long and clean as horizons. The anonymous poets returned again and again to the same metaphors. Beautiful *false compare*. These are the first folk poems of the country" (84). This consideration of the metaphorically expressed longing of the Sigiriya poets is itself a textual metaphor for Ondaatje's desire in *Running in the Family*, a text that formally presents that desire (the desire to "touch" his family "into words") with all the "confusion and brokenness" that attends this endeavour. The poet's awareness of the "false compare" that defines metaphoric equivalence underscores the grotesque potential of brokenness and confusion to highlight the means by which art generally creates a meaningful picture of its referent, and underscores the duality of a book that is as much about its own textuality as it is about its ostensible auto/biographical subject(s).

The consideration of the limitations of metaphor near the beginning of Ceylon's literary history is followed by a description of more recent poetic responses to despotism, and an illustration of the limitations of history itself, after one of the campuses of the University of Ceylon was converted into a prison camp during the Insurgency of 1971:

When the university opened again the returning students found hundreds of poems written on walls, ceilings, and in hidden corners of the campus. Quatrains and free verse about the struggle, tortures, the



unbroken spirit, love of friends who had died for the cause. The students went around for days transcribing them into their notebooks before they were covered with whitewash and lye. (84)

The poetry of the students and other insurgents, killed by the thousands, is ultimately overwritten by the "lye" of official history, extant only in bits and pieces, here and there in notebooks. This sense of the written and rewritten past is augmented after a hiatus, when Ondaatje talks with Ian Goonetilleke, a librarian who compiled a book on the Insurgency -- a book that had to be published in Switzerland because of censorship in Ceylon (*RF* 84-85). The only record of a small portion of the art of the insurgent artists, Goonetilleke's book reveals photographs of charcoal drawings destroyed after the Insurgency, works "that seem as great as the Sigiriya frescoes. They too need to be eternal" (85). Ondaatje sees the "burned down wall that held those charcoal drawings whose passionate consciousness should have been cut into rock. The voices [he] didn't know. The visions which are anonymous. And secret" (85). Here again, the acts of reading and writing do not allow Ondaatje the ingress he desires, the intimate connection to a past that now belongs to the textual, and that was very nearly lost altogether.

As this passage ends, Ondaatje sits alone, reading the poetry of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, a "powerful and angry poet," whose work he receives from Goonetilleke. Ondaatje chooses to end with a quotation from this poetry, adding a warning about the intertextual to a section which has already foregrounded some of the indirections and duplicities of language, literature and history:

*Don't talk to me about Matisse . . .  
the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio  
where the nude woman reclines forever  
on a sheet of blood  
Talk to me instead of the culture generally--*

*how the murderers were sustained  
by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote  
villages the painters came, and our whitewashed  
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire. (85-86)*

Here, at the source of the title to this section of *Running in the Family*, is an attack on imported intertexts that are essentially unrelated to the reality of life in Ceylon. A form of literary karapothas, the European intertexts are only another kind of "false compare" -- a way of finding meaning that is premised upon the abstraction of the subject. In this angry poem, that abstraction is equated (as so often happened in *The Dainty Monsters*) with a violence that is fatally literal.

This quotation is followed, significantly enough, by four poems in which Ondaatje partially concedes to Wikkramasinha's exhortation, momentarily eschewing his reliance on foreign intertexts (but not his reliance on metaphor) to engage with the reality of Ceylon. Absent also, however, is Wikkramasinha's anger; the vehemence of his rejection of "the European style" becomes another intertext, albeit a local one. As Barbour puts it, the defiant postcolonial agenda of Wikkramasinha's poem "is too monologic for [*Running in the Family*], yet its presence in it adds another voice to the dialogic collage it is becoming" (146). The poems that follow are all warm expressions of yearning, of loss and fulfilment, which analogize the writer's desire for a connection to his surroundings and to his past that is intimate and enduring. In "High Flowers," the poet focuses on the figures of a "woman [his] ancestors ignored," and her husband, a toddy tapper, working in the trees above her as she imagines his movement. This profoundly realized piece of local colour represents an illustration of imaginative desire, distance and intimacy, as the woman and poet consider the gaps that separate them from the shared objects of their desire: "From his darkness among high flowers / to this room contained by mud walls / everything that is important occurs in shadow --"

(88). These lines may recall the reader to the earlier description of the devil dances, the nights during which lives may be utterly changed by events that are unseen, lost to historical and biographical discourse. Interestingly, there is a moment in the poem that represents the intrusion of the intertextual, as the poet attempts to brush some of the "shadow" from his perception and representation of the toddy tapper by offering a comparison. As the poet watches the tapper working quickly "to reach his quota / before the maniac monsoon," he notes that the shape of the tapper's knife and pot "do not vary from 18th Century museum prints" (88). This statement simultaneously pays homage to the timeless continuance of aspects of traditional life in Ceylon and warns the reader of the equally enduring necessity of drawing equivalences (historical and metaphoric) in any act of representation. The limitations of such tropes are foregrounded by the final lines of the poem, in which the toddy tapper engages in an image of evasion and partial occlusion: "In the high trees above her / shadows eliminate / the path he moves along" (89).

The other poems of the section echo and reinforce the first, each revealing a profound sense of identification and desire between the poet and his new landscape. "To Columbo" recalls the earlier prose descriptions of the Sigiriya graffiti poems, describing with densely imagistic language the drive back from Sigiriya to Columbo (RF 90-91). Catching the minute details of the setting he passes through, the poet responds to the sunlight, sees "brown men / who rise knee deep like the earth / out of the earth," and "on a bench behind sunlight / the woman the coconuts the knife" (90-91). Even here, however, the sense of connection with the land is partially qualified by the poet's position in the moving jeep; while he is able to appreciate the intimacy of the "brown men" and the earth, he cannot fully partake in this intimacy -- he has to "remove / tarpaulin walls of the jeep / to receive lowland air". The next poem, "Women Like You," reverses course, arriving back at the Sigiriya rock-poems where

the writer considers the anonymous poets who "carved an alphabet / whose motive was perfect desire" (93). As before, this carved alphabet, inscribed permanently on the landscape, analogizes Ondaatje's own motives in writing *Running in the Family*, the desire to transcend "tropical gossip" and perceive the "intimate and truthful" with "utter directness" (RF 54). As such, the multi-voiced, multi-authored chorus of verses on the rock face suggests a textual correlative for *Running in the Family* itself, in which "Hundreds of small verses / by different hands / became one / habit of the unrequited" (93). This equation of the desire to apprehend his own past, his family and his father, with unrequited sexual and romantic love continues with "The Cinnamon Peeler," certainly the most optimistic of the four poems in this regard. This poem takes as its subject an imagined intimacy so profound that even when the lovers are apart, their connection declares itself in the smell on the woman's body, the places she has touched and been touched by the cinnamon peeler:

Your breasts and shoulders would reek  
 you could never walk through markets  
 without the profession of my fingers  
 floating over you. The blind would  
 stumble certain of whom they approached  
 though you might bathe  
 under rain gutters, monsoon. (95)

After an (imaginary?) encounter, during which the two lovers touch under water, without the transfer of the odour of the cinnamon, the woman searches her own body for the missing "perfume" and then wonders, "what good is it / to be . . . / left with no trace / as if not spoken to in the act of love / as if wounded without the pleasure of a scar" (96). As the poem ends, the woman accepts and desires the connection, touching herself to the hands of the cinnamon peeler, offering a statement of identity that is

profoundly relational, a connection testified in the senses: "I am the cinnamon / peeler's wife. Smell me" (97). In this final poem, the only qualification of the connection the poet seeks is in the indeterminate status of its second section, in which the relationship between poet and subject, the cinnamon peeler and the woman on whom his love is inscribed with a scent, is no longer unrequited. Is this section entirely imagined or fully realized by the speaker. To what extent does it share in the conditional mode of the poem's first lines ("If I were a cinnamon peeler / I would ride your bed / and leave yellow bark dust / on your pillow.")? In any case, the poem would seem to premise the potential for such intimacy on the imagination itself -- which is perhaps ultimately responsible for cancelling out the conditional by the end of "The Cinnamon Peeler." Here, as before, imagination is the key to crossing the gaps that separate artist and art from subject, from the object of desire itself.

On the whole, "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse" explores issues of representation and interpretation at the same time as it "establishes, however surreptitiously, a larger and historical and social context within which the stories of Ondaatje's family can be measured" (Barbour 148). This measuring has to do with the ways in which the writer has focused upon the textual nature of such contexts: the interpretations of Ceylon by colonizers and "karapothas," the nearly obliterated revolutionary art of the Insurgency, the Sinhalese alphabet, the love poems of Sigiriya, and the cultural and familial mythology in which the writer partakes. All of these become intertexts that reveal a grotesque consciousness of the fundamentally unrequited nature of history, historiography, and literature itself, as Ondaatje uses each to explore the epistemological legitimacy of texts, and of language itself. In this way, "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse" reveals the writer's self-consciousness about tropes of equivalence both as a creator and as a reader of texts. The intertexts that contribute to the generic chorus of *Running in the Family* are, in a sense, identical to metaphor in

their function; the various collected stories, literary allusions, bits of gossip and historical digressions act as oral/textual surrogates for the absent subjects the author wishes to apprehend, but which often seem to lead only to other intertexts, rather than to ultimately transcendent, "blazing" meaning. As Hutcheon summarizes it:

"Language has power, but it is not a supreme power: the past can (and does) escape articulation. The past is the ultimate intertext whose significance is both intensely desired and constantly deferred" (88). It is this desire and deferral that defines the play of the grotesque in the poems near the end of the section; like the section as a whole, they potently demonstrate the power of language at the same time as they abjure any claim to ultimate authority, or epistemological "supremacy."

This same desire is highlighted throughout "Eclipse Plumage," the next major division of *Running in the Family*. Here, the title itself, with its connotations of natural disguise and occlusion, focuses us on the abiding presence of difficulties occasioned by the kinds of texts the writer must work through to achieve his own vision -- and representation -- of the past. The first sub-section of "Eclipse Plumage," "Lunch Conversation," powerfully announces a narratological shift in scale from the earlier section, from the national stories of Ceylon's history and culture to familial anecdote -- the kinds of "text" the writer struggles with throughout this section as a whole.

"Lunch Conversation" dramatizes this struggle in a way that grotesquely conflates the roles of author and reader by focusing on how both must bring order to a seemingly disordered narrative. Here, many of the usual narratological tools for handling "conversation" are left out; speakers are generally unannounced or unfamiliar. there are no quotation marks -- all we have is the speech itself. (We don't even know how many people are involved in this communal act of story-telling, or where it takes place.) As was the case for Ondaatje during the original event, there is also no stable

central narrator who could provide us with some background information on the unfamiliar names and events, binding the spoken words into a coherent narrative structure. Indeed, all we know at the outset of "Lunch Conversation" is that we identify with the figure who cries out for order in the first lines: "Wait a minute, wait a minute! When did all this happen, I'm trying to get it straight . . ." (105). The story, such as it is, seems at first to involve multiple settings -- a wedding luncheon, a day at the beach during which someone named David Grenier drowned and Ondaatje's grandmother Lalla was carried out to sea -- and characters that shift in and out of the picture, some of whom are present for the "present" act of narration. There is an unresolved argument about whether or not Trevor de Saram was in love with Ondaatje's mother. There is also an interesting fragmentary scene in which someone named Hilden (who turns out to be the "host" at the gathering where the present story is being told) drew a circle in the sand around Doris and threatened her not to step outside of it. We later learn that this takes place as David Grenier is drowning and Lalla, Doris's mother, is being dragged away by the current, lost to the narrative of what is going on at the beach. Significantly, this act of drawing a boundary and enforcing stillness within its zone has much in common with the successful act of narration Ondaatje is searching for; he too wishes to keep his subjects quietly on the beach, away from the "swirling tides" of their complicated relationships, the vagaries of narrative itself.

As Ondaatje (and his reader) continues listening to and questioning the other story-tellers, he begins to create order out of what he has heard, but only after he (or someone else) comments that "there seems to be three different stories that you're telling" (108). At this statement, everyone laughs, insisting that it is really only one -- albeit one that spans half a century and incorporates events that seem unrelated by the standards of traditional narrative. The message here is that stories are not self-

contained units; the grotesque narrative in which Ondaatje is partaking collapses boundaries of time and place, highlighting the differences occasioned by perspective, and revelling in the profoundly associative capacity of memory itself. Finally, after a few more questions required to tidy up the chronology of this disjunctive "story," the writer seems to get it "straight" (or at least as straight as he can possibly get it) and shifts into an entirely different, less dramatic narrative mode. After his last question, the writer (we assume it is the writer) simply says "OK," as if the clarity he has achieved is as much as he could hope for. Thereafter, the conversational mode of most of "Lunch Conversation" is dropped, replaced with the more monologic voice of the writer, and the black comedy of Lalla's return to the beach. Lalla's incredible story of how "she passed ships out there" partially undermines the unitary nature of the narrating voice, in a story that we already know has been reconstructed from the difficult, raw material of the lunch conversation. Lalla, who has survived the current by joining it and letting it carry her back to the beach, learns that David Grenier, who fought the current, has died, and resolves to inform Dickie (David's wife) of the disaster. When Dickie finally asks if her husband is alright, Lalla responds, "Quite well, darling. . . . He's in the next room having a cup of tea" (*RF* 109). Frustratingly, perhaps, the narrative ends there, as the clarity and closure required by history gives way to the grotesquery of the anecdote, which ends just at the point of crisis where horror and hilarity collide.

The interrogation of the familial stories that provide the sources for *Running in the Family* continues in "Aunts," a section that considers the value of Ondaatje's older relatives (like Phyllis, the minotaur-figure introduced in "Jaffna Afternoons") who provide so many of the stories from which the writer must construct a sense of his own past, of the lives of his parents. The first sentences of the section suggest both the importance of the narratological resource they represent, and the grotesque, chaotic



energy of some of the stories they provide: "How I have used them. . . . They knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong" (110). Here is an ambivalent image of order-making -- the creation of a sarong of story out of wildness itself, the "wild threads" of memory. The writer records his own desire to impose order and stillness on the subject of his writing with a statement that recalls his earliest short poems; describing his aunts collectively, the writer seems frustrated by the limitations of his medium and comments, "I would love to photograph this." As before, photography represents the potential for stillness and clarity the writer searches for, the order that would cancel out the chaotic flux of his own experience. Unable or unwilling to resort to this medium, however, the writer must be content to fully explore the potentials of writing; when he focuses on one of his aunts, Dolly, his writing becomes increasingly detailed and precise, informing the reader of her age, height and weight (110). As if that weren't enough, Ondaatje resorts once again to the intertextual as a way of achieving a literary "photograph" of his aunt; to paraphrase Wikramasinha, Ondaatje speaks to us of Dickens, telling us that his aunt "moves frail as Miss Havisham" (111). (Perhaps significantly, this characterological comparison is otherwise unavailing in signifying anything about the writer's aunt, whose warmth and candour utterly contradict the analogy. It is probable that the allusion has more to do with the writer himself, with his great expectations about the ingress into the past she offers.)

Ondaatje's visit with his aunt connects him, once again, with the absent family members he wishes to apprehend, however provisionally. The connection with his father is especially strong, as he tells us, "[s]he and her brother Arthur were my father's close friends all his life. He knew that, whatever he had done, Arthur would be there to talk him out of madness, weakness, aloneness" (111). Dolly is also connected to the drama of his family's past; we learn that she "introduced most of the

children of [Ondaatje's] generation to the theatre . . ." (111). The two talk about the complex system of interrelationships that are largely lost to memory and to narrative. Lalla's young relationships, for instance, were so various that Dolly admits that she "could never keep up with her. We almost had to write the names down to remember who she was seeing" (111). As if in answer to the writer's desire for a photograph, Aunt Dolly finally produces one: a picture of "a fancy dress party that shows herself and my grandmother Lalla among the crowd" (112). Indeed, this photograph is reproduced for the reader of *Running in the Family* earlier in the text, immediately beneath the section title for "Eclipse Plumage" (RF 103). Showing twenty costumed men and women against a backdrop of lush vegetation, the picture itself plays against its textual description, revealing the gaps that distinguish both modes of discourse from their referents. Frustratingly, this photograph doesn't fill the gap as we might hope; Ondaatje has provided no means of determining exactly which of the unidentified women are Lalla and Dolly. We can only turn back the pages, stare at the assemblage of unfamiliar faces and wonder.

At one point in this conversation, the writer remarks on the continual interruptions of a man banging nails into the ceiling, trying to keep the roof up for another few years. As the scene continues, this symbolic act suggests another act of ordering, of trying to keep the lush natural world outside from invading the house -- an act that is tied in with what the writer is saying about experience, memory and discourse. Moving about his aunt's house, Ondaatje notes the grotesque dissolution of the boundary between within and without: "There is very little now that separates the house from the garden. Rain and vines and chickens move into the building" (112). As Dolly describes the photo, the writer analogizes the duality of their physical setting with his aunt's perception of the past, the capacity of her long-term memory to thrust itself into a present that is largely lost to her failing eyesight and hearing:

She reels off names and laughs at the facial expressions she can no longer see. It [the photograph] has moved tangible, palpable, into her brain, the way memory invades the present in those who are old, the way gardens invade houses here, the way her tiny body steps into mine as intimate as anything I have witnessed and I have to force myself to be gentle with this frailty in the midst of my embrace. (112)

Here, after an image of invasion that recalls the writer's oniric epigraph, Ondaatje recalls a moment of intimacy that is close to the connection he desires in "Tropical Gossip" -- the "utter directness" with which he wants to apprehend "all the lost history" (RF 55). The connection, however, is as provisional as it is precious, its fragility demanding a gentleness that corresponds with the loose textual "embrace" with which *Running in the Family* itself must attempt to contain the past.

The revelation of this need for a kind of narratological gentleness, which opposes any kind of discourse that presumes to fix its subject, is a useful, perhaps necessary, prerequisite for "The Passions of Lalla," the last section of "Eclipse Plumage," and the longest of the sub-sections in *Running in the Family*. Here, Ondaatje turns to focus on the figure of his maternal grandmother, whose profound and occasionally dramatic eccentricity -- throughout a life almost entirely unwitnessed by the writer -- places her in a zone very similar to his father's, where the unitary narrative strategies of traditional biographical discourse are unavailing. Participating in Lalla's own capacity to mediate contradiction and engage the energy of the grotesque, the text itself approaches a form sufficiently malleable to apprehend her, shifting in genre from straightforward reportage to unapologetic magic realism in an attempt, not to fix or explain her, but to approximate and analogize her movement and energy. The first paragraph of the section is suggestive of this energy, comprised entirely by an evocative vision of Lalla's death: "My Grandmother died in the blue arms of a

jacaranda tree. She could read thunder" (*RF* 113). The mysterious circumstance of her death, and the equally enigmatic statement that she could read thunder go unexplained for now, developed only later, in the more detailed representation of Lalla's death at the end of the section. In the next paragraph, the writer shifts to Lalla's birth -- her dubious claim to have been born at an outdoor picnic, and the fact that her bloodline suggests a mingling of contraries, fusing the influence of her father, "who came from a subdued line of Keyts," and her mother, whose family "was considered eccentric" (113). The years of Lalla's growth to adulthood are absent from Ondaatje's knowledge and therefore from his narrative, but his conjectural explanation for this gap emphasizes the grotesque capacity of this narrative to move into the mode of magic realism wherever necessary, to imaginatively participate once again in cultural superstition: "There is no information about Lalla growing up. Perhaps she was a shy child, for those who are magical break from silent structures after years of chrysalis" (113). Here, Ondaatje's narrative itself breaks away from the silent structures of generic biography in acknowledging its inability to fully comprehend Lalla's life, simply avowing the "magical" nature of the text's absent referent.

The title of "The Passions of Lalla" suggests Lalla's lustful energy for life and eccentric humour and, like the Passions of Christ (a figure with whom all of Ondaatje's earlier protagonists have been identified), also indicates that hers is a story collected from multiple sources; Ondaatje's is a collected and communal "gospel." This story provides the biographical skeleton of his grandmother's life, including her marriage to Willy Gratiaen, his death, and her administration of the family dairy. The writer gives considerably more attention, however, to the stories of Lalla's "passions:" her misadventures, exploits and occasionally grotesque practical jokes, all of which define her "chameleon nature" (*RF* 124). There is a story that implicates Lalla in "charming" a friend's husband after he cruelly kills his wife's chickens, so that he ultimately goes

mad, apparently believing himself to be a chicken. There is another story in which Lalla conceals a murderer from the police and, when questioned about the incident in court, mocks the judge. After a hiatus, we learn of Lalla's relationship with the children around her, how "children flocked to Lalla, for she was the most casual and irresponsible of chaperones, being far too busy with her own life to oversee them all" (*RF* 117). Her involvement with her own life is generally characterized by a passion for cards and practical jokes. In an illustrative incident, Lalla holds a dinner party and asks Lionel Wendt, "who was very shy," to carve the meat:

A big pot was placed in front of him. As he removed the lid a baby goat jumped out and skittered down the table. Lalla had been so involved with the joke -- buying the kid that morning and finding a big enough pot -- that she had forgotten about the real dinner and there was nothing to eat after the laughter and shock had subsided. (117-118)

This grotesque "dinner" (an inspiration for "Rat Jelly"?) evinces the theatrical aspect of Lalla's character, which is further attested to by the intricate lobster costume she creates for Ondaatje's mother's appearance at the Galle Face Dance (118), and by her behaviour at the writer's parents' wedding where, stressing Mervyn's Tamil background, she "had two chairs decorated in a Hindu style and laughed all through the ceremony" (119). (Here at last is a glimpse of the wedding that is absent in "A Fine Romance.")

After this, in a passage that examines Lalla's relationships to those around her, Ondaatje makes an observation that is clearly connected to his own attempt to retrieve and represent his grandmother. Although Lalla adored being surrounded by company of any sort, the writer explains,

being "grabbed" or "contained" by anyone drove her mad. She would be compassionate to the character of children but tended to avoid holding

them on her lap. And she could not abide having grandchildren hold her hands when she took them for walks. She would quickly divert them into the entrance of the frightening maze in the Nuwara Eliya Park and leave them there, lost, while she went off to steal flowers. She was always determined to be physically selfish. Into her sixties she would still complain of how she used to be "pinned down" to breast feed her son before she could leave for dances. (119)

Here again is the image of the maze that first appeared in "Jaffna Afternoons," signalling the complex of relationships and stories through which the writer must search for meaning. At this point, Lalla is analogous with the maze, losing her grandchildren (including Ondaatje himself) in its twists and turns so as not to get "pinned down," either by relational obligation, or, in the textual "present," by the confines of discourse. Even the act of breast-feeding is too confining; Lalla's eventual unnecessary mastectomy, her "claim to fame," becomes another grotesque gesture of freedom. The false breast that replaces her own partakes in the energy of her life, becoming a source of anecdote. Like Lalla, "[t]he false breast would never be still for long. She was an energetic person. It would crawl over and join its twin on the right hand side or sometimes appear on her back, 'for dancing' she smirked" (123-124). Lost to wind or to the dog, the artificial breast floats free of her body, humourously connecting her with the landscape around her, to that "[s]he went through four breasts in her lifetime" (124). What is more, we learn that Lalla had donated her body to six different hospitals after her death (123).

As the narrative progresses, we learn a little of the brothers and sisters Lalla "busied" herself with after her children grew up. We are introduced to Vere, the "sweet drunk" who is his sister's best friend, and to the more interesting figure of Evan, who seems to share a very special relationship with Lalla, which may in part be related to his ability to avoid being "pinned down:"

What happened to Lalla's other brother, Evan, no one knows. But all through her life, when the children sent money, Lalla would immediately forward it on to Evan. He was supposedly a thief and Lalla loved him. "Jesus died to save sinners," she said, "and I will die for Evan." Evan manages to escape family memory . . . (121)

Evan's evasion of family memory suggests an extreme potential of eccentricity, the ability of his marginalized position to place him outside of the maze of relationships the writer can see, in a zone that is beyond discourse. Evan is ultimately a name for a narratological gap, a word whose referent is unwritable.

Lalla's mysterious statement that she would die, like Jesus, for Evan takes us forward to Lalla's final years, in which she "was searching for the great death" (125). During this time, her "freedom accelerated" as her grotesque union with the world around her became more clearly defined. We learn at this point that she loved thunder because "it spoke to her like a king:" "Sky noises and the abrupt light told her details about careers, incidental wisdom, allowing her to risk everything because the thunder would warn her along with the snake of lightning" (125). Here again, the narrative mode the writer is working in has shifted, moving once more into the zone of magic realism and away from traditional biography. The writer has gone past the boundary of gossip and anecdote into a more private, imaginary sphere, where he is capable of detailing what cannot have been reported. This shift becomes more pronounced, after Lalla hears "the wild thunder and she knew someone was going to die" (127), in the representation of her own death. After a night of drinking and card-playing with Vere, Lalla steps outside for a walk just before dawn and is swept away by a "swirling tide" she had not noticed surging past the front step. Ondaatje's description of Lalla's "last perfect journey," riding the flood, engages the grotesque; energetically shrugging off the fetters of biography, the writer rides along with his grandmother. The flood itself

overwrites the landscape, removing boundaries; a week later, when the waters recede, there are fish in the badminton nets at the country club (*RF* 127). The waters, caught by the imagining eye of the writer, are teeming with vibrancy and life -- a diversity of grotesque creatures, dainty monsters that analogize the writer's project to the extent that their very survival depends upon partaking in the movement of the running water rather than resisting and trying to stay still; moving with the tide, Lalla

overtook Jesus lizards that swam and ran in bursts over the water, she was surrounded by tired half-drowned fly-catchers screaming *tack tack tack tack*, frogmouths, nightjars forced to keep awake, brain-fever birds and their irritating ascending scales, snake eagles, scimitar-babblers, they rode the air around Lalla wishing to perch on her unable to alight on anything except what was moving. (128)

Lalla's journey itself represents a grotesque transgression of boundaries; in an act that recalls the dream in which the writer's family passes through the walls of the Governor's labyrinthine mansion in "Jaffna Afternoons," Lalla is dragged across the flooded Nuwara Eliya Park, where "she floated over the intricate fir tree hedges of the maze -- which would always continue to terrify her grandchildren -- its secret spread out naked as a skeleton for her" (128). Finally, after this impossible vision, Lalla comes to the blue arms of the jacaranda tree, which brings an abrupt end to her (and our) journey: "and then there was the great blue ahead of her, like a sheaf of blue wheat, like a large eye that peered towards her, and she hit it and was dead" (129). The narrative -- and this section of *Running in the Family* -- ends there, analogizing Lalla's abrupt demise with an equally sudden narrative full stop; our impossible vision is coincident with hers.

The title of "The Prodigal" recalls the writer's earlier statement that he is both a foreigner and a prodigal who hates foreigners in "The Karapothas" (79), and would



seem to suggest a move toward traditional autobiography in this section of *Running in the Family*. As a whole, the section does not realize this possibility. Indeed, "prodigal" potentially functions less as an authorial signature than it does as an adjective describing this section as a whole, and the actions of its various subjects, connoting lavishness, extravagance and possibly wastefulness. Although the early sub-sections of "The Prodigal" do seem to be centred around Ondaatje and his trip to Ceylon, it is here that the book begins to shift to focus on the figure of Mervyn Ondaatje, on the scandalous behaviour of the father with whom the writer is attempting to re-connect.

The first two sub-chapters are powerfully realized, writerly delineations of place. In "Harbour," the writer considers a harbour at night. From the water at dusk, Ondaatje looks at Reclamation street (which has taken on the quality of a shadowy reflection of Bolden's Storyville) and remembers once having to say goodbye to his mother and sister at this harbour. Other memories, interestingly, are entirely intertextual; he recalls loving songs like "Harbour lights" and remembers how he "danced disgracefully with girls" to the tune of "Sea of Heartbreak" (133). Even as the writer looks out at the darkening harbour in the textual "present," he sings "the lights in the harbour don't shine for me . . ." (133-134). Not surprisingly perhaps, the writer considers the harbour a place of grotesque contradiction, where categorical oppositions like authentic and counterfeit are embraced and cancelled out: "There is nothing wise about a harbour, but it is real life. It is as sincere as a Singapore cassette" (133). In the harbour, and in "Harbour," the actual and the textual are equalized in the perceiving eye of the artist, who ultimately foregrounds the writerly nature of his project at the end of the section by emphasizing the "magic words" that are associated with this setting: "*Harbour. Lost ship. Chandler. Estuary*" (134).

One writerly apprehension of setting follows another in "Morse's Notebook (ii)," which begins with another image of invasion, of the grotesque collapsing of the

distinction between the house and the jungle. "The bars across the windows did not always work," we are warned, as the writer introduces his description of the ways "[w]ildlife stormed or crept into homes . . ." (135). Bats and snakes enter occasionally, seldom staying for long; other visitors are more permanent. In a passage that focuses on the fragility of textual history, the writer considers "the silverfish [that] slid into steamer trunks and photograph albums -- eating their way through portraits and wedding pictures" (135-136). The textual nature of Ondaatje's own "history" is emphasized as the passage continues and, with a gesture that recalls Oderic's epigraph, the writer foregrounds the gap that separates him from the referent of his writing:

One evening I kept the tape recorder beside my bed and wakened by [peacocks] once more out of a deep sleep automatically pressed the machine on to record them. Now, and here, Canadian February, I write this in the kitchen and play that section of cassette to hear not just peacocks but all the noises of the night behind them -- inaudible because they were always there like breath. (136)

Here then is a passage that once again conflates contraries; the immediacy and apparently intimate sensuousness of "Monsoon Notebook (ii)" is a paradoxical function of distance, of the (Singapore?) cassette that allows the writer to hear recorded sounds that went unnoticed earlier, in the presence of the actuality. The ability to recontextualize the night-noises of Ceylon, afforded by the tape recorder, paradoxically allows a kind of greater closeness, affording the writer a heightened sense of what went on behind the cries of the peacocks, sounds that were "unfocused by the brain -- nothing more than darkness, all those sweet loud younger brothers of the night" (136). In the end, it is difficult to know how to respond to the revelation of this gap and of the writer's ostensible claim for a greater accuracy and objectivity that is born of distance. In any case, the ambiguities in this passage powerfully foreground the recalled and written nature of the text before us.

This revelation once again occasions questions about discourse and narrativization, the retrospective projection of meaning and order into the contingent world of remembered experience. The issue is addressed in "How I Was Bathed," where the writer considers the interplay of memory, narrative and genre. Here, during a "formal dinner," Ondaatje listens to his sister recount how he was bathed as a five year old student of a Colombo girls' school that accepted very young boys. The complications of this act of story-telling are noteworthy: Gillian, the writer's sister, never witnessed the bathing; her story is second-hand, received from Yasmine Gooteratne, the prefect who had done the bathing, years after the event, when the two women were at college. Nevertheless, Ondaatje, whose experience of the event is first-hand, listens intently to the story, considering its potential as a source for the reclamation and representation of his personal history. After Gillian's dramatic presentation of the invigorating violence of the bathing -- the flung buckets of water, the carbolic soap, and the communal nakedness of the boys -- Ondaatje considers his response to the story and the response of the others at the table:

The guests, the children, everyone is laughing and Gillian is no doubt exaggerating Yasmine's account in her usual style, her long arms miming the capture and scrub of five-year-olds. I am dreaming and wondering why this was never to be traumatically remembered. It is the kind of event that should have surfaced as the first chapter of an anguished autobiographical novel. (138)

There is an indeterminacy to this passage that makes it difficult to determine the author's stance toward the remembered (or unremembered?) event. His comment that Gillian's story is "no doubt" exaggerated raises a number of possibilities: is this merely a reflection of the writer's estimation that hyperbole is his sister's "usual style," or does it also reflect his opinion of Yasmine, the other, absent story-teller? Is the

writer's suspicion a factor of his own memory of the event, which is without the trauma and violence of Gillian's narrative would seem to demand -- or does this story, after all, demand only the levity it occasions at the dinner table? The writer's own retelling of the story's telling leaves the indirection of this act of refracting narrative intact; he never offers a first-hand view of the bathing that would confirm or deny what is now a third-hand account of an unwitnessed event. What the writer does do is consider the response of the people at the table, and measure it against his own -- and against a conventionally literary way of narrativizing life experience: the traditional "anguished autobiographical novel" *Running in the Family* never becomes. Just as Billy the Kid's grotesque capacity to transcend boundaries allows him to consider the potentialities of "a newsman's brain," the energy of this text reveals its writing subject's ability to pass through the walls of the generic maze it represents, participating imaginatively (if only momentarily and conditionally) in a generic modality that is once again too monologic to sustain the grotesque energy of the book as a whole.

Later in "The Prodigal," we see this energy everywhere in the landscape of Ceylon, a setting of prodigal fecundity and diversity. In "Travels in Ceylon," the writer, travelling with his family, comments on the power of the shape-shifting landscape that is constantly changing around them, as nature and culture cast off their respective boundaries and invade each other:

Drive ten miles and you are in a landscape so different that by rights it should belong to another country. . . . The country is cross-hatched with maze-like routes whose only escape is the sea. From a ship or plane you can turn back or look down at the disorder. Villages spill onto streets, the jungle encroaches on village. (RF 147)

From this, the writer turns to the "casual obsession" with building impossible roads and making ingress into and through this landscape, and ultimately comes at last to the

figure of Mervyn Ondaatje, who "seemed fated to have an obsession with trains all his life" (148). The juxtaposition of images of road and rail with the disorder of Ceylon's chaotic landscape suggests a thematic association of these "cross-hatched" and "maze-like" routes with strategies of order, ways of inscribing a structure onto the grotesque shape of Ceylon itself. This association is not an uncommon one for Ondaatje; there is the connection between trains and a provisional kind of order in *Collected Works*, and Buddy Bolden's inexorable narrative movement toward his break-down in *Coming Through Slaughter* is often analogized with the act of moving down a road.

Interestingly, "The Prodigal" is prefaced by a photograph of a train coming around the side of steep, rocky incline (131). If the rail-bound movement of the Ceylon's trains is a textual metaphor for the "movement" of a traditionally structured sort of narrative -- one whose course and "destination" is presumed from the start -- Mervyn's obsession with these trains undermines this order, revealing his capacity to undermine and decentre the kinds of order his son both searches for and disallows. Indeed, the shift from son to father as the biographical subject throughout the rest of *Running in the Family* is representative of this energy -- analogized by a text that has been jumping generic tracks from the beginning. Here, autobiography (such as it is) swerves into the zone of fictional biography as prodigal father supplants prodigal son in a way that continues to emphasize the equally prodigal textual extravagance of *Running in the Family* itself. As Kamboureli describes it, this shift suggests a profound connection between father and son at the level of the text, a grotesque unification of the artist with his subject and his art and a demonstration of the capacity for "scandal" that runs in his family:

In a way affirmative of genealogy, the writer perpetrates the scandalous figure of his father by breaking generic codes. The iconoclastic father permeates the son's writing as a flow of decoded marks, a figure, a

figure of restlessness subverting meaning. In a filial gesture, the writer's language makes itself part of what it refers to, it speaks of the scandalous, of the slippages from genre to genre, from subject to subject. ("Slippages" 87)

The writer emphasizes his father's capacity to derail order and engage scandal throughout "Travels in Ceylon" in the frightening and humourous stories of how Mervyn stopped the trains with his revolver from time to time, once to allow a friend who missed the train to catch up, and later in the paranoid belief that the train carried Japanese bombs. At one point, Mervyn inexplicably removes his clothing and rushes into the darkness of a tunnel, "for three hours stopping rail traffic going both ways" (149). In an entirely imagined scene, the writer portrays a moment "only Conrad could have interpreted," when his mother enters the tunnel alone to retrieve his father, following him where no one else (except his writing son) would. The anecdote ends with a consideration of Doris's handwriting, its metamorphosis into a "wild" and "drunk" scrawl in the years after her marriage to Mervyn. Surprisingly, this writing is not hasty, but is in fact the result of

the most laboured process, her tongue twisting in her mouth. As if that scrawl was the result of great discipline, as if at the age of thirty or so she had been blasted, forgotten how to write, lost the use of a habitual style and forced herself to cope with a new dark and unknown alphabet. (150)

The transformation of Doris's handwriting -- presumably a function of her chaotic life with Mervyn -- recalls the writer's earlier consideration of the Sinhalese alphabet, and its suggestion of a connection between "the genealogy of self" and the "materiality of language" (Kamboureli, "Slippages" 90). Here, the "dark and unknown alphabet" of his mother's handwriting underscores the decentring influence of his father, and

analogizes the writer's own textual response to this influence, eschewing the habitual style of any single genre in an act of writing that is nevertheless "the result of great discipline." The "laboured process" of the writer's writing in both cases underscores the grotesque mediation of order and chaos in the act of inscription: the mother's laboured penmanship, the son's disciplined generic scrawl.

After a hiatus, Ondaatje continues with a consideration of his father's writing, as he details a public war of words between Mervyn and a Mr. Bandaranaike in which the two swap insults and spread gossip about each other in the pages of various resthouse visitors' books. These attacks were "as public as a newspaper advertisement" we are told, once again foregrounding the writer's reliance on public knowledge to gain a picture of his father's life. What is more, this strange feud reveals in other ways his father's capacity for "scandal" (here, a significantly writerly kind of scandal in which the original function of the visitors' books is undermined) as well as the occasional inability of historical texts to convey this kind of chaos: "This literary war broke so many codes that for the first time in Ceylon history pages had to be ripped out of visitors' books" (*RF* 152).

After a final hiatus, Ondaatje returns to the trains, describing one of his father's "most dramatic" rides, in which Mervyn stops the train and forces the engineer to repeatedly move the train ten miles back and forth on the track. Here, Ondaatje once again focuses on the train itself as a metaphor for narrative. And by drawing our attention to a particular group of passengers, on the contrary coexistence of order and chaos throughout *Running in the Family*. As his drunken father, nearly naked, begins singing limericks in the passenger cars, Ondaatje tells us that a group of high-ranking British officers continue to sleep in their car; nobody is willing to wake them because of the disorder around them, so they "slept serenely with their rage for order in the tropics, while the train shunted and reversed in the night and there was chaos and hilarity in the parentheses around them" (154).

This final scene is linked to "Sir John," the next sub-chapter of "The Prodigal," which focuses on a visit Ondaatje and Gillian pay to John Kotelawala, then a former Prime Minister of Ceylon, but formerly an acquaintance of Mervyn Ondaatje in the Ceylon Light Infantry, during the era when Mervyn was obsessed with trains. As a whole, this scene demonstrates some of the limitations of the historical sources the writer must rely on; the elderly statesman provides only one more perspective to the "three or four other points of view" the writer has already gathered (158); his memory itself is an entity that must be encouraged, coaxed with tidbits of forgotten or imaginary detail. Arriving at the estate, Ondaatje is aware of the peculiar nature of his visit and its "bizarre motive," wondering how Sir John will react to being visited primarily so that he can shed light on a considerably less historically "significant" figure. The writer acknowledges that this "is probably the first time anyone has come not so much to see him, *the* Sir John Kotelawala, but because he happened to know for a few hectic months during the war a consistently drunk officer in the Ceylon Light Infantry" (157). Eventually, Kotelawala comes forward with a contribution to the collective story Ondaatje is gathering, but then changes the subject, underscoring the provisional nature of narrative by "delighting in some scandal about 'one of the best liars we have'" (158-159). (It is at this moment that the writer nearly loses a toe to the hidden fan under Sir John's breakfast table.) The implicit warning about fictionalization here is reinforced in another of Sir John's anecdotes, in which he tells of "one of the most scandalous photographs organized by the Opposition" (159). In an entirely choreographed scene, a young couple orchestrate the appearance that Sir John is casually conversing with the young woman as she engages in "a blatantly sexual act" on his lawn -- at least, this is how it appears when the photograph appears in the newspaper a week later (RF 160).

As if to echo this story, the next (and last) section of "The Prodigal" focusses on another photographic image which involves a kind of distortion. A crucial part of



Ondaatje's attempt to reclaim the relationship shared by his parents, this photograph is what the writer has been "waiting for all [his] life," evidence that "they were absolutely perfect for each other" (*RF* 161-162). It is also, the writer tells us, "the only photograph I have found of the two of them together" (162). A kind of grotesque wedding portrait, the photo is described in a textual passage; the rich detail here seems to accord with the importance of this image to the writer's project:

My father sits facing the camera, my mother stands beside him and bends over so that her face is in profile on a level with his. Then they both begin to make hideous faces.

My father's pupils droop to the south-west corner of his sockets. His jaw falls and resettles into a groan that is half idiot, half shock. (All this emphasized by his dark suit and well-combed hair.) My mother in white has twisted her lovely features and stuck out her jaw and upper lip so that her profile is in the posture of a monkey. The print is made into a postcard and sent through the mails to various friends. On the back my father has written "*What we think of married life.*" (161-162)

Paradoxically, the source of connection and affirmation the writer has searched for is a parody, a grotesque distortion of the traditional wedding photograph which itself becomes affirmative insofar as it demonstrates a shared humour, a togetherness in a "theatre of their own making" that perhaps reveals nearly as much as it distorts (*RF* 162).

Significantly, the grotesque equivalence of author and reader -- our own shared role in this theatre of making -- is signaled over the page, where the very photograph that has just been described is printed on the page, below the section title, "What We Think of Married Life." The position of the photograph is consistent with the strategy of displacement used throughout *Running in the Family*, in which large spaces separate

pictures from descriptions, and events from explanations. Here, the sudden appearance of the photograph that has just been described for us reflects and dramatizes our role as readers, and our connection to the writer; in a way our relationship to the photograph is similar to his. As Linda Hutcheon writes:

We too have been waiting [for this photograph], if not all our lives, at least for 135 pages of fragments, for this look at the couple. But Ondaatje is not finished playing with his readers' expectations. Only after describing the photo in detail does he actually reproduce it. By then, of course, it is redundant: words can be as real as photographic images. (85)

Hutcheon's response to the photo suggests its potency as touchstone of response. For Hutcheon, the writer's descriptive powers are a match for the actual image; the words are as "real" as the photo and, she would have us believe, there is no discrepancy between these two realities, between the photograph in description and the photograph in reproduction. Certainly, however, this reading doesn't suggest the full range of response potentially elicited by the picture. The point of the belated photograph is to emphasize the play of our expectations against the actual phenomenon -- play in which expectations are validated (as in Hutcheon's case) or undermined by the appearance of an image that opposes (even slightly) what we have imagined. The sudden appearance of the previously withheld image represents an experiment with the limitations and potentials of even the most detailed textual reportage -- an experiment that must, in any case, italicize the importance of the imaginative consciousness of the reader as a co-creator of textual meaning. In this way, the photo partakes in the potential of the grotesque to foreground the processes of response, its fundamentally imaginative, creative and ultimately *active* nature, as the reader vaults the grotesque gap that separates description and referent, arriving at an image of the "real thing" which is

itself a piece of "theatre." Here as before, the art of the grotesque defers any ultimate meaning -- whatever is happening behind or around the misshapen faces of the writer's parents -- and instead dramatizes the ways in which provisional kinds of meaning are constructed, both by writer and reader.

"What We Think of Married Life" attempts once again to close the distance between the writer and his parents, to chart the course of their life together and the eventual estrangement that drove the family apart. "Tea Country" analogizes this search with another trip, a physical movement back into world of symmetry and monsoons, the landscape "that surrounded [his] parents' marriage" (167). The next sub-chapter, which shares its title with the section as a whole, focuses on memories of family life the writer receives from his older siblings. He begins by considering the duality of his own genealogical inheritance: the mother from whom he received his "sense of the dramatic, the tall stories . . . [t]he ham in [him]; and the father from whom he inherited a "sense of secrecy, the desire to be reclusive" (168). As the writer recounts the different styles of behaviour that defined these traits in his progenitors, it becomes clear that the grotesque, shape-shifting genre of *Running in the Family* itself constitutes an attempt to mediate these contradictory impulses. Like the text, the theatrical women of the Gratiaen side of the family inflate their stories with hyperbole; they "would take the minutest reaction from another and blow it up into a tremendously exciting tale . . . . If anything kept their generation alive it was this recording by exaggeration" (169). The other moments of the book, the private moments of mystery and imaginative identification -- and the very gaps that fragment the tall tales throughout *Running in the Family* -- are related to the influence of the father, who "swallowed the heart of books and kept that knowledge and emotion to himself," and whose "actions were minimal and more private" (168-169).

The grotesque energy of *Running in the Family* attempts to mediate and embrace these two impulses in a paradoxical act of trying to achieve a static picture of a family that dissolved and flew apart, and simultaneously interrogating the nature of this objective. Ultimately, the formal/generic unification of narrative modes enacts its own contingency, revealing at last the dissolution of the family unit, divorce and emigration, and the eternal separateness of the writer's father (172). This narrative impasse leads into "Dialogues," where narrative itself gives way to quotation and anecdote: a series of eleven anonymous reactions by different people who knew Mervyn Ondaatje. Significantly, the last of these is obviously spoken by a common friend of Mervyn and Doris and relates an instance of near reconciliation after the divorce -- a possibility of the kind of connection for which the text itself searches. The passage, which trails off into a final silence, once again underscores the unrequited nature of the writer's longing: "It was so close . . . ." (*RF* 178).

The two, short sections that conclude "What We Think of Married Life" are especially interesting insofar as they also demonstrate formal/textual analogues for the familial traits the writer has defined. Earlier in the text, he writes of his parents' love of books, and of the very different ways in which their respective love of literature manifests itself. For his father, as we saw above, the experience of literature is a private act; for his mother, the natural dramatist, literature is quite different, a far more public business. Indeed, drama is a part of everyday life -- a tool that can be used to construct order out of experience -- especially when experience becomes too chaotic to bear. In her motive to cure Mervyn of his alcoholism, she uses literature against him: ". . . in his moments of darkness she drew on every play she had been in or had read and used it as a weapon, knowing that when my father sobered up this essentially shy man would be appalled to hear how my mother had overreacted" (171). In "Blind Faith," the writer seems to take up his mother's strategy in the hope that it will help

him achieve his own, writerly objective: to "eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with 'the mercy of distance' write the histories" (179). The section as a whole is densely intertextual, drawing on Shakespeare's *Lear* to reimagine and represent his relationship with his father -- and relationships between generations in general -- in a textual setting that equates the familial with the fictional:

Fortinbras. Edgar. Christopher, my sisters, Wendy, myself. I think all our lives were terribly shaped by what went on before us. And why of Shakespeare's cast of characters do I remain most curious about Edgar? Who if I look deeper into the metaphor, torments his father over an imaginary cliff. . . . I long for the moment in the play where Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester and it never happens. Look I am the son who has grown up. I am the son you have made hazardous, who still loves you. . . . Let go my hand. Give me your arm. Give the word. "Sweet Marjoram" ... a tender herb. (179-180)

The desire for connection the writer feels is represented only allusively; the "word" he ultimately receives from the "father" he calls to is borrowed from another piece of theatre. Once again, the writer's desire is unrequited, unfulfilled; both father-son reunions, textual and extratextual, are unrealized: "it never happens." Interestingly, this sub-chapter shows a degree of awareness of the provisional nature of the textual -- indeed, of language itself -- at the same time as it calls on "Jacobean tragedies" to help "eliminate the chaos." At one moment, the writer considers the kinds of words that explain behaviour in these intertexts (and the "word" he asks his father for?), and avows his own difficulty is ascribing value to these expressions:

Words such as *love*, *passion*, *duty*, are so continually used they grow to have no meaning -- except as coins or weapons. Hard language softens. I never knew what my father felt of these "things." My loss is

that I never spoke to him as an adult. Was he locked in the ceremony of being "a father"? He died before I even thought of such things. (179-180)

Like the plays he and his mother call on to bring Mervyn to order, words themselves are revealed as abstractions; language itself becomes a kind of all-encompassing intertext the writer can not entirely trust. This accords with the view of language occasionally taken in the poetry of *The Dainty Monsters*, and with the art of the grotesque generally, which reveals the tendency of language itself to stand "on the side of order, of a limited experience" (Lynton 40). "Grotesque," once again, "is a word for this paralysis of language" (Harpham 6). In this passage, which considers words as coins and weapons, the use of quotation marks emphasizes the linguistic aspect of the writer's subject, the "things" his father had unknown feelings about, the role of "a father" itself as a restricting tissue of labels and "ceremony."

If "Blind Faith" partakes in the ordering strategies represented by his mother, "The Bone" indicates a different kind of writing altogether: a means of apprehending the text's lost subject that has more to do with his father's secrecy, a mode of reading (and writing) that is more private and emotional. Here, Ondaatje relates "one of the versions of [his father's] train escapade" that the writer "cannot come to terms with," in which, after escaping the train, Mervyn is found in the jungle, "huge and naked," holding in one outstretched fist five black dogs, suspended on ropes (181). The story, and the image, is chaotic, it escapes intelligibility and defies exegesis. If this is a metaphor, like the role of Edgar and Gloucester in the preceding section, it is certainly much more difficult to "look deeper into." Indeed, the entire passage is based on indeterminacy, and underscores once again the fictionalized and grotesquely poly-generic nature of *Running in the Family* as a whole. The title of the section makes no sense at all unless the reader connects this sub-chapter to the first section of the book,

"Asia," and the "bright bone of a dream" that sets him running: the proleptic image of his father "chaotic, surrounded by dogs" (21). It becomes clear then that this strange image has a sort of originary or seminal role for the book as a whole, but this conclusion is not without its difficulties. If the imagery of Ondaatje's original dream is derived from a story obtained during his time in Ceylon -- which "The Bone" would seem to suggest -- the status of the first section becomes indeterminate as well; the narrative chronology of the book as a whole is undermined, and the autobiographical mode of its first pages is finally exposed as artifice, as fiction.

"'Thanikama'," the first section of the final part of *Running in the Family*, is a forthrightly fictional representation of the writer's father, in which the freedom of fiction itself opens the only door that will allow Ondaatje the intimacy he desires. Like the representations of the devil dances and the death of Lalla, "'Thanikama'" is wholly invented, allowing the imaginative writer to close the distance between father and son at the level of the text, where the functions of author, subject and reader once again meet and merge. Appropriately, this representation of his father begins by emphasizing the longing for connection shared by son and father. The section opens with an omniscient, third-person account of an attempt to reconcile with Doris, in which Mervyn is significantly interested in intimacy. Like his son he wishes "to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness . . . like that deserving lover" (RF 54). As before, the meeting doesn't come off; the connection desired is once again unrequited, disallowed in part by the enduring presence of the indirection and artifice of drama: "He sat there all afternoon, hoping she would notice him and come down and speak to him properly, truthfully. He wanted his wife to stop this *posing* at her work. Had to speak with her" (185). Doris never comes, and Mervyn retreats from the hotel in his white Ford, moving toward the solitary space where, until now, the writer has been unable to follow.

Ondaatje's ability to follow his father at this point suggests the potency of the identification the writer has achieved -- even if that connection remains imaginary and provisional. Not only do the two figures now share a communal desire for connection, their roles throughout this section seem to overlap in other ways as well. Significantly, the third-person voice with which the writer begins "'Thanikama'" grows increasingly inconsistent as the passage continues, shifting into a first-person narration in the most intimate moments of this consideration of his father's private space, sitting drunk and alone on his bed at Rock Hill (*RF* 188). This connection is dramatized at other levels of the narrative, especially in the play of intertexts at work here. As Mervyn drives his Ford toward Kegalle, he picks up a hitch-hiking cinnamon peeler in a scene that, as Hutcheon notes, "had inspired (or been inspired by) a poem that the son had written and that we had read over ninety pages earlier" (92). At this point, *Running in the Family* becomes its own intertext as the imagined father participates in the writing of the son and the reader partakes in an act of textual connection between the present scene and the earlier poem. This substitution of original intertexts for literary allusions occurs again as Mervyn returns home and searches for the book he has been reading:

Where was his book. He had lost it. What was the book. It was not Shakespeare, not those plays of love he wept over too easily. With dark blue bindings. You creaked them open and stepped into a roomful of sorrow. A mid-summer dream. . . . No, he looked around the bare room, don't talk to me about Shakespeare . . . (188-189)

Echoing Wikkramasinha, the collective Ondaatje that defines this passage rejects foreign intertexts, the plays and dramas that have already been used to control the shifting subject of this grotesque narrative. What replaces such texts, we discover as Mervyn finally finds his novel in the bathroom, is *Running in the Family* itself. After considering the eternal encroachment of nature on the human world ("Tea bush became



jungle, branches put their arms into windows" [189]), an echo of his son's epigraphic "dream," Mervyn finally finds his book on the floor of the bathroom, itself now prey to this onslaught:

In the bathroom ants had attacked the novel thrown on the floor by the commode. A whole battalion was carrying one page away from its source, carrying the intimate print as if rolling a tablet away from him. He knelt down on the red tile, slowly, not wishing to disturb their work. It was page 189. He had not got that far in the book yet but he surrendered it to them. (189)

It is with a degree of shock that we realize that the father's act of reading is commensurate with our own; the imagined story and the material text combine at the locus of page 189, the page the ants carry away, the page of *Running in the Family* we are reading.<sup>2</sup> That Mervyn's significantly unfinished and now physically fragmented book is "a novel" calls our attention to the generic status of the book we are reading, the fiction it has become, and perhaps the fiction it has been all along. The associative gesture itself is a complicated one. On one level it announces a grotesque shift in referentiality, conflating writer, reader, text and referent on a plane that equalizes all participants in the processes of narrative. Nevertheless, the profound connection between father and son that is a part of this grotesque fusion is rendered partial by the assault of the ants, which insures that the father's reading of the son (like the son's reading of the father) will remain partial and incomplete. Ultimately, the imaginative grotesque energy that allows this invasion of the father's private space also occasions a self-consciousness about process and fictionalization that disallows the complete authorization of the son's narration. In this grotesque scene, "invented identification

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<sup>2</sup> Inexplicably, the NCL paperback edition of *Running in the Family* has completely obscured this relationship. The pagination of this edition is different from the hardcover (the scene being discussed appears on page 161), but unfortunately, the page number in the "fictional" text on the bathroom floor still reads "189."

and displacement occur simultaneously" (Barbour 158). Watching the ants, the Ondaatje figure in the text self-consciously avoids the mirror, evading a scene of recognition and identification that would undoubtedly have recalled the relationship of author and character in *Coming Through Slaughter*. Instead, the father sits alone and thinks of "Duty" -- one of the words his son expressed doubt about several pages earlier -- and witnesses the intrusion of a "midnight rat," whose significance here is both suggestive and indefinite.

The sudden appearance of the rat (one of Ondaatje's favourite animals) may be related to the representation of the act of writing itself in "Monsoon Notebook (iii)," where, "[a]t midnight [the writer's] hand is the only thing moving. . . . Watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble casually on perception, the shape of an unknown thing" (190). The focus on the writing hand underscores the physicality of the act of inscription -- the sensory immediacy of the kinds of truth the writer seeks to find and relate. This capacity is realized immediately after this passage, when the writing hand becomes associated with the brutality of "the fist of a downpour," which leaves the landscape rich with "the tactile smell of wetness" (191). On the whole, "Monsoon Notebook (iii)" -- its juxtaposition with the preceding sub-chapter -- obliges the reader to connect the communal midnight solitude which paradoxically unites and dissociates father and son; it is only here that we learn that "Thanikama" means "Aloneness" (190).

In "Final Days / Father Tongue" the writer returns once again to the direct relation of shared anecdote, the stories of Mervyn's "final days" he receives from those whose experience is greater than his own. Unlike "Dialogues," these stories identify their tellers, emphasizing the different kinds of relationships each speaker had with Ondaatje's father, and thereby investing their words with a kind of documentary authority. V. C. de Silva remembers Mervyn's incredible proficiency selling chickens;

Archer Jayawardene recalls the "tragi-comedy sort of business" of his funeral (*RF* 195-197). In the memories of both men, Mervyn is an anomaly, a strange combination of organization and wildness; despite his well-known excesses, he was also the founder of the Cactus and Succulent Society, an establishment he "loved organizing" (196).

This grotesque fusion of order and chaos -- which has defined the central struggle at work throughout Ondaatje's career -- finds its ultimate embodiment in his own father, a "written" figure whose contradictions define the course of his own inscription, guiding the writing hand of his son. As Kamboureli notes, the consistent thread that ties the fragments of *Running in the Family* is "the writer's desire to assign a paternity to his act of writing" ("Slippages" 88). Here as before, the desire to connect to the past is reflected by the text itself, which analogizes the author's search for "paternity:" the "father tongue" Ondaatje's half-sister describes:

There was this song he used to sing when he was drunk, over and over. He had made it up and he sang it only when he was really drunk. Partly English and partly Sinhalese, a bit like a baila as it used brand names and street names and gibberish. It made no sense to anyone but it wasn't gibberish to him because he always sang exactly the same words each time. (194-195)

The correspondence between this strange song -- its confusion of genre -- and *Running in the Family* is unavoidable. Indeed, the song's capacity to stave off its intelligibility underscores the impossibility of the writer's realization of traditional autobiographical closure at the same time as it reflects commonality with the son's writing. The strange indecipherable locutions of the "father tongue" evade authorization and, on one level, the son's text only "re-sounds the absent meaning of the father's song" (Kamboureli, "Slippages" 88).

After a hiatus, the author addresses the reader directly, offering his own description of his father's final days, the retrospective guilt borne of his own ignorance

of these dark final years. To a large extent, this is an ignorance the writer must now live with; the father cannot be captured by the text. As Ondaatje finally admits, "[t]here is so much to know and we can only guess. Guess around him. To know him from these stray actions I am told about by those who loved him. And yet, he is still one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut" (200).

As the passage continues, the author relates his brother's injunction to get the book "right:"

"You must get this book right," my brother tells me, "You can only write it once." But the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we ever thought we would be able to fully understand you. Love is often enough, towards your stadium of small things. Whatever brought you solace we would have applauded. Whatever controlled the fear we all share we would have embraced. That could only be dealt with one day at a time -- with that song we cannot translate, or the dusty green of the cactus you touch and turn carefully like a wounded child towards the sun, or the cigarettes you light. (201)

As the paragraph progresses it becomes clear that we are no longer the sole audience the writer addresses; the intended subject of this deeply personal monologue has shifted to the figure of the writer's father, who is now addressed, at last, "with utter directness." Ondaatje's response to his brother's exhortation is indeterminate, for it is impossible to ascertain the relationship between the grotesque incompleteness of *Running in the Family* and whatever is meant by getting the book "right." In this text, incompleteness itself "is organic to [Ondaatje's] subject matter" (Kamboureli, "Slippages" 90). What is more, the writer's admission that the book "again is incomplete" problematizes his brother's statement that Ondaatje can "only write it

once," potentially linking *Running in the Family* to the corpus of Ondaatje's earlier work, and the grotesque story of connection and separation, revelation and confusion -- of order and disorder -- that he has been telling us all along. (Recall, for instance, the characteristic ambivalence of Bolden's "right ending.") Here, the imaginative potency of this moving passage allows the writer to address his father in a text that avows its inability to "fully understand," and instead relies upon and expresses the love that is "often enough." The power of this love -- this desire for some kind of connection -- guides the last lines of the passage as they shift into the immediacy of the present tense, catching the father in a tender act of paternal nurturance, carefully turning his "wounded child towards the sun . . .".

Clearly, this profound moment of identification and imaginative reclamation occasions a release for both author and reader; as a moving statement of longing, it frees us from the necessity of completing and closing everything, of "fully understanding" in the way traditional auto/biography would require. And so the book ends in the peaceful moments of Ondaatje's "Last Morning," a lyrical description of the early moments of his last day in Ceylon, in the profoundly transitional minutes before dawn. Here, in what Barbour calls "a moment of infinite possibility, before the writing and shaping begin (and end)," the past and present coexist and intermingle in a profoundly ambivalent passage that nevertheless (or perhaps consequently) seems an oddly satisfying conclusion for the book as a whole. Indeed, the setting of the scene recalls the epigraph that begins the book, framing the text in a way that foregrounds the confusion of past and present and the equivalence of writing and reading. Ondaatje once again foregrounds his sensory awareness of place, the fact that his "body must remember everything" (202). The writer's body, which contains and mediates the genetic identities of his parents, is at the centre of his consciousness throughout this section as he sits with the emptiness of his dark room, allowing his imagination's

memory to recall "morning scenery" he never knew. At last, the final paragraph is freely ambiguous and indeterminate, depicting a zone that embraces the contradictions of nature and culture, poison and music -- a union also of the foreign and the local in the sound of "all this Beethoven and rain" (203).

The endurance of contradiction at the end of *Running in the Family* once again signals the complexity of the text as a whole, the contradictions that underlie Ondaatje's simultaneous desire to interrogate the limitations of his medium (and of perception itself) at the same time as he apprehends his subject, and the shared strategies by which meaning is engendered in the equivalent acts of creation and reception. Despite Kamboureli's valuable observation of the relationship between this grotesque meta-(auto)biography and Mervyn Ondaatje's drunken song, *Running in the Family* does much more than simply reinscribe the absence of meaning. True to the grotesque, it simultaneously gestures at a plurality of meaning, opening a field of significance in which we are never able to ignore our own author-function -- our own necessary participation in a text that celebrates the energy of the imagination at the same time as it emphasizes the distortion implicit in all acts of interpretation, revealing all "truths" as partial. The incompleteness of the text itself analogizes not only the limitations of textual history, but of personal history and memory as well -- the "interpretation" of the anarchy of experience into the structures of all our lives' stories. The enactment of the grotesque is never simply a tearing down of these structures, however; it celebrates the energy of the imagination at the same time as it encourages a self-consciousness about the processes by which meaning is engendered, about the fragility of the kinds of order we often impose. Like all of Ondaatje's earlier long works, *Running in the Family* advances a particular invitation to its reader: like the early visitors to Ceylon, we must enter this lush text-scape, engage its confusion and extravagance, and perhaps

see ourselves reflected in the process of our response a text that refuses to stand still.

Here, as before, we partake in the role of subject, as well as author. By "keeping up" with *Running in the Family*

we can arrive at a better understanding of the methods of representation, of the relation between play and creation, and of the force of habit and convention in understanding. Looking at ourselves looking at the grotesque, we can observe our own projections, catching ourselves as it were, in the act of perception. (Harpham 43)

And if we are willing to do so, there is little doubt that, like Ondaatje, we too will get this book right.

**Chapter Five:  
Realigning Chaos: Moving to the Clear in the Recent Novels**

"Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects." (*In the Skin of a Lion* 135)

Five years after the publication of *Running in the Family*, *In the Skin of a Lion* appeared, bearing Ondaatje's first generic subtitle since *Collected Works*: "A Novel." Another half decade would see the publication of *The English Patient*, which (bearing the same subtitle) would be the first Canadian novel to win Britain's Booker Prize, catapulting Michael Ondaatje into the international literary limelight. The subtitles themselves are significant insofar as they suggest the capacity of these recent novels to declare their genre -- and to be easily recognized as novels by readers. Unlike "left-handed poems," "novel" is a familiar label, denoting the predominant literary modality of our time. As I have suggested, the existence and process of the grotesque throughout Ondaatje's earlier works has been intimately related to their generic indeterminacy, their potent resistance to typological labels and conventional readerly strategies. In all of *Collected Works*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, and *Running in the Family*, the grotesque interplay between author, reader and text has been at least partially a result of the absence of a readily identifiable genre, a kind of typological authority that could stabilize the confused generic chorus each work represents. As such, the ostensible generic stability of these two novels -- perhaps suggesting a literary career that is "moving to the clear" in a field of competing genres -- engenders a paradoxical difficulty for readers who are familiar with Ondaatje's work, who must attempt to accord the generic clarity of *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* with the poly-generic convolutions of earlier writing, and to "read" this transition in the



light of the conflict between order and chaos that has defined the grotesque in Ondaatje's writing to this point.

Ondaatje's move to the novel is complex and suggestive. The recent novels are both less difficult for readers (who are not required to participate in the construction of a meaningful narrative experience to nearly the same extent as in, say, *Collected Works*) and more complicated as well. The very form of the novel as we know it allows the inclusion of multiple voices, various perspectives and socio-political contemplation. Among other things, it also permits a more comprehensive vision of the interrelationship of individual and community, of the stories that define the duality of isolation and intimacy on the periphery of the personal and the public, the private and the communal. (It is not surprising, after all, that such concerns did come to the fore after *Running in the Family*.) Writing of *In the Skin of a Lion*, Douglas Barbour notes the extent to which the novel "does not so much plot a single trajectory of narrative as offer moments of illumination and action in a number of lives, creating a larger, more complex collage than any of Ondaatje's previous books" (179). Because this kind of freedom from narratological teleology is an inherent potentiality of the genre (and because this is a freedom all Ondaatje's works have insisted upon), it is tempting to postulate a scheme of generic evolution wherein the novel itself is the apogee toward which Ondaatje has been moving all along. For Barbour, Ondaatje's insistence upon multiple voices and viewpoints in all of his longer works suggests that the writer has always been "on the path toward what Mikhail Bakhtin would call the 'novelization' of his poetry . . . eventually into forms of the novel itself" (7). Such a scheme risks overlooking much of the ambiguity of the earlier works and oversimplifying Bakhtin's concept of the novel, but it does suggest the degree to which the "forms of the novel" represented by Ondaatje's recent works formally and thematically accord with their antecedents. By briefly examining the novel itself, and

illuminating some of the properties of a genre with which twentieth-century readers may feel all too familiar, we may uncover several sources of energy in Ondaatje's recent novels, as well as their continuing engagement of the grotesque.

Barbour's reference to Bakhtin, and to the idea of "novelization," reveals some of the difficulties that attend the word "novel" as a generic category, and underscores the problem of applying Bakhtin's conception of the novel to individual works. For Bakhtin, "novel" is not so much a stable generic entity as an ongoing process of generic dissolution. The novel is a kind of anti-genre that is capable of expressing the unfinished and indeterminate nature of experience because of its capacity to embrace and parody other genres, never allowing any one facet of its own hybridized structure to predominate. This vision of the novel seldom comes into play in common parlance, where "novel" denotes only that the literary artifact in question possesses certain, rather superficial, formal traits: novels are, quite simply, long prose narratives often subdivided into chapters. If all this seems elementary, I can only reassert the tenuousness of the connection between these two formulations of "novel," and point out the potential risks in reading Ondaatje's career as a process wherein his works are progressively "novelized" into novels. The two different kinds of novel that inhere in this view (the one, an easily recognizable literary structure, the other, an anarchic tendency to antagonize static structures), though they are not exactly incompatible, are certainly not as analogous as this "evolutionary" reading of Ondaatje's oeuvre suggests. There is no reason, from a Bakhtinian perspective, to exclude *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* from the generic category of novel. In fact, the drama of its relentless polygenrism arguably renders this early work *more* "novelistic" than either *In the Skin of a Lion* or *The English Patient*, which are (paradoxically) *less* novelistic by virtue of their consistent participation in what is commonly understood to be the discursive mode of the novel. Such is the contingency of generic labelling -- as all of Ondaatje's works

have revealed.<sup>1</sup> While this difficulty can not be easily resolved (especially in the context of a literary career that is still very much in progress), it is surely a testament to the power of Ondaatje's oeuvre *in toto* that the publication of these books can occasion these kinds of questions about the interplay of representation, reception and reality.

Not surprisingly, these two novels do reflect the power of Ondaatje's earlier work to raise consciousness about the processes of artistic and historical representation, reception and understanding, simultaneously according with formalistic definitions of the novel and with Bakhtin's concept of the novel as "the genre of becoming" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 22). In "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel" -- the first of four essays in *The Dialogic Imagination* -- Bakhtin delineates a sense of the novel that is conspicuously similar to his conception of the grotesque in *Rabelais and His World*. The novel is inherently related to the grotesque in its ability to fuse and equalize disparate generic possibilities, representing all that is incomplete and ephemeral in reality. For Bakhtin, the novel remains true to the grotesque; it is never fixed or stable, but always in a process of development and self-interrogation, because "[o]nly that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process" (*DI* 7). Central to the ability of the novel to embrace other genres is its capacity for parody and generic reconstitution: "[t]he novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them" (*DI* 5). None of these parodied stylizations are permitted to gain significant authority over its peers; the novel infects each of them equally with "its spirit of process and inconclusiveness" (*DI* 7).

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<sup>1</sup> In a recent interview, Ondaatje has more directly expressed his own enduring difficulties with such labels, rather humourously citing *Coming Through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, and *The English Patient* as works that he has each considered his "first novel" (Turcotte 50).

For Bakhtin, this is the ultimate effect of the novelization of authoritative, static genres; it is the sum of parodic and recombinant processes by which "the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)" (*DI* 7). As such, the novel "is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality" (*DI* 39). The correlation of this vision of the novel as generic anti-genre and the conception of the grotesque held by Bakhtin and other critics is fairly obvious. Both are grounded in process and indeterminacy, both are resistant to monologic interpretation and share in the capacity to "[impale] us on the present moment" (Harpham 16). Because both the novel and the grotesque involve typological hybridity, the novel too occupies what Harpham terms a liminal space, in which "opposing processes and assumptions coexist in a single representation" (14). For these reasons, the novel is an excellent structure for expressing the contingency of perception and art, offering its reader "the middle of a narrative of emergent comprehension" (Harpham 15).

As I have suggested, these grotesque "novelistic" traits do not in themselves set *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* apart from earlier works. What does differentiate the two novels is the extent to which their author's concerns seem to have been refocused since *Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, and the ways in which Ondaatje takes advantage of the novel's scope as a literary structure. Here, characters achieve a new complexity as the author's third-person omniscience allows us inside their minds in a way that is new to Ondaatje's writing. Unlike Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, these characters are not so much sought after by the author as they are themselves searchers, attempting to vault the gaps that separate self from other, to

understand the shadows that lie in their relationships with the people around them and the tenuous links that define their role in a community. Community in this context can consist of the working-class immigrant population of Toronto, a group of four in a mined Italian villa at the end of World War II, or the microcosm of community itself in the intimacy of lovers. After *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje's representation of interpersonal relationships changes dramatically. Whereas, in *Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, relationships drive Billy and Buddy away from community into increasingly solitary and inaccessible places, a sense of connection with others emerges as something sustaining and positive. For the two earlier protagonists, the hazardous world of human relationships comes to represent the facets of experience they each fear most; Billy runs to solitary spaces because of the chaos occasioned by intimate contact, and Buddy does the same because of his various audiences' requirement for stasis and order. Many of the characters in *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* embody these impulses, but generally move back toward the hazardous world of relationships, toward the risks and contrary codependents of order and chaos that qualify the interplay of identities, and away from the perfect edge occupied by Ondaatje's white dwarfs. At the same time, Ondaatje's concern with different kinds of community-consciousness gives way to larger socio-political reflection, what some critics have seen as an emergent postcolonialism in his work after *Coming Through Slaughter*. All the while, the author himself comes to occupy a space quite different from his position in the earlier works, where he occasionally participates -- almost as a character -- in the unfolding of his own writerly dramas. In these novels, uniquely comfortable in the role of third-person omniscient narrator, his presence is signified in the act of writing that engenders and energizes these fictional worlds. In this way, both novels offer their readers "the solace of representation but [refuse] to deny the power of artifice; the authority to make such a complicated bargain with his readers stick has always been one of Ondaatje's most precious gifts as a writer"

(Barbour 206). Like the fictional Caravaggio, painter and thief, Ondaatje knows the value of demarcation, obscured behind the text just as Caravaggio escapes from jail by effacing himself against the sky with blue paint. As with the painted painter, the writing writer's presence can be discerned in the deformations of his medium, the grotesque moments where realist narrative avows its textuality, underscoring its own nature as writing and as art.

These qualities are reflected throughout the early sections of *In the Skin of a Lion*, which introduce Patrick Lewis, the boy who will eventually become a figure that cuts across the various narrative "trajectories" this novel details. As in *Running in the Family*, the text proper is prefaced by three epigraphs, two of which are imported intertexts, the other, a kind of fictional frame narrative for the novel as a whole. Immediately after the acknowledgements (which contain a familiar warning that "certain liberties" have been taken with "some dates and locales") the first intertext, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, provides the novel with its title: "The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion." Spoken by Gilgamesh, the ancient Sumerian king, these lines describe his grief at the death of his friend, the wild Enkidu. The suffering itself occasions a process of grotesque metamorphosis, a transposition of king and animalistic wild man -- a transformation echoed by William Blake's *Nebuchadnezzar*, in the powerful image of a Babylonian king reduced to the status of an ox. This transmogrification implies much about the narrative(s) to follow, suggesting grief as a motive for the political agenda Patrick adopts after the death of Alice Gull, as well as the more general idea of shift and flux, movement from centre to margin, from high to low.

This grotesque transition is crucial to the novel's treatment of history, its ability to counter official history with the marginalized stories and voices that exist in the

shadow of official truth. For theorists like Bakhtin, such transformation is crucial to the enactment of the grotesque: "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (*Rabelais* 19-20). Ultimately, this kind of ambivalent degradation is linked to carnival, the festive and unofficial energy that is eternally at odds with official truth and with the aesthetics of completion. For Bakhtin, whose study of medieval literature gave birth to the modern conception of the carnivalesque, this degradation focuses on the multiplicity of voices outside of the authoritative centre, celebrating "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (*Rabelais* 10). Interestingly, Geoffrey Harpham accords similar value to the transformative capacities of the grotesque itself:

All systems of decorum, whether political, cultural, or artistic, are designed to keep the low and the marginal in their places. But they are afflicted with built-in obsolescence. . . . As the condition is perceived, meaning, which must go somewhere, migrates to the low or marginal. Revolutions seek to reverse the meaningful/meaningless opposition, moving the bottom to the top in the name of greater fidelity to "reality." Grotesque is a word for that dynamic state of low-ascending and high-descending. (74)

*In the Skin of a Lion* realizes this potential of the transformative grotesque throughout. The worlds of centre and margin collide and overlap throughout the novel, as in the memorable scenes of the covert masque held within the Commissioner Harris's unfinished waterworks, and the night parade of the immigrant workers across the newly finished Bloor Street Viaduct. Both events are unrecorded by history,

unperceived by the eye of officialdom. This novel is carnivalized writing; the multiplicity of voices and viewpoints from the margin problematizes the increasingly unstable centre of truth, the authority of historical inscription. As if to emphasize the point, Ondaatje's second epigraph quotes John Berger: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one." This statement heralds the narratological complexity of the text to follow, in which characters and their disparate stories are developed in the absence of a "main" plot line. The links that bind this complex collage are revealed in their own time, as the various characters pass through each other's stories in ways that show Ondaatje's awareness of all that is ephemeral and permanent in human relationships. Even for Patrick, who is as close as we come to a central protagonist, the various narratives that impinge upon his own story are always only partially revealed.

Together, the two epigraphs also underscore the literariness of *In the Skin of a Lion* as an artifact. Like the broad variety of intertextual references in *Running in the Family*, they remind us of the fictional status of what we are reading, a purpose aided by their relative positions in the chronology of the Western canon. Existing at the farthest removes of literary history, they are chronological parentheses that embrace Western literature in its entirety, a kind of collective cultural intertext that has as much to do with *In the Skin of a Lion* as any other kind of historical document. Other intertextual references, scattered throughout the text, narrow the field somewhat, declaring *In the Skin of a Lion* as a piece of specifically Canadian literature, avowing both fictionality and nationality with a series of Canadian intertexts and metafictional cameos by figures like Al Purdy, Anne Wilkinson, and George Grant.

Immediately after the table of contents that follows Berger's epigraph, and before the opening of the novel's first section, there is a third epigraph, italicized, and a part of the fiction itself -- its first sentence suggesting an introduction for the novel to follow:



*This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through darkness. . . .*

*She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms. And he is tired, sometimes as elliptical as his concentration on the road, at times overexcited -- "Do you see?" He turns to her in the faint light of the speedometer. (ISL 1)*

The verbs used to designate this act of storytelling foreground the fictional teller's participation in the complexity suggested by Berger's epigraph. The girl listens and questions in an act of gathering -- an act represented also by the man's picking up and bringing together of "various corners." Necessarily, the story told -- an approximation by one character of the stories we are about to read -- is qualified by gaps; it is as elliptical as the exhausted driver's concentration on controlling his car as it "travels through darkness." The equivalence of operating a motor vehicle with telling a story, or with making art is, of course, related to the thematic function of movement in earlier works like *Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. More specifically, driving a car has been used as a paradigm for artistic control in *Coming Through Slaughter* and in "Application for a Driver's License." Here, the anonymous storyteller's provisional control over the disparate narrative strands he is trying to weave into a comprehensible whole imbues the drive itself with a sense of risk, a symbolic raising of the stakes that makes the loss of control seem all the more undesirable. Interestingly, this risk is diminished, not by the presence of a stable inclusive narrative, but by the companionship of driver and passenger, the presence of the girl who "*stays awake to keep him company*" (1).

The importance of this relationship is underscored by the novel's conclusion, an ending that demonstrates the differences between this book and earlier works like

*Collected Works* and *Slaughter* in its capacity to function as an image of community and cooperation. Here, the function of the italicized epigraph as a narrative frame is revealed at the same time as that frame is broken, contradicted in one of the grotesque deformations that signals the writer's presence, the textuality of the text. At this point, at the end of the various narratives the novel presents, we know the people in the car to be Patrick and his adopted daughter Hana, getting ready to drive to Marmora to retrieve Clara after the death of Ambrose Small. As Patrick prepares to climb into the driver's seat, he stops, enacting a contradiction of the italicized epigraph, switching position with Hana:

-Do you want to drive? he asked.

-Me? I don't know the gears.

-Go ahead. I'll talk the gears to you till we are out of town.

-I'll try it for a bit.

Hana sat upright, adapting the rear-view mirror to her height. He climbed in, pretending to luxuriate in the passenger seat, making animal-like noises of satisfaction.

-Lights, he said. (244)

At the end of a novel in which roles of protagonist and narrator shift like the gears Patrick teaches Hana, storyteller and story-receiver change places; the frame is broken as the symbolic, controlling act of driving is transferred to the listener. This transposition does more than simply underscore the written nature of the text, its narratological multiplicity, it also dramatizes the most important ramification of this textuality: the importance of the reader as another necessary partner, another active participant in the creation of meaning, the act of ordering and associating the novel's discontinuous stories. Like Hana, we are placed in the driver's seat at a complicated point in the text that equalizes writing and reading, endings and beginnings --

forestalling traditional narrative closure with Patrick's call for "Lights." The imperative reminds us of film directors, of the "Action" we've already witnessed, but perhaps the more potent symbol is the more literal one, the headlights that dispel part of the darkness our vehicle travels through. As such, headlights are qualified by the same "ellipsis" as Patrick's narrative; capable of illuminating only a fraction of the darkness, they nevertheless allow long and necessary journeys.

In the section titled "Little Seeds," this journey begins with Patrick's own story as a young boy living with his father in rural Ontario, a setting that defines his ambivalent role as insider and outsider throughout the novel. Throughout this section, Patrick's essential duality -- his simultaneous attraction to solitude and to community -- emerges as a function of the formative years he spends with his father, of the "little seeds" that are planted in his character. (Like the "little seeds of explosive" [19] that get caught in his father's clothing, the usual quiescence of the character he grows into can be set off violently, just as Alice's death much later in the novel transforms him into a kind of political activist and saboteur.) A born Canadian, Patrick is nevertheless used to life on the margin, which perhaps facilitates his later entry into Toronto's immigrant community and echoes Margaret Atwood's memorable statement that "We [Canadians] are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here . . ." (*Journals* 62). Significantly, the region of Patrick's birth "did not appear on a map until 1910," appearing in his school atlas only as a zone that is "pale green and nameless" (*ISL* 10-11).

In this context, Patrick's participation in community is minimal, consisting almost entirely (in the unexplained absence of any maternal figure) of his relationship with his father, Hazen Lewis. Significantly (especially after *Running in the Family*), the father-son connection here is warm and sustaining. The two work together at one point to rescue a neighbour's cow that has fallen through the icy surface of a river,

warming each other later with body heat under a blanket (*ISL* 11-14). Later still, when Hazen becomes a logging dynamiter, Patrick travels with him, gaining the skill he will eventually use to destroy the Muskoka Hotel and to threaten Rowland Harris's waterworks. In spite of his formative influence on Patrick, Hazen "did not teach his son anything" directly: "It was strange for Patrick to realize later that he had learned important things, the way children learn from watching how adults angle a hat or approach a strange dog. . . . But he absorbed everything from a distance" (*ISL* 19). In this way, Patrick's relationship with his father teaches him isolation as well as community, providing a model of uninvolved aloofness that resurfaces in Patrick's character later in the novel. Hazen "was an abashed man, withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus" (*ISL* 15).

As a boy, Patrick resists this influence, this kind of neutrality, fascinated by the possibilities of community and connectedness with the world outside his house, and the relational minimalism of his family life. Significantly, the novel begins with an image of community and connection that echoes the act of the young girl in the epigraph, who stays alert to keep the driver company. In the darkness of early morning, Patrick watches a group of loggers moving past his house down First Lake Road. At this point, Patrick has no idea where these loggers come from: "It takes someone else, much later, to tell the boy that" (*ISL* 8). What matters is the vision of community (community on the margin) that they come to represent. Patrick watches as, on some mornings, the loggers pass the cows that are returning from pasture, catching some of the warmth from the animals in a way that is echoed by the later scene in which Hazen and Patrick rescue the cow from the frozen river:

Sometimes the men put their hands on the warm flanks of the animals and receive their heat as they pass. They put their thin-gloved hands on these black and white creatures, who are barely discernible in the last of

the night's darkness. They must do this gently, without any sense of attack or right. They do not own this land as the owner of the cows does.

The holsteins pass the silent gauntlet of men. The farmer who follows the cows nods. He passes the strange community most mornings during the winter months, the companionship a silent comfort to him in the dark of five A.M. . . . (7-8)

The incident, I would argue, is entirely characteristic of the emergent view of community in Ondaatje's recent novels. The "strange" companionship here is momentary, no less comforting for its ephemerality and for the distances that separate farmer and landowner from the immigrant loggers who are permitted to retain their "strangeness," their mystery. The act of stealing warmth from the passing cows suggests a grotesque deformation that signals another, wholly textual, level of intimacy between reader and text. "Gently," in a manner that suggests no violence or invasion, the loggers touch the holsteins' black and white hide as the cows -- still obscure in the weak light of early morning -- move past. One of the many moments that focus on the interplay of colour, light and darkness in this novel (recall the early morning darkness of the epigraph), the scene connects the cows' skin to the black and white of the text itself, the words on the page that we must touch to receive its "warmth." The chromatic symbolism here is connected to the aforementioned rescue of the holstein in the river -- a textual rescue that, like Nicholas Temelcoff's rescue of Alice Gull, involves both connection and severance: the rope used to pull the cow from the water, and Hazen's "outrageous, luxurious act" of slicing the rope with his knife (*JSL* 13-14).

After a hiatus, the novel shifts from winter mornings to summer nights, revealing how Patrick enacts his intense desire for connection with the outer world after his father is asleep. At the kitchen table, the boy pours over the atlas that leaves his

own world unnamed, "mouthing out the exotic" named places that exist beyond the boundaries of the atlas's pebbled cover, its dyed map of Canada: "*Caspian. Nepal. Durango*" (9). Afterwards, the boy seeks out the insects that have been attracted to the kitchen windows, drawn by the single light he has left in the hope of entertaining their "summer night's inquiry." As Patrick grants the insect visitors fictional names, the text itself flashes forward to provide a proleptic glance of Patrick, now searcher and researcher, in a Toronto library, learning the real names of the insects, when there "will suddenly be order and shape to these nights" (9). Wishing to realize a connection between human and insect, Patrick takes up his double ocarina in an attempt both to "haunt" these creatures and to discover their language, vaulting a boundary between species in a way that also suggests a flight from his solitude in the farmhouse, an grotesque entry into the community of insects:

He knows the robust calls from the small bodies of cicadas, but he wants conversation -- the language of damsel flies who need something to translate their breath the way he uses the ocarina to give himself a voice, something to leap with over the wall of this place.

Do they return nightly to show him something? Or does he haunt them? In the way he steps from the dark house and at the doorway of the glowing kitchen says to the empty fields, *I am here. Come and visit me.* (10)

The ocarina, translating human language into insect, needs a counterpart to allow Patrick to understand the damsel flies, to allow him to leap "over the wall." The image recalls Ceylon's thalagoya, whose tongue imparted eloquence to those who ate it, and which allowed the young Ondaatje and his friends to scale walls in *Running in the Family*. Here again, boundary-crossing is linked to orality, but here, in the context of this profoundly dialogic text, the emphasis is no longer on eloquence or story-telling,

but on "conversation," the discursive mode that analogizes this novel's polyphony, the grotesque textual diaspora it becomes. Interestingly enough, it is another reptile -- Clara's orphaned iguana -- that impels Patrick to become a part of the immigrant community of Toronto, when he has to learn Greek to explain what he needs to meet the animal's particular diet of clover and vetch (*ISL* 112-113).

The connection to community represented by each of these dainty monsters is foreshadowed at the very end of "Little Seeds," which is framed by another appearance of the mysterious loggers. Returning to a winter night in the farmhouse, we find Patrick surprised at the appearance of an unseasonal blue moth at one of the farmhouse windows. Leaving the house, Patrick follows the insect through the snow as one anachronism is followed by the appearance of another: "Lightning bugs within the trees by the river. But this was winter!" (20) As Patrick remembers the last of the summer's fireflies dying in the folds of his handkerchief months earlier, fictional anachronism gives way to textual anachronism, a grotesque moment of retrospection and proleptic premonition: "(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) There is no explanation for the reader, either, who understands the source of Patrick's future analeptic allusion, but has no narrative context in which to place this proleptic event, or even Clara's casually dropped name; this is just one of the many moments in this novel that dramatize the need for connection and the impossibility of connection, the contradictory functions of rope and knife. Returning to the un-parenthetical present, the will-o'-the-wisp that draws Patrick toward the river is revealed to be the loggers, engaging in a carnivalesque celebration of the night, fire and ice on the solid river:

The ice shone with light. It seemed for a moment that he had stumbled on a coven, or one of those strange druidic rituals --

illustrations of which he had poured over in his favourite history book.

But even to the boy of eleven, deep in the woods after midnight, this was obviously benign. Something joyous. A gift. There were about ten men skating, part of a game. One chased the others and as soon as someone was touched he became the chaser. Each man held in one hand a sheaf of cattails and the tops of these were on fire. This is what lit the ice and had blinked through the trees. (21)

On skates made of knives, the loggers enact a playful paradigm of Patrick's (and others') journey throughout the novel. Like the headlights of the moving Ford at the beginning and end of the text, the flaming cattails carried by the speeding skaters suggest a defense against the darkness that is as comforting as it is partial, the joyous gift Patrick sees at the heart of this nocturnal ritual:

It was not just the pleasure of skating. They could have done that during the day. This was against the night. The hard ice was so certain, they could leap into the air and crash down and it would hold them. Their lanterns replaced with new rushes which let them go further past boundaries, speed! romance! one man waltzing with his fire" (22).

On the whole, the group of skaters represents an attractive sense of the communal, especially for the young boy who desires "conversation" and wants to vault the wall of the virtual cocoon represented by his farmhouse and his life with Hazen. The game of tag itself analogizes the play of interpersonal contact throughout Patrick's story, the other stories his life occasionally intersects. In his relationships with Clara and Alice there will be these moments of illumination and darkness; as in the skaters' game, such relationships involve brief touches and evasion, the romance of boundaries crossed and not crossed. The impact of the vision is profound for Patrick. However, at this point in his story -- young and very much his father's son -- Patrick is unable to cross the boundary into the community the skaters represent:



To the boy growing into his twelfth year, having lived all his life on that farm where day was work and night was rest, nothing would be the same. But on this night he did not trust either himself or these strangers of another language enough to be able to step forward and join them. He turned back through the trees and fields carrying his own lamp. Breaking the crust with each step seemed graceless and slow.

So at this stage of his life his mind raced ahead of his body. (22)

Participation in such a community remains, for now, a possibility of his future, of the network of relationships that will eventually lead him back to this night, and to the revelation of the loggers' race that parallels his discovery of insect names in the Toronto library, once again giving "order and shape" to past experience.

The gap between Patrick's twelfth year and his arrival in Toronto as a young man is textually spanned by "The Bridge," a section of *In the Skin of a Lion* that would seem to have nothing to do with Patrick, except that we engage in several of the stories he will eventually intersect. The section begins, like "Little Seeds," in the early hours of morning, this time with the image of a truck carrying tarring fire toward the Bloor Street Viaduct. Also like "Little Seeds" (and like the novel as a whole), the section is organized into a series of discontinuous and achronological mini-narratives; here, however, there is no single character that binds the fragments into a coherent whole. The early part of the section seems to be the story of the bridge itself, its completion in 1918, and of its official and unofficial first crossings. Jumping ahead of itself, to the completion of the bridge, the narrative hints at its involvement with Toronto's immigrant labourers, and its own treatment of history, in describing three rituals of inauguration for the newly constructed viaduct. A brief mini-narrative peels away the layers of documentation and history, moving from the public and official in the direction of the private and unknown. The story ignores the planned crossing of a car

filled with dignitaries, focusing instead upon a lone cyclist who beats them to the symbolic act:

During the political ceremonies a figure escaped by bicycle through the police barriers. 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 photographs he is a blur of intent. (27)

Reaching the other side of the bridge, moving east away from the centre of the city and the centre of authority in this decentring text, the cyclist's heroic act of transgression is greeted with applause; there are photographs that confirm his action, that make it public. The cyclist too is placed in the documented history of the bridge. Finally, however, the narrative reveals that "he was not the first," moving beyond history to another, wholly undocumented ceremony:

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 potency with which this carnivalesque image recalls the night skaters near Patrick's farm suggests the kinds of associations that exist between the seemingly fragmentary and discontinuous narratives of the novel as a whole. Indeed, "The Bridge" itself -- replete with images of architecture, cables and scaffolding -- is a kind of textual macrocosm of the symbolic rope with which Hazen and Patrick rescue the cow in "Little Seeds." As a section of the novel, "The Bridge" suggests not only a changing of place and a transgression of boundaries (as do the windows, doorways and rivers in Ondaatje's earlier work); it also indicates an archi-textual paradigm for connection and association in general. This is seldom the case in earlier works, where windows and doors generally provide only *escape* rather than ingress.

The relationship between the carnivalesque anti-official nature of the midnight parade and the text's particular view of the capacity of association is suggested in another narratological "deformation," much later in the novel. Here, the "Ondaatje" behind the third-person narrator steps beyond the purview of his characters to tell the reader directly of the photography of Lewis Hine, whose goal was to "*locate the evils and find the hidden purity:*"

Official histories and news stories were always soft as rhetoric, like that of a politician making a speech after a bridge is built, a man who does not even cut the grass on his own lawn. Hine's photographs betray official history and put together another family. The man 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 -- cavernous buildings where a man turns a wrench the size of his body, or caves of iron where the white faces give the young children working there the terrible look of ghosts. (145)

Analogizing Ondaatje's objectives in *In the Skin of a Lion* -- to uncover "evils" and "purity" -- Hine's photography betrays the "softness" of official history, its abstraction from reality; the relationship between the two artifacts, photographic and fictional, is emphasized by Ondaatje's allusion to "The Bridge," to the realities of bridge-building that the politician knows nothing about. (Likewise, in "The Bridge" itself, the politicians know nothing of the night crossing that honours the men killed during the building, men who will not be acknowledged either by "politicians" -- who will perform their own symbolic crossing in an automobile -- or by history itself.) The way in which the narrator constructs his own experience of Hine's photographs is significant as well -- especially given another intertext in this passage. In *Coming Through Slaughter*, photographer E. J. Bellocq is both similar to and significantly different from

Ondaatje's representation of Hine. Both artists focus on the marginal in their societies; arguably, both are involved in the search for "hidden purity," but Hine's photography evinces none of the predatory, fetishistic quality of Bellocq's solitary art. What is more, the responses elicited by the two photographers' work is significantly different: as we saw, Bolden views Bellocq as a potential escape from the public, from community itself. As Buddy tells "Webb" in one of his monologues at Pontchartrain, "I can't summarize him for you, he tempted me out of the world of audiences where I had tried to catch everything thrown at me. He offered mole comfort, mole deceit. . . . Put your hand through this window" (91). The exhortation that ends this passage echoes Buddy's earlier statement that "Bellocq was a window looking out" (*CTS* 59). Significantly, this statement is echoed and contradicted by the narrator's description of Hine's work in *In the Skin of a Lion*, where photographs are "rooms one can step into." The revision is subtle but significant, replacing escape and evasion from community with an image of entry and inclusion -- and of a history that is inclusive rather than exclusive -- revealing the extent to which these themes have been refocused in the decade between *Coming Through Slaughter* and *In the Skin of a Lion*.

As a site for the inception of various narrative strands that will be both connected and severed throughout the novel, "The Bridge" textually analogizes the viaduct this narrative is "built" around. In spite of the fact that we have seen the first crossings by workers, cyclist and officials, the bridge -- throughout most of "The Bridge" -- remains a shape-shifting grotesque of metal rib and cable, as partial as our sense of the narratives we are engaging in, the textual scaffolding that will bind them together at last. Indeed, the achronology of Ondaatje's representation of the bridge-building suggests much of the complexity of his handling of time throughout *In the Skin of a Lion*, the discontinuity of which encourages a particularly active kind of attention from the reader. We see the completed viaduct "christened" very early in "The

Bridge," just after the narrator sketches its creation, and notes the historical texts that survive to tell of that process:

The bridge goes up in a dream. It will link the east end with the centre of the city. It will carry traffic, water, and electricity across the Don Valley. It will carry trains that have not even been invented yet.

Night and day. Fall light. Snow light. They are always working -- horses and wagons and men arriving for work on the Danforth side at the far end of the valley.

There are over 4,000 photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time-lapse evolution. (26)

The insistent future tense of the first paragraph focuses on what the bridge "will" do, imparting a sort of heroism to the vision of the project itself, the capacity of the bridge as a product. The seasonal impressionism of the second, short paragraph suggests the endless work of the labourers, providing a kind of textual bridge to the third paragraph in which the shift from future tense to present tense -- from the past to the present -- is completed in a revelation of the photographs that record the successive stages of construction. Ignoring the large scale picture, however, the narrator turns again to images of the workers, to the unrecorded details that attend bridge-building as a process: "Men in a maze of wooden planks climb deep into the shattered light of blond wood. A man is an extension of hammer, drill, flame. Drill smoke in his hair. A cap falls into the valley, gloves are buried in stone dust" (26). These images look forward to Ondaatje's description of Hine's work, once again associating writer with a particular kind of photographer, and suggest a fascination with the labourers, whose stories the narratives to follow occasionally illuminate. The structure that encompasses these stories eschews the "time-lapse evolution" of the engineers' bridge photography, however, deconstructing the viaduct through a series of temporal shifts just as the

narratives themselves undermine the authority of official history. Once again, this strategy invests "The Bridge" (and the novel as a whole) with a capacity to foreground *process* rather than product, flux and metamorphosis rather than discursive stasis.

The thematic importance of connection and severance -- the contradictory and coextensive processes by which stories and bridges are engendered -- extends to the characterological throughout this section of the novel. Here, against the backdrop of the partial viaduct, we pick up several strands of narrative that are yet to be connected in this novel's complex architecture, fragments of life stories unbound by a single, comprehensive plot. In the short space of a single paragraph, we catch a glimpse of a young tarrer named Caravaggio having a fight with his foreman (28). Alerted to his importance by the fact that a later section of the novel is entitled "Caravaggio," the reader learns very little about him here; he drops out of the narrative, next appearing fifty-six pages later, when Patrick catches an equally momentary glimpse of "the neighbourhood thief, Caravaggio, returning home from work. . . . absorbed in the eating of Sicilian ice cream" (85).

Immediately after the first reference to Caravaggio, the narrative introduces Commissioner Rowland Harris, for whom the Bloor Street Viaduct is his "first child as head of Public Works" (29). Although this introduction is brief, we get a sense of the profound ambiguity with which Ondaatje treats Harris. At once an exploiting civic capitalist boss and a visionary builder, Harris is never stable or fixed; he is never the simple unfeeling villain that we might expect. Wearing an "expensive tweed coat that cost more than the combined salaries of five bridge workers" (43), Harris is clearly among the advantaged, living off of the sweat and blood of the labourers he never acknowledges. In spite of all of this, there is an odd heroism to Harris's representation that qualifies his abstraction from the workers, underscoring his capacity as a visionary. And if he is abstracted from his workers, he is certainly not as abstracted from his

project, the bridge itself that he visits at night, when it "seemed deserted" despite the "night shift of thirty or forty men":

He slipped past the barrier and walked towards the working men. Few of them spoke English but they knew who he was. Sometimes he was accompanied by Pomphrey, an architect, the strange one from England who was later to design for Commissioner Harris one of the city's grandest buildings -- the water filtration plant in the east end.

For Harris the night allowed scope. Night removed the limitations of detail and concentrated on form. . . . Harris spoke of his plans to this five-foot-tall Englishman, struggling his way into Pomphrey's brain. Before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting. (29)

The proleptic allusion to the water filtration plant glances forward to the work of Patrick and other labourers in the tunnels under Lake Ontario, and the final confrontation of Patrick and Harris, labourer and capitalist, within the plant itself. At this point in the text, however, what is more interesting is Harris's reaction to the viaduct itself, the capacity of night to remove "the limitations of detail." Interestingly, this flight from detail to the generality of form suggests a mode of perception and representation that the text has already rejected in the scene where the narrator dismisses engineering photography in favour of the minutiae of buried work gloves and falling caps. In a sense, the darkness allows Harris the luxury of abstraction from the process of the building, allows the commissioner to imagine his viaduct as a product -- solid and fixed -- at every stage of its evolution. There is no doubt, however, that Harris represents a kind of modernist/capitalist hero of the imagination; his concentration on form is attended by the potency of his creative vision, which casts ahead, gradually building its imagined Toronto, charting the way with the mythic hyperbole of "rumours and tall tales."

Emphasizing the ambivalence of Harris's representation, the next paragraph introduces one of the "tall tales" by which Ondaatje charts the relationships in his imagined city, suggesting a level of association between modernist builder and postmodern writer, reductive clarity and inclusive indeterminacy, the contradictory and coextensive field of the grotesque. On one of the windy nights when Harris and his English architect move "past the barrier," out onto the partial viaduct to which they are tethered by safety harnesses, the men are shocked to see a group of misdirected nuns walking dangerously past unnoticed barriers, onto the bridge itself. When one of them falls from the bridge, she is presumed dead by all, including the reader who has no reason to doubt that the commissioner's bridge has become "a murderer." After a narrative gap, however, we are privy to a scene of incredible rescue in which a "man in mid-air," dangling from a rope, sees "the shape fall towards him:" "He reached to catch the figure while his other hand grabbed the metal pipe edge above him to lessen the sudden jerk on the rope. The new weight ripped the arm that held the pipe out of its socket and he screamed, so whoever might have heard him up there would have thought the scream was from the falling figure" (31). The physical trauma of the rescue, the importance of the rope, and the chromatic black and white of the nun's veil ("it was a black-garbed bird, a girl's white face" [ISL 32]) recall the earlier rescue of the holstein from the frozen river. As before, this rescue is constituted by a vital act of connection; in the first rescue, the connection in the cooperation between father and son, here, in the act of catching the falling girl and in the extent to which nun and labourer subsequently participate in the shared roles of rescuer and rescued. Suspended below the bridge, the figures are physically joined at the end of the rope, each participating equally in the hazard of their situation. The scream of an immigrant labourer named Nicholas Temelcoff has replaced the nun's absent scream; they share even a collective voice, ultimately muted by their shared trauma. As such, they must act cooperatively to effect a doubled self-rescue:



*We have to swing.* She had her hands around his shoulders now, the wind assaulting them. The two strangers were in each other's arms, beginning to swing wilder, once more, past the lip of the chute which had tempted them, till they were almost at the lower level of the rafters. He had his one good arm free. Saving her would now be her responsibility. . . . Once they reached the catwalk she saved him from falling back into space. He was exhausted. (32-33)

The pair walk, unseen by Harris and the others, away from the bridge, to the dark solitude of the Ohrida Lake Restaurant, the relief of radio music and brandy.

In a formal analogy of the act that saves both Nicholas and the nameless nun, the narrative itself begins to "swing," moving analeptically and proleptically, back and forth across the present scene in the restaurant to create a more complete picture of Nicholas Temelcoff. In the first of these shifts, in a move that may be either backwards or forwards, we are introduced to Nicholas as a figure who is "famous on the bridge," whose "daredevil" work is so valuable he earns a full dollar a day, more than double the wage of his peers (34-35). Unlike these others, Nicholas "is a solitary," existing in an isolated space suspended in air at the ends of ropes very much like the one occupied by Patrick throughout "Little Seeds." In another of the grotesquely indeterminate moments in this novel, the narrator brings the nature of his own omniscience into question as he describes the effort it requires to occupy the space of his character, the kinds of resources that must be called upon to "find" Nicholas Temelcoff:

Even in the archive photographs it is difficult to find him. Again and again you see vista before you and the eye must search along the wall of sky to the speck of burned paper across the valley that is him, an exclamation mark, somewhere in the distance between bridge and river.

He floats at the three hinges of the crescent-shaped steel arches. These knit the bridge together. The moment of cubism. (34)

A complex passage, these lines simultaneously underscore the writerly, textual nature of what we are reading -- especially in the metatextual images of Nicholas as "burnt paper" and "exclamation mark" -- and italicize the importance of extra- and intratextual association, the links that "knit" the elements of bridge and narrative together. The reference to archival photographs problematize the very idea of narrative omniscience, just as the repetition of "you" in the second sentence foregrounds the commonality of the shared goal of narrator-author and reader, the shift from passenger's seat to driver's seat. To find him at last, we must "search along the wall of sky" that conceals him, a significant foreshadowing of the illusion that allows Caravaggio to escape from prison later in the novel. The space Nicholas occupies is liminal in the extreme, poised solitary in an airy space between boundaries, history and fiction, bridge and river; yet in precisely this space exist the possibilities of making the connections necessary for the construction of both bridge and text. He floats near the hinges and arches that "knit the bridge together" in "The moment of cubism." This vital moment of connection foreshadows other moments of illumination and connection throughout the novel, as when, much later in the novel, Patrick mirrors the narrator's act of examining archival photographs. In Nicholas, Patrick finds a link that binds several of the narratives in which he participates, knitting together the life stories that impinge upon his own, and allowing him to bridge the gap between self and other (*ISL* 144-145; discussed below).

The powerful ambiguity of Nicholas's position, of the representation of the viaduct itself, is subtly underscored by Ondaatje's reference to "The moment of cubism," in fact an intertextual reference to John Berger's essay, "The Moment of Cubism." Michael Greenstein observes that this essay can be read as a "kind of blueprint for *In the Skin of a Lion*" insofar as it documents some of the cultural tensions

that contextualized and inaugurated the Cubist movement in the early 20th century (122). Among these, the rise of an international socialism that opposed a global system of imperialism, the growth of radio and cinematic media, the genesis of mass production, and the new architectural possibilities that attended the availability of steel and aluminum seem particularly germane to the historical context of Temelcoff's story and Ondaatje's novel. On the relationship between Ondaatje and the Cubist artists he alludes to, Greenstein concludes that "Cubists may have imagined the world transformed, but Canada's post-cubist imagines the very process of transformation, running through the family of mankind, coming through slaughters of animals and labour, questioning the Enlightenment's progress with later process" (122-123). More generally, the reference to a movement in the visual arts that is roughly contemporary with the novel's historical setting occasions a profoundly associative moment for the reader, in which the potential of the intertext is not just single (a reference to Berger's essay), but endlessly multiple, urging the reader to consider the relevance of any number of Cubist art-works or Cubist artists.

In spite of Greenstein's point about Cubism and Ondaatje's "post-cubism," there are several very significant points of commonality between what Ondaatje does throughout *In the Skin of a Lion* and artistic experiments that were being made by artists like Picasso and Braque after the turn of the century; they too were able to imagine "the very process of transformation," in ways that revolutionized the artistic representation of modern life. These pioneers handled their subjects in ways that were increasingly opposed to the realist tradition, at first representing figures and objects as faceted, almost prismatic shapes and surfaces in an attempt to communicate the complexity of perception, as though the subjects were simultaneously being viewed from slightly different points in space and time. Later assays into what is now called collage Cubism involved the incorporation of found material -- cigarette wrappers,

postage stamps and the like -- directly into the work of art; the resulting collage generally offered no stable frame of reference by which to judge them as representations of anything less abstract than the chaotic multiplicity of modern life. The formal similarities between this grotesque "painting" and Ondaatje's textual collage are clear; indeed, "collage" has been one of the more common generic labels that have haunted Ondaatje's writing since *Collected Works*. Also useful is the association of facet Cubism with the narrative structure of this novel, in which the mini-narratives constantly shift our position as readers, problematizing our perception of a monologic plot. (At this level, intertext dialogues with intertext as the reference to Berger's "The Moment of Cubism" is made even more resonant by the presence of his earlier epigraphic statement about the multiplicity of story.)

An even more interesting art-history intertext (or litany of intertexts) is suggested by one of the last phases of Cubism, an Italian variant called Futurism. The Futurists, led by Umberto Boccioni in Europe and Joseph Stella in America, based their work on a 1910 manifesto that rejected the aesthetics of the past, heralding the dynamism of the present and the beauty of the machine as the new subject of art. The movement, though significant, was short-lived, dying out during the First World War, when "its leaders were killed by the same vehicles of destruction they had glorified only a few years earlier in their revolutionary manifesto" (Janson 687). Perhaps significantly, the most famous masterpieces of the movement are also the most resonant intertexts for *In the Skin of a Lion*. There is the furious movement of Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Cyclist*, and the incredible faceted complexity of Stella's *Brooklyn Bridge*, with its network of connecting cable, arch and girder, the play of shadow and light. As we have seen, each of these images has been incorporated into "The Bridge," translated from modernist painting to postmodern writing. The grotesque indeterminacy of their role in Ondaatje's text is a function of the coexistence of entirely

different aesthetics in *In the Skin of a Lion*. There are the images of the workers and the veneration of Hines that recall the earlier realist tradition of painters like Daumier, Millet and Courbet -- or the even earlier naturalist paintings of an Italian artist called Caravaggio -- each of whom honour the disadvantaged through their work. (There is also the more recent work of Frederick Taylor, whose *Hull Rivetting* adorns the soft cover copy of *In the Skin of a Lion*.) These images counter Futurist notions of the heroism of the machine by humanizing such imagery, placing it in more complicated contexts that necessitate reflection upon broader social and political realities that attend "progress" as the Futurists conceived of it, just as Harris's art deco fantasies are juxtaposed with images of injustice and labour. In a novel that has much to do with the play of colour and light (and paint, as we shall see), art history, like literary history, emerges as another intertext in Ondaatje's exploration of representation. The heteroglossia of voices that emerges from this intertextual base constitutes a kind of grotesque chorus in the novel; the various strands of realism and Cubist Futurism are coextensive here, they do not simply cancel each other out. This ambivalent coexistence of contraries is essential to the complexity of the grotesque space Nicholas Temelcoff, immigrant labourer and marginal figure, occupies as he dangles at a site between bridge and river at his moment of cubism.

Significantly, this moment is followed by a description of Nicholas's work that foregrounds his status as a realistically rendered labourer, the "daily chores" that exist at the level of detail generally ignored by Futurist imagery. Simultaneously, his work is connected to the process of association that is necessary for reading this novel, for mediating the conflicting representational modes it embraces and for making sense of the discontinuous facets of its narratological cubism. A kind of spider-builder, Nicholas equalizes bridge and river at the dynamic centre that connects all points: "He is happiest at daily chores -- ferrying tools from pier down to trestle, or lumber that he

pushes in the air before him as if swimming in a river. He is a spinner. He links everyone" (34). Analogizing Nicholas's associative dynamism, the text itself swings back to the present at the Ohrida Lake Restaurant, to the parrot, Alicia, that presides over the appearance of Nicholas and the nun on the night of the rescue. His dislocated arm secured by the nun's veil, Nicholas offers the woman a drink, which she silently accepts. Here, the builder who "links everyone" tries to connect to the quiet nun, finding his way through her shock:

"Don't be shy . . . talk. You must talk." He wanted her to come out to him, even in anger, though he didn't want anger. Feeling such ease in the Ohrida Lake Restaurant, feeling the struts of the chair along his back, her veil tight on his arm. He just wanted her there near him, night all around them, where he could look after her, bring her out of the shock with some grace. (37)

The woman says nothing, so Nicholas fills the silence that separates them, thanking her for the courtesy of sharing a drink with him, complimenting the beauty of her exposed hair, discussing the scars on his body that constitute a physical biography of accidents at the job site, brushes with death. The nun is voiceless, in the chrysalis stage of the metamorphosis her fall and rescue has inaugurated; nevertheless, her silence is active, an energetic participation in the strange dialogue this scene records:

He talked on, slipping into phrases from the radio songs which is how he learned his words and pronunciations. He talked about himself, tired, unaware that his voice split into two languages, the woman hearing everything he said and trying to remember it all. He could see her eyes were alive, interpreting the room. He noticed the almost-tap of her finger to the radio music. (37-38)

Exhausted, Nicholas finally falls into a deep sleep, leaving the nun alone in the strange setting of the Ohrida Lake Restaurant, its trompe l'oeil parody of an outdoor

Macedonian cafe, the curious parrot. Finally, she leans over and asks the unconscious Nicholas his name with a whisper, leaving him with a moth-soft kiss that recalls the intimate conversation of Patrick Lewis's summer night's inquiries (39). Once again, this inquiry impels the narrative into another backwards (or forwards) swing to another vision of Nicholas at work on the viaduct. The indeterminate chronology of this account is further complicated by the reportage of a past event in which a "traveller" collapses, threatening Nicholas with tons of falling timber and huge flailing cables. As is the case with his rescue of the nun, Nicholas survives by staying in motion, "swinging into the darkness" in another metatextual gesture (*ISL* 41). It is impossible to determine whether this remembered event (or, for that matter, the narrative that contextualizes it) takes place before or after the night at the restaurant. The story itself is related to that night only through an association of content; here, Nicholas's near death is connected to his textually "earlier" description of the numerous scars that cover his body.

The narrative quickly returns from the early morning of one of Nicholas's work day to the "present" of the restaurant, to the moments of early morning in which the (former) nun readies to leave the restaurant, realizing the metamorphosis that propels her forward toward a new life in the world: "What she will become she becomes in that minute before she is outside, before she steps into the six-A.M. morning" (41). She turns once again to the parrot who watches her as she departs, and to the sleeping man who rescued her. At this point, the story equalizes analepsis and prolepsis in a vision of Nicholas's past as a bakery worker and his future as a bakery owner: "Five years earlier or ten years into the future the woman would have smelled the flour in his hair, his body having slept next to the dough, curling around it so his heat would make it rise" (42). This doubled reference to events of which the woman is unaware looks forward to the next section of the narrative, where we learn of Nicholas's employment

at the bakery during the time after his arrival in Canada, and to a later section of the novel, the future in which Nicholas will again participate in "the metamorphosis of food" (*ISL* 149). In the interim, we have the narrative that directly follows the woman's departure from the Ohrida Lake Restaurant, where we once again see Nicholas at work, this time largely through the eyes of others, including Harris. Once more, there is no clear declaration of the chronological status of the scene; we simply watch him work, singing bits of popular songs he has heard on the wireless, trying to iron out the complexities of his new language, which "is much more difficult than what he does in space" (43).

This revelation gives way to the only clearly analeptic passage that charts Nicholas's history. The section begins with the narrator's historical reflection on the cultural media -- the radio songs and talking pictures -- that "light the way for immigration in North America" (43). Throughout the section we see the extent to which stage shows and movies provide a voice for Canada's immigrant population, and we learn that Nicholas's own voice emulates the model of jazz vocalist, Fats Waller (47). Moving from the general to the particular, the narrative shifts to focus on Nicholas, to the "great journey made in silence" that brought him to Canada in 1914 (43), and to the earlier comic-grotesque story of Daniel Stoyanoff, who got rich when he lost his arm in a North American meat factory and, in Nicholas's memory, had "tempted them all" to a new world where "everything was rich and dangerous" (44). Nicholas confronts the pain that is absent from Stoyanoff's tall tale during his own emigration, at the age of twenty-five, when two of his friends die from the trauma of the voyage (45). Nicholas arrives in a Canada that looks "primitive," finally making his way to Toronto, where he gets the job at the Macedonian bakery and begins learning English. By the time Nicholas gets his job working on the bridge, he has no community of his own; on the viaduct



he was seen as a recluse. He would begin sentences in his new language, mutter, and walk away. He became a vault of secrets and memories. Privacy was the only weight he carried. None of his cohorts really knew him. This man, awkward in groups, would walk off and leave strange clues about himself, like a dog's footprints on the snowed roof of a garage. (47-48)

This vision of isolation -- recalling the solitude of Patrick Lewis in "Little Seeds" and foreshadowing Patrick's periods of seclusion in Toronto -- directly precedes the last narrative of the section, beginning as Nicholas is awakened by a doctor working on his arm. He discovers that the nun had talked to Kosta, the restaurant owner, before leaving and he questions Kosta about the quality of her voice, her identity. Although he finds nothing in Kosta's answers (which we don't hear), Nicholas has clearly been altered by his experience with the young woman -- he too has shared in her process of metamorphosis, bound together by the act of cutting with which she turned her habit into his sling:

When he walks into the fresh morning air outside the Ohrida Lake Restaurant, on the morning after the accident on the bridge, he sees the landscape as something altered, no longer so familiar that it is invisible to him. Nicholas Temelcoff walks now seeing Parliament Street from the point of view of the woman -- who had looked through his belt-satchel while he slept, found his wide wire shears, and used them to cut away the black lengths of her habit. When he walks out of the Ohrida Lake Restaurant that morning it is her weather he grows aware of. He knows he will find her.

There are long courtships which are performed in absence. (48-49)

The unnamed nun has become a kind of spiritual "twin" for Nicholas as a result of their symbolic sharing of skin. The isolation that defines his marginal position on the bridge

can no longer be absolute; this strange community of absence connects him with another, turning him into a kind of searcher even as he hangs from the bridge, but will eventually drive him from this solitary site altogether:

The panorama [of the valley below the viaduct] revolves with him and he hangs in this long silent courtship, her absence making him look everywhere.

In a year he will open a bakery with the money he has saved. He releases the catch on the pulley and slides free of the bridge. (49)

The proleptic revelation of the bakery is coincident with the last grotesque gesture of the section. Here, Nicholas's metafictional act of sliding free from the bridge analogizes the reading of the reader, about to slide free of "The Bridge," into the greater characterological community of "The Searcher."

Where we might expect "The Searcher" to be a titular reference to Nicholas, and his conviction that he will "find" the nun, this expectation is dissolved by the reappearance of Patrick on the far side of "The Bridge." Indeed, there is no reference to Nicholas anywhere in "The Searcher," nor (at first) does there seem to be any sign of the vanished nun. At the beginning of the section, the title itself remains a mystery; there is only the image of Patrick, now twenty-one, arriving in Toronto, seeing in the fortuitously named Union Station the contradictory coextension of solitude and community that will define the space he occupies throughout much of the novel. As such, the short scene in Union Station is characterized by a grotesque ferment of imagery; Patrick arrives in the city "as if it were land after years at sea. . . . He was an immigrant to the city" (53). As if to undercut this vision of the city as a reprieve from the isolation of rural Ontario, the section ends with a contradictory image of the station as tenebrous, oceanic and dehumanized: "Patrick sat on a bench and watched the tides

of movement, felt the reverberations of trade. He spoke out his name and it struggled up in a hollow echo and was lost in the high air of Union Station. No one turned. They were in the belly of a whale" (54). Interestingly, these two images of the station are chronologically separated by a period of two days, between Patrick's arrival in Toronto and when he returns to collect his luggage, and it is plausible that the shift in imagery reflects a change in Patrick's attitude during this interval. Arriving in the station, Patrick has practically nothing, carrying little more than a mysterious piece of feldspar that he picked up on his journey. It is not until later in the section that we learn of the mining accident that killed his father in a feldspar mine (*CTS* 74). At this point, the stone subtly suggests a continuing connection to Hazen, a capacity for aloneness. The narrative focuses on Patrick's other "baggage," the accumulation of memories -- many "to do with colour" -- brought with him from the marginal space of Bellrock. He remembers the smells, tastes and sights of his summers and winters in the country -- seasonal events that we have shared in part -- as he enters a world where (contradictorily) "he was new even to himself, the past locked away. He saw his image in the glass of telephone booths" (54). The variousness of this new world seems, at first, to delight Patrick: "He ran his hands over the smooth pink marble pillars that reached up into the rotunda. This train station was a palace, its niches and caverns an intimate city. He could be shaved, eat a meal, or have his shoes coloured" (54). The palatial extravagance of the station (and of its textual description) connects backwards to the "tall-tale" extravagance of Commissioner Harris's imagined Toronto and forwards to Harris's romantic/modernist dream of the water filtration plant, a "Palace of Purification," with its herringbone tiles, and the commissioner's feldspar desk (235-236). As the passage continues in its characteristically ambivalent fashion, the wonderment Patrick feels at the revelation of this "intimate city" -- his consideration of changing the colour of his shoes -- gives way to a chillier image of city life that is anything but intimate: "He saw a man with three suitcases, well-dressed, shouting out

in another language. The man's eyes burned through everyone who at first received his scream personally. But the phrases were for angels in the air to assist him or for demons to leave him" (54). Afterwards, when Patrick returns to the station to get his bags, the man is still there, "still unable to move from his safe zone, in a different suit, as if one step away was the quicksand of the new world." It is at this point that Patrick sits, declaring his name to an oblivious audience, and perceives "the belly of a whale."

That this suggestive image is at least partially a result of the "reverberations of trade" in Union Station provides a tenuous link to the next section of "The Searcher," which seems to drop the subject of Patrick altogether, shifting inexplicably to the 1919 disappearance of Canadian millionaire and business magnate, Ambrose Small. Simultaneously as the reader attempts to digest the disappearance of Patrick Lewis, the narrative provides some background on Small's disappearance that is, itself, a commingling of historical fact and fiction. We are first told of the (fictional) existence of Small's Bertillon record, a document that precisely details a host of body measurements to be used as a system of identification for missing persons (*ISL* 55). The publicity of the disappearance gives way to a kind of hysteria of false reportage; the narrative details some of the grotesque lengths to which people went to assume Small's space, occupying the vacuum left by his absence:

During the fever of the case over 5,000 people claimed to be Ambrose Small. They claimed they had amnesia, were kidnapped in a brown sack, were disfigured, were hidden in geological holes in the Scarborough Bluffs, were stretched to longer than five foot six inches on racks, were overfed, had all their hair removed, had their memories wiped clear by certain foods, had their pigmentation altered, were turned into women, had the length of their right ear changed . . . (55)

As the story continues, the narrator moves to specific claims, simultaneously underscoring the grotesque interplay of identity and the relevance of documentation in

the attempt to "find" Ambrose Small:

A woman in Hamilton saw Ambrose with his throat cut. She woke one morning to feel blood on the pillow, looked up and saw someone was sawing her neck, and she said I am Ambrose Small. Then she woke up again. Another had a vision that she was unlocking the safe at the Grand Opera House and saw a curled-up skeleton inside resting on documents. (55-56)

The image of Small with his throat cut foreshadows other acts of cutting to come, as in Patrick's dream of slicing Small in two, and the scene where Caravaggio has his throat sliced in a prison cell. The grotesque transformations of the would-be Smalls and the strange nature of the visionary "sightings" suggest a communal attempt to enter the missing millionaire's space as a means of searching for him, a strategy that recalls the activities of Sheriff Garrett in *Collected Works*, Webb in *Coming Through Slaughter*, and even Ondaatje in *Running in the Family*. As a significant figure in the history of Canadian commerce, Small's disappearance (which has never been explained) places him in a zone very like that of William Bonney or Buddy Bolden, accessible through history only as a conspicuously empty space, a proliferation of documented rumour that makes traditional closure impossible. The narrative (at this point) can only offer a sketch of Small's public life prior to the disappearance, his relationships with his wife and with a young mistress named Clara Dickens, and his daily existence as a capitalist predator: "He was a spinner. He was bare-knuckle capitalism. He was a hawk who hovered over the whole province, swooping down for the kill, buying up every field of wealth, and eating the profit in mid-air. He was a jackal. This is what the press called him and he laughed at them, spun a thread around his critics and bought them up" (57). The ambivalence of this imagery, portraying Small as a sort of grotesque hawk-jackal-spider, is potent and associative, suggesting an unlikely link to the novel's other

"spinner," Nicholas Temelcoff, a man who would seem to have no connection to a figure like Small. The indeterminate nature of the allusion attests to the profoundly associative capacity of this carnivalesque novel, the complexity of the thread our spinner-author is weaving, and also to the incapacity of the text to offer monologic judgements of a figure like Small, whose disappearance places him (at least in part) on that perfect edge shared by Ondaatje's other white dwarfs.

The finality of this mystery is almost unbearable for those who knew of Small, who dream of him and pretend to be him, and for Small's family, who post an \$80,000 reward for the discovery of his whereabouts. The offer is enthusiastically embraced by a legion of "searchers," individuals who become professionally involved in the quest to find Ambrose Small. Once again, the role of "searcher" is paradigmatic of all of Ondaatje's earlier long works, analogizing the extent to which character, author and reader become involved in grotesque, metafictional searches for characters like Bolden and Mervyn Ondaatje. Indeed, an early draft of *In the Skin of a Lion* focused exclusively on the character of Ambrose Small and the mystery of his disappearance (Barbour 179). More significant, however, is the fact of the present novel, in which Small's story is only one link in a more complex web examining even more marginal figures, one of whom reemerges to the surface of the story when we learn that "[i]n 1924, after working for a year at various jobs in Toronto, Patrick Lewis became a searcher" (59). Ultimately, Patrick undergoes a process of evolution that analogizes the development of the novel itself; he too dismisses the teleology of finding Ambrose Small in favour of the intricacies and intimacies of other associations, accidental discoveries made along the way.

It is through his search for Small that Patrick is inaugurated into the close community of Clara Dickens, Small's lover, and the mysterious Alice Gull, the woman who is ultimately revealed as the transformed imago of Nicholas Temelcoff's rescued

and rescuing nun. Working with a collection of Small's personal correspondence, Patrick finds his way to Small's sisters who advise him to get in touch with Clara. Taking the train to Paris, Ontario, Patrick confronts the "perfect woman" and is dazzled by her, a woman unlike those "[i]n the books he read" who "were rescued from runaway horses, from frozen pond accidents" (61). This traditional literary rescue suggests the other acts of salvation in the text -- the cow in the river, the falling nun who becomes a rescuer herself, and the early morning drive taken to retrieve Clara after Small's death. That she upsets Patrick's too-literary view is suggestive of the extent to which (as was the case with Nicholas and the nun) Clara too participates in the role of rescuer throughout her subsequent relationship with Patrick. Meeting her for the first time at the door of her parents' house, Patrick first asks himself the question that will ultimately supplant his original goal as a searcher, and which recalls his earlier attempt to converse with the summer night insects in Bellrock: "And what else was she, apart from being the lover of Ambrose Small? Dressed up, about to go out, she had looked like a damsel fly, the sequins and gauze up to her neck" (61). As their relationship progresses, it takes on a life wholly its own, divorced from Patrick's search for Ambrose; she meets him at a library on the day they first make love, picking him up and driving him to the hotel, fully cognizant of the answers Patrick searches for. Increasingly, she becomes the central subject of his "searching;" the stories she tells him about her younger life and the questions he asks are primarily concerned with discovering who she is: "He loved the eroticism of her history, the knowledge of where she sat in schoolrooms, her favourite brand of pencil at the age of nine. Details flooded his heart" (*ISL* 69). Ultimately, Small is reduced in Patrick's eyes to nothing more than an obstacle, separating him from a fuller intimacy with Clara: "He no longer wanted Small, he wanted to exorcise Small from Clara's mind" (69).

Patrick is unable to accomplish this feat. After he (jokingly?) proposes marriage, Clara assures him that she will eventually leave him to rejoin Ambrose, still

alive and sequestered somewhere. Patrick nevertheless continues his exploration of "the complex architecture of her past," measuring his own shock as he uncovers her candid secrets, her first love affair with a man named Stump Jones, the revelation that she used to have intercourse with Ambrose on a ferry boat, that he was the first to bugger her (*ISL* 65-71). Even these details do not allow him to bridge the gap that separates him from her, to escape the moments of alienation that attend their closest intimacies. After making love, Clara reiterates her determination to rejoin Ambrose, the relationship Patrick can not fully understand: "As he held her, he still didn't know who she was" (72). Significantly, even as he is frustrated by his inability to know Clara completely, he holds parts of himself back, simultaneously desiring and threatened by further intimacy; his father's son, Patrick "defended himself for most of the time with a habit of vagueness" (71). Each of the lovers continues to maintain a distance, keeping certain boundaries intact, just as the text itself insists on deferring its secrets, holding its own mysteries intact.

One of these mysteries is Clara's friend, Alice Gull, to whom Patrick is introduced when he and Clara spend a weekend at Alice's cabin. At this point in the novel, there is no way to tell that Alice (now a talented stage actor who "reveals no past, [and] remains sourceless" [74]) is the unnamed nun of "The Bridge." The only clue is her name, the fact that she has taken her new name from the parrot who presided over the site of her metamorphosis in the Ohrida Lake Restaurant. Other, subtle clues linking her to Nicholas appear later in the novel, as when we learn she works at the Parrot Theatre (*ISL* 88), and when we discover her love for Fats Waller (142). For now, however, her past remains as much a mystery for the reader as for Patrick, who will later share in our task of bringing these two stories together; at this point, he simply enjoys the sense of community that results from his company with the two women.



The desire for connection and revelation that attends community is underscored by another of this novel's nocturnal ceremonies during Patrick's stay with Clara and Alice, when the women conspire to make a "spirit painting" of him while he is asleep, "to see what he will reveal of himself in his portrait at this time of night" (75). On the whole, the scene demonstrates the tenuousness of the relationship between knowledge and representation. After cutting the paper, they work so feverishly beside Patrick's sleeping body that the paper occasionally tears under the force of their crayons, the passion of their "magical" exploration of his character: "Given the vagueness of his covered body, they draw upon all they know or can guess about him. They kneel, their heads bright beside the candlelight, crayoning against the texture of the floor. Anger, honesty tumble out. One travels along a descant of insight and the other follows, completes the phrase, making the gesture safe" (75). As in the generic gesture-portraiture of *Running in the Family*, the accuracy of this grotesque painting relies on a mixture of insight and guesswork, a projection of honest emotion made "safe" by the communal and cooperative nature of the making, the participation of another. After the portrait is finished, the women leave their sleeping subject, running outside to engage in a carnivalesque celebration of a rainy night that is related to the skating "coven" of loggers in "Little Seeds," especially when Alice asks "Are we witches?" (76). Outdoors in the darkness, the women enact one last dramatization of the interplay of perception and faith, connection and occlusion; transforming into human animals "[t]hey crawl delirious together in blackness. There is no moon. There is the moon flower in its small power of accuracy, like a compass pointing to where the moon is, so they can bay toward its absence" (76).

The following night, when Patrick finally sees the painting and hears the story of its production, it is the vision of community he treasures most, the image of the togetherness that created the portrait rather than the painted image that explores his own character:

Later he will think of the seconds when he was almost asleep and they entered the dark room with candles. The approach of magicians. He feels more community remembering this than anything in his life. Patrick and the two women. A study for the New World. Judith and Holofernes. St. Jerome and the Lion. Patrick and the Two Women. He loves the tableau, even though being asleep he had not witnessed the ceremony. (79)

Interestingly, Patrick's imagining of this tableau is placed against intertextual references to famous paintings, creating a kind of grotesque *trompe l'oeil* that is made even more ambiguous because of the violent antagonism in each of the art-images Patrick chooses for his allusions. Even in the image of community he values, there are hints of intrusion that he still resists at some level, trying to maintain the autonomy of an isolated self.

The description of Patrick's response to the spirit painting is directly followed by a depiction of his own magic trick, when he blindfolds himself and moves around a memorized room, performing various tasks without the aid of sight. Unlike the moonflowers' "small power of accuracy," the utter clarity of Patrick's memory is possible only in a field of unnatural stasis. Angry at Clara's insistence that she is going to rejoin Ambrose the next day, Patrick insists that she remain still on the bed as he performs his tricks, manipulating inanimate objects all over the room as he loudly proclaims love for his captive audience (80). In this symbolic act of holding Clara still, Patrick crushes an eggshell on the floor "like the bones of Stump Jones," and ironically tells her that she is so beautiful he'll never go blind. The trick is an impressive failure however; Clara, who does leave Patrick for Ambrose at last, cannot bear the display. She leaves the bed and covers her ears, trying to shut out the sound of Patrick's voice until the two collide, bringing an end to Patrick's trick, which had not left sufficient allowance for the imprecision and flux of "the human element" (81).

After Clara "moves" again, leaving Patrick alone in the train station once more, he withdraws into an insular shell, speaking to no one, reading novels that no longer seem able to comprehend the complexity of human relationships, with their clarity, their too neat resolutions and closure:

All his life Patrick Lewis has lived beside novels and their clear stories. Authors accompanying their heroes clarified motives. World events raised characters from destitution. The books would conclude with all wills rectified and all romances solvent. Even the spurned lover accepted the fact that the conflict had ended. . . . If Patrick was a hero he could come down on Small like an arrow. He could lead an iguana on a silver leash back to its mistress. (82-83)

This vision of the fictional clarity Patrick had "lived beside," fictional intertexts like Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, conflicts with the open-ended complexity of his own life, the grotesque indeterminacy of the novel he lives within. As if in response to this, Patrick becomes a writer himself, inscribing fragmentary letters to Clara that chart the inner movements of his mind and emotions that are significantly more direct and honest than his behaviour in her presence (*ISL* 84-86). Two years after Clara's departure, Patrick is surprised by a visit from Alice, who looks about the space he occupies for clues that provide her (and us) with a vision of his life on an island of self-absorbed isolation:

He walked into the empty rooms, gesturing towards the broken things he was trying to assemble, broken glass and crockery, things he had flung long ago, after Clara had gone.

--What are those things?

--Glass, a crossword puzzle . . . a story.

Alice grinned at him. How much did she know about him and Clara anyway.

--I'm trying to get my life in order, he said.

--Well, this should begin it.

She moved about the room, touching nothing, as if everything in the sparse living room was potent and part of his cure. (86)

The potent objects on Patrick's table do not include novels at this point, and they say far more about his life -- and about the novel we are reading -- than traditional realist novels ever could in another of this novel's moments of deformation, another grotesque avowal of textuality. Patrick's assembly of broken things -- crockery and glass vessels -- analogizes our own reassembly of the disparate stories of *In the Skin of a Lion*, finding the seams and connections that, by now, have suggested the identity of Patrick's visitor. Both crossword puzzle and novel involve not only filling in gaps, but making connections as well, such as the connection between the novel in our hands and the "story" (possibly some of the letters Patrick has written "to" Clara) that also sits on the table. Near the end of her visit, Patrick and Alice abruptly make love, Patrick startled at the "animal growl" Alice makes as she lies on top of him. Afterwards, she suggests that he try to find Clara through Clara's mother, not so that the two can be reunited, but so that Patrick might "remove her shadow" (89). Alice leaves, offering only the cryptic remark that, when they next meet, they will finally be able to "say hello."

Following the link Alice offers, Patrick interviews Clara's mother and is shocked to finally learn of his own role in determining the site of the missing Ambrose Small, in the rural Ontario of his own youth. Encouraged by Patrick's stories of his isolated youth (through Clara), Small escaped to Bellrock, effecting a transposition of places with his most threatening searcher. Finding Small at last, Patrick engages in a scene of intense anticlimax; the interest Patrick has in his quarry is now only a function of their shared and unique experience of Clara. That is the source of their "mutual

excitement, as if each were looking into a mirror" (93). Parodying Patrick's earlier interest in Clara's past, Small jokingly asks if Patrick wants him to describe his childhood, but Patrick deflects the implication that he has come for Small:

--I don't want to talk about you, Small. I want Clara. Something about her cast a spell on me. . . . I don't know what it is.

--It's her unfinished nature, Ambrose says quietly. (93)

Ambrose's insight is perhaps the most significant revelation of this tiny conversation, underscoring the extent to which the "unfinished" -- the grotesque aspect of human relationships that frustrates Patrick -- is also vital to his attraction. (Indeed, many of the relationships in the novel are qualified by this kind of enchantment. Characters in this novel -- and in *The English Patient* -- are attracted to the grotesque, the incomplete. Clara is attracted to Small's "variousness"; Patrick and Small are attracted to Clara's "unfinished nature"; later, we discover that Clara is attracted to Patrick because he is "on the verge" [97].)

In a terrible ruse, Small agrees to wake Clara, asking Patrick to go outside and wait. Once Patrick is out, Small attempts to burn him to death from the roof with kerosene and a match. His clothing on fire, Patrick enacts a grotesque parody of the night skaters, running to the river, and using his pocket knife in an act of salvation, cutting away his burning overcoat as he runs (94). Small follows, throwing a burning bottle of kerosene into the water after Patrick, temporarily blinding Patrick in one eye (and symbolically breaking Patrick's earlier promise that he would "never go blind"). Patrick escapes from the water, cutting his tormentor on the shoulder before retreating to his hotel. The next morning, in another anticlimax, Clara finds Patrick and they spend a single day and night together. Still partially blind, Patrick painfully realizes the occupational hazard of all of Ondaatje's searchers. Clara helps him shave, inscribing his forehead with the mark her father used to brand his hunting dogs (98) --

both acts engendering intertextual echoes of *Coming Through Slaughter*. The section ends as Clara leaves Patrick once again the following morning, walking back toward Ambrose, and Patrick's river, stopping along the way for a metatextual chat with "young George Grant" (100).

The subtle allusions to Buddy Bolden and the indeterminate status of the end of this section of the novel underscore the grotesque ambiguity of Patrick's search, the disparity between what he has sought after and what he has gained. Like Webb, Patrick is a successful searcher on one level; Small is discovered, and Patrick finds Clara. Simultaneously, however, the goal of the search has been reversed in several ways; Small no longer matters, and "finding" Clara is not so much a reunion or connection as it is a gesture of necessary severance. Recalling the dream in which Patrick cuts a "grey figure" away from the body of Ambrose Small, this scene marks the point at which Patrick follows Alice Gull's exhortation to remove Clara's shadow from himself. This act of self-rescue suggests the function of the knife with which he cut away his burning garment, an act of cutting that must come before he can say "hello" to Alice and take his place, once again, in a community.

"Palace of Purification" begins underground, returning to the tenebrous realism of "The Bridge" with images of workers struggling to dig a tunnel under Lake Ontario for Rowland Harris's water filtration plant. Quickly, we discover that Patrick Lewis (no longer a professional searcher) is now one of the labourers, returning to work the moment a city photographer climbs back into the sunlight (105). In a personal space that echoes both his own father and the "daredevil" solitude of Nicholas Temelcoff, Patrick works underground as a dynamiter, earning extra money to perform in the "claustrophobic uncertainty" nobody else desires (107). Moving from the dark humidity of the men and mules toiling underground, the narrative moves above to

Commissioner Harris himself, the immaculate fiction of his own dreamworks rising around him like a monument. As before, Harris's representation is ambivalent; his callous single-mindedness is qualified at least in part by the choreography of his imagination, the architectural hyperbole of his dream with its brass elevators, rose-coloured marble floors: "The neo-Byzantine style allowed him to blend in all the technical elements. The friezes depicted stylized impellers. He wanted herringbone tiles imported from Siena, art deco clocks and pump signals, unfloored high windows which would look out over filter pools four feet deep, languid, reflective as medieval water gardens" (110). Quoting Baudelaire, Harris partakes in the role of a kind of visionary artist; his waterworks is the ultimate concrete poetry. What this vision ignores, however, are the images of the men working below him, images of sweat and hardship that accost him only occasionally, in his sleeping dreams (110-111). Also beyond the range of his vision are the weekly gatherings and dramas that take place in the unfinished world of the plant, illegal and carnivalesque ceremonies masked by partial walls and the noise of machines. At this point, the setting of the waterworks is a profoundly ambivalent site; at once a testament to Harris's modernist dream, it is also a civic structure, distanced at least in theory from the pure capitalism of Ambrose Small. But at night, the plant realizes its postmodernism, an architectural work-in-progress that belongs as much to its builders as to Harris. It is in this grotesque site, a confusion of centre and margin, that Patrick will once again say hello to Alice Gull.

Partially inaugurated into the immigrant community as one of the tunnel labourers, Patrick becomes more involved with the people who live around him when he begins learning some foreign words that are necessary to buy food for Clara's iguana. Soon, he is invited to the waterworks, where he watches a puppet-show that forcefully protests the status of Canadian immigrants in a grotesque discourse of voicelessness. Among the marionettes on stage, there is a "hero," a larger

puppet/human that wears "a Finnish shirt and Serbian pants" (117). As the drama unfolds, this every-immigrant's gregarious ambition is castigated by the law-gestures of the smaller puppets, who finally cluster around the hero in a terrible image of oppression:

A plot grew. Laughing like a fool [the hero] was brought before the authorities, unable to speak their language. He stood there assaulted by insults. His face was frozen. The others began to pummel him but not a word emerged -- just a damaged gaze in the context of those flailing arms. He fell to the floor pleading with gestures. The scene was endless. Patrick wanted to rip the painted face off. The caricature of a culture. His eyes could not move away from the face. (117)

When the character begins to rhythmically beat its wooden hand on the floor in an act of protest, Patrick can no longer bear the imagery. A born Canadian and outsider, Patrick doesn't fit in with the audience that participates in the carnivalesque drama by clapping in unison with the anguished "puppet"; he takes part in another way. Noticing that the painted face looks almost canine, and that the puppet's shirt looks "bloody" from sweat-staining, Patrick disengages himself from the audience, moving to the stage and holding the figure at the same moment we are reminded of Buddy Bolden's last performance, and his relationship with audiences. Following the figure backstage, into a strange zone of inanimate puppets and costumes where "[w]hat had been theatrical seemed locked within metamorphosis," Patrick discovers Alice, the woman behind the painted face of the anguished immigrant-hero. In one of the novel's several moments of unmasking and connection, Patrick helps her to remove the paint, a moment of intimacy that recalls the scene in which Clara shaved Patrick after the fight with Small: "He rinsed out the cloth again and holding her forehead steady wiped the targets off her eyes, cloth over one finger for precision, the blue left iris wavering at the closeness . .



. so that it was not Alice Gull but something more intimate -- an eye muscle having to trust a fingertip to remove that quarter-inch of bright yellow around her sight" (121). With tender "precision," Patrick unmask his friend, obliterating the abstraction of caricature.

This rediscovery and unmasking impels Patrick into the community of Alice and her daughter, Hana. In a scene that begins as Alice symbolically and allusively asks Patrick to open one of her apartment windows to let a cat in, she explains that Hana's father, Cato, was a *chetnik*, an immigrant political activist (122). This revelation leads into a discussion of politics and activism that represents an early stage of Patrick's metamorphosis from a loner with "a passive sense of justice" to a political activist-bomber. As the two characters argue it becomes clear that their dialogue says much about the interplay of values in this novel, and in Ondaatje's career as a whole. Alice accuses Patrick of being easily harnessed, like the water that will eventually be filtered through Harris's plant. (Ironically, Patrick will follow the course of this water later in the novel, when he swims through the in-take pipes toward his confrontation with Harris.) In a statement that reflects upon the isolated quality of many of Ondaatje's "heroes," she tells him that his disconnected insensitivity is a result of his capacity for isolation: "You believe in solitude, Patrick, in retreat. You can afford to be romantic because you are self-sufficient" (123). This "romantic" isolation casts us back to characters like Mervyn Ondaatje and Buddy Bolden, white dwarfs whose "self-sufficiency" dissolves the interface between individual and community, self and other. The dialogism of this novel, its far more probing and de-centred view of this exchange, challenges the "heroism" of white dwarfs, offering us more complicated characters, who are ultimately able to disavow the romance of their self-sufficiency. At this point, Patrick resists Alice's characterization, asserting his lack of faith in the abstracted and abstracting language of politics; he is suspicious of Alice's rhetoric, and when she tells

him that they are both "in a thunderstorm," he asks if this is a line from a tract (123). Later in the novel, Patrick observes that "[t]he trouble with ideology . . . is that it hates the private. You must make it human" (135). By coincidence or design, this statement echoes the oft-quoted sentiments of the author himself who, a decade before the publication of *In the Skin of a Lion*, made a similar statement in an interview with Sam Solecki: "I avoid reading books on philosophy, psychology, politics. It's a funny thing, political theses I find impossible to read. I have to be affected emotionally or in a sensual way before something hits me." Like Stuart McKinnon's *The Intervals*, a "political" text for which the younger Ondaatje has great respect, *In the Skin of a Lion* "starts from the personal and moves out" (Solecki, "Interview" [1975] 24-25). For Patrick (and for us), as Alice points out, the rhetoric of activism and ideology has already been humanized; her own capacity as a performance artist is intimately related to her agenda as an activist: "You reach people through metaphor. It's what I reached you with earlier tonight in the performance" (*ISL* 123). The reference to metaphor foregrounds the metatextual nature of Alice's performance, the correspondence between fictional stage drama and textual performance through which the author reaches us in a grotesque analogical act of partial unmasking.

At this point, Patrick remains uneasy with the challenges she presents, the difficult identifications that attend her world-view, the immolation of the insular self. For Patrick, standing at the window, "there was space in her small rooms only when he looked out" (122). Ultimately, however, Alice uses even this potentially escapist strategy against him; as the narrative moves once again toward the darkness of pre-dawn, Alice encourages Patrick to stay at the window, where he "will see something beautiful" (126). As they watch, lights begin to flicker on as the workers make ready to leave for "the killing floors and railway yards and bakeries":

--They don't want your revolution, Patrick said to Alice.

-- No. They won't be involved. Just you. You're a mongrel, like me. Not like my daughter here. But like me. (127)

Patrick, who must soon leave Alice and Hana to join the emerging workers, is defined by his status as a "mongrel"; like and unlike Buddy Bolden, he is a grotesque hybrid of insider and outsider, centre and margin, a Canadian son and ex-centric. In this capacity he will take his part in the cultural metamorphosis Alice foresees, the flash and rumble of her metaphorical thunderstorm.

For now, Patrick retains his status as an outsider in a marginalized community, a paradoxical "foreigner" among immigrant labourers. Moving from the watery darkness of Harris's tunnel to the aridity of Wickett and Craig's tannery, Patrick (and the reader) is exposed to more images of the hardship Alice's art and humanized ideology deplores. Patrick is "one of three pilot men" who use their knives in another symbolic act of cutting to shape the animal skins (129). The occupation is powerfully associative and metaphorical, linking both to the other acts of cutting we have already seen and to Gilgamesh's adopted lion's skin. Moreover, Patrick's cooperation in a group of three pilots -- with all of that title's connotations of navigation and guidance -- signals the grotesque tripartite coextension of writer, reader and character that Ondaatje's writing has engendered since *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. The textuality of the entire scene is foregrounded as it continues, particularly in the description of the tannery's least fortunate labourers, the dyers who colour the leather, working for a dollar a day at work that "left the men invisibly with tuberculosis and arthritis and rheumatism" (131). Simultaneously as these men provide a terrible picture of the realities of immigrant labour, they are linked to the chromatic imagery of the novel as a whole, its various plays of light and darkness, its painted personae. Their dyed skin recalls the pebbled surface of Patrick's childhood atlas; the green namelessness of his own originary site is a paradigm of the marginalized cultural space

of the immigrant. What is more, the inescapable stench sensually inscribed on the dyer's own skin casts even farther back in Ondaatje's writing, occasioning a grotesque revision of "The Cinnamon Peeler" that underscores their isolation: "What remained in the dyers' skin was the odour that no woman in bed would ever lean towards" (132).

As the section continues we witness Patrick becoming more and more an intimate part of a familial community with Alice and Hana. Patrick continues to debate issues of ideology with Alice, who goes further to humanize her politics when she offers Patrick several intertexts from Joseph Conrad, a representative immigrant writer (born Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in the Russian-dominated Ukraine) whose fiction Patrick has enjoyed (134). Significantly, Alice's reference is not to a novel or story, but to Conrad's letters, textual acts of correspondence that are perhaps more fitting in the context of Ondaatje's dialogic novel. Most of what Alice reads -- Conrad's criticisms of the leisure class -- leaves Patrick cold, until she reads a passage that eschews the vocabulary of politics, moving toward the more abstract and inchoate qualities of existence and experience. In her attempt to "convert" Patrick in the darkness of their shared bed, she whispers her "favourite lines" -- lines Patrick will ask to hear again: "'I have taught you that the sky in all its zones is mortal. . . . Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects'" (135). It is this intertextual statement that reaches Patrick at last, speaking about the human and private underpinnings of community, the "looseness of . . . structure" that qualifies what he sees as the rigidity of ideology. Avowing the coextension of chaos and order, "extreme looseness" and "structure," Conrad reiterates the fundamentally grotesque conflict we have been exploring all along: the struggle between the desire to order experience into categories and hierarchies of meaning, and the need to acknowledge the amorphous fluidity of existence. As this novel shows, the stasis of historical documentation and modernist architecture alike are unable to acknowledge their own

inherent disorder, the realities of labour, the carnivalesque nocturnal gestures of celebration and protest. Until Patrick removes Clara's "shadow," his own sight is similarly limited; his complicated blind-fold trick and his literary-realist vision of his own life do not sufficiently concede the complexity of "the human element," and its perpetual motion. To chart this complexity, he (and we) must partake in the symbolic acts of cutting and connecting -- the contradictory and coextensive processes with which the "spinner" creates its web -- both of which are necessary for apprehending (and valuing) the looseness of mortal things. In this grotesque and dialogic novel, textual crossroads and lacunae analogize Patrick's searching and severing, blurring the distinction between intra- and extratextual reality at the same time as the novel's play with genre and visual art forms foregrounds textuality itself. Another of the objects under Conrad's mortal sky, *In the Skin of a Lion* avows its structural looseness in this way, creating its provisional order in a way that suggests a consciousness (and acceptance) of the ephemeral and chaotic.

Freed of Clara's shadow by his symbolic act of severance, and increasingly a part of the community of Hana, Alice, and her friends (a group that includes a baker named Nicholas Temelcoff), Patrick is once again enabled as a finder of associations, a metatextual researcher who equalizes the functions of author and reader. The boy whose father once discovered him on the ground, with his ear "against the hard shell of cow shit" because of the faint voice of insects within, still searches after "conversation," the intimacy that exists somewhere over the wall of that "hard shell" dividing self from other. Patrick spends most of the remainder of the section looking into Alice's past, her relationship with Cato before his assassination in the North, and farther back, into the mysterious void of her early life. He looks at old photographs (including one of a group of men working on the Bloor Street Viaduct) and reads Cato's letters for clues about their relationship, their shared intimacy: "He realizes what he is doing, that he has become a searcher again with this family" (*ISL* 156).

Intrigued by the bridge photograph that Alice tells him to forget, Patrick begins to do research on the construction of the bridge itself, effecting a strange metatextual reprise of much of the early material in Ondaatje's "The Bridge," and reflecting the process of research that seems to inform our narrator's "omniscience." Significantly, Patrick's desire to look into the viaduct photograph is reinforced by another reference to his relationship with novels. In this instance, however, Patrick is not concerned with measuring himself against fictional "heroes" at the centres of stories; instead, this investigation is conditioned by the searcher's awareness of the marginal, the shadowy spaces obscured by the limited focus of plot:

Patrick had the photograph from Hana's suitcase in his pocket. In books he had read, even those romances he swallowed during childhood, Patrick never believed that characters lived only on the page. They altered when the author's eye was somewhere else. Outside the plot there was a great darkness, but there would of course be daylight elsewhere on earth. Each character had his own time zone, his own lamp, otherwise they were just men from nowhere. (143)

Within a novel that largely takes place at night or in the black hours of early morning, the reader-character's awareness of the decentred darkness outside of the limelight of plot corresponds to the text that creates him, its ability to equalize various life stories in a grotesque exploration of the margins of plot. Blurring the distinction between life and art, Patrick perceives the limitations of authorial omniscience, believing in the power of metamorphosis or alteration that manifests "when the author's eye was somewhere else." This acknowledgment also suggests an identification of character and reader, an equivalence of the space they occupy in attempting to make the connections this novel requires.

As if to emphasize this point, Patrick's research works "backwards," mirroring our own process of reading "The Bridge" as he moves from the archival to the personal

and private space of fiction, imaginatively engaging the gaps left by historical record. Early on, he finds the picture of the racing cyclist and works against history, back through the two years it took to complete the viaduct, intersecting stories of "survey arguments, the scandals, the deaths of workers fleetingly mentioned, the story of a young nun who had fallen off the bridge, the body never found" (144). Finally, he comes upon an architectural link in the story he is trying to recover, a picture in a newspaper article on daredevils: "Third from the left, the newspaper said, was Nicholas Temelcoff" (144). Temelcoff's position as the "third" swinging spinner recalls Patrick's occupation among three pilot cutters, once again suggesting the cooperation of the textual community of reader, character and author. It is only after Patrick leaves the library, however, that he senses the potential importance of his find, wondering at last if Alice might have been the falling nun. Interestingly, the moment of this provisional revelation is coextensive with another textual allusion to *Coming Through Slaughter*. Here, at the very moment that his act of connection expands his sense of the community he has joined, Patrick encounters the "perfect company" of a street band:

Now he was walking slowly . . . the click of his footsteps unconsciously adapting themselves to the music that began to surround him. The cornet and saxophone and drum chased each other across solos and then suddenly, as Patrick drew alongside them, fell together and rose in a chorus.

He saw himself gazing at so many stories -- knowing of Alice's lover Cato and Hana's wanderings in the baker's world. He walked on beyond the sound of the street musicians, aware once again of the silence between his individual steps, knowing now he could add music by simply providing the thread of a hum. He saw the interactions, saw how

each of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves. (144)

The street band both recalls and reverses Bolden's final parade, the grotesque moment of the jazzman's perception of the perfect audience for whom he has always wanted to play. Here, there is no break-down of musical order however; after the "chase" of horn and drum (which analogizes the loggers' game of tag) there is instead the descant of musical community, a choral falling together that mirrors Patrick's epiphany of his own place in a community of life stories.

Leaving the street band behind, Patrick realizes that he has been enabled as a teller of stories; the silence between his footfalls can be filled with the connective "thread" of his own voice. (Later, when Patrick confronts Nicholas with his theory, the baker comes to a similar revelation: "Patrick's gift, that arrow into the past, shows him the wealth in himself, how he had been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories" [149].) This reference to thread gives way to another allusive reversal of Ondaatje's earlier writing, focusing on the image of the web that so often -- as in "Spider Blues" -- represents the fatal stasis our need for order imposes on reality:

The street band had depicted perfect company, with an ending full of embraces after the solos had made everyone stronger, more delineated. His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night web -- all of these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day. A nun on a bridge, a daredevil who was unable to sleep without a drink, a boy watching a fire from his bed at night, an actress who ran away with a millionaire -- the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned. (145)

Here, the web is primarily an object of wonder; instead of a hostile, stifling net, this night web suggests something more gentle, able to incorporate "human order" and



suggesting a looser definition of order itself, which can now (like Victor Coleman's poetry) incorporate the fragmentary. Unlike Bolden's grotesque final solo, which isolates him from human community, the street band's solos leave individuals stronger, more able to participate in a communal ending of embraces just as Patrick -- audience and momentary participant for this metatextual performance -- sees his own life as one narrative thread in a "falling together of accomplices." Throughout this section, there is an attendant falling together of textual "accomplices" in the dialogue of text and intertext -- Patrick's story, Bolden's story, Ondaatje's poetry, Berger's epigraph -- all working to italicize that extra-/intratextual falling together of author, reader and text in the cooperative effort of sustaining the grotesque chorus this novel engenders.

Appropriately, the pages that follow Patrick's revelation are punctuated by metatextual references to reading that connect his search for meaning in "[t]he chaos and tumble of events" with the book in our hands, and specifically "those few pages in a book we go back and forth over" (*ISL* 148). Among these is a strange comment on the interplay of order and chaos in the novel itself: "The first sentence of every novel should be: 'Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human.' Meander if you want to get to town" (*ISL* 146). This "beginning" underlines Patrick's appreciation of a provisional kind of order that is as faint and human as it is cherished and necessary. That the apprehension of such "order" "will take time" is once again a function of that complex contract between the grotesque artist and his "perfect company," the active reader who is willing to forestall the direct teleology of getting to town and to participate in the creation of meaning along the course of this novel's decentering indirection. That this ideal hypothetical novel should begin with such an authorial assurance at all, however, underscores significant differences between *In the Skin of Lion* (and *The English Patient*) and Ondaatje's earlier work, in which the author never urges reading as an act of faith in his ability to make a satisfying order of

the lives of Billy the Kid, Buddy Bolden, or Mervyn Ondaatje. Indeed, more frequently, the author-figure in these works seems to be engaging in the reader's struggle against disorder, so that the two processes, of reading and writing, seem to be a reflection of each other -- a paradigm of the process by which experience itself is reduced to narrative. In any case, our response to this passage largely depends on our feelings about the overlapping of authorial and characterological voices at this point -- the extent to which Patrick functions independently of Ondaatje in this moment of indirect discourse.

Interestingly, the novel we are reading quickly escapes from the epiphany of order Patrick realizes in a frustratingly brief proleptic mini-narrative in which Patrick searches his memory for images of Alice, wanting her "to be with him here in this room as if she is not dead. As if he can be given that gift, to relive those days when Alice was with him and Hana, which in literature is the real gift. He turns the pages backwards" (*ISL* 148). The off-hand reference to Alice's death is shocking for the reader, who is free to turn back pages just as Patrick does, but for whom such backwards reading can provide no clue about this disturbing new mystery. Analogizing Patrick's analeptic act of recovery, the narrative itself moves back to the past -- what we have been reading as the present -- forestalling any representation of Alice's death with more images of their life together, and Patrick's continuing endeavour to understand her past. His continuing self-perception as a marginal figure is underscored as he reads through Cato's letters; the dead man's words have an alienating effect on Patrick, suggesting stories in which he had no part:

He has always been alien, the third person in the picture. He is the one born in this country who knows nothing of the place. The Finns of his childhood used the river, even knew it by night, the men of burning rushes delirious in the darkness. This he had never done. He was a

watcher, a corrector. He could no more have skated along the darkness of a river than been the hero of one of these stories. (156-157)

Patrick's marginal space occupies the paradoxical centre of this grotesque "plot." As such, he is profoundly and increasingly aware of the dramas that do not include him in this ex-centric novel -- a novel in which the shared nature of centrality is analogized by one of Alice's plays in which "several actresses shared the role of heroine. . . . Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story" (157). For Patrick, the revelation now occasions dissatisfaction with his role, with the limitations of his knowledge and involvement that qualify even the deepest intimacies:

He was an abashed man, an inheritance from his father. Born in Abashed, Ontario. What did the word mean? Something that suggested there was a terrible horizon in him beyond which he couldn't leap. Something hollow, so when alone, when not aligned with another -- whether it was Ambrose or Clara or Alice -- he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community. A gap of love. (157)

Overleaping the horizon within himself requires the alignment of some kind of community -- connection with the other in a search for intimacy. Accordingly, the section ends with a paradoxical flood of memories that underscores the fact of Alice's death, and Patrick's renewed isolation. Grounded in the present tense, the events described are clearly analeptic, as Patrick tries to regain what he has lost through memory, recalling moments he has spent with Alice. The dominant memory is of a day the couple spent in a field: "There are country houses on the periphery so they have walked to its centre, the distant point, to be alone. . . . He will turn while walking and see the fragility of her breasts -- the result of a pencil's shading" (160).

The delineation of setting in the first sentence analogizes the interplay of centre and margin throughout *In the Skin of a Lion*, where centre and margin are grotesquely coextensive; in the textual "field" of this novel, the shifting centre of plot is that distant point of aloneness and intimacy, unseen and away from the more static structures of historical documentation. The second line underscores the narratological complexity of the passage as a whole, foregrounding the temporal and ontological indeterminacy of the scene in its use of the future tense and its reference to "a pencil's shading." The complicated act of perception being recorded here is clearly focalized from within a memory -- a memory that is being transformed by Patrick's act of inscription, resulting in the metatextual "fragility" of Alice's *trompe l'oeil* breasts (*ISL* 159). This provisional act of recovery and connection leads to the section's final moment, another metatextual gesture in which the indirection of discourse (a shift of pronouns) betrays a consolidation not of character and character, but of character and author in another moment of indirect discourse: "He has come across a love story. This is only a love story. He does not wish for plot and all its consequences. Let me stay in this field with Alice Gull. . . ." (160).

The novel's shortest section, "Remorse" narrates the beginning of Patrick's career as a political saboteur, when he bombs the Muskoka Hotel in his interpretation of Alice's earlier exhortation to "name the enemy and destroy their power. Start with their luxuries -- their select clubs, their summer mansions" (124-125). The section title itself alludes to another earlier conversation, when Clara accuses Patrick of having no remorse (67). Patrick's etymological response -- that this "strange" word suggests "a turning around on yourself" -- underscores the extent to which he has been transformed, turning back on his own "passive sense of justice" in the process of being galvanized to political action at the same time as he turns back to his earlier role as an isolated solitary. The bombing of the hotel suggests an amalgam of motives, both

romantic and political, which play against each other indeterminately in a narrative context that provides little ingress into Patrick's thoughts, aside from his constant memory of Alice. The most interesting scene in this short section takes place after the bombing, when Patrick takes refuge in the Garden of the Blind (*ISL* 168-171). In this otherworldly setting, he encounters Elizabeth, an aged, blind woman who acts as a kind of spiritual guide or prophet figure. As if to avow the imprecision of Patrick's sight, his weakness for *trompe l'oeil*, she closes his eyes, teaching him to read the strange genealogy of plants in another of Ondaatje's gardens, another contradictory site of vegetal diversity, curative herbs and poisons. Searching his face with her hands, the woman discovers a welt by Patrick's ear -- perhaps a minor lesion resulting from his activity at the Muskoka Hotel -- and tells him to apply perumel (170). After this healing act, Patrick finally confesses that he is wanted by the police for "wilful destruction of property"; laughing cryptically, Elizabeth tells him, "Don't resent your life." This strange exhortation is related to Patrick's "remorse," urging him away from the solitary romanticism of his isolated role as a political saboteur and effecting a symbolic exchange of "balm" for "bomb."

Standing in this garden, content in each other's company, Elizabeth covers Patrick's eyes in a moment reminiscent of his partial blinding on the night he discovers Ambrose Small. Here, however, the blinding is more gentle and more ambivalent; the representation of the event underscores the reader's textual "sight" (and weakness for a kind of aesthetic, metatextual *trompe l'oeil*) even as Patrick shuts his eyes: "They are a frieze, a statue in this garden, a woman with her soft palms covering a tall man's face, blinding him" (170). When he opens his eyes again, looking into the blind eye of the old woman, Patrick realizes a moment of textual connection that has little to do with remorse or the desire for isolation:

Her green eye echoes somewhere within him. *Aetias Luna* -- and its Canadian name, *papillon lune*. Lunar moth. Moon moth. Her other

eye is simply not there, the old loose flesh of the eyelid covering nothing. But this eye is forest green, moth green, darting all over as if to catch his gaze, moving with delight over his shoulders, alighting on his ear, his nose. He had loved the lunar moth, its flare of the lower wing like a signature, a papyrus textured object whose small body he used to see pulsing on a branch or rock within his lantern light. (170)

Densely allusive, the imagery of the passage recalls the "summer night's inquiry" of Patrick's youth, his desire to have a grotesque, boundary-crossing conversation with insects, and the appearance of the "rare winter moth" that draws Patrick toward the skaters' celebration of community on a frozen river (20). That the woman's blind eye reminds Patrick of a "papyrus textured object" serves to remind the reader of the papyrus-textured pages of the novel itself, the textual field of inquiry in which we take our place in this communal conversation. The play of the woman's absent vision over Patrick's shoulders and face dramatizes the softness of the moth, the kiss with which Alice Gull leaves Nicholas Temelcoff on the night of her transformation, the balm of dialogue and community (39). The encounter impels Patrick back into the world of community, albeit the company of cell mates in the Kingston Penitentiary, where he pays for his act of wilful destruction and meets a thief named Caravaggio.

The section of the novel bearing Caravaggio's name is one of the most densely metatextual of all, bearing structural similarities to "The Bridge" in its nonlinear representation of the titular character; all the while it grotesquely avows its textuality at the same time as it fulfils the function of realist narrative. The section begins with Patrick and Caravaggio, working in another metatextual trio, painting the tin roof of the jail with a shade of sky blue. Their participation in this illusion, another *trompe l'oeil* "humiliation of the senses," imbues their task with hazard, as the painters "could

not move without thinking twice where a surface stopped" (179). To stay alive, advises the Italian thief, all the painters need to remember is "demarcation." Yet it is the antithesis of demarcation that allows him to escape, when he has the other men secure him to the roof and cover him with blue paint, "so he was gone -- to the guards who looked up and saw nothing there" -- crucified in blue, invisible to all but author and reader (180). As I've suggested, the thief's illusion analogizes Ondaatje's position in *In the Skin of a Lion*, his reformulated role in the trinity of author, character and reader, partially hidden behind the facade of realist narrative; the grotesquery that qualifies this realism is highlighted throughout the narrative of Caravaggio's subsequent escape in moments that betray his participation in literature and art. Later in this section, for instance, this illusion is echoed in a manner that underscores Caravaggio's capacity to function as a grotesque cipher, an author/character gravitating to spaces that are at once marginal and literary. Caught in a house by the returning family, Caravaggio climbs a bookshelf, assuming an utter stasis against the book bindings that surround him -- "as still as a gargoyle against Trollope and H. G. Wells" (198) -- obscured by a cryptic colouration that equalizes fictional thief and text itself. A seeker of marginal spaces, Caravaggio is named for the Italian painter, and throughout his section of the novel is involved in a kind of metatextual tour of Canadian literature. As such, his position in the novel suggests an equalizing of visual and literary genres and a complicated exchange between art and reality, realist narrative and postmodern text.

Escaping from Kingston by train, Caravaggio arrives in Trenton, finally finding himself at Redick's Sash and Door Factory (181). In this strange space, suggestive of the kinds of boundary zones (doors and windows) that have always attracted Ondaatje's protagonists, Caravaggio meets the young Al Purdy (Barbour 198). At this point, fictional thief and metafictional poet-to-be engage in an allusive act of unmasking, as Purdy helps Caravaggio remove the paint from his face just as Patrick helped Alice

after the masque in the waterworks. The dialogue between "real" poet and fictional character further unmasks the fictional aspect of the text, its status as a (Canadian) literary artifact. Significantly, the boy named Al asks Caravaggio if he is from a movie production company, implicating another mode of art-making in this novel's grotesque scene- and genre-shifting cinematography. What is more, the boy seems to have a keen appreciation of the grotesque; he hangs around the sash and door factory simply because he likes its strange imagery: "All the doors propped outside, where they don't belong -- things where they shouldn't be. . . . There is another place in town where you can see outboard motors and car engines hanging off branches" (181). In this scene of metafictional discovery, Purdy's poet's eye for the grotesque also partakes in the paradigmatic act of unmasking, foregrounding the relationship between both "Al" and Caravaggio, and Ondaatje himself, whose works have always engaged the grotesque in representing the act of searching, of attempting to unmask figures obscured by their position in history. This association is italicized when the young poet uses shears to cut off Caravaggio's blue hair -- and when the transformed thief looks at himself in a mirror for the first time in months (182). The metamorphosis of the shears and the self-reflection of the mirror allusively recall Ondaatje's relationship with Buddy Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter*, suggesting by textual association the relationship between author, reader and character.

This relationship is further emphasized later in "Caravaggio," in a narrative echo of the dialogue between Caravaggio and Al Purdy. Escaping into cottage country, Caravaggio breaks into an uninhabited cabin, stealing clothing and borrowing a canoe. On the lake, he meets another "real" Canadian poet, Anne Wilkinson.<sup>2</sup> Caravaggio and Anne meet twice, once on the lake, and again when he breaks into her cabin to use

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<sup>2</sup> Aside from various biographical details, the major clue to Anne's identity is a comment in the prefatory Acknowledgements at the beginning of the novel (Barbour 200).



the telephone. Each encounter reinforces the thief's capacity as a metatextual cipher, a shadowy amalgam of author and character. Meeting for the first time in their separate canoes on the shared lake, Anne substantiates this vision of Caravaggio by taking him for an artist, noting a splotch of "aquamarine" left on his neck from his earlier masterpiece of deception and escape (187). Later, before Caravaggio enters Anne's cabin to call his wife, he watches her from the darkness outside through a window while she writes "the first love poem [she has] written in years" (203). Both the telephone call and the love poem represent acts of correspondence and connection, a reaching out of the self to another (in Wilkinson's case, the "other" is the lake itself). More interesting, however, is the moment before Caravaggio enters the cabin, when (obscured on another rooftop) he watches the unsuspecting poet from outside her window. The qualified intimacy of this strange and partial connection engenders a paradigm of perception itself, of the processes of searching and finding as they have been portrayed throughout Ondaatje's oeuvre. As with Webb's search for Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter*, this act of seeing is invasive and fragmentary; the illicit intimacy he achieves is without dialogue and as such it fails to provide the kind of ingress -- the kind of connection -- that can't be stolen. Meanwhile, the "secret" words of Anne's love poem (which Caravaggio can not read from his position) suggest the act of writing itself, a metatextual act that mysteriously embraces the obscured thief even as it leaves him out, implicating yet another Canadian poet/"thief" who writes and watches in the shadows outside of our novel's various "windows:"

[Caravaggio] was anonymous, with never a stillness like this woman's. He stood on the roof outside, an outline of a bear in her subconscious, and she quarried past it to another secret, one of her own, articulated wet and black on the page. The houses in Toronto he had helped to build or paint or break into were unmarked. He would never leave his name

where his skill had been. He was one of those who have a fury or a sadness of only being described by someone else. A tarrer of roads, a house-builder, a painter, a thief -- yet he was invisible to all around him. (199)

At the centre of his own decentred story, in a section of a novel that bears his name, Caravaggio's paradoxical anonymity renders him invisible neither to the reader, nor to the "someone else" that describes him here. In this scene, Ondaatje creates a grotesque paradigm of perception and representation in which Canadian poet (and reader) watches fictional thief, who in turn watches Canadian poet engaging in the very act of writing that engenders the entire performance. Within the narrative, at the centre of this set of Chinese boxes, Anne somehow senses the watcher outside. This subconscious awareness is a function of the extent to which her own writing associates her with both Ondaatje and the narrator whose boundary-crossing omniscience breaks the window separating poet and thief.

Moreover, the act of inscription itself -- a love poem connecting her stillness with the landscape outside -- reaches out further still, into the inter- and extratextual "landscape" of this novel; the "secret" she inscribes "black on the page," is her own "Lake Song," which reads in part:

I am a hearer of water;  
 My ears hold the scund and the feel of the sound of it mortally.  
 My skin is in love with lake water,  
 My skin is the leaf of the willow,  
 My nerves are the roots of the weeping willow trees. (Wilkinson 20)

At the same time as the imagery of this poem collapses the boundary separating the poet from the natural world outside her room, the poem -- which is at least accessible to the active reader -- embodies a number of intertextual echoes that associate

Wilkinson's writing and Ondaatje's: the image of a grotesque fusion of the body with the natural world, the "mortal" status of the water, the water imagery in general, the repeated reference to "skin." (Also, in what is perhaps pure coincidence, Wilkinson's 1956 poetic historiography of her own family is titled *Lions in the Way*.) As with the earlier references to John Berger's essay, and to Cubist and Realist artists, our full appreciation of the relationship between Caravaggio and Ondaatje's fictional Anne is a function of our knowledge of the real Wilkinson's work, or our willingness to track down the references and uncover the salient intertexts (acting, in the process, as a kind of literary "searcher"). By knowing (or finding) the words to "Lake Song," we can imaginatively enter the poet's space in the same moment her imagination moves outward, past the thief-voyeur, and toward the lake that is doubly represented now, in the words of both Ondaatje and Wilkinson. In any case, each writer's writing, their shared "secret," "black on the page," signals another metatextual deformation, and implies the necessary companionship of the reader, the inscribed pages of the novel before us.

The crossing of boundaries implicit in this grotesque performance of textual dialogue suggests the possibility of a more direct connection than Caravaggio realizes on Wilkinson's roof. After he enters her cabin to contact his wife, Giannetta, he is caught as he hangs up the phone; here, poet and thief engage in another, much more intimate kind of dialogue. When she offers him something to eat, he follows her "into the kitchen feeling relaxed with her -- as if this was a continuation of his conversation with Giannetta" (201). The two talk honestly in another symbolic unmasking; here, they each allow the other to cross boundaries into their own life stories. Because of the correlation of poet and thief -- their shared capacity to cross boundaries -- Anne does not fear Caravaggio; when she asks him about her lack of alarm, he admits to watching her from the rooftop, citing her writing as the reason for her calmness:

--David, why am I not scared of you?

--Because you've come back from someplace. . . . You got something there. Or you're still there. (201)

Later, when Anne invites Caravaggio to sleep on her couch, he feels it necessary to remind her of his occupation; at this point, however, all that matters to the poet is what is shared by poetry and thievery -- the act of transgression:

--You can sleep here. I'm going up to bed.

--I'm a *thief*, Anne, *un ladro*.

--That's right. You broke out of jail. (202)

As if to emphasize the connection between Caravaggio's escape and her own poetry, she turns immediately to the subject of her writing, the love poem inscribed to "the sound of lakewater" (203). On the whole, this exchange dramatizes the sustaining potential of a level of connection and communication seldom achieved in earlier works. Here, Ondaatje's narrative moves from the qualified solitude of doorways and windowsills into the kitchen -- Canada's traditional family room -- with its associations of warmth and nourishment.

Significantly, such moments of connection in this section of the novel are balanced by violent images of severance. After meeting Al at the *Door Factory*, Caravaggio stares into a mirror and sees the scarring caused by a prison attack in Kingston. The attack itself is represented in a grotesque scene that merges oniric water imagery and a violent brutality that furthers the textual association with *Coming Through Slaughter*. Here, the thief's cell is invaded by a number of men (armed with a razor); in the attack that follows, Caravaggio is unable to discriminate between his nightmare and the actual attack.

Interestingly, Caravaggio is saved by Patrick's verbal interference, when Patrick instinctively uses his father's square-dance call to draw attention to the attack and to pull the thief from his dream: "His father's language emerging from somewhere in his

past, now a soundtrack for murder" (185). The emergence of this strange language draws the reader back to "Little Seeds" (one of which comes to fruition in the penitentiary), and to the narrator's description of Hazen Lewis's neutral, unemotional square-dance calling (*ISL* 19). At this earlier point in the novel, Patrick resists his father's taciturn and withdrawn instruction calling; it lacks the performative vibrancy required by a young boy who is hungry for conversation and community. In the chaotic violence of the jail cell, however, this is the voice that Patrick uses; its associative neutrality becomes a potent counterpoint to the racist epithets of the attackers: "'Fucking wop! Fucking dago!' '*Honour your partner, dip and dive.*'" (185) Neutral or not, the indeterminate status of the square-dance caller underscores the ambivalent position of the author; at the same time, the locutions of the square dance itself reflect the eternal flux of the novel's plot, its decentering choreography of connection and separation.

This grotesque textual "dance" is analogized by the last scene of the section: a carnivalesque love scene that surpasses the prison attack in the grotesque power of its imagery. Indeed, at the same time as the potent eroticism of this scene acts as a thematic counterpoint for the violence of the earlier attack, its boundary-crossing energy -- its unification of images of coupling and cutting -- suggests a fusion of connection and severance: the contradictory and coextensive gestures that analogize the performance of narration itself throughout *In the Skin of a Lion*. Here, in another kitchen, Caravaggio and Giannetta come together in a fantastic sexual "conversation" that unifies various bodily functions -- copulation, bleeding, consumption -- in a narrative context somewhat reminiscent of the solar rape in *Collected Works* and Bolden's final parade in *Slaughter*:

Giannetta feels the scar on his throat. Her soft kiss across it. He carries her, still in her, holding up each thigh, her eyes wide open,

crookery behind her crashing from shelf to shelf, as she nudges the corner cupboard. Blue plates bounce and come through the lower panes like water and smash on the floor.

With each step her bare foot on a pearl or a fragment of plate. She opens the fridge door. In its light she pulls her foot up to her stomach and examines it, brushing something away. He lies back and she sits over him, swallowing the cold wine. He traces the path down her body at the speed he imagines the liquid takes.

Her chin on her knee. Planting her foot on his shoulder she leaves blood when she moves it. When she opens her eyes wide he sees glass and crockery and thin china plates tumbling down from shelf to shelf losing their order, their shades of blue and red merging, her fingers on his scar, her fingers on the thumping vein in his forehead. . . . Fridge light sink light street light. At the sink she douses her face and shoulders. She lies beside him. The taste of the other. A bazaar of muscles and flavours. She rubs his semen into his wet hair. Her shoulders bang against the blue-stained cupboard. A kitchen being fucked. Sexual portage. Her body forked off him. (204-205)

The scene analogizes sexual intercourse with textual dialogue, marshalling intertextual echoes from other parts of this section, and from *In the Skin of a Lion* as a whole. Here, sexual commerce echoes the conversation between thief and poet in Anne Wilkinson's kitchen, combining that allusion with references to the prison attack: Giannetta's kiss on Caravaggio's scar, the blood from her own foot, and the violent frenzy of their shared lust. The predominant blue of the cupboard and the plates as they fall, like water, out of their "order" combines allusion with illusion, recalling and qualifying the stasis of Caravaggio's aquamarine self-painting, the grotesque trompe

l'oeil "portraiture" -- an erasure of ego and identity -- that corresponds to the position of the author behind and outside of the realist narrative. Here, the plates slide out of position, smashing to the floor in a kind of textual unmasking, underscoring the illusive aspect of all fiction and, indeed, all art. The allusive nature of the entire passage foregrounds its context within a larger literary structure, just as the narrative potency of the representation of sexual union -- its shifting focalization -- implies the presence of the author and the process of writing itself. In this scene, grotesque physical imagery becomes the vehicle for an exploration of the potency of intimacy and connection.

Whereas the attackers who enter Caravaggio's cell use a kind of knife to effect a brutal severance, the imagery here employs other symbolic utensils to announce a capacity for connection, such as the image of the "fork" with which Ondaatje describes the frenzied movements of Gianetta's body. But just as the disconnection of the earlier scene was qualified by Patrick's square dance call, here the sharp edges of the broken plates that cut Gianetta's foot suggest the continuance of distances, the kinds of disconnection that potentially underscore even this fantastic congruence. Nevertheless, at this point in the novel the impulse toward connection is dominant; the profoundly dialogic act of lovemaking traverses borders between unitary identities ("When she opens her eyes wide he sees . . .") and perhaps even between life and death ("her fingers on his scar, her fingers on the thumping vein in his forehead. . ."). The intermingling of such contraries suggests the ability of the grotesque to transcend these boundaries, just as the text itself potently eschews narrative realism to foreground the coextension of writing and reading, the dialogue between author, text and reader. In this way, the passage engenders a kind of "Sexual [metatextual] portage," what Patrick Lewis -- during his own revelation of participation in discontinuous stories -- calls "a falling together of accomplices" (145).

The "falling together" represented by Caravaggio's and Giannetta's coupling is roughly analogized by the last section of the novel, "Maritime Theatre," with its titular connotations of the flux of water imagery and performance. Here, in a narrative context characterized by genre-shifting and discontinuity, the various strands of plot move across their respective horizons, intersecting and intermingling. The first scene returns us to Patrick, announcing his release from jail in 1938, and providing a wealth of historical detail with which to contextualize this event. The effect is illusionary, however; as Douglas Barbour has noted, several of the events cited by the narrator are temporally displaced; Huey Long's assassination and the opening of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, for instance, took place in 1935. On the whole, this strategy of chronological displacement "creates an uncertainty effect missing from the earlier novel" (Barbour 200). The effect of this uncertainty bridges reader and character: sitting once again in the train station, "Patrick suddenly had no idea what year it was" (*ISL* 210). Looking up at a sign that reads "HORIZON," Patrick remembers leaving Clara in the station, remembers her pointing out the architectural hyperbole of its cathedral-like space, the Tennessee marble floors. He turns from this memory, physically turning and "discovering the horizon," identifying the boundary (a paradigm of that "terrible horizon within him beyond which he couldn't leap" [*ISL* 157]) he must cross to leave the solitary space of the train station once again.

Moving "tentatively" into the city, Patrick feels "invisible" until he enters the Geranium Bakery, reentering a community of love and of story: "Nicholas Temelcoff walked forward and embraced him. A bear's grip. The grip of the world" (210). Here, in this embrace, Patrick is reunited with Hana, reinserted into a community of love. And when she asks him about his time in prison, the reader is finally able to see the dual nature of an earlier scene of rescue:

In prison he had protected himself with silence -- as if any sentence would be unsafe territory, as if saying even one word would begin a



release of Alice out of his body. Secrecy kept him powerful. By refusing communication he could hold her within himself, in his arms. But on the night Caravaggio was attacked, his father's neutral song slid out as a warning. And Patrick turned from himself. (212)

The indeterminacy of the penultimate sentence establishes the potential complexity of the "neutral song" and its ability to function as a warning, both for the sleeping thief and for the solitary bomber. In any case, the resultant gesture -- the turning from himself -- suggests Patrick's revelation of the necessity of belonging in a community, of connecting with others. This act of turning -- of finding the horizon -- precedes Patrick's discovery of the "one friend" he made in prison (*ISL* 212), and establishes a foundation for his participation in the characterological and narratological community of "Maritime Theatre."

To counter this vision of the possibilities of interpersonal relationships, the section continues with a final glimpse of the last days of the life of Ambrose Small, a figure who "always kept the landscapes of his world separate, high walls between them" (213). For Small, such walls -- like the wall Clara had earlier detected in Patrick -- act as "the horizon that held him together" (213). Unlike Patrick, however, Small remains a solitary, dying alone in an isolated psychological space to which even Clara cannot gain ingress. Significantly, in his final days, Small's compartmentalized life flies apart as he enters a grotesque zone of discontinuous association and memory, "as if what had kept all his diverse worlds separate had been pulled out of him like a spine" (213). This transformation comes too late for Small, who is himself transformed into a grotesque; in a gesture opposed to Patrick's turning from himself, Small can only turn inward, paradoxically exploring hitherto repressed connections across a life based on the order of severance:

The only clarity for him now was this bare room where Clara brought him food. He had imploded, had become a Gothic child suddenly full of

language that was aimed nowhere, only out of his body. Bitten flesh and manicure and greyhounds and sex and safe-combinations and knowledge of suicides. She saw his world as if she were tied to a galloping horse, caught glimpses of faces and argument and there was no horizon. (214-215)

In Ondaatje's unvaryingly ambivalent representation of Small, the reclusive millionaire is here compared with a blue heron (214), an allusion that is quite significant for readers of Ondaatje's earlier poetry or *Coming Through Slaughter*. The association of Small with the heron kings of Ondaatje's earlier work underscores the inability of a novel like this one to come to any resolved or totalizing value judgements about Small, who moves -- like Bolden and the heron -- into an isolated and unreadable space. In any case, the textual association is a significant one, highlighting the most significant thematic metamorphosis in Ondaatje's writing career to date, simultaneously acknowledging and disowning the ambivalent heroism of white dwarfs.

Ambrose Small's death gives way, significantly enough, to a scene of pure dialogue between Patrick and Clara, as she calls him to ask for him to drive to Marmora to pick her up. This long conversation is occasionally marked by metatextual references -- subtle reminders of the book in the readers' hands, and the literary nature of the dialogic story in which we are participating. For instance, Patrick jokingly chides Clara for not remembering his lesson to always carry a book with her (218). Moreover, earlier in the conversation, Patrick makes reference to the telephone itself -- the medium of connection -- as "goddam *deus ex machina*," just before asking how Ambrose died (217-218). Here, such a comparison equates the telephone conversation with literature and drama, reinforcing the necessity of our participation in this novel's grotesque interlocution and simultaneously implicating the author in Small's *deus ex machina* death. The (necessarily imagined and fictional) death of this historical figure

establishes a causality for Patrick's reunion with Clara -- and perhaps for her assuming a place in the growing familial community that includes Hana as well. Here as before, the very form of the dialogue represented in narrative is imbued with a consciousness-raising capacity regarding the conversational aspect of narrative itself, the necessary coextension of production and reception.

Patrick agrees to drive to Marmora, deciding to bring Hana with him for company. Exhausted, he needs to rest before the drive and tells Hana to wake him in forty minutes; at this point, the excited girl makes Patrick promise to tell her all about Clara during the drive. Like Hana, however, the reader must wait for this journey to begin; the duration of Patrick's forty-minute sleep is analogized by the discontinuity of the narrative, which shifts back in time to explain how Patrick got a broken arm, forestalling the ride to Marmora and its promise of reunion.

The long narrative that comes at this point -- focusing on Patrick's invasion of the waterworks and final confrontation with Rowland Harris -- represents an ambiguous ferment of ideology and genre; like the earlier discovery of Ambrose Small, this entire section is characterized by a paradoxical and revelatory anticlimax. At the outset, we learn of the growth of social dissidence during the time when Patrick was released from the prison, and the resulting security measures at civic buildings like Harris's waterworks. The story moves across the bay to the lights of the yacht club on Toronto Island -- and a costume ball where we find Patrick, reunited with Caravaggio and his wife, Giannetta. The uninvited threesome (another trio of accomplices) work the crowd, finally securing a pleasure cruise on one of the yachts -- for reasons that don't become clear to the reader until after Caravaggio and Patrick have chloroformed the owners, and turn the yacht in the direction of the waterworks. Throughout this scene, and the one that follows, *In the Skin of a Lion* plays with the narrative modes of adventure novels, conflating typical espionage-story fare with touches of eroticism and

resonance that seem out of place: "While some sentences seem straight out of a light thriller, the perceptual intensity of others interferes with any straight generic reading" (Barbour 202). Here, the generic dialogism of the narrative establishes a foundation for the scenes to follow, and the climactic anti-climax of Patrick's confrontation with Harris. Diving from the yacht, Patrick -- equipped with scuba gear and explosives -- enters the waterworks' intake pipe, moving toward the filtering plant he intends to destroy, which now assumes the space of the former immigrant night masques and Alice Gull's potent metaphors. Moving through the tunnel, carried by the current of the black water, Patrick parodies Alice's earlier statement that he is easily harnessed, like water itself. The effect of the parody itself, however, is at least partially undermined by the scene of dialogue that follows Patrick's invasion of the waterworks, by bombs that never explode. After setting the charges, in a grotesque image that potentially underscores the ambivalence of the entire scene (Barbour 203), Patrick finally "[w]alks toward Harris, the blasting-box carried like a chicken under his arm" (*ISL* 234). (This strange grotesque-comic image may also recall readers to the death of Gregory in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, where another such chicken image foregrounds the relationship between violence and accountability.)

The conversation between Patrick and Harris foregrounds the ideological ambivalence and indeterminacy of the novel as a whole. Like the earlier exchange between Patrick and Ambrose Small, this confrontation is a kind of revelatory anti-climax; there is no philosophical resolution of the argument the two men engage in, and there is no explosion. As Douglas Barbour nicely summarizes it, "[t]heirs is a dialogue serving a dialogic text" (203). Over the feldspar surface of Harris's desk, Patrick accuses his former employer of forgetting the labourers, of caring more about herringbone tiles than about the deaths of his workers. Harris attempts to subvert the accusation by telling Patrick that he doesn't understand power, that he is simply

searching for a scape-goat: "What you are looking for is a villain" (237). And perhaps, even in the context of this adamantly ambivalent novel, that is what we are looking for as well. In any case, this scene refuses to totalize Harris or reduce him to literary caricature; immediately after Harris's accusation of Patrick (and the reader?), the Commissioner forgoes the stilted rhetoric of his homily on the complexity of power and explains himself through narrative, telling the story of his "dream" of Toronto (237). Harris's dream presents an oneiric vision of a metamorphosed Toronto, a place where gardens and fountains replace intersections, a city in which the excess of "wonderful things" -- planned and rejected -- has not been sacrificed to the short-sighted demands of economy or prudence. Harris's dreamed city is another testament to his status as a modernist visionary, a champion of imagination and creation whose dream transcends parody at this point, suggesting an indeterminate but significant level of empathy shared by civic boss and extratextual author.

This boundary-crossing relationship (and Harris's relationships with other characters within the text) is foregrounded as the scene continues. After his description of the dream, Harris characterizes Patrick as a member of a community that (like his imaginary cityscape) is never "accepted or acknowledged" (238). Harris's correlation of Ondaatje's fictional protagonist with his own imaginary city is rendered even more resonant by Harris's reference to Patrick's ex-centric community as "Mongrel company," a powerful allusive phrase that sets Patrick in the intertextual community of Bolden and Bonney, casting the reader back through *Slaughter* and through *Collected Works* to the imagery of some of Ondaatje's earliest poems. The ambivalence of this allusive remark strengthens the correlation of author and fictional builder/planner, just as Harris's later quotation from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (242) -- spoken as he watches Patrick sleep -- takes us back to the beginning of the novel, implying the omnipresent act of writing itself. Collectively, these metatextual signals denote a level of

correspondence between Harris and the author that we might expect only to apply to more traditionally "sympathetic" characters like Patrick and Caravaggio; however, such expectations overlook the open and ambiguous complexity of this dialogic novel, its grotesque capacity to embrace divergent values in the confused matrix of its textual/ideological dis-closure. Harris also seems to relate to other characters within the text in surprising ways. When Patrick quotes Alice's comment that, "In a rich man's house there is nowhere to spit except in his face," Harris is able to cite Diogenes as the source of Alice's "old saying," perhaps illuminating an area of commonality with the dead actress/activist that even Patrick doesn't share (Barbour 203-204).

Alice's entry into this conversation is significant, clearing the way for the true "climax" of this strange scene: the psychological and textual breakthrough that allows Patrick to finally embrace his role in a familial community with Hana, and with Clara. When Harris asks about Alice, suggesting that he has even seen her perform, Patrick tells him (and us) that she was killed in an accident, when she picked up the wrong bag -- a bag that was carrying a clock bomb. Patrick's voice begins to trail away as he tells the story, and the commissioner fears losing him altogether, describing his impression of Patrick's difficulty in a way that foregrounds the literary status of the story he is receiving along with the reader: "If he were writing this down, Harris thought, his handwriting would be getting smaller and smaller" (239). When Patrick finally tells Harris that he doesn't want to talk anymore, trying to return to the silence that protected him in the Kingston Penitentiary, Harris insightfully insists that if he doesn't speak about her death, "it will always be a nightmare." In an act of encouragement reminiscent of Nicholas Temelcoff's conversation on the night "Alice" fell from the viaduct, Harris insists that Patrick talk; interestingly, this exhortation analogizes and echoes a scene from much earlier in the novel, when Alice herself advises Patrick to confront Clara so that he might "remove her shadow" (89).

The first-person narration that the reluctant saboteur begins at this point -- and the third-person narration it eventually becomes -- suggest a Freudian return of the repressed for both character and narrative: the representation of a terrible event that has been inhibited for years in the fictional world of Patrick's life, and for almost 100 pages of text since the first mysterious reference to her death. The story begins as Patrick recalls being informed of Alice's situation when he is working in the tannery, running to find Nicholas, and searching for Alice in the crowd of a nearby demonstration. Patrick's narrative trails away into a silent white space as he remembers hearing the explosion, "near enough [for him] to have found her and picked up that bag and flung it anywhere else on the street. . ." (240). Significantly, Patrick's explanation begets as many questions as it answers. For instance, the fact that Patrick is warned and arrives at the demonstration *before* the explosion raises uncomfortable implications about the origins of the bomb in the bag, and about Patrick's possible role in the enactment of this terrible mistake. In any case, the narrative refuses to provide all the answers, even as it shifts into a third-person mode after Patrick's voice trails away, adopting a wider perspective that allows us to see Patrick and Alice in the street, as he holds her destroyed body in his arms, and is himself embraced by Temelcoff (240-241). Instead, this shift in voice and focalization underscores only the coextension of textual and psychological suppression, formally acknowledging Patrick's personal "working through" of his problem by foregrounding the simultaneity of the character's unburdening and the text's narrative disclosure. It is no coincidence that this third-person representation of Alice's death (which could have come at almost any point in this discontinuous novel) should arrive here, inextricably bound to the unravelling of Patrick's crisis, his eventual decision to reveal his pain to the unlikely audience of Rowland Harris. As such, this correspondence -- the double-voiced aspect of "Patrick's" story -- engenders a fusion of the intra- and extratextual,

the complex functions of story-making and story-receiving in the boundary-crossing dialogue of this novel.

After the horrifying and moving story ends, there is a strange hiatus, interrupted only by an italicized voicing of Patrick's name, an inquiry from an uncertain source (241). This single word stands alone, simultaneously suggesting the voice of Nicholas or Alice calling to Patrick from the context of the story we've just read; the voice of Harris questioning him in the dark office that contextualizes this narration; or even of Hana -- outside of this narrative frame -- attempting to summon Patrick out of the sleep he entered twenty pages (and forty minutes?) earlier. Potently ambivalent, the single word itself -- the identification of a name -- only foregrounds the dialogic, polyvoiced nature of this novel, the choral aspect of its entreaties to connection. In any case, Patrick's name bridges the story of Alice's death and the arrival of a symbolic dawn in Harris's office. Here as elsewhere in the book, dialogue itself has qualified and defused the crisis engendered by too-simple oppositions and abstractions. The commissioner contemplates the now sleeping figure of Patrick Lewis, fully cognizant, it would seem, of Patrick's vision and of his pain. This acknowledgment consummates the anticlimax of the scene, dissolving (in a way Harris's political rhetoric could not) the simple antagonism between disadvantaged labourer-activist and privileged civic boss. When a military officer enters the office at six o'clock, the blasting-box is defused and the injuries Patrick sustained in the intake pipe are tended. The charges brought into the plant are never detonated, and obviously Harris lays no "charges" of his own.

This denouement ends the analeptic narrative; over the page, Patrick's name is voiced once again, this time by Hana, who is attempting to awaken Patrick from his nap at the beginning of the novel's final "frame." This last scene brackets not only the narrative we have just finished, but the totality of *In the Skin of Lion* as well. The



transition from framed narrative to narrative frame is artfully gentle, as if Patrick has fallen asleep in the Commissioner's office only to wake up, his arm still damaged from the intake tunnel and "wet with the sweat of sleep," at home with Hana. Significantly, he continues to be reluctant -- hungry, perhaps, for the world of the past his sleeping has textually engendered, still desiring to stay in place, avoiding "plot and all its consequences" (160). He (and we) must move forward, however, as his daughter insists; when Patrick asks for "Five more minutes, ten more minutes," Hana tells him "No, we *have* to go" (243), impelling Patrick forward to his reunion with Clara, and impelling us forward to the contradictory ending of a novel that reunites us with (and severs us from) its beginning, analogizing the processes of connection and disconnection that have defined this novel for character, author, and reader alike. Moving to the car in a walking embrace, Patrick and Hana pass through the significantly metatextual zone of another early morning, where they perceive the ephemeral touches of a world of partially apprehended stories: "The houses at this hour beautiful and large, stray lights on within them, and [Patrick] could see the faint interiors, their privacy and character revealed, each room a subplot. His good arm was around Hana's shoulder while she hugged the thermos to her" (243). Here at last, sharing in the warmth of a family community with Hana -- no longer reduced in his capacity to do so by Alice's death -- Patrick looks in windows, avowing the beauty of "faint interiors" and hidden subplots, acknowledging the partial nature of the revelations their stories offer him. Comfortable with this aesthetics of the incomplete, Patrick finds the detail of the morning darkness "most beautiful" (244). Of course, this scene engenders a paradigm of the novel as a whole, the windows we have looked through and the faintly illumined worlds of "privacy and character" partially revealed along the course of its decentred path of subplots and intersections.

It is at this point that Patrick pauses, deciding to let Hana drive in a moment of textual paradox, a narrative disconnection between the novel's beginning and ending

that simultaneously reinforces the importance of connection and community. Indeed, Patrick's gesture is a potent dramatization of the grotesque coextension of severance and association; the intimacy of this scene's relationship to the novel's epigraph necessitates connection just as adamantly as the inconsistency of representation unhinges any simple correlation. The contradiction itself effects not only a transposition of the roles of driver and passenger, story-teller and story-receiver, but a unification of these roles within the ontological gap created by the disparity of epigraph and conclusion: a cracked frame that lets in the grotesque.

Here, and throughout *In the Skin of a Lion*, the grotesque defines a zone of uneasy compromise between the desire to order life experience into meaningful and conventional narrative patterns (and to impose those patterns on other life stories) and the attendant revelation of the tenuous nature of knowledge, the anarchic flux of experience -- shared and unshared, recalled and forgotten -- that imbues the most direct intimacies with unbridgeable distances. What distinguishes this novel from earlier works in Ondaatje's canon -- this 3 a.m. journey from the solitary space of a smoky hotel room or an asylum cell -- is the exchange of dialogue itself, the acceptance of the provisional nature of truth implicit in the process of conversation, the ceaseless choral interplay of thesis and antithesis. The dialogic trope of conversation -- augmenting the grotesque play of identity and identification in Ondaatje's earlier work -- creates the possibility of community itself, underpinning an antithesis of the silence and isolation of white dwarfs. In the night drive to Marmora, Patrick and Hana are sustained by the cooperative nature of their metatextual voyage, moving through a storyscape in an analogy of the reader's progress through their narrative. In this journey through light and darkness, we are all bound by the shared goals of finding order, and of apprehending the chaos beneath it -- "the looseness of the structure of all objects" -- in a way that continues to value both order and chaos, structure and looseness, connection

and separation. True to the novel that precedes it, the contradictory conclusion of *In the Skin of a Lion* sustains a vision of the community to which Ondaatje's readers always belong: the cooperative trinity of author, character, and reader that diffuses and equalizes creation and reception in a communal acknowledgment of the duality of existence. A falling together of accomplices.

\* \* \*

A further half decade would see the arrival of Ondaatje's most recent work, *The English Patient*. His longest work to date, this novel represents another falling together (and falling apart) of accomplices, this time in the setting of the Italian Villa San Girolamo during the final days of World War II. Here, for the first time in Ondaatje's writing, we are reacquainted with characters from earlier work. Hana, now a war nurse who has been traumatized both by the death around her and by the death of her father, resides in a villa *cum* field hospital, abandoned during the northward advancement of the Allies. Mined and subsequently shelled, the ruins and shelters of the Renaissance villa become a hermitage for Hana and for the eponymous "English patient," a living enigma who fell burning like Icarus, without identity or history, into the African desert. Soon, Caravaggio enters the story as well; having exchanged his occupation as a thief for similar work as an Allied spy, he too has been disfigured by the war, his thumbs cut off for performing his duty. Hearing of Hana's isolation in the villa, Caravaggio moves to her, attempting to provide the human connection that will begin her healing. Ultimately, however, he becomes more interested in the English patient, whom he believes to be a traitor, a double agent named Almasy. While Caravaggio -- transformed into another of Ondaatje's searchers -- attempts to navigate the labyrinthine convolutions of the English patient's story, looking at first for

incriminating evidence. Hana becomes involved with the last of this novel's excentrics, a Sikh sapper named Kirpal Singh, a searcher and defuser of hidden German bombs. In the story that embraces these four characters, we see the development of a small community in the villa, a coming together and an exploration of otherness in a historical context that will ultimately force that community apart -- with the terrible revelation of bombs no sapper can defuse, the atomic "fusion" bombs dropped on Japan. The bombing forces Singh to reevaluate his peripheral position in the Western culture he has been attempting to adopt, impelling him away from the Italian villa, and from his developing relationships with the English patient and with Hana.

On the whole, the novel explores some of the same territory as *In the Skin of a Lion*, investigating the contingency of perception, the interplay of chaos and order, the value of community, and the contradictory possibilities afforded by the isolation of silence and the associations of dialogue. Despite characterological and thematic overlapping, however, this novel is no sequel to *In the Skin of a Lion*. True to his own need for personal innovation, Ondaatje has once again created a work of art that seems unique in the context of its precursors, even if that uniqueness is, in part, a contradictory function of this book's realization of a more conventional novelistic form than is found in earlier works. Reacting to this with some ambivalence, Douglas Barbour identifies this "exquisitely seductive and provocative" novel as bearing "Ondaatje's blandest title yet" (206); although *The English Patient* "rejects nothing of the style and intensity of vision that mark his earlier works" at the local level of language and perceptual intensity, it is nevertheless the author's "most accessible fiction" (208).

Like *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient* works against the monologic stature of history by focusing on the particulars of individual experiences of historic events, and by organizing the structure of its own characterological "history" into

discontinuous narrative fragments that gradually flesh out each of the figures in the villa. This "accumulation of narrative fragments . . . never quite solidifies into a plot, [yet] never quite denies us the traditional pleasures of narrative movement" (Barbour 209). Indeed, the "traditional pleasures" of this novel are engendered by its conventional accessibility, the way in which the fictional context that holds these characters together in a common space has obliged the creation of a more singular and less diffuse "story" than any in *In the Skin of a Lion*. Here, the analeptic shifts that provide glimpses of each character's past experience usually clarify rather than disactualize the experience of the larger narrative; referring to events during and before the war, they underscore the sources of motivation that define the way these four life stories intersect in the present tense, fully disclosing the richness that underlies the seeming minimalism of this story. Furthermore, the textual shifts from past to present are more gently handled than in the previous novel, in which the relentless drama of textual achronology formally represents an active coextension of past and present that, at times, is sufficiently energetic to displace traditional narrative realism altogether.

Most important perhaps is the conspicuous paucity of those moments of formal metatextuality which italicize the identification between author, reader and character throughout Ondaatje's writing. To an even greater extent than in *In the Skin of a Lion*, the authority of narratological omniscience diminishes the characteristic indeterminacy of Ondaatje's earlier writing, abrogating the reader's obligation to participate in the hazardous role of the searcher, which formerly conjoined our reading with the functions of author and character. In fact, textual/authorial avowal of such uncertainty becomes conspicuous at only one point in this novel, in a description of Hana's evolving relationship with the sapper, a fictional analogy that equalizes the distances that paradoxically sustain their intimacy with the gaps that qualify relationships between character, narrator and reader:

How much she is in love with him or he with her we don't know. Or how much it is a game of secrets. As they grow intimate the space between them during the day grows larger. She likes the distance he leaves her, the space he assumes is their right. It gives each of them a private energy, a code of air between them when he passes below her window without a word, walking the half-mile to assemble with the other sappers in the town. (127)

The intrusion of the collective pronoun "we" in the first sentence -- in a matrix of consistently omniscient third-person narration -- engenders a rare referential crisis for the reader; nothing to this point in the novel has prepared us for this moment of doubt in the narrator, in the ability of the text to fully comprehend "private energy" or transcend the code of this "game of secrets." The uncertainty of the first two sentences diminishes as the passage continues, and we move back into the interior psychological spaces of the characters, the disclosure that Hana "likes the distance," and so on. The effect of the passage as a whole, however, is a disactualizing one. Whereas, in earlier works, such moments of indeterminacy were prevalent, here, the confusion itself seems strangely out of place (as, perhaps, confusion should). Alone in a relatively unproblematic narrative setting, it is as much a signifier of the difference between *The English Patient* and Ondaatje's earlier works as it is a warning about the illusive nature of artistic representation and a moment of author-reader identification.

The nature of this difference, it is clear, has a great deal to do with this text's engagement of the grotesque -- a property that, as we have seen, generally involves a complex and active dramatization of the exchange between author, text, and reader. In this novel, the traditional boundaries that demarcate these three functions are generally left intact, seldom challenged or crossed as they are in the passage above. Indeed, this quality is certainly at the heart of what Barbour identifies as the greater "accessibility"

of *The English Patient* in relation to the rest of Ondaatje's canon. This kind of accessibility -- a function of the novel's participation within a more traditional paradigm of the novel as a generic entity (and not so much in the Bakhtinian paradigm of the novel as a self-interrogating anti-genre) -- certainly represents a diminishment or diffusion of the grotesque at the formal level of the text. Interestingly, the formal/generic "clarity" of this novel imbues it with a paradoxically disconcerting effect when it is placed in a context with earlier works, up to and including *In the Skin of a Lion*, which evince a more potent discontinuity of form and a more insistent metatextuality than is sustained here. Identifying the source of this disturbance is a revealing exercise, and one which underscores several of the definitive traits of 20th century reader response and conventional literary value. Our age has long been characterized by spiritual and ideological indeterminacy, and we have subsequently come to ascribe value to the intellectual rigour occasioned by works of art that analogize this cultural uncertainty with similar kinds of hermeneutic difficulty. Within this critical climate it is clear that accessibility -- itself a fairly slippery signifier -- is a less than desirable trait for modern works of art and literature. Subsequently, even Barbour's laudatory consideration of *The English Patient* seems uncomfortable with its own identification of the relative accessibility of the novel; Barbour moves from this observation to a celebration of the novel's "intensity of vision" (a quality he feels associates the book with the earlier works) with an immediacy that is meant to be reassuring (208). Certainly, it would be difficult to define exactly what "accessibility" is, although it would seem antithetical to many of the formal qualities and traits I have associated with the grotesque; it denotes a relatively unproblematic exchange between text and reader, usually because the text in question adheres to the conventional rules and structures upon which the reader's paradigm of reception is already based. Accessibility, it would seem, leaves little room for the formal innovation or confusion that begets the grotesque, the boundary-crossing energy that disavows the usual

teleology of plot, formally underscoring the coextension of author- and reader-functions in the shared act of creation, and insisting on the ordering act of exegesis at the same time as it renders the results of such endeavour partial and indeterminate.

Given this provisional sketch of the tacit connotations of "accessible," it is clear that *The English Patient* is certainly less involved with the grotesque (at least in terms of the reader-author relationship it engenders) than *Coming Through Slaughter* or *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Simultaneously, however, the use of a word like "accessible" risks oversimplifying the fact of this major novel (which Barbour certainly does not do) and overlooking the different kinds of complexity it represents. Indeed, the accessibility accorded to this novel is qualitatively relative: a function of the novel's position at the end of a literary career that (to date) has been defined to a large extent by stylistic innovation and experimentation. In part, then, accessibility becomes the paradoxical response-function of a perceived discontinuity between this work and the corpus of artifacts that precede it.

More to the point, *The English Patient*, for all its comparative accessibility, remains a major work, a complex and suggestive novel that evinces an enduring fascination with issues that pervade the thematic landscape of Ondaatje's career, even if (especially if?) the formal structure through which these issues are explored has moved into what (in the context of this career) is new ground. It is also a novel that warrants some consideration here, for while the grotesque no longer defines artistic structure in the way it does for the earlier works, it certainly maintains significance at a thematic level. Moreover, moments of intertextuality and metatextuality still characterize this novel, although these moments are rendered with comparative subtlety, quietly effaced against the realist backdrop of the local narrative. Like the novel that precedes it, *The English Patient* explores the sustaining and positive aspects of relational connection and community. Indeed, these issues may very well attend the diminishment of formal



grotesquery at the textual level -- as the paradoxical distances that sustain the intimacy of the characters are analogized by the reemergence of the conventional boundaries distinguishing author, character and reader. Here again, Ondaatje (and his readers) watch as characters play out the dramas of searching and finding, discovery and disillusion, order-making and chaos-avowing: processes in which both reader and author once participated more directly. In this novel, to a greater extent than ever before, what I have established as a basic paradigm of the grotesque is projected almost entirely onto the characterological plane, the fictional world in which the characters connect and separate. Perhaps, in the end, apprehending the grotesque in a novel like *The English Patient* is not so much a matter of formal/textual obligation, but of choosing to read in a certain way, adopting the imaginative and active paradigm of response required by the earlier works, and fully engaging a fictional world in which removing the most accessible book from a shelf can blow your head off.

The projection of the grotesque into the fictional world of story is clear throughout the early sections of the novel. Here, readers are reacquainted with an older Hana who is very different from the teenager who accompanied Patrick on his night drive to Marmora at the beginning and ending of *In the Skin of a Lion*. "Shell shocked" by the experience of nursing dead and dying soldiers, she also carries the burden of her father's recent death. Subsequently, her refusal to leave the villa with the other nurses and doctors attests to her need for stability and isolation: a minimization of life experience and interpersonal contact that recalls Patrick's "cure" of isolation throughout the earlier novel. The process of Hana's recovery embraces the contraries of connection and seclusion that have been played out in the earlier works; indeed, the trauma of her experience of the war imbues her representation with a level of intertextual identification greater than that of any other character. Ondaatje's

descriptions of Hana often echo his own earlier works -- especially *Coming Through Slaughter* and (of course) *In the Skin of a Lion* -- often suggesting the distance she must go to be made complete in her dual capacity as an individual and a participant in community.

Even before the revelation of Patrick's death, Hana's desire for order and stability is evinced by a memory of working at a hospital in Pisa, and of a white marble lion that presided over this setting:

It stood alone on top of the battlements, linked by colour to the white marble of the Duomo and the Camposanto, though its roughness and naive form seemed part of another era. Like a gift from the past that had to be accepted. Yet she accepted it most of all among the things surrounding the hospital. At midnight she would look through the window and know it stood within the curfew blackout and that it would emerge like her in the dawn shift. She would look up at five or five-thirty and then at six to see its silhouette and growing detail. Every night it was her sentinel while she moved among patients. (40-41)

The lion, unchanged by the violence all around it, betokens the "naive" aesthetics of a world that pre-dates world war; it maintains an increasingly out-of-place permanence among the other icons of a lost culture, including the "mad logic of a tower leaning like a person in shell shock" and an increasingly grotesque menagerie of living sculptures in the "hospital" garden, where "[t]he topiary carved for thousands of years by too careful monks was no longer bound within recognizable animal forms, and during the day nurses wheeled patients among the lost shapes" (*EP* 41). The lion's strange clarity becomes an anchor for Hana, a "sentinel" she is constantly aware of as she moves among the broken bodies of the soldiers in her care. Simultaneously, the image of the lion and its architecturally allusive colouration creates a titular echo of *In the Skin of*

*Lion*, implying that the white pages of its textual structure are somehow related to the passing world this stone lion represents. As if to reinforce the point, the statue immediately takes on greater significance when Hana remembers receiving word of Patrick's death, and compares him to the "white lion" (41), suggesting the clarity and security she derived from her relationship with him. This loss of order, we are told, comes not long before Hana "had come across the English patient -- someone who looked like a burned animal . . ." (41), and subsequently decides to pull herself from the action of the war, "deserting" the medical corps to stay at the Villa San Girolamo with her last patient.

The setting of this act of retreat most clearly suggests the importance of the grotesque at the fictional level of the novel; like the gardens represented throughout Ondaatje's career, the Villa San Girolamo is a place that is hostile to boundaries, and inclusive of contraries. It is within this grotesque space that the major narrative intersections of the novel take place, highlighting the connections and disconnections that qualify human interrelationships in a microcosmic community. Lavishly represented throughout the early pages of *The English Patient*, this strange setting has borne the functions of nunnery, Nazi stronghold, and Allied hospital. A historical and architectural grotesque, the villa shelters Hana and the English patient from the weather outside, and from world events beyond their purview. Simultaneously, this fictional setting suggests the complexity of the textual, discourse "setting" that engenders it.

Mediating the dialogue of art and "reality," the villa occupies a curious middle zone. Just up the hill from the Villa Medici, the villa implies the omnipresence of art; it offers us a host of potential intertextual references that cross the boundary between literature and other art forms in much the same way that various kinds of cubist and realist images are embraced by *In the Skin of a Lion*. Here, the potentially dense collocation of artistic intertexts is partially undermined by their context in the villa,

where neglect and violence -- the intrusive disorder of war -- have imbued this symbolic site with a profound capacity for parody, a grotesque dialogue of aesthetic allusion with fictional reality. The entirety of the villa, in fact, suggests a unification of within and without that recalls the imagery of *Running in the Family*, in which the vibrancy of the Ceylonese landscape overleaped the boundaries of architecture, fusing the artificial with the natural:

The Villa San Girolamo, built to protect inhabitants from the flesh of the devil, had the look of a besieged fortress, the limbs of most of the statues blown off during the first days of shelling. There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth (43).

Inside the villa, walls that are adorned with ancient trompe l'oeil landscape scenes are parodied by other walls in which huge holes actually permit views of the outside world: "Some rooms faced onto the valley with no walls at all. [Hana] would open a door and see just a sodden bed huddled against a corner, covered with leaves. Doors opened onto landscape. Some rooms had become an open aviary" (13). Significantly, this crisis of referentiality is also evinced in the inter/metatextual space of the library, where a large hole "at portrait level" allows the ingress of "the habits of weather, evening stars, the sound of birds" (11).

The effect of this dialogue of intertextual art and fictional reality in the setting of the novel functions like a Magritte painting, juxtaposing art and reality in a way that makes it impossible to ignore the constructed, artistic nature of the entire image. Indeed, the setting of the villa becomes an important metaphor for the act of reading itself, suggesting a metatextual intimacy between character and reader, mediated at the level of fiction. In the early pages of the novel, when Hana reads books aloud beside her patient's bed, he lapses in and out of consciousness, realizing a partial apprehension

of plot in a way that implies a connection between the formal fragmentation of the novel before us, and the fictional fragmentation of his surroundings:

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)

Hana's retreat into this grotesque site of isolation -- and her relationship with the English patient -- bespeaks the psychological trauma of her experience of the war, experience that is represented analeptically in the course of the narrative development. In the role of a war nurse, Hana's mental survival has necessitated a painful mediation of connection and severance with the people she has encountered, most of whom she loses to the dynamism of war, or to death itself. In such a context, connection is almost impossible, and Hana becomes more and more withdrawn from the world around her; acts of connection are desperate and provisional, having as much to do with selfhood as with otherness. Her work as a nurse requires detachment, and in the historical context of her situation, even the alleviation of this detachment leads only to the most qualified intimacies: "To rest was to receive all aspects of the world without judgement. A bath in the sea, a fuck with a soldier who never knew your name. Tenderness toward the unknown and anonymous, which was a tenderness to the self" (49). Here, even love-making becomes a gesture of inward-turning, an ambivalent act that suggests more of distance than of closeness, more of solitude than of association. Ultimately, we discover that these moments of provisional intimacy underlie another source of Hana's pain, when she admits to Caravaggio that she had an abortion in Sicily after learning of her father's death (82).

A paradoxical strategy of disconnection, Hana's retreat to solitary spaces engenders a textual association with Ondaatje's earlier work, specifically to the similar

solitudes sought by Buddy Bolden. (The copious references to jazz throughout *The English Patient* create a kind of extended intertextual reference to *Coming Through Slaughter*. Indeed, the entire narrative represented by this decentred novel -- the brief hiatus from history shared by these four characters has the quality of a musical jazz "burden," a form that avoids the teleology of plot in a peaceful zone where "the musician did not wish to leave the small parlour of the introduction and enter the song, kept wanting to stay there, where the story had not yet begun . . ." [109].) Growing used to the anonymity of the countless dying soldiers she cares for, Hana remembers how she "called everybody 'Buddy'" in a way that foregrounds this intertextual connection: "Hello Buddy, good-bye Buddy. Caring was brief. There was a contract only until death. Nothing in her spirit or past had taught her to be a nurse. But cutting hair was a contract, and it lasted until they were bivouacked in the Villa San Girolamo north of Florence" (50-51). The reference to cutting hair in the context of a war that renders everybody "Buddy" powerfully illustrates the encroachment of detachment and anonymity into the personal sphere, the absence of community in a world coming through slaughter. The relationship between Hana's story and Bolden's is further reinforced in less than a page, when she remembers another allusive and self-reflective gesture; finding a tiny mirror in the hospital she stares at her own image for the first time in over a year: "Hi Buddy, she said. She peered into her look, trying to recognize herself" (52). Ultimately, the alienation that defines her surroundings migrates inwards to the sphere of the ego, effecting a crisis of self-identity. Throughout *The English Patient*, this crisis represents the crux of Hana's struggle -- what is at the very heart of her difficulty interacting with the people around her. Her intertextual relationship with Bolden continues to represent this process, even after she becomes involved with Kirpal Singh. During one particularly allusive moment, Hana inexplicably pours milk over the brown skin of Kirpal's arm (123), recalling a similar event in the relationship between Bolden and Robin Brewitt. Such moments of textual

identification oblige the reader to make associations, paradoxically underscoring the necessity of connection at the same time as they suggest Hana's enduring difficulty with connection.

Only near the end of the novel, when Hana has begun the process of healing, can she engage in a significant act of correspondence, writing a letter to Clara in which she begins to define her own sense of the coextension of the personal and the public that is at the heart of her problem. On the day after what feels like "*the end of the world*" -- the Allied bombing of Japan -- Hana writes: "*From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public. If we can rationalize that we can rationalize anything*" (292). Throughout the novel, it is this process of grotesque rationalization that is enacted in the interplay of identity between the four major characters. For Hana, the restorative capacity of "rationalization" is signaled as the letter continues, and Hana confronts at last the death of her father. At this crucial moment, speaking to Clara through her letter, Hana moves toward the private -- imaginatively entering the space of Patrick's final moments -- and simultaneously reminding us of Patrick's break-through in Rowland Harris's office, where he too confronted (through dialogue) the painful fact of Alice's death in a way that enabled him to participate in a community:

*Patrick died in a dove-cot in France. In France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they built them huge, larger than most houses. . . . The horizontal line one-third of the way down was called the rat ledge -- to stop rats from running up the brick, so the doves would be safe. Safe as a dove-cot. A sacred place. Like a church in many ways. A comforting place. Patrick died in a comforting place. (293)*

Here, the war of public and private is dramatized by a shift to the private and personal, an imaginative act of connection wherein Hana joins her father in a safe and comforting

place. Interestingly, this healing act is a paradigm of the novel itself, its capacity to focus on the details of personal relationships -- the "private energy" of this characterological "game of secrets" -- amid the swirling cultural maelstrom of the era. For the characters, as we shall see, the process of interpersonal "searching" -- the act of exploring the mysteries and secrets of another -- generally renders unexpected and partial treasures, rewards that are disassociated from the characters' roles in the larger, public drama of the war.

Just as Hana's eventual letter-writing echoes Patrick's dialogic breakthrough in Harris's office, the earlier stages of her story evince similarities to Patrick's periods of self-imposed isolation and silence after Clara's departure and after Alice's death. Throughout *The English Patient*, Hana's long process of beginning to remove the "shadow" of her father's death -- and of the massive casualties of the war -- creates an extended intertextual association between adopted daughter and lost father. Hana's "desertion," her withdrawal from the public role of war nurse in which she participates in the action of the war, recalls the solitary space of Patrick's minimal apartment, his aloneness with books and crossword puzzles. Like her father, Hana spends most of her time in the villa (prior to the arrival of Caravaggio and Kirpal) invading the potentially hazardous space of the library, reading to herself or to the English patient. Significantly, her only social contact is with the English patient himself, whose role in her life is suggestive of the clarity and stasis she is searching for. First encountered very soon after the death of Patrick, the English patient provides Hana with a strange sort of surrogate father figure. Simultaneously, he represents a relief from Hana's transitory and anonymous contacts with the people around her, anchoring her by his own need for absolute motionlessness. Burned beyond recognition and living a kind of grotesque half life, he is the one patient Hana can trust not to move, heal or die. Moreover, the strange, partial amnesia that seems to qualify the English patient's sense



of identity ensures a safety of distance in their intimacy. As such, their relationship is qualified by the continuance of mystery, the fact that Hana can stay in an unnatural "early" stage of familiarity, never confronting the pressures that attend greater disclosures of otherness and true dialogue -- a sharing of secrets the withdrawn nurse neither desires nor pursues at this point.

Interestingly, the correspondence with Patrick's isolation and peripheral position in *In the Skin of a Lion* is shared by the other major characters in *The English Patient* as well. Even Caravaggio, who acted as one of the metatextual connective "spinners" in the former novel, is rendered silent by his experience of the war. When we first encounter Caravaggio in *The English Patient*, his identity is withheld; he is identified only as "[t]he man with bandaged hands" (27). The absence of his identity at this point is a function of the silence with which he protects himself, rendered mute by the trauma of his activities as a spy, of having his hands destroyed by the Germans. Surviving the ordeal, Caravaggio is nonetheless "in near ruins" when he arrives at the Allied hospital, and he offers his healers no clue to his identity or feelings, except for his serial number (a partial disclosure of information and identity that confuses the distinction between friend and enemy). Once he is identified, the doctors and nurses respect Caravaggio's mute solitude, seeing him as a "war hero" who wanted silence:

That was how he felt safest. Revealing nothing. Whether they came at him with tenderness or subterfuge or knives. For more than four months he had not said a word. He was a large animal in their presence, in near ruins when he was brought in and given regular doses of morphine for the pain in his hands. He would sit in an armchair in the darkness, watching the tide of movement among patients and nurses in and out of the wards and stockrooms. (27)

Here, Caravaggio protects himself with the same silence that Patrick employed during his time in the Kingston Penitentiary -- a silence, interestingly enough, that Caravaggio

brought Patrick out of in the earlier story. The correspondence of "tenderness," "subterfuge," and "knives" betrays his distrust in the people around him, the predatory quality of all acts of connection in Caravaggio's eyes; this equivalence suggests a further deterioration of the categories of friend and enemy that imbues all relationships with antagonism. (This grotesque equivalence, combined with the silent, institutional space Caravaggio occupies here, provides another textual correspondence with Buddy Bolden at the end of *Coming Through Slaughter*.) Significantly, however, the former thief and metatextual poet-figure requires less motivation than Hana to reenter the hazardous world of words and connection. Overhearing a group of doctors conversing about Hana and the English patient, he abandons his silence at the sound of the name of his friend's daughter, determining to find her and bring her out of aloneness. It is only when Caravaggio enters the villa, confronting Hana in an act of connection, that we discover his name (31).

Ensnaring himself at the villa, Caravaggio is unable to penetrate Hana's defensive need for personal distances. Very quickly, he identifies her connection with the English patient as potential symptom of neurosis, and sets out to undermine this strange relationship. Familiarizing himself with the English patient, Caravaggio -- formerly involved with British Intelligence -- becomes convinced that he is actually a Hungarian double- (and then triple-) agent, a traitor named Ladislaus de Almásy (*EP* 163-164). Confronting Hana with his theory, Caravaggio is rebuffed; Hana dismisses both the theory and its basic value, telling Caravaggio, "You're too obsessed. It doesn't matter who he is. The war's over" (166). Caravaggio ignores this, deciding to engage more fully in dialogue with the English patient in the hope of uncovering his true identity. At this point, the former thief's obsession suggests another point of commonality with Patrick Lewis, a capacity to be transformed from solitary to searcher in the same way that Patrick does when he attempts to learn everything about Clara and

about Alice, constructing an intimacy with each of them that is intolerant of gaps in the incomplete disclosure of their secret history. What Caravaggio gains through the process of his searching is a qualified success, but it is the process of the search itself that is more significant here. In a familiarizing and defamiliarizing dialogue that recalls Patrick's interview with Harris, Caravaggio's evolving relationship with the English patient dramatizes the contingency of searching. Providing character and reader with some of the answers we require, this dialogic exchange simultaneously unhinges the binary logic of antagonism that inaugurates Caravaggio's search, reoccasioning Hana's question about what truly matters in the world of this post-apocalyptic sanctuary.

Finally, there is Kirpal Singh, bomb sapper and ethnic ex-centric, the last of the major characters to enter the grotesque space of the Villa San Girolamo. As a sapper, Kirpal represents another kind of searcher; he seeks out hidden German mines and defuses them, potently illuminating the hazardous nature of searching itself. The imagination and ingenuity with which bombs are hidden and triggered throughout the sapper's experience underscores the limitations of perception -- a theme that extends back through Ondaatje's career to his earliest poetry. In *The English Patient* -- perhaps more than in any other work -- trompe l'oeil can be fatal. The theme of perception and hazard is played out by other aspects of Kirpal's representation as well, particularly in the descriptions of his attempts to apprehend various religious artifacts he encounters during the war. There is, first, an analeptic description of a night the sapper spent in the Sistine chapel, attempting to see the faces and figures Michelangelo painted on the vault above:

The sergeant lit a flare, and the sapper lay on the floor and looked up through the rifle's telescope, looking at the ochre faces as if he were searching for a brother in the crowd. The cross hairs shook along the

biblical figures, the light dousing the coloured vestments and flesh darkened by hundreds of years of oil and candle smoke. And now this yellow gas smoke, which they knew was outrageous in this sanctuary . . . (77)

This "outrageous" and potentially destructive act ultimately affords the sapper a momentary revelation of the "great face" of Isaiah (78), the first major prophet, whose prophecies tell a tale of destruction followed by renewal and regeneration. This act is immediately echoed in the memory of the sapper's experience of the "Marine Festival of the Virgin Mary" in Gabicce Mare (*EP* 78-80), in which a statue of the Virgin is carried by boat and truck to the seashore. Unable to participate directly in the religious ceremony, Singh stays out of sight, once again using the telescopic sight of his rifle to "see the cream-coloured face and the halo of small battery lights" (*EP* 79). Both scenes underscore the coextension of perception and potential violence; in each case, there is the ambiguous use of the rifle to close a distance in a grotesque gesture of reverential blasphemy.

The fact that Singh remains quiet about the danger of his occupation as a sapper, that he "never speaks about the danger that comes with this kind of searching" (*EP* 74), suggests another significant aspect of his character and his role in the novel. An explosives expert, Kirpal's occupation signifies a connection to Patrick Lewis, a connection that is substantiated by the marginal position the Sikh soldier occupies in the fictional world of the novel. (Indeed, it is probable that the strong correspondence between Singh and Patrick is one reason for the relationship sustained by Hana and Singh in *The English Patient*, a connection that suggests, in part, the young woman's search for her lost father.) The analeptic narratives that develop Singh's past, from his youth in India to his training and service with the English bomb-dispersal unit, foreground this facet of his role in the action of the war. One of these, representing

Singh's relationship with his mentor Lord Suffolk and Suffolk's assistant, Miss Morden, shows Singh inaugurating his relationship with the Western culture he will attempt to adopt, the process of "beginning to love the English" (*EP* 190). The companionship between eccentric English mentor and ex-centric Indian trainee proves transitory, however, when Suffolk and Morden fully engage the hazard of their task, and are killed during an unsuccessful defusion (190). Indeed, the very task that kills Suffolk -- the activity of sapping in which he trains Singh -- potently suggests the complex interplay of centre and margin that defines Kirpal's representation throughout *The English Patient*, at the ambiguous and solitary centre of a radius of potential destruction. This grotesque zone where centre and periphery cohabit recalls the solitary centre-field where Patrick frolics with Alice Gull in *In the Skin of a Lion* (160), and functions as a paradigm for the narrative focus of *The English Patient* as well, a cooperation of stories that "centre" on characters in a private and de-centred textual field, removed from the central drama of history and war. Like Patrick Lewis's capacity for marginalization, Singh's participation in the bomb unit and in his other experiences is often defined by disconnection, or by grotesque connection from the margins -- the sort of provisional connection he achieves through the sight of his rifle. In the ceremony honouring the Madonna, the participants at the centre of the action have nothing to do with the distant sapper: "None of them was aware of his continued presence on the periphery" (80).

Later, when Kirpal talks with Hana about his experiences as a Sikh in the English military, he underscores the value he has placed upon his own decentred role:

You understand . . . it was just that I hated confrontation. It didn't stop me doing whatever I wished or doing things the way I wanted to. 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 or through a specific gate in the fort -- I just stood there, still, until I was invisible, and then I went through. Like a cricket. Like a hidden cup of water. You understand? (200)

A kind of self-made ex-centric, Kirpal thrives on his "invisibility" -- a detachment that continues to define his role as an Indian soldier in an English military unit. Existing in the "overlooked space" of his chosen "silent life," Kirpal avoids the dialogue of confrontation, attempting to remain detached from the language of politics. Like Patrick, Kirpal "was one of those never interested in the choreography of power" (*EP* 195). But just as the death of Alice Gull impelled Patrick out of his detached and silent existence, the bombing of Japan at the end of this novel forces Kirpal to recognize the political choreography that has defined the space he occupies -- the postcolonial revelation of the "death of civilisation," the bomb that "[t]hey never would have dropped . . . on a white nation" (286). After an aborted act of violence (an echo of Patrick's invasion of the waterworks), Kirpal engages in his own gesture of desertion, turning away from the war and moving back through the geography of Italy, back toward his future in India, away from Hana and away from the English patient.

This act of desertion represents the falling apart of the community in the villa, the conclusion of a novel that charts the intersections of the life stories in this strange space. At the mysterious centre of this cooperation of narratives, there is the English patient himself, whose necessary stasis anchors the other characters in a grotesque setting of boundary-crossing. Here, for a while, these characters are unnaturally free to participate in the exploration of each other; the barriers that define and demarcate human relationships are temporarily suspended. Clustered around a vulnerable character, whose skin is either gone or burnt beyond recognition, each figure in the villa partially shares in this vulnerability and exposure: ". . . here they were shedding skins. They could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defence but to

look for the truth in others" (*EP* 117). This shared kind of searching is suggested by Caravaggio's conversational "interrogation" of the English patient, and by the relationship that develops between Hana and Kirpal. Interestingly, before anyone joins Hana -- in the very early sections of the novel -- she plays games by herself when she is not caring for her patient. One of these is enacted every time she leaves the hazardous space of the potentially mined library, when "she walked backwards, stepping on her own footprints, for safety, but also as part of a private game, so it would seem from the steps that she had entered the room and then the corporeal body had disappeared" (12). The crux of Hana's "private game" is an act of effacement, a playful creation of enigma achieved through an erasure of self, which underscores her position of self-imposed isolation in the deserted villa. After she becomes involved in a community with Caravaggio and Kirpal, however, the rules of the game are rewritten and imbued with a dialogic aspect that results from the participation of another. Much later in the novel, Hana reenters the library (made safe by the sapper at this point), this time in a game of hide-and-seek with Kirpal, a ludic analogy of the process of searching itself (220-225). In this game, the participants connect and separate, call out and stay silent, catching each other to demand the prize of a "confession" at the end of a game with no clear victor. When Hana asks if she has won the game, Kirpal's ambivalent answer suggests the possibility of unity that undermines the hierarchy of winners and losers, what is to be gained by a dropping of the defences that still qualify the dialogic interplay of characters in the villa: "He still has said nothing since he came into the room. His head goes into that gesture she loves which is partly a nod, partly a shake of possible disagreement. He cannot see her for the glare [of her flashlight]. He turns off her light so they are equal in darkness" (225). The equality achieved in darkness simultaneously underscores the necessity of connection and the contingency of the defensive act of looking "for the truth in others," attesting once again to the distances that qualify intimacy.

Despite these distances, the strange community that collects around the English patient at the Villa San Girolamo is essential to Hana's healing -- and perhaps to Caravaggio's as well. After this community has already begun to fall apart, and Kirpal has left the villa, Hana is able to finally engage in an act of correspondence with someone outside the setting of the novel, writing to Clara in a way that underscores the importance of her experience: "*This is my first letter in years, Clara, and I am not used to the formality of them. I have spent the last few months living with three others, and our talk has been slow, casual. I am not used to talking in any way but that now*" (292). This disavowal of "formality" is responsible for the slow and casual openness of the letter that follows, the comforting representation of the death of Patrick, the desire to have been with him at the end of his life, and the plan to return to Canada: a promise of reunion.

As the titular character, the English patient occupies the contradictory centre of this decentred novel; his "story" -- which gradually emerges in his conversations with Caravaggio -- is directly related to the strange epigraph of *The English Patient*, a partial transcription of the minutes of a meeting of London's Geographical Society, in which brief reference is made to "the tragic circumstances of the death of Geoffrey Clifton at Gilf Kebir, followed later by the disappearance of his wife, Katharine Clifton, which took place during the 1939 desert expedition in search of Zerzura." While this particular mystery and act of searching seem privileged by their epigraphic status, the story that clarifies the enigma is hardly "central" to the novel that follows -- it never attains the primacy of plot we might expect. Accordingly, the titular status of the English patient does not render his story more important than any other in this novel. His centrality, rather, is a function of his structural role at this intersection of life stories, where he acts as a catalyst for the community that briefly develops before us. He is responsible for the characters' narratological "propinquity:" a word of association the English patient loves (*EP* 150).



A characterological grotesque of unrecognizable burnt flesh, the English patient anchors the other characters to the Villa San Girolamo, a setting in which he seems particularly at home, beneath the blue sky of his trompe l'oeil ceiling. A kind of living library -- whose memory and identity seems at times to be almost entirely literary and historical -- the English patient suggests a grotesque equivalence of art and life; as such, he is the most potently metatextual figure in the novel, an enigmatic cipher who mediates contraries and suggests an equivalence of writing and reading at both fictional and textual levels. As such, the English patient represents a blank, writable space upon which other characters in the novel project themselves and their needs in various ways. For Hana, the English patient provides solace after the death of Patrick, representing a kind of father figure: a piece of living stability to whom she can devote herself. This devotion eventually takes on a spiritual resonance, when Hana comes to see her patient as a "despairing saint" (*EP* 4; 45). For Kirpal Singh, the English patient evolves into another kind of surrogate father figure, replacing Lord Suffolk as an avatar of the English culture the Indian sapper is still coming to love. The two spend hours together, Kirpal listening to the English patient expound upon philosophical and aesthetic issues -- an activity that underscores his capacity as a kind of (Western) cultural mentor. For Caravaggio (and, to a lesser extent, for Hana), the English patient represents an absent story: a mysterious gap in personal and public history that inaugurates a process of searching.

Throughout the bulk of his narrative, the English patient remains nameless; indeed, namelessness seems to follow him wherever he goes, impelling those around him into the role of the searcher. In his catalogue of different kinds of wind, one is signified by a blank space, its name excised because of a painful history: "There was also the -----, the secret wind of the desert, whose name was erased by a king after his son died within it" (*EP* 16). Even the Bedouin tribe who rescue the English patient

from the desert have an unspeakable, secret name (95). To the military personnel who take the English patient from the Bedouin, this mystery is intolerable, suggesting the possibility of an enemy in their midst. Kept in a compound, near the caged body of Ezra Pound, the English patient only heightens the mystery, admonishing his captor/rescuers for not being more thorough in their questioning, and avowing a potentially incriminating cultural literacy:

"You should be trying to trick me," the burned pilot told his interrogators, "make me speak German, which I can, by the way, ask me about Don Bradman. Ask me about Marmite, the great Gertrude Jekyll." He knew where every Giotto was in Europe, and most of the places where a person could find convincing *trompe l'oeil*. (95)

Throughout the interrogation, the roles of questioner and questioned shift back and forth as the English patient inquires about the action of war, and then provides long speeches that develop historical analogies to other wars, never giving the slightest clue about his own history: "He had rambled on, driving them mad, traitor or ally, leaving them never quite sure who he was" (96). In the liminal space of the compound, not far from Ezra Pound and knowing the location of every Giotto in Europe, the English patient is a living text who must be "read" by those around him, and made to fit into the ordered narratives of war history and military intelligence, structures of order that are both vulnerable to and intolerant of the hazards of *trompe l'oeil*. To the military, the ambivalent phenomenon of the English patient represents what Geoffrey Harpham calls a grotesque "non-thing": "The mind does not long tolerate such affronts to its classificatory systems as grotesque forms present; within an instance of its being exposed to such forms it starts to operate in certain ways, and it is these operations that tell us that we are in the presence of the grotesque" (4). The characteristic "operations" to which Harpham refers involve the actualization of the mind's logical

classifications, attempts to make the grotesque figure understandable within the static structures of a conventional or perceptual order -- in this instance, within the simple opposition of ally or enemy that underlies the psychology of conflict. Ultimately, the English patient's first readers fail to gain this kind of understanding, giving up on him, and relinquishing him to the medical personnel at last. He occupies a similar space throughout most of the present action: of *The English Patient* -- a novel that shares the English patient's dubious label -- functioning as a grotesque personification of intertextuality, and a figure we must attempt to understand through the ordering "operations" of reading:

Now, months later in the Villa San Girolamo, in the hill town north of Florence, in the arbour room that is his bedroom, he reposes like the sculpture of the dead knight at Ravenna. He speaks in fragments about oasis towns, the later Medicis, the prose style of Kipling, the woman who bit into his flesh. 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. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless, without rank or battalion or squadron. (96)

Here, the absence of identity allows the English patient to cross borders, fulfilling a variety of functions (as we have seen) for each of the other characters who come into contact with him. To a large extent, he is transformed by other peoples' response to him, their attempts to read through the mystery he represents, constructing him through a kind of exploration, which is also a kind of projection. This transformative potential is underscored by another of the English patient's intertexts, a strange snippet of grotesque verse in one of his "drunken speeches:" "*Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound. A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire*" (115).

The English patient's capacity to foreground this process of projection, the order-making distortion of interpretation inaugurated by the enigma he represents, relates to Geoffrey Harpham's description of the function of "nonnons," which Vladimir Nabokov describes, in *Invitation to a Beheading*, as "absurd objects, shapeless, pockmarked, mottled, knobby things which, when placed before a distorting mirror become handsome and sensible" (Harpham 21). In Harpham's estimation, these nonnons

stand for the text, or the artifact itself; the mirror is the act of interpretation. All interpretation disfigures the artifact by rearranging it, taking elements out of their contexts and placing them in new juxtaposition to one another; but it takes a nonnon to enable us to see that distortion. The handsome and sensible form we see in the mirror is, quite simply, meaning -- a recreation of the text according to the demands of design or pattern, formal qualities which are prerequisites for any sense of significance. (21)

The English patient's capacity to foreground the act of interpretation is a function of his metatextual equivalence with the text that engenders his character; a kind of grotesque text-character, he has the ability to raise our consciousness about the processes of response that unify the ways in which both the English patient and *The English Patient* are recreated in a "sensible form." His participation in the role of a nonnon is effected by the paradigmatic equivalence of his physical disfiguration and the disfiguration occasioned by his subsequent interpretation by characters and by readers. As in most instances of the grotesque, this raising of consciousness has a disactualizing effect, underscoring the contingency of our recreation -- the distortions in the mirror that reflect our interpretive projections -- and highlighting the particular "demands of design or pattern" that underlie our determinations of significance.

Occasionally, in moments of weakness (or transcendence) during his conversations with the other characters (and especially with Caravaggio, who gives him extra morphine to assist his own searching), the English patient's boundary crossing takes him back beyond the day he fell into the desert, into the private and personal zone of his own hidden story. This is the case in the passage above, in which a brief reference to "the woman who bit into his flesh" interposes in a matrix of intertextual historical and artistic references. For Hana, these brief moments of fuller disclosure signify a painful love story in the English patient's past, a privacy into which she does not attempt to intrude too insistently. Conversely, for Caravaggio, these flashes of narrative represent clues to be followed, threads that will lead him to the revelation of an entirely different kind of story, a mystery story of political intrigue and espionage, a spy story with the satisfaction of revelation, judgement, and closure. Significantly, the story that gradually emerges from the English patient's disclosures represents a kind of success for Caravaggio, albeit a success that is heavily qualified by the process of the narrative. While the English patient never directly avows his identity, the story he tells finally proves Caravaggio's theory that the patient is Almasay, yet this revelation fails to provide the thief with the clarity for which he searches, the clarity that would allow him to recast the so-called English patient as either enemy or ally.

The narrative the English patient finally provides intersects with the first of this novel's mysteries and its first reference to the act of searching: the epigraphic allusion to the death of Geoffrey Clifton and the disappearance of his wife, Katharine, during the search for the lost desert oasis of Zerzura. The story develops the English patient's role as a desert explorer -- one of the original searchers for Zerzura -- and his relationship with the Cliftons. Significantly, the desert setting that provides a backdrop for all of the action of the English patient's story is itself a grotesque landscape of dynamism, of boundary crossing and boundary erasing. Here, amidst the dry shifting

sands that once were sea beds, "it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation" (*EP* 18).

This quality suggests much about the interplay of characters in the story Almasy tells Caravaggio, in which Geoffrey Clifton joins Almasy's exploration party. The exploration for *Zerzura* -- a paradigmatic act of searching -- highlights an area of commonality between Almasy and Patrick Lewis; as was the case in Patrick's search for Ambrose Small, the search for *Zerzura* yields an unexpected find: another love story, this time in Almasy's affair with Katharine Clifton. Like Patrick's union with Clara Dickens, this relationship is fraught with difficulty, the pain that attends connection and separation in a world of complex obligations and misleading appearances. Almasy's desire for connection with Katharine is profound, occasionally echoing Patrick's desire for a complete intimacy in *In the Skin of a Lion*, a total comprehension of the reality and history of an other:

How does this happen? To fall in love and be disassembled.

I was in her arms. I had pushed the sleeve of her shirt up to the shoulder so I could see her vaccination scar. I love this, I said. 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)

When this imaginative intimacy cannot be sustained, Almasy also demonstrates Patrick's capacity for self-imposed isolation, when, "[d]uring their months of separation he had grown bitter and self-sufficient" (172).

This story ends on a note of tragic reunion, when Geoffrey Clifton tries to destroy the love triangle at the lost (and found) oasis, crashing his plane in an attempt to kill Almasy, Katharine and himself. The attempt is a partial failure; the plane misses Almasy, and Katharine emerges from the wreckage alive but wounded. For a time, the two are together again in the ancient Cave of Swimmers (*EP* 248-249; 257-

258), before Almasy leaves to find help. When he fails to do so, Katharine dies alone in the cave, in another of this novel's solitary, holy places. Finally returning to her three years later, Almasy tries to take her body away in another plane, this time having the accident that left him burnt beyond recognition, falling on fire into the Libyan desert (174-175). Agonized by his past experience, having used the action of the war and his role as a spy-helper to get back to the Cave of Swimmers and to Katharine, the "English patient" embraces the erasure of identity inaugurated by the fire. Here, he realizes his goal "to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation" (139), an ultimate gesture of withdrawal that analogizes the shifting grotesquery of the sandy world he falls into: a desert desertion. Landscape suicide.

Pulled out of this insular space by his interviews with Caravaggio, the English patient -- finally revealed to be Almasy -- makes a comment that underscores his need for dialogue, and simultaneously underscores his metatextuality, his intimate relationship with the text we are reading: "You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book? Something to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies, loose vegetation, pockets of stones" (253). Encouraged to a more dialogic participation with the "book" he must "read," Caravaggio begins his own withheld story at this point, revisiting the events of Almasy's narrative providing the details of a hidden level of story that Almasy never knew. He tells Almasy of the English spies in his midst, of the mistaken English theory that he had murdered Geoffrey Clinton in the desert for his wife, of the fact that his movements through the desert on his journey to Cairo were watched and recorded by British aircraft, and of the unsuccessful English plan to kill Almasy in the desert after he left Cairo (254-255). Impressed, Almasy suddenly has to accord his own self-image as a solitary person to the fact of a documented "Almasy" he never knew existed: "I'm putting things into place. I was always a private man. It is difficult to

realize I was so *discussed*" (255). It is only in the exchange shared by Caravaggio and Almasy that the private theories of discussion are supplanted by dialogue, an interplay of stories. In this exchange, the story Caravaggio finds is itself a parable about searching; and in the process of his own search, the need for specific answers is supplanted by what is gained from the process of searching itself, which (as for Patrick and as for Almasy) is not what he expected. Ultimately, the thief's search for meaning and accountability is unseated by a shift from the historical and public to the private and personal, an act of familiarizing that unseats the larger drama of violence represented by the Second World War, and actually endears Almasy to Caravaggio.

In the end, the process of a dialogic searching for the identity of the English patient unseats the binary opposition of "us" and "them," "friend" and "enemy": the reductivist ideological opposition that engenders the logic of war. Caravaggio's ability to accept what he finds through the process of his search bespeaks the difference between his complexity and the relative straightforwardness of earlier characters like Detective Webb or Sheriff Garrett; his search for the English patient attests to his ability to recognize the gap between the disorder of the private and the required order of the public, to his own insight as an ex-centric thief and a friend to poets. In fact, Hana attests to Caravaggio's complexity and generosity of spirit earlier, when she warns the English patient of the thief's suspicion:

He says you are not English. He worked with intelligence out of Cairo and Italy for a while. Till he was captured. My family knew Caravaggio before the war. He was a thief. He believed in "the movement of things." Some thieves are collectors, like some of the explorers you scorn, like some men with women or some women with men. But Caravaggio was not like that. He was too curious and generous to be a successful thief. Half the things he stole never came home. (169)



It is Caravaggio's generous curiosity, his acknowledgement of the flux and disorder of life -- "the movement of things" -- that keeps the English patient's secret safe with him. Unfortunately, the binary logic of opposition that has been cancelled out by dialogue in the villa still characterizes the world of war, a world which will eventually intrude upon the quiescence of the villa, tearing apart the small community with the revelation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: the ultimate embodiment of the insanity and chaos that exists on the far end of war's deadly logic.

What remains in comprehending the ability of this novel to accord with the often grotesque metatextuality of Ondaatje's earlier works is some consideration of the peculiar textual contract this work represents. While this novel is formally less insistent upon correlating author- and reader-functions, the wealth of intertextual references and analogies of the act of reading accord the novel a kind of thematic metatextuality, constantly reminding us (as earlier works have done) of the coextension of searching and reading, and of the relationship between the fictional text before us and the necessity of reader participation. This issue is at the heart of the English patient's demand that his "reader" engage in dialogue with him: "You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book?" (253) The metatextual metaphor extends the question and the exhortation out into the extratextual world of books and readers, announcing the coextension of Caravaggio's reading of the English patient and our reading of *The English Patient*. In this way, here as in the earlier works, dialogism -- an activation of the creative and imaginative paradigm of reading that is associated with authorship -- is advanced as a necessary facet of response. The confusion of author, reader, and character is subtler in this novel than in any other of Ondaatje's works; nevertheless, the association is dramatized and underscored in a number of ways throughout *The English Patient*.

One of the clearest iterations of the textuality of the novel is in its spectrum of intertextual allusions. As we have seen, the very setting of the novel implies the presence of art, and the confusion of art and the context of the fictional "reality" in which such art is represented. The title character within this setting represents a grotesque proliferation of texts -- a kind of human anthology of historical and literary references -- but (throughout most of the novel) without an identity or a name that would help us to understand this chorus of textual voices. In this way, the English patient assumes a metonymic role in the novel that contains him, standing as a kind of characterological synecdoche for *The English Patient*, and perhaps for other works that incorporate the grotesque, which "confront us as a corrupt or fragmented text in search of a master principle, which Ernst Kris likened to a 'strong ego' to unify the parts" (Harpham 43). As is the case with all grotesques (and the case for Caravaggio's exploration of the English patient), this search for a unifying master principle is always in part a projection of ourselves and our needs into the sphere of perception. The entire process of provisional order-making implies "the force of convention and habit in understanding. Looking at ourselves looking at the grotesque, we can observe our own projections, catching ourselves, as it were, in the act of perception" (Harpham 43). This grotesque confusion of ground and field is generally dramatized by the overt textuality of the novel as a whole, the importance of the library, of books and of fine arts, at the local level of the storyscape we are passing through, and ways in which we project ourselves to bring unity to this textual chorus.

At a number of points throughout the novel, the intertextual intrudes into a character's (or reader's) understanding of a particular scene. Interestingly, intertexts maintain contradictory functions throughout the novel, dramatizing the gestures of connection and severance that have come to define Ondaatje's representation of community. Occasionally (as traditionally happens in literary allusion), an intertextual

correspondence will further our appreciation of a scene or character, allowing us to profit by juxtaposition in a kind of artistic, textual community. Generally, these moments underscore the positive aspects of association and analogy, enriching the ways in which readers are enabled (by past reading) to project themselves into the novel. Often, in the cross-generic diversity of this novel's intertextual base, we are urged to consider non-literary arts in this way, just as cubist imagery and specific cubist masterpieces shed light on *In the Skin of a Lion*. This process is suggested by one of the "powerful narrative images" that Douglas Barbour claims "affect a perverse permanence in the minds of characters and readers both" (209): the scene in which the naked Caravaggio enters a dark room containing a young woman and her commandant-lover to steal a camera that has caught him in a potentially incriminating photograph (EP 36-39). The paradigmatic moment of this memorable scene is a single image in Ondaatje's narrative photography/painting, a moment of potentially hazardous revelation that repeats the crisis of the camera flash:

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. The car lights sweep up into a corner of the room and disappear. (36)

Here, the lush narrative representation of this frozen moment -- its intrusion of light into darkness -- potentially implies the influence of another artist who was celebrated for his dramatic representation of effects of light and shadow, an Italian master naturalist: the historical Caravaggio. The play of the headlights in Ondaatje's scene

can be related to the characteristic play of light in many of Caravaggio's works. In *The Calling of St. Matthew*, for instance, Christ enters a tavern to summon Matthew, a tax-collector, from the company of his armed agents, a new apostle. Almost nothing in this amazingly realistic painting serves to raise the image above the status of a commonplace event, except for a "spray" of sunlight entering the tavern from above Christ's head, following the direction of his gesturing hand, and illuminating the upturned, somewhat threatened face of Matthew himself. This characteristically dramatic use of light effects a confusion of the "low" realism of the image -- its unflinching representation of the commonness of these figures -- and the true divinity with which it imbues this event. In the dark room that holds the fictional Caravaggio and the woman who has seen him, the visual/textual echo of the work of Caravaggio's namesake underscores our participation in an aesthetic and textual experience, a dialogue of artifacts. If there is any more direct relationship between the two images, it can only be in the woman's act of grace, the wordless contract that lets Caravaggio know that she will not expose him (just as Caravaggio will later dismiss his discovery of Almásy). Later in the novel, interestingly enough, the English patient refers to Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath* to construct an idea of his own relationship with the young sapper (116; quoted below).

It becomes clear throughout *The English Patient*, however, that intertexts have as much capacity to sever and disconnect -- to announce the abstraction from reality that qualifies all analogy and all metaphor -- as they do to proffer moments of association. Here, as throughout Ondaatje's career, the easy and direct relationship between metaphoric and intertextual equivalence is qualified by an acknowledgment of the inherent artifice of such tropes, of the gaps that separate the reality from art, the interval of the grotesque. At one point, fairly early in the relationship between Hana and the sapper, the two work together to defuse a German bomb. Resting afterwards,

Kirpal measures his feelings about the risk Hana took to assist him: quickly, the intertextual intrudes in a way that colours the sapper's understanding of his own position, resting in the field after a small, shared act of heroism:

But he felt he was now within something, perhaps a painting he had seen somewhere in the last year. Some secure couple in a field. . . . If he were a hero in a painting, he could claim a just sleep. But as even she had said, he was the brownness of a rock, the brownness of a muddy storm-fed river. And something in him made him step back from even the naive innocence of such a remark. The successful defusing of a bomb ended novels. Wise white fatherly men shook hands, were acknowledged, and limped away, having been coaxed out of their solitude for this special occasion. But he was a professional. And he remained the foreigner, the Sikh. His only human and personal contact was this enemy who had made the bomb and departed brushing his tracks with a branch behind him. (104-105)

In this context, literary and artistic intertexts grapple with "reality" in Kirpal's attempt to understand his own role, both in the field with Hana, and in the larger context of the war. The reference to the painting of the "secure couple in a field" is both generic and specific, providing an echo of Patrick's drawing of Alice through which the earlier character attempts to "stay in this field," away from the teleology of plot. Despite this potential association, the intertextual awareness Kirpal has gained from his time in Europe only serves to underscore a collective artistic voice that has no language for him, no tradition of heroism that can comprehend his race or, for that matter, the unending diurnal "heroism" of his duty. For Kirpal, the aesthetics of the intertextual serve only to underscore the essence of his ex-centricity in Western society -- a sleepless postcolonial moment for a soldier who seems "never interested in the

choreography of power" (195). This dialogue between the postcolonialism of *The English Patient* and the colonial values suggested by significant texts of Western culture is also represented by Hana's reading before Kirpal arrives at the villa. After one of her first invasions of the library, Hana emerges with Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, a novel of India by one of England's most successful literary imperialists. The presence of such a text, early in Ondaatje's novel, signals the intertextual and cultural landscape his own Indian character is moving through. Even the sapper's nickname, after he is dubbed "Kip" by the English (ostensibly because a butter stain on one of his reports was mistaken for kipper grease), serves to underscore his textual relationship to Kipling's novel, and the extent to which the "real" Kirpal Singh is abstracted by the dominant Eurocentrism of his intertextual surroundings.

Ultimately, the sapper's acceptance of this role comes to an end -- in a novel that doesn't end with "the successful defusing of a bomb," but with the detonation of an entirely too successful fusion bomb. Kirpal's story has been of his ultimate rejection of the texts of Western culture that set him always on the periphery; interestingly, his act of withdrawal from the Villa San Girolamo, and from Europe, suggests both the potency and fallibility of intertextual analogy. Hearing of the bombing of Japan over his radio head-set, Kirpal confronts the figure he most associates with the English culture he has been attempting to adopt: the English patient, whose true background the enraged sapper never discovers (284-285). Here, at the very moment Kirpal rejects Western culture and its constitutive intertexts, the English patient's analogy of Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath* is potently evoked by Kirpal's act of judgement: "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 this scene, the confrontation between the two men is coextensive with a crisis of discourse itself -- an ambivalent judgement of the very intertexts with which

the English patient has been associated -- which seems to avow both the potential for such analogies to provide connections and insight, and the coextensive hazards of oversimplification and epistemological abstraction. Significantly, the English patient -- perhaps related to Hana's naive white lion insofar as his intertextuality links him to the past, to an aesthetics that has never contemplated mass destruction -- cannot endure what he hears over the sapper's headphones; he welcomes the possibility of death offered by Kirpal's rifle. Not surprisingly however, Kirpal, who has only ever used his weapon to close distances, refuses to pull the trigger; he ejects his cartridge, throws his rifle in a gesture that erases his involvement with the English and with the war, and finally leaves the villa.

In this way, the ambivalent value of intertexts in this densely intertextual novel suggests the complexity that defines the paradigms of creation and reception as they are represented throughout *The English Patient*. Like Ondaatje's other works, this novel (and its title character) represent fragmented and incomplete texts that must be brought to some kind of order by the active participation of a reader. Here again, the relationship between reader and text suggests the coextensive contraries of order and chaos, an exploration of the potentials of narrative and language that is at once a celebration and a caveat. As we have seen, the provisional clarity of writing and reading is foregrounded by the shifting value of the novel's intertexts, the use of a metatextual "we" in a description of the relationship between Hana and Kirpal that implies the unknowable. It is also highlighted by what the characters say or feel about their own acts of writing and reading, about the potentials for accuracy and abstraction that inhere in both processes.

At one point, when Hana is remembering Patrick, she associates him with a line from one of the books she is reading: "A novel is a mirror walking down a road" (91). Still associated in his daughter's mind with the naive aesthetics of the white lion at

Pisa, Patrick's literary equivalence suggests a classic conception of mimesis -- the mirror Prince Hamlet tells his dramatic troupe to hold up to nature, a direct reflection of reality in art. If this aesthetic optimism is qualified by anything, it is the dynamism of the mirror itself, "walking down a road," through a shifting field of fleeting reflections, which renders the novel's field of vision partial and incomplete. Soon after, Hana considers the ways different writers choose to begin their works:

Many books open with an author's assurance of order. One slipped into their waters with a silent paddle.

*I begin my work at the time when Servius Galba was Consul. . . . The histories of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero, while they were a power, were falsified through terror and after their death were written under a fresh hatred.*

So Tacitus began his *Annals*.

But novels commenced with hesitation or chaos. Readers were never fully in balance. A door a lock a weir opened and they rushed through, one hand holding a gunnel, the other a hat. (93)

The first book in Hana's consideration -- the one which begins with a promise of order -- is a work of history in which Tacitus' "assurance" underscores the contingency of historical truth, the falsification of reality engendered by the rhetoric of power and hatred. In this way, the historian's assurance is qualified by the relationship between his own order-making and the "false" histories he attempts to supplant, the process -- highlighted by the grotesque -- in which "[a]ll interpretation disfigures the artifact by rearranging it, taking elements out of their contexts and placing them in new juxtaposition to one another" (Harpham 21). Significantly, any such act of assurance constructs the reader's role in a particular way, consigning the reader to a "silent" position in Hana's canoeing metaphor. Conversely, the "hesitation and chaos" of



novels requires a more active mode of response, rocking the readerly vessel with their sudden rush, necessitating a metaphorical balancing act from the beginning. These contradictory values of order and chaos, clarity and distortion, play back and forth throughout other characters' responses to art and language. A little further on in the novel, Kirpal remembers Lord Suffolk's passion for *Lorna Doone*, and specifically his fascination for "how authentic the novel was historically and geographically" (185). This aesthetics of authenticity extends even to the English patient, who admits that his own public writing as a desert searcher "had been stern with accuracy," evincing a fundamental mistrustfulness of "the false rhapsody of art" (241). Even his remembrance of arguments with Katharine further underscores his own sense of the hazards and strengths of language: "She had always wanted words, she loved them, grew up on them. Words gave her clarity, brought reason, shape. Whereas I thought words bent emotions like sticks in water" (238).

This coextension of clarity and deformation suggest the insight of this grotesque character into the essential duality of representation, a duality that is dramatized by the very different ways in which histories and novels "begin," silencing readers with assurances of authority and order or engaging them with the dynamism of "hesitation or chaos." For the English patient -- the characterological analogue of the novel we are reading -- successfully mediating the hazards and rewards of this duality requires a self-consciously active paradigm of reading and responding, the grotesque equivalence of creation and reception that all of Ondaatje's works have dramatized and encouraged. Reading *Kim*, Hana receives "the English patient's first lesson about reading," which is that reading is not merely an act of suspension of disbelief, but rather an imaginative act of identification with the author, an imaginative invasion of Kipling's space that implies a dialogic sharing in the process of creation (94). This essential dialogism is exemplified by the English patient's "commonplace" book, a fictional and intertextual

text owned by the titular character of our own novel, which suggests a potent equalizing of reading and writing: "It is the book he brought with him through the fire -- a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations -- so they are all cradled within the text of Herodotus" (16). A grotesque anthology of personal diary and public history, original writing and literary intertext, the English patient's book implies the necessity of a dialogic and associative response: a creative act of "writing back" that disavows the quiescent role encouraged by Herodotus' *Histories*, or any other ordered history. Significantly, Hana takes the English patient's "lesson" about reading to heart; after Caravaggio's arrival, she enters the library once again, inscribing a fragment of her own story -- of being "cared for by this friend of [her] father" -- onto a blank page at the back of *The Last of the Mohicans* (61). Concealing the novel on one of the high shelves of the library, this act of writing back represents an early step towards her last act in the novel, the sealing and sending of her letter to Clara, an act of written correspondence and connection.

The complexity of the English patient (and of *The English Patient*), then, is in part a function of the duality of his role, his ability to engage in the silence that associates him with Ondaatje's "white dwarfs" and simultaneously to represent a kind of writer/reader figure, underscoring the necessity of a dialogue between creation and reception. A site of mystery at the centre of Ondaatje's novel, the English patient highlights the grotesque interplay of centrality and marginality, comprehension and enigma, in a fictional world where such centres are "at once infinitely accessible and infinitely obscure" (Harpham xvii). The twinning of the impulses to silence and to dialogue -- played out in the duality of the English patient -- is represented by the very early stages of his relationship with Katharine Clifton. Aware of the ability of words to distort reality, their capacity to bend emotions "like sticks in water," the English patient

nevertheless avows his vulnerability to words in an explanation of "how one falls in love" (229). Significantly, this momentous event takes place in the context of a character's act of narration: one night, Katharine borrows Almasy's copy of *The Histories*, and begins to read aloud a story Almasy had always skimmed over: the famous tale of Candaules, who lost his beautiful wife to Gyges after vainly contriving to let the latter see his wife unclothed (232-234).<sup>3</sup> It is at this point that the English patient falls in love with Katharine, an act that equates the falling together of Ondaatje's fictional characters with a moment of intertextual analogy:

This is a story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story from Herodotus. I heard the words she spoke across the fire, never looking up, even when she teased her husband. Perhaps she was just reading it to him. Perhaps there was no ulterior motive in the selection except for themselves. It was simply a story that had jarred her in its familiarity of situation. But a path had opened itself in real life. (233)

The coextension of the intertextual narrative with Almasy's fictional "real life" -- his act of falling in love "with the help of an anecdote" (234) -- betokens the capacity of narrative to engage (or bend?) emotions. Interestingly, the endurance of the ancient anecdote suggests the ability of such a story to transcend the order of history; when Gyges kills Candaules at his wife's request, he becomes the new king: "A New Age begins. There are poems written about Gyges in iambic tetrameters. He was the first of the barbarians to dedicate objects at Delphi. He reigned as King of Lydia for twenty-eight years, but we still remember him as only a cog in an unusual love story" (234). This unusual love story, in a gesture of textual correspondence and

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the same legend acts as an intertext in Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business*, another novel that evinces a fascination with sainthood and more generally with the wondrousness of the seemingly commonplace.

characterological connection, crosses the boundary distinguishing fiction from intertext, inaugurating another strange love story, the illicit association shared by Katharine and Almásy. In the course of this association, the ordering distortion of narrativization qualifies the very intimacy it engendered, as each participant in the relationship plays the roles that accord with their interpretation of the other; as the English patient tells Caravaggio:

I began to be doubly formal in her company. A characteristic of my nature. As if awkward about a previously revealed nakedness. It is a European habit. It was natural for me -- having translated her strangely into my text of the desert -- now to step into metal clothing in her presence.

*The wild poem is a substitute  
For the woman one loves or ought to love,  
One wild rhapsody a fake for another. (236)*

Aware of the abstraction inherent in narrative and representation, the English patient (and the Hungarian searcher concealed behind this label) nevertheless is a participant in the rhapsodic processes through which he is abstracted by the characters around him. "Words, Caravaggio. They have a power," the English patient tells his listener, a statement that is both a warning and a testament of reverence and wonder (234).

Once again, mediating the potential hazards and rewards afforded by this power is a matter of reading, of realizing the kind of "curious" and "gentle" reading that characterizes Caravaggio's dialogic act of inquiry, and of being aware of the extent to which such acts of order-creating are qualified by our own projections, our own artifice. As with all grotesque artifacts and all of Ondaatje's works to date, the rewards of *The English Patient* rely on a certain kind of reader whom Harpham describes as "patient, imaginative, inquisitive, and impious" (43) -- the perfect audience that artists

like Buddy Bolden (and Michael Ondaatje) always try to coax from the crowd. For such readers, this novel affords new acts of searching, and new chances to better understand ourselves by acknowledging our participation in this process; as before, the connections that sustain this relationship are partial and contingent, like the acts of tenderness with which Hana reaches out to another and turns inward at the same time. In this way, our attempts to apprehend these characters, their stories, and the novel that contains them is also an exploration of self, an acknowledgement of the ways in which we project ourselves into the gaps of a fragmented story. And however contingent these imaginative acts of association must necessarily be, it is an impressive quality of Ondaatje's writing -- here and elsewhere -- that the kind of order we find is never entirely devalued by its grotesque collusion with chaos and mystery. Even here, in the generic clarity of Ondaatje's "most accessible fiction," we are still "moving to the clear," (self-consciously) throwing our nets over chaos; it is through the unceasing continuance of this psychological movement toward clarity, the unending flux of experience and understanding, that Ondaatje's writing achieves its power. For no matter how contingent the kinds of connections this novel invites us to make, the response to such an invitation -- the willingness to participate in this dialogue of authorship -- is never without reward.

Significantly, this novel ends with an ambivalent celebration of the associative power of story-telling and imagination, a narratological shift in perspective for which nothing earlier in the novel has prepared us. Fourteen years after the end of the war, Hana and Kirpal have entered the plots of their separate lives; Kirpal is a doctor in India, and Hana occupies an ambivalent zone, outside of the clear focus of the narrative, still detached, it would seem, from "her own company, the ones she wanted" (301). Separated by thousands of miles, the two are nevertheless connected in a textual embrace, a shared gesture of falling and catching that recalls Nicholas Temelcoff's heroic act, "caught" by the imaginative boundary-crossing eye of the narrator:

And so Hana moves and her face turns and in a regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left arm swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles. (301-302)

This final scene underscores the limitations of even the narrator's ability to fully comprehend the spaces these characters occupy, recalling the earlier moment of uncertainty that respected the private spaces of their relationship in the villa; once again, we are shut out of Hana's thoughts, finally unsure of the source of her "regret." Simultaneously, however, this passage suggests the heroism of even the most provisional story-telling, engaging us emotionally in another shared gesture, the grace of another reunion afforded by the associative poency of fiction and imagination: the narrator's impressive trick with a fork. This act of imaginative association -- recalling Ondaatje's relationships with William Bonney, Buddy Bolden, and his own father -- underscores the necessity of connection, the ties that (loosely) bind author and character.

And finally, because we too are involved in this dialogue, this falling together of accomplices, we profit by responding to *The English Patient* in ways that acknowledge the distortion and clarity of art, and ultimately by avowing the function of our own voice in the ordered chaos of Ondaatje's novel. By providing the necessary complement Ondaatje's works have always encouraged, we again assume the best position from which to apprehend the engaging complexity of a text that engenders and sustains this textual "community." And ultimately, by participating in this way -- with one hand on the gunnel and the other holding our hat -- we will not fail to appreciate the precarious rewards of dialogue that always exist in Ondaatje's art, underlying and energizing the inexhaustible power of his words.

## (Open) Conclusion

Dissonance  
(if you're interested)  
leads to discovery

-- William Carlos Williams, *Paterson IV*.

As I begin the conclusion of this study of the grotesque in Michael Ondaatje's career, it has been three years since the publication of *The English Patient*, and there have been no hints about future publication from an author who has always been secretive about work in progress. Nevertheless, if Ondaatje remains true to the rhythm he has established, we may expect another work in about two years -- perhaps in 1997. In any case, the endeavour of forecasting what that work might look like, the form it might take, is considerably more difficult than guessing the year of publication. The growing tendency toward clearer and more traditionally defined narrative structures, discussed in the last chapter, suggests the strong possibility of another novel (in the generic sense of the word), another third-person testament to the author's ability to create a more or less satisfying order out of his characters' (less successful?) attempts to order their own stories. Over the past decade and a half, Ondaatje seems to have increased his endurance for a genre he once called "a 100 yard hurdles" and for the kinds of planning and preparation that he sees as attending this kind of writing (Solecki, "Interview" [1975] 26). Simultaneously, however, there is always that other artistic objective that cohabits with the desire to make order, which has continually defined Ondaatje's search for a form appropriate to convey his messages about the interplay of reality, art, and perception. This objective, as I have said, conditions the desires of the artist who feels the need to create order, "yet at the same time feels the urge to disrupt his own habits and to break his tried methods to see what lies outside and beyond them," to court "disorder, distortion, obscurity, irrationality and so on," and "to violate language in [the] desire to report on the chaos of life" (Lynton 40). It is this anarchic

tendency toward formal and philosophical experimentation that renders contingent our attempts to look ahead in Ondaatje's career; such prognoses attempt to preempt a career that is still "moving" with the requirement for the reduction, order and stasis that criticism (like history) generally demands. Simultaneously, as Ondaatje has been arguably moving to the clear in his exploration of genre, he has always endeavoured to begin each work with a new set of clothes, and even the most recent and most conventional works must be recognized as innovative within the context of his own *oeuvre*: a movement into new ground where he experiments with a new kind of provisional order-construction.

It is unquestionable, then, that Ondaatje's work has changed dramatically since the publication of his early short poems and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*; it is equally obvious that the nature of this evolution is directly related to the manifestation of the grotesque in each work. Reading chronologically through Michael Ondaatje's writing is itself an exploration of the bifurcated (and seemingly contradictory) artistic objectives that engender the grotesque: the desire to apprehend and create order out of experience that typifies almost all art (and, indeed, underlies all acts of human narrativization and cognition), and the necessity of acknowledging the latent chaos that lurks beneath the surface of order and understanding, imbuing whatever order we are able to make with an aspect of contingency and hazard.

As we have seen, Ondaatje's experimentation with the formal aspect of his writing would seem to suggest a diminution of the grotesque over the course of his career. Ondaatje's earliest long works, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, necessarily involve their readers in the processes of the grotesque through their participation in fragmented and contradictory anti-genres. In each of these texts, readers are faced with a polygeneric confusion of prose and poetry, fiction and history: a formal hybridity capable of commenting on the different



branches of its mixed "parentage" in the very process of engendering unavoidable confusion. These texts engage the grotesque at the structural level, undoing the traditional linguistic and generic categories through which we generally make determinations about the kinds of stories we are reading and, consequently, the kinds of expectations that define our response. At the same time, the thematic fusion of logically incompatible categories and oppositions -- "world" and "earth," centre and margin, mind and body, sanity and madness, order and chaos -- multiply and coalesce endlessly within the fragmented text, complementing formal discontinuity with irreducible thematic contradictions and paradoxes in a grotesque aesthetic that valorizes process over product. In what is perhaps central among these categorical opposites -- the idea of order versus the apprehension of chaos -- Bonney and Bolden represent opposite sides of the same coin, the former struggling against chaos while the latter stands in defiance of imposed structures of stasis and order. (Of course, this analogical cliché is itself too reductive to comprehend the grotesque ambiguity of these characters; as we have seen, they are each defined by *both* sides of my metaphorical coinage.) In any case, they correspond roughly with the two halves of the bifurcated artistic objectives that characterize the grotesque artist and, more generally, illuminate the contradictory forces at work in all processes of human order-making and comprehension. In his delineation of the contingency of these processes, Ondaatje creates formal discursive settings that seem ill-equipped to comprehend his protagonists, to represent them in a manner that renders their stories in traditionally satisfying ways. As a result, even the traditional boundaries between author (active creator of order) and reader (passive receiver of order) are undermined by the grotesquery of the text; confronted with the typological incoherence and thematic ambiguity of what lies before us, we necessarily share in the difficult process of meaning-creating at the same time as the text refocuses our consciousness on the disfiguring capacity of any interpretive endeavour. It is this capacity for disfigurement

and abstraction that leads the artist to his paradoxical fascination with the possibility of silence, the white dwarf's response to experience.

Ultimately, of course, this kind of response is no more viable for poetry or art than it is for criticism and interpretation. Ondaatje does not simply follow Bolden into the jazzman's terminal artist's silence; his is a career of "come back stories," in which each publication augments his (and our) sense of the interplay of order and chaos, stasis and flux. True to the ambivalence that defines the grotesque, Ondaatje never allows his own apprehension of the provisional nature of order to wholly undermine the value of narrative, which resurfaces once again in *Running in the Family*, where it functions as an imaginative mode of connection with an other, and with the self. Here and elsewhere in Ondaatje's writing, the truths of fiction and myth are accorded their own value. They are capable of transcending history and transcending the need for absolute accuracy and order, speaking to us directly about the interplay of these forces in our own acts of order-making and chaos-acknowledging.

In *Running in the Family*, a text which is unified by the close relationship between the author/narrator and his collective subject (and, more specifically, the subject of his lost father), this valuation is powerfully dramatized by the denouement of the writer's goals as a searcher for paternity and family history. This objective can be read as a (qualified) success only if we are willing to accord value to the imaginative acts through which the author bridges the gaps left by gossip and public history. Even within the confused, multi-generic structure of this strange book, the qualified heroism of narrative and imagination augurs the even "clearer" generic structures of the novels that follow. Throughout this text there is a pervasive sense that Ondaatje holds considerably more of the responsibility for the order that confronts us than is the case in *Collected Works*. Significantly, his authorial "responsibility" transforms as we read through the first decade of his career, and is generally reflected by the level of

association that is represented between author and subject. As we have seen, there is considerably more "direct" relationship between author and character in *Slaughter* than in *Collected Works*, and this trend reaches a kind of climax in *Running in the Family*, where the potentially autobiographical aspect of the earlier works becomes literal and Ondaatje himself emerges as one of the shifting subjects of his own metatextual exploration. As such, *Running in the Family* can be read as a prelude to the acts of imagination represented by the later novels, where Ondaatje's narrative voice shifts into the third-person, where incomplete stories are rendered within more "complete" (more traditionally satisfying) artistic structures, and where Ondaatje's more complex major characters (all of whom embody the contradictory impulses that define Buddy Bolden and Billy the Kid) engage the grotesque interplay of chaos and order in the world of fiction.

The process of this formal evolution through and ultimately (perhaps) away from the grotesque is intriguing, and may be related to one of the constituent facets of the grotesque itself, which is always antagonistic to stasis. Significantly, Ondaatje's movement to the clear, away from the formal fragmentation that characterizes the grotesque in his earlier work, is detectable in the very early stages of his career, even in the formal differences between *Collected Works* -- a collection of "left-handed poems" --and *Coming Through Slaughter* -- arguably the first of Ondaatje's "first novels" (Turcotte 50). In this early transition, the juxtaposition of prose and lyric fragments in *Collected Works* is supplanted by a (jazz-like) fusion of poetic lyrical and prose narrative modes in the language of *Slaughter*. Paradoxically, I would argue that this increased capacity for formal hybridity leads us away from the grotesque, towards a provisional synthesis of narrative modes and towards the peculiar lyric intensity of the prose representation in *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*.

This instance of formal evolution, enacting an increasingly potent diffusion of the generic and linguistic categories by which we often label types of art, analogizes the

movement to the clear that typifies the psychological denouement of grotesque experience, which invariably results in a return of order, a re-formed clarity born in the wake of the recognition of the shortcomings of a previous paradigm. Formally, in the work of Michael Ondaatje, the grotesque (at least in part) undoes itself; where generic modes become so fused that they lose their affiliation with their original generic "purity," it becomes more and more difficult to ascribe typological illegitimacy to their once grotesque offspring. Writing of the cultural situation of the late twentieth century, Geoffrey Harpham comments on this effect on a broader, societal level. In an age of technological advancement and philosophical upheaval, the grotesque

is becoming the victim of its own success: having existed for many centuries on the disorderly margins of Western culture and the aesthetic conventions that constitute that culture, it is now faced with a situation where the center cannot, or does not choose to, hold; and where the marginal is indistinguishable from the typical. Thus the grotesque, in endlessly diluting forms, is always and everywhere around us -- and increasingly invisible. (xxi)

While I am not convinced that Western society has become so tolerant that the grotesque is at once a commonplace and (therefore) an impossibility, it seems clear that "dilution" -- the multiplication of grotesque hybridity to the point where grotesque forms cease to challenge us or to comment on their "parents" -- itself seems to be one way out of the grotesque. Indeed, the grotesque is always arguably in the process of moving to the clear; challenging our ways of constructing meaningful narratives out of experience, the grotesque exists to urge us, not away from acts of order-making, but toward a different model of order, one that is freer, more tolerant, and perhaps less abstracting than the paradigm we attempt to leave behind. As Harpham puts it, "synthesis itself, the reconciling of apparently incompatible elements, is the key

principle" (45). Synthesis, then, which would seem to be "antithetical" to the coextensive interplay of thesis and antithesis that defines the grotesque, is actually the intimate possibility that inaugurates the grotesque. Not surprisingly, the synthesis that results from the engagement with the grotesque -- the "final" interpretation at which we arrive -- is often imbued with a sense of uncertainty itself; such a synthesis necessitates an uncomfortable awareness of the continuing ontological dialogue it can never entirely silence. In this way, the grotesque

implies discovery, and disorder is the price one always has to pay for the enlargement of the mind. Art, perhaps, is measured by its ability to enrich our understanding, but it is also measured by its capacity to provide evidence for the falsification of whatever theories we arrive at. It is this latter capacity that insures a text's continued life, that guarantees that there is something left to discover. (Harpham 191)

Thesis and antithesis are premised upon the possibility of synthesis, the ontological ideal of a unified vision (whether that vision is of a garden, a relationship, or a developing literary career) capable of mediating the artificial contradictions of a too-stable and outmoded logic. But in the end (and at the beginning) of the grotesque it is perhaps this very synthesis, itself stultified by the eternal tendency toward ontological inertia and stasis, that becomes -- in a kind of mythic cycle -- the most fertile breeding ground for a renewed grotesque, rising again to shock us with the shortcomings of our paradigm, the new shadows it has engendered.

Ultimately, to whatever extent Ondaatje's works have progressed in the direction of order, his fascination for highlighting these shadows and shortcomings has never wavered, and the complexity and ambiguity of his works invariably realize Harpham's criterion that there is always "something left to discover." Significantly, Ondaatje's move toward clearer generic structures (which can most fruitfully be

appreciated as a kind of formal innovation in the context of his own work) has not been complemented by a correlative diminution of the themes that typify his earlier work, the complex interplay of order and chaos, convention and imagination, in the attempt to make sense of experience. As a result, my own consideration of these novels (which are, after all, only *relatively* traditional, set against the fragmentation of the author's earlier works) has sought to uncover or expose the increasingly "invisible" ways in which they accord thematically with the grotesque as it has manifested throughout Ondaatje's oeuvre. As we have seen, what is perhaps the most conspicuous difference between the two late novels and the earlier works is the way in which Ondaatje creates a particular kind of contract with his readers, encouraging them to participate in the co-creation of a meaningful artistic experience. In *Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, readers are effectively "deputized" by the heterogeneous structure of the works, the affronting gaps in the plot that we are obliged to fill. In this way, we are made to share in the collective objectives of the author and of characters like Sheriff Garrett and Detective Webb to "apprehend" Billy and to find Buddy Bolden if we are to have any kind of productive relationship with the difficulties of the text. As a result, each work engenders a grotesque confusion of character, author and reader; watching ourselves projected into the sphere of art by our necessary participation in the act of ordering shared by all three participants, we too enter into the text's field of inquiry in a way that highlights some of the unacknowledged processes that are universal to the experience of narrative and the narrativization of experience. In *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*, where the gaps in plot are not so pronounced, Ondaatje moves away from his consideration of isolated historical solitaries and toward visions of more complicated characters who struggle to take their place in, or outside of, different communities. Attendantly, the nature of the contract between author and reader changes as well, allowing the reader a greater latitude in determining whether or not to participate in the metatextual community each work represents. In these books, we

watch (in the same third-person space occupied by the narrator) as Patrick Lewis engages his own tendencies toward isolation and community, his own capacity to function as a searcher, and we witness the brief intersection of life plots in the strange space surrounding the burnt flesh-disguise of the English patient in the novel that shares his misleading label.

Throughout these stories, Ondaatje manages to catch "not clarity but the sense of shift" in a way that is quite different from the method of his earlier works; here, as in Victor Coleman's writing, the "unclear stir" of experience is represented without the sense of antagonism that pervades *Collected Works* and *Slaughter*. The intensity of the frustration born of the need for order exists at the level of fiction only, in the interactions of the characters as they connect and disconnect throughout the course of their respective stories. Subsequently, the grotesque is effaced by the relative calm of the discursive setting of each book, where the fleeting and contingent kinds of (precious) order they offer are generally delivered with a sense of assurance. Assured in this way, reading books in which the grotesque is rendered with relative subtlety, readers are comparatively free to define their own sense of each novel in ways that acknowledge or overlook their own participation in the creation of meaning. As I have argued, however, fully exploring the subtleties of these texts (becoming literary searchers on the trail of an intertext, willingly cooperating in the kind of open dialogue Caravaggio has with his English patient, and generally taking our place, once again, in the grotesque community of author, character, and reader) can allow us to perceive the "increasingly invisible" grotesque at work in these novels, still mediating the interplay of competing and contradictory values in a heteroglossic chorus that sings the ambivalence and intricacy of life itself.

At one point in *In the Skin of a Lion*, as Patrick Lewis engages in his research at the Riverdale Library, the narrator digresses to describe the imagery of the photographs

of Lewis Hine, and provides an italicized aphorism on the potentials of all artistic endeavour:

*Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and order it will become.*

(146)

With a potent brevity that is characteristic of Ondaatje's art, the author summarizes the kernel of this study of his work, this attempt to explore the interplay of chaos and order that engenders the grotesque throughout a still-evolving literary career. Beginning with the "chaos" of un-narrativized reality or experience, art realizes both sides of Ondaatje's duality of objectives, transforming reality in a way that suggests both order and chaos, an enrichment of understanding, and the evidence to falsify whatever theories we arrive at. Here as elsewhere in Ondaatje's writing, the contradictions afforded by this passage are profound and irreducible: the order required by art and interpretation is simultaneously valuable and dangerously reductive. Therefore, art must not seek to eliminate chaos, but to "realign" it, raising our consciousness of both the grotesque codependence of order and chaos, and, ultimately, of our own role in mediating the interplay of these contraries. In this way, the work of Michael Ondaatje -- living up to a grotesque doctrine of ambivalence -- is an always engaging illumination of the complexity and contradictions of existence -- and therefore realizes the full potential of "*the best art.*"



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